

Linking Residents to Community Services Study

Summary of Report

The primary goal of this study was to identify resources used by Surrey residents when obtaining information about community services. In our approach, we examined the accessibility and dissemination of information on community services. This involved surveying both service providers and residents in the City of Surrey.

As part of this process, we identified barriers to accessing information by specific populations such as culturally diverse, single parents, people living in poverty, and those with disabilities. In so doing, we also determined gaps in how information about services is available to residents.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Service Provided by Agencies

One of the key findings in terms of information dissemination is that about 85% of the agencies surveyed were directly or indirectly in the business of providing information referral. That is, regardless of what the main goal or mandate of the agency may be, clients tend to look to service providers to give them information about other kinds of services. However, due to lack of resources and/or funding, only 65% of these agencies formally provided information referral training for their frontline staff.

How Agencies Disseminate Information

We found that among the many approaches used to market their services, many agencies are now also using websites as a tool to provide information about their services. In fact, 80% of agencies surveyed had already established their own websites. However, agencies do recognize that the majority of clients rely heavily on word of mouth to find out about their services. This finding was supported by the residents we surveyed. Ninety-three percent of the time, residents indicated that they were likely to use family and friend networks to find information on services, while only 62% of the time they were likely to use the internet. Interestingly, it was mainly South Surrey residents who were more likely to use the internet to access information about services than any other group.

Resources Residents Use

Other than 'word of mouth', specific populations and regions in Surrey use different resources to access information. For example, men more than women and residents in South Surrey more than any other region were more likely to use the internet as a resource to find information. However, respondents indicated that the internet was useful for finding information on services and agencies that they knew existed. For example, residents may look up a specific agency's website for general information, but in terms of searching for general information on certain services, they found that the internet was more difficult to use.

Residents in Newton, specifically those with English as a second language, were more likely to use the ethnic media to find information on services. The ethnic radio and television programming were seen as more useful to learn about service, while the ethnic newspapers were more oriented to providing information on the political scene.

In terms of specific populations, we found certain resources, next to word of mouth, were more likely used by some more than others. For example, we found that people with disabilities were more likely to use the telephone as a resource more than others to find information on services; lone parents more likely to use referral services and community newspapers; and men were more likely to use the internet than women.

Difficulties in Accessing Information

Overall, the most common difficulty residents had in trying to access information on services were automated telephone systems. Specifically, systems that require the caller to push buttons were the most difficult to use, while residents also expressed concern with voicemail.

Having a language barrier was the most common difficulty for respondents for whom English was a second language. It was interesting to note, according to many respondents, they were able to receive help from family and friends for translation and interpretation. However, a large problem was a lack of knowledge and awareness of what exists in terms of services, or not knowing where to look.

From a geographical perspective, we found that residents in South Surrey had the least amount of difficulty in accessing information on services, while residents in Newton and Whalley had the greatest amount of difficulty.

Is there more difficulty with Particular Services?

Overall, respondents indicated that information on affordable housing was the most difficult to find. However, when looking at specific populations, certain groups had more difficulty in some areas than others. For example, respondents with disabilities found that youth and recreational services were more difficult to access information on, while lone parents found youth and children's services more difficult, and people with English language barriers found accessing information about educational, regulatory, and counselling services more difficult.

What Makes Accessing Information Easier?

Many respondents indicated that community resource directories, and information posted in common community spaces makes finding information easier.

Others felt that outreach programs designed to increase awareness of the kinds of community services that are available would be very helpful.

Finally, respondents said a common phone number designed specifically for information referral would be a good starting point. Also, it was noted that this phone-line should be serviced with live operators rather than an automated system to direct incoming calls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Offer information Referral Training Workshops for Surrey's service agency's frontline staff.

This could also provide an opportunity for frontline staff to network with other service agencies and add to their knowledge of services in Surrey. (see pages 12-13 of report)

2. Explore alternative options for outreach to various culturally diverse communities.

Translated materials are good information for walk-ins, but not to market services for outreach. For example, networking with ethnic radio or television programs can create more awareness within culturally diverse communities about services that an agency may provide. (see page 18 of report)

3. Encourage formation of directories for smaller communities (town centres) which can offer more in-depth information on services in each local area.

Respondents indicated that community directories make finding information on services easier. These directories could be for the use of residents as well as service agencies. (see page 27 of report).

4. Design a marketing approach that increases the awareness of the Community Connections Page on the Surrey Public Library's Website for Surrey Residents and service providers.

Only 26% of the service providers use the Surrey Library's Website as a resource (see page 15 of report), and many residents were not aware of the new addition of the Community Connections Page on the library's website. (see page 27 of report)

5. Create central 'Community Information Stations' at recreation centres.

As some respondents indicated the community centres are very large and visible structures in their communities. They may serve as an ideal location for a physical community board that provides information beyond recreation and cultural services. (see page 27 of report)

6. Actively pursue the creation of the 211 Phone Number

Many respondents indicated that having a common phone number designed to link callers with services would be extremely useful. (see page 27 of report)

7. Secure funding to pursue further research that allows for a more in-depth understanding of the key areas outlined in this study.

As an exploratory study, this research has identified a general framework for the process for delivery and access to information on community services in Surrey. Further work still needs to be done to build on some of the key findings that would allow for a more in-depth understanding of the issues.

For a copy of the full report, contact Surrey Social Futures Society
Report and Summary prepared by: Preet Heer