

December 4, 2024

Dear Niagara Regional Chair Bradley, Niagara Regional Clerk, Councillor Bateman and Councillor Sorrento,

Re: Welcoming Streets Pilot Project

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Niagara Regional Campus of McMaster University's Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine in support of the Welcoming Streets Pilot Project proposal being put forward to Regional Council by Mayor Siscoe on behalf of REACH Niagara, Positive Living Niagara and the St. Catharines' Downtown Association.

Regional Essential Access to Connected HealthCare (REACH) together with its partners is currently providing care in multiple locations across Niagara to individuals who are homeless, have insecure housing or are otherwise marginalized in their ability to access healthcare. Positive Living Niagara supports those in Niagara living with or affected by HIV through harm reduction programs including needle exchange, supervised consumption, peer support, case management and outreach programs. Both these organizations have identified significant health and social needs for individuals congregating in public spaces in St. Catharines which have impacts on the individuals and the communities in which they spend the majority of their time. Additionally, with cold winter weather having arrived, the risk to individual health and safety as well as community safety and cohesion is amplified for individuals who are living or spending most of their time without permanent shelter and those who may be using substances.

The Welcoming Streets initiative seeks to engage block leaders and peers with lived experience in these conditions to build relationships with individuals and businesses in the community, to take a proactive approach to safety and accessing services, to connect individuals with assistance in meeting their basic needs and to build skills and knowledge within communities to best respond to community and individual needs. These mobile teams to be distributed in higher needs areas across the city of St. Catharines will be responsive and flexible within the communities they serve.

Supporting this pilot program will facilitate supporting and connecting homeless and marginalized individuals and improve the sense of community and collaboration within existing businesses and services. This model of peer support from those with lived experience also represents meaningful employment and skill-building for these individuals and a model that could be replicated by other programs. Opportunities have been ongoing through REACH and Positive Living for the active participation and teaching of medical students and residents in unique care settings in Niagara including through community engagement. In this way, we are increasing the ability of future healthcare providers to provide culturally safe, medically excellent care and we are demonstrating the importance of social accountability in health care training and provision of health care within a region. Many of the trainees who learn medicine in Niagara end up practicing in Niagara when they complete their training. Early exposure to clinical opportunities through REACH and Positive Living has already resulted in the recruitment of physicians to fill this clinical need locally and will continue to in years to come. Our medical workforce is being encouraged, through this engagement, to understand social accountability as a foundation of healthcare and respond in creative and flexible ways to the needs of their community. For these reasons, as an academic institution, the Niagara Regional Campus fully supports this application.

Sincerely,



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