



A GOOD LIFE   
IN COMMUNITY



## A Life Outside of Services: Changing the Conversation

*A Good Life in Community*

A Project by Community Living Parry Sound made possible by the Ministry of Community, Children and Social Services' Employment and Modernization Fund.

## Introduction

Imagine a community in which no sheltered workshops, congregated day programs or segregated housing existed. A community where everyone who has a developmental disability lives a typical, ordinary life in neighborhoods, complete with just the right amount of paid supports. The small, northern Ontarian town that we call home is not quite there, but has made significant strides to achieve this vision. Moving us closer to this was the aim of *A Life Outside of Services: Changing the Conversation*, a two-year project completed by Community Living Parry Sound (CLPS) and funded by the Employment and Modernization Fund.

In order for the project, known as *A Good Life in Community*, to gain momentum, families had to first envision a life of full social and economic inclusion for their loved ones. This posed a great challenge for our organization that, to this day, works alongside the families who played a significant role in bringing the community living movement to the town of Parry Sound. Changing the conversation requires people with disabilities and their families to see their full potential in a community in which they are respected and empowered. People must also be made aware of the local resources (places, businesses, etc.) available in order to fully explore potential lifestyle options and interests. Employing a Community-First approach to changing the conversation, in this case, is vital. This means connecting people to resources and opportunities, collaborating with like-minded partners, and finding individualized solutions in the community to meet a person's interests.

We were able to achieve great success with this project, but as with any feat that sets out to challenge the status quo, it was not done without adversity or hardship. We invite you to share in our learning, and replicate this project in your own community. A life outside of services, though is unknown to the majority of people with disabilities, is not outside the realm of possibility. It is our hope that this framework provides some guidance for you as you work towards creating a community in which every person has the power and freedom to determine the life they want for themselves.

## Background

Families who have loved ones with a disability have, over the decades, come to rely on social services as a source of help and hope. Many are of the mindset that opportunities to create a full and meaningful life in community do not exist. Going against the grain and challenging the status quo can cause a lot of uncertainty, so in the hopes that we would dispel some of the fear, we invited families to come together to learn about the possibilities; a new future for their loved one with a disability.

CLPS identified five families who, through participation in the project, would model how a person-directed approach to supporting people in inclusive, community-based settings will enrich people's lives. Through the creation of individualized, dynamic and person-directed plans, the work done with and by these families over the span of the two year project was tracked to ensure it aligned with the person's goals. Planning with these families included the development of stronger links with existing services, resources and the infrastructure available locally. We discovered that working with community partners from diverse sectors has the added benefit of improving community engagement, participation and social inclusion through the blending of natural and paid supports. To CLPS, creating a life outside of services means working to cultivate innovative relationships that embrace diversity and celebrate abilities outside of the developmental services sector.

## Rationale

As an organization, we were aware of, and enlightened by the transformative work being demonstrated in other areas of the province, and we wanted to share that with the families who receive our services. We believe that the first step to systemic change is to shift the mindset - thinking and beliefs that limit families to a life in service – as this will lead to a change in expectations. That is why our work started with changing the conversation from living a life in service to establishing a good life in community. *A Good Life in Community* was designed to work intentionally with families using a holistic approach to support by charting the way to authentic social inclusion; the path to belonging.

## Outline

To achieve a wholesome life outside of services, a multi-pillared, personalized approach to successfully supporting people with developmental disabilities and their families was needed.

We attribute the success of our project to these three pillars:

1. Knowledge Transfer: Hosting a series of enlightening speaker events that shared the success stories from communities around the province. Each event had its own topic, intended to highlight the existing barriers to community living that people with disabilities too often face. The topics explored were affordable housing, inclusive education and employment, accessible and adaptive technology and envisioning a life outside of services.
2. Resource Mapping: Researching every possible resource available in our community and compiling a living document – in the form of a digital book – that provides citizens of our community the opportunity to explore their interests to the fullest extent. The ‘Community Map’ includes all organizations/businesses, people and places that will allow for people who wish to establish a life outside of services to do so with ease.
3. Planning and Facilitation: Offering person-directed planning and facilitation services to five families who were willing to be the early-adopters of a life outside of services. This entailed fostering relationships with members of the community who could, in turn, connect with people on the basis of interest and eventually become a part of the person’s natural network of support.

## Part One: Knowledge Transfer

The initial step one must take to establish a life outside of services is to first envision it. The aim of this pillar of the project was to share the successes of other communities across the province with citizens of Parry Sound; to provide people with disabilities and their families with a chance to hear and learn from people who have done what was once thought of as improbable, or unattainable. Changing the conversation – showing families that their loved ones with disabilities have endless possibilities in living a life they want – took shape in the form of an enlightening speaker series. The topics were deliberately chosen to highlight both the barriers and

opportunities experienced by people with disabilities in our community and beyond. We partnered with relevant organizations, businesses and individuals to host these town hall/forum-type events in venues that were conducive to the dialogues we hoped to start – community members of all ages, interests and abilities were invited to attend. We also utilized the available technology and live-streamed the first three events on Facebook as a way to broaden our audience – the videos can still be found on our [page](#) if you wish to ‘attend’ the events yourself.

## 1. Affordable Housing

The first of our four events was held in the auditorium of the newly constructed Parry Sound Community Hub – an old elementary school renovated into an affordable housing complex and a meeting space for a number of different community programs. We invited speakers with a variety of experience within the housing sector to share with us their innovative projects and creative solutions for the ongoing housing crisis in Ontario. A list of the esteemed speakers:

- **Mayor of Parry Sound**, who helped spearhead the Community Hub transformation project.
- **Housing Coordinator of the North Eastern region of Developmental Services Ontario (DSO)**, who worked 1:1 with families to find accessible and affordable housing to suit an individual's needs.
- **Supervisor of Homelessness and Integrated Services at the District Social Services Administration Board (DSSAB)**, who oversees the many different housing programs offered in the Parry Sound district – including shelters for women and children in distress.
- **Program Coordinator for Gateway Homeownership Muskoka**, an innovative down payment assistance program designed to help families and individuals with modest incomes secure a home of their own.

## 2. Inclusive Education & Employment

It's been proven that inclusive hiring practices and accessible education opportunities not only enrich the lives of people with disabilities and their families, but grow businesses AND strengthen communities, too. The second event of our speaker series set out to show people with disabilities, especially young adults, and their families, that inclusive opportunities do exist, and they are in-reach. Through our own employment service,

Leading Into New Careers (LINC), CLPS has an established network of employers with inclusive hiring practices – a secondary benefit to this event was to grow our network; to enlighten more local businesses about the perks of inclusivity. We held the event at the local post-secondary school, Canadore College. We invited several people to speak on behalf of the organizations they represent, organizations that work tirelessly to advocate and create inclusive opportunities for people with disabilities in the employment and education sectors. The organizations present were:

- **YMCA Centre for Employment**, local organization that offers 1:1 job coaching and group workshops for job readiness.
- **Contact North**, based out of Canadore College, connect adult students with online learning opportunities and provide the technology to allow people to complete their distance studies.
- **Canadore College**, a representative from the North Bay campus shared the adaptive and accessible supports that make the college experience notable for students with disabilities.
- **Family Support Network for Employment** provides families and people with disabilities with the knowledge and tools they need for effective advocacy when seeking employment.

### 3. Adaptive & Accessible Technology

Technology has become a major part of our livelihood, whether we like it or not. It has the power to simplify, and even enrich many aspects of our lives – one obvious benefit is the ability to connect with our friends and family who are both near and far. Technology can do so much for its users, but there remains a great deal of fear around it. That is why we wanted to host the third event of our speaker series in a more interactive, and less intimidating format – an expo! Our Adaptive and Accessible Technology Expo was held at the Bobby Orr Community Centre, the local venue in which all



*Caption: Tim Vancoughnett, who uses non-traditional methods of communication, attended the Adaptive and Accessible Technology Expo to share his own perspective of how technology changed his life.*

job fairs and similar expos are held. The goal was to bring together people with disabilities and/or seniors with complex medical needs, their families as well and support professionals to create connections to the world of adaptive technology. Allowing service providers and businesses to showcase their products in an approachable way created a fun atmosphere that was conducive to exploration and ultimately, to learning. Here's who we invited:

- **Community Living Essex County**, trailblazers in the developmental sector with the creation of an information-sharing platform called *Real XChange*.
- **HANDS The Family Help Network**, we asked Kimberly Forrest, Communication Development Assistant at HANDS, to share the successes of her work with a person supported by CLPS.
- **Community Living Windsor**, shared their agency's experience with enriching the lives of the people they support with their *Enabling Tech* program.
- **DSO** – We invited back the Housing Coordinator of the North Eastern region to share in our learning and to create opportunities for connection with attendees.
- **Full Circle Telecare**, offers remote monitoring/support services and solutions tailored to each person's unique needs and abilities.
- **Carelink Advantage**, provides communications technology to connect people with progressing medical needs with their family members or care providers so they can feel safe at home.

#### 4. Envisioning a Life Outside of Services

On the outset of *A Good Life in Community*, several CLPS employees who were involved in the project had the opportunity to view the documentary film [Intelligent Lives](#). There was an immediate understanding that the film would go on to play an important role in advocating for and sharing the project with our community. Two years later, as we planned our final event of the project, we set out to summarize the learning and engage people in a discussion about our responsibility to foster authentic social inclusion in the community. When determining how best to accomplish this, how we could deliver one last conversation-changing event, we pulled on our own emotional and galvanizing experience of watching *Intelligent Lives*. Hosting a screening of the film that's described

as “a catalyst to transform the label of intellectual disability from a life sentence of isolation into a life of possibility” was simply the most powerful and cost-effective way we could accomplish this. In keeping with the theme of hosting the events in venues that would allow for a dialogue to be started, we partnered with a local brewery/restaurant that hosts regular social justice film and discussion events.

## Part Two: Resource Mapping

When people with disabilities are excluded or segregated from mainstream activities, they cannot thrive because the opportunities to find belonging and purpose do not exist. We have all witnessed the harm that exclusion and segregation inflict on communities. For people with a developmental disability to build a good life outside of social services, we need to find a way to connect people back to their communities. The way to do this is by matching the person’s gifts to other people in the community who share the same interests as they do. This is the path to belonging.

A crucial step in mapping the path to belonging is identifying the places and people in the community to which a person *can* belong. Our primary objective for this process was taking note of the many businesses, clubs and services that make up the community of Parry Sound. We focused on the town rather than the surrounding areas as that is where the majority of the people that are supported by CLPS live. The final product is a 228-page document compiling the resources that present opportunities for people to connect with others on the basis of shared interests. [The Parry Sound Community Map](#) can be viewed on our website.

## Part Three: Planning and Facilitation

The final pillar of the project sought to build the organization’s existing capacity to deliver person-directed, planning and facilitation services. Briefly, planning and facilitation is a process through which individualized and unique plans for support are identified. We created a [video](#) to promote



*Caption: Rebecca Jones attending a DSO Housing Workshop and working with A Good Life in Community project lead, Tricia Bain.*

the service and to offer a more detailed explanation of the outcomes of the process. After hosting an information session about the project, we identified five families who would be ideal recipients of this service – who could pilot new approaches to determining the life they want for themselves. Planning with these families included the development of stronger links with the existing services and resources that were identified during the Community Mapping process. After identifying and understanding a person's interests, we can then connect people with others and support them in forming natural, authentic relationships that foster their belonging in the community.

Through planning with one of our project participants, Devin, we learned that he loved everything about car races, and more specifically monster trucks. Devin's dream for his future was to become a vlogger and race correspondent on Youtube. To facilitate the achievement of his goal of having an online presence in the world of monster truck racing, we connected Devin with one of our community partners, Norm. Norm is a citizen of Parry Sound who has made a name for himself in media and production, and we came to know him through previous projects that required his expertise. When Devin met Norm, magic happened. Norm mentored, coached and delivered support to a young, hopeful vlogger. Now, Devin is interviewing professional drivers and is achieving notoriety on his YouTube Channel. Through the process of planning, we were able to take a deep dive into what might enhance Devin's life and identify his interests. Finding and then facilitating the connection to the right resources at the right time is how people begin to create a meaningful life in community and outside of social services.

## Conclusion

People connect to a community by sharing their gifts or passions with others. As people connect with others in their community, through shared interests and contribution, they build social capital. A stronger community is then built as a result of welcoming people with diverse gifts. Changing the conversation about how people with developmental disabilities can create a good life in community is not simple. Building a life that is community-based and involving personalized and unique supports will require a lot of time, as well as trial and error. At CLPS, we subscribe to the ‘just the right amount of support’ school of thought. We are of the belief that the ideal support for any given person is a blend of natural and paid – and that natural supports are identified during the planning and facilitation process. Through this project was an opportunity to practice, learn and grow alongside families and self-advocates. This project has opened minds and new doors for people in our community and we hope some of what we tried can and will be tried in other communities, too. We invite you to watch the video that summarizes *A Good Life in Community*, called [the Path to Belonging](#), produced by Norm.