



Camp Lifting Leaves Feedback and Recommendations Report

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Introduction

Wow! Camp Lifting Leaves has returned to in person programming after two long years. While the virtual program was a necessary alternative in 2021, being able to share space in person was highly important for all the campers, chaperones, and staff who attended. That being said we are lucky to announce that Camp Lifting Leaves will now happen twice per year! We plan to host a virtual session and an in person session each year.

A return to in person program meant robust COVID-19 protocols. We are happy to report that there were zero positive COVID cases during camp! A sincerest thank you to all the campers, chaperones, and staff who worked very hard to do their part in keeping our community safe and healthy while at camp.

Camp Lifting Leaves is held in the fall every year so that means we are able to enjoy the magical beauty that this time of year brings. The campers who attended this year had a wonderful time participating in activities such as Queer Trivia, canoeing, arts & crafts, shelter building, and so much more. Campers and chaperones traveled extremely long distances in order to be part of this camping community. Some even traveled up to 8 hours by car! Most of our campers had never done Camp Lifting Leaves before so many arrived shy and a little anxious. However a few hours after settling in, many of their anxieties were put at ease. The weekend was filled with dancing, music, laughter, joy and inspirational conversations.

Camp Lifting Leaves differs from our other camp programs because of the intimate work we do with Indigenous wellbeing agencies, Children Aid Societies and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS). This year Camp Lifting Leaves received support from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services of Ontario (MCCSS) and the OACAS to ensure this program was financially accessible for all youth who wanted to attend. Thank you to all those at both the MCCSS and the OACAS who had a hand in making this possible.

At the Ten Oaks Project we value accountability. This means the feedback provided by campers, chaperones, and staff is crucial to ensuring our programs improve in ways that support all in our communities. We thank you all for taking the time to share your experiences at camp and for taking the time to read this report. Camp Lifting Leaves 2022 was a magical weekend of community building, joy and connection. We hope that the campers who attended the in person program will attend our virtual program in winter 2023!

Take care,

Kymani Montgomery
Programs Manager

Demographics

This year, we hosted 38 campers, 13 chaperones, and 6 staff. We had participants join from across Ontario.

Agencies that were involved with registering youth to participate in Camp Lifting Leaves:

- Bruce Grey Child and Family Services
- Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- Children's Aid Society of London & Middlesex
- Children's Aid Society of Ottawa
- Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- Dnaagdawenmag Binnoojiiyag Child & Family Services
- Family & Children Services of the Waterloo Region
- Family and Children's Services of Frontenac, Lennox and Addington
- Family and Children's Services of Guelph-Wellington
- Kina Gbezghomi Child and Family Services
- Peel Children's Aid Society
- York Region Children's Aid Society

In our participant registration forms, we ask demographic information to ensure our programming reflects our diverse communities. It is optional to provide this information, and the numbers below are based only on the folks who chose to respond.

Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour: 39%

Gay, lesbian, bi, queer, etc. (i.e., not straight): 74%

Trans and Non-binary: 61%

Queerspawn: 8%

Neurodivergent: 32%

Person with a disability: 32%

Recommendation:

In the past few years, across all programs, we've seen gaps in representation when it comes to folks who identify as Black, Indigenous, people of color, transfeminine, and queerspawn at Ten Oaks Project programs. While 39% of camp participants identified as Black, Indigenous, or people of color, this is a relatively low number considering how BIPOC youth are overrepresented in child welfare systems.

It is also recommended that the program management continue to prioritize BIPOC and transfeminine folks on the waitlists and in the hiring process. Additionally, transfeminine campers who show interest in Ten Oaks Project programming should be encouraged to apply to join the staff team once they are of the required age.

Our demographic questions and available options limit how folks can identify themselves and therefore limit our reporting on this area. English is a limiting language that does not

encompass a full range of experiences for our staff and campers. Engaging in best and promising practices for gathering demographic information and listening to feedback will allow us to develop a more fulsome picture of who attends Camp Lifting Leaves.

Feedback – Areas of Strength

Our standard feedback forms for campers, chaperones, and staff include a variety of questions around programming and the camp experience. We always gather feedback because hearing from our participants helps us improve our programs and better meet the needs of our participants. Below are some of the most popular aspects of Camp Lifting Leaves.

Camp Atmosphere and other General Feedback:

- Overall, the youth who attended Camp Lifting Leaves had a wonderful experience.
- This session saw the widest range of agencies joining camp. Some chaperones and youth travelled up to 8 hours to attend Camp Lifting Leaves.
- The ability to return to in-person programming was a major element of success! The COVID-19 policies kept our campers, chaperones, and staff safety throughout the weekend
- Our young folks set the stage early with a community contract that included statements around anti-racism, confidentiality, accountability, and more.
- Campers felt a great sense of community and made many connections through the weekend that will expand into the rest of the year.
- On the final day, many youth did not want to leave.

Programming:

- The planned activities challenged youth to go outside of their comfort zones and work together to create a sense of belonging and safety
- The Trans and BIPOC Centred Spaces were highlights for the youths who attended. They engaged in conversations that they would not have outside of camp.
- Even when campers were reluctant to join in an activity at first by the time they started it, they absolutely loved it.
- We were shocked at how many campers were into the polar plunge. They were fearless.
- Participants mentioned the following activities as being their favourites during the weekend:
 - o Canoeing
 - o Rock Climbing
 - o Archery
 - o Closing Campfire

Staff and Chaperones:

- Our host site staff provided us with so much support and care throughout the entire weekend from preparing and serving our meals to teaching us the importance of water safety with in a canoe

- The Ten Oaks staff and chaperones successfully combined efforts to ensure the campers enjoyed their time at camp
- Many chaperones commented on the level of inclusiveness at camp
- The partnership with OACAS supported the most successful promotion of the program among agencies yet, and ensured that everyone was able to attend regardless of available funds

Kitchen:

- Nutrition is always a central part of the success of any program. Our host site provided many accommodations for the various dietary needs and allergies of our campers, chaperones, and staff.
- Some of these meals were listed as favourites amongst our campers:
 - o Pancakes
 - o Fish and Chips
 - o Strawberry Shortcake
 - o Chicken Caesar Wraps
 - o Tacos

Feedback – Areas for Growth

Based on the feedback provided by our participants, chaperones, and staff, the following is recommended by the Programs Manager to be implemented in any future programming, depending on Ten Oaks' staff capacity and budget.

Camp Atmosphere and other General Feedback:

- While returning to in-person overnight programming was a highlight, many campers commented on the overwhelming feelings of sharing space with other campers and chaperones
- Both campers and chaperones suggest that cabins be sorted by age groups and not agencies to support cohesive cabins dynamics
- Due to multiple intersecting sources, the mental health needs for youth from our communities and who are in care has drastically increased. Additional mental health supports and staff would greatly benefit youth coming to camp
- For the first time, Camp Lifting Leaves had a waitlist. The necessity of a space such as this has radically changed since 2018. If possible increasing the number of campers admitted to camp should be considered
- The timing of camp conflicted with university and college schedules therefore some youth could not attend
- Starting with a conversations about shared space, boundaries, and consent are important as many youth do not regularly share space with others.

Programming:

- Due to the nature of the site, some programs were not accessible to all campers, unfortunately

- COVID-19 has impacted staffing across multiple sectors and Camp Lifting Leaves is no different. Staffing limitations impacted the amount of Centred Spaces we were able to run compared to previous years
- Some campers commented that indoor activities became overwhelming for those with sensory challenges

Staff and Chaperones:

- Many chaperones knew very little about camp prior to arriving due to challenges in communication between staff, chaperones, agencies, and the organization. Alternative forms of communication should be explored in future years in order to prepare chaperones as much as possible
- The specific wording of who is allowed to attend CLL caused some confusion amongst youth and agencies. The current language states that youth only need “an active file” with an agency. This includes both youth who are in care and youth who are out of care. There are different supports available to these two groups of youth including access to resources such as the Ontario Child Benefit Equivalent (OCBe) funding and paid counselling.

Comments from Camper and Chaperones

- “Thank you for a wonderful experience I hope to be back next year” - Camper
- “Super comfortable space, didn’t feel judged” - Camper
- “Loved this so much, highlight of this year” - Camper
- “Overall a very positive and important camp for youth. My youth were overwhelmed with the support and friendships they made. Almost all of the talk on the way home was positive other than the spiders...” - Chaperone
- “I had lots of fun and the staff and campers connected with me on a totally different level than other people [in] what is my daily life this camp really made me realize that I’m not alone out there and made me feel like I was one with everyone” - Chaperone

Closing Remarks

We want to thank everyone who had a hand in helping Camp Lifting Leaves return to in person programming. We also want to thank everyone who provided feedback about their experiences at camp! Whether you were one of the responders of our survey, someone who attended or hopes to attend one of our programs, or a past, present, or future staff members, we appreciate the time you took to read this feedback and recommendations report in its entirety.

The Ten Oaks Project is a small non-profit run by a small full-time staff. To ensure that our staff has the time and capacity to run our growing programs and community events, keep a healthy work-life balance, and avoid getting emotionally or physically burnt out, we have closed the feedback process for 2022. We look forward to connecting and hearing from you after the 2023 sessions! I will leave you with a quote from a camper.

“Thanks for the memories Camp Lifting Leaves. I won’t say goodbye...since I know we’ll meet again...So instead I’ll say...see you later!”