

## **Listen Up! Hamilton Youth Speak Out**

Summary of the Public Forum – October 10, 2006  
Hosted by the Hamilton Community and Youth Taskforce

Prepared by:  
Jennie Vengris, Social Planner



162 King William Street, Suite 103, Hamilton, ON L8R 3N9  
Phone: 905-522-1148 Fax: 905-522-9124 email: [sprc@sprc.hamilton.on.ca](mailto:sprc@sprc.hamilton.on.ca)  
website: [sprc.hamilton.on.ca](http://sprc.hamilton.on.ca)

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## **1. 0 INTRODUCTION**

Youth from a broad range of perspectives rarely have the opportunity to come together to talk about the issues most impacting them and their communities. The Listen Up! Hamilton Youth Speak Out Forum on October 10, 2006 provided that opportunity.

In 2005, a series of incidents in Hamilton and a strong media focus on gang-related youth violence in Toronto influenced the Hamilton Police Services to convene a group of service providers for youth to discuss prevention and intervention strategies for addressing youth violence. With more than forty agencies represented around the table, the group decided that one of the most crucial strategies for dealing with youth violence and youth issues more generally, was to give youth an opportunity to identify and talk about the issues most pressing to them. With that direction in mind, a smaller subcommittee was struck to plan a full day forum for youth and for people who work with youth. This subcommittee included both service providers and youth.

On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006, 105 youth and service providers met at the Hamilton Convention Centre for the Listen Up! Hamilton Youth Speak Out forum to discuss youth issues and possible strategies for engaging youth in change around those issues.

This report provides a summary and reflection of the conversations youth and service providers had in facilitated, small group discussions.

## 2.0 METHODS

This summary report is based on the small group discussions at the Listen Up! Forum. The small group discussions were each co-facilitated by one service provider and one youth who underwent training in advance.

The morning started out with a key note address from Director of Education, Dr. Chris Spence from the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board.

Youth were split up into five discussion groups. Each group had 9-12 youth who represented a broad range of experiences (for example, street-involvement, school-connected, facing mental health issues, etc.) Each of the youth small groups was encouraged to answer the question ***“What are some of the biggest issues facing Hamilton youth today?”***

Service providers were split into two small discussion groups. Each group of service providers had 15-18 people from a range of youth serving agencies and schools. They were asked to answer the question, ***“What issues are service providers facing in engaging youth in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of youth services?”***

In order to focus these small group discussions with both youth and service providers, the facilitators took the groups through the following activities:

- Brainstorming;
- Identifying themes and similar issues;
- Prioritizing;
- Describing the themes;
- Reporting back.

Over lunch, the facilitators met with one of the organizers to debrief and determine seven key themes emerging from the youth small group discussions. Each set of facilitators was given one of these key themes to focus their conversation in the afternoon small group discussion.

The afternoon began with a key note address from Sarah Taylor, a native of Hamilton who now is a VJ on Much Music.

Youth and service providers were integrated for the afternoon in seven group discussions. Each group was taken through an icebreaker meant to encourage collaboration between adults and youth. Each group was then encouraged to complete a ‘collective action chart’. The issue was posted and the group was asked to identify ***ways that youth could be engaged to respond to the issue at hand in three realms – youth as individuals, youth with agencies and schools and engaging youth in communities and governments.*** Once the group came up with a number of concrete ideas in each realm, the group was encouraged to prioritize those ideas.

## 3.0 RESULTS

This section highlights the findings from three sets of small group discussions: 1) with youth around the issues most important to them, 2) with service providers around the challenges of engaging youth and 3) with both service providers and youth around ways to engage youth to work on the youth-identified issues.

### 3.1 BIGGEST ISSUES FACING YOUTH IN HAMILTON

Through the small group conversations in the morning, youth participants identified seven key issues. The number in brackets following the response indicates the number of times mentioned in the small group discussions. These issues included (with examples):

➤ **Lack of access to community resources and social/family support (18)**

- "It's hard to get into school"
- "No community centre/programs for teens that are accessible and free!"
- "Food banks are only downtown – we need more in other areas like the mountain"

➤ **Poverty (17)**

*In terms of poverty – youth had two main issues: that income security programs were not effective and that they lacked access to good jobs.*

- "Welfare needs to be changed – better screening, more money"
- "I'm juggling work and school and I'm still broke"

➤ **Discrimination (13)**

*Youth talked both about broad forms of oppression (racism, heterosexism, class divisions) and about discrimination against them as youth.*

- "There is oppression (sexism, racism, heterosexism/homophobia) in schools settings, mostly negative words and no one challenges it"
- "Intolerance causes lots of oppression"
- "There is judgment and discrimination on youth", "Negative media perceptions of youth", "Lack of respect from bosses"

➤ **Sex (10)**

- "With sex there is pressure to have it and pressure to not have it"
- "STD's and teen pregnancy are both big issues"

➤ **Violence (8)**

- "Safety in schools is an issue – minor disagreements can lead to violence"
- "Gang violence is an issue for youth"

➤ **Mental Wellness (8)**

- "Teens feel stress, juggling everything – family, school, jobs, friends"

- "Suicide is an problem, other issues build your risk and then labels from peers make you believe it"

➤ **Substance use and misuse (5).**

- "Teens are using drugs – crack, cocaine, alcohol"
- "Drugs and alcohol are big issues"

Each group was asked to then do a thematic analysis of their brainstorming and to prioritize those themes. Youth were then asked to define and describe the issues. These issues descriptions can be found in the next section on youth engagement strategies. The issue descriptions are a collection of themes identified in all of the stages of the small group discussions and as often as possible appear in the words of the youth participants.

## 3.2 STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING YOUTH TO WORK ON THE YOUTH-DEFINED ISSUES

In this section, strategies for engaging youth to work on the youth defined issues are provided. This section is organized in the following way – these issues (which appear in their prioritized order) begins with the youth-articulated description and is followed by the strategies defined by youth and adults together. The strategy in italics was prioritized by the participants in the small group as most important and beside each strategy appears a number in brackets which indicates the number of votes it received.

In the afternoon each small group was assigned one of the seven youth issues. Research suggests that youth need to be involved in the programs, agencies, institutions, neighbourhoods and communities that respond to youth issues. The participants were challenged to identify ways that youth can be engaged in responding to the issue assigned to their group. Through the activity, these engagement strategies were split into three categories: 1) youth as individuals, 2) youth with agencies and schools and 3) engaging youth in communities and governments. The youth issues appear in their order of their importance as identified in the first section.

### **3.2.1 LACK OF ACCESS TO COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND SOCIAL/FAMILY SUPPORT**

Youth felt that their access to resources is limited. The location of the majority of food banks, shelters, programs are downtown. Publicity is limited and not many know of these programs. Additionally, youth older than 21 years old are not allowed to use many youth programs. Other important elements of this lack of access include: lack of awareness of community social programs, the concentration of services in the downtown core, where a person lives affects opportunities, lack of school and community connection, need for a sense of belonging, the need for more youth resources through the city and the lack of promotion of youth services. Transportation was also identified as an issue.

#### **What can youth do as individuals?**

- *Spread the word about services* – 13
- Partnering schools to help each other and for awareness of issues – 10
- Youth outreach programs with youth counselors on a range of priority issues – 7
- Access to 'safe' counseling – 7
- Peer mentors (eg. Big Sisters, Big Brothers) – 4
- Speaking up for what you need – 3
- Reimbursement of OW deductions – 2
- 'Lack of awareness' – 2

#### **What can youth do with agencies and schools?**

- *Teachers should assign a project to students to learn more about their community* – 9
- Community fair in school, mall, movie theatre – 6
- Teachers to inform of available services – 5
- Safer shelters – 5
- School PHN's to 'nurse' – 4
- Breakfast programs – 3
- Health centres close to schools – 3
- Student councils to advocate for services – 2
- Student council run website – 2
- Creation of programs without age restrictions – 1

### **What can youth do with communities and governments?**

- *Pay people to go to school – 12*
- The “City” needs to reallocate money for services – 7
- Recreation centre programs that are career oriented – 7
- More health clinics/access – 6
- Concentration of criminal activity in downtown core – not good – 5
- Community web page – 4
- Jobs in lieu of welfare – 4
- Advertisement of services – 1
- Art programs – 1
- Better connection among agencies

### **3.2.2 POVERTY**

Two major issues were raised in terms of poverty – employment and Ontario Works. Lack of employment opportunities, the need to compromise education, having bad hours, compromising future plans, “settling for less” were all raised as important issues. Ontario Works (OW) was an important part of the poverty definitions. Calls for more welfare funds, better screening process for OW, taking away penalizations for working on OW, providing monthly bus passes for people on OW if they are in school or have a job were all identified as issues. Finally, hopelessness, the poverty cycle and self-esteem were all named as issues related to youth poverty.

### **What can youth do as individuals?**

- *Older youth work with younger youth - 17*
  - *Homework support*
  - *Recreation*
  - *Big Brothers/Sisters*
- Youth can step up for each other – youth educating youth – look out for each other – we say it in ways we understand – 16
- Identify youth who youth can talk to/look up to ‘you get a vibe’ - 4
- Food drives – 3

### **What can youth do with agencies and schools?**

- *Have people who can speak up for youth, who know when you are being ‘screwed around’. Find people who will go to Ontario Works with youth and who can talk on the same level as youth -14*
- Who is there? – the Rock, TY, Mary’s Place – youth raise awareness amongst youth – make it personal – 13
- Skills, learning – model the advocacy role – share the learning – 6
- Co-op in agencies – overnight in shelters – 4

### **What can youth do with communities and governments?**

- *Actually be there for youth, not just for a couple hours before going home to a big house/nice apartment – passion – 10*
- *Incentives to youth to volunteer, get involved – 10*
- Trust youth, show young people matter – 9
- See people through ‘failures’ (classify kids ‘bad’ as early as 6) – 7
- Actually get in and help you – don’t throw me out – respect confidentiality – not judged – 4
- Don’t assume you ‘know’ already – don’t ‘analyze’, hand out ‘advice’ – 4

### 3.2.3 DISCRIMINATION

Youth felt that discrimination could be defined as granting or denying a person any right due to their age, colour, fashion (how one dresses), or around issues including housing, income, jobs, youth programs, police, or school. Discrimination also included racism, classism, ageism, hatred, judging someone before getting to know them. Stereotyping was a big issue especially related to dress codes, piercing/tattoos, bandanas and hair. The issue of being discriminated against because of age came up a number of times. Youth explained that they felt people 'assume you're going to steal', that they face a 'lack of respect from bosses', and that 'all youth are treated the same'.

#### What can youth do as individuals?

- *Set/enforce boundaries (challenge oppression) – Should you exclude people who say oppressive things from the group? Youth can make choices about where and with who to spend time - 17*
- Don't be afraid to take a stand (e.g. re: oppression) – also, teachers! – but not physically risky - 12
- Educating teachers re: harassment, etc – 6
- 'Enlighten' yourself – be open to learning – being curious - 4
- Spending time with likeminded people

#### What can youth do with agencies and schools?

- *Schools should undertake group activities – social justice, multicultural, shows, develop “cultural theme” month/day (Black History Month, LGBTQ Day) – make it fun! Bring food. And have longer projects – interactive, presentations, make issues visible – 26*
- Youth run, promote programming activities, events – 10
- Teachers: share more info: re life experiences – explain ground rules, no late policy – 10
- Agencies – learn what's out there – 7

#### What can youth do with communities and governments?

- *Bring services to their attention – make it attractive to youth! – 19*
- Participate in youth advisory committee – take advantage of what's there – remind them: youth are the future - 17
- Earth Songs festival – bring it back – 4
- 'Multicultural day' for the city – 3
- Writing letters
- Volunteer, help get funding

### 3.2.4 SEX

Youth identified the following issues related to sex: lack of support for gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) youth and pregnant young women; heterosexism and homophobia; the reality of sexually transmitted diseases (STD's/HIV) and sexual health issues; the pressure to have and the pressure not to have sex; lack of educational supports; the difficulty of talking to adults; media issues around sex; lack of resources, especially access to condoms; judgment and sexual security issues.

#### What can youth do as individuals?

- *Practice safe sex – 17*
- Volunteer – 15

- Talk about sex in peer support groups and with close friends – 8
- Keeping info confidential (keep it to yourself) – 7
- Research – 3

### **What can youth do with agencies and schools?**

- *Everyone has a 5 minute private meeting with a public health person – or any health person (do what you want with time) – 8*
- *Health class (don't give you the facts – needs to be it's own course) – 8*
- Volunteer programs – 7
- Agencies should be youth friendly (agencies recognize how stressful it is for youth to access) – 6
- Encourage schools to go through 'safe spaces protocol' – 4
- Heterosexism, homophobia 101 within schools - 4
- Posters with clinics and other resource info (bathroom stalls) – 3
- Hot lines – 3
- Mandatory tours of health clinics – 3
- Generate awareness i.e. – campaigns, condom distribution – 3
- Meet in private places – 2
- Participate
- Condoms in bathrooms – 2
- Websites (easier access) – 2
- Anonymously provide info for information – 2
- Education of procedures (testing) – 1
- Agencies continue to do outreach – 1
- Support sexual clinic office – 1
- Doing surveys

### **What can youth do with communities and governments?**

- *Lobbying the government for more residential and transitional housing services for street-involved pregnant and parenting teens – 12*
- Need more educational programs (cognitive/physical development) – free – special programs - classes – 9
- Easier access – awareness promotion in public and bathrooms – 8
- Neighbourhood that is safe, people to talk to – 4
- Partnerships between community programs to interact (no redundancy) – 4
- Cultural awareness and how they affect sexual issues – 3

### **3.2.5 VIOLENCE**

Gang violence was named as a concern for youth. Lack of safety in schools included both minor disagreements and more violent incidents but the youth noted that minor disagreements often lead to violence. Youth named harassment as a concern and added that this was especially unsafe for women. Trouble with the law included shoplifting, trafficking drugs and having weapons at school. Youth talked about 'getting in over their heads' and living up to stereotypes (a "bad ass" image) as reasons why youth engage in violence and crime.

### **What can youth do as individuals?**

- *Celebrating multiculturalism – 16*
- We need to figure out why people are violent? Nature vs. Nurture?

### **What can youth do with agencies and schools?**

- *Ensure that the school is the centre and hub of every community - 24*
- *Building community = building understanding - 6*
- *Talk about alternatives to violence – 5*

### **What can youth do with communities and governments?**

- *Open discussions – to get trust you must give trust – people who get youth – they LISTEN – 15*
- *Find good role models at home, at school and with police – need to find trust – 12*
- *Peer counselors (mediation) - 7*
  - *Comfort level*
  - *Easier to 'trust'*
  - *But might be looked at as a rat*

### **3.2.6 MENTAL WELLNESS**

The participants explained that youth are faced with many issues (i.e. sex, drugs/alcohol, stereotypes, violence, etc.) that directly result in elevated stress that can result in unstable mental health. Underestimation of the level of stress in youth today can lead to a lack of understanding and a lack of support and education. This results in youth turning to “negative influences”. It can also lead to additional issues include cutting, self-harm, depression, body image, self-esteem, and using drugs to cope with pain. Suicide came up in the small group discussions – youth suggested that issues build your risk and labels ‘make you believe it’. Youth concluded that in terms of mental wellness, ‘everyone is looking for someone who they can relate to’.

### **What can youth do as individuals?**

- *Remember confidentiality and use discretion (don't talk about other people) – 6*
- *Communication with someone else who can relate – 6*
- *Forums – 5*
- *More information – support groups – 5*
- *Someone to just 'listen' without stigma or bias – 4*
- *Youth accessing information for friends – 4*
- *Websites/internet – 2*
- *More help for parents – education – 2*
- *Parents being aware of friends – 1*
- *Lack of resources – 1*
- *More doctors dedicated to mental health rather than a GP*

### **What can youth do with agencies and schools?**

- *Youth serving agencies coming to schools – 9*
- *Guest speakers – 6*
- *Communication with parents – 4*
- *More training for professionals on health – 3*
- *Replace suspensions with sending them to support – 3*
- *Raise awareness of drugs et. That lead to these problems – 2*
- *Make it okay to talk about issues and illness – 1*
- *Assemblies to start off discussion – then break it down after a few weeks*

### **What can youth do with communities and governments?**

- *Educate/raise awareness – 10*

- Fees for medical services and medications – more funding for cheaper meds – 6
- Highlight positives to show that having a mental health issues is okay – 4
- More indepth doctor visits/meds – 4
- \*Legislation\* - 3
- Government funded programs (stable funding) – 2
- More commercials – 2
- Outreach by physically talking to people – 1
- People will find a way

### **3.2.7 SUBSTANCE USE**

Youth talked about using alcohol and drugs. Peer pressure, availability and low self-esteem all contribute to alcohol and drug use in youth. Youth talked about the negative impacts of drug use, “you lose (e.g. families, homes, friends, self-worth...) more than you gain (people thinking you’re cool)”. Due to improper information one doesn’t acknowledge the true effects (e.g. what happens, how it affects the body, mind and self-worth and self-respect). The motivation to do drugs has less to do with who you are around and more to do with how you feel about yourself.

#### **What can youth do as individuals?**

- *Say no = less peer pressure, set a good example, opening up more choice – 18*
- Make it known (to adults) that youth are dealing drugs – 12

#### **What can youth do with agencies and schools?**

- *Student to student – linking youth with others who have that experience (students helping students – email, letters, group meetings) – 19*
- Youth planning after school/evening programs for older youth – replace drug use with activities – 14
- Earlier drug education (life of drugs) – developmentally appropriate – use of youth in teaching – sharing their experiences – 12
- Change perceptions that drug use is ‘cool’ – part of culture – having fun (alcohol, weed) – Feedback/real/honest to services from youth about how helpful/what to do to improve it – use youth to do surveys – 6
- 3
- Harm reduction – ‘keep your life’ –
- Youth Advisory Committee (STAR)

#### **What can youth do with communities and governments?**

- *In school gyms have free recreation services that are planned by youth for older youth – advertise by youth, for example – tournaments like hockey – 22*
- Get youth input re: where youth housing should be – involvement in housing planning – 9
- Pay youth for planning, advice giving (gift certificate) – 8
- Youth/service provider/government forums – seek youth advice – 7

### 3.3 CHALLENGES FACING SERVICE PROVIDERS IN ENGAGING YOUTH

A number of themes emerged when service providers were asked to identify the challenges they face in engaging youth in services. The number in brackets following the response indicates the number of times mentioned in the small group discussions. The following challenges to engaging youth in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of services were named in the brainstorming exercise (examples are included):

- **Lack of resources/capacity (13)**
  - “Engagement takes time, focus – we need resources, we need to build it into our mandate, we need funding and deliverables”
  - “We don’t see the support we need – non-profits have no money”
  - “The sheer numbers of youth are a challenge”
  
- **Diversity of youth needs (11)**
  - “Mental health needs”
  - “Youth are facing poverty and systemic issues – lack of housing and dating violence”
  - “Newcomer youth – how can we help them out?”
  
- **Lack of organizational and broader support (5)**
  - “We have a lack of faculty support”
  - “We need to explain youth engagement to policy makers so that they understand the concept of youth programs”
  
- **Not working collaboratively (3)**
  - “There is a lack of connections – especially to informal services and supports”
  - “Community agencies need to come together to work collectively”
  
- **Keeping youth engaged (3)**
  - “The momentum isn’t maintained”
  - “Youth issues are often pushed back”
  - It’s challenging to keep youth engaged.

## 4.0 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

### 4.1 YOUTH ISSUES

Youth issues around violence and sex often make headlines. While youth do describe these as important, lack of access to resources and supports and poverty were the leading issues identified by youth. This is critical learning since youth issues mirror much of the energy in our community today. Local government, planning tables, social service agencies, funders and media are committed to working on poverty issues. However, more work needs to be done to talk to youth about how their experiences with issues such as poverty and lack of access to resources are unique to them as young people. The preliminary conversations between service providers and youth about strategies for engaging youth in directions for change suggest opportunities to integrate youth into community responses to these issues.

Through the duration of the small group discussions several key themes emerged. First, youth described a desire to connect and learn more about community agencies and available resources for young people. Furthermore, youth are interested in being involved and engaged in community planning around these resources. According to the participants, this engagement must value youth voice and offer incentives.

Youth articulated a clear need to connect. Youth talked about wanting to have access to people (including teachers, service providers and police) who demonstrate genuine caring and interest and want to connect with other youth around the issues impacting them most. One of the ways youth talked about connecting with other youth and adults was through mentorship programs. The literature and forum results suggest the critical importance of peer to peer mentoring and was named in nearly each of the seven afternoon groups. Youth want to talk to other young people about the issues facing them.

Schools were often named as the central point of access and information sharing. Youth suggested that the issues that are impacting them most should be both connected to the curriculum and to broader school events. Schools are also where the majority of youth are forming relationships and encountering most of these social issues. Additionally, schools are critical institutions in the neighbourhood and community – providing a venue for youth to connect with adults and adults to connect with other adults. However, it is likely that the youth that are not engaged in school face these issues most acutely, and require additional strategies and interventions to ensure access and information sharing.

Finally, youth are interested in issues of oppression in all of its forms (racism, heterosexism/homophobia, classism, sexism and more). The young participants talked about being oppressed as youth (feeling judged and that assumptions are made based on their age) and many youth talked about wanting to connect with struggles of oppression outside of their experience (for example, youth from middle class backgrounds are also interested in poverty, straight youth are interested in homophobia).

## 4.2 SERVICE PROVIDER ISSUES

The service providers in attendance talked about the challenges they face in engaging youth in all aspects of their service design and delivery. Lack of resources, agencies mandates and structures, lack of collaborative work between agencies and keeping youth connected were all named as barriers to real youth engagement work.

According to the service providers three sets of challenge areas exist: 1) organizational challenges, 2) philosophical challenges and 3) community capacity challenges.

Organizationally, many community agencies lack the resources (notably sustainable funding, staff, space, flexibility in hours of service) to do begin and maintain youth engagement work at every stage of program planning and development. Participants called on the need for funding applications, program evaluations and performance appraisals to require a measured commitment to youth engagement.

The participants discussed the philosophical challenges they face in doing meaningful youth engagement work. Many talked about working in structures that did not make room to engage youth. For example, rigid adherence to rules, lack of appropriate options for youth to engage, a focus on problems and not seeking information from the people who are relevant to the issues.

Finally, the participants talked about the lack of connection between agencies in Hamilton community in general as a challenge to meaningful youth engagement work. Lack of communication and sharing of resources were both raised as issues requiring further attention. Participants discussed the importance of looking at the broader, systemic issues that impact youth including poverty, substance use and cultural diversity.

## 4.3 WHERE DO YOUTH AND SERVICE PROVIDERS CONNECT?

In their respective small group discussions in the morning, youth talked about the concrete issues that impact them most (like lack of access to community services, poverty and discrimination) while service providers talked about the organizational, philosophical and community challenges that they face in engaging youth. While the youth and service providing participants seemed to have divergent conversations in the morning, through the afternoon discussions (when youth and service providers were in the same groups) many important connections were made. Service providers had the opportunity to hear from youth about what would help them navigate the issues identified in the morning and youth had an opportunity to share space and be heard from the service providers. In the evaluations and conversations after the forum, the service providers identified those sessions as opportunities for real and important learning about youth needs.

#### 4.4 POINTS OF CONSIDERATION FOR NEXT STEPS

The themes that emerged during the conversations between youth and service providers at the forum point to some natural directions for next steps. This is not an exhaustive list but provides a starting point for the many youth initiatives currently underway in Hamilton.

1. *Creating mechanisms for youth input.* Youth have energy and creativity for developing youth-friendly solutions to the issues they face. In the conversations and evaluations following the forum, service providers talked about the benefit they experienced in connecting with youth in the small groups to talk about solutions. Mechanisms for youth input into the services and communities that impact them are crucial.
2. *Schools as community hubs.* Schools were named as potential centres for engaging youth and communities around critical youth issues. Youth talked about wanting to be engaged in the issues that impact them most through curriculum (especially oppression, substance use, sex, lack of knowledge around community services). Youth also talked about schools as potential community hubs where services could be run for youth and where recreational needs could be met as well.
3. *Mentorship and peer to peer counseling.* Youth want to connect with their peers and with young adults when talking about difficult issues (sex, drug and alcohol use, mental health issues, violence oppression). Mentorship and peer to peer connections around the seven issues identified should be explored.
4. *Community service outreach.* Youth want community agencies that could potentially offer services to youth to explicitly outreach to places where youth naturally are (schools, youth agencies, etc.) Youth demonstrated a keen interest to know what is happening in their communities – both in terms of how to connect to help and how to connect to get help.