



The Connected Community Approach: What it is and why it matters

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I once knew a woman named Miriam, who wanted to stop a beautiful stand of trees in her community from being destroyed to make room for a parking lot. She didn't know what to do, who to talk to or how to connect with others with the same concern. So she personally called the company that owned the land the trees stood on. They thanked her for her concern, and days later, the trees were cut down and the concrete was poured.

University professor, Dr. Rasiah, wanted her research on improving health through physical activity to be relevant to the local community. She made up flyers inviting local residents to come and learn about how her research could help people to get more active. She was very disappointed when no one came to her presentation, and she didn't try again.

Howard, a foundation president, is frustrated with the lack of impact that his foundation has had on the social isolation of seniors living in poverty. He has found that funding individual programs to bring seniors together, while meeting with some success, did little to shift community culture. His hope was that neighbours would create informal arrangements and look out for one other in an ongoing way. Without knowing how or what else to fund, Howard and his foundation continued to fund individual programs - trying to get new outcomes from old models. Howard continued to be frustrated.

Neighbourhoods are made up of people; some who live there, some who work in large institutions, and some who work in small shops; some who grew up there and some who came from other places, tens, hundreds and thousands of miles away. Neighbourhoods and other forms of community are the places where people interact, where ideas are born and where there is real opportunity to create meaningful change. But people in communities can also be disconnected from each other and even more disconnected from the systems that affect their lives.

The key to understanding neighbourhoods, or in fact any community, is understanding how the people are connected. To get the most out of the efforts made to improve communities is to intentionally and strategically strengthen the links between and among initiatives and people. When information, ideas, relationships, supports and resources are understood and shared across the players in a community, talents and assets can be mobilized and combined in multiple ways. When people and organizations work together in different ways over time, they begin to foster a sense of shared identity and belonging. A shared narrative begins to develop, new ideas are sparked, and with good facilitation, multiple players from multiple sectors can all play a role in continuous neighbourhood improvement.

That is what the Connected Community Approach does.

The Connected Community Approach (CCA) is a set of principles and practices that connect people who want to make a difference in their community. It connects institutions and funders who want to affect change, grassroots groups looking to play meaningful roles in their neighbourhood and the social service organizations with missions to help individuals to thrive.

Fundamental to CCA is the belief that innovation and solutions to entrenched social problems are generated through collective problem solving. Equally fundamental to CCA is the understanding that much of western society focuses on individual rather than collective achievement. As a result, people and organizations can become disconnected from each other and from the systems designed to support them. Social interventions are often designed for isolated impact, and organizations and institutions often work in silos, disconnected from each other and from the very people they are trying to support. This is one of the reasons that Miriam, Dr. Rasiah and Howard have not met with the success they were hoping for: they were acting in isolation.

But it doesn't have to be that way. In both city and rural contexts, in North America and around the world, neighbourhoods can be places where people, organizations and institutions connect. When the links between and among these groups are intentionally strengthened, local initiatives are born. These initiatives help people identify what they need to overcome challenges, build resiliency and create and make the most of new opportunities. However, if we continue to build communities, programs, structures and institutions that are disconnected from one another, people, especially those most vulnerable, will live in communities that, instead of reinforcing a sense of place, belonging and shared responsibility, have the potential to reinforce a sense of isolation and despair.

CCA is a set of principles and practices that leverage and strategically connect the assets in and available to a community. CCA supports a wide range of players to actively contribute to the ability of a community to be all it can be and to support the people who live there.

The Connected Community Approach (CCA)

is a set of principles and practices for community development. CCA asserts that by intentionally focusing on and strengthening social networks between and among people and organizations, a community backbone organization can be a catalyst that stimulates community based social and economic improvement.

In CCA, the role of a community backbone organization is to leverage local assets, skills, aspirations, talents and resources from a wide range of actors so that they can be effectively mobilized to action.

A Community Backbone Organization (CBO)

is an organization located within a neighbourhood space that provides an anchoring point for social network structures across levels and sectors (person to person, organization to organization, etc). CCA typically only describes a single CBO, but this is a simplifying assumption. There could be multiple CBOs within a community, working in concert but focusing in different and/or complimentary fields.

Neighbourhood Spaces are areas that share some similar organizational, demographic, economic and/or geospatial characteristics. CCA was developed as a construct to work in neighbourhood spaces (although the principles and practices are transferable to other community contexts). CCA locates a CBO inside of neighbourhood space and works to improve the livability for people situated within that space. However, the CBO can reach beyond neighbourhood space to people, organizations and institutions for the purposes of forming helpful linkages and ties.

Gloger, Cerda-Llanos, Ivaniuk, Modlinska

The Connected Community Approach: A Theoretical Framework, 2016, www.connectedcommunities.ca

The Principles

CCA is not a service delivery intervention, but rather a way of understanding how to work in a community using a community development lens. What this means is that the focus of CCA is on changing and strengthening local systems: the way people interact, the way they access programs and services and spend their time, energy and money. It includes the way organizations conduct outreach, the way institutions engage community members, and the way businesses hire. CCA focuses on all these things simultaneously, as well as concentrating on how it gets communicated and understood by everyone. CCA offers principles and practices to support local access and influence on broader systems, including funding bodies, policy makers, researchers and politicians. Thus, CCA is a new approach to community development. It aims to change the community itself, which is quite different, yet complementary, to social services that seek to offer support and knowledge to individuals.

The Connected Community Approach is effective in supporting the following outcomes:

1. Increased capacity to develop innovative solutions to complex community based issues
2. Increased nimbleness and agility
3. Increased resident participation
4. Increased cross-sector collaboration
5. Decreased duplication
6. Allows for more effective use of funds
7. Increased opportunity to learn from one another
8. Increased social and economic opportunities

Community development work is not new. For centuries, there have been amazing examples of community development taking place around the world. CCA draws on knowledge and learnings from the past and looks to a variety of sources to inform its development. What is unique about CCA is not its focus on community or even its focus on connectedness, but that it takes principles and practices from various theoretical and philosophical frameworks and combines them in new ways. The theories include Asset Based Community Development, systems and complexity theories and, most recently, Collective Impact.

For more on these theories and how they play important roles in CCA, see the article **The Connected Community Approach: a Theoretical Framework** at www.connectedcommunities.ca

CCA looks different in each neighbourhood where it is applied. Most communities informally employ some aspects of CCA, whether it be the way communication flows, the level of **collaboration** present or the way residents engage with each other to affect change. What is important and unique about CCA is its intentionality and its inclusiveness. CCA does not exclude or seek to replace projects, programs or other approaches in a community, it builds on them using the following foundational principles:

1. In pursuit of thriving, just and equitable communities, each community is unique. CCA celebrates each community developing their own priorities and acting on their own initiatives, using their communities collective strengths and aspirations in distinct and exciting ways.
2. Effective community work is meaningful to large numbers of people. It offers a sense of belonging, a sense of accomplishment; it is inclusive and recognizes the worth, dignity and contribution of everyone.
3. Community improvement activities do not act in isolation. Good community development builds on past learning and experience and takes place within the current local, regional, national and global context.
4. Local residents are key players in building strong communities and hold a great deal of the wisdom necessary for success.
5. Organizations, businesses and institutions within a community receive benefits from and have responsibilities for that community.
6. Inclusive and meaningful community-based processes focus on assets, build on strengths and take a solutions based approach. CCA focuses on what we have to build on, rather than what is wrong or lacking.
7. Learning is a constant and comes from a wide range of sources.

The Practices

Fundamental to CCA is the concept of community backbone work. The person or organization taking on the role of community backbone focuses on discovering the strengths and aspirations of each person, organization, funder, and institution in and connected to their specific community. Using a wide range of principles and processes, the community backbone organization (CBO) facilitates communication to create spaces and opportunities for the strengths and aspirations of a community to be united towards common goals.

The concept of a backbone organization was first developed by John Kania and Mark Kramer, as a core function of Collective Impact (CI). CCA draws inspiration from their ground breaking work. A CBO provides many of the same functions for CCA as a backbone organization does for CI. Rather than driving disparate groups towards one measurable outcome, as in CI, the CBO supports multiple initiatives across several domains, working in place with an aim to make all interventions more successful.

The role of a CBO is to amplify the work of local change makers, organizations, institutions, funders and policy makers by engaging in core community-based processes which fall under three main categories: convening, facilitating and sharing knowledge.

Much has been written on the role of the Backbone Organization in Collective Impact. For more information, please see www.collectiveimpactforum.org

Convening

- Convening people with similar or mutually reinforcing ideas, talents and resources to align goals and strategies
- Providing creative spaces for shared learning and inspiration
- Connecting people and organizations inside the community with people and organizations influencing broader local, regional or global systems

Facilitating

- Supporting diverse groups to uncover and build on common ground
- Helping people and groups to understand the power dynamics inherent in any community and how to negotiate and manage them in respectful and productive ways
- Providing network leadership by identifying and strategically connecting community momentum to new opportunities
- Guiding people through processes that turn ideas and inspiration into action and results

Sharing Knowledge

- Sharing data, information and stories; fostering the emergence of a shared community narrative and; integrating a baseline understanding of past and present happenings in the community and in the social context it is part of
- Understanding individual, group and organizational aspirations and ensuring that each individual or group has access to people, opportunities and resources that may help them meet their goals

A CBO may convene people in groups based on a shared identity (residents, students, community outreach workers), but more often, a CBO will convene people based on what they are trying to accomplish. Thus, the researcher and the resident, or the service agency and the business, may find allies for their work both within and outside of their own peer group. Through CCA, Miriam, the example of a resident who felt powerless to affect change in her community, may indeed connect with other residents, but she may also connect with students working on an environmental project, a regional environmental group or an organization who trains people to mobilize to advocate for their issues.

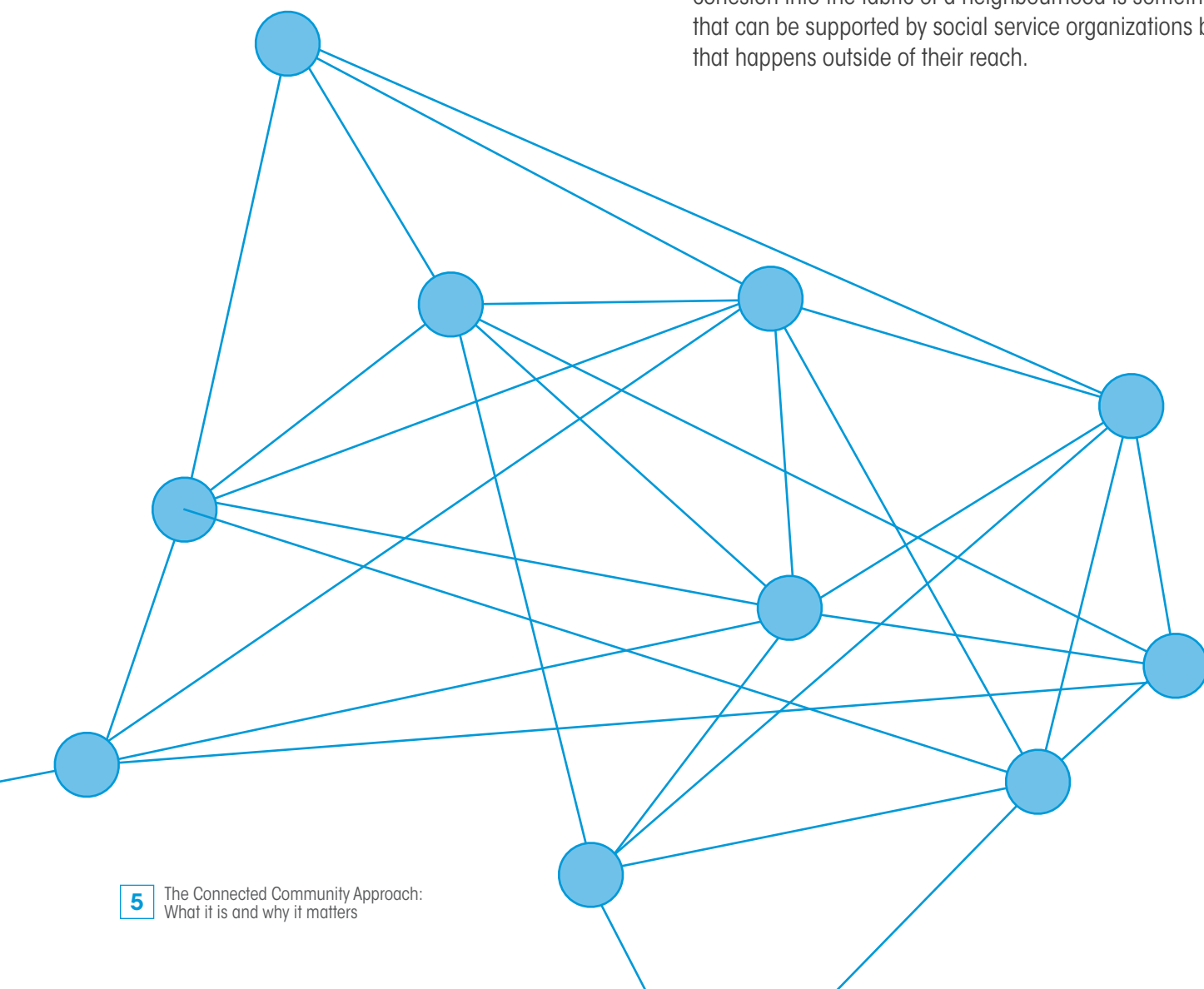
If you think of all the groups, programs, services, and initiatives generated in a community as the nodes in the following diagram, the CBO focuses on the links that connect them, making each one stronger and more in tune with and connected to the neighbourhood as a whole.

By using the principles and engaging in the processes described above, the CBO is able to help increase the capacity for residents, groups, organizations, and institutions to create the community that they want to live, work and play in.

If Miriam had lived in a connected community, chances are she would have connected with like-minded people and maybe even saved the trees from destruction.

If Dr. Rasiah had worked in a connected community, she would have been helped to integrate her research into the fabric of neighbourhood organizing activities, making it relevant to the real context of people's lives.

And, if Howard and his foundation were associated with a connected community, they would be able to help develop a collective response to the problem of social isolation for seniors that may include some programs and services, but would ultimately go much further. Building social cohesion into the fabric of a neighbourhood is something that can be supported by social service organizations but that happens outside of their reach.



Outcomes and Impact

CCA focuses on why and how people work together to affect change. CCA is not issue specific; it lays solid foundation so that people in a given community can be more effective in addressing the issues that they choose to work on.

So, what impact can be attributed to a connected community approach? By virtue of working with multiple stakeholders and audiences, it is important to assess CCA outcomes across the players and domains.

The audiences CCA engages with is, to a certain extent, dependent on the specific community, but it is likely to include some combination of residents, social service organizations, schools, faith communities, service clubs,

neighbourhood organizations, funders and politicians. It may also include institutions like universities and hospitals, urban planners, architects and sports leagues.

People being supported through CCA work in varied fields such as physical and mental health, economic development, environmental action, recreation, poverty mitigation and more. Each sector has a profound impact on individual and community wellbeing and, therefore, different groups may prioritize work of one sector over another for their collective action. In CCA, it is expected that multiple groups will work on multiple priorities simultaneously. CCA does not seek to unite a community in one common cause unless, of course, there is momentum from multiple groups in the community to do so.

The East Scarborough Storefront: An example of the kinds of outcomes achieved through CCA

CCA supports multiple audiences across several domains, so the specific impact that CCA has, and the measurement of that impact, to a certain extent is context-specific. Using a developmental evaluation framework, however, has allowed one Community Backbone organization, the East Scarborough Storefront (The Storefront), to develop an understanding of what impact their use of CCA is having on the Kingston Galloway/Orton Park (KGO) community, which provides a clear example of the possibilities CCA holds for other communities.

Over its 15-year history, The Storefront has worked with hundreds of people, organizations, funders and institutions to affect local change across a variety of domains. Throughout this time, The Storefront experimented with applying different methods to community development, drawn from experience, shared learning and research. Out of their work emerged a new approach to community development which became known as the Connected Community Approach (CCA).

In 2012, The Storefront identified the need to identify and articulate what they knew intuitively and anecdotally to be true: that the work of The Storefront as a CBO was having positive impacts on the KGO community.

For more on The East Scarborough Storefront, its Theory of Change and Community Impact Strategies, please see www.thestorefront.org

Applying traditional formative and summative evaluation methodologies to The Storefront's CCA work typically led to frustration. These evaluation techniques are helpful in evaluating individual programs, but less so for collaborative and collective community-based systems change. The Storefront embraced developmental evaluation as a means to evaluate the outcomes, as well as the value of CCA principles and practices in affecting those outcomes.

The focal point of developmental evaluation is a Theory of Change. A theory of change is quite simply a hypothesis that asks: How is what we are doing creating the change we are trying to make? It then explores further by asking: How do we know that what we are doing is affecting the change we are trying to make? And finally, What can we do better or differently in order to increase our influence on the change we are trying to make?

For more on Developmental Evaluation and Theories of Change see Michael Quinn Patton's book [Developmental Evaluation](#).

The Storefront's impact statement, or the change we're trying to make, is:

People in KGO will have increased freedom, knowledge and opportunities to make meaningful choices concerning their own and their community's wellbeing.

How we are making that change possible begins with using CCA principles and practices outlined above. Using these principles and practices, The Storefront developed five Community Impact Strategies which we can use here as examples of the type of impact that CCA can create.

As a Community Backbone organization, The Storefront has worked with hundreds of residents and dozens of organizations to develop its strategic foci:

- Active, healthy lifestyles (Community Building Through Play)
- Social cohesion (Neighbours helping Neighbours)
- Economic wellbeing (Community Wealth)
- Environmental stewardship (Green Places and Spaces)
- Knowledge and education (Community Knowledge)

For more information on The Storefront, it's Community Impact Strategies and their outcomes, please go to www.thestorefront.org

Over the past 15 years, residents in the marginalized, inner-suburban community of KGO have benefited in these areas because The Storefront's role as a Community Backbone organization and its use of CCA principles and practices to engage in collaborative activities. The results to date include:

- increased opportunities for residents to learn from each other, from service providers and from academic institutions, embedding learning and sharing in every interaction, every event and every initiative;
- increased access to programs and services, making it easy for service providers from across the city to bring their expertise to the community through a ground breaking service delivery hub model: a shared space for 35 social service agencies who bring their programs and services to the community on an itinerant basis;
- increased economic opportunities by building community wealth through locally developed and driven workforce development pathways
- increased civic participation by constantly increasing opportunities for residents to have voice and opportunities to participate in leadership roles across the community and in the broader political sphere.

For residents like Miriam, there are multiple entry points to participate in the civic life of a connected community. Miriam could use her passion for local environmental issues to connect with others to save a stand of trees; teach or learn from others how to be better environmental stewards and; access the programs and services to help her with a range of issues that might be affecting her ability to fully participate in her community and in society at large, including the barriers she may have to finding and keeping gainful employment. A connected community finds ways for residents like Miriam to have the freedom, knowledge and opportunity to make meaningful choices for herself and her community.

But it's not only the residents who benefit from CCA. Fundamental to the philosophies underpinning CCA is the idea that in order to work for social change, or work to ameliorate the effects of social ills such as poverty, a truly connected and strategic community nurtures its change makers. CCA supports community building from the ground up, but it also supports community building from the inside out. Any organization providing community backbone supports must be a healthy organization in order for CCA to have its maximum impact. A healthy, strong and deeply rooted Community Backbone organization can help change makers working in a variety of disciplines, such as those described above, be more effective. Outcomes The Storefront has achieved for organizations and change makers include:

Increased Innovation

A connected community co-creates initiatives with local change makers. These may be social service organizations or residents and business professionals. Innovation is possible because CCA uses a think tank approach with residents and professionals resulting in innovative and strategic initiatives across domains.

Increased Collaboration:

CCA helps people to break out of individual, organizational and institutional silos. CCA brings people and groups together to harness the power of collaboration and collective wisdom,

Decreased Duplication

Another fundamental premise of CCA is that each new neighbourhood initiative should build on past learning and also leverage the assets and resources of the present. So, rather than two similar initiatives running in parallel, CCA supports the idea of taking the strengths of each to create mutually reinforcing initiatives and projects.

Service organizations across KGO have a formalized structure called Cross Community Organizing (CCO):

The purpose of the KGO CCO group is to:

- A.** Collectively use our understanding of the KGO “eco-system” (appendix A) to increase its potential to support the residents of KGO.
- B.** Develop a KGO collective voice in which residents’ aspirations and needs are at the forefront.
- C.** Act strategically with a focus on enhancing neighbourhood processes and the linkages between and among the various systems that affect the lives of people in KGO.

More Sharing of Resources

CCA leverages all that is good in the community for the benefit of the community. In a connected community, people, organizations and institutions lend, borrow, give and share the assets available in order to create greater impact.

More Effective Use of Funds

Each funding dollar spent in a connected community is amplified. It is used more strategically and to greater effect because each individually funded initiative has the potential to be leveraged in multiple ways, multiple times, by multiple players

So, for a professor like Dr Rasiah, a connected community would offer easy ways to connect with residents, organizations and other researchers who are interested in promoting a healthy lifestyle. In a connected community, Dr. Rasiah's research would have increased potential to not only help individuals increase physical activity in their own lives, but also for organizations to increase physical activity in their programs.

CCA builds community from the ground up and from the inside out, but it does not isolate the community from the broader systems, policies and sector initiatives that affect it. In fact, CCA facilitates horizontal connections (connections within the neighbourhood), as well as vertical connections (connections within larger systems). CCA facilitates vertical connections by influencing them to be more effective, more just and more meaningful.

How does CCA affect change in a way that systems influence on people's lives? The Storefront has been exploring ways to draw connections between local experience and big systems, thereby finding ways for the local experience to influence policy and systemic issues. The results that The Storefront has seen thus far include:

Increased Integration

The Storefront helps policy makers, funders and other big systems players to work with each other on the ground in a way that it is often difficult for them to do at policy tables. Real life examples of what policies and funding priorities mean on the ground can have a profound influence on the direction that policy and funding programs take

Grassroots Influence on Policy Decisions

Consultation is critical for effective policy, and many policy makers and funders make it a key part of their work. However, in marginalized communities, consultation burnout is a real problem. In KGO, voices, ideas and community positions are collected and honed over time. Resident advocates understand the needs and wants of the broader community and speak up at strategic points in strategic ways, making consultation a way of life rather than a one off event.

Research that Engages Community Members

Researchers do meaningful and important work. Neighbourhood-based research is critical to our understanding of the systems that affect people's lives, but a neighbourhood is not a sociological study - a neighbourhood is where people live. These people, or residents, are interested in their neighbourhood and the forces that effect it, so The Storefront and its university partner have developed a reciprocal learning approach to their work together. As a result, research has become more meaningful because residents are involved as participants, not just subjects.

Pilot projects successfully tested

The KGO community has neighbourhood-wide communication systems. The Storefront and other community players can leverage knowledge and participation from across sectors across the community, making KGO a great place to test pilot projects. They are often successful because it is easier to foster a shared understanding of the project and its goals with these resources in place and bring various parts of the community together to ensure success.

For Howard, the foundation president, engaging in a connected community might have eased his frustration. He would have been able to connect with people who understood the informal local system, thus helping him to learn how best to invest his dollars to make the local system work better to achieve his goal of reducing social isolation.

For Miriam, Dr. Rasiah, and Howard, living and working in a connected community could make the difference between achieving their goals and making a real difference and giving up or settling for engaging in activities with little impact.

All communities have a certain degree of connectedness: people know each other and help each other. What is new about CCA is that it brings an intentionality to creating or strengthening the web of inter-connectedness that we, as social animals, require to thrive. CCA recognizes the community as a whole system, creating initiatives that honour the fact that a community is made up of people with diverse values and strengths, all of which can make the community a place where people have the choices, knowledge opportunities to live meaningful lives, play and thrive.

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Collective Impact Forum

<https://collectiveimpactforum.org>



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