

# Community Project: The Rural Context

## *Who is the community partner?*

The **Renfrew County Healthy Communities Partnership** is our partner. Renfrew County is a rural county just west of Ottawa. It has the largest geographical area of any county in Ontario. Renfrew County is characterized by a low population density; it covers over 7,000 square kilometers with a population of approximately 100,000 (2011). The Renfrew County Healthy Communities Partnership is a group of community organizations who are addressing the social determinants of health to make Renfrew County a more vibrant, healthier place to live. The three lead organizations involved in this project with the University of Ottawa include Renfrew Seniors Support Services, Barry's Bay seniors support services and the Killaloe Community Resource Centre. The Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport are also closely involved.

## *Why are the partners working on this project?*

From the CSGVP and other data sources, we know that formal volunteering and direct helping in rural communities and small towns can be different from larger urban centres. There are different needs, challenges, and opportunities. In Renfrew County, many non-profit organizations depend on volunteers in order to carry on their work. While there are many volunteers in the county, many more are needed. To help address this need, the Killaloe Community Resource Centre developed a online volunteer portal through which residents can learn about opportunities for volunteering with various community organizations. Despite considerable efforts in the development of the portal, it is not being used to its full potential. Given this situation, community organizations in Renfrew County would like to learn how to better attract, support and retain volunteers within their rural community/small towns context. They would also like to learn whether an on-line portal will work at all and if so, how it could be configured to attract more volunteers

## *What are the project's main activities?*

A variety of activities have taken place or are underway. Initially, there were some broader dissemination activities (community presentation, media events) with our partners to understand the CSGVP data. These events assisted in determining how the broader national level findings could apply to Renfrew County, and gap areas where additional knowledge was needed to understand how to attract, support and retain volunteers within a rural community/small town context. To fill these gaps, a local tailored survey was designed with the community partners to better describe and understand the county level issues and learn from it about their own strengths and challenges.

## *What are the anticipated results or outcomes from this project?*

While the project focuses on Renfrew County, within the context of the broader E=MC2 Project, we anticipate that the results will be relevant and useful for many other Canadian rural communities and small towns. In the short and medium term, the partners are aiming to learn about: barriers and facilitators to volunteering in rural areas; how residents would like to learn about volunteer opportunities; rewards of volunteering; how to encourage and assist volunteers in a rural context; and possible improvements to volunteer portals. Another anticipated outcome is having quality community-level evidence on volunteering to assist with obtaining resources for further development of community initiatives in this area. The long-term goal of the current project is to increase volunteerism rates in Renfrew County, Ontario, by attracting new volunteers and supporting and encouraging new and existing volunteers to continue and to possibly do more volunteering if they can..

