

Speqtrum Check-In Program Evaluation

Prepared for

Speqtrum

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Executive Summary

Speqtrum is Hamilton's only youth-focused LGBTQ2SIA+ organization offering virtual support programming. The purpose of this research was to evaluate Speqtrum's Check-In program, which aims to support LGBTQ2SIA+ youth by 1) increasing feelings of connection to the LGBTQ2SIA+ community, 2) supporting participants with mental, social, and financial challenges, and 3) reducing their feelings of isolation. A team of McMaster University Research Shop researchers 1) conducted a literature review assessing the need for the Check-In program; 2) analyzed the Check-In program attendance and referral records; 3) distributed a survey with the Check-In program participants (n = 13); and 4) led interviews with Check-In program staff and volunteers (n = 4).

The findings suggest Speqtrum's Check-In program responds to an identified need for more accessible and affordable programming for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton. Moreover, the Check-In program has made a positive impact on increasing youths' sense of connection to LGBTQ2SIA+ people, increasing youths' level of support with social, mental health and financial challenges, and decreasing youths' feelings of isolation.

The virtual Check-In program for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth bridged a short-term service gap created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The program also reduced the barriers many LGBTQ2SIA+ youth experience in accessing in-person support and services. The accessibility and confidentiality the Check-In program allows Speqtrum to expand their outreach to youths not comfortable or unable to access in-person services. It is for these reasons the Check-In program has value and should seek further funding to sustain the program.

Introduction

Context

Speqtrum supports the growth and development of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth and their communities in Hamilton, Ontario. They accomplish this goal by administering programs that build the skills and capacity of its beneficiaries.

In response to COVID-19, Speqtrum created a weekly online Check-In program. Funded by the CFC Emergency Community Support Fund, five trained Speqtrum members offer weekly check-ins for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton over Facebook, Instagram, phone, or email. Check-ins provide youth with the space to discuss whatever they are comfortable with, though Speqtrum staff are unable to provide crisis support or counselling services. Speqtrum offers referrals and connections to other community resources to assist participants with issues beyond the scope of the program.

Speqtrum provides virtual support programming for Hamilton's LGBTQ2SIA+ youth. Speqtrum leadership believe this type of programming facilitates the following positive change for Hamilton LGBTQ2SIA+ youth:

1. Increased sense of connection to the LGBTQ2SIA+ community in Hamilton,
2. Increased feelings of support with mental, social, and financial challenges,
3. Reduced feelings of isolation.

Speqtrum would like an evaluation of the Check-In program to determine the value and effectiveness of this kind of programming and, if deemed valuable, to assist with grant applications to sustain the program.

Scope

The scope of this evaluation is structured by the following questions:

1. Appropriateness: Is the program responding to an identified need?
2. Effectiveness: Is the program achieving its aimed participant outcomes?
3. Process: What are the program's operational strengths and opportunities for improvement?

The purpose of this report is to provide Speqtrum staff with:

- evidence to assess and communicate the value of the Check-In program to broad range of funders to secure sustainable funding for the program; and
- possible areas for improving the program.

This report is a summary of the McMaster Research Shop team's research methods, findings, and recommendations for Speqtrum to consider.

Methodology and Limitations

The research team conducted four research activities, detailed in the sections below:

1. a literature review of the need for virtual LGBTQ2SIA+ support programming in Hamilton;
2. a document analysis of the Check-in program attendance and referral records;
3. a survey with the Check-In program participants; and
4. interviews with the Check-In program staff and volunteers.

The research team centered the program evaluation on Spectrum's Theory of Change for the Check-in program (see Appendix 1). The research team sought feedback from the community partners throughout the process of developing data collection procedures and instruments.

Literature Review

The team conducted a literature review to evaluate the need for the Check-In program (i.e., its appropriateness). The reviewed literature included grey literature on LGBTQ2SIA+ youth experiences in Hamilton and within Canada.

The first part of the literature review shows a scan of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth experiences related to Spectrum's Check-In program outcomes. The program outcomes explored include: feelings of isolation, lack of connection, and levels of support with mental health, social, and financial challenges. The second part of the literature review answers: *is there a need for virtual peer support for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton?* The final section of the literature review assesses: *Does the Check-In program fill a service gap?* The research team searched if there were existing similar services and an expressed need for this kind of program in the city.

Document Analysis of Program Records

The team conducted an analysis of program attendance, shift reports, and referral records to gauge:

1. The number of participants the program serves virtually.
2. How staff and volunteers feel about their workload and what topics they most commonly discussed during their shifts.
3. Outcomes relating to if/how the program supports participants with social, mental, and financial challenges.

To protect the participants' identities, the community partner compiled the non-identifying data into spreadsheets for the Research Shop team. Speqtrum staff and volunteers completed the program attendance and referral records from the start of the program in April to October 2020. Staff and volunteers completed the shift reports from May to October 2020.

Survey with Check-In Participants

The research team invited Check-In program participants to complete an online survey hosted on Google Forms. The survey focused on assessing the impact the program had on participants' 1) feelings of isolation, 2) sense of connection to LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton, and 3) level of support with social, mental health, and financial challenges. Participants also had the opportunity to provide feedback about their experience in the program.

The Check-In team helped recruit the participants. The research team provided the Check-In team a letter of information about the study to share with the participants during their check-in sessions. The Check-In team also provided the participants with two email reminders over the three-week period. In total, 13 out of 28 active participants completed the survey (a response rate of 46.4%). Speqtrum invited three inactive program participants to complete the survey, but they did not respond.

The first three mandatory questions in the survey obtained participants' consent. The responses were confidential and anonymized. Staff assured respondents that participation was voluntary and would not affect their ability to continue being a participant in the Check-In program. The participants who completed the survey had the option to enter a draw for LGBTQ2SIA+ themed prize packs as an incentive.

The format of survey questions varied. The survey used a number of open-ended, 5-point Likert scales, and multiple-choice questions. The research team recorded results from the survey in an Excel spreadsheet and later created charts and graphs summarizing the responses. A copy of survey questions included can be found in Appendix 2.

The following are some notable limitations of the survey:

1. **Small survey population.** The findings from the survey may not reflect the experiences of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth participating in other similar programming due to the fairly small number of Check-In program participants (28).

2. **Generalizability.** A possible sample bias was detected. Only 1 out of the 13 respondents identified as being a part of a racialized group. As a result, this sample is not likely to be representative of the experiences of LGBTQ2SIA+ youths who are Black, Indigenous, and/or persons of colour (BIPOC).

Interviews with Spectrum Check-In Staff and Volunteers

The research team led interviews with the Check-In team (staff and volunteers) to assess program effectiveness and collect feedback. In addition to leading Check-In sessions, the staff are responsible for a number of additional duties including preparing referrals for the participants. Correspondingly, we prepared different interview guides for staff and volunteers. The project partners reviewed and approved both interview guides beforehand. A copy of the interview guides can be found in Appendix 3 - 5.

Topics discussed in the interviews included:

- the workload,
- the referral process,
- addressing participants' mental health, social, and financial challenges,
- addressing participants' feelings of isolation and loneliness,
- participants' intersectional needs, and
- program strengths and areas for improvement.

In addition to the topics listed above, the staff reflected on the need for the program in Hamilton and the long-term goals (post-COVID-19 restrictions) of the program.

The research team hosted and recorded the interviews using Zoom. The available Check-In team members signed up for a 1-hour time slot provided in a shared Google Drive Word document. The research team confirmed the participant's sign-up via email. The confirmation email included a Zoom invite, a copy of the verbal consent script, and the interview guide to review. Before the beginning of the interview, one of the research associates read the prepared interview verbal consent script to the participants and received consent.

The following are some notable limitations of the survey:

1. **Recruitment Process.** Interviewees had access and/or read the interview guides beforehand to minimize any possible psychological harm the topics may cause. Sharing the guide beforehand may have resulted in rehearsed and inauthentic responses.

2. **Perception.** The interviewees provided information based on their perception of the program participants. The data collected on addressing participants' challenges and feelings were not directly from the program participants' perspectives. As a result, the data collected are to be treated as the staff and volunteers' perceived program impact on the participants.
3. **Virtual setting.** The interviews were led virtually using an online platform that requires access to the internet. Internet connection failures occasionally caused disruptions during the interviews. This disruption may have resulted in minor errors when transcribing.

Literature Review: Appropriateness of the Check-In Program

This literature review attempts to answer the question: is there a need for Spectrum's Check-In program in Hamilton? The literature review first explores if the Check-In program outcomes align with the needs of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton. The second section of the literature review assesses the value of and need for virtual programming for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton. The final section of the literature review explores if and how the Check-In program is filling a service gap for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton.

Alignment with needs of LGBTQ2SIA+ Youth in Hamilton

Spectrum's Check-In program outcomes are as follows: 1) to increase LGBTQ2SIA+ youths' sense of connection to the community, 2) reduce feelings of isolation, and 3) to provide LGBTQ2SIA+ youth with support for social, mental, and financial challenges. These identified program outcomes align with the needs of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth found in local and national assessments on LGBTQ2SIA+ youth experiences.

A recent study, "Mapping the Void," found a lack of connection and support among LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton (Mills et al., 2019)¹. 68% of surveyed youth felt an LGBTQ2SIA+ community existed in Hamilton, but the majority of the respondents did not feel they were a part of the community (Mills et al., 2019). Moreover, the study reported that LGBTQ2SIA+ individuals infrequently connect with other LGBTQ2SIA+ people (Mills et al., 2019). Spectrum's Check-In program addresses this lack of connection among LGBTQ2SIA+ youth by offering weekly communications with support personnel who identify as LGBTQ2SIA+.

Hamilton lacks support for LGBTQ2SIA+ communities in regard to mental health, social, and financial challenges. Notably, "Mapping the Void" respondents find mental health services in Hamilton be financially inaccessible (Mills et al., 2019). Many of them report leaving the city to access the supports they need (Mills et al., 2019). Affordable support that is designed with the needs of LGBTQ2SIA+ people in mind is needed in Hamilton (Mills et al., 2019). Spectrum's Check-In program provides free support for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth to fill these gaps with accessible and affordable mental health, social, and financial services in Hamilton.

¹ "Mapping the Void" surveyed 906 people who identify as LGBTQ2SIA+ and "live, work, study, or play in Hamilton" (Mills et al., 2019, p. 15).

The needs and challenges of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth have further importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May, the preliminary findings of a Canada-wide study on the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ2SIA+ youth found that common challenges youth experience include increases in depression, anxiety, and dysphoria due to isolation, lack of access to support, and already-long wait times for care getting longer (Prempeh et al., 2020). Similarly, the findings of a second national study in June show COVID-19 had greater impacts on the physical, mental and overall quality of life for those in the LGBTQ2SIA+ community compared to the average Canadian (Egale, ACCEC & INNOVATIVE, 2020).

Alignment with Need for Virtual Support

Several studies have highlighted that some youth do not feel comfortable accessing in-person LGBTQ2SIA+ support spaces. For instance, Mills et al. (2019) reports that many LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton who attend school are aware that their school has a physical safe space for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth, but most do not feel comfortable or safe accessing these spaces (Mills et al, 2019).

Research suggests that virtual platforms are accessible to youth exploring gender and sexuality issues. For instance, recent research by Trans Youth Canada surveyed 107 youth from Canada, mostly from Ontario. Of these youth, 81% reported learning about gender diversity online, and 67% through social media (Prempeh et al., 2020). Additionally, 67% said they feel supported to talk about their gender identities through online platforms and social media (Prempeh et al., 2020). These findings suggest that online or social media peer support programs can be effective in supporting LGBTQ2SIA+ youth.

Does the program fill a service gap?

“Mapping the Void” has found that LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton have expressed a need for community spaces (Mills et al., 2019). Correspondingly, 40.9% of LGBTQ2SIA+ individuals in Hamilton have traveled outside of Hamilton to access LGBTQ2SIA+ services because they were unavailable or insufficient in Hamilton (Mills et al., 2019). Of these, 49.4% looked for community centres, social and support groups (Mills et al., 2019). Moreover, a need for LGBTQ2SIA+ spaces other than clubs or bars (Mills et al., 2019) shows there are very few spaces for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth.

From April to December 2020, Spectrum was the only youth-focused 2SLGBTQIA+ organization in Hamilton offering virtual programming for this vulnerable population. In the Hamilton Spectator, Spectrum’s program coordinator, Jyss Russel (2020) wrote:

“...some of the Positive Space groups usually offered by the city and school boards were postponed, while others were cancelled outright. Many city, hospital, non-profit, and educational staff that have been working to create safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ youth have been redeployed to other COVID relief efforts.”

Results: Document Analysis of Program Records

The following section shows the results from the available Check-In program reports and records.

Attendance

In total, 30 youths signed up to participate in the Check-In program from April to October 2020. 19 of these youths had never previously accessed Spectrum’s services (19 of 30 participants, or 63%).

Table 1 shows the number of check-in sessions completed through each virtual platform. The Check-In program completed 531 check-in sessions with LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton as of October 2020. 90% of the check-in sessions took place through Facebook or Instagram (482 out of 531 sessions).

Table 1. Check-in sessions from April - October 2020 (N = 531)²

Virtual Platform	Number of check-in sessions (N)	Percentage of sessions (%)
Facebook and Instagram	482	90.8%
Phone	36	6.8%
Email	13	2.4%

In addition to the check-in sessions, Speqtrum offered an online drop-in service called Peer Support. The Peer Support shifts were not limited to those who are a part of the Check-In program. From April to October 2020, Peer Support volunteers had 110 interactions with youth during shifts.

Shift Reports

Table 2 shows the Check-In team’s feelings about the number of sessions they led per shift (typically about 2.5 hours). On average, staff and volunteers felt 5.5 check-ins per shift were “too many” and 3.7 check-ins per shift were a “good amount”.

² Table 1 does not include Check-Ins that were started by a Spectrum staff or volunteer, but did not receive a participant response.

Table 2. Check-In teams' feelings on check-ins per shift from May-October 2020 (N = 98)³

Staff and Volunteers feelings about the number of Check-Ins during shift	Average number of check-ins per shift	Range number of check-ins per shift	Sample number (N)
Too many	5.5	4-7	11
Good amount	3.7	0-7	70
Too few	2.5	0-7	17

Table 3 shows an overview of the topics discussed during the check-in sessions. The topics shown are related to youths' social, mental health, financial, and other challenges.⁴ The most commonly reported category was social challenges (202 out of 394, or 51.3%). However, mental health and symptoms of mental health such as feelings of anxiety, depression and feelings of loneliness were the most mentioned topic (69 out of 394, or 17.5%).

Table 3. Topics discussed during Check-In shifts from May-October 2020 (N = 394)

Topic theme	Number of mentions (N)	Percent of mentions (%)
Social Challenges	202	51.3%
Other	53	13.4%
School	35	8.9%
Relationships and/or dating	26	6.6%
Accessibility, disability and/or ableism	25	6.3%
Homophobia and/or transphobia	13	3.3%

³ Table 2 does not include Peer Support conversations that sometimes take place during staff and volunteer shifts. Some staff and volunteers may report a low number of Check-In sessions but select "Good amount" or "Too many" because they are also leading Peer Support during the same shift. Also, the data does not include when two options were selected (N = 10).

⁴ Table 3 does not include other topics not addressing the listed challenges of interest, such as activities, hobbies, and conversations about pets.

Bullying, harassment and/or abuse	12	3.0%
Conflict	11	2.8%
Sexuality and gender identity	9	2.3%
Other healthcare and service provider barriers	8	2.0%
Racism	6	1.5%
Community	4	1.0%
Mental Health Challenge	93	23.6%
Mental health and symptoms (anxiety, depression, feelings of loneliness, etc.)	69	17.5%
Support, counselling and/or therapy	10	2.5%
Coping mechanism	9	2.3%
Self-care	4	1.0%
Other	1	0.2%
Financial Challenge	68	17.2%
Employment	32	8.1%
Housing or shelter	22	5.6%
Other	11	2.8%
Food insecurity	3	0.8%
Other Challenges & Topics	31	7.9%
Transgender and/or transitioning	20	5.1%
Covid-19	11	2.8%

Referrals

Table 4. shows the different types of referrals youth received through the Check-In program. The most common referrals were informal referrals and basic need referrals.

Informal referrals involved providing youth with information on community resources. The most common informal referrals were overviews of LGBTQ2SIA+ affirming mental health, housing, food, and healthcare resources in Hamilton.

The basic needs referrals largely addressed food insecurity concerns.

Transition-related referrals were also common. These referrals included providing binders, support or information on changing gender markers or names, connecting youth with trans-affirming doctors, and connecting participants to local trans youth groups.

Table 4. Referrals given from April - October 2020 (N = 59)

Type of referral	Number of referrals made (N)
Basic Needs (such as a gift card for groceries)	19
Informal Referral (information provided to youth on community resources, how to access them, and level of LGBTQ2SIA+ safety)	19
Transition Related (such as providing binders, support with changing gender markers or names, trans-affirming doctors, or local trans youth groups)	10
Service Referral (referral form filled out by Spectrum staff and submitted to a person/organization)	5
Specific Item (such as appliances, clothing, or laptop)	5
Other	1

Results: Survey with Check-In Program Participants

The research team surveyed the participants of the Check-In program. The following section shows the results of the survey.

Participant Demographics

Table 5 shows the ages of the Check-In program participants based on 12 responses. The average age of participants was 21.9 years old, with participants ranging from 13 to 29 years old. As the table shows, the most common age group is 24 years or older (6 out of 12 participants).

Table 5. Age of Check-In program participants (N = 12)

Age	Number of participants (N)	Percent of participants (%)
17 and under	3	25%
18 to 23	3	25%
24 and over	6	50%

Table 6 shows the participants' description(s) of their gender identity. The most common responses were non-binary (7 out of 13 participants) and transgender (6 out of 13 participants).

Table 6. Gender identity (N = 13)

Description(s) of gender identity	Number of mentions (N)	Percent of mentions (%)
Non-binary	7	53.8%
Transgender	6	46.2%
Woman	1	7.7%

Table 7 shows the participants' description(s) of their gender identity. The most common responses were pansexual (4 out of 13 participants), bisexual (4 out of 13 participants), and queer (4 out of 13 participants).

Table 7. Sexual orientation (N = 13)

Description(s) of sexual orientation	Number of mentions (N)	Percent of mentions (%)
Pansexual	4	30.8%
Bisexual	4	30.8%
Queer	4	30.8%
Asexual	2	15.4%
Demisexual	1	7.7%
Panromantic	1	7.7%
Questioning	1	7.7%
Lesbian	1	7.7%

Other demographic information collected:

- All participants reported living in Hamilton or the surrounding area (13 out of 13 participants).
- All participants were Canadian citizens (13 out of 13 participants).
- 1 out of 12 participants identified as a member of a racial or ethnic group.
- 10 out of 13 participants self-identify as a person with a disability.

Program Participation

The Check-In participants have a fairly consistent weekly attendance. 11 out of 13 participants (84.6%) shared that they participate in a check-in session “every week of the month” or “3 out of 4 weeks of the month”. Most participants spent between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours during a check-in session (11 out of 13 participants, or 84.6%).

Table 8 shows how participants learned about the Check-In program. Most participants learned about the program through social media (10 out of 13 participants, or 76.9%).

Table 8. Check-In program outreach (N = 13)

Methods	Number of mentions (N)	Percent of mentions (%)
Social media	10	76.9%
Through a friend	3	23.1%
By word of mouth	2	15.4%
Through an online search	1	7.7%
I was referred from another service	1	7.7%
Previous member of Spectrum	1	7.7%

Table 9 shows the reasons for joining the Check-In program and how often participants mentioned each reason. As the table shows, the most common reason for joining was wanting to talk to someone about mental health (10 out of 13 participants).

Table 9. Reasons why participants joined the Check-In program (N = 13)

Reasons for joining	Number of mentions (N)	Percent of mentions (%)
I wanted someone to talk to about mental health challenges	10	76.9%
I was feeling isolated because of COVID-19	9	69.2%
I wanted to access support via social media, online, and/or remotely	9	69.2%
To feel more connected with LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton	9	69.2%
I wanted someone to talk to about social challenges	8	61.5%
I wanted someone to talk to about financial challenges	4	30.8%
I thought it would be fun	4	30.8%

Someone recommended me	4	30.8%
To fill a gap when previous peer support or LGBTQ2SIA+ programming was cancelled due to COVID-19	3	23.1%
Other: I wanted to continue accessing Spectrum’s services	1	7.7%

Program Outcomes

Feelings of Connection and Isolation

Table 10 shows the impact the program had on improving participants’ feelings of connection and reducing participants’ feelings of isolation. As the table shows, participants reported an improvement on both of these areas as a result of participating in the Check-In program. Outside of the Check-In program, some participants mentioned the influence of friends, family and other support groups on their feelings of connection and isolation.

Table 10. Check-In program’s impact on participants’ sense of connection and feelings of isolation⁵

Statement	Weighted average	Sample size
I have felt more connected to LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton as a result of participating in the Check-In program	4.3	9
I have felt less isolated as a result of participating in the Check-In program	3.8	9

⁵ Table 10 used a scale of 1 to 5 to measure how much participants agree or disagree with the statements provided. 1 meant strongly disagree and 5 meant strongly agree. Only the participants who reported joining the program because they wanted to “feel more connected to LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton” or were “feeling isolated because of COVID-19” (as shown in Table 9) were included.

Support with Mental Health, Social, and Financial Challenges

Another one of Spectrum’s intended outcomes is to support participants with social, mental health, and financial challenges. As Table 11 shows, the most common challenges discussed during check-ins are mental health (13 out of 13 participants) and social (12 out of 13 participants).

Table 11. Challenges discussed (N = 13)

Challenge	Every time	Often	Sometimes	Never
Mental Health	4	7	2	0
Social	1	4	7	1
Financial	1	0	6	6

Figure 1. Level of support with social, mental and financial challenges

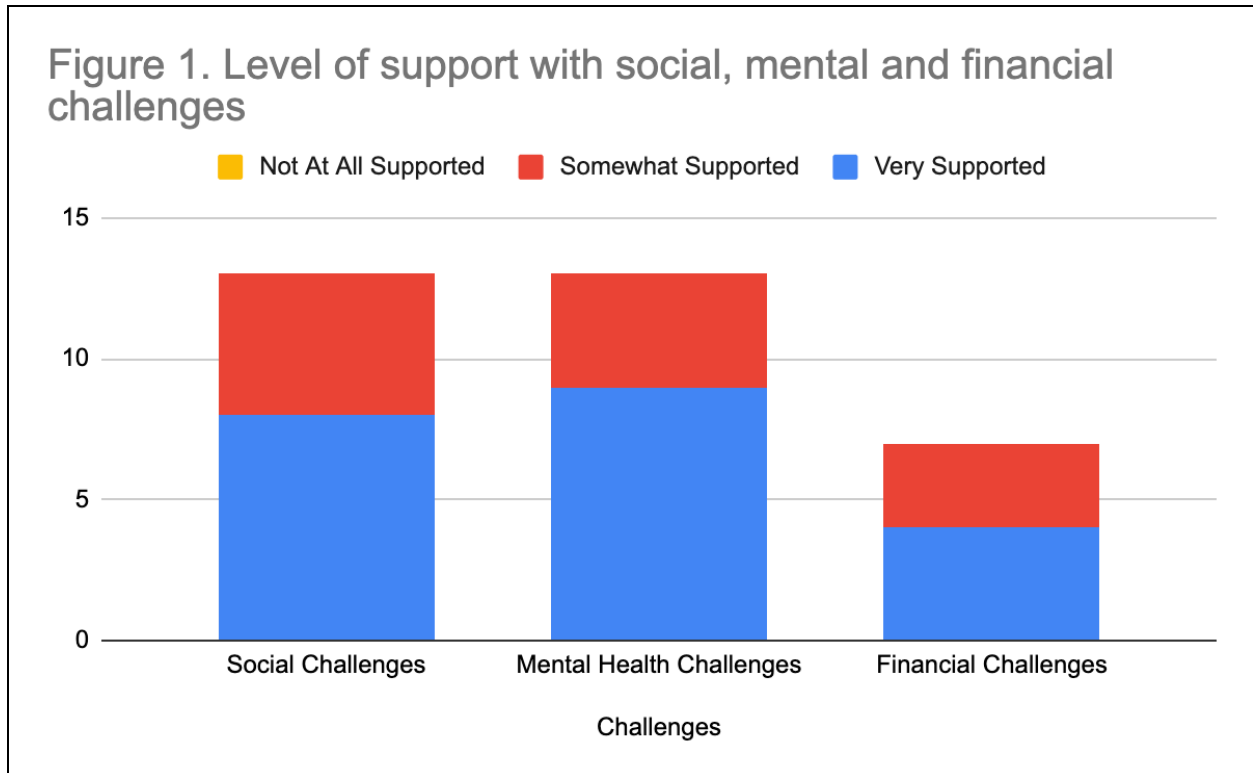


Figure 1 shows the level of support participants felt through the program with their mental health, social, and financial challenges. All participants who sought support reported feeling "somewhat supported" or "very supported" with all three challenges.

Figure 2. Other supports for social, mental, and financial challenges

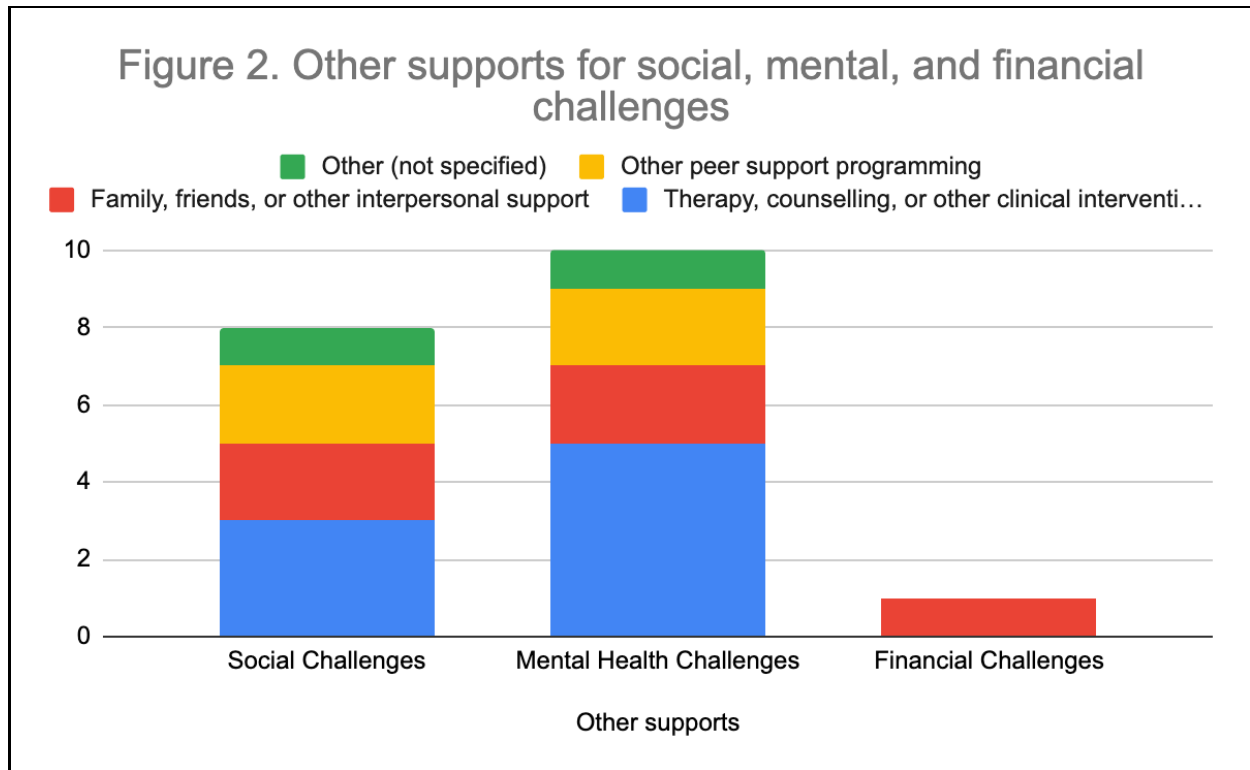
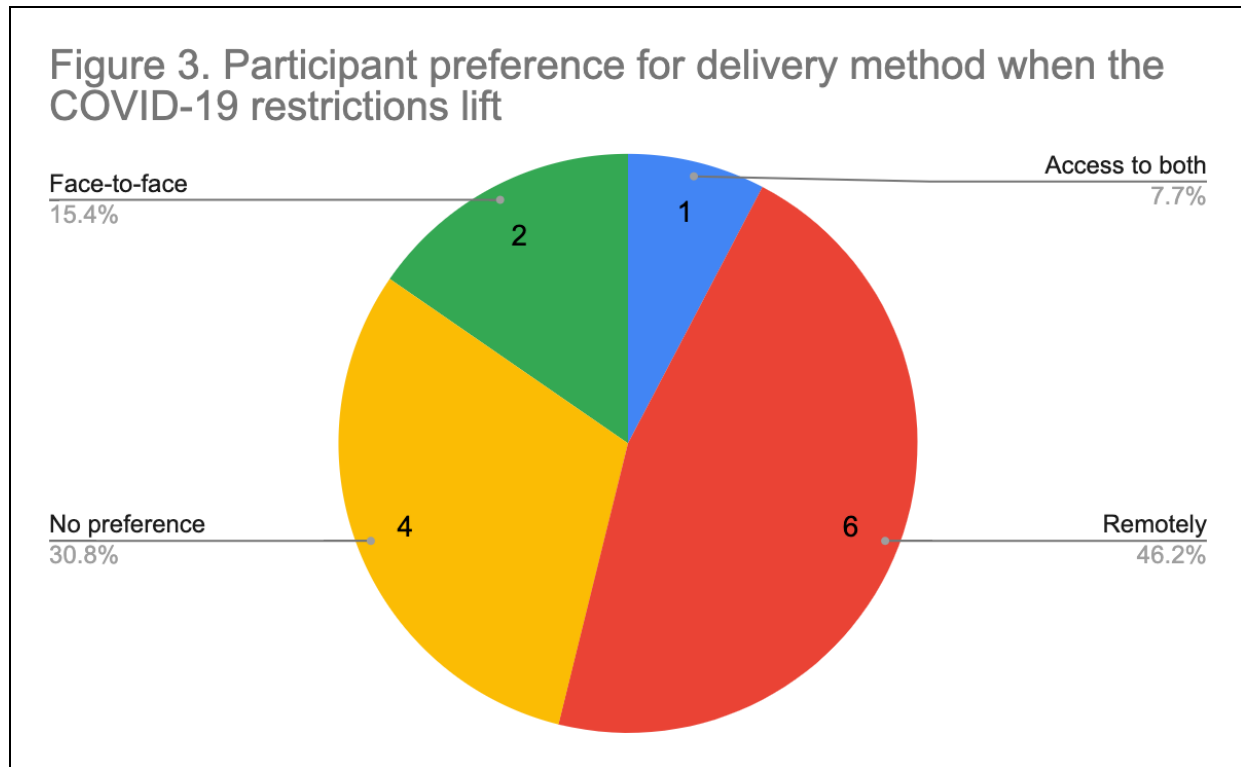


Figure 2. shows the other supports the youths accessed to for help with these personal challenges. Youth reported therapy, counselling, and other clinical interventions most often as their other supports for social and mental health challenges. Youth also listed family and friends as sources of support with these challenges.

Program Feedback

All 13 respondents agreed that the Check-In program has been a positive experience and they would recommend the program to a friend. Figure 3 shows participants' preference for the program's delivery once the COVID-19 restrictions are removed. The most common preference was keeping the program remote (6 out of 13 participants). Notably, 4 participants did not have a preference.

Figure 3. Participant preference for delivery methods, if COVID-19 restrictions lift



Program Strengths and Opportunities

The survey provided open-ended questions for participants to answer about Check-In program strengths and opportunities for improvement. 12 out of 13 participants commented on the program strengths, and 6 out of 13 listed opportunities for improvement. Table 12 shows three main program strengths youths described most frequently: care, feeling less alone, and consistency and routine.

Table 12. Participants' reflection on program strengths.

Theme	Explanation	Illustrative Quote
Care and support	The most common theme youth expressed was how the program connects them to a person who cares about them (N = 5)	<i>"You get the feeling that someone really cares about you, and they understand. That alone can help with a lot."</i>

Consistency and routine	Youth expressed the benefits of having the weekly Check-Ins as a part of their routine (N = 3).	<i>“Structure/routine, building familiarity. Something to look forward to even if it’s a bad day.”</i>
Less alone	Participants expressed the program helps them feel less alone (N = 1).	<i>“I really enjoy being able to talk with [Check-In team member]. Makes me feel less alone and I know I am supported.”</i>

Youth also expressed the following program strengths:

- feeling greater connection to LGBTQ2SIA+ community,
- feeling humanized,
- practicing gratitude,
- filling a gap between therapy sessions, and
- providing an authentic space that is different from other therapy sought.

Youth expressed the following opportunities for program improvements:

- a need for more available Check-In hours,
- a need for more people to be able to access the program,
- a need to continue the program once the COVID-19 restrictions are removed,
- a need to offer both in-person and remote Check-In’s once the COVID-19 restrictions are removed.

Overall, all participants expressed the Check-In program is of value to them and should be continued.

“Spectrum is so needed in Hamilton.”

Results: Interviews with staff and volunteers

The Need for the Check-In Program

In the interviews with the staff, the staff discussed that one of the reasons for starting the virtual Check-In program was to fill a service gap created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many services shut down in April 2020 because of the COVID-19 restrictions, leaving LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton without support. Spectrum was the only LGBTQ2SIA+ youth-led organization providing support. As one staff member noted,

“When COVID hit, everything basically shut down and any sort of support that was tied to like a really big institution took like months to get back up running online on the digitally secure platform. Youth who had been attending groups like every week or every month, both like therapy group, mental health groups, but also specifically queer and trans groups were totally left with nothing for a while. So, we jumped in with the Check-In program to try and fill that gap a little bit.”

Beyond addressing the identified service gap, the staff and volunteers found increased accessibility as a benefit to creating a virtual online program for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth. As one staff member explained,

“Being able to do something online means that it's actually so much more accessible to people who have different needs and stuff that we weren't able to accommodate before.”

Table 13 shows the different ways the Check-In team believes virtual programming has increased Spectrum’s accessibility for LGBTQ2SIA+ youths.

Table 13. Virtual programming increased accessibility for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth

Population	Explanation	Illustrative quotes
Closeted youth	The Check-In program supports youth who are not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity to their family and friends.	<i>“Especially for those who are like, not out or in non-supportive homes or houses, unsupportive roommates, whatever the situation is. The fact that they're essentially locked down in a</i>

		<i>bubble means that they just need more support, and they need it virtually because it's the only way to get it."</i>
Transgender and non-binary youth	The Check-In team expressed that some transgender and non-binary youth may experience misgendering as a harm when accessing in-person or even phone-call based services. The Check-In program provides social media and online messaging as a safer, alternative method.	<i>"Many queer trans youth are anxious about phone calls for a variety of reasons, primarily because of general anxiety and also like voice dysphoria. A lot of people don't want to talk and get gendered by their voice."</i>

In light of the program’s ability to reduce accessibility barriers to support programming for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth, the staff argued that there is value in continuing this virtual program after the COVID-19 restrictions lift. As one staff member stated,

"So I think [the Check-In program] has merit beyond COVID for groups I've already mentioned, but like youth who are in like, you know, unsupportive homes or can't come to an event. Maybe they can't get transportation, maybe it's not safe. Maybe spaces are not accessible to them. I think it has a lot of potential for those areas and also just generally like it's nice to feel like someone cares about you every week. And there's just someone there who's like checking in on you."

Another staff member stated,

"And a lot of our [in-person events] were designed with the fact that even myself like there's a nervousness involved. There's, there's, um, you know worries about being judged, [youth's] social anxiety that a lot of people in our community being, you know, many of us with histories of bullying, with histories of discrimination. You know they are hesitant to enter new spaces. So, I think that there is a need for [the Check-In program]."

Workload and Program Demand

According to the staff members, the Spectrum Check-In program has received a great amount of interest among LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton. Because of limited resources, the program is currently full and has a waitlist of interested youth.

The Check-In team said that their workload is difficult to balance. The Check-In team expressed the need to expand the program to meet the growing demand and adequately support LGBTQ2SIA+ youth. As one staff member noted,

“...we are online for two and a half hours trying to do Check-Ins on 10 people is not feasible. And it's happening because we don't have a choice and not because that's the ideal capacity.”

Another volunteer noted,

“I feel like I always have to like to cut them off. I always have to be like, ‘I'm sorry. I actually have to cut [the call] now.’ Which I guess in some people's eyes is a good thing. But to me, like, that's not a good thing. They clearly need, you know, more support. They clearly need more care and attention...”

Members of the Check-In team suggest the program needs to either:

1. increase the duration of shifts of the current staff who are part-time, or
2. hire more staff to fulfill the increasing demand of the program.

Referrals

Interviewees view providing referrals as an important part of the Check-In program. The Check-In team supports youth in finding services and supports that are knowledgeable on the experiences of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth.

In the interviews, the Check-In team shared that there is a *“huge gap of knowledge”* among LGBTQ2SIA+ youth on available support and services. According to the Check-In team, most of the youth, especially the young ones, are not aware of the LGBTQ2SIA+ support services available in Hamilton.

One challenge LGBTQ2SIA+ youth have is the lack of consistency in the availability of resources for them in Hamilton. One staff member noted,

“it's so unstable that even if you find a resource list that an organization put out like three months ago, it's probably not up to date anymore, especially with COVID, everything is now pretty much out of date.”

Another challenge the Check-In team noted is that many mental health resources and services for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth are limited and have long wait times. When youth are waiting to access these supports, Spectrum often tries their best to fill these gaps with other short-term solutions. One staff member noted,

“And when you have youth who have experienced years of trauma, because of transphobia and homophobia, racism, six sessions is like not enough, but it's kind of like here's something while you get on a longer wait list to try and get something else.”

When accessing services, especially those who are not trained or knowledgeable of LGBTQ2SIA+ experiences and care, the youth are at risk of discrimination and dehumanization. One volunteer noted,

“I then have to support them through navigating a service and essential service that they need to survive that treats them like less than a human being.”

Participant Outcomes

Support with Mental Health, Social, and Financial Challenges

The youth commonly discussed mental health, social and financial challenges during their check-in sessions.

The Check-In team expressed that feelings of anxiety and depression were the most common mental health challenges youth discussed. One volunteer noted,

“I think I have had, on some level, a chat about anxiety or depression or like along those themes with I think every participant.”

Other common themes youth discussed included stress, PTSD, and trauma.

Both volunteers shared that they do not feel equipped to properly address concerns related to trauma and its effects. The volunteers noted that learning more about trauma from a peer-support perspective would be helpful.

Volunteers reported discussing a wide range of social challenges during check-ins with youth. The Check-In team shared that closeted youth struggle with talking to their family about topics of mental health, gender identity, and sexuality. Other challenges

mentioned include unhealthy relationships, discrimination in the workplace, racism, and bullying and emotional abuse by friends and family.

The major financial issue youth discussed during the check-ins was affordable housing. The Check-In team members noted that the program helped some youth members find housing. A Check-In team member explained how in many cases, youth are staying in transphobic and/or homophobic households because of financial challenges.

LGBTQ2SIA+ youth who want to leave these households often have to live on the streets or in a shelter, if possible. Notably, LGBTQ2SIA+ youth are likely to feel unsafe in a shelter, *“Cis straight youth don’t feel safe at shelters. Why should trans, queer youth feel safe?”*

Feelings of Connection and Isolation

The Check-In team stated that nearly all youth have expressed an increase in feelings of isolation and loneliness because of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Check-In team members report that participants’ response to the check-in sessions has been overwhelmingly positive. One volunteer shared, every participant has expressed at some point that the check-in session has bridged a gap and reduced feelings of isolation. As noted by the volunteer,

“As far as ‘does our Check-In program help with those feelings of isolation and loneliness and support the youth?’ I would say absolutely. Like no contest, basically every single user that I’ve worked with has expressed that at some point.”

The youth value the relationship they were able to build with the Check-In team members and appreciate the support. A volunteer noted, *“I do have one young person who’s like, literally, I look forward to talking...this is the one thing I look forward to all week and it’s what keeps me going.”*

While they are optimistic about the program’s capacity in bridging the gap, the Check-In team members also emphasized that the problem of loneliness cannot be resolved by the program alone. A staff member explained,

“We are able to bridge the gap, to a certain extent, but it doesn’t fill it ... [to not be able] to be with their friends physically is a toll that cannot be bridged by talking with people that you don’t know that well online.”

Addressing Diverse and Intersecting Needs of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth

The Check-In team has members with different identities, orientations, and ethnicities which makes it easier to cater to the diverse and intersecting needs of program participants. In the past, if there were staff members who belonged to similar communities as a participant, the check-in team asked youth beforehand if they would like to conduct the session with that individual. However, team members noted that there are gaps within the program when it comes to addressing the needs of youth who are trans and/or BIPOC.

A volunteer expressed interest in attending training workshops led by community leaders who are BIPOC on how to effectively address complex challenges faced by racialized youth. The volunteer noted,

“if we have training, or like things coming from BIPOC people that like BIPOC people want to communicate to white people, then yes, I want to be there. I want to learn about it.”

Another volunteer highlighted the challenge of supporting trans youth because of the multiple levels of oppression they experience. The volunteer explained,

“There's a layer of dysphoria, there's the layer of being closeted, there's the layer of being socially isolated and forced to live at home and at the same time not have anywhere else to go. And then there's, you know, actually there's a whole lot of other layers.”

Members of the Check-In team acknowledge there are systemic barriers and challenges youth will constantly face. Nevertheless, they focus on reducing the psychosocial effects of social isolation and discrimination by listening to youths' challenges and providing support where possible. As noted by a volunteer,

“I think that our program really does help them...Feel better about things... like they tend to be like, ‘Wow, thank you. I really appreciate that you were there for me’.... On the other hand, though, like there are limits because we can talk with them about their situations, there's really very little we can do to change their situations.”

Program Strengths and Opportunities

Table 14. Check-In Team members' reflection on program strengths.

Theme	Explanation	Illustrative Quote
Accessibility	Youth can easily connect with a team member which reduces the barrier in getting support.	<i>"Being able to do something online means that it's actually so much more accessible to people who have different needs and stuff that we weren't able to accommodate before."</i>
Consistency	The youth ideally talk to the same team member every week. This allows youth to build a relationship with the team member. Moreover, team members can follow up with the youth on referred resources to ensure their needs are met.	<i>"Ongoing rapport with the participants is a strength. Our ability to forward to resources and not just refer and run. We are actually able to follow up with them. Our ability to follow up is strong and beneficial."</i>
Discretion	The program is committed to protecting the confidentiality and identity of all participants. Youth can seek support without worrying about their parents or other acquaintances finding out.	<i>"They can set up their own social media profile that has no info about them just to message us, if they want... like we've had people message and there's like nothing on their profile and their photo is blank. And like we don't need to know anything more about them, then the time to message them and like their name and pronouns... So I think from the privacy, confidentiality safety piece, that's really key."</i>
Youths' Agency	The program gives youth the freedom to discuss what they want to discuss. There is no pre-designed structure or questions youth have to follow.	<i>"it's very much about their agency, their independence, the way they want to be cared for."</i>

Teamwork	The Check-In team uses their diverse experiences and backgrounds to support each other. The team often brainstorm ways to address the issues and challenges youth face.	<i>“I’m able to, like, take what we talked about as a team and bring it to basically care and support for youth in a better way.”</i>
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The opportunities for program improvements the Check-In team expressed include:

1. **Create additional time slots and/or hire more Check-In team members** to meet the demand (growing waitlist) and expand program outreach.
2. **Organize Check-In team training** for:
 - a) providing trauma-informed care from a peer perspective,
 - b) suicide prevention,
 - c) gender dysphoria and transgender experiences, and
 - d) providing effective support and resources to youth who are BIPOC.
3. **Adding a ‘go-to’ person for transgender youth and team members** who is willing to answer their questions or provide support on transgender and gender diverse experiences. A staff member suggested that a *“go-to person could advise other staff members on how to support trans youth, share their experience, things they learned, things they (or their friends) tried that didn’t work, things they tried that worked.”*
4. **Make a point to periodically allow youth to change their check-in time slots.** The youth picked their time slots in the very beginning of the pandemic. Notably, youth might prefer a different time slot now that schools have reopened. Giving everyone an option to change their time slot on a periodic basis would be beneficial for the ever-changing lives youth face.
5. **Give youth the option to be partnered with a team member with whom they share a specific identity.** This requires building a diverse Check-In team to allow for youth to connect with a member who can relate to their multiple, interconnected identities.
6. **Having more emergency funds to support youth in crisis.**
7. **Provide the youth with more clarity on what the program is able to provide, in terms of funding.**

8. **Provide a workshop for parents of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth.** This recommendation is to be taken with discretion. Such programming can pose a risk for youth who are not fully out to their families — team members might accidentally out youths to their parents.

9. **Create more opportunities for the youth to socialize and participate in recreational activities.**

Summary and Conclusions

Appropriateness: Responding to an Identified Need

Intended Outcomes

The program's three intended outcomes (increased sense of connection to the LGBTQ2SIA+ community in Hamilton; reduced feelings of isolation, and increased support with mental, social, and financial challenges) align with the needs of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton.

Results of the literature review suggest that feelings of isolation and a lack of connection to other LGBTQ2SIA+ persons are common among LGBTQ2SIA+ youth (Mills et al., 2019). Comparably, one of the most common reasons youth signed up for the Check-In program was to feel more connected with LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton.

Research also shows that the well-being, financial state, and social lives of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Canada have worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the surveys, youth identified struggling with feelings of isolation due to COVID-19 and wanting to access social and mental health support as some of the reasons for signing up for the program. In the interviews, the Check-In team stated that many youth have expressed increased feelings of isolation and loneliness due to the pandemic. Comparably, the most common topics discussed during Check-In sessions based on shift reports included facing social challenges and coping with feelings of anxiety, depression and loneliness.

With regard to increased support with challenges, the Check-In team discussed in the interviews how the Check-In program gives youth a platform to discuss their concerns and the opportunity to get help through the referral program.

Virtual Support

Research findings suggest virtual support is a format that youth are comfortable with and will readily access if it is available to them. Secondary research suggests many LGBTQ2SIA+ youth feel uncomfortable with accessing in-person resources (Mills et al., 2019) and that social media is a safer location for discussing gender and sexuality (Prempeh et al., 2020).

Virtual programming improved Spectrum's outreach by boosting the number of participants that had never previously accessed Spectrum's services. The majority of survey participants stated they learned about the program via social media and would prefer remote delivery of support (rather than in-person support) once the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Interviews with Check-In staff and volunteers suggest that participants are amenable to virtual programming because it's easy, discreet, and "lower stakes" for those that are hesitant towards accessing new physical spaces.

Service Gap in Hamilton

Results from our secondary research suggest there's an urgent need for supports for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton (Mills et al., 2019). Check-In staff and volunteers explained how this need has been exacerbated due to closures caused by COVID-19, and that Spectrum was the only LGBTQ2SIA+ youth-focused support when the pandemic restrictions began. In the survey, a subset of participants stated that they joined the program to fill a gap when previous peer support or LGBTQ2SIA+ programming was cancelled due to COVID-19.

Results from our secondary research suggest that mental health-related supports are particularly needed due to the financial inaccessibility of most mental health services in the community (Mills et al., 2019). The Check-In staff further characterized mental health services as being limited and having long wait times. The Check-in program is a free service and our research suggests youth commonly discuss mental health during their check-in. Moreover, youth highlighted the consistency of the program as an important feature.

Effectiveness: Achieving Aimed Outcomes

Increased Sense of Connection

Findings suggest the Check-In program successfully increases participants' sense of connection. All survey participants reported an increased sense of connection resulting from participating in the program. Staff interviews suggest this may be due to the relationships youth develop with Check-In team members.

Reduced Feelings of Isolation

Findings suggest the Check-In program effectively reduces participants' feelings of isolation. The majority of survey participants reported having reduced feelings of isolation due to their participation in the program. Volunteer interviews confirmed that all

participants, at some point during their discussions, have expressed that the sessions help them feel less alone with their struggles.

Support with Social, Mental Health and Financial Challenges

Social challenges. Findings suggest Spectrum’s Check-In program effectively supports participants’ social challenges. Check-In shift reports show over half of Check-In discussions centered on social challenges. This was confirmed in the interviews with the Check-In staff and volunteers, who reported commonly discussing social challenges like relationships/dating and experiences of homophobia/transphobia during Check-In sessions. In the survey, all participants who identified discussing social challenges during their check-in sessions reported feeling “somewhat” or “very” supported with these challenges.

Mental health challenges. Findings suggest Spectrum’s Check-In program effectively supports participants’ mental health challenges. Based on the document analysis, about a quarter of Check-In discussions focus on mental health challenges. Similarly, in the interviews, Check-In staff and volunteers reported commonly discussing mental health challenges such as feelings of anxiety and depression. These findings were confirmed in the survey as all Check-In participants reported discussing mental health challenges during Check-In sessions and feeling “somewhat” or “very” supported with these challenges through the program.

Financial challenges. Findings suggest Spectrum’s Check-In program effectively supports participants with financial challenges. Based on the document analysis, under a quarter of Check-In discussions focus on financial challenges. During the interviews, Check-In team members noted that the major financial issue discussed with youth is affordable housing and that the program helped many youths find housing. In the survey, the seven participants who identified discussed financial challenges during their Check-In sessions reported feeling “somewhat” or “very” supported with these challenges through the program.

Other challenges. A document analysis of program records showed other common topics discussed during the weekly check-in sessions included coping with the COVID-19 pandemic (2.8%) and transgender and/or transitioning (5.1%). Support provided by the program for other challenges is evident through the various referrals given to participants such as informal and transition-related referrals.

Process: Strengths and Opportunities

Strengths

Common program strengths identified by the youth participants included:

- Feeling supported and cared for;
- Feeling less alone; and
- Appreciation for the consistency of the Check-In program being a weekly commitment.

Common program strengths identified by the Check-In team included:

- the program is more accessible to LGBTQ2SIA+ youth because it is virtual;
- the program provides consistency for the youth by connecting with the same member every week; and
- the program protects the confidentiality and identity of all participants.

Opportunities

The findings suggest the following three opportunities to improve the program:

1. expand the capacity of the Check-In program;
2. continue the program remotely once the COVID-19 restrictions lift; and
3. provide further training for the Check-In team.

To expand on the first opportunity, a growing list of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth waiting to access the Check-In program calls for a need to hire more Check-In team members and/or increase the shifts of the current part-time members. Notably, the Check-In team have expressed through the interviews and shift reports that their workload is difficult to balance. Youth participants also expressed in the survey their desire for more hours available for check-ins and for others to be able to access the program.

To expand on the third opportunity, the Check-In team highlighted the need for training to address the following:

- **Diversity of participant needs.** During interviews, the Check-In team expressed a desire to expand and better incorporate the voices of individuals who are BIPOC and/or trans in their training, in order to meet the diverse needs of youth.

- **Support with mental health challenges.** The Check-In team recommended organizing training programs on suicide prevention and trauma to better equip the team in providing support to youth with mental health challenges.
- **Support with other challenges.** The Check-In team recommended organizing training programs and workshops on how to support transgender and gender nonconforming youth in dealing with gender dysphoria, phobia and discrimination.

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Appendix 1: Theory of Change

Goal	Activities	Outputs	Participant Outcomes (short-term)
<p>Primary: Fill a service gap in Hamilton by providing ongoing virtual support to LGBTQ2SIA+ youth without access to reliable family and community supports.</p> <p>Secondary: Build capacity and community among LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social media advertising and presence to connect with youth 2. Weekly check-ins over Facebook/ Instagram, phone, or email 3. Referrals to connect youth with community supports and resources 	<p># youth participating in program</p> <p># check-ins conducted</p> <p># of referrals</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased sense of connection to the LGBTQ2SIA+ community in Hamilton 2. Increased support with mental, social, and financial challenges 3. Reduced feeling of isolation

Appendix 2: Survey with Check-In Program

Participants

Section 1: Letter of Information

Thank you for your interest in participating in this survey about your participation in Speqtrum's Check-In program. Your feedback will be used to make any changes necessary to the program and communicate to funders the value of Speqtrum's Check-In program in supporting LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton, Ontario.

Please carefully read the Letter of Information that was provided to you with the survey link by a Speqtrum Team Member.

This survey should take you approximately 15 - 30 minutes to complete.

The survey asks you to answer a few questions about yourself and how your participation in Speqtrum's Check-In program had an impact on 1) your sense of connection to the LGBTQ2SIA+ youth people in Hamilton; 2) feelings of support with social, mental health, and financial challenges; and 3) feelings of isolation you may have had upon entering the program.

Your responses will be completely confidential and anonymized. The feedback that you provide will not affect your ability to continue being a participant in the Check-In program.

As a token of appreciation for your time and feedback, you may choose to opt into a draw for a prize to be determined by Speqtrum staff. Possible prizes may include gift baskets with a gift card and/or some LGBTQ2SIA+ themed items.

Participating in this survey is completely voluntary. If you require translation or any form of assistance to complete this survey, or you have any questions, please let a research volunteer or a Speqtrum staff member know. You have the option to skip any question that you are not comfortable answering. Should you feel distressed at any point while completing the survey, please stop filling out the survey immediately and let a research volunteer or staff member know. If you feel distressed as a result of your participation in this survey after completing it, please contact a Speqtrum staff member, Kaiden at info@speqtrum.ca or contact Speqtrum during peer support hours or access additional support services such as LGBT Youthline (youthline.ca) or Trans Lifeline (translifeline.org).

Section 2: Consent

The following three questions are the only mandatory questions for this survey. Selecting "Yes I understand" to the following items will indicate your consent to participate in this survey. If you do not want to participate in the survey, you can exit the survey by closing this tab in your browser.

I understand that my participation in this survey is completely voluntary and that I am able to stop taking the survey at any time.

- Yes, I understand

I understand that my individual responses to this survey will be kept anonymous and will not be shared with anyone outside of the McMaster Research Shop and Spectrum.

- Yes, I understand

I understand that I have had the opportunity to ask any questions about my participation in this survey.

- Yes, I understand

Section 3: Demographics

The following seven questions will ask you about your information. Please remember, all questions are optional to answer. If you are not comfortable answering any of the questions in this section, feel free to skip the question or select the, "Prefer not to answer" option.

What is your age?

- _____

Where do you live most of the time?

- Hamilton or the surrounding area (e.g. Stoney Creek, Winona, Dundas, Ancaster, etc.)
- Prefer not to answer
- _____

Do you self identify as a member of the following racial or ethnic groups?

Please select all that apply.

- Black
- First Nations
- Inuit
- Métis
- Indigenous (not included elsewhere)
- Another racialized community (please specify below under "Other," if desired)
- I do not identify as a member of any of these racial or ethnic groups
- Prefer not to answer
- _____

What is your status in Canada?

- Non-permanent or Temporary resident (Visitor permit, student permit, work permit, or refugee claimant)

- Permanent resident/landed immigrant (A person who has been granted the right to live permanently in Canada by immigration authorities, but who has not yet become a Canadian citizen through naturalization)
- Canadian citizen
- Prefer not to answer

Do you self-identify as a person with a disability?

For the purpose of this survey: "Persons with Disabilities" means persons who have a long-term or recurring physical, mental, sensory, psychiatric, or learning impairment. It is recognized that individuals often prefer to self-identify using terms such as: Mad, differently abled, psychiatric survivor, consumer, service user, mentally ill, patient, neurodiverse, disabled, etc. Please note that self-identification does not require medical diagnosis of a disability.

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

What is the best description(s) of your present gender identity?

(For example: Man, Woman, Two Spirit, Transgender, Intersex, Gender nonconforming, etc.)

- _____

What is the best description(s) of your present sexual orientation?

(For example: Heterosexual/Straight, Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Queer, Two Spirit, etc.)

- _____

Section 4: Check-In Program Participation

The following six questions will ask you about your participation in the Check-In Program.

How often do you participate in check-ins with Speqtrum?

- Every week of the month
- 3 out of 4 weeks of the month
- 2 out of 4 weeks of the month
- 1 week per month
- Less than once per month
- Prefer not to answer
- _____

On average, how much time do you spend on a check-in session with Speqtrum?

- 30 minutes or less
- More than 30 minutes, up to 1 hour
- More than 1 hour, up to 1.5 hours
- More than 1.5 hours

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer not to answer
<p>How long have you been a part of the Check-In program? Please select the month and year in which you joined Spectrum's check-in program. If you cannot remember, an estimate of the date you joined is acceptable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MM/DD/YEAR
<p>Are you currently a participant in the Check-In program?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No
<p>How did you hear about the Check-In program? Please select all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through social media • Through a friend • By word of mouth • I was referred to it from another service I received • Through an extracurricular activity • Through an online search I did myself • Prefer not to answer • _____
<p>Why did you join the Check-In program? Please select all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To fill a gap when previous peer support or LGBTQ2SIA+ programming was cancelled due to COVID-19 • To feel more connected with LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton • I was feeling isolated because of COVID-19 • I wanted to access support via social media, online, and/or remotely • I wanted someone to talk to about social challenges (for example, dealing with homophobia, transphobia, issues at home, and/or issues at work) • I wanted someone to talk to about mental health challenges (for example, anxiety and/or depression) • I wanted someone to talk to about financial challenges (for example, paying rent, seeking employment) • I thought it would be fun • Someone recommended it to me • Prefer not to answer • _____

Section 5: Sense of Connection and Feelings of Isolation

The following eight questions will ask how your participation in Spectrum's Check-In program had an impact on your sense of connection to LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton and feelings of isolation you may have had upon entering the program.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
"I have felt more connected to LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton as a result of participating in the Check-In program"**

1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree"

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 Strongly agree

Has anything else in your life other than the Check-In program increased your feelings of connection to LGBTQ2SIA+ people in Hamilton?

If yes, please describe.

- _____

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
"I have felt less lonely as a result of participating in the Check-In program."**

1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree"

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 Strongly agree

Has anything else in your life other than the Check-In program made you feel less lonely?

If yes, please describe.

- _____

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
"I have felt less isolated from others as a result of participating in the Check-In program."**

1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree"

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 Strongly agree

Has anything else in your life other than the Check-In program made you feel less isolated?

If yes, please describe.

- _____

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"I have felt a greater sense of companionship as a result of participating in the Check-In program."

1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree"

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 Strongly agree

Has anything else in your life other than the Check-In program made you feel a greater sense of companionship?

If yes, please describe.

- _____

Section 6: Feelings of Support with Social, Mental Health, and Financial Challenges

The following questions will ask how the Spectrum's Check-In Program had an impact on your feelings of support with social, mental health, and financial challenges you may have had during your participation in the program so far.

Social challenges:

How often during weekly check-ins do you discuss personal social challenges (e.g. dealing with homophobia/transphobia, issues at home and/or work)?

- Every time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never
- Prefer not to answer

How supported do you feel with your social challenges as a result of participating in the Check-In program?

- Very supported
- Somewhat supported
- Not at all supported
- Not applicable
- Prefer not to answer

Are there ways you've been getting support for your social challenges other than through the Check-In program?

If yes, please describe.

- _____

During your participation in the Check-In program, were you referred to any community resources or services to help you with your social challenges? (e.g. a peer support group, volunteer opportunities, community organizations, events, etc.)

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

If you selected "Yes" to the previous question, please describe the resources or services you were referred to help you with your social challenges. If you selected "No", please skip this question and the next two questions.

- _____

Did you end up using or accessing the resources or services you described?

- Yes, I used/accessed all of the resources described above
- I used some but not all of the resources described above
- No, I did not use any of the resources described above
- Prefer not to answer
- Not applicable

If you did not use any or only some of the resources referred, what were your reasons for not using or accessing the resources or services you described?

- _____

Mental health challenges:

How often during weekly check-ins do you discuss personal mental health challenges (e.g. mental health issues, chronic illness, anxiety, depression)?

- Every time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never
- Prefer not to answer

How supported do you feel with your mental health challenges as a result of participation in the Check-In program?

- Very supported
- Somewhat supported
- Not at all supported

- Not applicable
- Prefer not to answer

Are there ways you've been getting support for your mental health challenges other than through the Check-In program?

If yes, please describe.

- _____

During your participation in the Check-In program, were you referred to any community resources or services to help you with your mental health challenges? (e.g. LGBTQ2SIA+ led or affirming therapist/counsellor/coach, a community support group, support lines, general mental health services).

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

If you selected "Yes" to the previous question, please describe the resources or services you were referred to help you with your mental health challenges. If you selected "No", please skip this question and the next two questions.

- _____

Did you end up using or accessing the resources or services you described?

- Yes, I used/accessed all of the resources described above
- I used some but not all of the resources described above
- No, I did not use any of the resources described above
- Prefer not to answer
- Not applicable

If you did not use any or only some of the resources referred, what were your reasons for not using or accessing the resources or services you described?

- _____

Financial challenges:

How often during weekly check-ins do you discuss personal financial challenges (e.g. paying rent, seeking employment)?

- Every time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never
- Prefer not to answer

How supported do you feel with your financial challenges as a result of participating in the Check-In program?

- Very supported
- Somewhat supported
- Not at all supported
- Not applicable
- Prefer not to answer

Are there ways you've been getting support for your financial challenges other than through the Check-In program?

If yes, please describe.

- _____

During your participation in the Check-In program, were you referred to any community resources or services to help you with your financial challenges? (e.g. scholarship and grant opportunities, a peer support group subsidy program, food bank/support programs, financial counselling, accessing housing).

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

If you selected "Yes" to the previous question, please describe the resources or services you were referred to help you with your financial challenges. If you selected "No", please skip this question and the next two questions.

- _____

Did you end up using or accessing the resources or services you described?

- Yes, I used/accessed all of the resources described above
- I used some but not all of the resources described above
- No, I did not use any of the resources described above
- Prefer not to answer
- Not applicable

If you did not use any or only some of the resources referred, what were your reasons for not using or accessing the resources or services you described?

- _____

Other areas of support:

During your participation in the check-in program, were you referred to any community resources or services that do not fit under the previous categories?

(The previous categories address social, mental health, and financial challenges)

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

If you selected "Yes" to the previous question, please describe the resources or services you were referred to help you (e.g., transition-related referrals such as getting gender gear and changing legal documents). If you selected "No", please skip this question and the next two questions.

- _____

Did you end up using or accessing the resources or services you described?

- Yes, I used/accessed all of the resources described above
- I used some but not all of the resources described above
- No, I did not use any of the resources described above
- Prefer not to answer
- Not applicable

If you did not use any or only some of the resources referred, what were your reasons for not using or accessing the resources or services you described?

- _____

Overall, were there one or more referrals that you wanted, but did not receive?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

If you selected "Yes" to the above question, can you explain what the referral(s) was that you wanted and did not receive? If you selected "No", please proceed to the next part of the survey.

- _____

Section 7: Your Feedback on the Check-In Program

The following three questions will ask you to provide some feedback on Spectrum's Check-In Program.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"The weekly Check-In program has been a positive experience for me"

1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree"

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2

- 3
- 4
- 5 Strongly agree

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"I would recommend the weekly Check-In program to a friend"

1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree"

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 Strongly agree

Would you prefer to participate in the Check-In program remotely if the COVID-19 precautions and social distancing policies get lifted?

- Yes, I would prefer to access this program remotely (i.e., over messenger, phone, email, etc.)
- No, I would prefer to access this program face-to-face if possible
- I do not have a preference
- Prefer not to answer
- _____

What do you like most, if anything, about the Check-In program?

- _____

If you had a magic wand, what changes, if any, would you make to the Check-In program?

- _____

Section 8: Final Questions

Would you be willing to participate in a future interview or focus group about your experience with Spectrum?

- Yes
- No

Would you like to be entered into a draw for a prize as a thank you for participating in this survey?

Possible prizes may include gift baskets that will include a gift card and some LGBTQ2SIA+ themed items.

- Yes
- No

If you answered “Yes” to be entered in the draw or participating in a future interview/focus group, please provide an email or phone number you can be reached at.

Please note we will not share your contact information and will only contact you for the purposes identified above.

- _____

Thank you for participating! Your response has been recorded.

Appendix 3: Interview Guide for Check-In Staff

Read: “Verbal information and consent script” before beginning	
A. Introductions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been working at Speqtrum? 2. Can you briefly tell me about your main roles with the Speqtrum Check-In program?
B. Access the need for the check-In program	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you elaborate on the need for the Check-In program in Hamilton? Are there other organizations undertaking similar initiatives? 2. How is the Check-In program different or similar to other programs available for LGBTQ2SIA+ community in Hamilton? Or, is this a unique intervention for the target population? 3. Are there other cities/regions/communities that have utilized a similar model to provide support to the LGBTQ2SIA+ community?
C. Program logistics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you responsible for conducting any Check-In sessions? If yes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How many every week? 2. How do you feel about the amount of time the Check-In staff have with the participants? 2. Tell me a little bit about the amount of interest you have received from youth in participating in the program. 3. Do you anticipate a need to hire extra staff to meet the demand?
D. Referrals We understand that at the Check-In program, you often refer resources to the program participants. We were curious about how you both went about researching the various resources available.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Could you explain a little bit about the number of available resources available for LGBTQ2SIA+ youth? Is it a challenge to find relevant resources available in Hamilton and/or in Canada for the LGBTQ2SIA+ youth? 2. Thinking about the social challenges, mental health issues, and financial barriers LGBTQ2SIA+ youth may face, do you find it easier to find resources for some of these challenges more than others? 3. From your perspective, are relevant resources/support services accessible for the LGBTQ2SIA+ youth you work with? 4. From your perspective, are the youth you work with at Speqtrum often already aware of the resources available

	to them or do you find they are often surprised to learn about the available resources? Or a mix of both?
E. Participant Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you think the program is able to address the concerns and issues of all participants, especially those belonging to other marginalized communities based on their ethnicity, class, ability, religion, etc.? Can you speak to some of the ways the Check-In program is successfully achieving this and what are some ways the Check-In program could improve on addressing diverse and intersecting needs of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. (possibly follow-up) Are there any additional efforts you would want to incorporate into the Check-In program to better equip staff to address diverse and intersecting identities? Such as provide additional training, or hire more specialized staff, for example.
F. Long-term goals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We understand that the Check-In program has the short term goal of bridging the gap of little-to-no resources available to LGBTQ2SIA+ folks in the time of COVID-19. Thinking about long-term goals, would you hope to continue the check-In program beyond COVID-19? In other words, do you think there is a place and demand for the Check-In program outside of present circumstances?
G. Strengths and weaknesses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keeping your future goals in mind, according to you, what are the major strengths of the check-In program and what aspects require improvement? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If you had a magic wand or unlimited resources, what changes could be made to make the program better or more impactful?
H. Conclusion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As we come to the end of the interview, let's wrap up with: what is your favourite part about working at Speqtrum? 2. That concludes our questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to share with us or think is important for us to know?
Thank the interviewees for taking the time to share their thoughts with us.	

Appendix 4: Interview Guide for Check-In Volunteers

Read: “Verbal information and consent script” before beginning	
A. Introductions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been working at Speqtrum? 2. Can you briefly tell me about your current role at Speqtrum? 3. How do you think things are going with the Check-In program so far?
B. Staff load	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How many participants are you responsible for conducting a Check-In session with every week? 2. How do you feel about the number of participants you are responsible for? 3. How long are the Check-In sessions? 4. How do you feel about the amount of time you have with the participants?
C. Referrals As a part of your role as a Check-In Team Member, we understand you may refer program participants to Jyss and Kaiden to learn about some available resources or services in the community.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do the program participants directly ask you for resources, or do you refer them to Jyss and Kaiden after you assessed the need for resources? Or a mix of both? 2. If applicable, from your perspective, how aware are the youth you work with of the available resources to them? Are youth fairly aware of the resources available to them in the community or are they not as aware? Or a mix of both?
D. Participant Outcomes - mental/social/financial challenges The following questions will ask you to reflect on your conversations with	.Addressing the mental health challenges <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflecting on your previous sessions with the participants, have you faced instances where the youth wanted to discuss mental health challenges? (yes/no) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. (if yes, follow-up) What are the most common mental health challenges they’ve expressed?

<p>youth during Check-In sessions.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Do you feel you have been able to satisfactorily address their concerns related to mental health challenges? Why or why not? Is there anything that could have better equipped you to address youths' mental health concerns as a Check-In Team Member? <p>II. Addressing the social challenges</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflecting on your previous sessions with the participants, have you faced instances where the youth discussed their social challenges? (yes/no) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. (If yes, follow up) What are the most common social concerns/challenges they have expressed? Such as issues with bullying, unaccepting family members, relationship issues, etc. 2. Do you feel you have been able to satisfactorily address these concerns? Why or why not? 3. Is there anything that could have better equipped you to address youths' social concerns as a Check-In Team Member? <p>III. Addressing the financial challenges</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do the participants discuss financial challenges or issues related to poverty (e.g., housing) with you? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. (If yes, follow up)- What are the most common financial concerns/challenges they have expressed? 2. Do you feel you have been able to satisfactorily address these concerns? Why or why not? 3. Is there anything that could have better equipped you to address youths' financial concerns as a Check-in Staff? <p>IV. Other</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you feel confident in your ability to address the concerns and issues of all participants, especially those belonging to other marginalized communities based on their ethnicity, class, ability, religion, etc.? Why or why not?
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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is there anything the Check-In program could provide you or further support you to help you feel more confident in addressing diverse and intersecting needs of LGBTQ2SIA youth?
<p>E. Participant Outcomes - Feelings of isolation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. From your perspective, does the Check-In program support youth with feelings of loneliness or isolation? Why or why not? 2. Have the participants expressed feelings of loneliness to you related to COVID-19? 3. Have the participants ever expressed feeling disconnected from LGBTQ2SIA+ communities? 4. In your opinion, what's the biggest impact that the Check-In program has had on participants?
<p>F. General strengths and weaknesses</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. From where you stand, what are the biggest strengths of the Check-In program? 2. What about the program do you think participants find the most valuable? 3. Are there any elements of the program that make it particularly easy to access or beneficial to participants? 4. If you had a magic wand or unlimited resources, what changes could be made to make the program better or more impactful? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is there anything that could help you, as a Check-In Team Member, succeed in your role? 2. Do the virtual check-ins run smoothly? Can the scheduling process be made more efficient? 3. What according to you are the major strengths of the Check-In program and what aspects require improvement?
<p>G. Conclusion</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As we come to the end of the interview, let's wrap up with: what is your favourite part about working at Speqtrum? 2. That concludes our questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to share with us or think is important for us to know?
<p>Thank the interviewees for taking the time to share their thoughts with us.</p>	

Appendix 5: Verbal Information and Consent Script

Hello, my name is Shubham/Gurpreet and with me is Shubham/Gurpreet. We want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We're working on a Research Shop project on behalf of Spectrum. The purpose of this research is to understand the impact the Check-In program has on its participants and learn possible ways to improve the Check-In program.

We will be asking you about your thoughts on your workload, the referral process, your reflection on discussing topics of mental health, social and financial challenges with the program participants, and lastly, some strengths and weaknesses of the Check-In program.

The information we gather will be used to communicate to funders the value of Spectrum's Check-In program in supporting LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in Hamilton, Ontario, as well as make any recommendations to strengthen the program.

Do you have questions about the project?

Confidentiality - Before we begin our discussion, I want to spend a few moments going over some basic ground rules for today:

- Your participation is voluntary. You can leave or stop participating in this interview at any moment you choose with no repercussions on yourself.
- You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.
- The information which we collect from these interviews will unlikely be attributable (*connected or associated*) to you. If we decide we want to use a quote and attribute it to you, we would contact you ahead of time to see if that was alright.
- I will strive to protect the confidentiality of our discussion or your written responses. Keep in mind that we can be identified through the stories we tell when deciding what to tell me.

Use of Tape Recorder – with your permission, this interview will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what you say.

- All audio files and transcripts will be securely stored in a Google Drive folder that only the Research Team has access to.
- We will also be taking notes throughout the discussion.
- Only the research team will have access to transcripts from this discussion.
- The tapes and transcripts will only be used for this project and will be destroyed once the report is complete.

We ask that when using abbreviations or acronyms, you say the full name at least once to aid transcription.

If at any point you feel tired or fatigued please let us know and we can take a short break. We will also ask periodically if anyone would like to take a short break.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you give your consent to participate in this interview? **[Interviewee member must say “yes” in order to proceed - a nod of the head will not suffice]**