

THE WELLCOMS MOBILE VAN PROJECT: BUILDING PATHS TO JUSTICE IN RURAL WELLINGTON COUNTY

Interim Report, August 2019

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A Project of the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County
Funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

Since opening in 2002 the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County has found providing service to the rural part of Wellington County a challenge. Rural Wellington County encompasses approximately 2,657 square kilometers. There are several small communities spread throughout the County. Driving times between Guelph and some communities are 45 minutes to an hour. Public transportation between the small towns in rural Wellington County and the city of Guelph is poor or non-existent.

The WellCoMs van is intended to meet the legal needs of the population of rural Wellington, needs which have been perceived to be unmet since the establishment of the Clinic. During the pilot project, between mid-May and the end of October 2019, the van will make one-day visits on a regular basis to the towns shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Communities Served by the WellCoMs Van

Community	Population	% of the Population below the low- income cut-off
Drayton	2,111	7.6%
Erin	2,647	7.4%
Clifford	8,23	13.3%
Hillsburg	1,124	1.3%
Arthur	2,333	9.7%
Palmerston	2,624	5.2%
Elora	7,424	7.2%
Puslinch	7,336	5.8%
Mt. Forest	4,643	15.3%
Harriston	1,797	13.5%
Rockwood	4,629	5.8%
Fergus	20,767	7.2%

Legal problems research carried out over the past 25 years has shown conclusively that the prevalence of legal problems among the population is high. Four studies carried out in Canada between 2004 and 2014 have shown that about half the adult population will experience at least one everyday problem with legal aspects they consider serious and difficult to resolve. Many people experiencing these “justiciable” problems, problems that have a potential legal solution although they might more sensibly be resolved in other ways, do not always recognize the legal nature of the everyday problems they experience and often do not seek appropriate help from competent sources.

If legal clinics are to meet the legal needs of the public, they must develop ways of building service delivery on the basis of outreach. The WellCoMs van is one form of outreach to the community. It will go out to where people live or spend much of their time. The van will set up in a conspicuous place in each of the towns in order to attract the attention of people using that community space. In addition, the presence of the van will be advertised using the ways people normally communicate in the community; through social media, posters placed in places of business that people frequent, information posted at the local library, news articles in community newspapers and information provided to community groups in the town.

This interim report describes the extent to which, within the first five weeks of the project, the van is achieving its broad objective of identifying legal needs and providing assistance to the people of rural Wellington County. The report is based on only 5 weeks of data and on-the-ground experience. However, this early snapshot will allow timely assessment, discovery of unanticipated developments of both a positive and negative nature and, if needed, early course corrections.

DATA SOURCES

This report is based on data gathered between May 15 and June 20. The data were gathered by the two legal workers providing service from the van, using two data collection forms. One form is being used to record a limited amount of information about people making casual stops at the van. The second form captures more extensive data about people identifying a problem and asking for assistance. In addition, some data were drawn from notes made by the outreach workers at the van and from Clinic management information data.

HOW THE COMMUNITY VISITS “ROLL OUT”

The WellCoMs van makes one full or half day visit to 12 communities in Wellington County according to a pre-established schedule. Early on in the visit the outreach workers post on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter and sometimes on more than one platform. The van stops in an open space such as a parking lot in a place intended to attract attention by passers-by. Appropriate arrangements with local officials are made in advance. A tent is put up in front of the van with prominent signs advertising the availability of legal help. During the visits an outreach worker will also visit agencies that serve residents in the community such as: the community library, community service organizations, a local food bank, and ordinary places of retail business, sometimes placing posters in those places advertising the schedule for the WellCoMs van. These are places where people are likely to notice them as they go about their normal daily activities. Community leaders and representatives from community organizations are invited to informally stop by the van to learn about the project. The strategy used by the

WellCoMs van project is to learn about the normal patterns of communication and information-sharing used by people in the course of daily activities, connecting the van with these aspects to the social organization of the communities.

OUTREACH

During the 5-week period from May 15 to June 20 the van made a total of 29 visits to the 12 rural Wellington County communities.

Table 3: Number of Visits to the 12 Communities

Community	Number of Visits
Drayton	3
Erin	2
Clifford	3
Hillsburg	1
Arthur	3
Palmerston	3
Elora	2
Puslinch	1
Mt. Forest	3
Harriston	3
Rockwood	3
Fergus	2
Total	29

During that time a total of 173 people visited the van. Fifty people made casual stops as they were passing by the location, but did not identify a problem. One hundred and twenty-three people identified problems and were provided with some form of immediate assistance.

Table 4: Number of Visits to the Van by Individuals

Community	Casual Visitors	Problem-Focussed Visitors	Total Visitors
Drayton	5	6	11
Erin	5	5	10
Clifford	5	14	19
Hillsburg	-	3	3
Arthur	8	19	27
Palmerston	1	12	13
Elora	1	6	7
Puslinch	2	2	4
Mt. Forest	4	20	24
Harriston	10	15	25
Rockwood	5	9	14
Fergus	4	12	16
Total	50	123	173

At this point it is not known what factors explain the larger numbers of visitors in some towns. The number of visitors is not strictly a function of the Census population. Arthur, with a population of 2,333, and Harriston, with a population of 1,797, had the largest number of visitors, 28 and 26, respectively. Fergus, which has a population of 20,767, registered 16 visitors. Puslinch, with a population of 7,336 which is about in the middle of the 12 communities in terms of population size had 4 visitors. Hillsburg is the second smallest community with a population of 1,124 and had the fewest visitors to the van, 3. However, the smallest community, Clifford, with a population of 823, had 19 visitors. The number of visits is important. The van made three visits to Arthur, Harriston and Mt. Forest. These three communities had the largest number of visitors. Micro patterns of population movement for shopping and other normal daily activities may account for smaller towns having disproportionately larger numbers of visitors. The factors influencing the pattern of visiting will be explored in greater depth in order to develop a sustainable approach that is rooted in the structure of the communities being served.

One of the main principles of outreach is going out to where people live or normally spend their time in order to reach people who would not otherwise request assistance. Building service delivery on outreach is extremely important because many people experiencing legal problems do not ask for assistance in a timely manner, according to a study in one Ontario community clinic, sometimes waiting until the situation is desperate.¹ The WellCoMs van is succeeding in meeting this criterion for outreach. In about 5 weeks between May 15 and June 20² the WellCoMs van attracted 173 visitors. Fifty were casual visitors who did not discuss a problem at that particular visit and 123 visitors identified a problem to the legal workers at the van and were given some form of assistance. Of course, any extrapolation is highly tentative but these numbers would put the project on track for a total of 840 visitors with 590 people being provided with immediate assistance within the 24 weeks until the end of October. Extrapolations beyond the end of October when the community visits will end is not possible. Ideally if the project continues to prove successful, it will be developed into a form that is sustainable over the winter.

People requesting assistance and identifying themselves by name were checked against the clinic data management system to determine if they previously had contact with the Clinic. Remarkably, it appears that approximately 93% of the people requesting service at the van had not previously accessed help through the Clinic. It cannot be determined if the people who approached the WellCoMs van would not have sought assistance or would not have eventually done so. It also cannot be determined if a proportion of the people were experiencing legal need for the first time. However, it is clear that the project is an effective way to reach people who had not previously been served and possibly would not otherwise receive the help they needed.

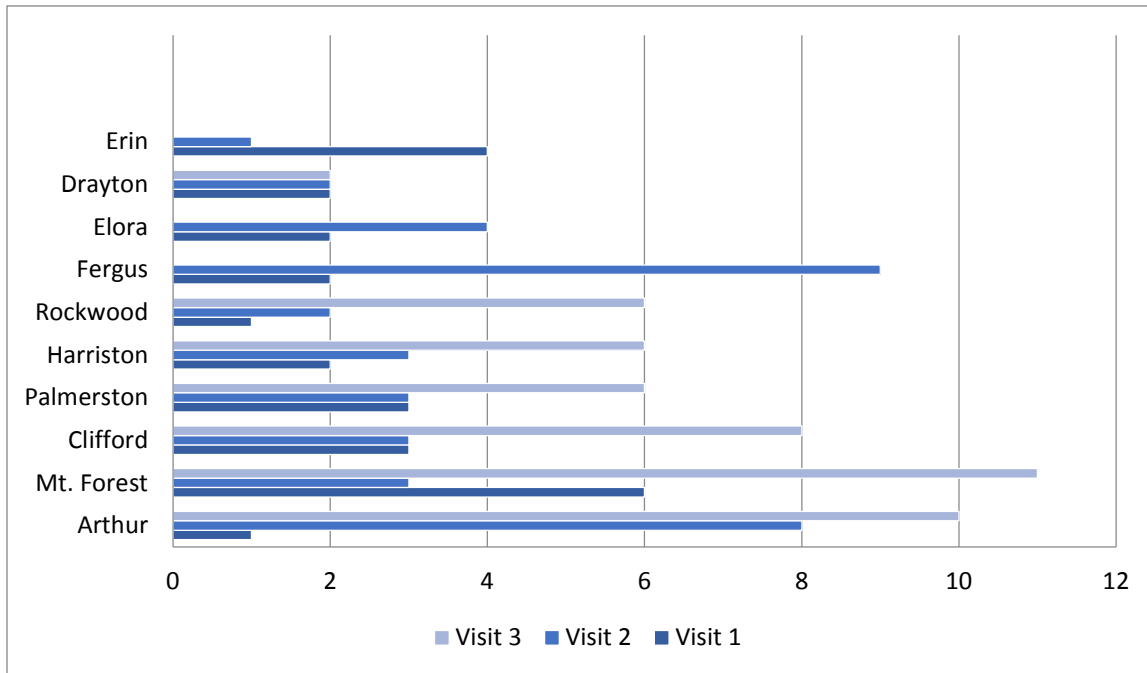
The graph in Chart 1 shows the number of visitors identifying problems by the order of visit. The 6 communities that had three visits by the van had increasing numbers of visitors with problems. The patterns are slightly different. The number of visitors to the van in Arthur, Rockwood and Harriston increased regularly from the first to the second and the second to the third visits. The number of visitors in Palmerston and Clifford were the same for the first and

¹ Paths to Justice: Navigating with the Wandering Lost, Providing Access to Justice in Rural and Linguistic Minority Communities in South-Eastern Ontario, Report of the Five County Connecting Regions Project, March 2011

² There were different numbers of visits to the 12 communities on different dates spread across the 5-week period

second visits then increased for the third visit. Mt. Forest had a high number of visitors on the first visit of the WellCoMs van, the number dropped on the second visit, but increased on the third. Three visits to Drayton produced the same number each time.

Chart 1 The Number of Visitors by Order of Visit for Visitors with Problems for Communities in Which There Were Two or More Visits



There were two visits to Fergus and Elora. In Elora the number of visitors on the second visit exceeded the first. In Erin, the reverse was true. The number of visitors was larger on the first visit, declining on the second visit.

The patterns for some communities may be anomalous. The data are preliminary. More visits have occurred since the preparation of this report. However, it seems evident that repeated visits build familiarity with the WellCoMs van in most communities, attracting greater numbers of people with legal need asking for assistance.

How People Heard about the Van

The majority of people coming into contact with the van learned about it casually by passing by the temporary street-side location, 68.9% and 24.0% from the two groups of contacts.

Table 5: Ways People Learned about the WellCoMs Van

Ways People Learned	People Identifying Problems	Casual Contacts
Passing by	68.6%	24.0%
Word of mouth	5.1%	--
Social media	8.5%	2.0%
Community newspaper	4.2%	--
Community Agency	11.9%	4.0%
Poster	1.7%	--
Legal Aid	--	4.0%
N/A	--	66.0%
Total	100% (123)	100% (50)

Focusing on the more complete data obtained from people who identified a problem and obtained assistance, a total of 31.4% combined: learned about the van from a source that can be considered as part of the network of communication in the community; were told about it by someone, learned about it through social media, a community agency, a community newspaper or from a poster placed in various places around town by the WellCoMs van staff. This is promising because making use of the ways people normally access and exchange information is important for developing a sustainable approach that may involve fewer visits to the communities. Further analysis will determine whether the percentages for these types of learning will hopefully increase over the course of the project. A basic objective of the WellCoMs project is to become embedded in the community. If people become aware of the services available from the clinic through the normal means by which information is communicated in the communities the project should be more sustainable in the longer term.

It is remarkable that among the group of people who identified problems almost 70% encountered the van casually by passing by the location. This suggests the extent of problems with probable legal aspects extant among people in the 12 rural communities and the need for an effective form of outreach to identify them and provide assistance.

THE PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY PEOPLE ACCESSING THE VAN

The most frequently occurring type of problem identified by clients of the van was family law.

Table 6: Types of Problems Identified

Type of Problem	Percent
Family Law	31.4%
Landlord-Tenant	14.4%
Pensions (ODSP and CPP-D)	11.0%
Wills and Powers of Attorney	9.3%
Civil Disputes	9.3%
Criminal Matters	5.9%
Employment	5.1%
Debt	3.4%
Government Benefits	2.5%
Education	1.7%
Mental Health	0.8%
Other	0.8%
N/A	4.4%
Total	100.0% (123)

THE ASSISTANCE PEOPLE RECEIVED

Because of a change in the data collection process detailed data on types of assistance cannot be provided. However, all of the 123 individuals received some service. Depending on their needs some clients were provided with prepared referral sheets. For example, a visitor to the van who has a debt problem and may have to appear in court will be given a copy of the Courts and Tribunals sheet. The staff at the van will highlight: Pro Bono Ontario, Law Society Referral Service and Steps to Justice.

The community legal workers at the van also provide specific local referrals. These are listed below.

- Women in Crisis
- Community Resource Centre
- Here 24/7
- Mount Forest Family Health Team Outreach Workers
- East Wellington Community Services
- The local MP and MPP
- Local Foodbank
- Wellington County Housing
- Senior's at Risk

A SHIFT IN BALANCE OF RURAL AND URBAN SERVICES

One of the long-standing objectives of the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County has been to increase service to rural Wellington County. This has clearly been done judging from the

number of people served by the WellCoMs van. Also, however, the balance of rural versus urban intakes at the clinic has shifted since the beginning of the WellCoMs project. During May and June of 2018, 21% of intakes came from communities in Wellington county rather than Guelph. During May and June 2019, the approximate time period during which the van has been operating, 35% of intakes have been from the rural parts of Wellington County. It appears that the presence of the WellCoMs van in the rural towns throughout the county has had a broader effect than providing immediate service to people immediately, the vast majority of whom had not previously been clients of the clinic. Among the 50 casual contacts at the van, 24% said they did not previously know about the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County, compared with 14% saying they had heard about the clinic. 62% did not answer.³ The presence of the van may be increasing the general level of awareness of legal aid and the numbers of people contacting the legal clinic for assistance. This should be examined in greater detail.

MOVING FORWARD

It could be judged premature to draw conclusions on the basis of 5 weeks of data and experience about a project that will last another 24 weeks. However, the early results are very promising. The project appears likely to succeed in bringing greater access to justice to people in rural Wellington County.

The mobile van is an effective form of outreach. The presence of the van, supported by the messages on social media, news articles in community newspapers, posters and schedules placed in the windows of organizations and businesses around town and invited visits by representatives from community organizations seem to have so far combined to produce an effective outreach strategy.

The van has attracted 173 people, most of whom have learned about it by simply passing by. Remarkably, given the unplanned nature of these contacts 123 people have identified problems they are experiencing and have received some form of assistance. This is not only evidence of the effectiveness of the van as an outreach strategy; it is evidence of the depth of unmet need in these communities.

Equally remarkable, over 90% of the people who received help have not previously sought help from the Legal Clinic. The data about the individuals is not sufficiently detailed to know if they would meet normal financial eligibility requirements. However, in progressive legal aid regimes coverage and financial eligibility restrictions are relaxed. People with problems are not turned away. Rather, they are provided with some assistance appropriate to the particular problem and the individual's circumstances and capacities to act competently in her or his own interests.

One objective of the clinic has been to increase the proportion of the overall service of the clinic provided to people outside the city of Guelph. The percentage of intakes from outside Guelph in May and June 2019 increased to 35% compared with 21% for the same two months one year ago. It is not possible to tell if this is solely related to the increased numbers arising from the van, or if the presence of the van had some influence.

³ The large non-response percentage is because of a change in data collection procedures part way through the 5-week period. Many people were not asked the question.

The WellCoMs project is serving the needs of Wellington County communities while, at the same time, drawing on the resources of those same communities. The project is attempting to use the normal channels of communication to connect people in the community with the service. The project is also attempting to engage through social organization to help in the communities to generate referrals. For instance, there is some evidence suggesting that food banks are important sources of referral. There is a library in each of the 12 towns. In one town the clinic was told that people asked the library staff about the van. The libraries may be information hubs. It is often the case that certain gathering places in the community also serve as information hubs. The possibility of reaching clients through all of the main places where social networks are most dense should be explored.

Embedding legal aid in the community can be a powerful strategy for enhancing access to justice. The early results of the WellCoMs project suggest that becoming part of the community being served may increase the effectiveness of outreach. It may also contribute to the sustainability of legal services delivery based on outreach projects. Knowledge of the service becomes part of the patterns of information sharing in the community and accessing legal services becomes part of the broader patterns of seeking help. An important aspect of the WellCoMs project moving forward will be to explore the information flows and the social organization of helping in the communities in order to better understand the ways in which the WellCoMs project and legal aid more broadly can develop sustainable service delivery.

The van will cease visiting the communities at the end of October because of winter weather. Assuming the success of the project continues, some concrete planning should begin well before the end of October to transition to another stage of WellCoMs so that the expansion of service delivery will not be lost and, importantly, the learning process will continue. Support for the project by policy and funding organizations that have a commitment to meeting the legal needs should continue to increase the learning about effective and sustainable ways of providing service to hard-to-reach populations.