

Access to Information

Community information centres have been in Canadian communities for more than 50 years and are important to help understand a community's the social support infrastructure. In Waterloo Region, the first community information program was established in 1972. Technology has changed and, the community service landscape is continually shifting, but the basic information service provided by the Community Information Centre of Waterloo Region is much the same in 2014 as it was in 1972.

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in on-line information access with a proliferation of information coming from a range of sources, some reliable, some not. This situation contributes to information overload that can make it more challenging for people to find the help they need. Thus, there has also been a corresponding increase in the need for direct person to person mediated support to access appropriate, accurate and reliable information and for customized information products tailored to specific needs.

Information access issues were first identified by youth and seniors in 2004. These issues have since been validated for other demographic groups, including persons with disabilities and new immigrants:

- Systems are often difficult to use.
- Information formats are not efficient.
- There is a need for multiple formats and points of access.
- 'Human connectors' are not approachable or knowledgeable.

To be accessible, information must be: timely and available when people need it; current and up-to-date; easy to use; practical and concrete; clear with no jargon; relevant; and complete for people's needs.

We've still got a way to go ...

- Create policies that recognize community information as a public good and a human right.
- Collaborate with the Community Information Centre WR to minimize duplication and to make better use of information that is already being maintained.
- Provide funding to support projects to design systems and information formats for the natural ways people seek and use information.
- Provide support to ensure that training is available to help people use information systems well.

Things to talk about:

- What information do people need to help them in everyday life and in times of need or crisis?
- How can we be sure that trusted, reliable and useful information is available to everyone who needs it, when they need it and in ways that are accessible and meaningful?
- What role do public bodies (governments, institutions) have in ensuring information needs are met and what are the limits to their role?



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