

Max Bell Foundation & Burns
Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship

CONNECTIONS FIRST

MAX BELL FOUNDATION & BURNS FUND POLICY FELLOWSHIP

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Natural Supports and naturally supportive communities appear to be a concept whose time has come. Based on the evidence collected through our study of community natural supports in the Connections First project, we believe there is no better time than now to implement the policy recommendations that follow.

The policy recommendations arising from the Connections First Policy Fellowship Project are a key deliverable. These were developed in consultation with stakeholders and vetted through the Project's Advisory Committee.

The policy recommendations are categorized as municipal, provincial and federal. Ideally, governments will work together to advance Natural Supports for all citizens, particularly for children in their middle years and their families. Whilst policy action at each level of government will achieve some benefits, a collective effort across the levels of governments would catalyze Natural Supports and related strategies in communities.

At the outset of the Project, we anticipated developing recommendations for the inclusion of the concept of Natural Supports in business plans and strategies related to the middle years (children 6-16 years). However, over the two-year duration of this Project, the use of Natural Supports and/or 'social connections' language and concepts emerged in a few Government of Alberta policy frameworks and documents.

Early in 2019, the Ministry of Children’s Services in their Well-being and Resiliency Framework, as well as the Well-being and Resiliency Framework: the miyo resource kanakatohehk miyo-ohpikinawawasowin, were already advancing a social connections/Natural Supports approach in Alberta communities as a core component of the prevention strategy aimed at reducing the impacts of adversity on children of all ages. The Ministry is commended for their leadership on this important policy agenda that is built on the foundations of the brain science, and the prevention and proactive supports of adverse childhood experiences.

More recently the Government of Alberta’s stated goal to “harness the power of civil society” (Premier Jason Kenney) and the establishment of the **Premier’s Council on Charities and Civil Society** as one platform of nine to enable this action, aligns strongly with advancing a Natural Supports approach. As Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Community and Social Services states, “This new Council will strengthen the creativity and capacity of civil society in responding to pressing social issues.” Social connections, and therefore Natural Supports, are critical components of a civil society.

At the same time, language and approaches related to Natural Supports have been incorporated into documents from the Cities of Edmonton and Calgary as vehicles for enhanced social and community cohesion. A key example is the Abundant Community Initiative in Edmonton and Calgary. This common language of community natural supports has been even more evident during the current COVID-19 crisis where ‘community’ has been so important to citizens generally, particularly to families with children and those who are most vulnerable in our communities.

The policy recommendations arise from the Connections First work which highlighted the value of Natural Supports to attenuate the impact of vulnerability for children in their middle years and their families. The recommendations build upon and strengthen the policy efforts to date. With the concepts, approach and language already being used in several policy documents, the recommendations that follow focus both on broadening the uptake in additional policy documents and across other areas of government. The recommendations are intended to further support implementation and evaluation of the approaches we now find embedded in numerous frameworks and strategies.

Indigenous ways of knowing

Readers will note that we have not included recommendations for First Nations government’s policy.

While this Fellowship did not focus on any specific populations, expanding the conversation on Natural Supports into First Nations communities is an important consideration for the next stages of work on this agenda.

The duration of our project was insufficient to engage respectfully and meaningfully with First Nations’ citizens and governments regarding Natural Supports. In our consultations with families in both Edmonton and Calgary, those who identified themselves as Indigenous family members understood the concept and value of Natural Supports for the development of children in their middle years. The wisdom in our First Nations’ communities about the important role of community in supporting children’s development could advance the Natural Supports approaches in their communities and provide insights and ideas for non-Indigenous communities.

With the new federal legislation Bill C 92, there is an opportunity to consider how a Natural Supports approach could be used in the Child Intervention system as a component of a prevention and early intervention strategy; identifying potential families at risk early, helping them build their Natural Supports in the community, and looking to the value of Natural Supports in advancing overall community well-being. This will be critical for all levels of government; federal, provincial, municipal and First Nations.

Key Recommendations

Federal:

- Embed Natural Supports language and concepts in relevant Public Health Agency of Canada policy documents.
- Encourage applicants on future grants opportunities targeted at building resilient communities to use a Natural Supports approach, and when appropriate, include Natural Supports outcomes and indicators in reporting and/or evaluation requirements.

Provincial:

- Embed the concept of social cohesion and Natural Supports in overarching Government of Alberta policy frameworks/business plans in alignment with the concepts in the civil society agenda.
- Develop measures, i.e.: outcomes and indicators, to guide and support communities in the development of strategies to advance social connections and Natural Supports. This should include specific measures for children in their middle years and their families beyond the school setting.
- Include Natural Supports in the Government of Alberta Ministry of Children's Services Wellbeing and Resiliency Evaluation Framework.
- Develop policy(s) to reduce the risks and barriers to service delivery and charitable organizations of engaging with volunteers to augment funded staff in programs that build Natural Supports.
- Include requirements for Natural Supports advancement across the lifespan and specify funding for "engagement coordinators" in Family and Community Support Services funding.
- Develop a culturally specific strategy for enhancing Natural Supports in Indigenous communities consistent with the Well-being and Resiliency: The miyo Resource ka-nakatohkenhk miuyo-ohpikinawawasowin document. The learnings could then be embedded in all communities with Indigenous families, not only in First Nations communities.

Municipal:

- Provide leadership and incentives at the municipal level to support and shift Community Associations, Community Leagues, etc. to achieve a broader vision of their role in supporting and building community social connections and Natural Supports.
- Provide training for relevant municipal staff to increase the understanding of the value of Natural Supports in building community resilience and cohesion.
- Identify and address barriers in vulnerable communities to adopting a Natural Supports approach.

The funders and authors of the Connections First Project encourage policy makers to include relevant products (the indicators, guide and evidence) from the Fellowship as a resource for communities and organizations to use in advancing Natural Supports for children in their middle years and their families.

With the generous additional support from the Project funders, for the remainder of 2020, the Fellowship leads are available to mobilize the knowledge of Natural Supports through staff training sessions, in-services, or to provide information to advise on upcoming projects and policy strategies. Contact information is also on the website (www.connectionsfirst.ca).