



WRRC Community Conversation Report

WRRC Ideas – November 4, 2010

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Introduction

The Waterloo Region Rainbow Coalition (WRRC) was formed in fall 2010 because some members of the Rainbow* community in Waterloo Region felt there was a lack of advocacy and unity among the various individuals and groups in our community. We are a fully grassroots community group, that is non-profit, and intends to compliment the current resources and services in Waterloo Region.

WRRC's current objective is to hold a series of three "community conversations" throughout October and November 2010. The purpose of these conversations is to bring the community together to identify and begin working towards building a unified Rainbow Community in Waterloo Region. We intend to strengthen our community through advocacy, building awareness, increasing inclusion and by developing a unified voice and vision for the Rainbow Community.

Each of the three conversations will reveal new ideas and possibilities to give the WRRC feedback on how to proceed so we can start problem-solving the issues that we have collectively identified. This is a collaborative community-building process that we hope will strengthen the local Rainbow community to discover and start working on sustainable solutions. After these three meetings, WRRC will proceed based on community consensus.

WRRC - Ideas

The second meeting of the three conversations was held on November 4, 2010. Approximately 30 people attended this conversation; several had attended the first event, but there were also many newcomers as well. The focus of this evening was to look at our community's strengths and weaknesses, at what opportunities for community-building exist, and what threats might hold up our progress. A large group discussion took place that explored these topics during the first part of this event. We have summarized the primary themes that emerged below:

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our community is able/willing to educate and inform• There is some community leadership already in place• Ability to connect through the Internet and social media• Our community's history / institutional memory• This is a small community, in comparison to other cities• There are allies in our community who are receptive to change• We have lots of momentum and enthusiasm for making change• Existing LGBTQ businesses/services (e.g., Little Bean, Proud magazine)• There is a sense of community ownership and an expectation of progress• There is a progressive voice here; pockets of great things happening already• Some organizations are already doing outreach (e.g., school system, Police)• Existing LGBTQ community groups (e.g., Tri-Pride, GSAs, GLOW, Rainbow Centre)
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of advocacy services• The lack of a central Rainbow voice• Historical "rifts" between certain groups/individuals

* We define the "Rainbow Community" as those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, intersex, queer, questioning, fluid, unlabelled, asexual, straight allies, and all other members of our community who are interested in increasing awareness and inclusivity of gender and sexual diversity.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WRRRC needs to develop more structure and organization • Lack of available funding for LGBTQ community initiatives • Lack of data and statistics about the local Rainbow community • Very little (updated) information out there about resources, groups, events • Various Rainbow groups do not communicate with one another; isolation • Marginalized individuals (e.g. immigrants, newcomers) are often left out • The resources that exist are already taxed; volunteer burnout is common • Our community is largely closeted; some people don't want to participate • Unreasonable expectations (e.g., all groups must be everything to everyone) • False assumption that the area is already welcoming (tolerance vs. acceptance)
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WRRRC is an opportunity • Lots of various skills and talents in Rainbow community • Waterloo Region is growing quickly; this is the right time! • Partnerships with our allies helps build sustainability of initiatives • We can learn from other organizations and groups in other cities • Faculty of Social Work (Students and Faculty willing to learn) • Push from the Region of Waterloo to bring in more medical services • Other organizations are already doing good work to increase inclusivity • Empty real estate means opportunity for finding a central location • 2010 is an election year • Many organizations have stated they want to partner with the Rainbow Community (e.g., Police, Crime Prevention Council, community health centres)
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General apathy in the community • Volunteers are key – but not everyone has the time • A lack of appropriate and welcoming medical services • To get funding, will need to develop a formal structure • Need to be clear about what our aims are as a community • A central location can't possibly serve all of Waterloo Region • We are very close to Toronto; many people will just go there • Misinformation, assumptions, and prejudice in Waterloo Region • Geographically, we are very large – hard to connect 3 cities and 4 townships • Privilege, power, and oppression not always understood by Rainbow community • How to communicate with folks who are disenfranchised and/or marginalized?

This large discussion was followed by smaller group discussions where participants commented on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the context of the six issues of concern identified during the previous conversation. A brief summary of these discussion are below.

1. Community Building

There was an emphasis from this group to focus on the existing strengths within the Rainbow Community. Recognizing the progressive and enthusiastic voice that we have, as well as the events and services that are currently provided, and to grow along with our currently growing community in Waterloo Region was an important theme. However, there is still an issue of invisibility for the Rainbow Community in Waterloo Region. There should be more opportunities for shared roles, leadership, volunteer positions, and collaboration between groups to make sure no individual or group sense of entitlement obscures our

community vision. We should provide opportunities for groups to reconnect and work through their differences. The need for training, education, and agency involvement is very important. The lack of structure and unity among local groups and agencies, data and information has been a barrier to obtaining funding in the past. There are many diverse needs, and there is no way to be “everything to everyone”.

2. Allies

There is no clear process on becoming or being an ally, and it is fraught with social and cultural misperception which is why more people likely do not become allies. Creating awareness that being an ally to the Rainbow Community is not about sexuality is important. Some allies do not want to claim the “ally identity”, and others fear the social repercussions of the label. Education and outreach needs to be offered in Waterloo Region in order for the role of the ally to be understood and strengthened. The concept of an “ally spectrum” was discussed. On one end, people can be an ally without claiming the identity, and on the other end of the spectrum, are allies who are activists for the Rainbow Community. The spectrum concept allows for specific roles as an ally to be created, and gives the opportunity for everyone to become involved regardless of their interests. The possibility of a certificate program was discussed, as well as exchanging training between local agencies and the Rainbow Community to implement an ally certificate and recruit/advocate for allies from all groups and service providers. A list of local service providers to contact was created, as well as the types of outreach that could be created.

3. Unity and Diversity

The desire for the local Rainbow Community to create a unified voice, and work together to build networks and opportunities locally was a strong theme. There has historically been a lot of disconnect between groups because of high turnover rate, and unique service requirements. There is a social perception that groups who service or work with a certain segment of the Rainbow Community need to be relevant and open to everyone, but niche groups should be encouraged and recognized. We need to make sure that education, outreach, training and services are as accessible as possible to cater to both urban and rural communities. The Rainbow Community is so diverse that it can be hard to meet everyone’s needs, so we need to prioritize our focus and build from there. On a related note, while examination of how the rainbow community is organized in other communities can prove educational in identifying how to meet the needs of the Rainbow Community, we must avoid adopting an approach from another community that does not respect the uniqueness of Waterloo Region. A “Rainbow Show and Tell” could be a unique and interesting event where local groups and service providers can come together and showcase how they can work with and service the Rainbow Community. Also, the continuation of community conversations was deemed important to keep the dialog going within the Rainbow Community outside of the service providers and local events to avoid bias.

4. Lack of Services

This group discussed how WRRC might develop into an organization that can advocate for inclusive services in Waterloo Region. It was suggested that a coalition format would work well, but that some key elements will need to be established, including: a mission statement, logo, website, core board of directors, and greater visibility. Many felt that it would be useful to have a coalition made up of an executive committee plus various subcommittees focused on specific projects. Emphasizing communication between groups would be important, so it would be helpful to continue holding these community conversations on a regular basis. Also, improving access to health services was seen as the most important area of focus.

5. Discrimination and Harassment

A focus here was on how to better address prejudice, discrimination, and harassment. Training and education were seen as key. Many people also placed a strong emphasis on developing partnerships with agencies. But how can we provide meaningful training on LGBTQ issues to various service providers? What really works to create inclusion? How do we encourage people to reflect on their own privilege and its impact? Some said that it is difficult to report hate crimes. Discrimination from police was discussed, but it was noted that Waterloo Regional Police Services is working hard to develop ways to appropriately serve LGBTQ citizens.

6. Information and Awareness

This group felt that what is most important is to have a way to inform the community and connect people more easily. This can make the Rainbow Community feel more welcoming. Some people felt that while a central focal point is necessary, it doesn't have to be a physical location – we can start by using the Internet and social media. A website/blog was proposed, that would be updated regularly with user-generated content, news, events calendar, resource list, editorials, videos, etc. The key would be to have it largely community-driven. It would be staffed primarily by volunteers. Also, people said that we should continue building a central voice/hub in order to advocate for our community; something like an umbrella group or a coalition that works together.

Conclusion

We realize that there are a multiplicity of needs and services identified in this meeting which can not all be addressed immediately. The important thing is to keep this information readily accessible, and to decide what the most relevant areas need to be addressed first, and to build from there. With the establishment of support from local agencies, we believe that we can make a difference in the areas mentioned above in the Rainbow Community, and move towards making progress in the diverse areas mentioned above. We will be looking to the community during our third meeting to establish how to proceed from here.

Please note that a similar report will be completed after each of the conversations, in order to further inform and engage the community in this initiative. A final report will also be produced after all three conversations have taken place. We encourage agencies and services providers in Waterloo Region to attend the events and reference these reports while engaging with and supporting the Rainbow Community.