

## SKILLS THROUGH ACTIVITY AND RECREATION HAMILTON - TENANT CONSULTATION

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### 1.1 STAR Program Description

Community Skills Training for Children of Hamilton-Wentworth (aka STAR Hamilton) has operated in the City of Hamilton for almost 25 years. It was developed in partnership with the former Hamilton-Wentworth Housing Authority (now City Housing Hamilton) to support children and families in public housing.

The program offered by Community Skills Training for Children of Hamilton-Wentworth is STAR<sup>1</sup> (skills through activity and recreation) and is modelled after a program called *PALS* (Participate and Learn Skills), which was developed by Dr. Marshall Jones and Dr. Dan Offord. Drs. Jones and Offord also evaluated the program, demonstrating that *PALS* was successful in decreasing the incidence of ‘problem behaviors’ such as teen substance abuse, violence, and delinquency.

The foundational theory of the STAR program is that children, who are given the opportunity to learn skills in a supportive and pro-social environment, are recognized for their mastery of those skills, and whose individual characteristics are nurtured, are more likely to internalize healthy beliefs. Children who have confidence in their basic skills are apt to become involved in groups where healthy development is fostered.

Until recently STAR Hamilton offered programs out of three City Housing Hamilton’s social housing communities—Oriole, Kenora, and Congress. STAR offers supports to families in these communities, providing after school programs, spring break, and summer programs for children from 5 – 15 years of age. In Oriole and Kenora, STAR has been operating its programming in a housing unit that is made available by City Housing Hamilton at no charge. STAR also typically employs youth from these communities as staff.

### 1.2 Context and Purpose of Consultation Process

STAR engaged the SPRC through Banyan Non-Profit Management Services, who has been supporting STAR in management and other administrative capacities, to carry out a consultation with tenants in the communities served by STAR. STAR’s relatively recent organizational changes present an opportunity to exchange knowledge and reflections with the communities it serves in order to develop collaborative solutions that maximize the benefit of STAR’s services to service users. In this context, SPRC committed to engaging families in the three City Housing Hamilton sites it serves (Oriole, Kenora, and Congress) to better understand their needs in order to enhance STAR’s programming to be more responsive. This consultation was aimed at supporting STAR as it strives to continue to meet needs of diverse families in STAR’s catchment area. During the course of this consultation process, the STAR Board of Directors decided to dissolve the corporation and have the Hamilton East Kiwanis Boys and Girls Club (aka the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton) take on operating the STAR program from within its organization. Through this upcoming transition, the authors hope that this report will help inform and shape programming decisions for the STAR program.

The purpose of this consultation was to address the central question: “What do tenants in STAR’s catchment areas want and need from STAR?” Employing a utilization-focused approach, SPRC consulted with stakeholders to collect relevant information that will directly help to inform STAR’s decision making about program design and delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> Over time the program name became synonymous with the organization.

SPRC staff consulted with tenants from the three communities served by STAR, as well as community partners. A detailed discussion of methodology appears in the next section (2.0). Following that, findings from consultations with tenants are presented (Section 3.0), including survey findings (Section 3.1), interview findings (3.2), and a summary of key findings (3.3). Findings from consultations with community partners are then described (Sections 4.0 and 4.1), which are also followed by a summary of key findings (4.2). Overall findings are then analyzed in the Discussion section (5.0). The report then concludes with recommendations and next steps in an action plan to enhance STAR's services (Section 6.0).

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This consultation used a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods to address the central question of “What do tenants in STAR’s catchment areas want and need from STAR?” Consultation was carried out in three phases: first, surveys were completed by tenants of the areas served by STAR who were also parents; second, semi-structured interviews with a smaller sub-set of survey respondents were conducted by telephone or in person; finally, key informant interviews with community partners were conducted.

The following indicators were explored to answer the research question and inform the development of recommendations for enhancing STAR’s services:

- Frequency of use of STAR’s services
- Level of satisfaction with STAR’s services
- Barriers to accessing STAR
- Demand for STAR’s services on days and/or at times other than its current schedule
- Demand for STAR’s services for age groups other than it currently serves
- Services that stakeholder families would like to see STAR offer
- Good practices used by other community organizations serving the same areas with respect to safe travel between home and service locations
- Options for meeting STAR’s liability concerns (e.g. staff-child ratios) that maximize community benefit

The initial plan for engaging tenant families was to host a series of six community workshops: one each for families who were and were not involved with STAR in each of the three areas. At each workshop a facilitator would lead participants in discussion and activities to explore ways that STAR could better meet the needs of residents. Interpreters were to be engaged during the workshops in order to make them more accessible.

This approach was determined to be unlikely to be the most effective way to reach a large number of residents. Because of similarly structured workshops and meetings associated with other processes taking place in some of the areas served by STAR, researchers were concerned that residents may have consultation fatigue in terms of this format. Further, organizing this type of workshop requires considerable time and other resources (e.g. refreshments, child care, and interpretation) with no guarantee of having robust participation from residents. Instead, surveys were selected as a lower cost method of reaching a larger number of residents, and interviews were selected as a method of getting richer, more qualitative data from residents.

## 2.1 Tenant Surveys

Any City Housing Hamilton tenants in one of the areas around Oriole, Kenora, and Congress who were parents or had children in their care were eligible to complete the survey. Surveys asked questions about their children's involvement with STAR, their level of satisfaction with STAR's services, and changes to services that would encourage them to send their children to STAR more often. (See Appendix A for the complete survey.)

In order to maintain the commitment to accessibility based on language the survey was professionally translated into French and Arabic, as well as being available in English. Although many more languages than these are spoken in the communities served by STAR, for budgetary reasons translation into two other languages was possible. This decision also allows for a short summary document to be translated into the same languages so that residents can be informed of how their input will help shape STAR's activities going forward. These languages were selected after consulting with service providers in the area as well as the most recent Census data available about language spoken at home for the three areas combined.

Participants were offered an incentive of being eligible for a draw for one of twelve \$100 gift cards to a grocery store of their choice if they completed a survey. Respondents were assured anonymity in their responses because the survey did not ask for any identifying information. When completed surveys were returned, respondents were given draw ballots, which asked for the participant's name, phone number, and preferred grocery store.

Initial strategies for distributing surveys included sending surveys home with children attending STAR and asking them to deliver the surveys to their parents. Some service providers working out of the East Kiwanis Community Centre in the McQuesten neighbourhood were asked to distribute surveys to any of their clients who were City Housing tenants and parents. Service providers working in the Congress community were also asked to distribute surveys. One resident who had been involved with STAR also volunteered to distribute surveys among residents in one neighbourhood. Unfortunately, these strategies led to only a small number of completed surveys being returned.

To try to improve the survey response rate, SPRC sought opportunities to connect with residents directly. Surveys were distributed at an outdoor community event in the McQuesten neighbourhood, where Oriole Crescent is located. Residents of Congress Crescent were reached at an employment conference held at a neighbourhood church. In Kenora, surveys were dropped in the mailbox of each unit. Respondents returned completed surveys either to the unit in which STAR runs programming, or to the unit of a community volunteer who assisted with survey distribution.

In total, 77 surveys were completed. 36 of these were completed by residents in and around Oriole Crescent, 30 from Congress Crescent, and 11 from Kenora Avenue.

## **2.2 Tenant Interviews**

Twelve (12) draw winners were selected from survey respondents at random using an internet-based random number generator. Each completed ballot was numbered, and twelve winning numbers out of the total number of completed ballots were generated. Winners were reached by telephone to inform them that they had won one of the \$100 grocery store gift cards. Two winners were unable to be reached after ten attempts to contact them, and so new winners were drawn using the same random number generator. Once contacted, winners were asked if they would be willing to take part in a brief interview, and were informed that they would not be offered any further incentives or compensation for taking part in the interview but that their input would help shape programming that could benefit them and their neighbours. (See Appendix B for the tenant interview guide.) All but one of the winners agreed to be interviewed. The main methodological advantage to reaching interviewees in this way is that the sample is random. Two other residents volunteered to be interviewed: one was contacted through STAR staff, and another volunteered when surveys were being distributed. Both of these interviewees were interviewed in person. Thirteen (13) tenant interviews were completed in total.

## **2.3 Community Partner Interviews**

The final stage of consultation for this project was a series of interviews with four (4) community partners who were involved with STAR in some way, or became relevant through interviews with tenants. Each interview was structured slightly differently, emphasizing findings or draft recommendations that were most relevant to each interviewee depending on the relationship of the interviewee to STAR. Interviews usually included discussion of draft key findings and draft recommendations to gauge their feasibility or possible responses to their implementation. In some cases, community partners were asked more specific questions about their programs and how issues such as safety around volunteers or pick-up and drop off of children were addressed.

The following section discusses findings from consultations with tenants, including the survey and interviews.

### 3.0 TENANT CONSULTATION FINDINGS

#### 3.1 Tenant Survey Findings

Nearly half of survey respondents had never sent their children to STAR. However, respondents who had sent their children accessed a mix of STAR programs (after school programs, March break camps, summer camps). Most respondents who sent their children to STAR were very happy with its services.

One parent indicated that they were happy with STAR's services because their "children have fun and it keeps them active after school and it gives them opportunity to learn new things." Some parents felt that the "after school program is fantastic," and that their "children really enjoy it." They enjoyed the fact that STAR provides an opportunity for children "to play with their peers, learn new things, and be a team player."

Despite the majority of parents who sent their children to STAR being happy with its services, nearly 18% of parents who sent their children to STAR revealed that they were either somewhat unhappy or very unhappy with STAR's services. There were complaints that "they don't do a lot with the children," and that it is "usually disorganized and little information is given." Another reason some parents gave for being unhappy with STAR's services was due to the fact that staff were "not enough equipped to deal with the behaviour of some of the children, and not good planning for activities." One parent raised a significant concern about how "there was no one to help special needs children at the time."

There were several various barriers to attending STAR identified by parents. Most people have never heard about the program. In fact 60% of those who do not send their children to STAR were unaware of its existence. Numerous parents (34%) explained that their children are too old/too young for STAR based on age eligibility. 18% of respondents had their children enrolled in other programs, and 15% were unable to send their children to STAR because it did not fit their schedules. Other obstacles to attending include individual negative experiences some had with STAR services, concerns about staff and also some who thought STAR was disorganized. Additionally, there were a few parents who felt that the pick-up/drop-off policy could be inconvenient. Furthermore, several parents complained about being turned away when there were too many children in attendance and not enough space for their own children.

The top three priorities that parents would had for the kinds of activities they would like to see at STAR are physical activity, learning, and fun. These were then followed by activities involving skill-building, social time and lastly, healthy snacks.

Most respondents (84%) said they would be comfortable sending their children to STAR if children were supervised by a mix of paid staff and volunteers.

Two-thirds of respondents were comfortable with a staff ratio of 5 children or less to one staff person. The other third of respondents were comfortable with up to 10 children per staff member. Some respondents felt that it depended on the children's ages.

Many parents suggested that STAR should offer after-school programs closer to dismissal times and focus more on homework/educational activities and physical activity. Parents also recommended advertising for STAR, and providing more information about the program overall, how to register, and policies regarding supervision, transportation, pick up/drop (etc.) as well.

Parents also provided information on the days of the week and times of day that they would prefer STAR offer programming. The following tables summarize parents' responses. The two most preferred days from tenants from each area are bolded in Table 1. The most popular time period from each area is also bolded in Table 2.

**Table 1: Day Preferences**

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>	<b>Saturday</b>	<b>Sunday</b>
<b>Oriole</b>	7	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	8	4	9	7
<b>Kenora*</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	3	0	0
<b>Congress</b>	8	6	7	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>

Parents from different areas preferred different days (Table 1). Most parents indicated that after school would be the most suitable time to drop their children off, followed by evenings (Table 2).

**Table 2: Time Preferences**

	<b>Mornings (9-12)</b>	<b>Afternoons (1-4)</b>	<b>After school (4-6)</b>	<b>Evenings (6-8:30)</b>
<b>Oriole</b>	2	3	<b>18</b>	9
<b>Kenora</b>	0	1	<b>11</b>	2
<b>Congress</b>	3	3	<b>14</b>	8

### 3.2 Tenant Interview Findings

Many similar themes that were found in survey responses came emerged from tenant interviews as well. Several parents did not know about STAR, while others had children who were too young to attend. Most parents who had heard of STAR first learned of it through a flyer in the mail. Others learned of STAR from neighbours.

Parents who did not send their children to STAR indicated that this was because they were unaware of how to register, or even that the program existed. Several parents did not send their children to STAR because they were too young attend. Some parents also mentioned that their children attend other programs such as day care, dancing/ballet, swimming lessons, a reading buddies program, arts and crafts and sports teams.

Most parents who had sent their children to STAR were generally satisfied with the program overall based on their past experiences with STAR. They felt that staff members are helpful, have a positive attitude, seem well trained, and do a good job of supervising the children. Parents also saw STAR as a great opportunity for children to socialize and interact with each other while working as a group with older children, as well as children their own age. Moreover, parents really liked the activities that STAR offers as they are fun for the children, and keep them engaged and busy. Some parents also commented on how STAR has been a learning opportunity for their children too, and they were pleased with the fact that they were often getting help with their homework there.

There were some complaints about organization and structure of service and quality of the staff in the past. Most of those who complained indicated that that they have noticed an improvement in these areas of concern, and that STAR is continuing to progress. On the other hand, one respondent felt that STAR did not offer enough variety in activities since the program's change in leadership. In the past the program offered computer time, outdoor play, and crafts, but the respondent indicated that recently STAR was

offering only crafts. This limited activity was of concern to the parent and led the parent not to send their children to STAR anymore. Another parent was concerned that at STAR, “they don’t do a lot of reading or homework time, but rather mostly fun activities.” They stated that they would like to see more focus on educational activities rather than simply entertainment. Another parent suggested that they offer a wider variety of activities so that children are not getting bored doing the same things, and also said that activities should be more organized.

The biggest concern was about constraints regarding the number of children who could attend STAR due to lack of staff. Parents complained about children being turned away when STAR was at capacity, and requested that there should be an increase in the number of staff so that more children could attend on a more frequent basis.

When asked what their children liked about STAR, most parents said that the children enjoyed getting out of the house, taking part in various activities that they don’t get to do at home, and interacting with the staff as well as other children who they don’t normally play with. The children seemed to be having a good time there and coming home satisfied most of the time.

Similar to their parents, children also complained about issues surrounding attendance capacity because they would get upset and disappointed upon getting turned away and having to leave (as reported by parents). Another complaint was that children do not always want to do what the staff have planned, which can cause them to often get bored there. In addition, there was a criticism that there are not enough arts and crafts activities as there should be.

One parent was concerned with the language barrier for Francophone children (and parents), and suggested that it would be a good idea to offer services in French. Another parent also mentioned that language would be a barrier for some residents, and that providing translation could help to serve families with limited English. Two respondents also discussed being dissatisfied with the time that STAR takes place. One stated that “4:30-6:30 is an odd time because it is the middle of dinner. It would be better from 3:30-5:30 so that children have a chance to do their homework there and get help there. Plus they could still make it home for dinner (at 6) and it is still light out. [STAR] should make it earlier so children still have energy to do homework and play.” Another said that when STAR operated from 3:00-6:00 p.m. in the past it was more convenient because it began immediately after school. This parent also appreciated the 6:00-8:00p.m. period of programming for older children. The current hours beginning at 4p.m. were seen as inconvenient. Also related to the timing of the program, some parents had concerns about the gap in service in September of this year.

Most interviewees indicated that they were comfortable with STAR’s current pick-up/drop off policy. Although it can be an inconvenience at times, most parents agreed that this is the safest and most accountable approach. Several parents mentioned that they would not send their children to STAR without adult supervision anyway. One person suggested that perhaps the policy should depend on the child’s age, and that older children might be safe to walk there alone if they live close by. However, some participants requested volunteers to assist with transportation as it can be inconvenient at times, especially for single mothers. One parent explained that lone mothers are not sending their children to STAR as much because with competing responsibilities (e.g. work, picking children up from school, cooking, etc.), dropping children off and picking them up from STAR was not possible. Another mother was inconvenienced by having to take all her younger children with her to drop off her older child to attend STAR because she did not have a stroller and could not leave the younger children at home. In such cases, this inconvenience could be alleviated by designating another adult to pick up and drop off the child, an option about which this participant may not have been aware.

All respondents indicated that they are comfortable with the current ratio of one staff supervising five children. One parent said that they would be comfortable with a higher ratio, up to 8 children per staff member. Another respondent stated that any more than 5 (children) to 1 (staff member) would be worrisome. One significant drawback of these ratios, however, is that with a limited number of staff members, STAR's capacity to serve area children is also limited, sometimes resulting in children getting turned away. Space constraints within the housing units used by STAR also limit the number of children that can be served at one time. In response to this limited capacity, some parents rush to get their children to STAR in time for a vacant spot.

When respondents were asked how STAR can improve as a service, one of the more popular answers was that the program should accommodate younger children who are currently unable to attend. Another comment suggested they should promote the program more to spread awareness, which has been evident in survey responses, as a considerable amount of respondents had not heard about STAR. As in survey responses, some parents wanted STAR to offer 5 days of programming per week. One significant request was to have special needs training for staff so that they could accommodate children with disabilities. One parent had a negative experience with some volunteers (at STAR and outside), suggesting that more attention should be paid to staff and volunteer assessment and training to ensure that they are appropriately capable of working with children. Other suggestions were that there should be more sports (i.e. soccer and swimming) and other physical activities included to keep the children active. As discussed above, some parents also suggested that STAR include more educational or homework-based activities in their programming. Overall, parents suggested a wider variety of more organized activities for their children to choose from. One parent thought that it would be a good idea run the program on Friday nights, such as movie or games night, since the children don't have anything to do. Lastly, some parents suggested that there should be "more planned activities" and greater planning in general. Specifically, one parent mentioned that in the past STAR had a schedule of planned activities each month, but that more recently STAR's programming has been more "day-to-day."

### **3.3 Key Findings – Tenant Consultations**

- Nearly half of parents surveyed were not aware of STAR.
- Most parents who sent their children to STAR were satisfied with the program.
- The main reasons for parents being unhappy with STAR were:
  - Complaints about the structure, resources and organization of the program
  - Some children and parents had bad experiences with the staff members
- The main barriers to participating in STAR were capacity (children being turned away) and ages (children being too young to be eligible).
- Parents' top priorities for STAR's programming were physical and learning activities.
- The majority of parents were not concerned about supervision by a mix of paid staff and volunteers, or the ratio of 5 children per staff member.
- Most parents were comfortable with the current pick-up/drop off policy. Some single parents expressed some difficulty with transportation saying that the current policy could be inconvenient, especially for families with only some children who are eligible (in terms of age).
- Most parents want STAR to operate after school. Some suggested that it would be more convenient to begin after-school programming closer to dismissal time rather than at 4p.m.
- Parents recommend that more attention is devoted to staff and volunteer assessment and training, including developing capacity serve children with disabilities and Francophone children.
- Congress Crescent residents were aware that STAR is not currently operating there and would like to see it back.

## 4.0 COMMUNITY PARTNER INTERVIEW FINDINGS

### 4.1 Community Partner Interview Findings

Interviews with community partners focused on developing and exploring the feasibility of possible recommendations. Findings from these conversations are discussed under six themes in this section: awareness, scheduling, pick up/drop off practices, capacity, and space.

#### *Awareness*

Because so many parents consulted were not aware of the STAR program, input was sought from community partners about the extent to which awareness was a challenge for other programs, and how awareness could be strengthened. Community partners indicated that awareness was an issue not only for the STAR program but for other programs as well. Resident awareness of programs leads to greater participation, which in turn supports applications for funding support to continue or expand programming. Participation is also a key priority for City Housing Hamilton when it agrees to provide housing units to community partners to offer programming at no cost.

Since resident awareness is so crucial but also so limited at present, sharing information with tenants about STAR effectively is essential. From City Housing Hamilton's perspective, tenants are often overloaded with information when they first move in, and so sharing information about available programs and services such as STAR immediately may not be the most effective method of building awareness. CHH employs community relations workers who may be able to visit residents shortly after their tenancy begins and share information about the STAR program if tenants have children in the ages that STAR serves or younger (since these children will eventually reach the age of eligibility).

#### *Scheduling*

In exploring scheduling possibilities for STAR, a representative from the Boys and Girls Club indicated that it may be possible to run the program in all three locations (Oriole, Kenora, and Congress). Currently STAR operates only in Kenora and Oriole, but not Congress. The Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton would also hope to be able to offer STAR programming 5 days per week. Depending on funding, weekend programming may also be an option. Currently the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton operates at the East Kiwanis Community Centre near Oriole Crescent on weekends with children from the Oriole complex, so community benefit may be maximized as much through coordination between programs and awareness-raising as through trying to expand STAR's services to weekends.

Community partners also discussed the possibility of coordinating program schedules to maximize benefits to the community. As discussed in the tenant interview findings, Wesley Urban Ministries offers a reading buddies program after school in the Kenora area on Mondays and Tuesdays. STAR currently operates on the same two days in this area. Since STAR and Wesley have coordinated program scheduling in Kenora in the past, it is reasonable to expect that such coordination could be possible again in the future. Community partners were generally open to working together around scheduling, though Wesley staff indicated that changing the days they operate would be a challenge because of staff availability.

### *Pick Up/Drop Off Practices*

Some parents had shared concerns anecdotally with staff around STAR's more recently implemented policy requiring parent drop-off and pick-up at STAR prior to this consultation. This issue and various strategies for meeting safety and liability concerns around pick-ups and drop-offs were explored with community partners.

The Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton have different practices for different types of programming. For camps, the organization has strict pick-up policies where parents or guardians are pre-arranged and checked off when picking children up. The mode of travel (e.g. walking, driving) is also monitored. In some situations a family member who is not scheduled to pick a child up is not permitted to take the child home until consent is received by the organization from a designated parent or guardian by phone. In contrast, the same organization does not have a pick up policy for their drop-in program. Parents are made aware that children are walking to and from the program location alone in this case. During drop-in program hours there is also a walk safe program available, in which a child or youth may ask to be walked home by volunteers.

At Wesley's reading buddies program, children under 10 years of age must be dropped off and picked up by a parent. Children 10 years old and older may travel independently. Parents are made aware of these policies when registering their children in the program.

Bussing is another travel option used by programs running in areas served by STAR. For example, CityKidz regularly has a school bus picking up and dropping children off for Saturday programming, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton has bussed children from various locations, including Oriole Crescent, to their pool facility on Ellis Avenue. As a side benefit to this transportation mode, another community partner pointed out that times when children are bussed to another location for programming is a prime opportunity for community meetings with parents.

### *Capacity*

Several possible recommendations for increasing STAR's capacity to serve more children were discussed with community partners.

The possibility of using volunteers to escort children to and from STAR if parents are unable to pick up/drop off was explored, though this option may require more resources and organization than is feasible at present. Such an arrangement would require obtaining police reference checks for any potential volunteers, and then organizing opportunities for parents to meet volunteers and give written consent to having their children picked up or walked home by the volunteers. These processes would require a fairly significant investment of staff time to organize and implement.

As an example of a highly regulated volunteer program, Wesley Urban Ministries insures all of its volunteers after a rigorous volunteer intake process. Volunteers are interviewed by a volunteer coordinator, complete an application form for the agency, have a current criminal record check (including vulnerable sector screening), and receive the same orientation session as staff members do prior to volunteering. Though some volunteers find the process time consuming, it is designed with the priority of children's safety as a central concern. Again, working with volunteers may require more capacity than is currently available given all that is involved in preparing volunteers to work with children.

Given that STAR's current 5 children per staff member ratio was established fairly recently, and also given that some parents described having their children turned away at STAR because the program was at capacity, interviewees were asked about the possibility of having more flexible ratios. As with pick-up and drop-off practices, partners had different ratios depending on the type of program. In a camp environment, for example, one organization has a ratio of 10 children to 2 adults, one of whom is a volunteer leader in training. For cooking exercises, the ratio is 8 children per staff member. A drop-in program operates with a supervisor, who can respond in an emergency and part-time staff in each room coordinating activities. Another organization runs its after school program with two staff members and a ratio of 10 children per staff member.

Another option for expanding STAR's capacity may be to use STAR locations as pick-up points from which children are taken to other larger institutional locations in order to allow for more physical activity programming. Though it is generally preferable and more convenient for children to be able to access programming in their neighbourhoods, bussing to other locations such as schools or community centres may be an option if buses were donated. Such arrangements could allow for greater access to a gymnasium, craft room, or kitchen facilities.

The possibility of including younger children in STAR's programming was also discussed. While this may be possible, it may also not be necessary for STAR to be the agency serving children under 5. Instead, STAR could work with nearby Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYCs) to coordinate programming in terms of scheduling (day versus evening), use of equipment, and communicating with parents. Specifically, STAR could coordinate programming with OEYCs such that a family's younger children could go to an Early Years Centre while older ones go to STAR, and this option could be communicated to parents. Such coordination could also be helpful in assessing demand for programming for young children during the after school period (while STAR operates).

Finally, youth from the areas served are often employed as staff at STAR. This model offers the advantage of staff having some familiarity with families served while also offering positive role modeling experiences for youth. On the other hand, younger staff members may have less experience or training. Retaining older, more mature staff (such as post-secondary students) has been difficult for STAR because of the limited number of hours available and financial pressures on those students.

### *Activities*

Parent suggestions that STAR focus more on educational and physical or outdoor activities at STAR were very much in line with the approach that the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton currently takes. The Club focuses on active living, healthy eating, and being engaged at school. Working on these focus points is an extension of the Club's work and should help to address parent desires for particular types of activities.

### *Space*

The final theme explored with community partners was programming space. STAR is not currently operating at Congress Crescent, though the complex does have some spaces that may be able to be used by STAR. In particular, Congress Crescent has an Early Years Centre and also a refurbished common room which may be able to be used for STAR programming in that neighbourhood. This would require partnering with the tenants association, which is working on developing programming. Such partnership could be a strong opportunity to work closely with tenants to shape responsive programming and also to build awareness and enthusiasm about STAR among tenants.

The issue of space is also related to issues of awareness and participation. Taking a unit of housing off the market for community programming use is a decision made by City Housing Hamilton when there is overall benefit to the community. From CHH's perspective, a unit being used for community programming at least three to four days per week would be ideal.

Finally, it should be noted that the space available within housing units used by STAR limits the number of children that can be served safely and the amount of physical activity that can take place within the units. Therefore the physical space available in the units and surrounding community facilities that may be used by STAR must be considered in any future programming decisions.

#### **4.2 Key Findings – Community Partner Interviews**

- Awareness is challenging for STAR and other programs. Awareness is also crucial to increase participation, which is a key priority for City Housing Hamilton.
- City Housing Hamilton may be able to task community relations workers with sharing information with tenants about programs available in the area (such as STAR) after their tenancy begins.
- Depending on resources and capacity, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton may be able to offer STAR at all three locations, up to five days per week, and possibly including weekends.
- Coordinating program schedules with other community partners is essential for maximizing community benefit. Switching program days may be challenging for Wesley's reading buddies program in Kenora due to staff availability.
- Community partners had a variety of pick-up and drop off policies depending on the type of program and ages of children. Some partners also bus children between locations.
- Incorporating more volunteers into STAR to increase capacity may be an option, though volunteer intake, screening, and training can be prohibitively resource intensive.
- Community partners had a variety of staff-child ratios depending on the types of activities. STAR's ratio of 5 staff to one staff member was the most limited among partners consulted.
- Using STAR units as pick up locations and escorting children to nearby institutions such as schools or community centres may be another option for increasing STAR's capacity to serve more children, particular in terms of physical activity.
- Coordinating program schedules with agencies serving younger children, such as Ontario Early Years Centres, and sharing this information with parents could make STAR more accessible to families with children who are not all eligible for the STAR program because of age.
- Because The Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton already focuses on active living, healthy eating, and being engaged at school, parent desires for more physical and educational activities should be addressed by STAR going forward.
- Programming space options exist at Congress, including an Ontario Early Years Centre and a refurbished common room. There may also be opportunities to partner with the Congress tenants association around programming.
- Maximized use of space is crucial for City Housing Hamilton when taking a unit off the market for community programming use. A minimum of 3-4 days of use per week minimum would be ideal.
- Retaining older, more mature staff has been difficult for STAR because of the limited number of hours available.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

Through all of the findings discussed in the previous sections, there are several key issues that emerge as important for any programming decisions that The Boys and Girls Clubs of Hamilton may make around the STAR program. The four key issues explored in this section are improving awareness, improving service, increasing capacity, and coordinating with other programs.

Clearly a lack of awareness among residents about STAR is a crucial challenge facing the program. Awareness is essential to increase participation and also to strengthen relationships and communication between STAR and tenants in the communities it serves. Stronger relationships with a broader range of tenants can also help STAR to be a more responsive program on an ongoing basis as residents' needs change and as residents themselves move in and out of the neighbourhoods. STAR may wish to explore ways to improve awareness, including advertising to all existing tenants at community events, other programs, door-to-door flyers, and partnering with City Housing Hamilton community relations workers to share information about STAR with new tenants. Communicating about which days STAR offers programming in each area is an important part of building awareness. Specific days of service should reflect the preferences of parents as indicated in this report, but more important than the particular days of service is consistency. This allows for clear and more predictable communication with parents in the areas, which makes the program more accessible.

A second issue worth further discussion is improving service by addressing parent complaints. Of course most parents who do send their children to STAR were satisfied with the program. Still, STAR may be able to increase participation by addressing some of the complaints from parents who were unsatisfied with the program. Service could be improved (and most parent complaints could be addressed) by undertaking the following actions:

- Offering more organized activities
- Offering more physical and educational activities
- Beginning the program closer to dismissal time at area schools (such as at 3:30p.m.)
- Making transportation easier for lone parents, possibly through use of approved volunteers to walk children to and from the program, or by supporting parents in designating another adult or sibling to escort their children to and from STAR
- Exploring opportunities for staff capacity building around working with children with disabilities
- Prioritizing hiring staff who have French or other language capacity in addition to English
- Offering more continuous service between summers and school year
- Exploring staffing models that include a mix of more and less experienced staff, leaders in training, and/or volunteers

A third key issue drawn from consultation findings is increasing STAR's capacity. Many parents complained about their children being turned away when STAR was at capacity, suggesting that demand for STAR among residents is greater than the current level of participation. For this reason STAR may want to explore ways to increase its current capacity. Some parents suggested increasing the number of staff and/or the number of days that STAR operates so that more children could attend. These options could be explored, though of course would have resource implications. Another option for increasing capacity could be through use of volunteers, though as discussed this also can impact resources. Increasing the ratio of children to staff members could be another way to increase STAR's capacity. Looking at ratios used by comparable programs serving comparable ages could help to determine what other ratios might be reasonable. STAR could also increase capacity by offering programming at larger locations such as schools or community centres. Offering STAR at Congress Crescent again would be

another way of increasing the program's capacity. As discussed above, there spaces are available at Congress that could likely be used for STAR if the program had staff capacity to offer service at that location.

The fourth key issue of coordination with other programs is a crucial one. Community programs all aim to benefit the communities they serve in some ways, and all require resources to operate. In order to use limited resources most effectively to achieve maximum community benefit, programs should work together to offer programming at complementary rather than competitive ways. For STAR this means collaborating with programs in the areas it serves around scheduling, communication, and use of space.

In terms of scheduling, STAR should attempt to coordinate programming days with Wesley's reading buddies program at Kenora so that the programs are not offered on the same days. Since no clear preference emerged from respondents from Kenora, STAR may want to consider operating in Kenora on Wednesdays and Thursdays. If the reading buddies and STAR programs operated on different days of the week in the same unit, that unit could become a more well-known hub for children and youth programming, which could in turn boost participation levels. Another option for coordinating scheduling would be for STAR to work with the Early Years Centres operating in the same areas to see if offering programs at the same time would be possible, allowing younger and older children in families to access programming at the same time and therefore making programs more accessible.

Communication is another avenue in which coordination between service providers can increase community benefit. Particularly when service providers are coordinating scheduling, communicating this coordination to parents can be an important way to encouraging participation and reducing barriers to accessing programs like STAR. Service providers could also work together on cross-promotions for their programs in order to save on staff time spent in developing and distributing flyers, for example.

Lastly, space is another way for services to coordinate to maximize community benefit. Particularly when many residents are not aware of a program, or programs have low attendance, having space dedicated to only one program that operates a few hours a week is not an efficient use of community resources. For example, in Kenora, neither the STAR unit nor the unit used for Wesley's reading buddies is used for other activities at other times; each is used for after school programming two days per week. Coordination between STAR, Wesley, and City Housing Hamilton may be the best way to use space efficiently to maximize community benefit in Kenora. Such collaborations may also be beneficial in other areas depending on what local programs operate and where.

This discussion of the issues of improving awareness, addressing complaints, increasing capacity, and coordinating with other programs helps to inform the recommendations and next steps offered in the following section.

## 6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

### 6.1 Recommendations

Taking all of the above findings and discussion into consideration, this report now offers the following set of recommendations under the four issues raised in the discussion section. Here they are restated as imperatives or mechanisms for improving service in the next period reorganization: improve awareness; increase capacity; improve service; and coordinate with community partners.

#### *Improve Awareness*

- Advertise more. Consider coordinating with other service providers to make advertising more cost effective and beneficial to community members.
- Make pick-up and drop off policy clear. Try to make the policy more accessible by informing parents that they can designate other adults or siblings as approved escorts and providing forms to do so.
- CHH employs community relations workers who may be able to visit residents shortly after their tenancy begins and share information about the STAR program if tenants have children in the ages that STAR serves or younger (since these children will eventually reach the age of eligibility).

#### *Increase Capacity*

- Consider using volunteers to escort children to and from STAR if parents are unable to pick up/drop off (with parental designation/approval). For example, explore the possibility of having high school students earn their volunteer hours helping with the after school program, and then drawing from this pool for summer camp employees.
- Consider more flexible ratios, depending on ages, needs, etc.
- Look for opportunities to expand capacity to serve more children with increased staff or trained volunteers. Having the STAR locations as a pick-up point and running programming at the East Kiwanis Community Centre, local schools, or other larger/institutional locations could be another way to increase capacity and include more physical activity programming.
- Offer service on as many days as resources allow, and consider including weekend days.

#### *Improve Service*

- Offer more organized activities
- Offer more physical and educational activities
- Begin the program closer to dismissal time at area schools (such as at 3:30p.m.)
- Make transportation easier for lone parents, possibly through use of approved volunteers to walk children to and from the program, or by supporting parents in designating another adult or sibling to escort their children to and from STAR
- Explore opportunities for staff capacity building around working with children with disabilities
- Prioritize hiring staff who have French or other language capacity in addition to English
- Offer more continuous service between summers and school year
- Explore staffing models that include a mix of more and less experienced staff, leaders in training, and/or volunteers

### *Coordinate With Other Community Partners*

- Coordinate with other services in area about scheduling to maximize community benefit. Consider moving days to complement other services.
- Collaborate with local OEYCs and advertise any service schedule coordination to parents in order to increase participation from families with children who are not all eligible for STAR because of age.
- Explore the possibility of operating both STAR and Wesley's reading buddies programs at Kenora out of one unit of housing on different days with Wesley Urban Ministries and City Housing Hamilton.

## **6.2 Action Plan**

To prioritize the above recommendations, this section proposes time frames in which recommendations should be implemented in the short, medium, and long-term.

**Short Term:** Focus on implementing as many of the recommendations under **Improve awareness** as possible. These recommendations are generally no or low-cost, and would help to address the most common finding from consultations with tenants.

Either concurrently or after some of the recommendations to improve awareness have been implemented, begin work on the first two recommendations under **Coordinate with other community partners**. These recommendations are also fairly low cost, but will require more time and communication with partners and so will likely take longer to implement than those aimed at improving awareness. The third recommendation of exploring possibilities of sharing space in Kenora should not be undertaken in the short term as it will require more coordination.

The recommendation to consider more flexible ratios could also be implemented in the short term.

**Medium Term:** Begin implementing the recommendations under **Improve service**. Most of these recommendations will require program planning or staff recruitment and training. Some will also involve longer term planning. Also in medium-term is when STAR should begin to explore the possibilities of sharing space with the reading buddies program at Kenora.

**Long Term:** Direct efforts to implementing the remaining recommendations under **Increase capacity**. Most of these recommendations are longer-term activities that will likely involve seeking funding to support increased staff numbers and/or capacity.

## APPENDIX A – TENANT SURVEY

[Only the English version of the survey is attached here. French and Arabic versions are available upon request. Contact Carla Klassen: [cklassen@sprc.hamilton.on.ca](mailto:cklassen@sprc.hamilton.on.ca) or 905-522-1148, Ext. 304]

### STAR Parent Survey

Pour la version française de cette enquête, voir page 4.

أنظر في صفحة رقم 7 للأستطلاع باللغة العربية

The STAR program (Skills Through Activity and Recreation) offers after school programs, March Break camps, and summer camps for children ages 5 to 15 in select Hamilton Housing Corporation communities.

STAR wants to hear from parents in your area about how they could change their programs to better meet your family's needs. STAR has asked the Social Planning and Research Council to gather input from residents through this short survey. The survey is also available in French (see page 4) and Arabic (see page 7). The survey should take about 5 to 10 minutes to complete. By completing it you can enter a draw for one of twelve \$100 gift cards to a grocery store of your choice. To enter the draw, just fill out your name and phone number on the last page, separate the pages and return the draw ballot and survey to the place you got the survey. None of your answers will be connected with your name or phone number – these will only be used for the draw.

1. Are you a parent or guardian of one or more children?

Yes

No

If No, you do not need to complete the rest of the survey. Thank you for your time! You can still enter the draw by filling out your name and phone number on the last page of this survey.

2. Check all that apply. I have sent my children (or children in my care) to STAR's:

- After school program
- March break camps
- Summer camps
- My children used to go to STAR, but don't go anymore.
- I've never sent my children to STAR.

**\* If you've never sent your children to STAR, please skip to question # 5.**

3. About how often do your children go to STAR?

- less than once a month
- once a month
- two or three times a month
- once a week
- more than once a week

4. A) On a scale from 1-4, with 1 being not happy at all and 4 being very happy, how happy are you with the services STAR offers?

1 = Not at all happy    2 = somewhat unhappy    3 = somewhat happy    4 = very happy

B) What are your reasons for being happy or unhappy with STAR's services?

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**\*Please skip to question #7.**

5. What might make you want your children to go to STAR? **(Answer only if your child isn't in the STAR Program.)**

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6. If you don't send your children to STAR, why is that? Circle all that apply. **(Answer only if your child isn't in the STAR Program)**

Never heard of it    Doesn't fit my schedule    My child is already in another program

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

7. For after school programs, are you happy with the days STAR offers services in your area?

I'm happy with the days and times that STAR offers services in my area.

OR

It would be best for my family if STAR offered services on (select up to 4 days):

Monday      Tuesday      Wednesday      Thursday      Friday      Saturday      Sunday

8. Overall, what times could STAR offer services that would be best for you and your family?

Mornings (9am-12pm)    Afternoons (1pm-4pm)    After school (4pm-6pm)    Evenings (6pm-8:30pm)

9. Please finish this sentence "The thing that really gets in the way of me sending my children to STAR more often is..." (Examples: days or times STAR operates, the activities, ages of children served, the level of supervision, convenience, pick-up/drop-off policy, language, or other)

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10. Which of these does STAR have to include in their programs for you to send your children there?  
(Circle all that apply.)

Learning      Fun      Physical activity      Healthy snacks      Skill-building      Social time

11. Would you be comfortable sending your children to STAR if your children would be supervised by a mix of paid staff and volunteers?  
 Yes       No

12. What is the largest number of children in your child/children's age group(s) for each staff member that you would be comfortable with? For example, selecting "2" means you're comfortable having no more than 2 children per staff member at STAR.

2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

13. What kinds of activities or services would you like to see at STAR that you don't see right now?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. How many children in each age group do you have in your care?

Age	Number of children in that age group
4 and under	
5-6	
7-8	
9-10	
11-12	
13-15	
16 and above	

Thank you for completing this survey. Your input will be used to help STAR improve its services. If you have any questions or concerns about the survey, please contact Carla Klassen, Social Planner at the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton: 905-522-1148 extension 304, or by email at: [cklassen@sprc.hamilton.on.ca](mailto:cklassen@sprc.hamilton.on.ca)

# STAR Survey Ballot Form

Thank you for completing our survey! Your feedback will help STAR adjust its programming to better meet the needs and desires of residents like you.

To enter a draw for one of twelve \$100 gift cards from a grocery store of your choice, please print your first and last names on this ballot with your phone number. The information on this ballot will not be connected with your survey answers.

Winning ballots from this draw will be chosen on August 24, 2012. If your ballot is chosen you will receive a call from the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

I prefer a gift card from the following grocery store:

\_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX B – TENANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How did you initially hear about the STAR program? (Possible prompt: What was the reason that first prompted you to give STAR a try?)

*\*If they haven't sent their kids to STAR, but have heard of it:*

Have you tried to send your kids there, but were refused?

Why don't you send your kids to STAR?

Do they do other programs? If yes, which ones?

*\*then ask questions 6 to 11 as hypothetical questions, i.e. "How *would* that policy affect you and your ability to send your kids to STAR?"*

2. What has your experience been with STAR? (Possible prompts: how long have your kids attended STAR? How has STAR changed since you first heard about it? Are you/your family currently attending? If not, why did you stop?)
3. A) What do you like about STAR?  
b) What do you **not** like about STAR?
4. A) What do your kids like about it?  
b) What do your kids **not** like about STAR?
5. What (if anything) are some possible issues/concerns you (or your kids) might have at STAR? So maybe things like **activities**, language, times/days of programs, ages, policies, services offered. Does that make you think of anything else that might be a concern for you?
6. STAR requires all children attending their programs to be dropped off and picked up by a parent, guardian, sibling, or other designated adult. How does that policy affect you and your ability to send your kids to STAR? What are your concerns about your kids getting to and from STAR safely? (If no concerns: Are you not concerned about safety because you live nearby the STAR location, or another reason?)
7. (If there are barriers from the policy) How could it be changed to work for your family? What would be the best way of doing safe drop-off and pick-up at STAR?

8. STAR used to be more informal about how many kids could attend at once, but that has changed. Now STAR will serve up to five kids for every staff member. Does this change make you more likely or less likely to send your kids to STAR?
9. Are you comfortable with the number of staff supervising the number of kids at STAR? (Possible prompts: [If not comfortable] What are some suggestions that you might have regarding supervision?)
10. How do you think STAR can improve as a service? What (if anything) should be added, changed, or taken out?
11. Is there anything else about STAR that we should talk about that we haven't covered? (Possible prompts: Do you have any other comments or questions about what we've discussed?)