

Community Agencies At A Crossroads

A Portrait Of Competing Demands

**A Report Based On Findings
From The Community Agency Survey 1999 - 2000**

**Social Planning Council Of Ottawa-Carleton
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In late 1999, The Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton sent a survey to 548 community agencies in Ottawa.¹ The purpose of the survey was:

- to provide a snapshot of the impact of service system restructuring;
- to share challenges and creative solutions; and
- to identify supports needed by the community agencies.

167 agencies (30.5%) responded to the survey, a higher than the average return rate for self-administered surveys. Given the breadth of qualitative and quantitative information provided, the results of the COMMUNITY AGENCY SURVEY paint a representative portrait of the situation facing community agencies on the threshold of a newly amalgamated City.

The SURVEY reveals that the needs of clients are increasing and more complex. Agencies note the increasing number of people who are experiencing greater stress, are less able to meet their basic needs, and at the same time, have less access to support services.

The SURVEY also shows that, in the struggle to meet the increased and complex needs of clients, agencies are experiencing a rise in staff and volunteer stress and fatigue. Some agencies have implemented service reductions or changes in order to cope. As well, agencies are compelled to seek alternative resources. Most agencies have looked to partnerships as a way to address some of their challenges. Many are attempting to diversify their funding. There is an increased reliance on volunteer support to meet current workloads.

SURVEY responses echo a broader trend in the non-profit sector in Canada where nine in every ten organizations say their ability to serve clients has been significantly weakened by income instability or cuts.² Even while client needs increase, organizations are forced to divert attention away from clients to address fundraising, partnering, reporting and computerizing.³ Staff are beginning to question the sustainability⁴ and, in some cases the usefulness of efforts, in this environment of scarcity and unmet needs. There is a pressing need for solid, long term and adequate core resources to enable agencies to meet the increased demand for their services.

¹ The agencies were selected from the database of the Community Information Centre of Ottawa ("Blue Book").

² Statistics Canada. 2000. www.statcan.ca.

³ Statistics Canada. 2000. Information and Insight for the Nonprofit Sector. www.statcan.ca.

⁴ The same issues were identified in another survey conducted by the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton in the spring of 2000. Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton, Community Inventory and Gap Analysis Study Prepared for Success by Six Ottawa-Carleton As Part of the Early Years Demonstration Project. Ottawa: Success by Six Ottawa-Carleton, December 2000.

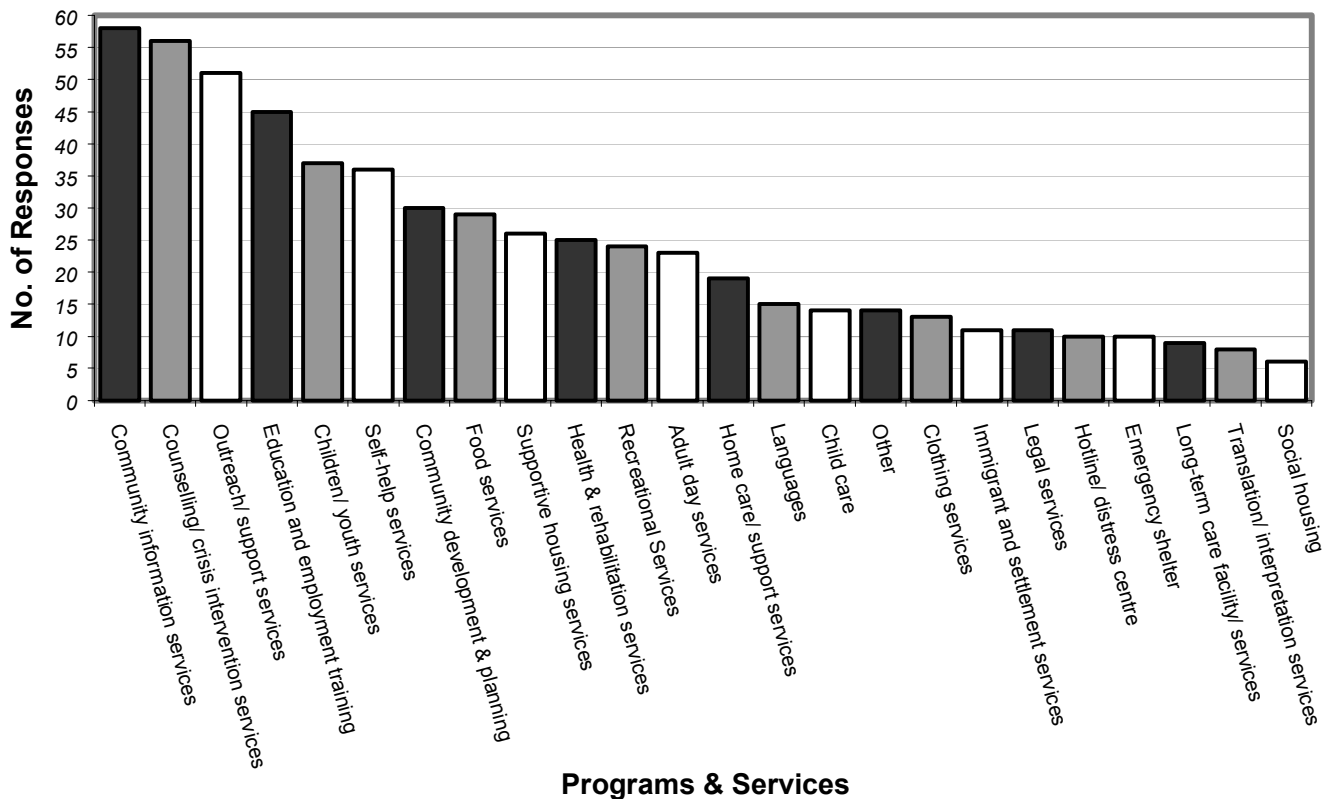
What Services Do Community Agencies Provide?

Community agencies in Ottawa offer a wide variety of programming. The 167 agencies which responded are involved in more than twenty types of programs or services. The three services which responding agencies most commonly identified as part of their activities were:

- Community information services (58 agencies);
- Counselling / crisis intervention services (56 agencies); and
- Outreach / support services (51 agencies).

Several agencies are multi-functional and consequently, identify themselves as undertaking activities in more than a single type of program or service. Chart 1 below shows the full spectrum of services which responding agencies provide.

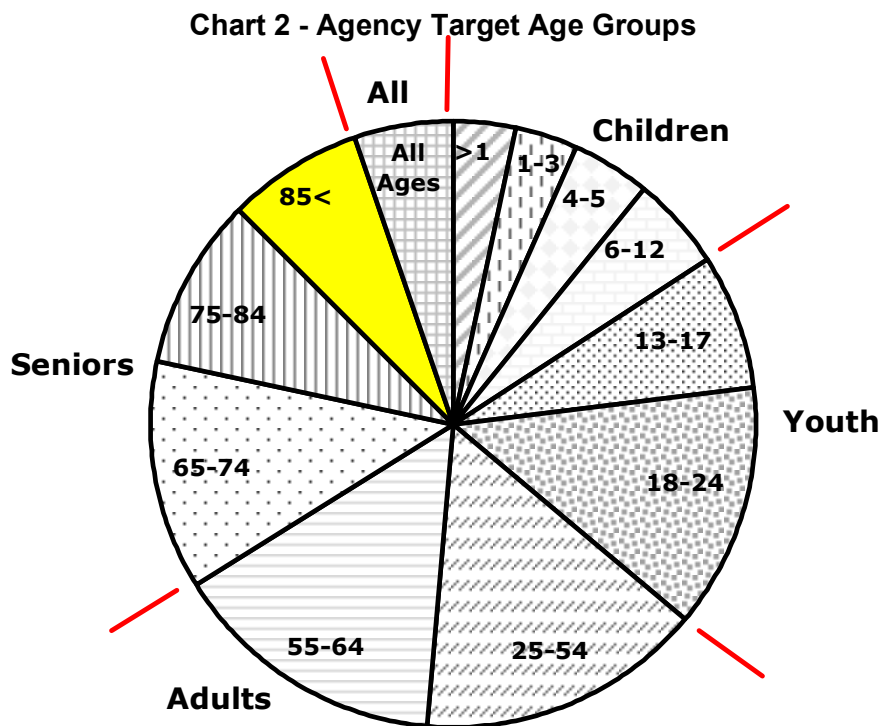
Chart 1 - Agency Program and Service Type (n=554)



Who Uses The Services Of These Community Agencies?

According to the agencies surveyed, more women (63%) utilize community services than men (37%). This is not surprising, as there are a greater number of women who are poor. For example, in 1996, there were 24,965 female lone parent families in the city with an average income of \$33,292. This is approximately half the average family income of \$67,871 at that time.⁵ As well, women are more likely than men to be caregivers of other family members, and may seek services in relation to these individuals.

Most agencies serve clients from a variety of age groups. Collectively responding agencies serve the full spectrum of age ranges within the population. Chart 2 below shows the percentage of responding agencies who reported each age groupings as their main client group.



47% of respondent agencies provide unilingual services in English, while 16% specified they provide unilingual services in French.

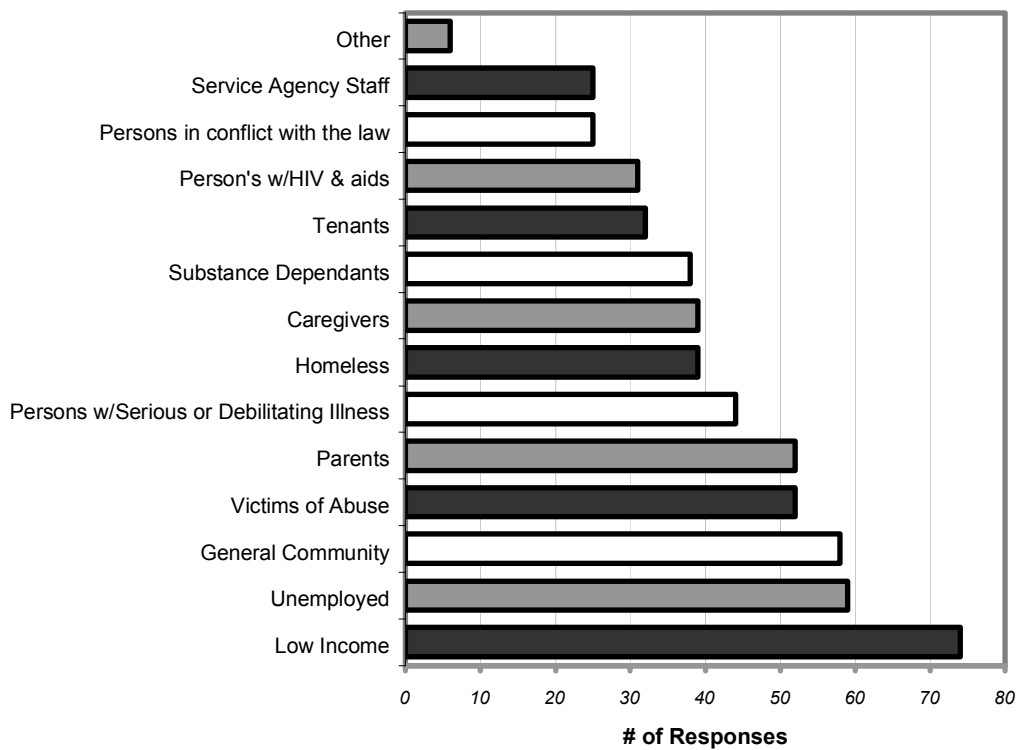
Respondent community agencies indicated that persons with physical, psychiatric and cognitive/developmental disabilities, new Canadians, visible and ethno-cultural minorities, and the aboriginal population use their services.

⁵ City of Ottawa. April 1999. 1996 Census Characteristics by Regional Ward. Ottawa.

Agencies identified the main client populations, by category of need, who use their services.⁶ Chart 3 below indicates the categories of needs which responding agencies address. The client populations most commonly served, by category of need, are:

- low income clients (served by 74 agencies);
- the unemployed (served by 59 agencies);
- the general population (served by 58 agencies);
- victims of abuse (served by 52 agencies);
- parents (served by 52 agencies).

Chart 3 - Areas of Client Need



What Are The Main Challenges Facing Clients?

Agencies identified a list of issues which impact negatively on their clients, whatever their category of need. As well, these issues substantially interfere with the agencies' ability to meet the needs of their clients.

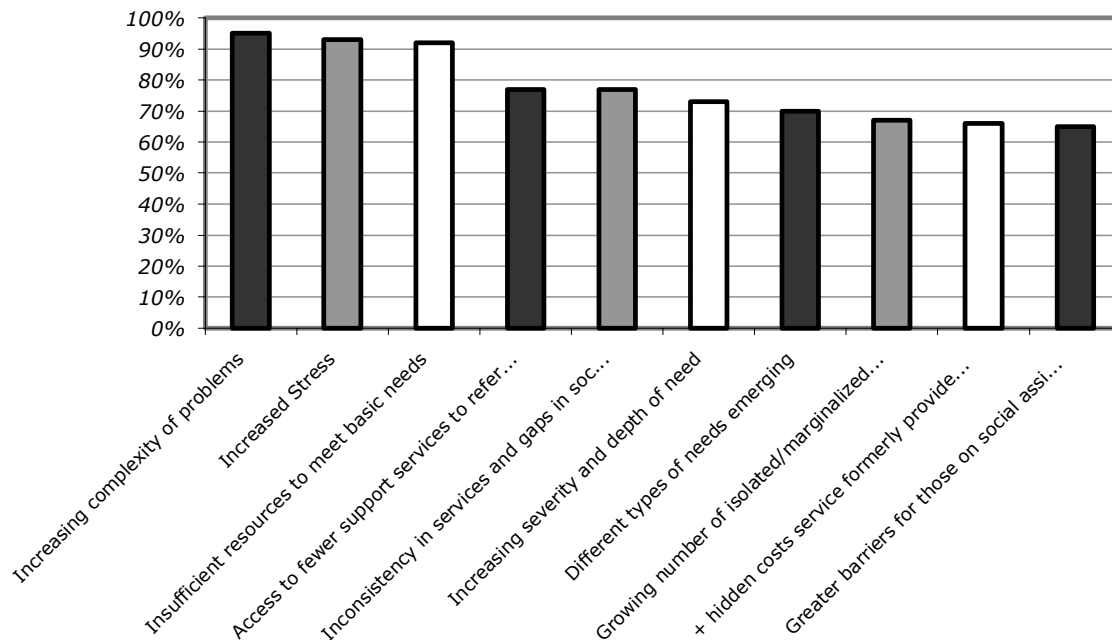
- fully 95% of the respondents highlighted the increasing complexity of their clients' problems;

⁶ Many agencies provide services responding to a diversity of needs. Respondents gave multiple responses to the question with respect to area (type) or needs.

- 93%, indicated that the increased stress levels were equally challenging;
- 92% stressed the difficulty of insufficient resources to meet basic needs. This is related to the problem of the increasing severity and depth of need, which was identified by 73% of agencies;
- 77% indicated the difficulty of access to fewer support services for their clients and inconsistencies and gaps in social services.

The full list of challenges is represented in Chart 4 below.

Chart 4 - Challenges Faced by Clients



Survey responses demonstrate clearly that while community agencies are struggling with their own challenges, it is increasingly their clients who are suffering as their needs go unmet.

What Organizational Changes Are Community Agencies Experiencing?

While 22% of agencies indicated they have not experienced organizational changes in 1999, most agencies identified changes, particularly related to financial and human resources. Again, the survey results largely mirror national trends. Much energy is being expended toward funding diversification, contract work, and funder reports. This is creating a climate in the non-profit sector of increasing competition for access to the decreasing

sources of government funds and for public recognition, which has led to an increase in stress.⁷

Broad Changes

The broad changes most often cited by responding agencies were:

- Insufficient time to train or motivate staff (37%)
- Less capacity to respond to complex range of problems (29%). At the same time agencies reported fewer support options available for their clients.
- An inability to respond to specific problems (24%).

Changes With Respect to Staff

Changes with respect to staffing were identified as significant issues.

- Almost 65% of responding agencies indicated that greater workload pressures and increase demand on personnel were the main source of changes experienced by their organizations in recent years. This is consistent with the trend for the non-profit sector across the country where heavy and expanding workloads have led to the concern that community needs are not being met.⁸
- As well, 52% of agencies noted greater stress and uncertainty. This is consistent with national trends, where the non-profit sector has indicated a “sense of organizational vulnerability”.⁹
- 36% cited greater fatigue.

Changes With Respect to Volunteers

One quarter of respondent agencies indicated little or no changes in volunteering patterns. For those who experienced changes, the most commonly cited were:

- Difficulties in finding volunteer replacements (29%). Many community agencies rely on volunteers to carry out their activities. Volunteers are not easily replaced and the need for qualified volunteers is great. Across Canada the recruitment of qualified volunteers is considered to be a constant struggle by most organizations in the sector¹⁰;
- Volunteers were seeking paid work (25%). Many of those looking for work consider volunteering as a step toward paid employment or perceive volunteer activities as a means to help acquire new skills to apply in a paid environment.¹¹ Furthermore, community agencies recognize that they may be ill equipped to provide the training and motivation volunteers deserve and require to remain committed.

⁷ Canadian Centre for Philanthropy. 1997. Caring Canadians Involved Canadians. www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/71-542-xie.pdf

⁸ Statistics Canada. 2000. www.statcan.ca.

⁹ Statistics Canada. 2000. www.statcan.ca.

¹⁰ Canadian Centre for Philanthropy. Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

How Are Community Agencies Responding To The Changed Environment?

In order to cope with dwindling financial resources, increased workload and volunteer/staff fatigue or burnout, Ottawa community agencies have had to resort to a wide range of measures. 29% reported they were undertaking income diversification initiatives. The other primary strategies listed fall under four categories.

Responses with Respect to Collaborative Activities

Almost 80% of responding agencies identified the development of partnerships or collaborative initiatives as part of the solution. They listed building alliances between community agencies, community health and resource centres, social service agencies, corporations, academic institutions and all levels of government. Of those involved in collaborative efforts, one third identified networking as a promising solution to several challenges. Just under one third undertook fundraising partnerships, particularly carried out in co-operation with municipal, provincial and federal governments. One quarter collaborated with other organizations on joint programming, and some shared staff or office space.

Responses Altering Provision of Services

One in five agencies stated they made no change in provision of services as a response to challenges. However, this was not the case for most agencies. The most commonly cited program changes identified were:

- Increased waiting list size (30%);
- Increased waiting time for services (25%);
- Merged or adapted services (21%).

Other notable changes listed by agencies included reduction in the hours of service, cancelled services, and charging a fee-for-service. These measures, however, decrease access to important services by members of the Ottawa community at a time when agencies are witnessing increased client needs.

Responses with Respect to Staffing

Some agencies reported solutions to respond, in part, to staff needs. These included revised job descriptions, improved training, upgrading technology and more contracting.

Responses with Respect to Boards of Directors

Respondent agencies, in general, felt the recruitment of “active” board members might help agencies meet some challenges. Also, the reduction of board size was considered an option to streamline decision making and to create a more responsive management structure.

What Supports Do Community Agencies Need?

The challenges which agencies identified point to three key areas where community agencies need support.

- Increased funding, particularly the need for stable core funding. As well, however, agencies need help with fundraising initiatives and funding diversification efforts.
- Assistance with human resource issues in relation to staff and volunteers. In particular, agencies need increased levels of staffing. As well, there is a need for support for training of staff and volunteers, and finding and supporting volunteers.
- Support with respect to networking and policy issues, leading to a reduction of program silos and barriers for clients, as a response to the complexity of issues.

The Need For Information Services

Responding agencies identified a need for research assistance to support and enhance their work. Agencies have identified that analysis and sharing of agency based data and information on their client populations are essential to inform their fundraising, reporting, strategic planning and evaluation. The responses to the COMMUNITY AGENCY SURVEY highlight the necessary role the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton currently plays in providing community-based research.

Agencies were asked to identify what types of research and information they need from the Social Planning Council.

- 39% indicated the usefulness of quarterly newsletters and bulletins about important social issues.
- 26% expect the Social Planning Council to provide information on more isolated and/or under-funded communities.
- 23% found usefulness in the sharing of success stories and creative solutions in the community.
- 22% identified analysis and the sharing of available socio-demographic data as a need to provide them with a context for their work. Agencies are benefitting from Social Planning Council research illustrating trends for specific populations, geographical areas or issues in the City.
- 17% of agencies indicated the need for the collection and analysis of quantitative data.
- An equal number (17%) look to the SPCO to map support services available in various areas of the community and to identify issues or gaps in the available information.

Furthermore, agencies identified the need for the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton to continue to foster co-operation and partnerships with multidisciplinary groups, bringing together public, private and non-profit organizations on a wide variety of issues.

The survey responses demonstrate that the work of the Social Planning Council and other research bodies fulfills a significant need in the community for community agencies. Research and analysis support, such as that provided by the Social Planning Council, assists front line agencies to meet expectations of funders, to enhance service planning, and to aid in understanding and responding to their clients and communities. This is reflective of national trends. In a profile of Canadian non-governmental organizations (NGO's), the Canadian Council for International Co-operation discovered that most NGO's do not have the skills "in house" to do research and develop policy,¹² yet the new economy is pushing for more information and knowledge in this area.

Observations And Recommendations

Despite (or perhaps because of) a lack of financial and human resources, community agencies have found novel ways of meeting challenges. Their strategies are innovative ways to adapt to the new environment but are not substitutes for the real need identified for solid, long term and adequate core resources to enable agencies to meet increased demands for service.

While their clients have more complex and unmet needs, agencies experience increased workloads resulting in unreasonable pressures and demands on the staff, volunteers and agencies in general. There is a greater increased reliance on volunteers to meet the workload, but inadequate time to train and support either volunteers or staff. Some agencies have reduced or restricted service provision, which in turn, further restricts clients' access to supports. Waiting lists are growing.

Agencies are compelled to seek alternative resources, which increases competition among agencies for a decreasing and finite pool of funding resources. Furthermore an increase in accountability demands, commonly without the benefit of appropriate measurement tools, has caused many agencies to have trouble in securing the necessary resources to meet their mandates¹³. Concurrently, new partnerships and co-operative arrangements are emerging. In either case, the capacity to diversify or the ability to partner with other public and private organizations has proven to be a difficult process

¹² Canadian Council for International Co-Operation (CCIC). Downloaded November 2000. Characteristics of Voluntary Organizations. <http://fly.web.net/ccic/volsector.htm>

¹³ Government of Canada 1999. Working Together. A Government of Canada Volunteer Sector Joint Initiative. Ottawa: Office of the Privy Council.

for community agencies, each strategy having its own impacts on workload and services to clients. More and more, agency staff and boards are faced with diverging and competing demands on their time: meeting the needs of their clients on the one hand and income diversification and partnership building for the organization on the other hand. Staff and volunteers are often caught in the middle.

The voluntary sector¹⁴, including community agencies, is vital for the development of healthy communities and is important to Canadians in general. The sector mobilizes people, creates a sense of community, enhances democracy, fosters community participation and strengthens society.¹⁵ In Ottawa's fast-paced changing environment, increasing population¹⁶ and growing income gap¹⁷ the critical need for a strong voluntary sector is accentuated. It is important that no additional strains be placed on an already fragile and overburdened sector, and that it receive increased support.

The Transition Board was committed to developing a model to strengthen, sustain, integrate and recognize the contribution the sector can make in the new City.¹⁸ As well, the new City of Ottawa recognizes the contributions of the voluntary sector and considers it crucial to the socio-economic health for the City.¹⁹ A first step which demonstrated the City's commitment to supporting community agencies and the voluntary sector was seen in the recent announcement of the appointment of the first ever Coordinator of the Voluntary Sector. Agencies are looking to the new city of Ottawa to define additional concrete means by which it will assist them to address the challenges they face, and to adjust to the new City and the new economy.

Finally, the new City government and the community agencies need to work together to reaffirm that Ottawa's voluntary sector "is a vital pillar in our society as are the public and private sectors".²⁰ The capacity of the sector, and the community agencies within it, need to be enhanced so they can more effectively meet those needs in the community which are not the responsibility of government or business. Real capacity building within the sector means enhancing "the human and financial resources, technology, skills, knowledge

¹⁴ The voluntary sector refers to those organizations and agencies that are neither under the auspices of government nor private business. It includes, but is not limited to, volunteer organizations. For example, most community agencies are part of the voluntary sector, whether or not they have paid staff.

¹⁵ Industry Canada. Downloaded November 2000. Non-Profit Discussion Paper. Strategis Collection: Corporate Law Policy Directorate. <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca>

¹⁶ City of Ottawa. May 4, 2001. Population, Employment, Household and Dwelling Projections 1996 to 2031. Ottawa.

¹⁷ The Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton. A Tale of Two Cities. Ottawa: SPCOC, 1999.

¹⁸ Conseil de Transition d'Ottawa. 2000. Modèle de participation bénévole par la's et le leadership. Ottawa.

¹⁹ Conseil de Transition d'Ottawa. 2000.

²⁰ Canadian Council for International Co-Operation (CCIC). Downloaded November 2000. Characteristics of Voluntary Organizations. A Profile of Canadian NGOs.

and understanding required to permit organizations to do their work and fulfill what is expected of them by stakeholders”²¹. Community agencies are at a crossroads and need to be assured that they can count on having stable resources and the capacity to prioritize their clients' needs as they transition into the current fast paced knowledge based economic climate.

The Social Planning Council offers sincere thanks to all those who took the time to complete the community agency survey.

²¹ Government of Canada 1999. Working Together. A Government of Canada Volunteer Sector Joint Initiative. Ottawa: Office of the Privy Council.