



# Community-Led Change: Aligning DWCC's Work to Community Needs Post-Pandemic

Windsor Downtown Community Collaborative's Report to the Ontario Trillium Foundation

September 2023

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# **Executive Summary**

The Downtown Windsor Community Collaborative (DWCC) embarked on a transformative Community Engagement Project to re-engage with the Downtown Windsor community, given the evolving impact of the global pandemic. While DWCC's mission and vision remained constant, the changing context called for an understanding of the community's needs. Optimal Affect, a human-centered consultancy, provided expert facilitation and coaching to guide DWCC through three key phases: team alignment, insights interpretation, and reflection on project learnings.

## **Key Findings**

## **Addressing Core Needs**

The core needs of the community were identified and prompted DWCC to evaluate projects accordingly.

- Insight 1 Covid created isolation—people need access to events, resources, and programs to feel more connected to the community and decrease feelings of isolation
- Insight 2 People need to see support and resources for mental health, addiction and homelessness in order to feel safe downtown
- Insight 3- People need connection to nature and a clean environment to enjoy the downtown core
- Insights 4 People need more diversity of businesses and infrastructure in the downtown core and welcoming pedestrian access

#### **Positive Impact**

The pilot projects showed positive outcomes outweighing the negatives—reflecting the genuine need and intention behind these initiatives.

## **Areas for Improvement**

Identifying areas for improvement is crucial for expanding and growing successful programs—highlighting the need to prioritize the most impactful projects.

#### **Success Evaluation**

The alignment with community needs and demonstrated impact was considered while evaluating projects. The question of the minimum number of participants for a worthwhile investment arose, leading to the development of a Project Assessment Tool.

## **Scope and Alignment**

DWCC recognized that not all community needs aligned with its mission. The focus was on creating an impact that resonates with the organization's goals, which has clear connections to insights 1, 2 and 3.

## Implications for Future Work

## **Sustainability and Leadership**

DWCC must prioritize intentional leadership development and succession planning. Handbooks and guidelines could enable project leadership by different individuals in various locations.

## **Volunteer Engagement**

Understanding the capacity of volunteers is vital, given the high-needs nature of the community. Tailored volunteer recruitment and development strategies should be implemented.

## **Key Decisions**

The organization needs to decide which projects require revision, continuation, or conclusion, utilizing the Project Assessment Tool (Appendix A) for alignment and decision-making.

#### **Resident-Led Initiatives**

Exploring resident-led initiatives and community-driven efforts should be encouraged, supported by a combination of staff, allies, and residents.

## **Further Considerations**

## **Food Security**

Though food-security did not emerge as a core need, DWCC acknowledges its importance and that food often draws people to existing programs that support connection and mental health. Secondary research leveraging existing data sources would provide even better insight into programming that addresses core community needs.

The DWCC Community Engagement Project's pilot programs have provided invaluable insights into the community's needs and preferences. To enhance community impact, DWCC should prioritize impactful programs aligned with core community needs. Sustainable volunteer engagement, intentional leadership development, and resident-led efforts will solidify DWCC's role in creating positive, lasting change in Downtown Windsor.

# **Background**

"Because we long to see the city be a good place to grow up and grow old, we are focused on creating and supporting loving community at the neighbourhood, grass-roots level. We see this happening on our sidewalks and streets, in our parks and playgrounds, on our front porches and in the common spaces we live our lives. We see our neighbourhoods through the lens of Asset Based Community Development principles: everyone has something to contribute, and community is the place where we are valued and find belonging."

—DWCC Mission

## **The Project**

The Downtown Windsor Community Collaborative (DWCC) saw the need for re-engaging with the community. The organization's mission and vision in service to a good place to grow up and grow old hasn't changed, but the impact of the global pandemic over the past two years has changed the context. In order to determine what comes next, DWCC wanted to start by listening to and understanding the needs of the people of Downtown Windsor—seeking their input on the best way forward. DWCC hired a professional consultancy to provide support for collaboration and decision-making at pivotal moments in the project lifecycle.

## The Approach

Through a supportive grant by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Optimal Affect was hired as a consultancy specializing in human-centred process facilitation. Founder and CEO, Sarah Nicole uses a flexible and adaptable approach to meet people where they are and continue to drive the group towards the best possible outcomes. She was hired to provide three thoughtfully designed and facilitated sessions, along with coaching to support DWCC's core team and community developer as they:

- 1. Kicked-off the 12-month project and build team alignment
- 2. Interpret insights from community engagement research and determine the next steps for pilot projects
- 3. Reflect on project learnings and what it means for the future of DWCC

The goal of this project was to help DWCC understand what challenges the community is facing, what the community needs and wants in order to address the challenges, what solutions the community would propose and what the role of DWCC could be in supporting the needs of the downtown community.

# **Project Overview**

The following project overview provides insight into the human-centred process that guided this work from start to finish.

## Team

This is the small, but mighty team that took this project from concept to implementation.

## **Bob Cameron, Director**

Provided project oversight and support at key moments throughout the work.

## **Alex Song, Community Developer**

Lead the project from start to completion.

## Braydenne Bain, BSW 4th Year University of Windor Placement Student

Supported the project with data synthesis, insights and pilot project ideation.

## Samer Agha, Community Member

Informed participant recruitment with a lens on equity-seeking groups.

#### Sarah Nicole Martin, Consultant

Provided process coaching and facilitated group work throughout the project.

## **Purpose**

The project team started by getting clear on the purpose of the work.

Due to Covid-19 most of our programming and gathering of resident leadership ceased. Significant changes in community makeup have occurred. Leadership and funding of DWCC was depleted. It is presumptive to assume programming can return to the way it was. In service to our mission, we'll deconstruct and reconstruct our services—placing community stakeholder needs at the centre of decisions regarding the future of the Downtown Windsor Community Collaborative.

## **Objectives**

The project team identified core objectives and ensured that every step of the work was aligned to these core objectives.

## The project team set out to:

- Understand the needs of the community through engagement that leaves people feeling heard and valued
- Reflect on how current programming meets or does not meet those needs
- Recommend changes to better meet the needs of community stakeholders
- Inform long term planning regarding the leadership and operation of DWCC

Phase #1	Team Alignment & Project Planning Define a project vision, charter and set key milestones. Explore design principles for stakeholder engagement with equity-seeking groups.	Sept - Dec 2022
Phase #2	Community Engagement & Data Synthesis Develop engagement tools, facilitate engagement activities, track engagement data and demographics and begin data synthesis.	Jan - Mar 2023
Phase #3	Interpretation & Next Steps Review the data and insights from engagement, reflect, interpret and decide what these learnings mean for the project's next steps. Generate ideas of possible pilot projects, develop, launch and test pilot projects.	Apr - May 2023
Phase #4	Reflection & Implications Review and reflect, making sense of all of the learnings and outcomes of the project. Facilitated dialogue to begin to understand what this means for the future of the organization.	Jun - Aug 2023

# **Our Guiding Principles**

By consensus, the project team came up with guiding principles to continue to come back to through the project.

**Collaborative.** Working with community leaders and organizations who have relationships with the people we need to reach.

Flexible and adaptable. Remaining grounded in our why, what and how while adjusting to meet project needs.

**Human-centered.** Always putting the needs of people first in a way that is trauma-informed and anti-oppressive—creating the conditions for safety and meaningful connection.

## **High-level Research Questions**

The project team developed high-level research questions to guide the development of specific engagement tools—aligned to the types of target audiences. Each engagement tool then took a deeper dive into these high-level questions.

## Engagement activities were design to explore these key questions:

- How do community stakeholders experience Downtown Windsor and surrounding neighbourhoods?
- How have experiences changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the needs of community stakeholders—which needs are being met and where are the service gaps?
- What ideas do community stakeholders have for how to improve their community experience?
- What role is DWCC well positioned/not well positioned to play in meeting the needs of community stakeholders?

## **Key Stakeholders and Demographics**

During engagement planning the project team identified core audiences and community stakeholders groups and identified the best ways to connect with each audience.

The goal was intentional engagement with all community members, with a key focus on:

- Youth
- Families
- Arabic Speaking Communities
- Students
- Older Adults
- Street Involved Community Members
- Glengarry Community
- Downtown Business Owners

While the project team did identify a core group of stakeholders central to understanding the experience of Downtown Windsor, they acknowledged that intersectionality plays an important role in reaching a group that's representative of the downtown community.

As such, demographic data was collected to identify missing or lacking voices and adapt engagement activities accordingly:

 Age, location, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, employment/student, dependents, family status, housing status, downtown business owner

Responses were collected anonymously and participants were given the option to decline answering the demographic questions.

## **Engagement Activities & Who We Reached**

## **Pop-up Events Questionnaire**

Connecting to events already going on in the community allowed the project team to meet people where they are. A short questionnaire was used for 1:1 conversations. To provide accessible options, participants were also offered the opportunity to complete a written or digital questionnaire on their own.

## Target Stakeholders:

- Youth and Family
- Arabic Speaking Community
- Students
- Street Involved Community
- Glengarry Community

## **Online Survey**

One online survey allowed us to reach a large number of stakeholders.

Open-ended questions enable stakeholders to share their experiences and ideas.

#### Target Stakeholders:

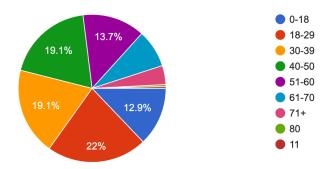
All - wide distribution

#### Who We Reached

Through the pop-up events and online survey a total of 274 community members participated. Here is a capture of some of the key demographics of the people who voluntarily shared this information

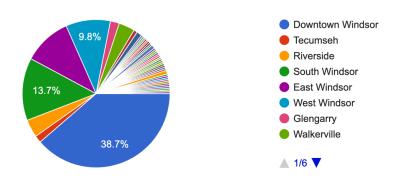
## What is your age

241 responses



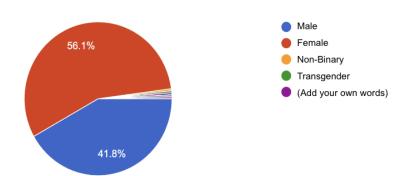
## Where do you live?

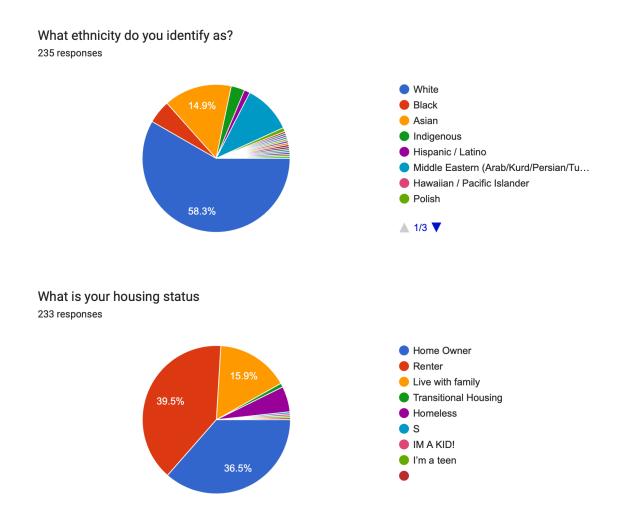
256 responses



## What is your gender?

239 responses





Capturing the voice of the Arabic Speaking Community was of key interest to us due to a visible growth and vibrancy of this demographic seen in the downtown core. Specific efforts were taken to include this group. These efforts included help from local Arabic Speaking Faith Leaders by meeting with leaders of the downtown Mosque, local Arabic speaking business leaders and local resident leaders. All leaders were supportive and willing to collaborate when we presented this project but we did not receive a significant response from this demographic considering the effort, time and collaboration that was invested. Some additional strategic planning and reflection is recommended in future efforts to reach this important growing community.

# **Engagement Insights**

The project team completed synthesis of all the data collected during community engagement. Each piece of information was organized into themes that surfaced organically from the data we collected, then the themes were further clustered into key insights. Each insight was framed as a needs statement that's descriptive of what was learned from the community.

The following information is a summary of the insights and the themes that make up each insight.

## Insight #1

Covid created isolation—people need access to events, resources, and programs to feel more connected to the community and decrease feelings of isolation.

- Due to Covid, isolation has increased and people are less likely to go out
- People need accessible and diverse community events and entertainment to build connection and belonging
- People need localized access to coordinated advocacy, resources and programs for all ages

## Insight #2

People need to see support and resources for mental health, addiction and homelessness in order to feel safe downtown.

- The current state of downtown is preventing people from feeling safe (ie. crime, drug use)
- People need accessible community programs and support for Mental Health and Addictions
- People need to see resources to improve access to affordable and safe housing
- People feel that downtown has been neglected and is currently moving in the wrong direction

## Insight #3

People need connection to nature and a clean environment in the downtown core.

- People highly value the walking and scenery of the waterfront
- People need a cleaner more aesthetically pleasing downtown core

## Insight #4

People need more diversity of businesses and infrastructure in the downtown core and welcoming pedestrian access.

- People need more diversity in businesses and infrastructure to make downtown appealing (ie. restaurants, shops, markets)
- People enjoy the nightlife and restaurants of downtown
- People need more parking and welcoming pedestrian and street design

## Moving from Insights to Action

Before determining next steps and pilot projects, it was important to pause and assess how learnings from the community align the the mission of DWCC. While Insight 4 is an important and valid need from the community, DWCC acknowledged that this is outside of alignment with the organization's mission and the focus should be placed on creating an impact in alignment with the organization's mission. Insight 1, 2 and 3 are well aligned to the organization's mission.

# **Pilot Projects & Outcomes**

The project team used the engagement themes and insights to generate ideas about how DWCC might go about addressing each need. They came up with 8-10 ideas for each needs statement and then prioritized based on which ideas could create the most impactful pilot projects.

The following is a summary of the pilot projects identified, the needs statements it addresses and the outcomes of each pilot.

## Dine & Doodle

A woman's group that meets over a meal and works on crafts and arts projects.

#### **Need Addressed**

• Insight 1 - Covid created isolation—people need access to events, resources, and programs to feel more connected to the community and decrease feelings of isolation

## **Participation**

15 people participated in this program and 13 responded to the feedback survey.

#### **Feedback Themes**

- I enjoy the feeling of connection and sharing life experiences
- I'm grateful for the program—I feel like I belong
- I enjoy learning art techniques—a social activity that doesn't involve substances5
- I feel like this program is a safe space to connect and be validated
- I enjoy this as a growth opportunity and meeting other people in my healing process
- I would like to see more opportunities to participate
- More funding needed for more opportunities like this
- Sometimes the conversations got too intense with no real supervision or direction

## Yoga / Crafts / Games

A group for social connection and fun activities

#### **Need Addressed**

 Insight 1 - Covid created isolation—people need access to events, resources, and programs to feel more connected to the community and decrease feelings of isolation

## **Participation**

3 people participated in this program and 1 responded to the feedback survey. A comedy night was suggested at one of the meetings and planned. 10 people attended the comedy night.

#### **Feedback Themes**

• Local leadership requires investment to ensure events are as successful in attendance and qualitative goals. DWCC Staff embrace a stronger leadership development role as a primary goal.

## Enroute 502

A weekly social gathering for people who are recovering from complex trauma. The group has speakers, music and small group sharing and activities.

## **Needs Addressed**

 Insight 1 - Covid created isolation—people need access to events, resources, and programs to feel more connected to the community and decrease feelings of isolation • Insight 2 - People need to see support and resources for mental health, addiction and homelessness in order to feel safe downtown

## **Participation**

On average, 30 people participated in this program each week and 20 responded to the feedback survey.

#### **Feedback Themes**

- I experienced healing, support and connection through this group
- I experienced community and connection through this group
- This group was educational for me
- Great to connect with others on a journey of recovery
- I would like this program to continue
- I would like this group to be able to facilitate more people
- I would like to have more daily assistance
- The format is too fast

## Streetlight

Bridging the gap of connection with the marginalized and our neighbours with no fixed address.

#### **Need Addressed**

• Insight 2 - People need to see support and resources for mental health, addiction and homelessness in order to feel safe downtown

## **Participation**

21 people participated on the walkabout team each week and over 100 distinct people were engaged on the street. 11 people responded to the feedback survey.

### **Feedback Themes**

- I feel connected to people and respected by the group
- I'm building empathy and understanding of the needs and experiences of others
- I enjoy collaborating with new people while we work to bring happiness to others
- I love this initiative and the opportunity to learn and grow
- I would like this program to happen more often
- I would like training (i.e. how to talk to people, drug overdose)
- I would like shade and more tables/chairs to sit with people
- I would like to see more people coming to help
- I would like to find a way to engage people for longer

## **Urban Landscapers**

A group that wants to beautify and make downtown more welcoming through small projects and cleanup crews.

#### **Needs Addressed**

• Insight 3 - People need connection to nature and a clean environment to enjoy the downtown core

## **Participation**

5 people participated in this program and 5 responded to the feedback survey.

#### **Feedback Themes**

- I enjoy socializing and meeting people who care about improving downtown together
- I enjoy seeing the immediate positive difference it makes to clean up the city
- We are doing great work, let's keep it up
- It would help to know where to drop off garbage outside of household pick-up days
- I would like to see a regular schedule and more frequency
- I would like to see more people involved and providing them with the tools needed to do the job

# **Sharps Containers**

A group advocating for strategic placement and more sharps containers

#### **Needs Addressed**

• Insight 3 - People need connection to nature and a clean environment to enjoy the downtown core

## **Participation**

While this pilot project had a lot of interest at first, no one ended up participating in it.

## **Reflection & Implications**

The Community Engagement Project and Pilot Programs helped DWCC to surface valuable insights from the Downtown Windsor community and for the

future of the DWCC. Here are the key findings and considerations that will shape the future direction of the organization's work.

## **Key Findings:**

- Addressing Core Needs: Mental health, isolation, and connection to nature were identified as core needs of the community. Projects should be evaluated on their ability to address one or more of these needs effectively.
- **Positive Impact**: The pilot projects demonstrated positive outcomes that outweighed the negatives. The responses from the community reflected the genuine need and intention behind these initiatives.
- **Areas for Improvement**: The focus on improvement areas was in support of expanding and growing successful programs. Prioritizing projects with the most success was deemed essential.
- **Success Evaluation:** Criteria for investing in a project included alignment with community needs and demonstrated impact. The question of the minimum number of participants required for a worthwhile investment arose. An evaluation tool will help ensure projects aligned to community needs, as well as organizational scope and capacity.
- **Scope and Alignment:** It was acknowledged that not all community needs statements fall within the scope of DWCC's work. The emphasis should be on creating an impact in alignment with the organization's mission.

## **Implications for Future Work:**

- **Sustainability and Leadership:** To ensure sustainability, DWCC needs to develop intentional leadership and succession plans. Handbooks and guidelines could enable project leadership by different individuals in different locations, promoting duplication in other cities.
- **Volunteer Engagement:** Understanding the capacity of volunteers is crucial, given the high-needs nature of the community. Volunteer recruitment and development should be tailored, acknowledging the potential for turnover.
- **Key Decisions:** DWCC must decide which projects require revision, continuation, or conclusion. As a result of this work we developed a Project Assessment Tool (Appendix A) that can support decision-making and ensure alignment.
- **Resident-Led Initiatives:** For sustainable impact, exploring resident-led initiatives and community-driven efforts should be considered, supported by a combination of staff, allies, and residents.

#### **Further Consideration:**

• **Food Security:** Though food-security did not emerge as a core need, DWCC acknowledges its importance and that food often draws people to existing programs that support connection and mental health. Secondary

research leveraging existing data sources would provide even better insight into programming that addresses core community needs.

The DWCC Community Engagement Project's pilot projects have provided invaluable insights into the community's needs and preferences. Moving forward, the organization should prioritize impactful programs that align with the core needs identified—mental health, isolation, and connection to nature. Sustainable volunteer engagement and intentional leadership development are essential for the continuity of these initiatives.

To maximize community impact, DWCC should focus on a few key areas, rather than attempting to address all needs. Embracing resident-led efforts and empowering volunteers will strengthen the organization's presence and create a positive, lasting change in Downtown Windsor.

# Conclusion

The Downtown Windsor Community Collaborative's (DWCC) Community Engagement Project and the subsequent pilot programs have been instrumental in re-engaging with the Downtown Windsor community and gaining valuable insights into their needs. As the impact of the global pandemic changed the context in which DWCC operates, the organization recognized the importance of understanding the evolving community landscape.

The engagement process, facilitated by Optimal Affect, provided a human-centred approach to ensure community stakeholders felt heard, valued, and empowered in shaping the future of DWCC's initiatives. The pilot projects demonstrated positive outcomes and allowed DWCC to identify areas for improvement, leading to a prioritization of impactful projects aligned with the organization's mission.

The core needs of the community were identified as mental health, isolation, and the natural environment. DWCC is now equipped with a Project Assessment Tool to evaluate potential and existing initiatives based on alignment with community needs and demonstrated impact. This tool will aid in making data-driven decisions and maximizing the organization's community impact.

Moving forward, DWCC is committed to fostering sustainability and leadership development, ensuring projects can be led by various individuals in different locations. The emphasis on resident-led initiatives will enhance community ownership and inclusivity, while tailored volunteer recruitment and development strategies will strengthen the organization's capacity.

Furthermore, DWCC acknowledges the potential of food-related programs in addressing community needs, and secondary research will be conducted to explore this avenue further. Overall, the insights gained from the community engagement process will serve as a powerful lens through which DWCC will evaluate and adapt its current services to better meet the needs of Downtown Windsor.

The dedication and collaboration of the DWCC team, the consultancy Optimal Affect, and the community stakeholders have been pivotal in the success of this project. The knowledge and understanding gained from this initiative will shape the future trajectory of DWCC, making it a resilient, responsive, and community-driven organization committed to fostering a good place to grow up and grow old in Downtown Windsor.

DWCC looks forward to applying the valuable learnings and insights from this project to continue supporting and serving the community effectively, while also striving for meaningful, positive change in the downtown area. The project's success is a testament to DWCC's commitment to human-centred engagement and its dedication to creating a thriving and inclusive community for all.

Many thanks to the neighbours who enthusiastically participated, Sarah Nicole Martin of Optimal Affect, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation for making all of this possible.

Alex Song, Community Development DWCC

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# Appendix A

# **Project Assessment Tool**

Evaluating Our Work & Strengthening Alignment to Community Needs in Downtown Windsor

This framework has been specifically developed to support DWCC in evaluating the alignment of current programs and future initiatives with the expressed needs of the community—its purpose is to foster dialogue and spark ideas that can lead to informed decisions. Utilizing data gathered from comprehensive community engagement conducted in early 2023, this tool provides valuable insights into program effectiveness and helps identify areas for improvement. Given the dynamic nature of community needs, it is strongly recommended that this assessment tool be re-evaluated at a minimum interval of 12 months to ensure ongoing relevance and accuracy. There are two recommended approaches for re-evaluation: Firstly, key insights can be shared with the community for validation, strengthening the partnership between DWCC and the community. Secondly, re-engaging the community to develop new insights can inform the creation of an updated assessment tool. To foster continuous improvement and maintain community engagement, it is essential to re-engage with the community within 18-24 months. This versatile tool can be utilized for both new projects, as well as evaluating and enhancing the alignment of existing initiatives, providing a holistic approach to community-driven progress.

## Answer each question in the assessment tool based on the follow criteria:

## 1 = Strongly Disagree

The project does not address any of the community needs and is completely out of alignment with their priorities.

## 2 = Disagree

The project has limited relevance to community needs and only partially addresses their priorities.

### 3 = Neutral

The project has some degree of alignment with community needs, but there is room for improvement and further consideration of their priorities.

## 4 = Agree

The project aligns well with community needs and effectively addresses their priorities.

5 = Strongly Agree

The project is highly aligned with community needs and is a perfect match for their priorities.

People need connection to nature and a clean environment to enjoy the downtown core.						
How well does th nature?	nis project align to th	ne community's nee	d for connection to			
1	2	3	4	5		
How well does this project align to the community's need for a welcoming (clean & aesthetically pleasing) downtown core?						
1	2	3	4	5		
For existing projects: How might we iterate on this program to improve alignment to community needs?						
Covid created isolation—people need access to events resources, and programs to feel more connected to the community and decrease feelings of isolation						
How well does the decreased isolati	nis project align to th on?	ne community need	for connection and			
1	2	3	4	5		
How well does th	nis project align to th	ne community need	for accessible and			

## For existing projects:

1

diverse community events?

2

How might we iterate on this program to improve alignment to community needs?

3

4

5

# People need to see support and resources for mental health, addiction and homelessness in order to feel safe downtown

How well does this project align with the community's need to feel safe in the downtown core?					
1	2	3	4	5	
How well does this project align with the community's need to see support resources for people experiencing homelessness?					
1	2	3	4	5	
For existing projects: How might we iterate on this program to improve alignment to community needs?					
General					
DWCC exists to serve the downtown community. How central is this work/project to the downtown core?					
1	2	3	4	5	
It's important that projects are aligned to the interests of residents in the downtown core—how well supported is this work/project by residents?					
1	2	3	4	5	
It's important that projects are aligned to the interests and passions of those who make it possible—how well does this work/project align with the passions of staff?					
1	2	3	4	5	

For existing projects:

How might we iterate on this program to improve alignment to community needs?

## Based on the assessment, consider the following:

- What's most and least surprising about the assessment answers?
- What can we conclude about the project's alignment to:
  - Community needs
  - Resident interest
  - Staff passion
- Based on our assessment so far, is this project is:
  - o Ready to go

<ul> <li>Not moving forward</li> </ul>	
Requires iteration	
<ul> <li>Needs further input</li> </ul>	
<ul> <li>If iteration is required, what changes will be made?</li> </ul>	
<ul> <li>What are a few next steps we can take?</li> </ul>	
<ul> <li>When will we complete these next steps?</li> </ul>	
Notes:	