

THE CANADIAN JOURNAL OF AUTISM EQUITY
LA REVUE CANADIENNE DE L'ÉQUITÉ EN MATIÈRE D'AUTISME
VOLUME 4 | ISSUE 1 | APRIL 2024

Fostering Inclusion Around Housing Transitions

Allison Annesley, Independent Author, Canada

Maddy Dever, Independent Author, Canada

RECOMMENDED CITATION: Annesley, A., Dever, M. (2024). Fostering Inclusion Around Housing Transitions. *The Canadian Journal of Autism Equity*, 4(1), 12–17.

Fostering Inclusion Around Housing Transitions

Favoriser l'inclusion dans le cadre des transitions en matière de logement

Allison Annesley^[1], Maddy Dever^[2]

Abstract

This qualitative research project was designed to determine how Community Connectors can best support neurodiverse residents when they move into new housing. The research team also sought to generate greater awareness of the Connector role and support for a pilot. Team members collected and analyzed a range of perspectives, including lived experience, by running focus groups, conducting key informant interviews, and consulting with a diverse advisory panel. A Community Connector assisting neurodiverse residents as they transition to more independent housing can have an outsized impact, on housing success, housing stability, and quality of life. The Social Finance for Social Inclusion Solutions Lab has developed an outcomes-based pilot model to increase access to Community Connectors.

Connectors help residents form relationships and over time, develop a new network of support. Housing providers may also be more willing to welcome these tenants, knowing they have adequate support. Connectors can also facilitate volunteer or employment opportunities, further integrating residents as full and valued members of the community. We found a social impact bond could be a novel way of increasing access to Community Connectors. Both impact investors and government funders are interested in the outcomes a pilot would likely achieve. Social impact bonds are just one idea though. Any funding model that could pay for an outcomes-based pilot with independent evaluation, would generate the evidence required to scale and increase access to this important resource.

¹ Independent Author

² Independent Author

Résumé

Ce projet de recherche qualitatif a été conçu pour déterminer comment les connecteurs communautaires peuvent mieux supporter les résidents neurodivers quand ils déménagent dans un nouveau logement. L'équipe de recherche cherchait aussi à générer une meilleure conscience du rôle du connecteur, ainsi que du support pour un projet pilote. Les membres de l'équipe ont recueilli et analysé un éventail de points de vue, y compris l'expérience vécue, en organisant des groupes de discussion, en menant des entretiens avec des informateurs clés et en consultant un groupe consultatif diversifié. Un connecteur communautaire qui aide les résidents neurodivers à faire la transition vers un logement plus indépendant peut avoir un impact considérable sur la réussite et la stabilité du logement, ainsi que sur la qualité de vie. Le Social Finance for Social Inclusion Solutions Lab a développé un modèle pilote basé sur les résultats afin d'accroître l'accès aux connecteurs communautaires.

Les connecteurs aident les résidents à créer des relations sociales et, avec le temps, à développer un nouveau réseau de support. Les fournisseurs de logement peuvent aussi être plus enclins d'accueillir ces locataires, sachant qu'ils bénéficient d'un soutien adéquat. Les connecteurs peuvent aussi faciliter les opportunités de bénévolat ou d'emploi, ce qui permet d'intégrer davantage les résidents comme des membres à part entière et appréciés de la communauté. Nous avons trouvé qu'une obligation à impact social pourrait être une façon novatrice d'accroître l'accès aux connecteurs communautaires. Autant les investisseurs d'impacts que les bailleurs de fonds publics s'intéressent aux résultats qu'un projet pilote est susceptible d'apporter. Les obligations à impact social sont seulement une idée, cependant. Tout modèle de financement qui pourrait financer un projet pilote axé sur les résultats et assorti d'une évaluation indépendante produirait les données nécessaires pour étendre et accroître l'accès à cette ressource importante.

Keywords

Inclusive Housing, community connectors, autism support programs, community inclusion, outcomes-based service delivery

Mots-clés

Logement inclusif, connecteurs communautaires, programmes de support à l'autisme, inclusion communautaire, prestation de services axée sur les résultats

Background

In Canada, over one hundred thousand people diagnosed with autism (autism spectrum disorder/condition) and other developmental disabilities aspire to transition to more independent housing; however, they face many barriers due to a lack of sufficient resources and support (Inclusion Canada, 2018). Autism is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder (ASA, 2013) often co-occurring with an intellectual disability, as many people diagnosed with autism also have some level of intellectual disability. The reverse is also true (Mefford et al, 2012; Newshaffer et al., 2007; Wilkins and Matson, 2009) and both groups benefit from inclusive housing that provides support tailored to individual needs. The lack of truly inclusive housing is a glaring equity gap, undermining a basic human right (CPRD 2005, & NHSA 2019) for this large group of vulnerable citizens in a country that aims to lead, not lag.

Overview

In 2022, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) funded a Solutions Lab research project designed to explore how this gap can be addressed. The project team sought to find an innovative way to pay for a Community Connector pilot program to demonstrate how this important role improves housing outcomes and quality of life.

Community Connectors help integrate residents into their new communities when they move, fostering inclusion and the development of an informal support network. This one-on-one tailored support helps improve housing success and stability, along with a range of other outcomes valued by our society. In addition, it also provides government stakeholders with the means to scale Connector support across the country.

The project team for this Solutions Lab included the parent of a young adult on the autism spectrum (article co-author Allison Annesley) and the project advisory included an Autistic advocate who is also the parent of four Autistic children (co-author Maddy Dever).

Not surprisingly, we found housing providers are more likely to welcome neurodiverse residents who have Connector support. This is important, given these tenants are frequently screened out in the rental process. Without support, they are more likely to face communication challenges with landlords and neighbours.

Background Research

Our lab research began by trying to identify where and how Community Connector services are currently offered. We also explored the impact Connectors can have on the quality of life for the people they work with. We examined what success looks like and what kinds of funding models are currently used to pay for Community Connector service.

A research scan revealed Connector programs are rare in Canada and where the service does exist (mainly in British Columbia and New Brunswick), Connectors are often provided primarily to support employment goals. We learned that one-on-one Connector service is tailored to the needs of the person being supported, usually on an hourly basis. Funding is typically provided indirectly by government ministries, though in some cases families pay directly for the service. Cost can be a barrier though as most Canadians with disabilities live on low or very low incomes (ESDC, 2016; IRIS, 2013).

Consultation

The Lab team conducted a series of consultations that included focus groups and key informant interviews with people from a variety of backgrounds to gather their insights and perspectives. This included autistics as well as people with other developmental disabilities, family members with lived experience, support agencies, housing providers, policymakers, and subject matter experts who specialize in housing and social finance. Through these consultations, the Lab team found Community Connectors can have a tremendously positive impact on the quality of life for the people they support, particularly with respect to inclusion. We also found meaningful inclusion contributes to housing success and stability. We heard from all groups consulted, including funders, that housing transitions

are a time of great need, and that Connector support has or would improve outcomes. Additionally, people making housing transitions may be seeking support for employment or volunteer goals and Connectors can help with both.

The Proposed Solution

Further research was conducted to explore innovative funding options to pay for the Connector service, which is difficult to find or access in most of Canada. Based on the results of this research, a conceptual model for a “social impact bond” or SIB was developed. SIBs are bonds that invite impact investors to provide the capital required for a social program. These investors will often accept a lower return or profit on their investment if the outcomes achieved align with their values. With a SIB, impact investors receive their money back, along with a pre-determined return from outcomes payers, usually government agencies or philanthropic partners. These “outcomes payments” occur after an independent evaluation has confirmed the program the bond was designed to support has achieved its intended outcomes.

In this case, the proposed bond would provide Connector service to neurodivergent adults leading up to and including their transition to more independent housing and continue until they are well settled. The proposed structure would fund service for 1-200 people for 2-3 years with 6 months reserved at the start and end of the program for preparation and evaluation respectively, for a total bond term of 3-4 years.

Metrics to measure success would be based on desired outcomes in three categories: 1 - housing success and stability, 2 - quality of life and well-being, and 3 - social inclusion. The investment required would range from between \$1.5 million to \$3.5 million, depending on pilot size or the number of residents being supported. The funds would be used to pay for the Connector service, independent evaluation, and general administration, with a proposed rate of return for investors of between 5 and 7%.

The conceptual SIB structure was presented to potential impact investors nationwide in a series of consultations. There was a very high level of interest and support for the Connector service and investors were curious to learn more about how a pilot would work. Potential investors understood the need to generate evidence proving the Connector service can achieve important outcomes. Since a successful pilot could lead to the expansion of the program across the country, there were many questions about how specific metrics could be determined and properly measured to gauge success. Some believed the rate of return could be lower, recognizing the need for this service is great, alongside the need for more affordable housing.

Key Lab Findings

Potential government partners were interested in the idea of funding an outcomes-based pilot but not necessarily with a social impact bond. The proposal to develop meaningful metrics to measure pilot success was very well received. Third-party evaluation would be a novel approach to provide outcomes payers (government partners) greater confidence that their financial support can achieve the outcomes all parties have a shared interest in.

Housing providers, support providers, and other key stakeholders agree the long-term outcomes of a pilot would demonstrate significantly improved housing success and stability. Tenants would thus be able to retain their housing with fewer landlord and property manager

disputes and less unit turnover. Tenants would enjoy greater inclusion, leading to the development of personal support networks that, over time, could augment and replace family support, as family members age.

As more developers and property managers observe the success of inclusive housing pilots where Community Connector support is provided, there will be a diminished perception of risk associated with welcoming these tenants. We heard in our engagement with existing landlords that these residents make great tenants. Greater exposure to this kind of positive landlord experience will encourage new partnerships among the various stakeholders required to make more inclusive housing possible.

We anticipate local businesses will also be more welcoming to these residents as they are more visibly active in the community, regardless of the level of support they require. Additionally, tenants with developmental disabilities tend to shop locally, which business owners and staff appreciate and value.

When more neurodivergent residents have housing stability and inclusion, we can expect fewer negative outcomes, along with improved physical and mental health. We found that there was a correlation between housing challenges and higher use of the healthcare system, social services, and the criminal justice system. Whereas truly inclusive housing offering support to tenants based on their individual needs, reduces shelter use and homelessness as some of the most precariously housed people retain their housing.

Providing Connector service on a broad scale has the potential to facilitate deep and wide-ranging social and economic inclusion, as neurodiverse residents participate more fully in their community. In some cases, this can include new or increased employment. The increased independence of these residents can also free up family members and other loved ones to participate more fully in their own social and economic activities. In addition, stigma and discrimination in housing will decrease as examples of successful integration become more common. The longer-term impacts of our project will be felt as Community Connectors are funded more broadly, and inclusive housing projects become more accessible to people in need, as programs are scaled.

Next Steps

At this point, some federal and provincial stakeholders have expressed interest in providing Community Connector support for housing transitions, but further work is needed. The project team's focus on innovative funding has switched to developing a more specific structure for an outcomes-based pilot to demonstrate impact and generate the evidence required to scale. The Lab team is neutral on how a pilot is funded but some groups may still find the Social Impact Bond a useful tool where other funding is not available. We see greater awareness of the many benefits that inclusion can provide as the main takeaway for many stakeholders.

Both federal and provincial funders have expressed interest in what Connector support can achieve. This is an important first step toward unlocking government financial support for broader Connector services. Our team plans to pursue funding to develop a turnkey pilot structure. This includes developing meaningful indicators for desired outcomes based on key stakeholder consultation, especially people with lived experience. Designing a robust pilot evaluation framework is another important element. We are continuing to increase awareness of the

Community Connector role and its potential to improve housing and quality of life outcomes. Based on what we heard from the range of people we spoke to throughout this project, we believe the potential for program uptake is high.

Neurodivergent residents have a right to housing that meets their individual needs and respects their agency. We believe Community Connectors can be a crucial way to help this happen.

References

- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. (2013). DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Available at <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>
- Mefford, H.C., Batshaw M.L., Hoffman, E.P. (2012). Genomics, intellectual disability, and autism. The New England Journal of Medicine. Available at <https://www.nejm.org/doi/10.1056/NEJMra1114194>
- Newschaffer, C.J., Croen, L.A.; Daniels J., Giarelli E., Grether J.K., Levy S.E., Mandell D.S., Miller L.A., Pinto-Martin, J., Reaven J., Reynolds A.M., Rice C.E., Schendel, D., Windham G.C. (2003). The epidemiology of autism spectrum disorders. Annual review of public health. Available at <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.28.021406.144007>
- Wilkins J., Matson J.L. (2009). A comparison of social skills profiles in intellectually disabled adults with and without ASD. Behavior Modification. Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0145445508321880>
- Srivastava, Anand K. and Schwartz, Charles E. (2014). Intellectual Disability and Autism Spectrum Disorders: Causal Genes and Molecular Mechanisms. Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews. Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0149763414000773?via%3Dihub>
- Employment and Social Development Canada. (2016). A backgrounder on poverty in Canada. Available at <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.824654/publication.html>
- Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society (IRIS). (2013). Looking into Poverty: Income Sources of Poor People with Disabilities in Canada. Available at <https://irisinstitute.ca/2013/11/19/new-report-looking-into-poverty/>
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Article 28 (2006). Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-28-adequate-standard-of-living-and-social-protection.html#:~:text=States%20Parties%20recognize%20the%20right,promote%20the%20realization%20of%20this>
- National Housing Strategy Act (NHS Act) (2019) Available at <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/N-11.2/>