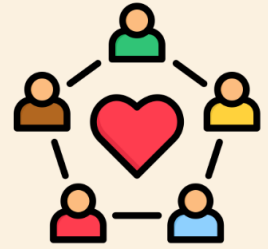




Welcoming Streets Initiative

Qualitative Evaluation of Downtown St. Catharines Pilot Project

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PREPARED BY: Dr. Samantha McAleese

Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology & Criminology
Brock University

Isha Brar

Research Assistant
Department of Sociology & Criminology
Brock University

Dr. Scott Neufeld

Assistant Professor
Department of Psychology
Brock University



PREPARED FOR:



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Introduction and Summary

In December 2024, the [Niagara Regional Council](#) voted to allocate funds to a pilot project to better support people experiencing homelessness, street-involved community members, and business owners and employees in downtown St. Catharines. The program, Welcoming Streets, has already been implemented in other Ontario cities (e.g., Guelph, Brampton, Kingston, Belleville) and has been identified by local advocates, practitioners, and business owners as a promising option for St. Catharines and other municipalities in the Niagara Region.

Welcoming Streets is a peer-led street outreach program that aims to build connections and remove barriers to existing services and resources, with the broader goal of creating more inclusive communities. The program fosters meaningful partnerships among social service providers, businesses, and people with lived and living experiences of poverty and housing insecurity. Outreach through Welcoming Streets began in downtown St. Catharines in April 2025, and funding for the pilot project ends in Spring 2026.

Researchers from Brock University were approached by the two lead organizations ([REACH Niagara](#) and [Positive Living Niagara](#)) to support the qualitative evaluation of the Welcoming Streets pilot in downtown St. Catharines. The evaluation team (Dr. Samantha McAleese, Dr. Scott Neufeld, and Isha Brar) collaborated with project partners to design a comprehensive evaluation plan to report on whether the Welcoming Streets pilot in downtown St. Catharines is meeting its stated objectives:

- Connect with people congregating in public spaces to ensure they have access to supports relevant to their lives.
- Improve conditions in the neighbourhood by bringing back the sense of community and positive street culture of the past, where people work together to support one another.
- Monitor the community to ensure everyone is safe, and provide support as needed.
- Act as a positive role model for our community.
- Help individuals link up to service providers by providing warm transfers to service.
- Creating positive representations of equity-deserving populations to minimize stigma and stereotypes.

This evaluation of the downtown St. Catharines Welcoming Streets Initiative used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating surveys and focus groups across multiple participant groups: Block Leaders, business owners, employees, community partners, Welcoming Streets Team Leaders, organizational leadership, and street-involved community members. These qualitative methods helped us gather a range of perspectives on Welcoming Streets from those who deliver it, those who encounter it, and those it is designed to support. The findings indicate that the pilot

in downtown St. Catharines is off to a strong start and operating as intended: as a visible, relational approach to safety in public spaces that prioritizes dignity and connection over enforcement and exclusion.

While the overall sentiment towards Welcoming Streets is positive, this evaluation of the pilot initiative identifies clear opportunities to strengthen and sustain its impact. What is important to note when reading these recommendations is that gaps in service identified in survey and focus group responses are shaped by both individual experiences and the broader local service landscape. Specifically, calls to extend evening and weekend hours must be carefully considered, given that other resources and services in St. Catharines and the Niagara Region are typically unavailable during these times. In other words, extending Welcoming Streets' hours in isolation risks reproducing (and perhaps exaggerating) service gaps, especially if referral pathways, safe spaces, and supports remain largely unavailable outside standard operating hours.

With this broader context in mind, [recommendations](#) emerging from the evaluation of the downtown St. Catharines Welcoming Streets Initiative include:

- **increasing staffing and outreach teams** to improve response times and expand geographic coverage beyond the downtown core;
- **pursuing a stronger municipal partnership** to build on the City of St. Catharines' public support for the program and translate it into more sustained, operational engagement;
- **securing stable, long-term funding** to support program continuity, mobility, and outreach capacity;
- **developing partnerships** to create safe gathering spaces that reduce reliance on precarious and over-policed public spaces;
- **strengthening internal coordination** and mechanisms for incorporating lived experience and community feedback into ongoing program development; and
- **aligning hours of operation with community needs** while simultaneously advocating for expanded service availability across the local service landscape, particularly in the evenings and on weekends, to ensure outreach efforts can meaningfully connect people to appropriate resources and supports.

For more information and updates about the downtown St. Catharines Welcoming Streets Initiative, please visit: reachniagara.com/programs/welcoming-streets



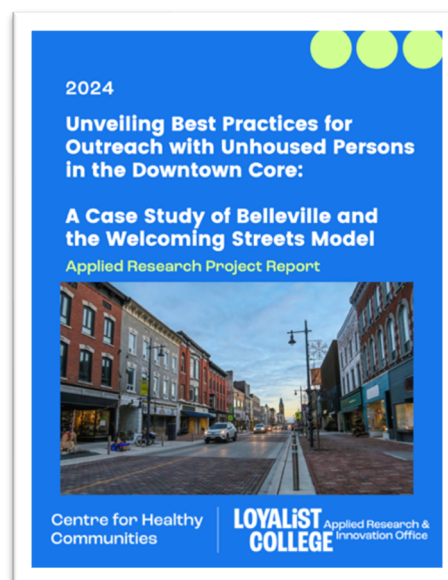
Background

As of September 2025, approximately [1,264 people](#) in the Niagara Region were experiencing homelessness. The [2024 Point-in-Time count](#) and survey reveal a diverse unhoused population. For example, individuals experiencing homelessness range from children under 15 to seniors over 65. More than half of respondents (56%) report chronic homelessness. Across the region, 305 short-term emergency shelter beds are available, but only a limited number are accessible to new intakes on any given day. Furthermore, shelter access is shaped by multiple factors beyond bed capacity, including eligibility restrictions, personal safety concerns, the presence of pets or excessive personal belongings, and so on.

Due to these barriers, people experiencing housing instability may continue to rely on public spaces for shelter, creating visible challenges in shared community spaces, particularly in places like [downtown St. Catharines](#). The situation has been widely described as a crisis, causing tension among those who work, live in, and visit the downtown core. Local [media have highlighted frustrations](#) among business owners and residents, prompting **[calls for more meaningful investments from all levels of government to prevent and end homelessness in Niagara](#)**.

Over the past few years, Welcoming Streets initiatives have played a key role in other Ontario cities by fostering connections among community members and acting as a bridge between unhoused individuals and business owners. [Evaluations from cities like Belleville, Ontario](#), suggest that the model is quite effective in this regard. Outreach workers have built good relationships in downtown spaces, helping to address the concerns of business owners, unhoused community members, and all residents and visitors (including providing resources and making referrals to other essential supports). The St. Catharines pilot draws on this experience while highlighting the importance of including people with lived and living experiences of homelessness.

The complete evaluation report on The Welcoming Streets program in Belleville, Ontario, can be accessed here (click on image).



Analysis of Survey Responses

This section highlights key takeaways from the surveys. Complete, unedited responses are included [here](#).

Welcoming Streets Block Leaders

At the time of completing the survey in October 2025, most Block Leaders had been working with the Welcoming Streets Initiative for at least 5 months.

Overall, Block Leaders (n=17) feel very confident (n=5) or extremely confident (n=10) in their ability to conduct outreach and connect people with appropriate services and resources. Additionally, the majority of Block Leaders feel they are often (n=11) or always (n=4) able to connect people with the services or supports they need. Except for two respondents, most Block Leaders feel that the Welcoming Streets Initiative has contributed to a more inclusive and connected community in downtown St. Catharines.

Block Leaders highlighted the multifaceted role they play, offering both practical support and human connection. For example, Respondent 1 described their work as **"Helping people in need, provide support with connecting to resources and guidance on making informed decisions,"** while Respondent 6 emphasized **"being the platform that connects the gap between homeless and community members."** Many Block Leaders framed their contributions in terms of giving back and fostering community pride, such as Respondent 14, who wrote **"Helping others, contributing to society and pride in the community,"** and Respondent 10, who described the work as **"Rewarding. I enjoy helping and giving back to the community."**

Emotional rewards and personal development were frequently highlighted in survey responses. For example, Respondent 11 said, **"It gives me self-esteem, dignity and hope...It lifts my spirit to be able to work,"** while Respondent 4 described the program as **"a guiding light...in my frame of mind, has been a great success in this community."** Respondents also recognized the tangible, life-sustaining aspects of their work. Respondent 17 described **"giving out water and snacks...provide a listening ear,"** whereas Respondent 8 emphasized **"saving lives, learning from elders, being part of the community."**

Amid overwhelmingly positive feedback about Welcoming Streets, there was awareness of the complexity of the Block Leader role. For example, Respondent 7 questioned whether some actions risked **"enabling"** certain behaviours, signalling reflection on the moral and ethical dimensions of their engagement with street-involved community members.

Block Leaders report that most people are looking for support with access to **food and water** (n=12), **shelter or housing** (n=11), **harm-reduction supplies**

(n=11), **access to (mental) health care** (n=17), and **help with ID paperwork** (n=6). Many (n=10) noted that people also appreciate having someone else to talk to. Block Leaders have observed some changes in the community since starting their role with Welcoming Streets, including **improved relationships between businesses and street-involved individuals** (n=14), **reduced stigma and stereotyping** (n=11), and a **stronger overall sense of community** (n=10). Much of the program's impact stems from bridging the gap, or easing the tension, between businesses and street-involved individuals, creating connections that might not otherwise exist.

According to Block Leaders, the program's strengths include consistency, compassion, and practical support, particularly in meeting people's basic needs. Block Leaders describe a range of positive changes resulting from the program, emphasizing increased awareness and connection to services. Respondent 1 noted that **"People are more aware of the services in the community. People are reaching out to get connected to services within the community,"** while Respondent 5 observed that **"people are able to approach us now without hesitation."** Relationships between businesses and street-involved individuals have improved, according to Block Leaders, with Respondent 3 highlighting that **"Businesses are more open to homeless people entering,"** and Respondent 7 noting that **"businesses are more likely to contact Welcoming the Streets than calling the police."**

Many respondents emphasized the broader social and emotional impact of the program, including increased compassion and understanding, as described by Respondent 12, who wrote, **"Many business owners have become more understanding of the struggles people are going through...Unhoused folks have become more understand[ing] also that we are not here to judge...but rather try to help support them."** Respondent 10 captured the sense of strengthened community support, stating, **"People in the community are more comfortable connecting with Block Leaders...[and] those struggling have more of a support system since this program has started."** Practical improvements, such as clean streets, harm reduction efforts, and assistance with food and shelter, were also highlighted.

Survey responses indicate that Block Leaders widely perceive the Welcoming Streets Initiative as fostering trust, compassion, and stronger communication among community members, businesses, and individuals experiencing homelessness, yielding both tangible and relational benefits. Most Block Leaders (n=13) agree that the Welcoming Streets Initiative has contributed to **a more inclusive and connected community**. Suggestions for improvement include **extended hours** and weekend shifts, **safe spaces** for socializing and activities, **increased funding** for outreach and events, and **better coordination** among Block Leaders. Despite these areas for growth, positive sentiment dominates, with most Block Leaders expressing **pride and motivation** in their role.

Business Owners, Employees, and Community Partners

Of those who responded to the survey, eight (8) are business owners in St. Catharines, five (5) are employees of those businesses, and seven (7) are representatives of community partner organizations. Most respondents are located in downtown St. Catharines (n=12), with others in Queenston (n=6) and in Geneva Square (n=2). All respondents had heard of the Welcoming Streets Initiative, and most (n=13) reported being very familiar with the program and/or having directly interacted with someone from the program.

Respondents understand the goals of Welcoming Streets as providing compassionate outreach that supports street-involved individuals while fostering safer, more connected communities. Many emphasized engagement and connection to services. For example, Respondent 3 described the goal as to **“engage with clients experiencing homelessness, assist with immediate needs and referrals,”** and Respondent 16 highlighted **“assessing their needs and pointing them in the direction for the help they need.”** A strong theme across responses was acting as a bridge between unhoused individuals, community agencies, and businesses. For example, Respondent 9 described Welcoming Streets as **“a great contact point between business owners and the vulnerable unhoused population,”** and Respondent 18 noted its role in **“bridg[ing] a gap between businesses in the community and the clients the community agencies serve.”** Several respondents also stressed the importance of reducing unnecessary police involvement through de-escalation and non-punitive responses, positioning Welcoming Streets as an alternative to enforcement.

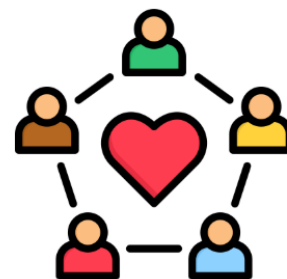
Since the launch of Welcoming Streets in April 2025, respondents most often reported their perception of increased outreach and support for people in public spaces (n=12) and improved relationships between businesses and street-involved community members (n=11), suggesting a clear perceived shift toward **more relational and supportive interactions in downtown St. Catharines**. Fewer, but still notable, respondents observed reduced stigma and stereotyping (n=8) and a greater sense of community (n=6), indicating emerging cultural change alongside practical impacts. A small number reported no noticeable change (n=4), underscoring that transformation is uneven and still unfolding. Open-ended responses add nuance, highlighting **improved access to resources**, the value of **a trusted alternative** point of contact when someone is in need, and **a growing willingness to engage with Welcoming Streets**. Several respondents also pointed to the program’s internal impact, describing **“an incredible boost for the block leaders,”** including increased confidence and a renewed sense of purpose.

Most (n=15) respondents agree or strongly agree that Welcoming Streets has contributed to a more inclusive and connected community, and when asked what the initiative is doing well, they most frequently emphasized its visible, relational, and responsive presence in downtown St. Catharines. Several highlighted the program’s accessibility and reliability, noting that it is **“easy to call them and**

[they] immediately answer,” which **“make[s] us feel better”** and that staff are **“physically present and quick to answer a call when needed.”** Relationship-building was often described by these respondents as a strength, particularly engagement with people experiencing homelessness in a **“welcoming and empathetic manner”** and the ability to **“build connections with those street-based community members”** while supporting everyday needs such as meals and outreach. Respondents also underscored Welcoming Streets’ role in mediation and de-escalation, with several noting its effectiveness in **“bridging conversations between business owners and street people,”** reducing conflict, and resolving situations without police involvement. Although a small number of respondents expressed uncertainty about the program’s reach or impact, the dominant narrative portrays Welcoming Streets as a trusted, compassionate presence and an option that meets people where they are and strengthens the social fabric of the downtown core.

Respondents’ suggestions for improving or expanding Welcoming Streets largely center on **increasing capacity, coverage, and visibility**, while recognizing the complexity of the issues the program aims to address. Several emphasized the need for **more teams, staff, and participants to cover additional areas and reach more businesses**, alongside **extended or later response hours and improved response times**. Respondents also highlighted the need for **more funding** and acknowledged that greater financial resources could support expanded capacity and a **more mobile outreach** model to reach additional neighbourhoods. Others suggested expanding beyond St. Catharines to areas like Niagara Falls. A smaller number highlighted the need for more concrete destinations and resources to which individuals can be referred, as well as **incorporating community members’ lived experiences more directly into program development**. While some respondents expressed uncertainty or felt the program did not need to expand, the prevailing sentiment points toward growth guided by adequate funding, more outreach workers, and opportunities for ongoing community input.

These responses from business owners, employees, and community partners portray Welcoming Streets as an initiative widely perceived to be improving interactions in downtown St. Catharines while centring dignity, care, and trust for street-involved community members.



Street-Involved Community Members

Surveys were administered with street-involved community members (n=9) in February 2026.

The frequency of contact with Welcoming Streets varied among respondents, with most reporting they had interacted with a Block Leader a few times (n=6). Some reported interacting about once a week (n=1) or nearly every day (n=1), while one respondent had only interacted once. **Every respondent (n=9) indicated that they trust Welcoming Streets** and all reported feeling **welcomed** or **supported** by Block Leaders. This is a significant finding. People experiencing homelessness often struggle to trust outreach workers and social services. The fact that each person surveyed reports feeling safe and welcomed by Block Leaders highlights what a peer-led model can achieve in a relatively short time.

When asked what kinds of help they had received, respondents most frequently identified **food or water** (n=8) and **harm reduction supplies** (n=7). A **listening ear or emotional support** was also commonly noted (n=4), and several indicated they had received **help connecting with another resource or support** (n=3). One respondent had received help **finding housing or shelter**.

Respondents were asked what, if anything, makes Welcoming Streets different from other resources. Several emphasized the program's **visibility in the community** and described Block Leaders as being **"outside communicating - frontline," "outside helping," and "mobile,"** highlighting that their public presence is a meaningful distinction from other local services. One respondent noted that Welcoming Streets is **"the only one other than NASO" that** provides this kind of outreach, and another emphasized that there is **"nothing else like it out here."** The lived experience of Block Leaders was also identified as a source of credibility and connection, with one respondent simply describing it as **"real experience."**

Suggestions for improvement centred on a desire for expanded coverage, with one respondent noting **"not enough interactions"** and another calling for **"more/further routes."** A need for additional housing support was also raised (which we recognize is not within the purview of Welcoming Streets, but speaks to the depth of unmet needs that street-involved community members and outreach workers continue to navigate). Responses such as **"very good program," "great job!" and "brightens my day,"** suggest that street-involved community members experience the Welcoming Streets Initiative in a generally positive way.

Findings from street-involved community members provide important confirmation that the Welcoming Streets Initiative is reaching and positively impacting those it is designed to support. The program's relational, non-judgmental, and physically present model of outreach and engagement appears to be fostering trust among a population that often has reason to be cautious of institutional supports.

Analysis of Focus Group Responses

Welcoming Streets Block Leaders

Two focus groups were conducted with Welcoming Streets Block Leaders (n=8) in January and February 2026. The following summarizes key themes from those discussions.

Lived Experience as Foundational

One of the most prominent themes across both focus groups was the importance of lived experience to the effectiveness of the Welcoming Streets Initiative. Block Leaders repeatedly highlighted that their personal histories of homelessness, drug use, involvement with the shelter system, and/or navigating the local service landscape gave them a kind of credibility and relational ability that no formal training alone could provide. This shared experience was seen as both a personal asset and the core of the Welcoming Streets model.

"I know where they're at. I've been there, done that. I'm not teaching them but guiding them in a way to get what they need because I know what they are looking for."

— BL 3, Focus Group 1

"If we're doing it, they can do it too, right?"

— BL 5, Focus Group 2

This orientation shaped how Block Leaders approached their interactions with street-involved community members. Rather than positioning themselves as service providers delivering programming to clients, participants described their role in terms of guidance and mutual recognition. Several noted that street-involved community members are often more willing to engage with Block Leaders than with police or other outreach workers, precisely because Block Leaders are recognized as peers.

"I think it's a real human-to-human experience. And sometimes, like, you know, a snack in a bottle of water and a couple of minutes of conversation can change somebody's day, and it's a lot nicer to talk to us than it is to say the police or something like that."

— BL 1 Focus Group 1

"They would rather listen to me than a cop. Especially since I know half of them."

— BL 3, Focus Group 1

"It's like having an interpreter. Having the local knowledge and being tied into the resources."

— BL 8, Focus Group 2

Participants also reflected on the emotional aspect of this work. Being a **“safe person,”** someone people can confide in without fear of judgment or further marginalization, was seen as both a skill and a responsibility. Block Leaders described the importance of acknowledging people’s presence in straightforward, direct ways, such as making eye contact, using someone’s name, and pausing to ask how they are doing.

“A lot of people just walk by them like they’re invisible. If you even just walk back and say, “Hey, how are you doing?” with a smile on your face, just to acknowledge they exist.”

— BL 6, Focus Group 2

Adapting to the Weather

The focus groups took place at the end of January and early February of 2026, after the program resumed following a pause in outreach activities.¹ Winter weather conditions were a major concern in both sessions. Block Leaders described how extreme cold weather changes the nature of their work by intensifying the needs of street-involved community members. When temperatures drop, failing to connect someone with shelter, a blanket, or harm-reduction supplies is life-threatening.

The urgency of winter outreach was emphasized through participants’ stories of specific incidents. For example, a Block Leader recounted trying multiple times to contact a shelter by phone at the end of a shift, but receiving no answer, while someone was at risk of spending hours in -25°C temperatures. Without being able to secure a bed, the best response was to offer a blanket and direct the individual to a downtown church that would open later in the evening.

“All we could do, right at the end of the day, was get them a blanket because the church doesn’t have any — so we told her to go there that night, gave her a blanket, and hoped it would stay dry for five hours before they opened the doors. It doesn’t feel useful. I just want to do more. It’s never enough.”

— BL 2, Focus Group 1

Winter also created operational challenges for effective outreach. When temperatures dropped to -10°C or colder, some Block Leaders moved their shifts indoors at Start Me Up Niagara (SMUN). Participants had mixed feelings about this change. While they understood the reason, several said that indoor shifts felt less

¹ The Welcoming Streets Initiative launched in downtown St. Catharines in April 2025 with two part-time outreach workers (28 hours/week combined), each paired with one Block Leader per shift. Staffing was reduced to one outreach worker in early November 2025 when the other went on a leave of absence, and the program was paused in mid-November when that outreach worker accepted another position within REACH Niagara. A new full-time outreach worker was hired in mid-December 2025 and, following onboarding and a Block Leader training refresh, the program resumed in mid-January 2026 under a revised model: morning shifts pair the outreach worker with two Block Leaders; afternoon shifts see two Block Leaders conducting outreach independently while the outreach worker focuses on dedicated business engagement.

effective as inside SMUN, people already had access to snacks, safe supplies, and support, which made Block Leaders feel they had less to offer.

"There wasn't much I could do, like there really wasn't much I could offer anybody, which made me feel a little useless, to be honest."

— BL 2, Focus Group 1

"Outside, you're a lot more useful."

— BL 1, Focus Group 1

At the same time, participants noted that indoor shifts were not without value. One Block Leader directed people to an ODSP outreach worker who was present in the SMUN space. Another reconnected with a Block Leader who had not known the program had restarted and was signed up for the next training session. Still, the dominant view was that the program's relational model is most effective when Block Leaders are physically present on the street and accessible to people who might not seek out formal services.

Participants also observed that street-involved community members showed more appreciation for outreach during winter. The basic supplies Block Leaders carry (such as snacks, water, socks, hand warmers, and safe supplies) are valued more when exposure to extreme weather is a concern.

"Especially in the cold, you see them being extra grateful."

— BL 5, Focus Group 2

"Business owners were really impressed with what we were doing — even out in this weather."

— BL 5, Focus Group 2

Winter also raised concerns about the whereabouts of people who had previously been visible downtown. Following the implementation of [a zero-tolerance open-air drug use policy](#) in the Niagara Region, and with cold temperatures driving people off the streets, Block Leaders noted that fewer people were visible in public spaces. Rather than interpreting this as a sign of improvement, Block Leaders expressed concern that people were increasingly using substances alone (in tents, in doorways, in isolated locations) where the risk of a fatal overdose with no one present to intervene is significantly higher.

"I notice not as many people out on the streets — it could be because of the weather. [There are] concerns that more people are using alone — in a tent somewhere, for instance."

— BL 5, Focus Group 2

"If you nod off too long, you're dead. People often would rather use by themselves, because that way they don't have to share. So that's a really scary thing."

— BL 2, Focus Group 1

Block Leaders also offered practical suggestions to improve winter outreach capacity. These included carrying hot beverages (hot chocolate, coffee) on shifts; using larger, more robust carts or wagons suited to winter conditions rather than the two-wheeled bundle buggies used in summer; and developing a mobile capacity that would allow Block Leaders to cover more ground without walking for hours in extreme cold.

"It would be great if we could have, like, some hot beverages — one of those bladders with hot chocolate or coffee. Maybe like a wagon — a winter wagon with the big wheels."

— BL 1, Focus Group 1

Trust and Relationality

Across both focus groups, Block Leaders consistently described trust as the mechanism by which Welcoming Streets does what it does. Several Block Leaders described the importance of being a familiar face, someone people recognize and associate with safety rather than with enforcement, judgment, or the repeated experience of being turned away.

"A lot of people are really scared. They don't know what to expect from people. We're all scared. We don't know what we're going to encounter after being shot down, or told no, or feeling hopeless for such an extended period of time. A familiar face really would make a difference."

— BL 2, Focus Group 1

This emphasis on familiarity led to a small critique of the program's current structure, which is that having too many Block Leaders, with shifts distributed across a large pool of workers, reduces the likelihood that people will build genuine relationships with specific individuals. Participants expressed a preference for a smaller, more consistent cohort of Block Leaders whose faces become known to the people they serve over time.

"Not as many employees. They recognize us better instead of a stranger every time — people are more comfortable that way. It takes a few meetings sometimes. And people start getting comfortable."

— BL 3, Focus Group 1

Trust-building also took time on an individual level. One participant described supporting someone through the process of finding stable housing over the course of several weeks, showing up consistently, encouraging persistence, and navigating the administrative steps alongside them.

"I'm just a familiar face. Every week I saw him and was just like, keep with it, man, you're almost there."

— BL 5, Focus Group 2

Participants were also clear that trust is what makes people more willing to disclose their actual needs, accept referrals, and engage more actively with various services and supports.

Systemic Barriers and Service Gaps

While Block Leaders spoke with pride and commitment about the work they do, both focus groups surfaced a consistent frustration that the structural conditions shaping life on the street are largely beyond what any single outreach program can fix. Service gaps, lack of shelter beds, and the absence of evening and weekend supports created recurring situations in which Block Leaders knew what someone needed but were unable to provide it.

"Lack of services. You know, like calling a shelter and getting the answering machine repeatedly. When we're shutting down in 10 minutes, and this person's going to be outside for 5 hours in -25. Are you kidding me? It's just so unjust."

— BL 2, Focus Group 1

A repeated concern was the gap in outreach coverage outside of standard operating hours. Current shifts run from 9a.m. to 12p.m. and 1p.m. to 4p.m., with no evening, night, or weekend presence. Participants noted that this leaves significant windows of time, including the evening hours when many people are most active and most vulnerable, entirely uncovered.

"It would be nice if there was funding for like an evening shift. That's when everybody's out really, is after dinner."

— BL 5, Focus Group 2

"Night time for sure. And there's nowhere to get safe supplies after 7:30, right?"

— BL 3 and BL 2, Focus Group 1

The one-hour gap between the two daily shifts was also identified as a practical problem. Helping someone navigate the shelter system, reach a service provider, or access a resource does not stop at a fixed time.

Participants also described the cumulative effect of being turned away repeatedly on the people they serve. When someone has asked for help many times and been told no (no shelter beds, no services, no support), they eventually stop asking. Block Leaders expressed genuine concern about people who had become so discouraged that they would not engage even when help was available, because the pattern of disappointment had become their expectation.

"They know that more than half the time, we'll try to connect them to the shelter to get a bed, but reality is there's not going to be a bed. And they know that, so they might not want to waste their time listening to us."

— BL 7, Focus Group 2

Underlying these frustrations was a broader recognition that the issues, such as homelessness, addiction, mental illness, and poverty, require responses at a scale and scope far beyond what a daytime peer outreach program can provide. Block Leaders were not naive about this. They were clear that they could offer connection, compassion, and navigation support, but that without affordable housing, more shelter beds, expanded mental health and addiction services, and drop-in spaces, the structural causes of the situations they encountered daily would remain unaddressed.

"More beds. Affordable housing. People need to be inside, not outside. Period. There needs to be more openings. It's shameful this city has so many empty buildings, but people are sleeping outside."

— BL 2 and BL 1, Focus Group 1

Relationships with Business Owners

Block Leaders described their relationships with business owners as generally positive, with most businesses expressing appreciation for the program's presence and openness to the work Block Leaders do. When the program paused at the end of 2025, businesses noticed, and their reaction when outreach resumed highlighted how valued the program had become in downtown St. Catharines.

"Most of the businesses seemed extremely happy that we were back in motion."

— BL 5, Focus Group 2

"So even if it's not always super positive feedback when it wasn't there, they missed it, right? They noticed."

— BL 7, Focus Group 2

Block Leaders explicitly positioned themselves as an alternative to calling the police, offering a faster, more relational, and less escalatory response to situations involving street-involved community members. Several participants noted that businesses are increasingly opting to contact Welcoming Streets first, both because they trust the program and because they recognize that a police response can worsen situations.

"Calling the police can aggravate the situation as opposed to calling us."

— BL 6, Focus Group 2

At the same time, Block Leaders showed empathy for business owners, describing the real pressures of operating in an environment where street activity creates difficult-to-manage challenges. One participant described a business owner who had been robbed repeatedly and was beyond frustration, and rather than dismissing their reaction, acknowledged it as understandable given their experience.

Response time was identified as a key tension in the relationship with businesses. Participants noted that when someone calls for help, even a 1-hour delay can feel unacceptable, particularly in winter. The program's lack of a mobile transport option (for example, a vehicle that could move Block Leaders across the downtown) was identified as a practical constraint on their ability to respond promptly.

"The only thing they don't like is when they call and it takes us like 2 hours to get there. We could use some huskies and sleds."

— BL 3, Focus Group 1

Impact of Welcoming Streets on Block Leaders

A theme that emerged in both focus groups was the impact of the work on Block Leaders themselves. Participants spoke about what the role had given them: purpose, routine, income, connection, and a sense of contributing to their community. For several participants, the experience of being a Block Leader was inseparable from their own ongoing recovery and stabilization.

"The consistency and regularity of having an influx of the honourarium and the accountability of showing up somewhere on time — all of this is just good. Consistency is healthy, routine, all of it. It feels good to help, period. That's what it comes down to."

— BL 2, Focus Group 1

"I guess it just feels good. It's nice to help people out, and it's nice to see them get some help, and then you see them a week later, and they are trying to do better, looking better. It's rewarding. I never thought I would give a shit, but it does feel nice."

— BL 3, Focus Group 1

Several participants described the role as a stepping stone and a way to gain experience, build confidence, and move toward employment in community and social services more broadly. The low-barrier nature of the program was noted as important, as it is accessible to people who may not otherwise be eligible for formal employment or volunteer roles.

"It's been very rewarding for me — it got me out of my comfort zone, just getting out there and talking to people and being able to actually make a difference. The honorarium is also very useful, and it gets me into that type of work because I want to do that. It's kind of like a little stepping stone for me."

— BL 1, Focus Group 1

Welcoming Streets is designed not only to support street-involved community members and business owners, but also to support the people who deliver outreach. By employing people with lived experience, providing honoraria, and offering structured shifts and training, the program creates real work opportunities for people who are often excluded from them.

Recommendations from Block Leaders

Both focus groups ended with Block Leaders sharing suggestions to strengthen and expand the Welcoming Streets Initiative. These recommendations were consistent across both sessions and aligned closely with concerns raised in the survey data.

- **Extended and restructured hours:** Participants called consistently for evening and weekend shifts, coverage of the lunch-hour gap between the two daily shifts, and “wiggle room” that would allow Block Leaders to complete a referral or support task even if it extended past the end of a scheduled shift.
- **A smaller, more consistent cohort of Block Leaders:** Participants preferred a stable group of Block Leaders whose faces become familiar to the people they serve, rather than a large rotating pool of workers.
- **Winter-specific operational adaptations:** Hot beverages, larger and more robust supply carts suited to winter conditions, and a mobile transport option to improve response time and geographic coverage.
- **A downtown kiosk or stationary presence:** One participant suggested a physical kiosk at a central downtown intersection, offering a visible, accessible point of contact for both street-involved community members and businesses, complementing rather than replacing the mobile outreach model.
- **A safe indoor gathering space:** Participants called for a drop-in space where people could socialize, do activities, and spend time without having to make a purchase or meet eligibility criteria. Several noted that the closure of such spaces during COVID had created a gap that has not been filled. One participant was clear, however, that this is not Welcoming Streets’ role to fill alone: the program should advocate for such a space while recognizing it requires coordination across multiple organizations.

“I don’t want to sound like a naysayer, but I believe Welcoming Streets needs to stay in its lane in a lot of ways. We can’t be a drop-in centre. It all sounds good in a fairytale world, and we need it — but hopefully we can get other organizations and other people and everyone downtown to work together to add those things.”

— BL 7, Focus Group 2

These findings offer a detailed account of the Welcoming Streets Initiative from the perspective of the Block Leaders who implement it. Winter outreach, in particular, revealed both the program's strengths and its limitations. Block Leaders showed up in difficult conditions, adapted their approach, and provided support that was meaningful precisely because it was offered in a moment of acute vulnerability. At the same time, the structural gaps they navigated (full shelters, unanswered phones, services closed after dark) were more dangerous in winter, and the program's current operating hours left significant gaps uncovered. The recommendations that emerged from both focus groups affirm the value of the design of the Welcoming Streets Initiative and identify the resources, structures, and coordination needed to enable it to work as well as possible.

Team Leaders and Organizational Leadership

A focus group was conducted with Welcoming Streets Team Leaders and organizational leadership from REACH Niagara and Positive Living Niagara (n=3) in January 2026. The following presents key themes from that discussion.

The Value of the Peer-Led Model

All three participants articulated a clear understanding of what makes Welcoming Streets distinctive, which is the deliberate integration of people with lived and living experience into the program's delivery.

"Really utilizing the peer aspect of incorporating our members of the community with lived and living experience in creating that safe environment for each other, while also really putting a face to the name for the broader community to see that people who are unhoused or use substances or maybe experiencing ongoing mental health concerns are still members of the community and they do deserve to be treated as human."

From a leadership perspective, the peer model serves multiple functions simultaneously. It creates more effective outreach as Block Leaders can reach people that professional workers cannot, because their credibility is relational rather than institutional. It creates capacity-building opportunities for Block Leaders themselves, providing structured roles, honoraria, training, and a pathway toward employment for people who are often excluded from other jobs. And it serves a broader public education function, making visible to businesses and the general community the humanity and complexity of people experiencing homelessness.

"One of my favourite stories out of this is that one of the Block Leaders was hired by REACH. To me, that is the most beautiful part of this program. It's building their capacity to give them a really strong place in the community while building relationships with others that likely would have previously stigmatized them."

The pairing of Block Leaders with trained outreach workers was identified as a crucial structural element of the St. Catharines model. Participants clearly stated that this pairing is necessary, as outreach workers provide professional support, crisis navigation, and skill transfer that Block Leaders need to perform their work safely and effectively.

Multi-Agency Collaboration

A theme that emerged with genuine enthusiasm from all three participants was the quality of collaboration between REACH Niagara and Positive Living Niagara. The program's structure benefits greatly from two agencies with different mandates,

expertise, and organizational cultures sharing supervision of outreach workers and Block Leaders, coordinating logistics and data reporting, and presenting a unified presence to businesses, community partners, and the Niagara Region. According to participants, this worked exceptionally well, and its success was attributed to both organizational compatibility and the particular strengths of the individuals involved.

"The collaboration on every level, from management to team leads to outreach workers to Block Leaders, between both agencies — I don't think the program would have been as successful if the model wasn't picked up by two of the agencies in the region that have the best expertise for this program."

The shared supervision model allowed each team lead to contribute their respective strengths. One lead took primary responsibility for peer engagement and the relational dimensions of Block Leader support, while the other focused on data collection, mental health and addictions expertise, and community agency engagement. This complementary division of labour, while informal, was described as highly effective.

"There were things that [she] took on from a team lead perspective that weren't my strong suits, and kind of vice versa. I really leaned more into that personal engagement with the Block Leaders from a peer-led perspective. [She] did a lot of the data pieces and a lot of that engagement from that mental health and addictions perspective with the greater community."

Participants also described the practical benefits of the partnership for program design. REACH and Positive Living were able to draw on existing resources (including a client contract template from Positive Living's Consumption and Treatment Services) and adapt them for the Block Leader context. The ability to learn from each other's institutional knowledge and experience was identified as an important advantage, particularly in the early stages of implementation.

The REACH-Positive Living partnership was also noted as strategically significant for funding purposes. Funders increasingly look for inter-agency partnerships, and the Welcoming Streets model offered a demonstrably effective example of two agencies working together. This positions the program well for future funding opportunities.

Adapting to the Weather

Cold weather introduced specific operational challenges and required deliberate adaptation. A key development was a partnership with Start Me Up Niagara (SMUN), which agreed to host Block Leaders during cold-weather advisories. This arrangement benefited both programs as it gave Block Leaders a safe and warm

indoor base, and SMUN was able to improve its staff-to-client ratios, allowing more people into the drop-in space.

"Start Me Up Niagara has been incredibly helpful with the cold weather advisories. By them having — you can call them staff, I guess — there, it allows them to increase their capacity because they have better staff-to-client ratios. So then more people can come into their drop-in centre."

Leadership also noted that cold weather changes who is visible downtown, and why that matters. Fewer people on the street does not mean fewer people in need. As Block Leaders noted in their own focus groups, people may be using substances alone in tents or isolated locations, significantly increasing the risk of an unwitnessed overdose.

"We do see a seasonal shift in how people navigate downtown and how they congregate during different seasons. That's a big one."

Looking ahead to the warmer months, participants expressed curiosity about how the SMUN partnership would evolve and whether flexibility and partnership capacity would be available to support the program across different seasonal conditions.

Relationships with Business Owners

Building relationships and sustaining engagement with business owners were major topics of discussion. Participants described three broad categories of business response to the program: (1) a small group that was unwilling to engage at all; (2) a larger group that was broadly supportive but needed guidance on how to interact with street-involved community members in more compassionate and informed ways; and (3) another group that expressed support without following up until a second round of more intentional outreach, which brought some of them on as regular callers.

"The key point for business engagement is the follow-up. Now, were the calls reasonable for our service? No, but it still was a success that they were calling. We had the door open to engage with them."

A recurring challenge was helping businesses understand what Welcoming Streets is, and what it is not. For example, some contacted the program with expectations better suited to emergency services. Therefore, educating businesses about the types of responses the program can provide has been an ongoing effort.

The program's pause at the end of 2025 revealed that even businesses that had been difficult to engage were expressing relief when outreach resumed in January 2026.

"Sometimes you don't know what you have until it's gone. Even some of the more complicated businesses were saying, we're really glad that you're back. That really speaks volumes about the value of the program and the impact it was having."

The program's revised model directly addressed a gap identified during the early phase of the pilot, in which outreach workers were consistently absorbed by street-level crises and had little time left for business engagement. The new model dedicates approximately half of the outreach worker's time specifically to business outreach.

"We couldn't always do dedicated business engagement because they were just dealing with crises, truthfully, on the street all the time. We tried to redesign it, where half the time is spent doing outreach in collaboration with the Block Leaders on the street, and then the other half is spent strictly doing business engagement."

Opportunity for Municipal Collaboration

All three participants reflected on the relationship between the organizations involved with the Welcoming Streets Initiative and the City of St. Catharines and expressed a desire for ongoing collaboration as the program continues. While the City has offered enthusiastic public support for the program (in fact, two councillors were among those who originally brought it forward as a promising practice), there is still an opportunity to translate that support into a more sustained and meaningful partnership.

Participants noted that **"clearer communication channels"** and more consistent **"points of contact"** within the City would help the Welcoming Streets Initiative function more effectively and respond more quickly to emerging needs (such as garbage cleanup in the downtown core). They also suggested that building in more regular dialogue between the City and program partners could help align efforts, particularly where municipal policy directions intersect (and sometimes interfere) with the program's focus on harm reduction.

Looking ahead, participants were hopeful about a stronger partnership between the Welcoming Streets Initiative and the City of St. Catharines – one built on shared goals, regular communication, and mutual accountability.

"I really look forward to a strengthened partnership – and I will frame it very intentionally as a partnership with the municipality."

Funding and Scope

Funding instability was identified as a serious and ongoing challenge. Uncertainty about whether the program would be extended beyond December 2025 contributed directly to the six-week service pause, staff turnover, and difficulty recruiting qualified outreach workers for short-term contracts.

"Because of that, we had staff turnover, and then we're in this position to recruit for a very short-term contract, which is tough. At one point, we did think the funding was going to end in December. The outreach workers involved were worried about job security."

At the time of the focus group, the program was operating with a single outreach worker, which leadership described as a significant vulnerability.

"I also thought it was really important that we had two outreach workers available. Right now, we only have one, and that honestly is a big challenge. That's hard when you're trying to start a new program and you want a strong presence, and then you're dependent on one outreach worker."

Participants also noted that funding pressures can distort a program's identity over time, pushing organizations to expand their scope or take on functions that aren't a good fit in order to demonstrate impact and secure continued support.

"We're not interested in doing something if it's setting people up for complete failure. That's just not fair for frontline staff. We have to get the right funding to do this work based on the expectations."

"I think we have to still do that in a very intentional way, and also honouring what this program is meant to do, and not try to make it something that's maybe not meant to do. People are able to see the value in this program because it is really unique."

One specific version of this pressure is the call for Welcoming Streets to create or operate a drop-in space. Leadership acknowledged that the need for such spaces is real and well supported by the data, but made it clear that this is not the program's role. Welcoming Streets can advocate for drop-in spaces and help facilitate the partnerships needed to create them, without taking that on itself.

Participants also reflected on how much ongoing effort it takes to help people understand what the program does. Despite numerous presentations to businesses, community agencies, and funders, confusion about the program's scope persists, suggesting that public education is not a one-time task but an ongoing function of the program.

"It takes a lot for people to wrap their heads around it, truthfully. How do we get people to see the value in this program in complementing work that's already happening? People understand that it's not NASO, it's not an emergency service."

On the question of expanding Welcoming Streets to other Niagara municipalities, leadership cautioned that the conditions that have made the St. Catharines pilot work cannot be assumed to exist elsewhere, and that expansion should occur only where those conditions are in place.

"Every municipality in Niagara is so, so unique, and I think we have to acknowledge the critical success factors for this program to run well. Is that something that other municipalities have in place if we do talk about expansion?"

Recommendations from Leadership

The focus group's closing discussion invited participants to reflect on what Welcoming Streets is doing well and what changes they would want to see as the program moves forward. Several priorities emerged consistently.

- **A second outreach worker:** Operating with one outreach worker creates pressure on that individual and leaves the program without coverage when they are unavailable. This was the most concrete and urgent structural recommendation from the group.
- **Stable, multi-year funding:** Short-term contracts make it difficult to recruit, plan, and build the sustained relationships the program needs. Funding stability is a condition for the program to function as it is intended.
- **A stronger municipal partnership:** Building on the City of St. Catharines' public support, there is an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the City and the Welcoming Streets Initiative through more regular communication, clear points of contact, and ongoing collaboration and problem-solving, particularly where municipal policy decisions intersect with the program's goals and mandate.
- **Sustained community and partner education:** Helping businesses, community agencies, and the public understand what Welcoming Streets is and what it is not requires persistent, relationship-based engagement over time.

The leadership focus group offered a strategic view of the program that complements what Block Leaders and street-involved community members described in their own words. Participants were proud of what the program has achieved and candid about what it still needs.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for the downtown St. Catharines Welcoming Streets Initiative draw on the full evaluation dataset, including surveys of Block Leaders, business owners, employees, community partners, and street-involved community members, as well as focus groups with Block Leaders and organizational leadership.

Increasing staffing and outreach teams to improve response times and expand geographic coverage beyond the downtown core:

- The pilot demonstrated that a large, rotating pool of Block Leaders, while well-intentioned, reduces the frequency of individual shifts and disrupts the relational continuity central to the peer-led model. A second outreach worker is the most urgent and specific staffing gap identified by organizational leadership, and its absence creates significant operational vulnerability. Rather than simply adding more Block Leaders, the priority should be ensuring that the people delivering outreach are present often enough and consistently enough to build the trust the program depends on.

Pursuing a stronger municipal partnership to build on the City of St. Catharines' public support for the program and translate it into more sustained, operational engagement:

- Organizational leadership identified the relationship with the City of St. Catharines as one of the most significant opportunities for strengthening the program's impact. More regular communication and clearer points of contact between the City and program partners would help the Welcoming Streets Initiative respond more effectively to emerging community needs and ensure that municipal policy decisions are made with an awareness of, and in coordination with, the program's goals and mandate.

Securing stable, long-term funding to support program continuity, mobility, and outreach capacity:

- Short-term contracts have produced staff turnover, a six-week gap in service at the end of 2025, and sustained uncertainty about the program's future, all of which undermine the trust-building and relationship-based work that Welcoming Streets depends on. Adequate and stable funding is a condition for program integrity and for ensuring that frontline staff and Block Leaders are not set up to fail.

Developing partnerships to create safe gathering spaces that reduce reliance on precarious and over-policed public spaces:

- The need for drop-in spaces and safe indoor environments is clearly documented across the survey and focus group data, and their absence is one of the most consistent structural barriers Block Leaders encounter. The appropriate role for Welcoming Streets is to name this gap, facilitate coordination among organizations that can address it, and resist pressure to expand scope beyond what the program is designed and resourced to do.

Strengthening internal coordination and mechanisms for incorporating lived experience and community feedback into ongoing program development:

- Block Leaders have a reliable understanding of what is and is not working on the ground, from the gap between the two daily shifts, to the specific practical needs of winter outreach, to the impact of having too many Block Leaders with too few shifts. These insights should be systematically gathered and acted upon, both as a matter of program quality and as an expression of the peer model's core values.

Aligning hours of operation with community needs while simultaneously advocating for expanded service availability across the local service landscape:

- Block Leaders, organizational leadership, and street-involved community members all identified evening and weekend outreach as a priority. At the same time, extending outreach hours in isolation, without a corresponding expansion of the services people can actually connect to outside standard operating hours, risks creating a false promise. Expanding Welcoming Streets' hours of operation should therefore be pursued in conjunction with, and as part of a broader advocacy effort for, expanded service availability in St. Catharines and across the Niagara Region, particularly in the evenings and on weekends.

Survey Results

Welcoming Streets Block Leaders

Survey links (Microsoft Forms) were sent out to Welcoming Streets Block Leaders in October 2025, and a total of seventeen (17) Block Leaders responded.

An overview of responses (unedited) to all survey questions is presented below.

How long have you been working as a Block Leader with Welcoming Streets?

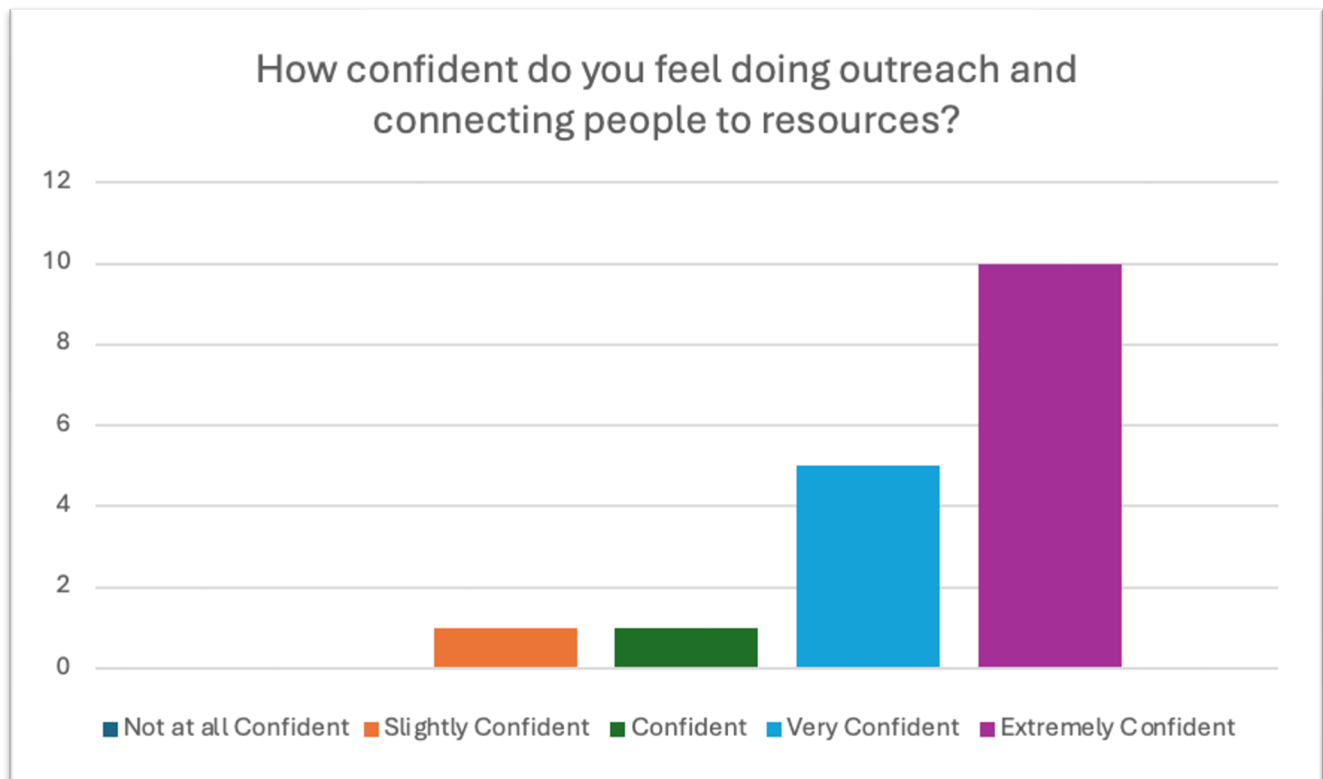
Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	April 30th 2025
Respondent 2	3 – 4 months
Respondent 3	May 2025
Respondent 4	may 2025
Respondent 5	5 months approx.
Respondent 6	four months
Respondent 7	since the first shift in may
Respondent 8	six months
Respondent 9	the end of june 2025
Respondent 10	5 months
Respondent 11	5 months
Respondent 12	6 Months
Respondent 13	7 months
Respondent 14	5 months
Respondent 15	5 months
Respondent 16	5 months
Respondent 17	3 months

How would you describe what it means to be a Block Leader in your own words?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"Helping people in need, provide support with connecting to resources and guidance on making informed decisions. Supported with finding shelter, health services and other community resources."
Respondent 2	"help others"
Respondent 3	"Given opportunity to help other people, provide support and navigation to resources. Getting in touch with community an better understanding of the needs of those in it. Seeing the positives and negatives of policies and laws providing insight into the direct effects of the community. Using personal knowledge to support those in the community"
Respondent 4	"inspiration , a great help, in not only daily contact and food munitions to the homeless, but also a guiding light as to getting lodging! In retrospect , the block leader program in my frame of mind, has been a great success in this community, thanks to all!"
Respondent 5	positive support assistant
Respondent 6	"being the platform that connects the gap between homeless and community members"
Respondent 7	"to me i feel that we are doing more enabling, thaing snacks and safe supplies and delivering them"
Respondent 8	"saving lives, learning from elders, being part of the community"
Respondent 9	"providing a bridge of compassion and communication between people on the streets experiencing mental and addiction. we are able to lend an ear , give direction to resources . speaking with biusnes owners and community members."
Respondent 10	"Rewarding. I enjoy helping and giving back to the community."
Respondent 11	"It gives me self-esteem, dignity and hope - that other good things will come. And it's enjoyable meeting new people. I've lived on the streets my whole life and feel good about helping out those still out there. It lifts my spirit to be able to work."
Respondent 12	"Community focused support to people in often difficult situations, helping to connect people to community resources that are available to help make life more managable. connecting businesses to resources and mediating between them and folks on the street. Straying connected to whats happening in our community,our streets and coming up with plans to help foster safe spaces."
Respondent 13	"rewarding, helping homelessness and business's solve everyday problems."
Respondent 14	"Helping others, contributing to society and pride in the community."
Respondent 15	"I love it. I enjoy helping others who need it such as homeless and people with mental health issues. I feel great when I can get them into a shelter or services that they require."
Respondent 16	"awesome"
Respondent 17	"Being friendly with businesses,, inquiring if they need support. Giving out water and snacks to folks, and talking to them to help with any problems, provide a listening ear."

How confident do you feel doing outreach and connecting people to services and resources?

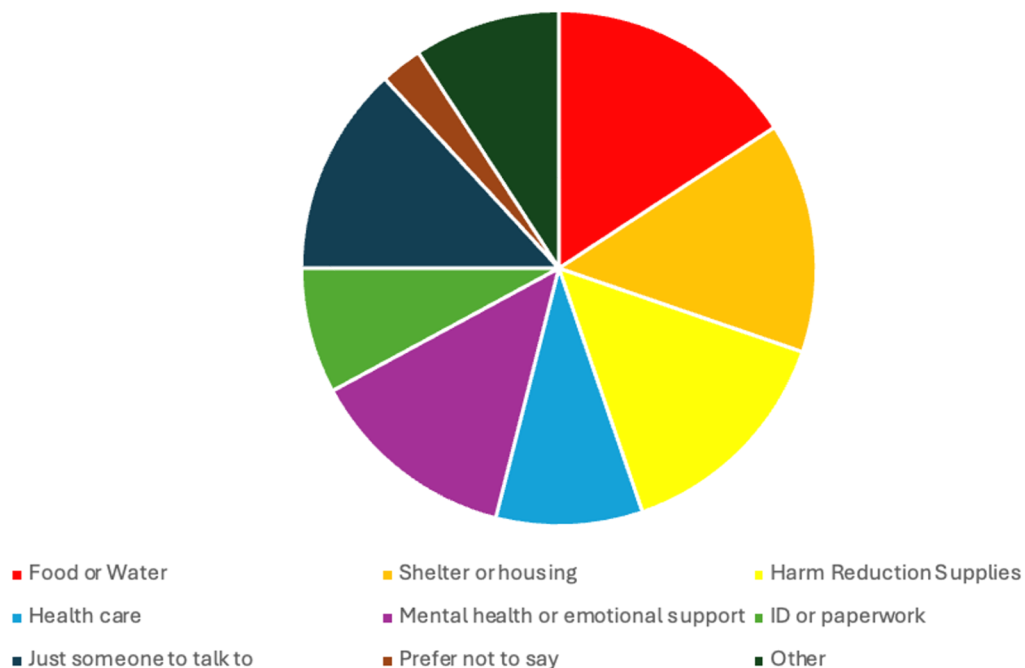
- Not at all confident (0)
- Slightly confident (1)
- Confident (1)
- Very confident (5)
- Extremely confident (10)



What kinds of support are people usually looking for when you connect with them?

- Food or water = 12
- Shelter or housing = 11
- Harm reduction supplies = 11
- Health care = 7
- Mental health or emotional support = 10
- ID or paperwork = 6
- Just someone to talk to = 10
- Prefer not to say = 2
- Other = 7
 - everything stated as cannot click more than one
 - all of the above
 - bus tickets
 - picking up sharps

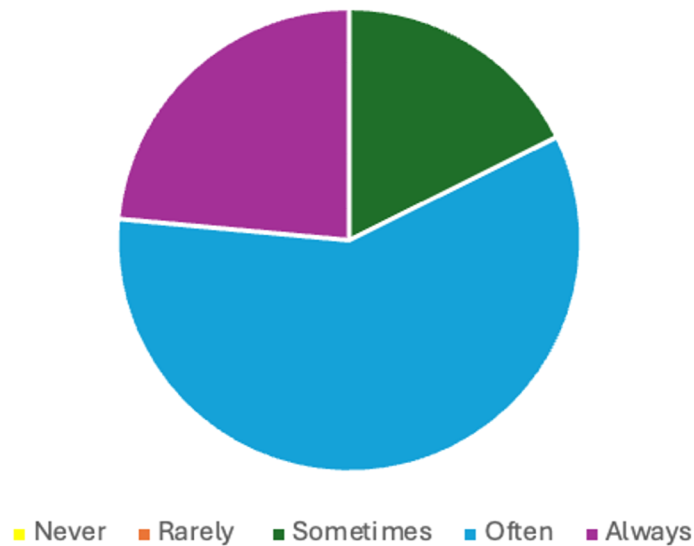
What kinds of support are people usually looking for when you connect with them?



In your role as a Block Leader for Welcoming Streets, how often are you able to help people access the services or supports they need?

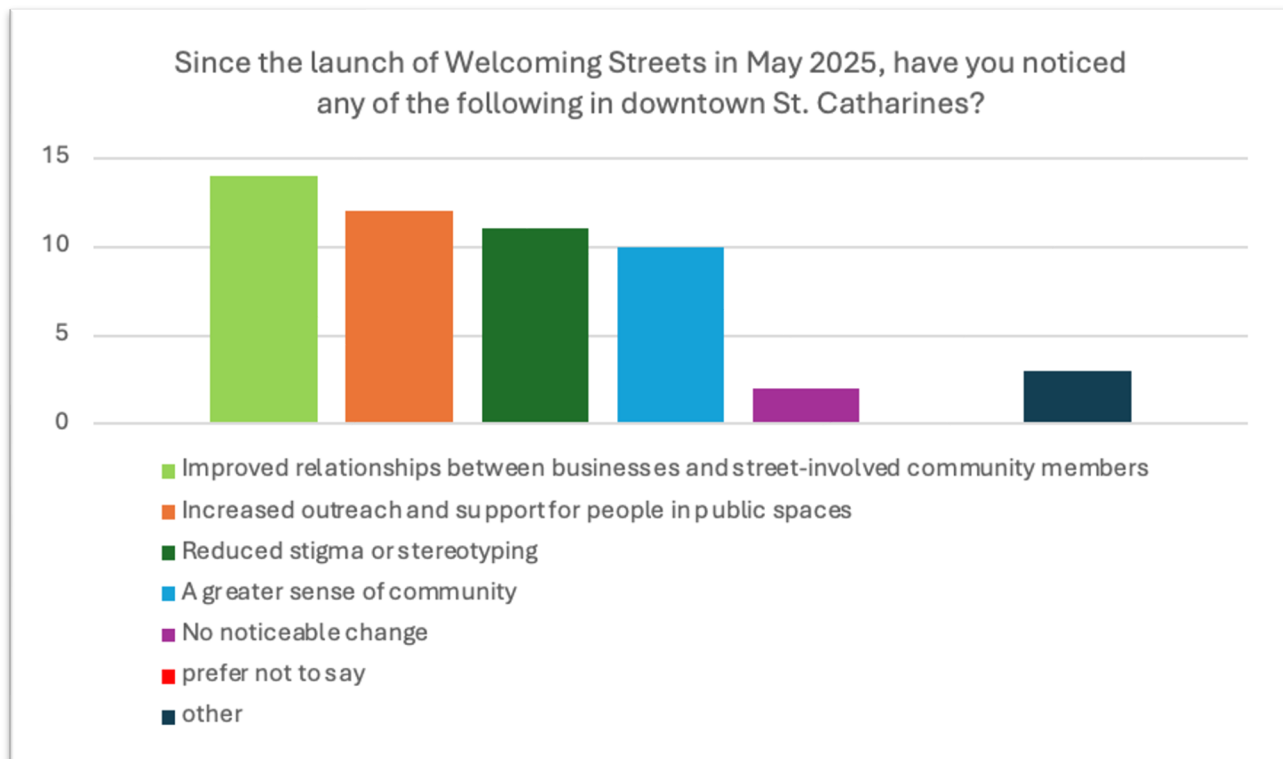
- Never = 0
- Rarely = 0
- Sometimes = 3
- Often = 10
- Always = 4

In your role as a Block Leader for Welcoming Streets,
how often are you able to help people access the
services or supports they need?



Since the launch of Welcoming Streets, have you noticed any of the following in downtown St. Catharines?

- Improved relationships between businesses and street involved = 14
- Increased outreach = 12
- Reduced stigma = 11
- A greater sense of community = 10
- No noticeable change = 2
- Prefer not to say = 0
- Other = 3
 - People come searching for us to provide support and passing it on to others
 - first 5 answers
 - all of the above EXCEPT no noticeable change

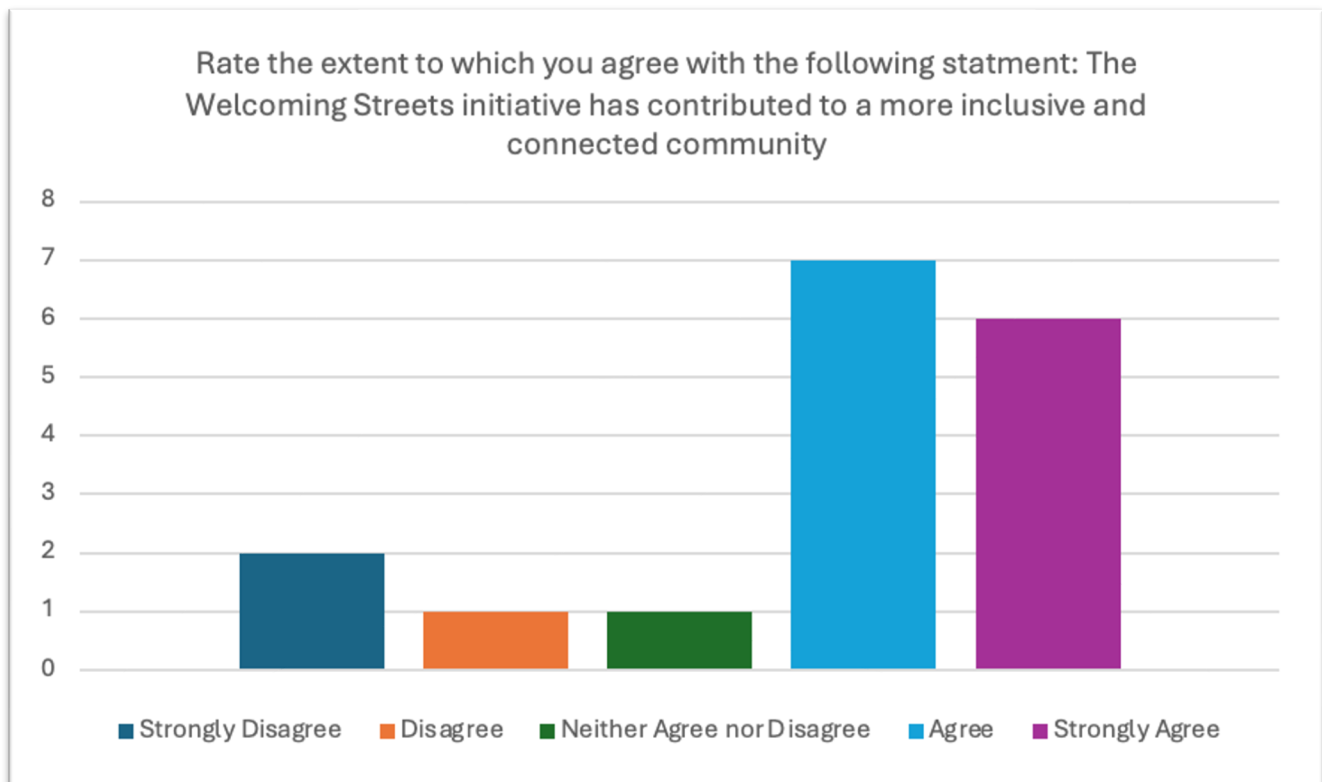


Can you tell us more about the changes you've noticed, or anything that stands out in your mind since the program began?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"People are more aware of the services in the community. People are reaching out to get connected to services within the community."
Respondent 2	"no changes"
Respondent 3	"- People noticing the gear and what we do and what we can do, people come up to us or others tell people about to be able to provide guidance and support. – Businesses are more open to homeless people entering."
Respondent 4	"Help in getting people shelter , as well as sustainable good such as water,gatorade, and foods to keep the people who are in need of food and water, i see a considerable difference and am happy to be a part of the TEAM !"
Respondent 5	"people are able to approach us now without hesitation"
Respondent 6	"I noticed outside of my shift i still hold a report with the community members and still able to provide a peace of mind , peer support"
Respondent 7	"businesses are more likely to contact welcoming the streets than caling the police"
Respondent 8	"less mental health issues, clean streets, business owners relationships."
Respondent 9	"a lot of community members feel compassion towards members of the community experiencing mental health and addictions, but they don't know how to help.We are able to give suggestion to both ends and help people interact."
Respondent 10	"People in the community are more comfortable connecting with Block Leaders to get the help they need. I feel that people that are struggling have more of a support system since this program has started"
Respondent 11	"It expands – the more we talk and help people, the more we are able to help more. Our help, caring goes a long way."
Respondent 12	"Many business owners have become more understanding of the struggles people are going through and coming at issues they go through with more compassion and understanding, if they feel they need extra support in dealing then they call block leaders to assist. Unhoused folks have become more understand also that we are not here to judge or tell people what to do but rather try to help support them if we can"
Respondent 13	"better communication between the homeless and business's"
Respondent 14	"More positivity and extra income for people who desperately need it (block leaders)."
Respondent 15	"see previous question reply"
Respondent 16	"we hand out food and beverages, pick up sharps crack pipes, and needles"
Respondent 17	"There's more support for businesses"

Rate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: The Welcoming Streets initiative has contributed to a more inclusive and connected community.

- Strongly disagree = 2
- Disagree = 1
- Neither agree nor disagree = 1
- Agree = 7
- Strongly agree = 6



What do you think Welcoming Streets is doing well?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"Getting out into the community and helping those in need. People seem to be happy to see us as we provide a variety of supports."
Respondent 2	"all well"
Respondent 3	"Informing people who dont know the system, supporting those who are unaware of resources in the community."
Respondent 4	"association with all , people we are in touch with , Kay and Leslie have provided a Great Source of Knowledge to us as team associates, and the people we work with, i think this program is great in the ways we are i my opinion lessen people being angry, which takes a huge load of oppression for us all in the end"
Respondent 5	"making sure people are getting the proper information or services available to them."
Respondent 6	"yes it is forsure!"
Respondent 7	"they are consistant"
Respondent 8	"community health safety"
Respondent 9	"connecting the community through compassion, providing referrals and direction to people in need. bridging the gap ."
Respondent 10	"I believe that people have more safety with Block Leaders and we have been doing well at getting to know everyone in the community and be able to support them no matter what stage they are in with their life."
Respondent 11	"Pretty much everything we are tasked with doing"
Respondent 12	"Welcoming streets is doing well at everything ive described in my previous answers and i definitely feel is an asset to or community and i bekieve both businesses and those we come across daily would agree as well"
Respondent 13	"answering calls and proving snacks and water to the homeless, cleaning the pipes off the streets"
Respondent 14	"Bridging the gap of the business peoples' thoughts to street people. Using a more helpful approach than calling the cops."
Respondent 15	"everything."
Respondent 16	"service to others"
Respondent 17	"Helping people on the streets and helping businesses."

What Suggestions do you have for improving the program or expanding its reach?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"More hours and availability that more than 8-4 and weekend work is available. More food support and available."
Respondent 2	"more hours"
Respondent 3	"Weekends or evening support – People are still out there but do still need that support. – More personalized Cards with information and how to reach out to us. – More meetings to connect with other block leaders – More community events hosted by WSI to bring awareness to the needs and concerns of the community."
Respondent 4	"Just to keep on Working , our help is truly helping people everywhere, a lot of shop owners have expressed relief due to REACH!!"
Respondent 5	"no."
Respondent 6	"id like to be a little more hands on"
Respondent 7	"no"
Respondent 8	"reaching out to elders"
Respondent 9	"more shifts to cover a wider timeframe and more areas of st catharines. there is more places to engage than just the downtown core."
Respondent 10	"I believe that if there was a place to gather for people would be nice. For people that are finding the program benifital a place that people to go to hangout and maybe have a craft of hobby to share and socialize would be something we could work towards"
Respondent 11	"Continue to work on the areas we are working on, with the same people. This builds people's ability to solve their own problems."
Respondent 12	"The program if it had more funding would be able to reach more people, cover more areas, provide more supports like a safe space for people to get together and accomplish futhering their goals."
Respondent 13	"pretty good system as is"
Respondent 14	"Bigger budget to be able to reach a bigger target audience and increase the demographics of the city."
Respondent 15	"longer or different hours, weekend hours, more shifts for people working"
Respondent 16	"helping more people"
Respondent 17	"no"

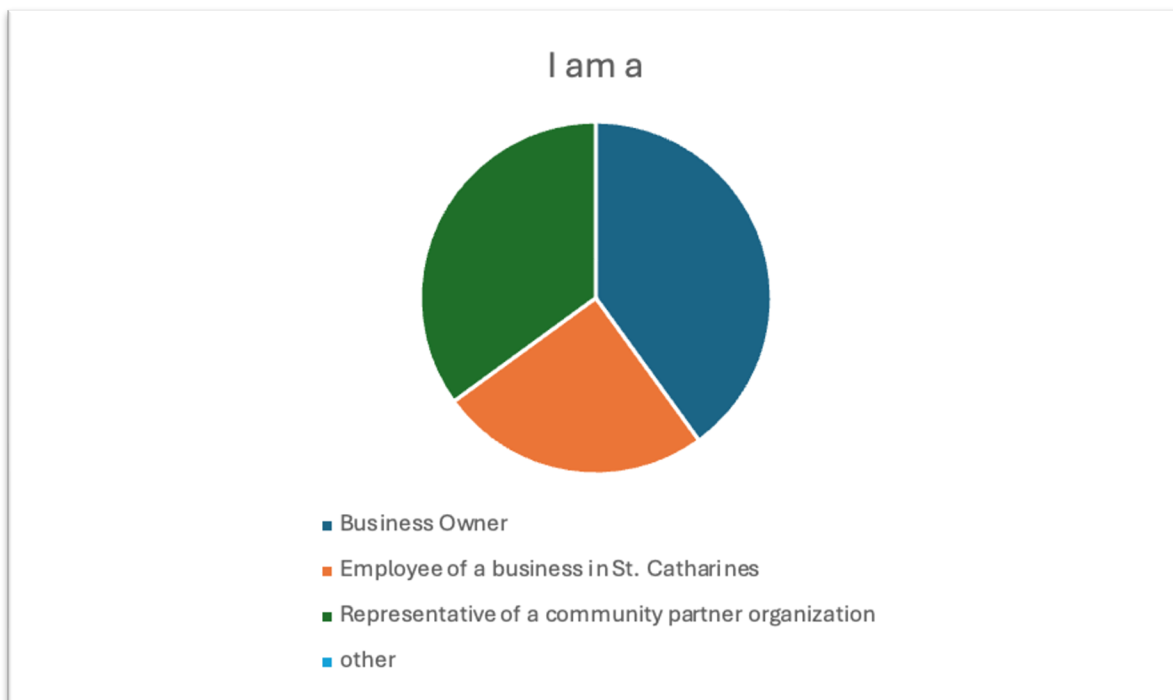
Business Owners, Employees, and Community Partners

Survey links (Microsoft Forms) were sent out to downtown St. Catharines business owners, their employees, and various community partners in October 2025. A total of twenty (20) people responded.

An overview of responses (unedited) to all survey questions is presented below.

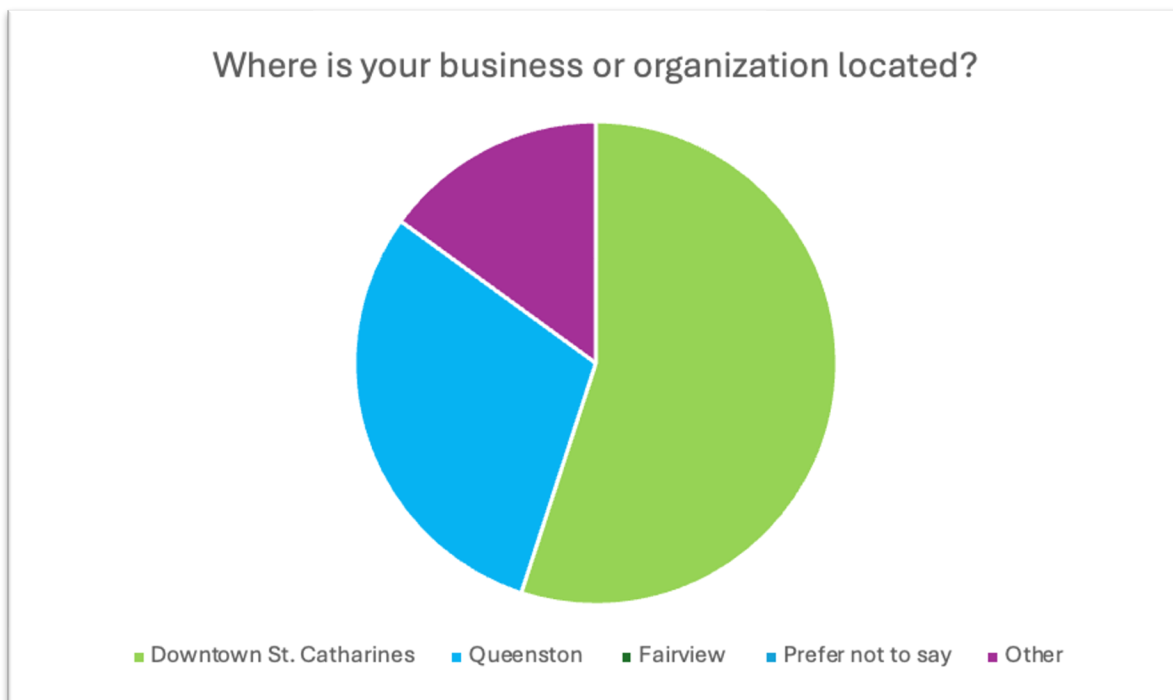
I am a:

- Business owner = 8
- Employee of a business in St. Catharines = 5
- Representative of a community partner organization = 7
- Other = 0



Where is your business or organization located?

- Downtown St. Catharines = 11
- Queenston = 6
- Fairview = 0
- Prefer not to say = 0
- Other = 3
 - Geneva Square
 - Geneva St/ Welland Ave Area
 - St. Catharines



How familiar are you with the Welcoming Streets initiative?

- Not at all familiar = 0
- I've heard of it, but don't know much about it = 1
- I know a little bit about what it does = 1
- I understand the program and its goals = 5
- I am very familiar with the program and/or have directly interacted with the program = 13
- Prefer not to say = 0



How did you first learn about Welcoming Streets?

- Word of Mouth = 3
- Email or newsletter = 1
- Social Media = 0
- From a Welcoming Streets team member/block leader = 7
- Through another business or organization = 1
- Through a contact at REACH Niagara or Positive Living Niagara = 7
- Prefer not to say = 0
- Other = 1
 - staff member



In your own words, what do you understand to be the goals of the Welcoming Streets initiative?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"They support us and we feel safe more know"
Respondent 2	"To engage positively with individuals, supporting those in need of help, providing safer communities for the locals of niagara"
Respondent 3	"Engage with clients experiencing homelessness, assist with immediate needs and referrals to Community agencies."
Respondent 4	"They are a frontline outreach team that combines a skilled social worker and a person with lived experience that engage with those communities that are at risk to promote a safer community for all people"
Respondent 5	"In a kind and respectful way, to safely remove individuals way from areas where they are harassing and or disrupting other individuals and or businesses"
Respondent 6	"To create pathways to support services for individuals who needs assistance To reduce the involvement of authorities (Police/Bylaw officers) in matters that do not require them"
Respondent 7	"Helping to find assistance for people in need, that do not necessarily require emergency services."
Respondent 8	No answer
Respondent 9	"I believe WSI to be a great contact point between business owners and the vulnerable unhoused population. They provide information for services/ programs available as well as physically being on the streets to assist in deescalating/ mental health situations to prevent unnecessary police involvement that could further complicate things."
Respondent 10	"I understand the goals of welcoming streets to be a group for added support and resources for street involved community members"
Respondent 11	"To assist people on the street in need"
Respondent 12	"Engage with unhoused, addicted or otherwise struggling individuals in our community and on our streets to provide attention to needs in an empathetic manner, advise of resources available, encourage positive actions."
Respondent 13	"To provide a gentle response to local businesses to alleviate the needs for calls to police. Also to Ensure our community members are doing alright"
Respondent 14	"To make connections with marginalized individuals who are in the downtown and queenston street areas. To refer them to resources and get them to leave areas that are having issues with loitering, drug use, and other unwanted behaviour. One city councillor said it was also to reduce the burden on the police."
Respondent 15	"Their main goal is to an in between from the owner/residents of the areas who come into contact with homeless or troubled individuals."
Respondent 16	"Reaching out to people on the streets, assessing their needs and pointing them in the direction for the help they need."
Respondent 17	"Creating community connections in the downtown core proving peer led street outreach"
Respondent 18	"To bridge a gap between businesses in the community and the clients the community agencies serve. to assist local business owners with client engagement. To increase outreach and support for people in public spaces"
Respondent 19	"to ensure the unhoused are safe and know where they can go to receive services"
Respondent 20	"To improve the interactions between businesses, the unhoused community, and acceptance"

Since the launch of Welcoming Streets, have you noticed any of the following in downtown St. Catharines? Select all that apply.

- Improved relationships between businesses and street-involved community members = 11
- Increased outreach and support for people in public spaces = 12
- Reduced stigma stereotyping = 8
- A greater sense of community = 6
- No noticeable change = 4
- Prefer not to answer = 0
- Other = 5
 - Better Resources for the individuals
 - Provides another outlet to contact if someone is in need
 - Haven't noticed anything
 - Such an incredible boost for the block leaders. Increased confidence and sense of purpose
 - A willingness to get involved with Welcoming Streets is a source of help when we didn't know exactly how to help

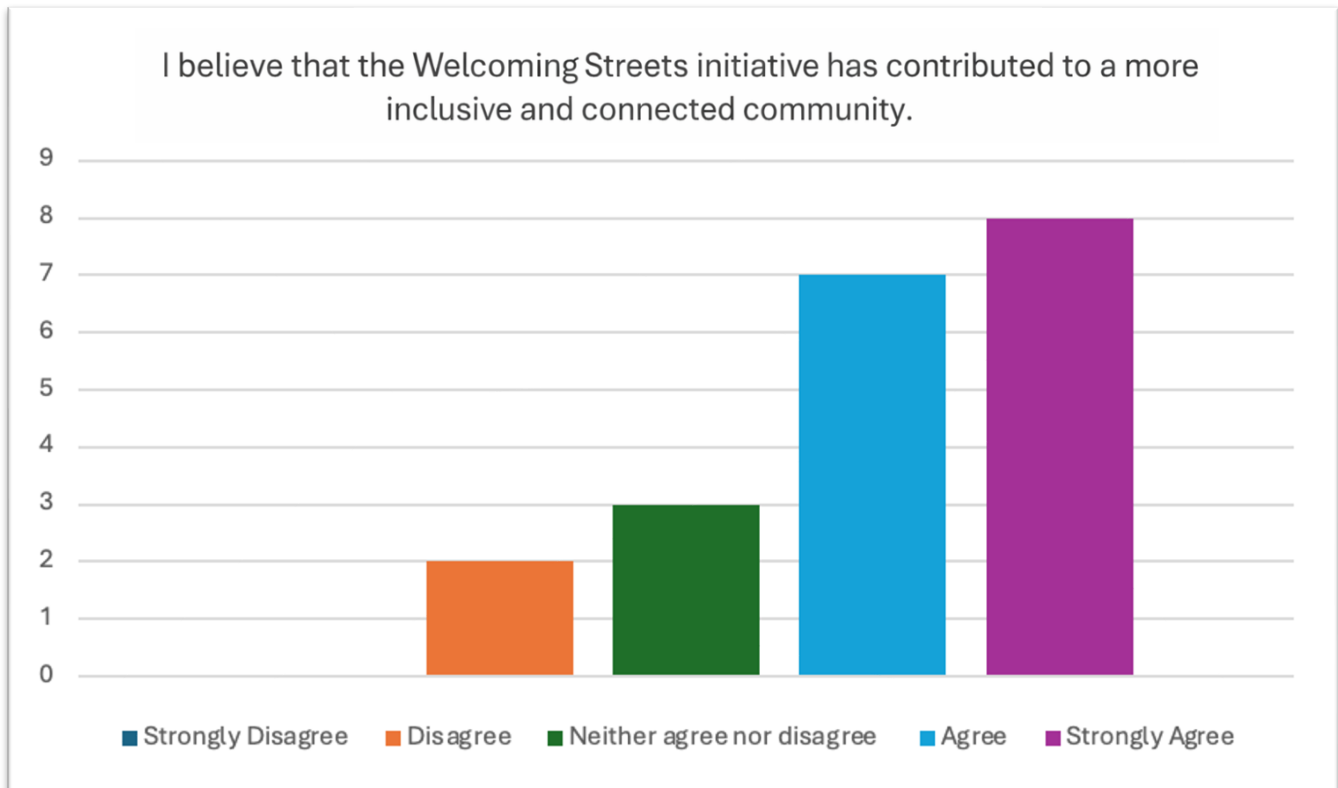


Can you tell us more about the changes you've noticed, or anything that stands out in your mind since the program began?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"More safe"
Respondent 2	"Less solicitors outside of Geneva square, linger less"
Respondent 3	"The clients feel more supported"
Respondent 4	"As a community member it is all our responsibility to keep every member safe. Sadly, this hasn't been the case in st Catharine's in very instance. The welcoming streets initiative has taken some the pressure off local business to engage with community members they may not understand while also educating those businesses in a positive and trauma informed way on how they might help in those sorts of engagements."
Respondent 5	"By coming to our place of business and removing individuals on a consistent basis, it has helped those that do disrupt our business to not show up as often. This said however some of our regulars continue to show up because our customers feel bad for them. Whatever need is help in educating the consumer in the negative impact it has to continuously provide food or money for them as they will come back and disrupt the flow of our business. Again how does one express this without looking like someone who does not care for others! Much"
Respondent 6	No answer
Respondent 7	"Not as many visibly distressed people this summer. And the fact that we now have a new level of help we can contact in situations where emergency services are not required."
Respondent 8	No answer
Respondent 9	"Police presence has been less hostile in general, at least during the day."
Respondent 10	"I think I have noticed that street based community members have had access to more everyday support. For example, I think that there has been reduced mess with going through trash as frequently because they have access to daily supports like meals. However this can also lead to other trash being left from those meals."
Respondent 11	"We have noticed a significant decrease in the amount of people laying around on the streets"
Respondent 12	"We have a few particular people who frequent our plaza for panhandling. WSI has become our first option for helping to gently move people along."
Respondent 13	"Less calls for police – reduces pressure on police as well as fear of interaction"
Respondent 14	No answer
Respondent 15	"Better communication with homeless individuals"
Respondent 16	"Their goals align with ours and other stores in the area appear to be having better interactions with people on the streets."
Respondent 17	No answer
Respondent 18	"More community engagement with clients and business owners. a sense of responsibility and pride from the clients who have worked for the program, going out and assisting their peers and making money."
Respondent 19	"we never see the teams and are not aware of the impact they are having – came once when called but asked for more support and was told no"
Respondent 20	"As I mentioned, the incredible change in the block leaders themselves. Some who I've known to be in a constant state high and dope sick, have worked to become functional and showing a little pride."

I believe that the Welcoming Streets initiative has contributed to a more inclusive and connected community.

- Strongly Disagree = 0
- Disagree = 2
- Neither agree nor disagree = 3
- Agree = 7
- Strongly agree = 8



What do you think Welcoming Streets is doing well?

Respondent	Answers
Respondent 1	"I feel that I'm supposed because it easy to call them and immediately answer it make us feel better"
Respondent 2	"Communicating and cooperating with individuals, helping to guide them"
Respondent 3	"Engaging and building relationships with those experiencing homelessness"
Respondent 4	"The outreach aspects of there work I have seen first hand and they are excellent. Their networking capability is excellent he'll for those working in a forward facing workers businesses"
Respondent 5	"Providing awareness of care to those that are in the streets"
Respondent 6	"Removing officers from situations that a support program can resolve"
Respondent 7	"Follow up on calls. Have seen response in situations that have resolved and where incidents were still ongoing."
Respondent 8	No answer
Respondent 9	"I love that they are physically present and quick to answer a call when needed."
Respondent 10	"I think that welcome streets is doing well at supporting the everyday needs of street based community members such as providing access to meals and other outreach programs as well as building connections with those street based community members"
Respondent 11	"Welcoming streets has done a great job tending to the vulnerable populations needs"
Respondent 12	"Engaging with those on the streets in a welcoming and empathetic manner where possible."
Respondent 13	"Everything. Helping out community with their block leaders and the work they do."
Respondent 14	"I don't think the program has met the goals it set out to achieve. The clientele it is reaching has already been approached by numerous other agencies"
Respondent 15	"Talking between businesses and homeless people"
Respondent 16	"Bridging conversations between business owners and street people and reducing conflict."
Respondent 17	"Trying to make connections"
Respondent 18	"Engaging business owners in the community"
Respondent 19	"don't know since we don't see them or have any connection with them"
Respondent 20	"Being present, I have seen people seek them out and are aware they are a source help."

What suggestions do you have for improving the program or expanding its reach?

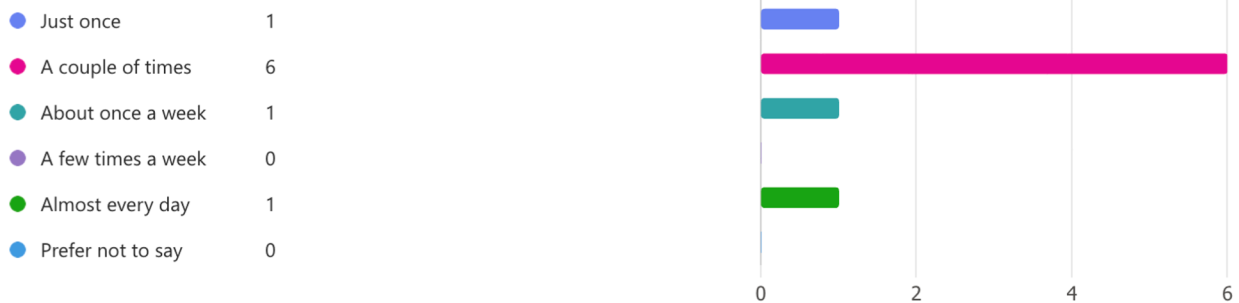
Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"More teams to cover more area"
Respondent 2	"I'm not sure!"
Respondent 3	"Having a welcome streets initiative in Niagara Falls would also be helpful."
Respondent 4	"I think that they could use more funding to increase their capacity. Also adding a more Mobil element to allow for a wider reach would be an excellent way to impact more neighbourhoods."
Respondent 5	"Having places that they can send people to and also give them more resources to allow for mixing people to safe destinations."
Respondent 6	No answer
Respondent 7	No answer
Respondent 8	No answer
Respondent 9	"I don't really know what else I could suggest."
Respondent 10	"I think it would be helpful if welcoming streets could do rounds in our area in downtown st catharine's more frequently or assist with moving people along or redirecting street based community members to resource based public spaces instead of streets and sidewalks in front of businesses."
Respondent 11	"Increased hours, mobility support for workers due to long walks daily"
Respondent 12	"Extended hours for response (later in day). Incentives for habitual panhandlers to find other options. I understand this is a much deeper problem than is possible for WSI to solve - however when customers start to stay away from business due to constant pestering and fear of having people approach their car windows upon parking, it is a frustrating situation for business owners and difficult to respond in an empathetic way."
Respondent 13	No answer
Respondent 14	"I don't feel the program should expand. Unsure why REACH a health care agency is involved."
Respondent 15	"more people needs to be involved"
Respondent 16	"None at this point in time"
Respondent 17	"Response time"
Respondent 18	"hiring more clients to participate in the program, offering more shifts or longer shifts to reach more businesses"
Respondent 19	"more visibility, they need more support so they can offer more support"
Respondent 20	"The community members would have better input, as per their experiences to date."

Street-Involved Community Members

How many times have you interacted with a Block Leader or an outreach worker from the Welcoming Streets Initiative?

- Just once = 1
- A couple of times = 6
- About once a week = 1
- A few times a week = 0
- Almost every day = 1
- Prefer not to say = 0

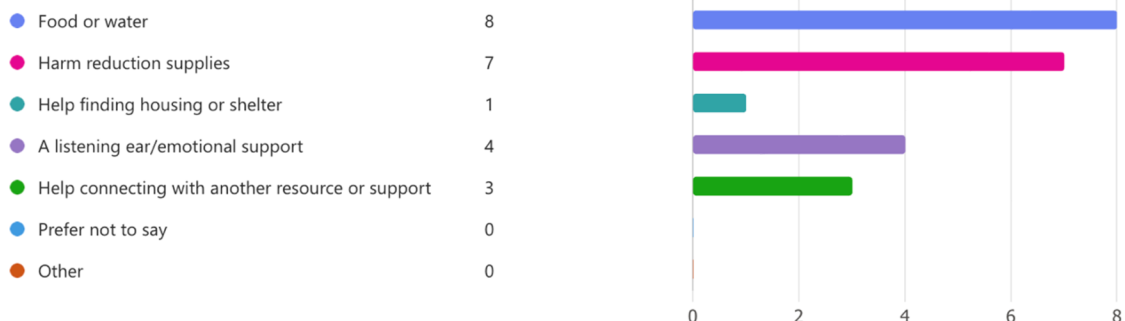
1. How many times have you interacted with a Block Leader or an outreach worker from the Welcoming Streets Initiative?



Have they been able to help you with anything specific?

- Food or water = 8
- Harm reduction supplies = 7
- Help finding housing or shelter = 1
- A listening ear/emotional support = 4
- Help connecting with another resource or support = 3
- Prefer not to say = 0
- Other = 0

2. Have they been able to help you with anything specific? (Check all that apply)

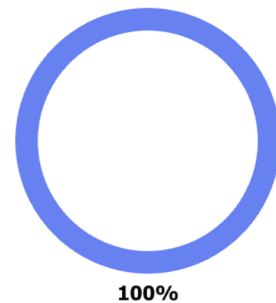


Do you trust Welcoming Streets outreach workers or feel safe talking to them?

- Yes = 9
- No = 0
- Sometimes = 0
- Not sure = 0
- Prefer not to say = 0

3. Do you trust Welcoming Streets outreach workers or feel safe talking to them?

● Yes	9
● No	0
● Sometimes	0
● Not sure	0
● Prefer not to say	0

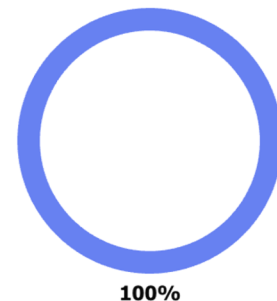


When you see someone from Welcoming Streets, how does it make you feel?

- Welcomed or supported = 9
- Unsure/no strong feelings = 0
- Uncomfortable = 0
- I usually don't see them = 0
- Prefer not to say = 0

4. When you see someone from Welcoming Streets, how does it make you feel?

● Welcomed or supported	9
● Unsure/no strong feelings	0
● Uncomfortable	0
● I usually don't see them	0
● Prefer not to say	0



Is there anything that you think Welcoming Streets could do differently or better?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"they are out in the cold doing well"
Respondent 2	"help with housing"
Respondent 3	"not enough interactions"
Respondent 4	"nope all is good"
Respondent 5	"no"
Respondent 6	"more/further routes"
Respondent 7	"being one"
Respondent 8	No answer
Respondent 9	No answer

Is there anything about Welcoming Streets that makes them different from other supports or resources?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"outside communicating - frontline"
Respondent 2	"they are outside helping"
Respondent 3	"they are the only ones other than NASO"
Respondent 4	"nothing else like it out here"
Respondent 5	"no"
Respondent 6	"1. Variety of supplies. 2. Bein mobile"
Respondent 7	"real experience"
Respondent 8	No answer
Respondent 9	No answer

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences with Welcoming Streets?

Respondents	Answers
Respondent 1	"looking for work"
Respondent 2	"brighten my day"
Respondent 3	"very good program"
Respondent 4	"no"
Respondent 5	"great job!"
Respondent 6	"At work I do"
Respondent 7	No answer
Respondent 8	No answer
Respondent 9	No answer

Focus Group Guides

Welcoming Streets Block Leaders

OPENING DISCUSSION: ROLE AND EXPERIENCE WITH WELCOMING STREETS

- How would you describe your role as a Block Leader to someone who doesn't know what Welcoming Streets is about?
- What does a typical day look like for you when you're doing outreach for Welcoming Streets?

DISCUSSION: IMPACT AND BARRIERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Impact and Barriers

- When you're able to help someone access what they need, what helps make that happen?
- What gets in the way of doing what you know would be helpful for someone?
- Have you seen any changes in downtown St. Catharines since you started as a Block Leader for Welcoming Streets?

Relationships

- How would you describe your relationships as Block Leaders with other people in the community?
 - Street-involved community members?
 - Business owners?
 - Other frontline workers or service providers?
- Do you feel safe and supported when doing outreach for Welcoming Streets?
 - If yes, what contributes to that feeling of safety?
 - If not, what contributes to that feeling of unsafety? What would help you feel safer?

CLOSING DISCUSSION: REFLECTIONS

- What is Welcoming Streets doing well that you think should continue?
- If Welcoming Streets continues past the pilot stage, what changes would you want to see?
- Is there anything else you want to say that we haven't asked about yet?

Welcoming Streets & Organizational Leadership

ROLE AND EXPERIENCE WITH WELCOMING STREETS

- Can you briefly describe your role within the Welcoming Streets program?
- What were your initial hopes or expectations for how the program would operate in downtown St. Catharines?

IMPLEMENTATION

- From your perspective, what has gone well in terms of implementing the pilot?
- What challenges have you encountered?

RELATIONSHIPS

- How do you think Welcoming Streets has been perceived by the general public?
 - Business owners?
 - Other partner organizations?
- Can you talk about the support that you have received? Any moments of tension?
 - Street-involved community members? Business owners? Other frontline workers or service providers?
- Are there particular partnerships that have been key to the pilot's success so far?
 - What makes these partnerships more impactful?

REFLECTIONS

- What is Welcoming Streets doing well that you think should continue?
- If this program continues past the pilot stage, what changes would you want to see?
- Is there anything else you want to say that we haven't asked about yet?

Evaluation Activities and Timeline

The evaluation of the Welcoming Streets Initiative in downtown St. Catharines incorporated two methods with various participant groups. Surveys and focus groups helped gather a range of perspectives from people with different relationships to the program.

SURVEYS:

- Downtown St. Catharines Business owners, employees of those businesses, community partners, and Welcoming Streets Block Leaders were invited to complete a survey.
 - Links to the survey (Microsoft Forms) were sent via email, and those contacted had 4 weeks to complete it.
 - The surveys were designed to take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete.
- Street Involved Community Members
 - Outreach workers, employed by REACH, connected with street-involved community members who have had experiences with Welcoming Streets and assisted them (if necessary and requested) in completing a paper-based survey.
 - The surveys were designed to take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

FOCUS GROUPS:

- Welcoming Streets Block Leaders were invited to participate in a focus group.
 - Email and verbal (phone and in-person) invitations were extended to Welcoming Streets Block Leaders by REACH and Positive Living Niagara.
 - Those who wished to participate were asked to attend a focus group designed to take approximately 60 minutes to complete.
- Welcoming Streets Team Leaders, Welcoming Streets Staff, and Organizational Leadership from REACH and Positive Living Niagara were invited to participate in a focus group.²
 - Email invitations were sent to potential participants.
 - Those who wished to participate were asked to attend a focus group designed to take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

Data collection took place between October 2025 and February 2026. Business owner, community partner, and Block Leader surveys were open from October 7 to November 11, 2025. Street-involved community member surveys were administered by outreach workers in January 2026. Focus groups were held in January and February 2026.

² The initial evaluation plan included one-on-one interviews for this group of participants, but logistical and scheduling constraints during the data collection period necessitated a shift to a focus group. While this adjustment was practical in nature, the group setting also facilitated peer exchange and allowed participants to build on one another's responses.

Method	Participant Group	# of Participants	Recruitment	Location
SURVEYS	Downtown St. Catharines Business Owners & Employees	13	St. Catharines Downtown Association, REACH and PLN	Online: Microsoft Forms
	Community Partners	7	REACH and PLN	
	WS Block Leaders	17	REACH and PLN	
	Street Involved Community Members	9	Outreach workers	Downtown St. Catharines
FOCUS GROUPS	WS Block Leaders	8	REACH and PLN	In person: REACH
	WSI Team Leaders & Organizational Leadership	3	REACH and PLN	Online: Zoom

Focus groups with Block Leaders (n=2) were facilitated by Dr. Samantha McAleese (lead external evaluator) and Isha Brar (research assistant). The focus group with Welcoming Streets leadership was facilitated by Dr. McAleese. All focus groups were audio-recorded, with participant consent, and transcribed for analysis by the evaluation team.

Survey data were analyzed descriptively. Closed-ended responses were summarized using frequency counts and percentages. Open-ended responses were reviewed and grouped thematically to identify recurring patterns across participant groups.

Focus group data were analyzed thematically. Transcripts and notes were reviewed to identify key themes, areas of consensus, and divergent perspectives within and across participant groups.

All survey responses were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was requested or retained. Focus group participants were informed that their contributions would be reported in aggregate and that no individual would be identified in the final report. Participants were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Since street-involved community members are a vulnerable group, special care was taken to ensure their participation was voluntary and free from perceived coercion. Outreach workers explained to potential participants that their choice to join or not would not affect their access to services.

**For any questions about this report,
please contact Dr. Samantha McAleese at smcaleese@brocku.ca.**