

## The How and Why of Subsidies

Program and service affordability is a key issue for people living in poverty. While there are a number of other factors that also affect participation, affordability is an important barrier to address.

The reality is that if people cannot afford the programs, they will not participate anyway.

Many communities do offer fee subsidy programs, but some programs can unintentionally create barriers because of the process. Application processes that have been identified to create barriers include:

- Requirements to provide proof of income
- Cumbersome application forms
- Use of complex language
- Interviews involving personal questions
- Situations where the applicant feels judged or stereotyped
- Applications only available at certain times
- Limited access to clear information about subsidy opportunities including who qualifies and how to apply
- Lack of existing relationship with the person providing assistance<sup>1</sup>

In one study, low income women said that they felt humiliated by such programs because they were made to feel as if they were begging for reduced fees. Many of the study participants asked, “Why is a subsidy offered at all if it is so difficult to obtain?”<sup>2</sup>

Staff who administer fee subsidy programs have also identified a number of issues including:

- Lack of training in working with diverse groups
- Increasing pressure to address the bottom line of cost recovery
- Time pressures to balance workload
- Lack of resources to change or improve the system<sup>2</sup>

Innovative programs have been developed to address the barriers identified by program participants, staff and others.

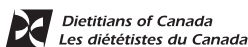


A joint initiative of  
BC Recreation and Parks  
Association and the Heart  
and Stroke Foundation of  
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BC Healthy Living Alliance  
members



### What to Say When They Say...<sup>3</sup>

This has been adapted from Leisure Access: Enhancing Recreation Opportunities for People Living in Poverty, available for download at [www.lin.ca](http://www.lin.ca).

#### ***“We offer a subsidy but no one ever takes advantage of it.”***

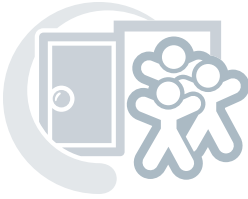
There are many reasons why people may not take advantage of fee subsidy programs, but in general it helps to:

- **Increase awareness** – often fee assistance programs are not well advertised for fear of abuse. When information uses simple language and is easy to find, those who need the assistance will be know how to get it.
- **Remove proof of poverty** – the application process itself can be a barrier if it requires proof of poverty and makes the applicant feel judged or belittled. People affected by poverty are often already sensitive about their situation and do not readily want to feel ashamed.
- **Address other barriers** – it’s not just about money. Even if individuals receive a fee subsidy, the many layers of barriers (transportation, scheduling, childcare, apparel, self-esteem, etc.) also prevent participation. It is important to develop strategies to help alleviate those barriers too.

#### ***“If we offer a subsidy everyone will want one, and it will be abused.”***

Yes, the reality is that some people may abuse the opportunity for a discount, but the majority of people who access fee subsidy programs are in real need of assistance and would not be able to participate otherwise. Some communities have developed strategies to address this:

- **Develop partnerships** – some communities administer their fee subsidy programs through community partners who work directly with people in need of fee assistance. Because the partner organizations already have a relationship developed with individuals, they are in a better position to assess need, and the privacy of the individual is maintained.
- **Trust government-issued documents** – some communities only require income assistance cards, at time of application. By accepting a variety of valid documents, front desk staff are able to approve the subsidy without an onerous application process and without the client needing to divulge personal income information.
- **Offer flexible payment plans** – some individuals may not be able to pay for programs or passes in one lump sum so they do not bother participating at all. Providing opportunities for flexible payment options (e.g., monthly bank withdrawals for an annual facility pass) may enable participation by more people.
- **Provide free and low-cost opportunities as part of regular programming** – some communities offer weekly free, loonie or twoonie programs that are available to everyone. While some participants may not need the discount, it is an opportunity for all community members to be physically active without feeling like they are singled out or receiving “charity.” Some popular programs include free walking clubs, loonie swims or public skates.



***“We can’t afford it. All programs need to be cost recovery.”***

While there is increasing pressure for cost recovery, many recreation departments retain the mandate of providing services for all community members. The need to develop strategies for inclusion may need to be addressed at the policy level, but for the present there are still numerous ways to ensure that people living in poverty have opportunities to be physically active:

- First and foremost, talk to people living in poverty in your community. Many will say that they do not want a “hand out” and would like to pay what they can in a dignified manner. Talk to community members living in poverty and the organizations that work closely with them to determine what supports are needed and wanted.
- Drop-in programs are a service and are offered regardless of whether it is at capacity. Allowing drop-ins for free or at a subsidized rate may attract adults who cannot plan ahead because they are working part time or on-call.
- Low cost drop-in times at non-peak hours may attract shift workers and may increase the number of people participating.
- Targeted programs may be developed and implemented through partnerships that involve cost sharing and may act as introductory opportunities for people who may not normally access recreation opportunities.
- Increasing active transportation alternatives (that may be incorporated as a normal part of the community planning and park development process) may have benefits for those who cannot afford to own an automobile. Improving sidewalks, bikeways and walking trails can be covered by capital funds and development charges, and there are also many grant funds available for planning such changes, as there is a growing consciousness of climate change.

Fee subsidies need to be treated as one of many strategies to increase access to recreation and physical activity among low income community members – not the only one. Ensuring community members have a choice in how they participate is a key to improving health through physical activity.

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Reid C., Frisby W., & Ponio P. (2002). “Confronting two-tiered community recreation and poor women’s exclusion: Promoting inclusion, health, and social justice.” *Canadian Women’s Studies* 21(3) 2002).
- <sup>2</sup> Frisby W., Reid C. & Ponio P. (2007). *Levelling the Playing Field: Promoting the Health of Poor Women Through a Community Development Approach to Recreation*. In P. White & K. Young (Eds), *Sport and Gender in Canada* (pp. 120-136). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Frisby W. & Fenton J. (on behalf of The Kamloops Women’s Action Project) *Leisure Access: Enhancing Recreation Opportunities for Those Living in Poverty* (British Columbia Health Research Foundation, 1988).

