



Measuring  
Rural Community  
Vitality



# **CENTRE WELLINGTON** COMMUNITY VITAL SIGNS INITIATIVE

August 30, 2017



RURAL ONTARIO  
INSTITUTE

# I INTRODUCTION

It is a challenge for rural centres to undertake data collection to understand issues in their community. The **Vital Signs** tool is a potential solution in that it helps communities take a snapshot of their demographic reality for insight on key issues. Vital Signs is a national program led by community foundations coordinated by **Community Foundations Canada**. It leverages local knowledge and measures the vitality of communities (Community Foundations of Canada, 2017).

In 2015, the **Centre Wellington Community Foundation (CWCF)** joined the 23 Communities Foundations across Canada using the Vital Signs tool in releasing its first **Vital Signs report**. This initiative sought to harness local knowledge, measure rural community vitality and improve wellbeing. The report was designed to engage the Centre Wellington community to identify key areas where action and attention is needed most. The community decided on three main themes: 1) the gap between rich and poor, 2) leadership and belonging, and 3) arts and culture (Centre Wellington Community Foundations, 2015). Data collected on the three themes provided service providers and other stakeholders a snapshot of the opportunities and challenges in Centre Wellington. The next step required building on this information to develop indicators of community wellbeing in key areas through community consultation. In 2016, the CWCF Community Vital Signs project was selected by the **Rural Ontario Institute** to participate in its **Measuring Rural Community Vitality initiative**, which offered funds to facilitate the community consultation.

# I NEEDS ADDRESSED

Centre Wellington has been experiencing significant growth in the last few years, and anticipates 79% further growth between now and 2041. In 2016, Centre Wellington reported a population of 29,800, however, projections estimate that a 79% growth in community population could bring a resident total up to 52,300 by the year 2041 (Stantec, 2017). Community leaders have struggled with collecting data to aid in their discernment of a variety of subjects, including 1) the gap between people who are rich and poor, 2) belonging and leadership, and 3) arts and culture. Lack of data was acknowledged as a barrier for stakeholders and local government in making informed decisions on policies and programs based on residents' felt needs. Increasing understanding to inform planning in those three areas was important to solidify wellbeing during growth. To this end, the 2015 Vital Signs report presented a snapshot of the community's thoughts for these three areas of focus.

# | SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

Prior to sponsoring the 2015 Vital Signs report, CWCF found it difficult to assess the community's pulse on these three areas. They put Vital Signs to work due to its low cost, high value methodology suitable for data collection in a small rural area. While the resulting report gave important insight, it did not offer tools to measure progress on the three areas. Consequently, CWCF decided to conduct a community consultation to further elaborate on the three themes of the Vital Signs report and used 3 out of the VS 11 indicators to track progress.

A Community Leadership Advisory Committee (CLAC) was formed to lead the community consultation. The CLAC involved high-level stakeholders to gather resources in the three focus areas. The committee included the CWCF CAO, an artist, the Elora Arts Council Director, a youth leader and counsellor, staff from the local newspaper, among others. The CLAC's purpose was to serve in an advisory and support role to the Vital Signs project. A big responsibility taken by this group was to develop a survey in the community and host issue-based workshops. Members drew on networks to identify and connect with other key stakeholders to provide additional data, and met at least 10 times during the project (Centre Wellington Community Foundations, 2015).

The following methods were used to engage the community and collect data:

## 1) Community survey and key informant interviews

A 'Community Voices' survey was developed to gather views on the three topics. Community members were invited to fill out a short survey on the three issue areas for six weeks from May-July 2015 (Centre Wellington Community Foundations, 2015). 446 people responded to this survey.

Interviews were offered to community experts to gather further in-depth data and to 10 residents willing to share their experience on The Gap between Rich and Poor. Community leaders and experts identified key data sources, provided context on issues, and helped raise the profile of the Vital Signs project. Resident interviews offered participants a more comfortable setting to share their experiences. Confidentiality was ensured and interviewees were compensated with gift cards for their time (Centre Wellington Community Foundations, 2015).

## 2) Issue Area Workshops

Three meetings were held on each of the three topics to generate in-depth discussion and data. Key stakeholders such as the Food Bank, faith groups, financial institutions, student programs, arts organizations, sports clubs and seniors' centers were divided into separate committees for each of the three themes. An additional workshop was held to bring stakeholders together across issue areas.

The purpose of these meetings was to:

1. Seek input from stakeholders about a specific issue and its key indicators.
2. Identify potential data sources in the community and decide what data was still missing.
3. Provide a forum for stakeholders to network (Pratley, 2015).

### 3) “Vital Conversation”

CWCF held a “Vital Conversation” on food insecurity as a special topic, facilitated by a guest speaker. 65 people from the community responded to the invitation to join the discussion and share experiences.

## Timeline

Community Foundations of Canada provided a sample timeline, which served as a guide for its local implementation. The Community Foundation of Canada provides local foundations a plan and timeline to support the project. The CWCF project followed these guidelines and the project manager supported the team in meeting deadlines and adjusting directions when required. Challenges to overcome included establishing and maintaining momentum and distributing reports. These were solved through focused efforts and social media outreach.

Project milestones leading up to the program evaluation include:

- **November 2014**  
Determine issue areas, establish Community Leadership Advisory Committee, and develop workplan.
- **January-February 2015**  
Identification of project staff, volunteers and project resources. Start scan of available existing information (i.e., Stats Canada, County and Municipal databases).
- **March 2015**  
Arrangements confirmed with local partners and consultants. Communications activities, and community and media engagement activities begin.
- **April-May 2015**  
Community consultation.
- **June-July 2015**  
Selection of Vital Signs community wellbeing indicators.
- **October 2015**  
Local launch for community and media activities.
- **November 2015**  
Program evaluation.

## Budget

CWCF had a \$35,000 budget for this project, including the \$15,000 from the Rural Ontario Institute grant. Other organizations that contributed funding for this project were Waterloo Wellington Community Futures, Middlebrook Social Innovation Fund, BDO, John E. Morris Law Office and Athol Gow & Jason Thompson. Approximately \$25,000 was spent in three key budget areas: hiring a project leader, graphic design and printing. Public meetings were fairly inexpensive as gathering spaces, supplies and snacks were either donated in-kind or minimal in cost.

The local newspaper, *The Wellington Advertiser*, distributed the report with their paper across Wellington County and printed the report for a substantial discount. They were important partners for raising awareness about the report and its findings.

**Centre Wellington** is a township of about 29,000 residents in south central Ontario, located in Wellington County. The primary communities are Elora, Fergus and Belwood. The area is agricultural but also includes industries such as manufacturing and tourism.

The **Centre Wellington Community Foundation (CWCF)** is a public, charitable foundation created by the people of Centre Wellington. Its mission is to strengthen the Centre Wellington community by helping donors achieve their giving goals, and by helping local registered charities organizations find resources to support their work (Community Foundations of Canada, 2017).

**Community Foundations of Canada (CFC)** is the national network for Canada's 191 community foundations. From large cities to small towns, more than 95% of Canadian communities have access to a community foundation. CFC has worked with and invested in Canadian communities for the past 94 years. They run the national program Vital Signs for rural communities (Community Foundations of Canada, 2017).

# | COMMUNITY ASSETS

The following are some of the community assets that contributed to the success of the project:

## Community Foundations of Canada – Vital Signs support

The Community Foundation of Canada's Vital Signs framework was cost effective and easy to use. The processes and instructions are clear, explaining how to use the framework and develop a report. CFC members were supportive in providing guidance as needed. The Vital Signs framework laid out a roadmap for measuring rural vitality and outlined a process and framework for the report. At the publishing stage, the national campaign was supportive in raising the profile of the report. CFC's support for CWCF and Centre Wellington left stakeholders feeling a part of a larger network of rural communities across Canada.

## High community engagement

The high engagement rate of community members and stakeholders is evident in the 446 survey and interview participants. 15-20 community groups were engaged during the workshops producing key information to increase understanding on the three areas of focus.

## Volunteers

Aside from hiring a project manager and graphic designer, everyone in the project worked on a volunteer basis. Volunteers played an important role in organizing and implementing the engagement strategy. They represented key sectors including health centers, senior groups, youth committees, local government and service providers. They offered first-hand community expertise and provided greater exposure for the project to attract a larger audience for engagement.

## Strong research support

CWCF hired Dr. Erin Pratley as project manager. As a local PhD researcher, she brought expertise that ensured the project methods and data were sound and effectively communicated. This supported strong leadership and quality research. Dr. Pratley surveyed national and provincial data to find relevant information for Centre Wellington. She also played a significant role in liaising with Community Foundations of Canada.

## Leadership and partnerships

Aside from the project manager's leadership contribution to this project, other committees supported the success of this work:

- **Steering Committee** encompassed influential people in Centre Wellington including the former hospital CEO, engaged community members and the Board of Centre Wellington Community Foundation.
- **Board of Centre Wellington Community Foundation** included municipal councilors, the head of Human Resources for the Centre Wellington Township, among others.
- **Community Leadership Advisory Committee (CLAC)** included stakeholders of various sectors.

Leadership in this project was grassroots and community-based, involving many community stakeholders. It created ownership and built on the theme of belonging. It tapped into community expertise and strengthened leaders. A noteworthy example of this is Raymond Soucy coming on board the CWCF team as Executive Director while first being engaged as a resident engaged in the consultation.

# | RESULTS

The Vital Signs report met its goal of providing more community data and gave Centre Wellington a platform to engage in meaningful conversations about the three areas of focus. It produced greater understanding and a sense of belonging, which serves as a core value and guiding force for the CWCF.

Other communities have also benefited from the CW Vital Signs process and report. Examples include:

- **The Arts Council** used report findings to improve their communications by hosting networking events. Quantifying the value of arts in the community has always been a challenge, and the arts community is now taking steps to gather information at events. As a result, key statistics and baselines are available to give a sense of the economic impact of art events in the community.
- **Elora Cataract Trailway Association** used the report to work towards great public trails and to demonstrate the importance of a trail network for both as a sense of belonging and the economic impact of an extensive trail network.
- **Bungalow 55's** community lunches are a good example on local activities directly stemming from the Vital Signs report that are making a positive return on social capital. These community lunches tap into the stakeholders from the Vital Signs consultation.
- Various organizations such as **Big Brothers and Sisters** and the **Children's Foundation of Guelph and Wellington** are using the report to structure funding applications for their organizations. The CWCF uses the same to identify grant recipients. The Vital Signs report has become a benchmark of excellence for local organizations as they plan their work.

Internally, the Vital Signs report and project supported the CWCF to leverage increased partnerships and funding, and to raise the profile of community initiatives. This has led to additional volunteers stepping forward, and to a more cohesive community working together. The findings from the VS Report have been presented to the community in efforts to broaden the reach of the report and to engage more people and organizations.

The Vital Signs report and the CWCF connection to Community Foundations of Canada has opened doors to further potential partnerships. Although the CFC does not have endowment funds for specific areas, they do have access to utilize some national or special funding. CWCF sees this as potential areas of partnership with other agencies to create a bigger impact.

CWCF has also offered grants of up to \$1,000 to local community groups working toward the three main focus areas: 1) the gap between rich and poor, 2) leadership and belonging, and 3) arts and culture.

# LESSONS LEARNED & ADVICE TO OTHERS

CWCF was impressed and satisfied with the overall process and achievements of the Vital Signs project. Their lessons learned and advice to others include:

- Vital Signs can be a big task for volunteer-based groups. Hiring a professional to spearhead the project was key to its success.
- Recognize skill gaps and use your resources to bring various skillsets into project leadership. Having leaders from many sectors form part of the Community Leadership Advisory Committee was a great asset to the project.
- Reports that seek to promote community wellbeing need to be written in accessible language. The CWCF Vital Signs report's accessibility was helpful both for people familiar with this type of data and to others for whom this was new.
- Engaging partners in the process is crucial to maintaining momentum. When the community feels ownership of the report, they are more likely to apply the information.
- The structure provided by Community Foundations of Canada was significant in the process of developing the Vital Signs report. Use as guideline and make accommodations when required.
- Find support in good partnerships. ROI understood the need for data in rural communities and were willing to support this endeavour financially. The CFC offered strong technical assistance from beginning to end. All organizations involved in the project contributed to the project's success.
- Advertise and raise awareness through mixed media, including: local newspaper, social media, word of mouth, community groups and websites.
- Ensure follow up by doing more consultation, keeping up the conversations, supporting partners and comparing results to baseline data.

## CONCLUSION

The Vital Signs report was the first initiative to produce significant Centre Wellington community data and a 'snapshot' of the most important issues for residents, by residents. Community consultations not only enhanced the data but built bonds in the community. The report provided an indicator of community wellbeing and a framework for future direction and initiative. This is particularly timely given the community's expected growth and change over the next few decades. Using a community-based approach was crucial in the success of this project. Engaging stakeholders from various sectors brought invaluable local expertise into the project and helped others make connections that continue to grow. While the Community Vital Signs initiative met its direct project goals, the process and report have produced many other positive unintended consequences in the community that generate further momentum. CWCF intends to continue building upon the work of the Vital Signs report and sees value in spearheading future reports to continue developing and updating local data.

# | CHECKLIST

## Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?

It may work well if your county/organization...

- Can find key partners who understand your mission, can support it financially, and are willing to share their knowledge.
- Have hard-working and dedicated volunteers invested in the project.
- Is willing to be reflective and respond to community needs and any obstacles that may arise.
- Is willing to provide ongoing support and engagement in the community.

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The Rural Ontario Institute provided information gathered and summarized by Dr Suzanne Ainley of Ainley Consulting to Platinum Leadership to describe the community projects. All such descriptions have been reviewed and approved by the relevant community contacts.

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