

9-1-2019

Building Community Connections: The Second Interim Report of the WellCoMs Mobile Van Project

Ab Currie

Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, abcurrie@sympatico.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/cfcj>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Currie, Ab, "Building Community Connections: The Second Interim Report of the WellCoMs Mobile Van Project" (2019). *Canadian Forum on Civil Justice*. 13.
<https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/cfcj/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Research Centres & Programs at Osgoode Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Forum on Civil Justice by an authorized administrator of Osgoode Digital Commons.

BUILDING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Second Interim Report of the
WellCoMs Mobile Van Project

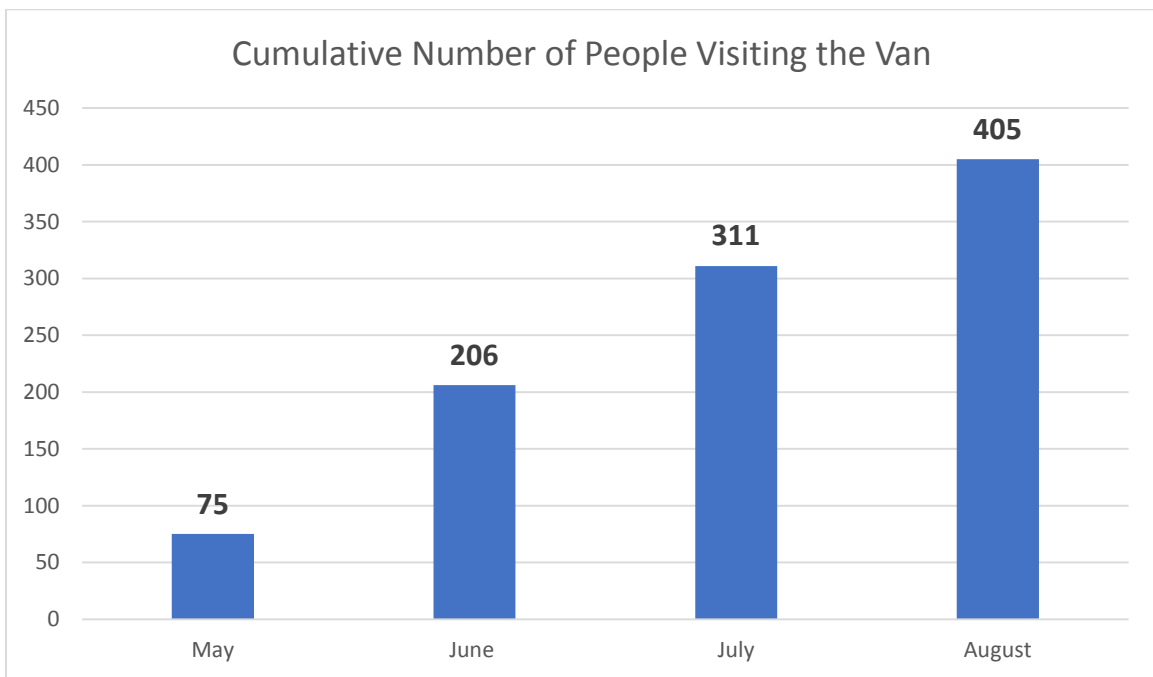
Ab Currie, Ph.D.
Senior Research Fellow
Canadian Forum on Civil Justice

Building Community Connections: Second Interim Report of the WellCoMs Mobile Van Project

Ab Currie, Ph.D.
Senior Research Fellow
Canadian Forum on Civil Justice

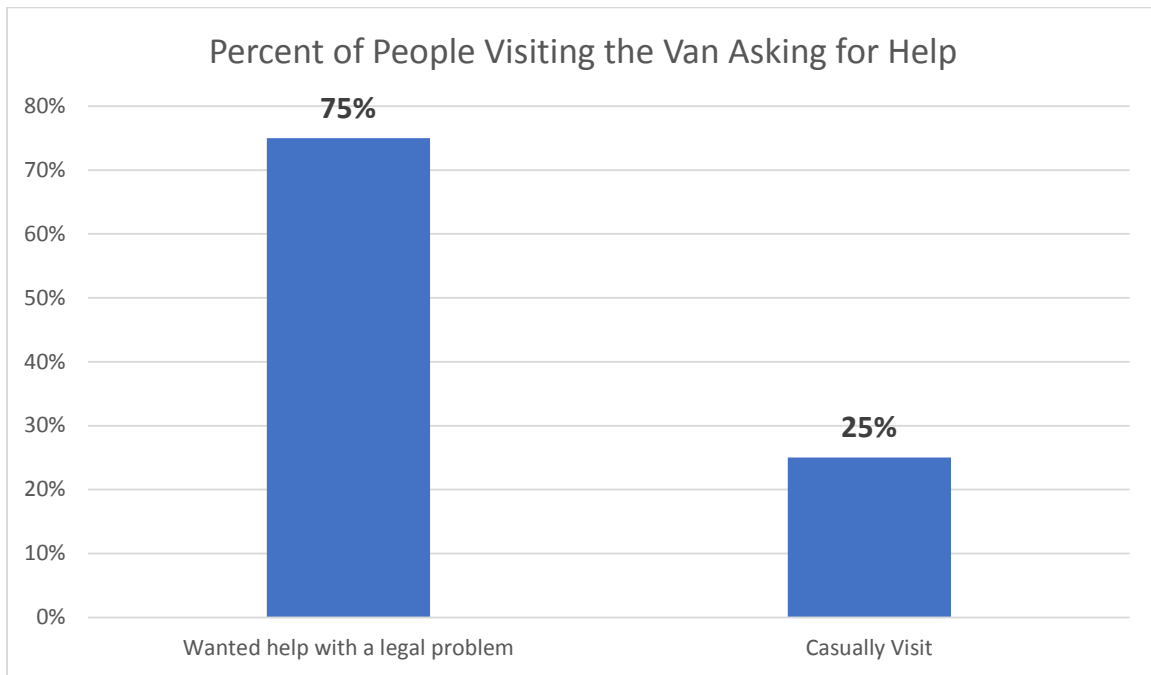
The WellCoMs mobile legal services van is a project being carried out by the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County to increase the level of service to rural areas of the county. The project is being funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario. This report comes at the end of the fourth month of a six-month project. It shows that the project has so far been highly successful in identifying unmet legal needs of people in the rural areas of Wellington County. At the end of October when street-side community visits by the van become problematic because of inclement fall and winter weather a second phase of this project will continue.

Chart 1: The Number of People Coming to the Van Continues to Increase



The WellCoMs van began visiting communities on May 1, 2019. Data collection started two weeks later on May 15. Between May 15 and August 28, 2019 there were a total of 405 recorded visits to the van across all 12 communities.

Chart 2: Three Quarters of the People Coming by the Van Had a Legal Problem and Were Provided with Some Assistance



304 people or 75% of the individuals had at least one problem for which they wanted help. Four national legal problems surveys estimated that about 45% to 50% of adult Canadians will experience one or more legal problems within a three-year period. Using that benchmark, the prevalence of legal problems and the extent of need in rural Wellington County is significant. The van is highly effective at identifying people with legal needs. This is mostly hidden legal need experienced by people who would not otherwise obtain timely assistance since most people were not aware of the legal clinic. Only a small number had previously made contact with the clinic.

The two smallest communities with the highest rates of poverty, Mount Forest and Arthur continue to have the largest number of visits by people wanting to discuss problems. As of the end of August, Mount Forest was visited by 56 people, 18.4% of the total and Arthur had 53 visits, 17.4% of the total. This suggests that the van is reaching the geographic areas of greatest need. Five communities – Palmerston (25), Harriston (25), Rockwood (26), Clifford (23), Drayton (21) and Erin (20) – cluster together with between 20 to 26 visits. A cluster of 3 communities, Hillsburg with 9 visits, Puslinch with 10 and Elora with 14 visits make up a low visit cluster.

There were 44 visits across all communities in May. Recall that although the van operated for the full month in May, data collection began on May 15. After a peak of 101 visits by people with problems in June, the number of visits during July was 81 and 78 in August.

Patterns of visits by order of visits will help the Guelph clinic learn how to manage visits to the different communities. For example, there were 48 visits by people with problems to Arthur during the mid-May to end of August period. The number of visits peaked for the 2nd and 3rd visits. Visits by order of visit were: 1st visit = 1, 2nd = 16, 3rd = 11, 4th = 2, 5th = 9 and 6th = 9. There

were 56 visits to Mount Forest with peak numbers on the 4th and 5th visits. The numbers of visits by order of visit for Mount Forest were: 1st visit = 6, 2nd = 3, 3rd = 11, 4th = 16, 5th = 6, 6th = 6 and 7th = 8. Taking one example from the middle cluster of communities, the pattern for Clifford was: 1st visit = 3, 2nd = 2, 3rd = 14, 4th = 2 and 5th = 2. More data is required before drawing any conclusions about these detailed patterns.

At the current rate of contact the total annual number of contacts by the summer van and its fall and winter version would equal some 1,215 visits, based on 405 visits to the van over the 15-week period during which data were collected. As noted above, 304 people identified a problem and received some assistance and 101 people dropped by casually but did not identify a problem. On an annual basis one might expect slightly more than 1,000 (1,003) visitors identifying problems for which they wanted immediate assistance. It has not been possible to identify and count people who dropped by once casually then returned to discuss a problem. The outreach workers are aware that some people return for additional help.

The first interim report (August 2019) indicated that 93% of visitors to the van with problems and seeking help had not previously had contact with the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County. It can be assumed that many of the people using the services of the van would not otherwise have received help with their legal problem, at least in a timely manner. This could mean identifying and helping over 1,000 people on an annual basis who would probably not receive assistance, which would be a significant accomplishment.

Family law remains the largest problem category with 31.3% of all problems. The five most frequent problem types following family law were:

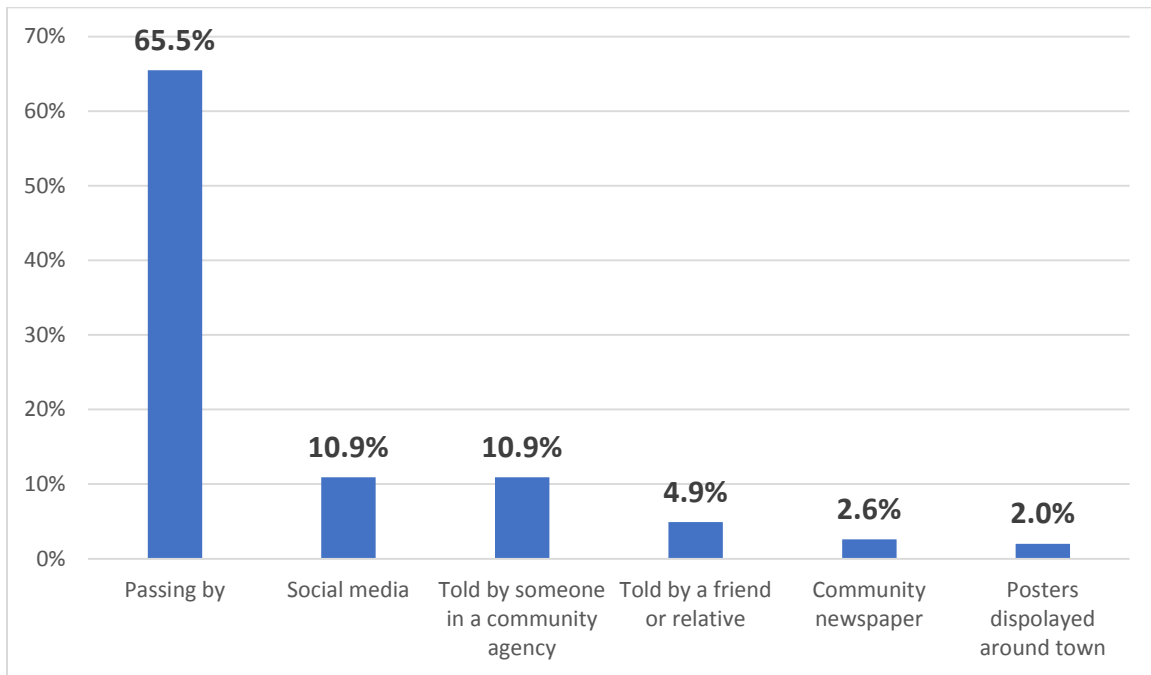
- Landlord tenant = 13.8%
- General civil disputes = 10.5%
- Criminal matters = 7.2%
- Wills and powers of attorney = 7.2%; and
- ODSP problems = 6.3%.

Only a small percentage (5.3%) of people visiting the van were under 25 years.

The people visiting the van are about evenly split between males and females, 49.3% male and 50.7% female.

8.9% of visitors connected with the clinic by skype.

Chart 3: Most People Said they learned about the Van by Simply Passing By



Locating the van in conspicuous places in small communities is clearly an important way of connecting with the community. 65.5% of the people identifying problems and seeking help said they learned about the van from “passing by”. The other methods by which people connected with the van were:

- 10.9% said they learned about the van from the social media posts made by the outreach workers on community Facebook pages.
- 10.9% were referred by 16 different community agencies. These included a variety of organizations such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, food banks in different towns, local MP’s office, family health teams in two towns and a child and family services agency.
- 4.9% of visitors said they had been told about the van by a friend or relative or by a community organization (but not a referral). One source mentioned was a weekly church announcement
- 2.6% had learned about the van from a local newspaper
- 2.0% learned about the van by noticing posters placed in places such as coffee shops, convenience stores, libraries, and other places where people normally go in the course of daily activities.



PEOPLE ARE BEGINNING TO TALK ABOUT THE VAN, TO ASK QUESTIONS AT THE VAN FOR A FRIEND OR RELATIVE, OR TO TELL SOMEONE ABOUT THE VAN.

There are other indications that the presence of the van and the availability of help with everyday legal problems is becoming part of the social fabric of the community. Among the 304

people who identified a problem and obtained some assistance, 8 people volunteered that they were told about the van by another person, a mother, partner or another family member such as a cousin or a friend. These people are a subset of the 4.9% of visitors with problems who said they learned about the van through word-of-mouth contact.

25 visitors to the van volunteered that they were asking for information on behalf another person. The others included friends (12), a partner or spouse (2), close family members such as a son, daughter, brother or sister (8) and other relatives (2). Presumably these inquiries led to conversations between the parties involved.

Visitors sent to the van by others and asking for information on behalf of others represent a different type or level of attachment to the community compared with actions such as passing by, taking note of a social media posting or taking note of a poster. These involve social interactions rather than individual actions. Similarly, the instances where information about the van is passed on by someone in agency such as a CMHA worker, a parole officer, or in any community assistance centre, but not as a referral, is also a social interaction.

The van is becoming part of what might be called the social organization of helping in Wellington County communities. Sixteen different agencies referred people to the van, making up 9.9% of the 304 people with problems. Two food banks in the County referred the largest



**THE VAN IS BECOMING PART OF THE NETWORK
OF SERVICES IN THE COMMUNITY. 16
ORGANIZATIONS HAVE MADE REFERRALS TO
THE VAN AND THE VAN HAS REFERRED PEOPLE
TO 48 COMMUNITY AGENCIES.**

number of people. The Drayton and Mount Forest family health teams, a parole officer and the Canadian Mental Health Association represent the variety of types of organizations making referrals.

The outreach workers at the van made 48 referrals to various community organizations, representing 15.8% of people receiving help. The constituency

offices of MP's and MPP's, the Wellington County Office, John Howard and Elizabeth Fry societies and community legal clinics in other areas reflect the variety of organizations to which people were referred.

Taken together, these indicate that the availability of legal help is becoming part of people's conversations, not simply that the service is available but making the assistance itself part of normal social life, as a normal part of life in the rural communities.

The van is making legal assistance part of the social organization of the community; part of people's ordinary daily activities in their familiar social spaces and part of the social structure of helping that already exists.

After 15 weeks of operation the data support three preliminary conclusions.

- 1) The presence of the van in the social spaces people normally occupy is clearly an effective way to identify people with unmet legal need.

- 2) The van appears to be becoming embedded into the social fabric of communities in rural Wellington County. The van is connecting with the communities it serves in several ways.
 - a) First, people connect with the van through a number of individual actions. People connect with the van “passing by” because it exists in the places where they normally live, work, shop and move from one place to another. They learn about the van by means of posters in the places where they spend their time such as coffee shops and corner stores.
 - b) Second, people are learning about the van from others. Accessing the service provided by the van may be becoming an aspect of the social interaction between people in the communities. People stop by the van to ask for information on behalf of friends and family members. Presumably, the help received becomes a conversation between them. People tell others about the van and suggest they stop by. Sometimes, they bring their friend or relative to the van.
 - c) The outreach workers observe that people are sometimes waiting for the van to arrive. Also, they sometimes drive to the location of the van from another place in the county. This very tentative observation, combined with the observations above in b) signal that the van is evolving beyond a source of help people discover primarily because it is in a conspicuous place in the social space people normally occupy. It is possible that the van is becoming a space in the community, regardless of its location in a particular place on a particular day, where people know help is available. It is as if it becomes part of community knowledge of where help is available and expectations that help can be found there. To the extent that the van becomes part of people’s expectations of help, it is quite strongly embedded in community.
- 3) Third, the van may be becoming part of the social organization of helping in the community. So far in the project a total of 16 different organizations in the rural Wellington communities have referred people to the van. The van has referred people to 48 organizations. These are building blocks of collaborative partnerships on which to build a holistic and integrated service.

These different types of connections represent early, tentative but definite steps toward legal aid becoming embedded in the community it serves. These are first steps to access to justice becoming part of the social organization, of the normal networks and patterns of everyday life, of these communities. At page iv of the executive summary, the final report of the Action Committee on Access to Civil and Family Justice (Access to Civil and Family Justice: A Roadmap for Change, October 2013) states that the report would hopefully lead to: “access to civil and family justice becoming a topic of general civic discussion and engagement – an issue of everyday individual and community interest and wellbeing.” The WellCoMs mobile van is accomplishing the challenge to legal services providers issued by the national Action Committee. It is not doing so by generating formal public discourse. People tend to be reactive to problems and to think in concrete terms of the substance of the problem affecting them, not theoretically about access to justice as a conceptual abstraction. Public engagement is being achieved in rural Wellington County by making access to justice part of ordinary everyday community life.