

## Every Child Plays

### Report on the Access to Recreation for Low-Income Families in Ontario Policy Planning Institute



held on November 14, 2007  
Wellesley Community Centre, in Toronto

# Every Child Plays

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Access to Recreation in Ontario Policy Planning Institute  
November 14, 2007 • Toronto

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Parks and Recreation Ontario gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion for this project.



*Note: Detailed notes from all the Breakout Sessions are available under separate cover.*

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## Executive Summary

Dear Access to Recreation Policy Planning Institute Delegates,

I am pleased to provide you with the Summary Report to inform our next steps provided by Susan Wright of the Randolph Group following the November 14<sup>th</sup> Policy Planning Institute for Access to Recreation in Ontario.

Your participation generated dynamic discussion and innovative ideas, as well as providing the Task Group with new insights into the barriers of access to recreation for low-income families.

The report presents a summary of the barriers, solutions and next steps that were identified as priorities at the Institute, and which will provide the basis for continued work by the Task Group. The report identifies a number of areas of focus for future policy and advocacy including:

- Developing a co-coordinated approach to service delivery;
- Enhancing and annualizing funding for access initiatives;
- Ensuring programs and initiatives are designed to avoid stigmatizing families;
- Ensuring programs are sensitive to the sometimes complex social, emotional and physical health needs of the families they seek to benefit.

Solutions identified include:

- A national recreation, sport and cultural infrastructure program that requires community recreational facilities and green space to be welcoming, inviting and accessible;
- Outreach to new Canadians includes meaningful messages about the value and importance of recreation for improved physical health and quality of life;
- Services are designed to engage our diverse communities;
- Schools and other social agency partners are viewed as critical to this effort as they can provide additional facilities, training, support and referrals, ensuring that the continuum of options for children and youth is inclusive of the indicators of health: education, child care and, we believe, affordable access to recreation for all.

What is also clear in the recommendations is that this is a complex problem without one magic solution. Moving forward, the Task Group and our allied partners like you must implement a multi-pronged approach, as every order of government has a role to play which is captured in the formatting of this report. There needs to be a blend of grassroots initiatives, such as the sharing of promising practices through collaborative networks, along with policy and legislative changes at the provincial level and recognition by our Federal government that they are responsible for setting the national agenda for access to community sport and recreation just as previous Federal governments had done with other social policies such as National Child Care. Work by our higher tier government bodies must be complimented by local leadership within municipalities and local school boards who have the power and mandate to create policies and user fee practices designed to increase participation for those currently marginalized.

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As stated in my opening remarks, improving access to recreation should be a simple prospect. However, we are all very aware that in Ontario this debate will touch on broader policy and funding issues, such as service rationalization, health care costs, chronic disease prevention, hard infrastructure, transit etc.

While many of the recommended changes in the report may seem daunting, I remind you that progress has most certainly been made! Ten years ago, improving access to recreation was not an issue generating much discussion outside of the recreation sector itself. Just five 5 years ago, we could not have held this policy planning institute, at least not with the range of sectors, advocates, researchers and recreationists that we had in attendance. Nor would we have had a Provincial Ministry dedicated to “Health Promotion” providing key funding to make this institute possible. November 14<sup>th</sup> marked a milestone: the debate is now over. There was no one in the room arguing against the importance of improving access to recreation for low-income families and we have a provincial government ready to listen to the good ideas we bring forward. We recognized a myriad of wonderful initiatives happening throughout the province achieving measured results in a number of communities.

The pieces are coming together and we now require the comprehensive strategy with short- and long-term objectives to continue advancing the access policy issue.

This Task Group is committed to doing just that. In the weeks to come, we will review this preliminary report, identify five to six strategic policy objectives for various orders of government, create an Action Plan for Change and begin to position the policy recommendations.

Your continued interest and participation in this discussion is appreciated and the Task Group will keep delegates informed of key milestones and advocacy opportunities as we move forward. Once again, I would like to thank you for your participation and involvement in the Policy Planning Institute.

Yours in Recreation,



Howie Dayton,  
Chair, Ontario Task Group on Access to Recreation for Low-Income Families

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## Introduction

This summary report highlights key findings from the Policy Planning Institute held on November 14<sup>th</sup> at the Wellesley Community Centre in Toronto. Close to 100 representatives from a broad range of human service sectors participated in the Institute. (A list of participants is provided at the end of this summary report.)

### Objectives

The objectives of the Institute were to inspire ideas, generate enthusiasm, identify solutions and establish first critical steps to increasing access to recreation for low-income children, youth and families.

### Opening Remarks

Howie Dayton, the Chair of the Access to Recreation in Ontario Task Force, began the Policy Planning Institute by saying:

*“EVERY CHILD PLAYS... Let us imagine an Ontario some time in the not too distant future as a place where children can be children, where as a community, we embrace the right of children to their childhood, to their innocence and to having safe places to play!”*

*The simple truth is that children in many families and in neighbourhoods across our great province are living lives with little play. These children and youth are missing out on basic childhood experiences, something I hope each of us is able to look upon fondly, remembering magical moments where many of our dreams were formed. In recreation, we know that children dream big...on the basketball court, on the ice, in front of a canvass, on a stage.... we also know that children who develop passions, skills and commit to an area of interest they come to love, one that makes them feel special, talented and good at something, have a greater chance of enjoying lifelong learning and lifelong success.*

*Childhood play is essential yet the global reality remains similar today as it did in 1989 when the United Nations first guaranteed the rights of children to rest and to leisure in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.*

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*The role of community recreation in Ontario is essential in providing many opportunities for child play. Children and youth are healthier and much more resilient as a result of their participation in a broad range of recreational pursuits. The reality for children and youth of lower income families however, is that participation in community recreation can be costly and therefore difficult to access. Parents facing financial hardship value recreation but cannot often justify the expense of, say a-learn to swim program over school clothes, or groceries. The irony is that recreation originated out of an effort to provide troubled youth with something to do after school and in the summer and has now become a service highly inaccessible to the same youth it was originally intending to serve.*

*It is time to re-open the doors to community sport and recreation. We need to work together and find the solutions necessary to break down the barriers to play. It is imperative that we succeed both for the personal health and welfare of children, youth and families at risk but also for the quality of life in our communities. We need to provide positive role models to teach our youth the thrill of sport, the beauty of artistic and cultural expression, the wonder of nature our environment and the great outdoors. There needs to be safe and well maintained parks and outdoor recreation spaces for youth to play which are close to home, a rec centre to go to where there is opportunity to swim, play in the gym, skate, have a nutritious snack and work on homework in a supervised setting after school. Imagine if this could be provided without cost being a barrier; imagine how relieved parents who would otherwise not be able to afford the registration fees will feel when they no longer have to say no to their children's request to join into such activities with their friends.... We can give families hope, and children the opportunity to develop into rounded, creative and dynamic leaders and future productive citizens in our community. That is our vision ... that is the reality we are trying to create here in Ontario.*

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### Keynote Speaker

**Sherri Torjman**, Vice-President of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy was the keynote speaker for the Institute. She spoke about the compelling evidence regarding the value of recreation to physical health, mental health, social well-being and economic well-being. She also identified critical barriers and the need for enhanced policy measures at a number of levels (e.g. infrastructure, community design, the role of schools etc.). Sherri spoke about her work on *Shared Space: The Communities Agenda* (Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2007) and the need for new forms of collaboration to address complex issues. She highlighted the need to build resilience through action in 4 areas: sustenance (e.g. basic needs); adaptation (e.g. early childhood development and literacy); engagement (e.g. through empowerment and meaningful participation in recreation, the arts, etc.); and opportunity (e.g. job creation).

### Panel Discussion

During the lunch time panel, three speakers provided their own insights on the issues related to access to recreation for low-income families.

**Dr. Mark Totten**, Director of Research at the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa talked about the importance of focusing efforts on those “who need it the most” such as those living in deep poverty and families living in remote communities. He also challenged the group to ensure that recreation programs are designed carefully to minimize harm (e.g. ensuring the right mix of kids, addressing gender and cultural issues).

**Dr. Terry Bennett**, Research Fellow at the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University highlighted the work done by Dr. Dan Offord, and the vital role that recreation can play in supporting skill development, learning readiness and civic communities. She noted the importance of having a balance between universal and targeted programs, as well as the importance of “keeping score” so that we will know whether interventions are really working.

**Jennie Vengris**, Social Planner at the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, highlighted some of the barriers and solutions identified through her work in Hamilton. She cited the need to create appropriate spaces and mechanisms for youth engagement.

The remainder of the Institute consisted of a series of breakout sessions designed to pinpoint barriers and identify solutions to move forward on this critical issue. The results of these sessions are summarized below.

## Pinpointing the Major Barriers Results of Breakout Workshop #1

During the first workshop the groups identified the top system barriers having an impact on access to recreation for low-income children and youth in Ontario. The barriers include:

### 1. Lack of access

- Competition for space in communities and lack of access to schools
- Lack of accessible services and programs at the local level
- Need for accessible green spaces for informal recreation activities

### 2. Insufficient community engagement

- Lack of engagement of communities and youth in the planning and development of programs

### 3. Lack of outreach

- Lack of outreach to low-income families
- Need for a system navigator/guide to assist low-income families in accessing programs

### 4. Stigma and lack of awareness

- Stigma associated with asking for financial assistance and the complexity of processes for obtaining subsidies
- Lack of awareness among low-income families – providers not reaching out into community and the lack of easily understandable materials to inform low-income families of options and the importance of recreation

**5. Lack of understanding of, and specific programming for, diverse needs**

- Lack of understanding of cultural diversity
- Need for programming geared to specific groups (e.g. girls, immigrants)
- Need for more holistic concept of recreation (including arts/culture)

**6. Insufficient coordination and collaboration at the local level**

- Lack of coordinated approach to service delivery – need for single sites for multiple services, coordinated access to subsidy, coordinated delivery, process integration
- Lack of communication between social services, public health and recreation

**7. Lack of “one voice” and system coordination**

- Lack of coordinated planning/systems approach
- Lack of coordination among different levels of government
- Need for a national/provincial strategy or framework to establish a continuum of accessible and essential development opportunities for low-income children and youth

**8. Lack of funding (and costs of participation for users)**

- Need for core, multi-year term funding for access initiatives - one time grants are unsustainable
- Insufficient funding and support for subsidy programs
- Rising user fees

## Identifying the Best Solutions

### Results of Breakout Workshop #2

During the second workshop the groups identified the “best solutions”. These solutions are organized by level:

#### *Community-Level Solutions*

##### **1. Access Policies & Subsidy Solutions**

- Municipal policies (all municipalities should have policies and plans in place)
- Communities could develop access/concession card systems
- Private sector/local business engagement to support affordable access/subsidies

##### **2. Community & Youth Engagement**

- Engage community and youth in the design of programs
- Provide alternative settings that are youth-run and community-driven

##### **3. Community Hub Centres**

- Establish locally planned and designed community hubs

##### **4. School-based Partnerships**

- Implement more “community schools”
- Promote the idea of a “seamless day” for children and youth from breakfast to after school

##### **5. Green Spaces**

- Plan for safe accessible spaces for informal recreation
- Influence neighbourhood planning

## *System Solutions*

### **6. Public Education & Awareness**

- Promote and build awareness of the benefits of play/recreation
- Build the case for community investment in affordable access for all

### **7. Collaborative/Multi-Sectoral Partnerships**

- Research and implement innovative collaborative delivery models – e.g. one-stop programs
- Engage multiple sectors: business, government, volunteer sector, low-income families, arts, culture, education, research etc.
- Bring health, recreation and social services together

### **8. Best Practices Portal**

- Develop a system for researching and sharing best practices

### **9. Infrastructure Investment**

- Require municipal access policies to be in place, and fully implemented, for access to federal/provincial investment
- Increase capacity of community sites to be multi-service programming hubs

### **10. Sustainable Funding**

- Provide multi-year core funding

## Making it Happen

### Results of Breakout Workshop #3

During this third breakout session the groups identified the following ideas regarding what needs to happen to ensure the solutions are implemented:

#### *Actions for the Task Group and Sector Leaders*

1. **Share the Institute's findings with other ministries and other levels of government.** (Focus on including recreation in discourse at Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction)
2. **Build the Task Group and formalize action teams.** Review the membership of the Task Group and ensure all relevant players are included. Engage multi-sectoral partners including business in this dialogue.
3. **Create a provincial policy platform.** Develop a provincial policy statement on affordable access to recreation. Create a template for a recreation access policy. There is also a need to link with issues that are front and centre on provincial and federal agendas such as healthy living, poverty reduction, obesity.
4. **Develop a provincial framework/strategy** that leads to strategies, policies and funding decisions. The strategy needs to address the needs of both rural and urban centres (i.e. inclusive of all Ontarians).
5. **Build public awareness** of the issues and the need for action
6. **Encourage and support key individuals and research institutions that are engaged in research** and have evidence to support the benefits of recreation
7. **Develop a "portal" for best practices.** PRO could facilitate this and also connect with other provinces/territories for partnerships.

## *Actions for Communities*

8. **Encourage/facilitate community fundraising** (e.g. through community foundations) to support access initiatives
9. **Improve our cultural competence** by engaging marginalized populations (perhaps through settlement organizations)
10. **Develop front-line/outreach strategies** (i.e. getting to meet people through non-traditional ways) – use animators
11. **Promote case management models**, e.g. “wrap around” process, wrap services around a family, remove barriers
12. **Do local program planning with schools** and look for opportunities to work with school boards and schools
13. **Enhance partnerships with sports** – need to invite them to our table and conferences
14. **Identify and mobilize community champions and leaders**, elected officials to review this platform and commit to action
15. **Start with our own organizations** – take the information discussed here and implement solutions in our own programs/organizations

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## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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<b>Ann Robinson</b> Municipality of Chatham-Kent	<b>Daniela Seskar-Hencic</b> Ontario Public Health Association	<b>Hilary Gold</b> Playing with Freedom
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**Jim Bradley**

Sport Alliance of Ontario

**Joy Thompson**

Town of Halton Hills

**Julian Diego**

SKETCH

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Physical Activity Resource Centre

**Karen Glass**

Ontario Works

**Kevin Lee**

Scadding Court Community Centre

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Boys and Girls Clubs of Ontario

**Pamela Grant**

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Regional Municipality of Niagara

**Patricia Murray**

York University

**Paula Cicc-Bowles**

Town of Ajax

**Petra Wolfbeiss**

Association of Municipalities of Ontario

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Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse

**Rod Jacobs**

Ontario Aboriginal Sport Circle

**Rory Gleenson**

Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies

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Toronto Community Foundation

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