

# CONNECTIONS FIRST

Max Bell Foundation & Burns  
Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship  
August 9, 2019

## **SUMMARY: AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF COMMUNITY- BASED NATURAL SUPPORTS**

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Communities can build resilience in their children and youth by providing access to resources, activities, and programming that promote the creation of natural supports.(1-4) Understanding these opportunities within community settings is instrumental in creating more naturally supportive environments for children and youth, and their families.

**OBJECTIVE** To conduct an environmental scan of perceptions regarding factors that serve as facilitators and barriers in the development of natural supports within Calgary communities.

**METHODS** To capture a snapshot of key facilitators and barriers to opportunities and events available within communities that can enable the creation of natural supports for children, youth and families, City of Calgary Community Social Workers (CSWs) were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to provide information on their perceptions and practices of natural support opportunities within their respective communities. CSWs were targeted due to their work within communities to design, implement and evaluate community events and programs; they are also a point of contact for community members and organizations, and provide supports and services to residents and families. Interview transcripts were analyzed to extract and categorize data into reoccurring themes. Commonalities identified among categories were quantified as data permits.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS** Seven CSWs representing 10 communities in Calgary, all classified as highly vulnerable,(5) participated in this environmental scan. This sample allowed for the identification of potential facilitators and barriers for residents and families to participate in community-based opportunities that can enable the creation of natural supports. Below are the key facilitators and barriers identified by CSWs. Each facilitator or barrier presented includes the number of CSWs that discussed the particular idea in the interviews:

**TABLE 1** CSW perceptions of key facilitators and barriers for residents and families to participate in community events and opportunities.

Perceived Factor	Explanation	Number of CSWs (Total n=7)
<b>Facilitators</b>		
• Free food	Providing food at events enables those with low income and food insecurity to participate. Food is a key vehicle to create connection through gathering, and is also an opportunity for sharing culture and tradition.	7
• Free events and activities are open to everyone	Free and low-cost events and activities increase accessibility for low-income families and individuals. Events open to everyone are more attractive for families as all family members can attend, and promotes inclusivity of individuals, including youth and seniors.	7
• Community champions	Engaging with community residents with leadership roles, referred to as community champions, creates a sense of familiarity for other residents, and can assist with recruitment of volunteers, and increasing community participation and capacity-building.	7
• Local events and activities	Events and activities that occur at a location within the community increases accessibility, especially for children, youth and senior citizens.	6
• Connecting with residents directly	Recruitment and gathering information from community residents through word-of-mouth and door-knocking is perceived to be more effective than posters, fliers and newsletters. This also enables building of trust, which is key to creating connections with residents.	5
• Convenient and flexible timing	Offering events and activities at times that are convenient for caregivers with busy work schedules, and children and youth with schoolwork and extracurricular activities, promotes greater participation.	4
• Free childcare	Providing free and low-cost childcare at events and 3 activities enables more caregivers to attend.	3
• Consistency	Offering programming and activities, such as summer camps, at consistent locations, times and/or frequencies enables the creation of closer connections and relationships.	2

**TABLE 1** Continued.

Perceived Factor	Explanation	Number of CSWs (Total n=7)
<b>Barriers</b>		
Community connections are not perceived to be a priority	Highly vulnerable communities have many families and individuals focused on meeting basic needs, such as food and shelter. As a result, creating connections and participating in events and activities within communities oftentimes are not prioritized.	7
• Low income families	Many families and individuals in the communities studied experience financial barriers potentially limiting community participation as the primary focus is meeting basic needs. This is especially a barrier when there are few free or low-cost community events and opportunities offered.	7
• Busy schedules	Many individuals and caregivers work long hours, multiple jobs and have varying work schedules. Large, multigenerational families living within a single household can add additional stressors, including childcare costs and care for older generations. Busy schedules can limit community participation and may prevent individuals from taking on leadership roles.	7
• Unaware of events and activities	Spreading awareness of events and activities can be challenging, especially for newcomers, immigrants and refugees who are frequently unaware of available resources and supports.	6
• Language barriers and lack of funding	Immigrants and refugees with little or no ability to understand or speak English are often discouraged from participating in events and activities. Further, lack of funding limits event, activity and program development. It also requires implementation of maximum participation numbers of children, youth and families due to limited resources and supplies.	5
• Lack of communal space	Several of the communities studied have limited community space for events and activities decreasing accessibility, especially for children, youth and senior citizens.	4
• Challenges engaging youth and seniors	Seniors and youth were identified as two groups within communities that are difficult to connect with and engage. These two groups are also the most likely to be socially isolated.	3

**SIGNIFICANCE** CSW perceptions regarding current natural support opportunities in communities have provided insight into program availability and accessibility, and have identified potential areas of further work to promote system-wide changes in Alberta. Information and data gathered from this project will serve to inform knowledge users, such as community planners and policymakers, to better understand how to optimally invest and develop community initiatives and strategies that strive to enhance natural supports for children and youth and their families.

## REFERENCES

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