

## Executive Summary

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This report summarizes an assessment of the assets, needs, gaps and opportunities for improving human services in eight municipalities in Middlesex County, Ontario, and it illustrates the direct link that exists between a community's social programs and its economic vitality. The report was commissioned by the United Way of London & Middlesex, and guided by a multi-party advisory committee over the course of 2012-2013.

Multi-methods were used to compile, assess and react to the data including: literature and document analysis; human services key informant interviews; telephone, on-line and paper surveys; focus groups with consumers and engaged citizenry; and service provider panel discussions. There was a variety of respondents to the surveys, the majority of whom were female and home owners. Service agencies were canvassed, and data from each geographic centre within Middlesex County collected and reported in both aggregate and disaggregated forms.

This needs assessment focused on Middlesex County (excluding London) with an emphasis on the communities of Lucan, Strathroy, Glencoe, Dorchester and Parkhill and their surrounding townships. The population of Middlesex County is approximately 71,000 people, and has experienced an increase of 2.3% since 2006. The main challenges are dealing with economic pressures while maintaining a sustainable environment and a healthy agricultural base. Hidden in these trends are tensions between long-time and newer residents, and their different approaches and traditions.

Rurality can negatively affect the recognition, experience and manifestation of numerous social and economic issues and subsequent service provision and access. Some of these issues are compounded by stigma, pride, lack of anonymity and isolation, such as domestic violence, poverty, economic duress and mental health and addiction problems. Access to the internet is positively correlated with income, and telephone charges pose a barrier to connection for rural residents. Transportation is a necessity, and generally privately owned and operated, but access to many government and other services is often at considerable distance.

These factors also affect the delivery and design of services. Access and reliability are affected by long distances, winter weather driving and time shortages. Sparse population distribution requires consolidated services, adaptations in service delivery, fewer locations, and challenges client trust, decreases volunteer recruitment and retention, and increases staff turnover and delivery costs.

To this end, local resource centres have historically been available to provide a valuable and safe space for struggling citizens. These centres help to connect those residents in need to the social service or government agency most suited to address their issue. However, recent changes to the resource centres' funding models and reduced operations have created great

risk, but offer great potential as well. Through collaboration, communication and coordination, there is a prospect for long-term sustainability of service delivery and capacity of non-based service providers to respond to this opportunity.

Respondents and informants report lack of services, information and/or access were key service issues in Middlesex County. Almost 40% of the respondents work in London, and hence found access to local services difficult during business hours. Two-thirds of the respondents did not know of the 211 service. The optimal system would have services available locally in order to raise awareness, serve local need and build social capital.

The physical and mental health of Middlesex county residents and their need for services is affected by the social determinants of health. Reported gaps in service include caregiver respite, youth access to sexual and reproductive health, well baby clinics, palliative care, midwifery, dental care for children and services for children with disabilities. However, the need for mental health and addictions services was most pronounced with shortages and incomplete continua of care limiting availability and level of care.

The economic recession of the past five years has resulted in a rise in unemployment, shortage of full time work, less training money and more use of temporary labour by local companies. Plant closures have eroded the tax base and increased the need for retraining. The agricultural workforce is aging with 44% needing replacement within the next 10 years, and farm consolidation and global competition are inserting stress into the sector.

Housing pressures include unaffordable housing for 40% of renters and long waiting lists for social housing. A transportation deficit, however, was an overriding theme in the consultations. Lack of adequate transport systems increased isolation for marginalized and aging groups, as well as for stay-at-home parents. Lack of transport affects mental and physical health by reducing access to social life and human and health services.

Education services are in flux, with consolidations of existing schools, expansion of full day kindergarten, lack of any post-secondary education, and the limitation of adult training to one centre in Strathroy. There is considerable unmet need for adult education and training among respondents. The most serious gap in services for children was child care, with the suggestion that the lack thereof was a serious risk to retraining and employability. Children's mental health services were under available, as are recreation programs for children, with no indoor swimming pool available in Middlesex County.

Each geographic area within Middlesex County is reported upon separately, with data sources described and data mapped against provincial data, and in some cases, peer regional data. In summary, these data reflect a County and various centres within the County affected by significant economic and social pressures, shifts in agriculture, plant closures and job loss, and an overall difficulty in accessing needed health and social services. Various forms of limits on access are described, that illustrate the impact of demographic changes and rurality on Middlesex County residents, as well as shifting social networking patterns that undermine voluntarism and the strength of social capital.