



Why do we invest in Connected People?

A sense of belonging creates better communities

A sense of belonging -- when we feel comfortable and welcome in a place -- translates into very tangible actions and behaviours in people and communities. Creating, establishing and maintaining essential connections is strongly associated with improved physical and mental health, both of which are key to building and maintaining vital communities.

According to the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, “*Vital communities are characterized by strong, active and inclusive relationships between residents and private sector, public sector and civil society organizations that work to foster individual and collective wellbeing. Vital communities are those that are able to cultivate and marshal these relationships in order to create, adapt and thrive in the changing world.*”¹

In 2013, Statistics Canada’s annual Canadian Community Health Survey reported that 67.7% of Ontarians reported having a “very strong” or “somewhat strong” sense of belonging to their local community. This feeling of being a part of the greater whole is essential to healthy and vibrant communities. It leads to increased participation and engagement in the community and better health outcomes.²

- A greater sense of belonging encourages people to go out and participate in organized and informal social activities. As a result, they get to know more people and have more life experience with a variety of community members. This leads to a broader social network and more social connections.
- People with adequate social relationships are at a 50% lower risk of death than those with poor or insufficient social relationships. As a risk factor for mortality, social isolation exceeds obesity and physical inactivity, and the positive effects of social connectedness on long-term health are equal to those of quitting smoking.³

¹ Canadian Council on Social Development, (2015). *Community Vitality: A Report of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing*.

² Statistics Canada, (2013). *Canadian Community Health Survey, 2013*.

³ Public Health Agency of Canada, (2015). *What Makes Canadians Healthy or Unhealthy?*

Social isolation is bad for our physical and mental health

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, social Isolation – a feeling of being disconnected from the community -- is one of the key determinants of health. For some, social isolation is caused or deepened by marginalization, which excludes certain members of society from the greater community because of language, geography, race, religion, sexual orientation, income and education levels, or ability. For others, social isolation is a consequence of the trend towards fewer people living in extended families, or even near each other. Many delay getting married and having children, and more and more people of all ages are living alone.

- Simple face-to-face interactions with people like neighbours are deteriorating.⁴ People who do not know their neighbours may be less likely to vote or volunteer, and more likely to face serious health issues.⁵
- Social isolation and the loneliness that often accompanies it reinforce social distance and take away interest in going out and participating in social activities. The resulting lack of good connections with others creates the conditions in which depression, addictions and even such physical illnesses as diabetes can take hold.
- Seniors are especially vulnerable to isolation, and tend to feel its effects more keenly than others – yet 20% of Ontario seniors do not participate in frequent (i.e., weekly or monthly) social activities.⁶

By closing the social, economic and physical distances that exist between people and groups of people, we can reduce social isolation and embed the full participation of diverse groups in the DNA of our communities.

Diversity in all its forms is a good thing

Of all the provinces in Canada, Ontario welcomes the most immigrants from countries around the world. People of different ages, genders, religions, races, cultures, classes, abilities and sexual orientations all form part of Ontario's rich tapestry. Roughly 30% of the population, or 3.6M Ontarians, were born outside of Canada. The three leading countries of birth are India, UK and China. That said, immigration is only one source of the diversity we proudly claim.

The Maytree Foundation's DiverseCity project highlights the ways in which diverse leadership benefits the community as a whole, and not just the marginalized individuals who step into leadership roles. While the project was focused on the City of Toronto, the findings apply to all communities. Institutions – including businesses, non-profits and government planning tables – need to be as diverse as the populations they serve; any imbalance is an obstacle to economic growth.⁷ When they value and use the strengths that people of diverse backgrounds bring, communities grow stronger, more resourceful, and more resilient. This in turn strengthens their organizations, their economies and their ability to innovate.

⁴ Pinker, S. (2014). *The Village Effect*. Penguin Random House Canada.

⁵ Brian Bethune, (2014). *The end of neighbours: How our increasingly closed-off lives are poisoning our politics and endangering our health*. Macleans Magazine

⁶ Miedema, D. (2004). *Growing old alone - The rise of social isolation as Canada ages*. Ottawa, Ontario: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.

⁷ Maytree, (2011). *Charting Prosperity: Practical Ideas for a Stronger Canada*. Toronto, Ontario: Maytree.

When people have a say in decisions that affect them, they experience a sense of shared purpose and deeper feelings of belonging. A 2012 evaluation of DiverseCity's OnBoard program found that more diverse boards were better at many things, including strategic planning, governance procedures, and stakeholder relationships.

So what's our strategy?

The Connected People action area is based on the belief that that when everyone feels at home, and is able to play a meaningful role in his or her community, we all benefit. People who are connected to those around them are more likely to reach out and participate in everything their community has to offer, and to provide value by actively engaging in its economic, social, cultural and political institutions. This leads to better health outcomes, knowledge that is wider and deeper, fresh ideas and approaches never before imagined, and better and more responsive programs and policies.

Diversity is a vibrant source of ideas and approaches for building and maintaining the social infrastructure of communities that are stronger and more integrated. When that happens, people can access the supports they need for personal wellbeing; leadership and decision-making are more responsive to the community; and groups that are otherwise disconnected find opportunities to collaborate for shared benefit. The key is to tap into this diversity in a meaningful and respectful way. OTF aims to support initiatives that recognize and include Ontarians' many perspectives and experiences, and make it possible for them to fully participate in building and improving their communities.

Priority Outcome: Diverse groups work better together to shape community

OTF seeks to fund initiatives that achieve the following results:

1. People have a say in shaping the services and programs that matter to them

The collective input of a group often yields a better result for all than the single-minded perspective of an individual, and the same is true of the programs and services delivered in neighbourhoods across the province. They can only be relevant, responsive and creative when everyone is engaged in shaping them. If people's ideas and experiences are valued, they are empowered to improve their own lives and the lives of others by providing valuable insights into the issues that matter most to them. Creating room for people to influence the nature and design of community services and programs gives them a sense of ownership that is critical to success.

Project or Grant Examples:

- Community residents establish a Community Advisory Council to bring together members of the Business Improvement Association and local community services agencies to transform their main street area into a vibrant family friendly community meeting place.
- Community members with varying intellectual disabilities, their families, and other community members contribute to the development of curriculum about inclusion in order to improve individual and institutional relationships with people living with intellectual disabilities.

- A resident's association sets up a committee to gather input from diverse perspectives on public space enhancement projects in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith neighbourhood
- More than 650 volunteers receive inclusion training to welcome and activate the participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, intersex, asexual (LGBTQTQIA) communities in sports and recreation events, games and celebrations surrounding the 2015 Pan/Para-Pan Am Games.

2. People who are marginalized take on leadership roles in their community

Which people are marginalized varies from community to community. Sometimes language and race prevent people from taking on leadership roles; for others, it is age or physical ability. When these barriers are eliminated, space is made for new leaders to emerge -- leaders who are more in touch with their communities and better able to work with and on behalf of community members. This not only challenges our assumptions of what leadership looks and sounds like, but also has symbolic importance in that it shows others that they too have the right and the ability to lead.

Project or Grant Examples:

- To tackle a documented gap in representation on non-profit boards, promising leaders from newcomer and visible minority populations are identified, trained and appointed to serve on boards
- An Aboriginal Secretariat is launched to ensure that decision-making and oversight for programs and services is led by the community
- A civic inclusion curriculum is developed and launched in collaboration with community agencies in order to increase civic leadership and political participation for recent immigrants and people from racialized communities.

3. Diverse groups work together and improve community life

When different groups can find common ground, they build on each other's strengths and close the distance between them. OTF aims to strengthen community ties, build a culture of collaboration, and give people a powerful, collective voice with which to move issues forward for the betterment of all. Opportunities to work together in new and different ways can be found by identifying the groups that are actively participating in their communities and supporting them in making the right alliances with each other.

Project or Grant Examples:

- Nine community-based groups from a variety of ethno-cultural communities come together to develop materials and train peer leaders to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate education and resources to prevent violence against women.
- A neighbourhood association works with community agencies and faculty and students from a local college to provide opportunities for students to complete the practical components of their degrees in community agencies and programs in need of volunteers with specific skills.
- Community groups increase the availability of French-language activities while creating the opportunities for cultural exchange amongst themselves and with the community at large.

Priority Outcome: Reduced social isolation

OTF is seeking to fund initiatives that achieve the following results:

1. People who are isolated have connections in their community

Many of us take our circles of family and friends for granted, but for some people, opportunities to engage with others are few and far between. They need good support systems to link them with people who share their needs and interests and who can provide help when necessary. OTF supports initiatives that reach out to, and encourage the participation of, people who are isolated. We are also committed to creating welcoming public places and spaces that are accessible in every way, where all can gather to enjoy what the community has to offer, fully and with dignity.

Project or Grant Examples:

- A new community kitchen becomes a hub for programs and services for a densely-populated urban neighbourhood
- Iranian and other Farsi-speaking youth participate in a series of dialogues, workshops and art exhibitions on gender and sexual identity designed to tackle loneliness and depression
- A local community centre brings people with physical disabilities and seniors with mobility issues together to help design and oversee renovations to a community centre, and to provide ongoing advice to other building owners and landlords in the community

Frequently Asked Questions

1. With our rapidly changing demographics, how do we determine who is marginalized?

This will vary from community to community. There are always groups of people who have less say about what happens to them and their community than others. Barriers to full participation include language, age, sex, gender identity, race, culture, ancestry, religion, ethnicity, physical and intellectual ability, sexual orientation, geography, employment status, income level, and level of formal education.

2. What is social isolation?

People who are socially isolated have only a limited sense of belonging to the place where they are. Because of that, they keep to themselves and do not participate fully in what is going on around them. Often they are very lonely as well, which can put them at higher risk of depression, addictions and even physical illnesses. Even the perception that one does not belong can lead to actual isolation. Understanding what causes this is critical to preventing it.

3. What do you mean by diversity?

Diversity is the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within our communities. They include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. All of these make us who we are as individuals, and everyone has a different story. By recognizing, respecting and appreciating what makes us unique we are able to embrace different ways of thinking and doing things that will strengthen all of us as we move forward together.

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