

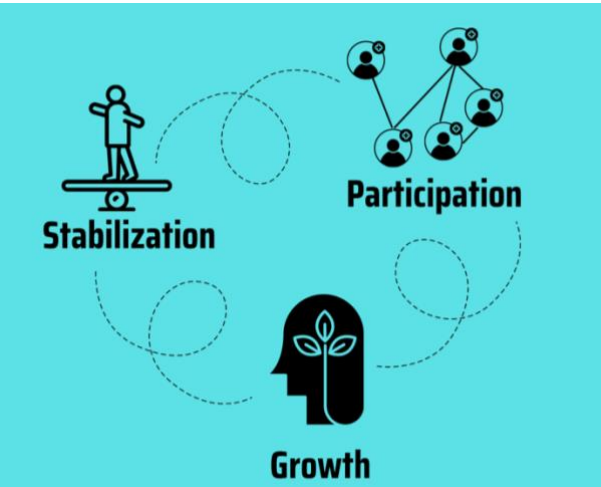
Understanding Start Me Up Niagara’s Radically Inclusive Service Model

Report created by: Shannon Moore, Kim Duffin, Karen Louise Smith, Julie Gregory and Curtis Tye

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Appendix

This appendix to the final report on Start Me Up Niagara’s (SMUN) highlights quotes from service user interviews as well as observations noted from the Brock research team during interviews and in-person engagement SMUN.



SERVICE USER PERSPECTIVES

WHY DO YOU COME TO SMUN?

“When I started here, at first, I was so exhausted sometimes during the day, running from out of cold churches and not getting proper rest. I was sleeping on the floor. The floor was hard cold tiles. It was cold. And then we put down a cardboard box, and then they upgraded the floors upstairs to this nice linoleum floor, which was soft and warm. It wasn’t so cold. And then we got boxes and then yoga mats and stuff for participants to take naps on. They got blankets and stuff. So, that pretty cool, too. I like the fact that people could feel so comfortable, they’ll just, like curl up under a table and have a nap when they need to”.

“They have helped me a lot. They have helped me more than anything. Even if they notice you are crying or something they’ll pull you aside, which a lot of places don’t do, shelters won’t.

“They give you blankets, they have taken me off the street, they have brought me to hospitals. I think they are amazing”

“ To get coffee, food, friendship”

“To sleep, get warm”

“It’s kind of like a diving board into another place where you find friendship. You get to talk to people.”

“Its close by”

“Everybody knows your name.”

“It is somewhere to go everyday.”

“ It’s relaxed here.”

“Welcoming coming here.”

“It feels good.”

“Good people here.”

“It’s not judgmental. When you are outside of here you get judged a lot.”

“ I come here for coffee, support”.

“ I get out of the cold and get something to eat, drink and meet friends here.”

“This is the first place we come when we wake up. The second we wake up it’s get dressed and go get a coffee. And then you know it’s a good start to the day.”

“Something to do during the day.”

“Come for the coffee and stay for the company is what I always say.”

“I come here to stay warm, get some food and coffee, a place to sleep and someone to talk to.”

“Warm, safe, environment for people to come together during the day. Get their stuff together and figure out how they are going to face the day.”

“It gives you confidence,”

“Takes a weight off your shoulders”

“Gives you hope”

“Community networking and social supports.”

“Some of your friends are here.”

“Everybody is casual.”

“I come here for comradery, friendship, sometimes coffee and sometimes to play the guitar. And I’ve gotten to know the staff. If I have a problem on my shoulders they’re good with me. They’ve got great advice.”

“Socialize, have a coffee, get out of the cold.”

“Comfortable”

“Safe place to be”

“Hospitable environment”

“They help you with everything-- clothing, food money.”

“You feel like you are part of something. Part of a family, and you get to achieve something sometimes.”

“There are activities and people that have knowledge in the community. They know where the outreach is, and they’ll help me get connected with whatever I need. So, It’s more than just a coffee shop.”

“Being on ODSP and having depression issues and not a lot to do, it kind of fills a void to a certain point.”

“It feels like you got purpose, socially involved, you come here and you are not alone. It is really as simple as that.”

“It is something that just gives me that extra nudge to know that I have somebody there to help me out and that makes me thrive a little harder.”

“It’s just a good way to get network news, because being homeless it’s hard to hold onto a cell phone sometimes, it hard to just hold onto belongings like that. And so, you are kind of out of tune with the world when you don’t have your simple Facebook or messages. It a great place to find out information which at the end of the day sometimes all somebody had. It important to know when someone is doing good or not doing good so that you can find out how to help. And that has been a big thing for me. Staying in the loop.”

“It helped me turn my life around, things just automatically get good.”

“If you need any kind of help you will find it here”

“You can come with or without money. It doesn’t matter. You can sleep all day if you need.”

“Largely this organization is attractive because its non-religions.”

“Just having anybody to talk to. Sometimes I see my son and I want to show off his pictures and I just got to get it out of my system.”

“It gives me a break from being at home. It’s a small town. If you want to leave your house, if you are bored at home, what is there really to do in this town indoors where you can go and be comfortable?”

“We are all trying to change and make things better for our lives.”

“It’s a very diverse group of people. It is unfortunately a lot of ODSP, it’s retirement people and then it’s addicts. So it is people who are down and out and don’t have a lot of income--- and you know what, if it comes down to it, its like Tim Hortons for poor people. You get free coffee and there’s snacks.”

“I enjoy coming here because there are people you can talk to if you need help in any way, shape or form. They are there for you. I appreciate that with all of my heart.”

“All my friends are here. I get to see them. That’s cool.”

“There are times when there is a lot of rowdiness and somebody you don’t know is going to pull a goddamn pistol or a knife because I know the people they deal with

here. But, 95% of the time I feel safe and comfortable but if something did break out our safety is in good hands.”

“It gives me a break if I’m in kind of a down mood. I have coffee, something to eat and get free WIFI.”

“Being here helps me learn patience and how to deal with people by watching staff deal with them.”

“I think it is great that they are here for certain people because, you know, if they weren’t here, a lot of people would just give up.”

“The volunteers and staff make you want to come back, they make you feel like you are wanted. They are amazing. It makes you feel like you are important. Something other than just a homeless person on the street and not just another addict or statistic.”

“Down to Earth. They don’t put on that they are somebody better than us.”

“Easy to work with, easy to talk with, they don’t push you. They are always supportive. They are always encouraging. Sincere.”

“Accepting. Non-judgmental.”

“The staff are absolutely spectacular. They do a hell of a job to make it feel good. They uplift. My life has been seriously changed by these folks. What a blessing.”

“They do everything. If you want to change and get things good all you have to do is ask because there isn’t much they won’t do for you.”

“In a government office they give you an appointment time and say wait there, wait there, wait, and then all of the sudden, well maybe we will stop this appointment today and we’ll rebook you and you have already sat there for two hours, three hours.”

“You can talk to one of the counsellors and they will put you on track.”

“It started off as doing my taxes and then I had lost my job. So Eventually, it turned into needing housing assistance, and then it was somewhere to go for coffee, and then it evolved into Art me Up, and then being involved with that group. And nowadays, I even volunteer for the Bingo department. It started doing taxes to actually needing help and assistance to volunteering and having something to do.”

“I’ve been coming to SMUN for about two years, but I just started using their services about six months ago.”

“Guidance to get away from some of the bad habits and off the street.”

“It helps me get out of my apartment. Communicate with other people that are not using drugs and alcohol.”

WHAT SHOULD SMUN KEEP DOING?

“There is no place like this place. No place anywhere near this place. Top shelf people.”

“It’s for people that need help. So, if this place wasn’t here who knows what they would be doing?”

“I think that without this place there’d be a lot more crime in the community, there’d be a lot more hungry and homeless people.”

“Keep the doors open for those that need it because there are lots that do.”

“Keep just about everything, housing support, there isn’t enough housing as it is, they got coffee, the snacks, the movies, Bingo day.”

“It’s a good place. There should be more of them. Because I think these places are needed everywhere.”

“Keep on providing the very fresh coffee and baked goods that they have. Knowing that we have a place to go that’s safe and have a cup of coffee and see friends that we know and find out the news about our friends that either very good or very bad. It’s a good place to connect messages. I’ve gotten a message from one of my friends that was actually in the hospital but couldn’t get a hold of me, they had gotten a hold of someone here and there was a message up on the message board for me.”

“Keep doing what they are doing and give everybody an equal opportunity to get involved in whatever they can.”

“We couldn’t live on the income we get from disability.”

“Keep the doors open when it’s cold outside.”

RESEARCH TEAM ON-SITE OBSERVATIONS & REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

When asked the question “Why do you come to SMUN?” I would venture to say that everyone starts with the fact that it is a place to go to and get a cup of coffee and a snack- to get out of the cold- to go somewhere. What I feel differs is what that cup of coffee represents to each individual. What I mean is that I believe that SMUN is serving multiple needs, for instance that cup of coffee for one person is a chance to socialize and be with people that they feel comfortable around but for another it provides meaning for their day and for still another it might be the only source of food that they receive that day. I am using this cup of coffee as a metaphor for the benefits that follow depending on the need of the participant. This is an example of how SMUN meets people where they are without judgment. This non-judgmental environment is another feature that I would keep hearing from participants both on and off the record. From what I have witnessed and the participant’s comments, a cornerstone of SMUN is that people come in at different levels. The non-judgmental environment allows for this low barrier delivery of service possible. Evidence for this is backed up by the participant responses that all of them found that visiting SMUN is much more comfortable and rewarding than a medical or government office. When participants were asked if they found SMUN more comfortable than a coffee shop, their responses went beyond the usual “it’s free” or “the price is right” and almost all expressed their feelings that they were more comfortable in this space and were welcomed as many noted “Tim Horton’s doesn’t want us there”. Participants commented on a sense of belonging with some even going as far as claiming SMUN as “family”. One particular participant expressed that coming to SMUN for their cup of coffee was a chance to “get connected” even though that same person didn’t really talk to anyone. This highlighted another significant feature of SMUN- not only are the staff non-judgmental but so are the participants- people’s needs and boundaries are respected.

Other participant’s responses to why they come to SMUN include social and community networking, social supports, arts and crafts, etc. Participants voiced their appreciation for a place that would receive their cheques as this ensures that “nobody will steal their money”. Another common response was that people came to SMUN for help regarding housing issues. Housing was a repeated topic in the responses. First of all, there was appreciation from many for the help they received but also this concern also came up when participants were asked “What would you like SMUN to start doing?” Many said that they would like SMUN to step up their housing program and that meant everything from starting their own shelter to getting the government to come up with more adequate housing. Similarly, many participants requested shower facilities at SMUN and one person suggested that lockers would be a useful addition.

Another common thread that I noticed throughout many participants comments was the concept that SMUN is a 'safe place'. I have already touched on SMUN being a safe space mentally with its non-judgmental and "what do you need today?" environment. However, in this instance I am addressing the need for a physical 'safe' space. Participants feel that they can come in and sleep and not be worried that something will happen to them or that they will be kicked out.

As far as the programs go the participants commented on how these activities offer hope and gives them a feeling that they "accomplished something". What I found interesting here is that even when an individual did not participate in activities they seemed to appreciate their value. For instance, one participant went from zero participation to taking full advantage of the programs and commented on the value found as a result. Participants commented how good their volunteering made them feel and others said it raised their self-esteem when they participated in the various activities.

A concern that repeated was raised by service users was hours of operation at SMUN. First of all, appreciation that the facility was open on holidays was shared by many. All participants commented that this was an important part of SMUN as the holidays are difficult when you don't have anywhere to go. I would go as far as to say that ALL participants expressed the need for SMUN to be open more hours. This was the main concern that people would change along with the housing situation.

One of the participants comments "I see how to deal with people by how the staff deals with them ...it's taught me to be patient". I found this remark to be a benchmark of the value of SMUN and all that they do. For some, witnessing these respectful and non-judgmental interactions are their only windows into this type of behaviour. One learns from modelling this type of behaviour and it is an example that this is occurring at SMUN.

In conclusion, I wanted to share my thoughts on a scene that I witnessed that to my mind sums up the great work being done at SMUN:

When I came to do interviews, I was upstairs sitting at one of the tables mingling and talking to some of the participants. All of a sudden, a woman and a man came in and they were well known by both staff and participants. Apparently, the woman had very recently (I think within the last week) had a baby and she came in dishevelled and in rough shape along with her partner who was in worse shape as he had cuts and bruises from a fight. People were talking to this man and woman and from what I overheard it was clear that they were supposed to be in court that morning. SMUN staff gave the woman some additional clothing to wear and also helped put herself 'together'. One staff member along with a participant ever so gently attempted to comb out the

woman's hair which was matted and tangled beyond repair. I was touched by the caring and gentleness given to this woman by both the staff and participants. Then a long time volunteer entered the room and he asked them what time their court appearance was. It was 9:45am and court was at 10:00am and they still had to get there. This volunteer took charge and told them he would drive them to court- to my mind. Without the immediate intervention of this volunteer it would not have been possible for these two service users to arrive at court on time. They did not have any transportation. Everyone at SMUN worked together within their multiple roles (service users, volunteers, staff), responding with a sense of present moment immediacy and all were focussed on the goal of meeting an urgent need--- getting this couple off to court. The support showed by everyone was overwhelming witness and was lead by one volunteer who was spearheading it all. It was a scene that I will not forget and I wanted to share that with you. If it were not for SMUN that couple would not have appeared in court and this could have had a disastrous effect (bench warrant for non-appearance or a conviction due to lack of attendance). For me, I am sharing this because I feel that this vignette demonstrates not only the need for a program like SMUN but also it reveals the impact of this type of programming.

Finally, common threads woven throughout all of the interviews can be summarized in the following key words: INCLUSIVE, NON-JUDGMENTAL, SURVIVAL, ACCEPTANCE, COMMUNITY, HELP, COLLABORATION and HOPE.