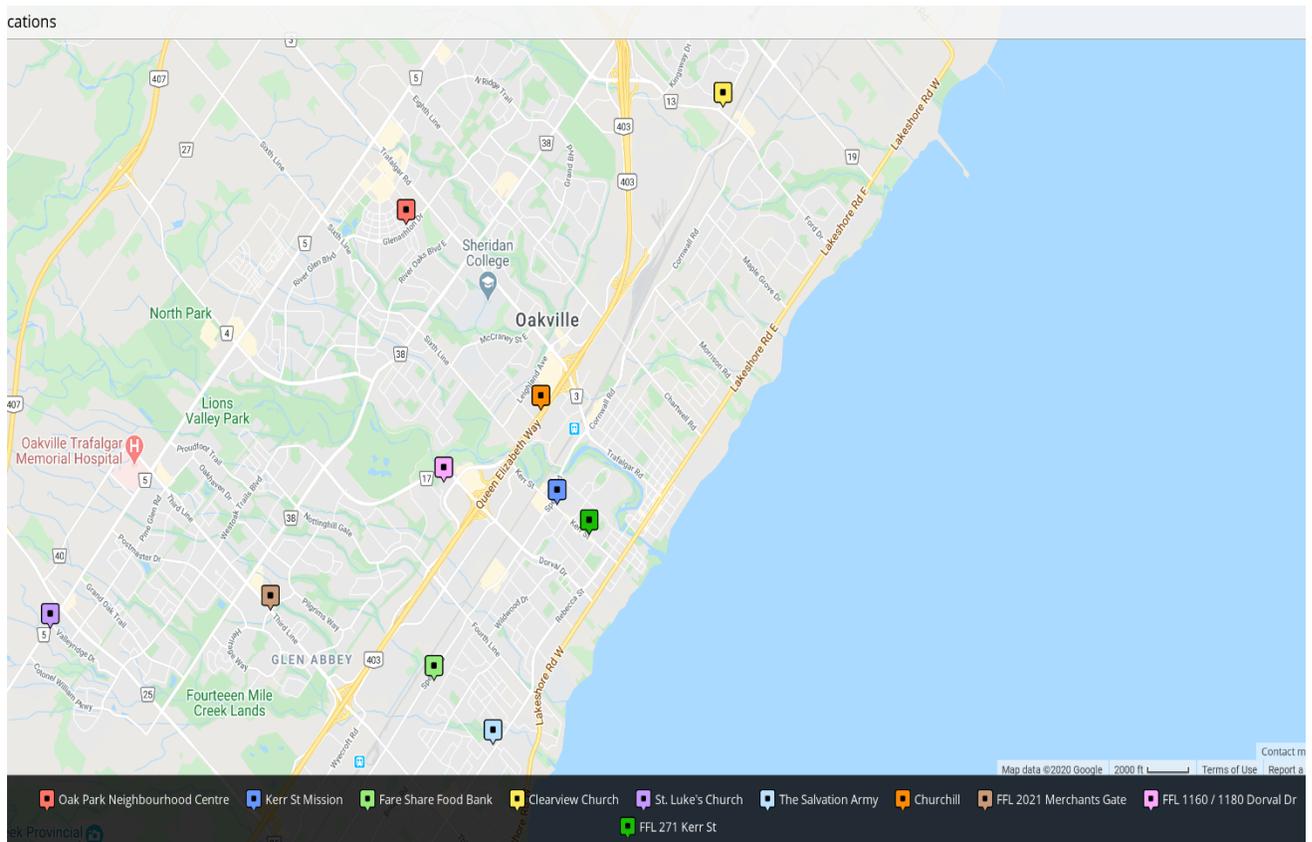




Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre: Oakville Food Bank Co-ordination Project



Funded by Halton Region

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The goals of this project were twofold: to geographically map food bank use in Oakville to identify any gaps, inefficiencies, or overlaps in service and to establish average weekly food needs for families with the hope of determining realistic food requirements for community programs. It is believed that if food banks can provide enough food to meet the needs of their neighbourhood, families will be able to meet their needs with one visit per week, thereby saving the time, energy and expense they spend in search of food security.

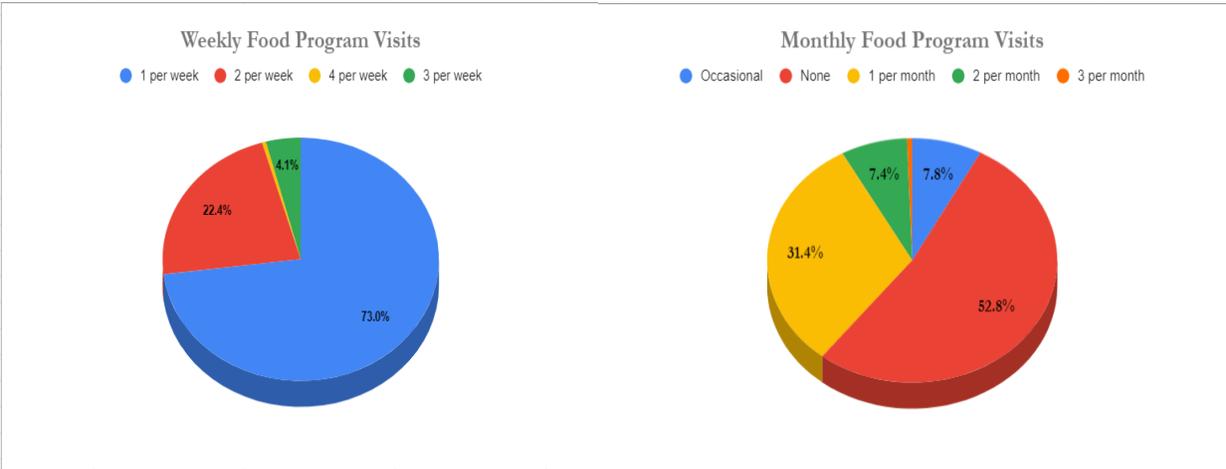
The project required that at least 5 participating service providers review and comment on the survey prior to it being put into circulation. This was accomplished at the November 13 Oakville Outreach Alliance meeting held at Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre where 9 organizations were represented. The Salvation Army suggested, and others agreed, that in addition to the questions regarding food bank use, a separate section be added where clients could choose to identify themselves and other areas of need. This included needs such as filing taxes, isolation, recreation or parenting help. This part of the survey would then be left with a staff member where the survey was conducted and they would follow up with the individual.

Thanks to the cooperation of the Alliance members, we were able to conduct surveys with food bank users at the Salvation Army, Clearview and St Luke's churches, 4 of the co-ops serviced by Food for Life, Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre, Churchill and Kerr St Mission. Unfortunately, COVID-19 arrived just as I was to visit Fare Share and while I was not able to survey their clients in person, Fare Share provided us with postal codes.

We anticipated conducting surveys with 640 households, asking questions relating to food bank visits and the amount of food families need to feel food secure. We managed to collect responses from 512 food bank users before pandemic restrictions made further in person work an impossibility. (Please note that while we did our best to avoid surveying each family more than once, we must allow for the possibility of duplicates as separate family members could have attended different programs and completed a survey.

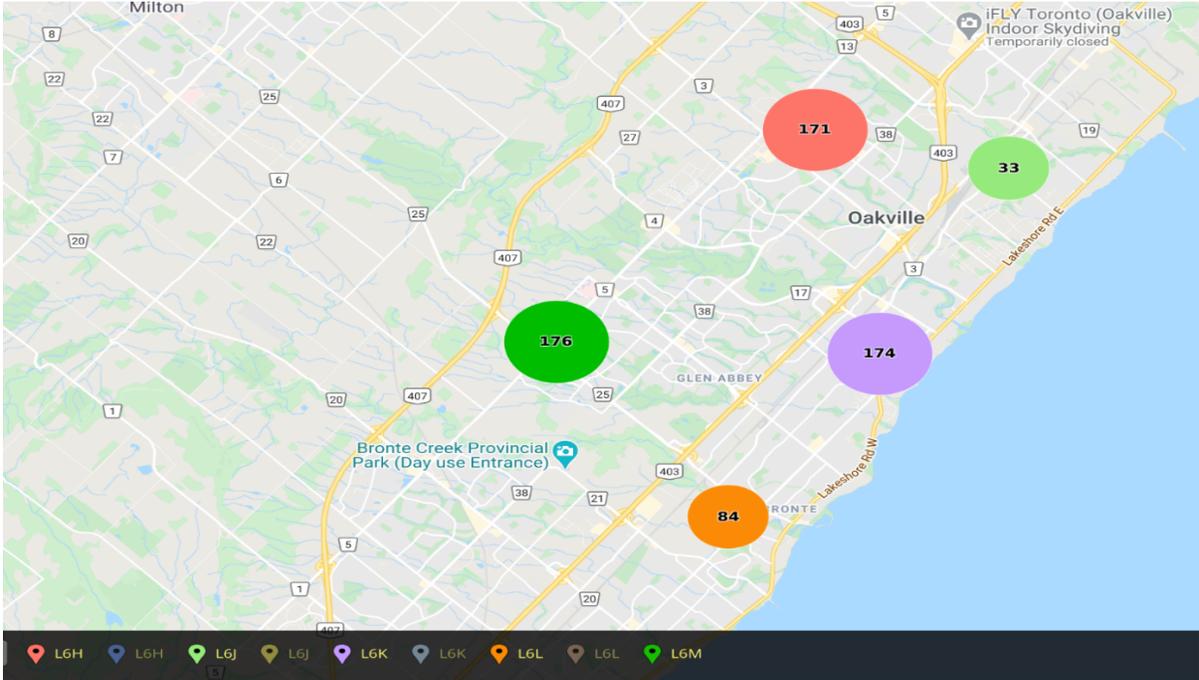
The graphs below illustrate the responses people gave about their visits to weekly and monthly food programs respectively. The food visits to monthly programs such as Fare Share and The Salvation Army are, for the vast majority of households, in addition to weekly food bank visits. In considering the validity of this research, we must keep in mind the undeniable stigma that some people feel about being a food bank user. Given the fact that they were surveyed at a food bank, they had to acknowledge using at least one program. Their visits to other programs during the week are likely underrepresented however, as not everyone acknowledged using more than one program even though we observed them at multiple locations. This is understandable. Some people might worry about being seen to "abuse the system" because they use multiple locations. Others might not want to take the risk of giving a true number for fear of being told they may only attend one.

Visits to Weekly and Monthly Programs by Food Bank Users

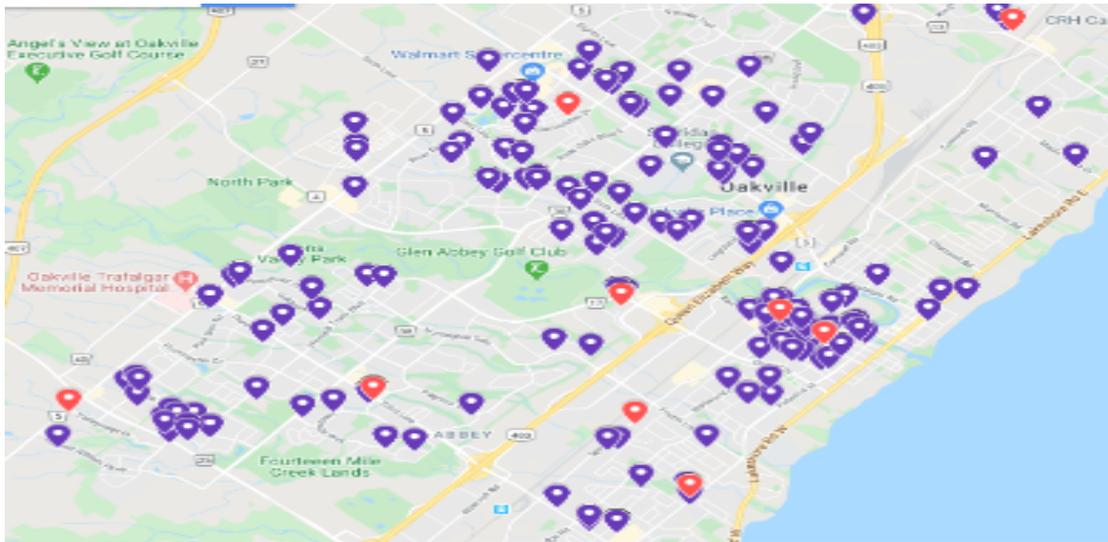


We were able to geographically map the postal codes of over 640 users at 11 food programs. As the map below illustrates, there is a relatively equal distribution of users living in postal codes beginning with L6M, L6H and L6K, with lesser but still significant numbers in the L6L and L6J regions.

Food Bank Users by Postal Code Area

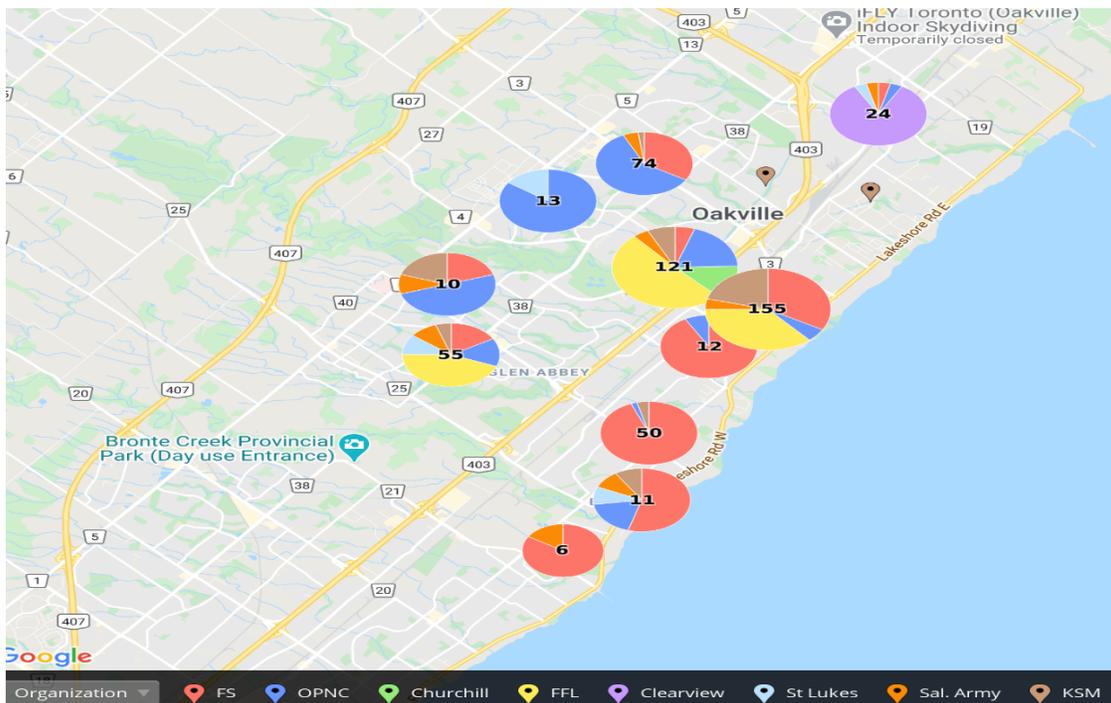


Food Bank Users by Postal Code Areas



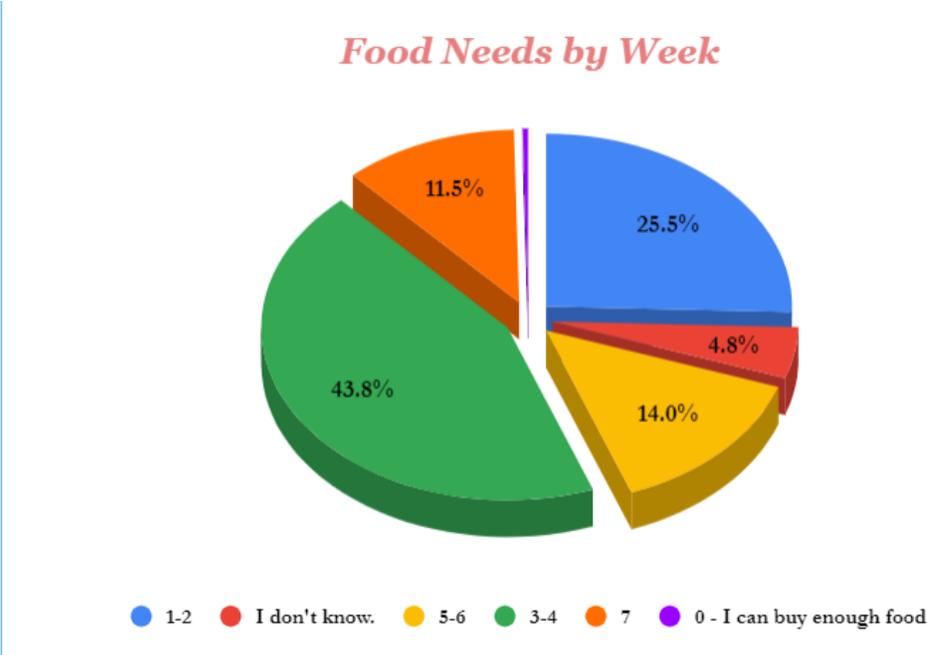
The second map illustrates the specific food programs that clients across town are attending. It reveals that families are not only using the services of their neighbourhood programs but also travelling a distance to use the services of others across town. For example, the 55 users in the Glen Abbey west area are visiting a Food for Life co-op, St. Luke's, KSM, OPNC, Fare Share and/or The Salvation Army. Clients living in the Clearview neighbourhood are also going to St. Luke's, Fare Share, the Salvation Army and Oak Park in addition to the program Clearview Church offers.

Where Food Bank Users Live and Where They Get Food



This next graph illustrates the responses given when clients were asked how many days worth of food they need to receive from a food program to meet their weekly needs. While a few individuals were unable to answer this question, 26% of families responded that their needs are being met by a single food bank visits. 44% of the respondents identified 3-4 days worth of food (double the amount received from a single food bank visit) as the amount they need from food programs to feed their family. 14% of food bank users said they needed 5-6 days of food help every week while a further 11.5% reported needing a food bank’s help to feed their families every day of the week if it was possible. Individual food banks are not able to meet this demand by themselves thereby necessitating families travel to other programs, spend more of their limited dollars at the grocery store, or simply go without sufficient food.

Number of Days of Food Help Required to Meet Families Needs



Many of the individuals who completed a survey were vocal about their need for food help, citing limited financial resources and the increasing cost of food as obstacles to eating well. Several of them expressed gratitude to the organizations providing them with food and meals and to the many volunteers that help these programs function.

The following is an example that we think illustrates the complexities facing both families and the organizations trying to help them. During one of the Food for Life co-op programs I visited, I was approached by a woman I have seen for years while volunteering at the Kerr St Mission market. I had served her at a KSM market session earlier in the week at which time she took home the pantry items, toiletry and fresh produce allotted to a family of 2. I saw her again at the St Luke’s Church food program a couple days later and again for a third time at the co-op. Her cart on this day was filled with several produce items, milk, some meat and a few prepared salads. I accepted the invitation to visit her apartment where I was graciously served with coffee and cookies. The counter in the small kitchen, as

well as a small table in the living room, was covered with well ripened fruit and vegetables. The woman hadn't yet unpacked what she'd been given downstairs so I can only surmise the produce on the counter was from her food bank visits earlier in the week or purchased from a store. She told me that she never turns down free food meaning she occasionally has to give away produce because she and her husband cannot eat it all. At the same time, she said there is never enough of other foods like yogurt, milk and meat. She does not have a car and while she sometimes takes the bus to food programs, she wants to save her bus money to get to church. She has a friend drive her when possible but often has to walk. When this woman filled out a survey, she wrote that she attends 1 food bank per week.

At first glance, it is wonderful that this family has so many options with regard to food help. There are multiple programs that she is able to access when she needs food. Perhaps too, there are secondary needs, outside of food, that are being met with these visits, such as an excuse to leave the house or social time with friends. Taking a closer look however, several thoughts and questions come to mind. The more people that attend a food bank session, the less food there is to go around. Having less food could result in families having to attend more programs. It takes time, energy and planning to attend food programs in Oakville. Is there someone to watch the children? Bus tickets and gas for cars cost money. We have to wonder whether or not this is the most efficient way to meet the food insecurity issues of Oakville families. Could a change in the system whereby all food needs are met at a single program close to home result in benefits for both the food bank user (more time with family, less worry about food security, saved transportation costs, etc) and the organization offering the program (more efficient use of staff and financial resources, freed up time for alternate programming to meet non-food needs)? We believe this is a conversation worth having.

This second example relates to the issue of fair distribution among food bank users. A gentleman who receives 3 Food for Life bags from Churchill each week, shares an apartment with 2 people with disabilities. His health is failing and he is concerned about his roommates' ability to care for themselves when he is gone. In an attempt to continue caring for them after he passes, he has, over the last several years, cut up the food he receives and stores it in two large freezers. This way they have a year's worth of food when he dies. The cost to run the freezers is more than he can manage so OPNC assists him with his hydro bill annually. We have also supported him to ensure plans are in place to care for the dependents if he dies. After so many years however, the chopping has become a habit and so they continue to take more than they need from the food bank. Meanwhile families with several children get one bag only from the food bank. We wonder then if there is there a way we can work together to be consistent across Oakville as to how much food a client gets. It would be helpful to look at strategies and see if we can come up with some shared procedures that would provide consistency but also ensure we are able to properly provide for families.

The final question of the survey related to people's interest in some form of social time being offered during food bank sessions. This question was not covered under the scope of the grant but we wanted to take advantage of having access to people. The responses were fairly split with 46.5% of respondents saying they would enjoy the opportunity to have social time. The remaining 53.7% responded that they would prefer to simply pick up their food and go. It should noted however, that several of the latter category said they were not interested only because they either had no time or no one to watch their children. Perhaps if we could do better at meeting the food needs of our neighbourhoods, it would leave us more time and resources to develop social programs that would appeal to our clients and meet a broader spectrum of needs.

The following is a story that speaks to this issue directly. A man came to OPNC struggling to meet his bills after his daughter, who had a disability, moved out. When it was suggested that he could rent out his daughter's room given his proximity to Sheridan college, he said that doing so would disqualify him from using some local food banks. He claims that he goes to almost 10 food banks a week, 2 a day in Oakville, Burlington and Hamilton. This is concerning and suggests that for people using food bank visits to socialize rather than for true food need, alternate activities are needed. It would be interesting to see if multiple food bank use would decrease if those of us with the capacity to do so, started offering more social opportunities.

In summary, the findings of this project remind us that there are people experiencing food insecurity all over Oakville, from the east to the west, and the north to the south. Food banks and other food programs are working hard to meet this most basic need but families are still having to exert significant time, energy and expense to travel to and acquire food. As the number of families experiencing food insecurity increases, so too the demand on food banks increases. By engaging in dialogue and working together actively, we will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the programs we run thereby benefitting the community we serve. There is a commitment from these food banks and programs to work together to get there.

Food Bank Partners Resolutions and Commitments

The June 11 meeting between Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre and its community partners discussed these findings in depth and all were in agreement that the data aligns with what the agencies are observing in their own communities. The Salvation Army specifically stated that the results of this project would be very useful in guiding their strategic plan and idea for relocation. The following is a list of resolutions and commitments made.

1. Partner agencies committed to helping each other meet food shortages. For example, Fare Share Food Bank committed to providing St Luke's with much needed bread. Fare Share in turn, will accept any excess meat from St Luke's. Oak Park will provide formula to St Luke's clients.
2. Oak Park will continue to run the utility support program to help clients with the burden of utility costs thereby freeing up money for food.
3. The Salvation Army committed to increasing their food bank client base and accepting over flow from partner agencies who are beyond capacity. They also agreed to provide some household items where needed.
4. Based on survey responses relating to social opportunities, community partners committed to meeting this need where possible. The Salvation Army stated that they are poised to meet this need with a 'Coffee and Chat' program. St. Luke's is also prepared to offer to a social time to clients.
5. The need for a shared database was identified with The Salvation Army and OPNC requesting to share information with others. Fare Share reported they have begun sharing data with Kerr St Mission and were surprised by the level of overlap. Food for Life has begun using the Links2Feed database as they believe it will improve the efficiency of the system and position them to be better able to reach out to clients in need.

It should be noted that the research data displayed in this report was gathered prior to March 5, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic made itself fully known in Canada. As such, these numbers do not reflect the many individuals and families in Oakville whose financial situations have been affected by the pandemic and now find themselves turning to food banks for the first time. If ever there was a time to come together and look at the way organizations are meeting the food needs of Oakville's residents, surely it is now.

We are very appreciative of the cooperation of the various agencies, organizations and faith communities allowing access to their programs. Also of the cooperation and willingness of clients to participate in the surveys and share their experiences with us.