

## Continuing Housing Innovation in Windsor-Essex - A Collaborative Project

Eight people and their families from Windsor and Essex County joined together in collaboration with the following partners: Alliance General Contracting and Flex Custom Home Solutions (two private developers), City of Windsor, Office of Community Development and Health Services/Housing; Windsor-Essex Brokerage for Personal Supports (Brokerage); Windsor-Essex Family Network (WEFN) and Community Living Windsor (CLW), on this innovative proposal/project. A 'project advisory group', called the *Windsor-Essex Innovative Housing Collaborative Advisory Group*, was formed to advise and steer the work.

The people and families participating each have a personal vision for their individualized, innovative housing and support option - one that best meets their unique strengths and challenges. Each vision for home and everyday involvement was developed over a period of time as a result of the following common themes:

- ongoing independent facilitation support;
- conversations with trusted friends and family;
- varied life experiences, roles and responsibilities supported somewhat by individualized funding;
- a local community development initiative called My Home, My Choice that involved the following active partners key to its success over the years: WEFN (the lead), Brokerage, CLW, Family Services Windsor-Essex, City of Windsor, CMHC, ACCESS (Kingsville), Inclusion Press, and PooranLaw. This initiative also involved other partners, too numerous to name. It offered regular opportunities for people and families, as follows: inspiration through real family stories and presentations; availability of timely and relevant information resources about housing options; learning events held at regular intervals; as well as partnerships and community development work with specific local, municipal, provincial and federal government organizations/agencies over six years.

Through a thoughtful and intensive process that involved the person (and family) identifying their dreams, questions were considered and talked through seriously:

- What makes a house a home? Who do I want to live near, or with?
- How can I be more involved in my neighbourhood and my community?
- What supports will I need to contribute and to participate in my passions/interests?
- How will I be supported to make more connections?
- What additional valued roles will I take up in my new home and community?

Six out of the eight people and their families experience highly complex challenges on a day to day basis -- challenges families have found are best met by individualized approaches. They include: total physical support, complex medical issues, mental health experiences (dual diagnosis), autism, and behavioural challenges that are expressed through various modes of communication.

Affordable and safe housing is a basic need for all of us. Most of the people labelled with a developmental disability involved in our proposal have secured housing funding in collaboration with the City of Windsor. Options include: funding for renovations to create or enhance a secondary suite/separate living space within an existing home; funding for renovations of a private home purchased by family; down payment assistance for the purchase of a private home and receipt of a housing allowance to secure a private market rental apartment. Families are working alongside sisters, brothers and close friends - who in the future will be the people who will ensure that the focus person's life continues to unfold as they desire. Families have set up RDSPs and structured their wills to include supportive measures such as discretionary and housing trusts -- enabling funds to be available to ensure housing repairs/maintenance can be sustained into the future.

When we have a great place to live in a great neighbourhood of our choice, we can turn our focus to being more connected to our community and enhancing our valued social roles. Communities are richer when everyone, regardless of difference, has the chance to interact and get to know each other, to share their gifts and contribute. The request of the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) from the families in this project was for support dollars to assist each person to live fully, be supported in their home and become more connected with their community. Years of independent facilitation, learning events, conversations and creative problem-solving have occurred to enable each person and their trusted others to identify the kinds of support they need to live a safe, healthy and rewarding life. This support funding will allow people to give back to their community through volunteering, working and/or being part of clubs and associations that match their passions and interests. Each person's vision aims for a real and meaningful life - an ordinary life with pursuit of active lifestyles - with little to no use of segregated programs. People and families have the ability to choose to purchase the services of independent supporters or supporters through an agency. This purchasing power gives the person/family control in order to respond to things when life changes.

All of the people in this project are best supported through the tailored approaches they have developed – the higher the complexities, the more tailored the support. Home and support options will assist each person to achieve greater independence from their family and will at the same time increase their interdependence and connectedness with others in their neighbourhood and community. The amount of funding required for support is less than what a traditional support would cost. Cost benefits aside, the quality of life benefits of honouring each person's direction regarding "their own home" and structuring supports to what they want and need cannot be overstated.

Many people and families in Windsor-Essex have long been exploring possibilities for housing with the assistance of Windsor-Essex Family Network led learning events like My Home, My Choice, Dollars & Sense and RDSP Information Sessions. They have been planning and thinking about their future and an ordinary everyday life by using independent facilitation offered by Windsor-Essex Brokerage for Personal Supports. Community Living Windsor has supported innovative housing options by receiving, distributing and monitoring funds on behalf of people and families and individualizing supports as people/families identify what they want/need --- for more than 20 years. The people and families participating in this project are ready to put things into action and work with our collaborators as they support individual journeys to create "one's own home", expand support networks and continue exploring community.

All elements of this proposal have the potential to be replicated provincially, the results of which include individually tailored home and support solutions that keep supports and housing separate as a basic tenant:

- Partners and families can meet with stakeholders in their communities to look at possibilities; they can work with their municipality to talk about funding programs for appropriate, affordable housing ideas.
- Persons/families can work with independent facilitators to have the person's voice heard above all others while creating the possibilities for a real and active life in the community.
- Family-to-family support can be provided by 'family networks'.
- Individualized/direct funding for supports can be provided by MCSS.
- Agencies can assist with the provision of services and supports/including financial tracking and invoicing systems;
- Contributions of goods/services can be provided by those in the community that care to help enact change and positive results in the lives of persons with developmental disabilities.

Such elements led to the collaborative project: *Continuing Housing Innovation in Windsor-Essex*.