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Canadian Tire Jumpstart Program

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Attention: Board of Directors

I am Julie Casey and I am a social worker supporting children and youth in West Elgin County in Ontario. I would like to first commend Canadian Tire and the Jumpstart Program for all that you do to support communities and low income families in accessing physical activities and recreational programs for children and youth. Your list of funded activities are diverse but I ask that you consider adding Therapeutic Farming/Gardening, Animal Assisted Physical Activities and Wildlife Conservation to your approved recreational activities that are eligible for funding. These nature based recreational activities provide excellent physical activity, assist in meeting the diverse interests of children and youth while also providing a supportive and nurturing environment for children & youth's physical, social, mental and emotional needs.

As a member of the West Elgin Youth Task Group, I participate in a community agency collaborative group that focuses on addressing youth mental health, sense of belonging and wellness. I provide child and youth services through my own practice, Nourishing Hearts Wellness Care Farm where I deliver clinical services including private child and youth counselling, mobile animal assisted therapy services to children and youth students with special needs, along with nature and farm based recreational activities and programs. The clinical services are eligible for third party insurance coverage and a sliding scale service fees are provided for families without insurance coverage; and for the families without coverage and can not afford the sliding scale, a life enrichment program that is non-clinical and recreational based, has been developed which has a lower recreational fee to increase feasibility and therefore accessibility for lower income families but even recreational rate is out of reach for many families in our community. The life enrichment recreational programs include Therapeutic Farming/Gardening, Animal Assisted Activities and Wildlife Conservation. Adding these activities would to the eligible Jumpstart activities would greatly benefit the families, children and youth that require additional environmental, mental, social and emotional supports in order to participate in physical recreational activities and community participation.

I am not seeking any Community Development Funds but rather asking to have the above activities recognized and listed as funded activities.

West Elgin Community Profile

Household Incomes

According to the 2015 West Elgin Community Wellbeing Survey¹, 13.6% of household incomes are under \$20,000, with 23.9% (largest group) are between \$20,000 - 39,999. On average, 3 dependents are supported by the total annual household income of survey respondents; however responses ranged from as low as 1 and as high as 10 dependents. Furthermore, 3.6% reported that they are currently unemployed and looking for work, 22.6% reported that they have struggled to pay their bills in the past 6 months and 9.3% said they could not afford to buy food or eat due to poor income. This economic profile is further supported by Elgin St. Thomas Public Health 2011 Healthy Communities report² that states West Elgin has a high proportion (16-24%) of households below the “poverty line” that Statistics Canada refers to as the Low Income Cut-Off rate.

Physical Activity

The Elgin St. Thomas Public Health 2011 Healthy Communities reported 53.9% of people 12yrs + are not active or moderately active in their leisure time and 88% of children and youth are not meeting the recommended 90 minutes of physical activity a day, as outlined in Canada’s Physical Activity Guides. According to the report, cost is a large concern for utilizing recreational activities and physical fitness programs and makes the following recommendations: 1) There needs to be low/no cost programs offered to youth as well as greater awareness for available programs that already exist. 2) There should be an emphasis on creating a variety of physical fitness opportunities to keep youth interested. 3) The community should endorse the utilization and promotion of existing infrastructure, such as parks, community centers and trails, for physical activity.

Health and Wellbeing

According to the 2015 West Elgin Community Wellbeing Survey, a greater proportion youth between the ages of 12 and 19 compared to all other age groups expressed that they did not feel a sense of belonging to their community. Additionally, this same age group had the smallest proportion reporting excellent or very good health (47.6%) compared to 61.7% for those aged 20 to 30, 68.9% for those aged 40 to 64 and 59% for seniors aged 65 and older. The Elgin St. Thomas Public Health 2011 Healthy Communities report, made the following recommendations: 1) Youth mental health programs are needed stating youth need people to talk to, 2) There should be more trained counsellors at school as well as more professional help options within the community, as well as drop in centers where teens and youth can speak to trained professionals, 3) There needs to be more recreational facilities that youth can use as outlets for life stress and 4) These facilities should have trained staff that can recognize signs and symptoms of mental health related issues.

West Elgin Children and Youth Recreational Programs

Currently West Elgin Municipality, YMCA and West Elgin Health Centre offer very limited recreational program options: Babysitting Course, Home Alone Safety, Kids Cuisine, Summer Camp, Drop-In Centre. West Elgin is approximately 60 km (45 minute drive) to St. Thomas were many child and youth programs

¹ West Elgin Community Wellbeing Survey, 2015

² Elgin St. Thomas Public Health Healthy Communities Report, 2011

are delivered for Elgin County families. According to the 2015 West Elgin Community Wellbeing Survey, 38.3% of community members already have between a 30-90+ minute commute to work, so travel to St. Thomas to access child and youth recreation programs may not be feasible both from a time and financial perspective.

Child and Youth Mental Health

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health³ report the following prevalence of mental health challenges:

- 1/2 of Ontario parents report having ever had concerns about their child's level of anxiety
- 1/3 of Ontario parents have had a child miss school due to anxiety
- 1/4 of Ontario parents have missed work to care for a child with anxiety. This is significantly higher among parents who have had concerns about their child's anxiety.
- 62% of Ontario youth report ever having had concerns about their level of anxiety; only 3 in 10 (32%) have spoken to a mental health care professional about anxiety.
- As many as 1 in 5 children and youth in Ontario will experience some form of mental health problem.
 - 5 out of 6 of those kids will not receive the treatment they need.
- 70% of mental health problems have their onset during childhood or adolescence.
- 17% of children ages 2-5 years meet diagnostic criteria for mental health problems.
- 28% of students report not knowing where to turn when they wanted to talk to someone about mental health
- Canada's youth suicide rate is the third highest in the industrialized world.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health conducted a study involving more than 10,000 students in Grades 7 through 12 in 220 schools across Ontario. It examined the prevalence of anxiety symptoms, such as feeling nervous, hopeless, worthless or depressed. The findings are disturbing. One-third of students in the survey were found to have moderate to severe symptoms of physiological distress. That's up from two years earlier when one-quarter suffered the same levels of mental illness. And 14 per cent of students met the criteria for "serious" physiological distress, up from 10 per cent only a few years ago. Only one in five young people get the mental health help they need. The study further stated that improving the mental health literacy of teenagers has the potential to deliver similar results as early intervention and education programs in schools had in lowering substance abuse among teenagers over the last two decades.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health also lists the following challenges with the current system:

- 36% of Ontario parents have sought help for their child; of those who did, 4 in 10 didn't receive the help they needed or are still waiting for treatment
- Half of Ontario parents who have sought mental health help for their child said they have faced challenges in getting the services they needed. The primary reason cited was long wait times (65%). Other challenges include: services don't offer what my child needs (38%), don't know where to go (26%), and don't offer services where I live (14%)
- 76% families surveyed indicated it was very or extremely difficult to know where to find help.

³ Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

- 63% of youth point to stigma as the most likely reason to not seek help.

Providing specialized recreational programs with trained staff to teach mental health literacy in the moment when needed, helps to: 1) Address these challenges to accessing services, 2) Would provide an initial access point while also 3) Providing the support children and youth require to actively participate in recreational activities when living with mental health challenges, and 4) Increase the opportunity to reach the children and youth in potential need.

Animal Assisted Recreation Programs

For children and youth that struggle with mental health and social challenges, having animals present can help create the supportive environment they need to participate successfully. Interacting with animals stimulates a surge of Oxytocin, a hormone that is naturally produced in the human body that has a calming and relaxing effect. According to the 2012 Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health⁴, animal assisted interventions has been shown to be beneficial for children and youth. The potential therapeutic benefits include: 1)The addition of animals in a therapeutic setting is beneficial for the following reasons: Animals can act as a “social lubricant”, making clients feel safe and comfortable in the therapeutic setting. Animals can also “regulate the emotional climate” with their enthusiastic greetings; this can help build rapport and help clients feel more comfortable. 2) The presence of animals can affect the perceived environment, making it more comfortable and friendly for children and youth. 3) The presence of an animal can provide support for the child during emotional challenges. The child may find it easier to develop trust with the animal, as they perceive it to be non-judgmental, prior to trusting others.

Nature Based Recreation Programs

The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada⁵ states, while obesity and poor mental health are complex problems, researchers believe that—among children—more screen time and less physical and outdoor play are among the causes and quotes the National Wildlife Federation, “our kids are out of shape, tuned out and stressed out, because they’re missing something essential to their health and development: connection to the natural world.” The evidence suggests that viewing, interacting with, and living in natural environments can have multiple effects on reducing stress, increasing patience, increasing self-discipline, increasing capacity for attention, increasing recovery for mental fatigue, or from crisis and from psycho-physiological imbalance. Some children and youth in particular can benefit from a nature program including those who struggle socially, have an emotional issue, such as anxiety or depression, are troubled teen, enjoy the outdoors, are interested in animals and plants, and like to explore. Nature programs provides a therapeutic environment that creates a calming effect which then allow children to develop social skills, increased confidence and self-esteem.

Therapeutic Farming/Gardening, Animal Assisted Physical Activities and Wildlife Conservation

Therapeutic Farming/Gardening

⁴ Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2012

⁵ Child and Nature Alliance of Canada

Gardening activities include digging, raking, weeding, mulching, hoeing, sowing seeds, transplanting plants, watering and harvesting. These activities naturally utilize the whole body providing moderate to high physical intensity.

Animal Assisted Physical Activities

Animals provide the motivation for participating in physical activities. Physical activity is achieved through engagement with the animals and the animal environment. Activities include exercising, training and playing with the animals, feeding and grooming, and maintaining the animal environment which includes mucking out stalls, hauling & spreading bedding, sweeping & raking and cleaning and washing the environment (walls, ceiling, floors and windows).

Wildlife Conservation

Shares many of the gardening activities but over a much larger space and also involves additional activities including tree planting, pruning, and maintaining trails.

Nourishing Hearts Wellness Care Farm (Example Environment and Program)

As a mental health provider I been in collaboration with Quad County Developmental Services, Bluewater Respite, Community Living, West Elgin Community Health Centre, West Elgin High School, Aldborough Public School and London District Catholic School Board to support children and youth with a variety of life and mental health challenges, including children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, are on the Fetal Alcohol and Autism Spectrum and those experiencing low self-esteem, depression and anxiety. As much as we have work to challenge the stigma of mental health, it still exists as a strong barrier (63%) to seek and access mental health services. Youth need a supportive community that offers a variety of services, in a variety of settings and focus in order to meet the diverse unique needs and interests without emphasizing mental health specific programing. Nourishing Hearts provides “Life Enrichment Programs” that are recreational activities that are nature and animal based. The farm environment provide a supportive and skilled environments that informally teaches mental health literacy skills during recreational activities when necessary for comfortable, safe and successful participation. The Life Enrichment Programs are offered in small group modalities. The group size is kept below a 1:8 staff to youth ratio in order to provide the individualized mental health and social support necessary for positive engagement. Physical, social and mental health are intertwined and cannot be separated.

Thank you for your time and consideration of expanding your eligible activities to include Therapeutic Farming/Gardening, Animal Assisted Physical Activities and Wildlife Conservation. As I mentioned earlier I am not seeking any Community Development Funds but rather asking to have the above activities recognized and listed as funded activities.

Sincerely,

Julie Casey MSW, RSW

