



QUIET CUTS:

Economic Access to Community Recreation in Toronto

by Community Recreation for All

June 2011



Executive summary

Parks, Forestry and Recreation's Welcome Policy proposal leaves 95 percent of eligible Toronto residents out of the subsidy program.

On June 15th, Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PFR) released a report on their subsidy program, the Welcome Policy. The report suggests a cut in individual subsidy allocations and proposes to provide the subsidy program to only five percent of eligible Toronto residents. (1)



In addition, the report considers the Welcome Policy in isolation from other factors influencing economic access to recreation programs and centres including Priority Centres, user fees, permit fees, drop-in programs and need. Finally, the proposal for the Welcome Policy is not grounded in the broader five-year PFR Service Plan, which is still pending.

While consultations were done in advance of this report, they were hived off from the broader public consultations into the Service Plan. Participants in the two Welcome Policy consultations for community agencies were given very little notice, and were told that the decision to move from a course-based to a dollar-based allocation had already been made. Finally, the bulk of the input provided at the consultations for community agencies is not reflected in PFR's report.

Community organizations and residents are concerned about City Council's ability to evaluate the Welcome Policy report without informed consultation, additional data from PFR, a comprehensive plan for economic access and, most importantly, a vision for community recreation in Toronto.

We recommend that City Council directs PFR to present a comprehensive plan for economic access to community recreation, one that respects City Council's policy of offering quality, year-round recreation programs to everyone, regardless of their ability to pay.

We suggest that this plan take into account questions that, to date, have not been addressed by PFR. These include the costs incurred by other City departments when people cannot access community recreation or space. They also include the costs of administering both user fees and the Welcome Policy. A set of questions for City Councillors to ask PFR is supplied in this report.

We believe community centres should be for communities. In Toronto, this is not currently the case. We hope that this City Council will ask the right questions, and come up with an inspiring and vibrant plan to let people in.

(1) According to City Council policy, all Toronto residents whose income falls below the Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) qualify for the Welcome Policy. According to City of Toronto data, 604,048 people have incomes that fall below LICO. Although 107,868 people were accepted into the Welcome Policy program in 2011, only 23,527 could access programs, approximately 3.8 percent of eligible Toronto residents. The new proposal hopes to bring this number to 28,753, or 5 percent of eligible Toronto residents.

The state of economic access

Background

Toronto has 134 community centres. Twenty-one of these are free 'Priority Centres.' The remaining centres charge fees for everything from youth sports to meeting room space. Over the past two years, program user fees have gone up by an average of approximately 6 percent. In addition, in 2010, PFR applied fees to formerly-free programs like leisure swim in pools and a range of children's activities.

During the 2011 budget process, Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PFR) proposed to City Council to cut free adult and general programming at Priority Centres. PFR assured the public that the Welcome Policy would be an alternative to lost free programming. In January's *Operating Budget Analyst Briefing Notes* relating to PFR's budget proposals, it states:

By introducing adult user fees at Priority Centres, the allocation of recreation subsidy shifts away from a focus on geography to a focus on need, as the same adult programs with the new user fees will be available at no charge through the Welcome Policy subsidy program.

That same month, the Welcome Policy subsidy was frozen for the first time in its history—no-one in the City of Toronto was able to register for any recreation program using the subsidy. In May, PFR General Manager Brenda Patterson was quoted in the *Toronto Star* as saying that periodic freezes of the subsidy policy would likely become a 'trend.'

In short: economic access to Toronto's recreation centres and programs is getting worse. The Welcome Policy is little-known, difficult to access and often humiliating. In addition, increased user fees, new user fees and decreased access to Priority Centres have all put pressure on the Welcome Policy, which is already periodically frozen, and for which, to our knowledge, PFR has not requested any new funds.

PFR's Welcome Policy Proposal

Under this proposal, parents will be forced to keep their children out of fun and skills-building activities during the year in order to 'bank' their recreation dollars and to put them in camp in the summer.



PFR's proposal for the Welcome Policy does not request additional funds for the subsidy program, which is currently budgeted at \$8.7 million. Nor does it suggest a remedy to the well-documented frustrations of the complex, inconsistent and often humiliating application process. Instead, it suggests a cut to individual allocations. Right now, individuals using the Welcome Policy can choose from a range of programs per season. PFR is proposing to allocate each individual using the Welcome Policy an annual dollar amount instead—\$455.00 for children and youth, \$212.00 for adults.

Calculating using the prices of basic, 'low-end' PFR programs, this proposal constitutes an approximate cut of \$100.00 per person in annual allocations. It also places specialized programs like outdoor summer camps, music programs and skiing largely out of reach for most individuals using the subsidy program.

For many families, summer camps in particular are used as child care. Under this proposal, parents will be forced to keep their children out of fun and skills-building activities during the year in order to 'bank' their recreation dollars and to put them in camp in the summer.

The PFR report compares their proposed dollar allocations to less 'generous' allocations in municipalities like Kingston and London. This comparison, however, fails to address other elements that contribute to economic access including eligibility requirements, population needs, user fee rates and availability of free programs and space.

The comparison also fails to cite the percentage of eligible participants who succeed in accessing subsidy programs in these municipalities. PFR's plan proposes to reach only 5 percent of Toronto residents who are currently eligible for the subsidy program.

Everybody Gets to Play

In 2007, PFR proposed a new service plan called *Everybody Gets to Play*. Among other recommendations, the plan called for a shift in the Welcome Policy from a course-based to a dollar-based allocation. It also called for a phase-out of the Priority Centres. There was a strong public reaction against this proposal, and the plan was permanently tabled. As outlined above, PFR is currently and quietly instituting similar cuts to those proposed in *Everybody Gets to Play*.



Community voices

Welcome Policy consultations

In May and June, PFR held a short set of consultations on the Welcome Policy. These were held separately from PFR's public consultations into the service plan, and were invitation-only. Two consultations were held specifically for representatives of community agencies.

At the agency consultations, participants were told that the decision to move from a course-based to a dollar-based allocation had already been made. As a result, participants were not asked to give input as to whether or not they thought this shift was a good idea, but rather on what the shift should look like. Despite this, PFR's report states:

A majority of agency representatives also generally supported the conversion, saying that a dollar-based allocation is the most equitable approach to providing subsidies.

Community workers did, however, offer a range of input that was not offered in PFR's report to Council. We encourage City Councillors to request facilitator notes from all the Welcome Policy consultations.

Needs assessments, community consultations and reports

- The 2011 *Community Scan Report* by Unison Health and Community Services summarizes an in-depth research study that consulted more than 1,100 community residents and workers in North West Toronto. Among those residing in the Bathurst-Finch neighbourhood, **the most frequently cited community service need was access to recreation** – well above housing, transportation and food security. In the Weston-Mt. Dennis neighbourhood, agency staff noted there is currently no recreation centre at all. As one participant in a focus group of resident leaders from this neighbourhood highlighted, **“The city needs to step up and spend more money for the recreation centre.”**
- In 2011, Public Interest conducted a survey on community recreation in Toronto. While the survey remains open, of 544 respondents, 499 or **91 percent think that “there should be a policy providing free access for people who can’t afford it.”**
- In 2009 and 2010, the Toronto Women's City Alliance conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with more than 100 women. Recreation was highlighted as a key need for women in the city. **Barriers to access cited by women across the city included fees, lack of child care and transportation.**
- While input from the public consultations PFR conducted into its five-year service plan have yet to be made public, City managers acknowledged that access emerged as a key theme. During his concluding remarks, the host of the North York consultation on May 19th stated that **the message that it's all ‘about access’ was heard loud and clear by City managers present.**



- Evidence suggests that major savings to City departments including Police, Children's Services, Public Health and Toronto Employment and Social Services can be gained by opening up access to recreation. The ground-breaking five-year Ontario study, *When the Bough Breaks*, demonstrates **a direct correlation between investment in recreation and overall savings in City budgets.**

Community Recreation for All Survey

In 2011, Community Recreation for All created our own survey, which was sent out through various community networks and answered by 96 respondents. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents said they were answering the survey as community residents, 47 per cent said they were answering as community workers.

Please note, in the case of community workers, this is a significantly larger sample than the one engaged in PFR's Welcome Policy consultations. We do not know how many community residents were polled by PFR on this subject. **Ninety seven percent of respondents want to see the present Welcome Policy allocation maintained or increased.**

All comments cited below reflect themes that were repeated more than once. When most respondents made reference to a particular theme, this is noted.

#1. VISION. Respondents were asked to describe their vision for community recreation. An overwhelming number of respondents described a recreation system that offered 'access for all' with 'dignity' and 'without barriers.'

Taxes are already cut from our pay cheques. Why pay again for our children to access community recreation especially the low income and family with more than two children. Remove the barriers.



#2. BARRIERS. Respondents were asked to name what they saw as barriers to community recreation. Most respondents referenced the costs of programs. Others talked about the complicated and often humiliating process of applying for the Welcome Policy. There are many references to 'crazy red tape,' 'user fees, bureaucracy and red tape,' and 'paperwork and bureaucracy e.g. calling parks and recs for permits.'

Some respondents also referenced language barriers, distance/high transportation costs and 'not enough staff to support the many disabled children in our community.'

The current barriers to economic access to community recreation is many families can't afford extra programs for their children/youths with the cost of living rising. When communities offer programs and courses it strengthens the community because it brings everyone together.

#3. WELCOME POLICY. Respondents were explained the details of the current Welcome Policy entitlement, and asked if they thought people who receive the Welcome Policy should get less (access to fewer courses), more (access to more courses) or the same (access to the same number of courses) than they do now.

Respondents who want to see the present allocation maintained:	38%
Respondents who want to see the present allocation augmented:	59%
Respondents who want to see cuts to current, individual allocations:	2%

Whether someone is poor or rich, the kids should have exposure to a quality program.

#4. PRIORITY CENTRES. Respondents were asked to choose between a model of individual subsidies (Welcome Policy) and one of free community recreation centres for all (Priority Centres).

Respondents who want to see a model of free community recreation centres:	75%
Respondents who would choose a model of individual subsidies:	24%

The department needs to get back to serving the entire City population with a focus on lower income families-it is presently moving at great speed to exclude families who can't afford City programs. This is unhealthy for the entire City, short sighted and socially harmful in the long run.



ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- Women only programs and weight-room time is needed.
- Children's programs fill up too quickly.
- Longer hours for pools.

They should have a pick up and drop off system for those who have limited access to public transportation.



**To request a full copy of the survey results, please email:
communityrecreationforall@gmail.com**

Questions for Parks, Forestry and Recreation

We recommend that City Council requests the following information from Parks, Forestry and Recreation:

According to City Council policy, all Toronto residents whose incomes fall below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) qualify for the Welcome Policy. Under the new proposal, PFR states they will be able to provide programs for 28,753 people. In Toronto, 604,048 people have incomes that fall below LICO. This means that 95 percent of eligible Toronto residents will not have access to the subsidy program.

- What is PFR's plan to meet the City's policy of providing quality, year-round access to community recreation to Toronto residents regardless of their ability to pay?
- What kind of needs assessment has PFR performed to inform its decisions about access to recreation programs?
- If the move is made from a course-based to a dollar-based allocation for the Welcome Policy, will this be indexed to user fee increases?
- How many people tried to register for programs using the Welcome Policy during the two freezes to date in 2011?
- Were camps closed and/or staff laid off as a result of the Welcome Policy freezes?
- What dollar amount would be needed to resource the Welcome Policy to the point where it fulfills its mandate?

PFR promised \$200,000.00 in savings from the elimination of free adult and general programs at Priority Centres.

- What was the cost of purchasing equipment to charge fees at the 21 Priority Centres? Equipment needed for each Priority Centre includes point of sale machine, new safe, new jacks, and dedicated computer.
- What is the cost of training staff to charge fees and administer the Welcome Policy at the 21 Priority Centres?
- What are the ongoing staff costs associated with charging fees and administering the Welcome Policy at the 21 Priority Centres?

Staff from several City departments are involved in administering the Welcome Policy and charging fees for PFR programs.

- What is annual cost of maintenance, repair and upgrading to equipment associated with charging fees and administering the Welcome Policy?
- What are the annual staff costs associated with administering the Welcome Policy and charging fees?
- If the City invests in access to recreation programs through increased to supports such as the Welcome Policy and Priority Centres, what savings might other City departments gain, including Police, Children's Services, Public Health and Toronto Employment and Social Services?



References

PFR and City documents

2011 BUDGET BRIEFING NOTE, PF&R Adult Program Fees at Priority Centres (Revised Feb. 22, 2011).

Improving Access to Recreation: Everybody Gets to Play. Parks, Forestry and Recreation. 2007.

Operating Budget Analyst Briefing Notes, Parks Forestry and Recreation. January 10th, 2011.

Welcome Policy Recreation Program - Subsidy Allocations. Parks, Forestry and Recreation. 2011.

Additional documents and sources

Communities In which Women Count: The Women's Equality Report Card Project. Toronto Women's City Alliance. June 2010.

Community Scan Report. Unison Health and Community Services. 2011.

'Freeze on Toronto's 'Welcome Policy' means low-income families missing out,' by Dan Robson, *Toronto Star*. May 11th, 2011

When the bough breaks: provider-initiated comprehensive care is more effective and less expensive for sole-support parents on social assistance. Browne G, Byrne C, Roberts J, Gafni A, Whittaker S. McMaster University, 2001.

Survey - Community Recreation for All

Survey – Public Interest

Members of Community Recreation for All attended a Welcome Policy consultations for service providers and both public and stakeholder consultations for the Service Plan.

Community Recreation for All is a broad group of community organizations and residents in Toronto that includes Chinese Canadian National Council – Toronto Chapter, Frontline Partners with Youth Network, Grassroots Youth Collaborative, LAMP Community Health Centre, Unison Health and Community Services, Toronto Women's City Alliance and 106 & York Urban Arts Festival.

