

# How does Durham design its social programs? By listening to people with lived experience

By Jennifer Foden

While you could list off all the impressive social programs that Durham Region has to support its residents—from Project Search, a training program for students with disabilities, to a community walk to end intimate partner violence, to an eyeglass clinic for low-income seniors—perhaps the most impressive detail is how they design them: by listening to people with lived experience.

Take their local immigration program, for example. When the war in Ukraine started and folks were coming to Canada, Durham was able to be “really responsive,” says Allison Hector-Alexander, director of diversity, equity and inclusion at the Region. “We were able to work very closely with the community—and that is really the core of how we do this work, everything that we do is either for community or by community... we go to folks to ask ‘how do you want us to support you?’—and so we worked very closely with a local Ukrainian group and we went to our council and we advocated for funding to create wraparound support.” This includes housing—Durham has 500 newcomers and asylum seekers in local hotels—plus help getting identification, counselling and advice on how to navigate the workplace or access income support.

Then there’s the Building Safer Communities Fund that the Region received from the federal government in 2022. They have used the money to develop a micro-grant program for the community. “We awarded 10 different youth groups or individuals,” says Hector-Alexander. “To involve them in programming that prevents or interrupts guns and gang violence.”

Another notable grant was \$400,000 that was awarded to Durham College, who partnered with the Region, Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences and Black Health Alliance to look at mental health in Black communities. Notably, Ajax has the highest percentage of Black folks of a major city in Canada. “This research will investigate the accessibility of mental health services to Black residents, whether they are culturally responsive and what challenges may exist when accessing and navigating mental health supports,” says Hector-Alexander. “This work will be informed by the lived experiences and voices of community members.”

Tracey Tyner Cavanagh, manager of strategic partnerships and initiatives in the social services department at the Region, echoes Hector-Alexander’s approach. “[It’s] one thing for us to say where the challenges and gaps are, but we really don’t know when I’m not living in poverty. So, we... are really engaging the community to tell us what needs to be better and how to do that.”

Tyner Cavanagh says they’re currently in the process of establishing a Social Services People with Lived Experience Advisory Committee to help provide feedback on their programming. Such as, their free tax clinics, where an estimated \$22 million has been returned to Durham residents living with low income, to social service hubs in community spaces that help residents access government benefits and credits, open bank accounts, get social insurance cards, et cetera.

The Region also funded a new shelter where the focus is providing more than just a bed. This might include mental health and addictions workshops, counselling, employment services, health clinics, living skills and more. “Community engagement took place prior to the shelter opening,” says Tyner Cavanagh. “We saw that the number of shelter beds in Durham are not enough and the system requires transitional housing to help support and move people through the stages of homelessness.”

Hector-Alexander adds that the Region isn’t just there for the hard times. “We celebrate a lot with the community,” she says. “It’s not where we wait until another traumatic event. We’re always celebrating.”

This is part of a 10-article series profiling the innovation happening in Durham Region. The region has been recognized as one of the top seven Intelligent Communities in the world for the third year in a row. Learn more at [durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities](https://durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities) and [IntelligentCommunity.org](https://IntelligentCommunity.org).