

Living Our Principles To Build A Community Where Everyone Belongs

John O'Brien

More than 25 years of collaboration with people with intellectual disabilities, their families and the St. Marys community has developed significant assets that Community Living St. Marys can employ to build a community where everyone belongs. This report* focuses on one of those assets, the **Principles** that set Community Living's boundaries and activate intention and invention in service of its Vision and Mission.

Intention and invention

Nurturing welcome and support for contributing roles in community life is co-creative work that involves people with intellectual disabilities and their families, community members, and those who organize and provide assistance. There are two aspects to this work, both of which push back devaluing underestimates of people with intellectual disabilities by individualizing supports to both a comfortable home life and an engaged community life.

Establishing a person in typical housing and assisting them to establish secure and comfortable routines provides a base from which they can move into valued community roles. The necessary skills and knowledge come from a **Good Day Mindset**. This mindset draws on practical knowledge of finding and making a home; identifying, acquiring and employing relevant technologies; and offering capable assistance specific to people's impairments and neurophysiological differences. *Conscious Care and Support* offers valuable

*This report organizes my reflections on a series of group discussions in St Marys between 19-23 March 2018. I had the privilege of listening to small groups of people Community Living serves; family members; community leaders; staff team members; team leaders, facilitators and administrators; and Board members. Focused on mapping assets and suggesting opportunities to even further develop capacity to act on some of its principles, this report supplements the work of note-takers who made detailed records that capture the many important ideas and suggestions that people shared. Those who gave their time and contributed their thoughts to the discussion choose to attend; they can't be expected to represent the whole organization. Discussions were open ended, there were no standard questions and no attempt to achieve agreement. Each participant will have their own reflections on the discussion they attended. Not everyone will agree with what I have made of what I heard.

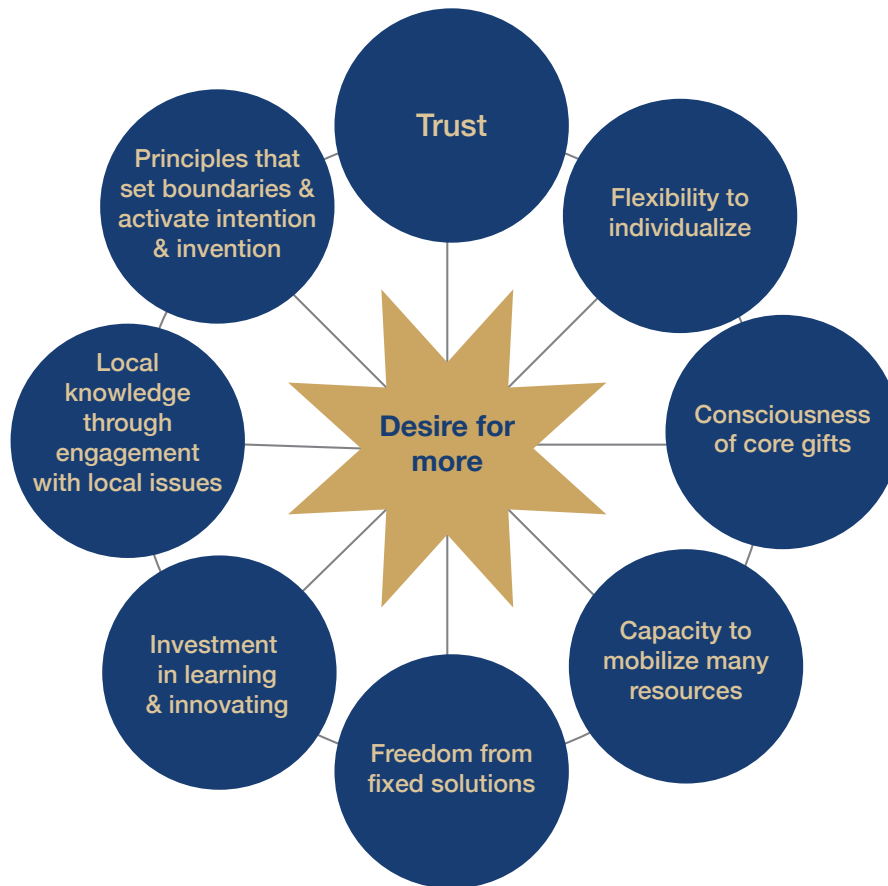
This is not a "Report" in the form of a set of problem statements and recommended solutions. It is a reminder of the assets and possibilities that show up for an outsider on a brief visit. Much of what I am up to here is thinking on paper about what I learned. To the extent that it brings what is familiar into focus from a slightly different angle and reinforces attention to questions that matter it will have done the work that I intend.

I am grateful to everyone who participated for this opportunity to learn more about the long term effort to provide individualized supports aimed at community change.

<p>Vision A community where everyone belongs.</p> <p>Mission To nurture the ability and willingness in our community to welcome and support all people as valued and contributing citizens.</p>



Community Living Assets



Desire for more Community Living draws its energy and takes its direction from people and families desire for more of what is good in life and staff desire to develop more capacity to assist them.

Trust People and families with a desire and willingness to reach for more of the good things of life choose to invest their trust in Community Living. Some seek Community Living because they trust its people, others develop trust over time, a very few find trust too difficult Trust encourages people to express and pursue what is meaningful to them.

Flexibility to individualize Supports are co-created with people and their families and adjusted as interests and needs change.

Consciousness of Core Gifts A cultural commitment to discovering and developing gifts ties people and staff in a common pursuit and energizes and directs the search for meaningful roles.

Capacity to mobilize many resources Good reciprocal relationships with many community resour-

ces and networks extend what is available beyond what is accessible through effective relationships with MCSS and practical knowledge of the way the system works.

Freedom from fixed solutions Supports are not bound to buildings or group based programs. Staff teams are committed to individuals.

Investment in learning and innovating In addition to offering a variety of learning opportunities to people, families and staff, Community Living is active in a network of innovating organizations and participates in projects that expand its capabilities.

Local knowledge through engagement with local issues As an organization and as individual members Community Living contributes to action on community issues including housing, economic development, education and the transition to adult life, and civic life.

Principles that set boundaries and activate intention and invention.

resources to co-create the foundation for engaged community life. As a result of good work from the Good Day mindset, people belong to their community through the home they inhabit and their growing recognition as a neighbor, a regular customer and a familiar face at local events.

Moving out from this necessary home base to connect and contribute takes a different kind of intentional and sustained work by people and their allies. People's gifts, capacities and interests lead to multiple roles in diverse community settings. The knowledge and skills to support engagement in valued roles and negotiate necessary accommodations come from an **Community Explorer Mindset**. An appreciation of a person's gifts and interests energizes a continuing search for settings in which those gifts and interests could make a distinctive difference. After a conscious appreciation of a person's Core Gift, this search might be purposeful conversation in local networks to discover opportunities to share and develop the person's gift. Sometimes the search works in the background: something comes up in casual conversation or catches the eye on a notice board that might connect gift to engagement. It continues with an invitation to the person to explore what might be possible and what it might take to be actively engaged. It moves further with the person's decision to risk involvement and the resolution of whatever practical issues that facilitate the person's engagement. Action from the Community Explorer Mindset deepens a person's belonging. They are not just a face in the festival crowd, they have an active and positively regarded role in making it happen. Five principles direct action that expresses the Community Explorer Mindset.

The assets identified on the facing page strongly position Community Living to serve people and families from both mindsets. Individualized supports free people and their team from the entanglements of group based activity. The trust that team members have earned makes home a safer space **and** increases the chances that a person will respond to an invitation to stretch by moving into a community role. Local knowledge gained through engagement with the issue of affordable housing can both facilitate locating a good home **and** open doors to opportunities for a person's gifts to make a difference.

How might action for community engagement increase?

During my visit I heard many more stories of supporting good days than stories of activating community engagement. There were more stories of Community Living as a contributing organization represented by its leadership than stories of people with intellectual disabilities themselves as active citizens.

I think there are several good reasons for this imbalance and that most of them signal the desirability of renewing appreciation of the Community Engagement Principles as activators of intention and invention aimed at active citizenship for more people.

Community Engagement Principles

Principle # 3

We believe that a range of relationships are valuable and important to everyone.

- We will support people to explore and develop those relationships through intentional and natural opportunities

Principle # 4

We believe everybody has the right to self-determination.

- We will support people to be full citizens of their community
- ...

Principle # 5

We believe that inclusive communities are created and strengthened by recognizing and acting on the belief that each person has unique gifts that are necessary contributions.

- We will help people discover their gifts, abilities and skills
- We will help people use/ share/contribute their gifts

Principle # 7

We believe that being involved in your community leads to full citizenship.

- We will create inclusive supports
- ...

Principle # 8

We believe we have a role in grassroots community development.

- We will support people who use our service, families, board members and staff at every level to lead and take part in community initiatives

GUIDE Framework

Effective principles are...

Guiding

A principle is prescriptive. It provides clear instruction on what to value, what to pay attention to and how to think about what you see, and how to act.

Useful

A principle guides the translation of knowledge into valued action. You can interpret your work in its terms.

Inspiring

A principle orients attention and action to what is meaningful and right. You are challenged to engage what is difficult: actively expressing values in complex situations.

Developmental

A principle applies over time to efforts to adapt and realize what is valued in continually changing conditions.

Evaluable

The effects of a principle can be documented and judged: is it being followed and what are the results of following it?

Adapted from: Michael Quinn Patton (2018). *Principles-focused evaluation: The guide*. New York The Guilford Press. Chapter 6, GUIDE for effective principles.

- Discussion participants with stories of community exploration and engagement either didn't attend or didn't tell those stories, possibly because of the open ended questions I asked.
- Some people do not yet experience the regular good days that form the base for community engagement. This may be because of difficulty establishing the trust necessary to a good relationship. It may be because of particularly challenging or changing needs. It may be because the practicalities of establishing home and routine are in process. Attention to a secure foundation necessarily takes priority for these people.
- Workforce issues are negatively effecting people's days through turnover and time spent recruiting and preparing new team members; changes in assignments, sometimes without sufficient orientation to make support workers confident in their knowledge of a person; a sense among some team members that an unhealthy gap between team leaders and team members has grown as meeting Ministry requirements demands more team leader time; uncertainty about the availability of capable support workers in the long run, especially given the growth in numbers of people who rely on Passport budgets that don't fully cover costs.
- Many people are in stable situations They have good days and show no obvious signs of wanting greater community engagement or a more diverse network of relationships.
- Team members themselves vary in the extent of their own engagement in the community and neighborhood where the person they support lives and the local knowledge and networks available to those who live there.

Tested against the GUIDE Framework from the emerging field of Principles-Focused Evaluation, the relevant Community Living Principles seem good. They offer clear **guidance**. Provide inclusive supports that enable people to develop a range of relationships; to be full citizens; to discover and contribute their gifts; to take part in and lead community initiatives. They **usefully** state the value to people and their communities that Community Living's work should express through statements of belief in relationships, community roles and the difference every person's gifts make. They are **inspiring**; work consistent with these principles has definite moral weight and encounters human tensions. They are **developmental**. Realizing these values is not a matter of simply following a protocol. It is a co-invention through engagement in situations indicated by appreciation of a person's developing gifts. They can be **evaluated** through stories of relationship and contribution, recounted from different perspectives: person, family, community members, support workers, outside observers.

As a community St. Marys does not lack possibilities for engagement. It is alive and changing. Citizens are in the process of discovering effective ways to adapt to demographic and economic changes by actively involving citizens with diverse identities, histories, resources and interests. Community leaders value welcome. This time of change offers opportunities for Community Living

as an organization and for people with intellectual disabilities as citizens: supplying enough affordable, accessible housing; establishing effective transportation both within the area and in the region; developing jobs that attract and retain young people and benefit from the skills of older people who want to continue to earn; recruiting sufficient capable people to provide the support elders and people with disabilities need; exploring many options for engaged and healthy aging and pathways to a good death.

People with intellectual disabilities have gifts to contribute. The community has many opportunities for contribution. The principles are well stated to activate the Community Explorer Mindset.

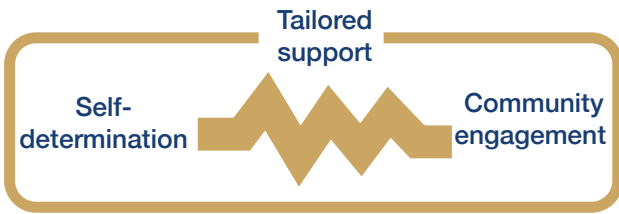
How might the principles be renewed in action?

The principles are presented as a list but they are best understood as a whole. To make them live people must find a connection with their own hearts, minds and hands. As understanding of why the principles matter and how they direct attention and affect decisions deepens, the creative energy they induce increases. Because they reflect a long history of engagement with multiple streams of thinking and practice, some study is necessary to a good understanding. Because the commitment to co-create supports tailored to each person makes it impossible to reduce principles to generalized procedures, people need practice in thinking with them by using them purposely in planning and reflecting on action.

One thing that makes the principles especially useful is that they frame tensions that are integral to providing good support and easy to avoid. Some tensions show up between the high expectations set by principles and the actual performance of Community Living as it shows up in people's community lives. For example, reviewing the extent and quality of people's engagement in grassroots community initiatives (Principle #8) may reveal a distance between principle and performance that invites teams to step into the tension and join people in a search for opportunities for their gifts to make a difference. This calls on the team to accept that more is possible and calls on their capacity to put Community Living's assets to work in co-creating a path that creatively reduces the tension.

At this point a different sort of tension often shows up. These can be mapped and considered as tensions between principles. A common tension enlists self-determination to qualify commitment to community engagement. A person is happy with having good days and shows little interest in becoming more involved in community life. A team that lacks what it needs to think through this tension risks sacrificing one principle for another. Risk increases because understanding self-determination in a way that erases pursuit of community engagement avoids the disruption of good and familiar routines and shifts the uncertainties and demands of community exploration off the team's mind.





When two principles are in apparent conflict, bringing a third principle into the discussion often helps. The commitment to put the person first and tailor make support means that any move toward community engagement would be co-created. This is where understanding some of the thinking that informs the principles allows deeper understanding.

For example, Social Role Valorization Theory (SRV) reminds us that, to a greater or lesser extent, people with intellectual disabilities cope with accumulating effects of wounding experiences inflicted because of their vulnerability to social devaluation. Coping by withdrawing from more than “say-hi-and-chat-a-moment” contact with their fellow citizens is common and understandable, though a lifetime of this is inconsistent with Community Living principles. SRV also alerts us to the many ways that well intentioned people can, without consciousness, reproduce conditions that create social distance between people with intellectual disabilities and their fellow citizens. Creation of parallel activities exclusively for people with intellectual disabilities in the name of therapy, sport, safety or protection from unpleasant experiences is common and understandable, though Principle #7 rules out Community Living as an organizer of such activities. More subtly it is understandable to accept a person’s coping by withdrawal from diverse relationships and community roles as their free choice. SRV promotes Community Living principles with its choreography of ‘bending over backwards’ to avoid the wounds inflicted by social distance. Such an effort may be a long term matter. It may require carefully building up enough trust and personal and local knowledge to craft an invitation to step into civic life that a person can accept. It may call for practical imagination to identify, negotiate and support valued roles that match a person’s gifts and capacities. It will surely accept that the rhythms of a good life can include periods of rest from engagement. What the principles do clearly direct is sustained, careful attention to each person’s next step into more diverse relationships and greater community engagement.

Maybe...

- .. make sure that people and families have good opportunities to teach about the principles –and to learn more about them for themselves.
- .. renew and intensify efforts to create live bridges between workshops and conferences and following action. Include as a condition of Community Living sponsorship producing a specific report in whatever form on “What this learning event contributes to our understanding of the principles.”
- .. create opportunities to challenge one or more principles or question the way they are currently understood. This would encourage active thinking and reduce the possibility that staff see the principles as un-discussable commandments that demand unquestioning obedience.
- .. encourage production of stories or art work that purposefully exemplify or interpret one or more principles in action.

The **GUIDE Framework** check suggests that team members can interpret their work in terms of principles that inspire and guide development. To actually make this happen takes a combination of organized learning opportunities and team process.

Community Living makes multiple learning opportunities available. New team members are introduced to the principles in orientation and regular training. There are opportunities to study some of the schools of thought that underlay the principles, for example by doing *Core Gift* work or participating in SRV training. There are opportunities for deeper learning that enrich understanding of the principles by learning complementary practices and perspectives, for example through involvement in the *Conscious Care and Support* initiative. Recent efforts to introduce mentoring look promising.

Learning opportunities provide a vocabulary. Teams are the site of conversations that can interpret and guide Community Living’s work in terms of

the whole body of principles. Individual conversations can supplement team discussion but they can't replace it. Teams need to develop ways that work for them to make the principles alive in identifying and solving problems and discovering and stepping together into new possibilities. Principles need to frame questions, inform thinking, and remind the team what is meaningful. It is the team leader's responsibility to assure that whole team shares responsibility for this way of working. This is challenging when schedules make whole team meetings difficult and filling necessary hours makes team membership unstable. It is difficult when team leader responsibility to assure that external requirements are met reduces contact with the people teams support and time to be with team members.

A possible next step: invite each team to review the principles relevant to diverse relationships and community engagement (see the box on page 3), describe how they are supporting each principle in the person's life, the valued roles and relationships that result, and their next steps. To extend the learning, share the descriptions across teams and reflect on what is working and where more is possible. Quality Assurance Committee members might facilitate team inquiry to get a sense of how teams think about the relationship of the principles to their work.

How might Core Gift work* contribute even more to community engagement?

In Community Living's *Core Gifts* video, Bruce Anderson focuses the challenge set by Principle #5. Now that people know their purpose in life, what will they do to strengthen inclusive community.

Community Living has invested in Core Gift work with great results. It explodes the bias toward diagnostic language that reinforces the inferiority of "client" to "staff" and provides everyone with a common positive language to describe their distinctive gift and contribution. It gives everyone the opportunity to review their life experience in terms that put times of wounding, trouble and struggle in perspective as source of gifts. It directs and motivates action that is responsible to life's purpose.

This simple illustration suggests a progression in Core Gift work. Before the process the gift is unspoken, implicit in fragments of a person's story. As the process surfaces and makes a pattern of previously disconnected aspects, a person can claim the Gift. Claiming



Unspoken



Claimed



Animating purposeful relationships

What's the purpose of your life? And, knowing that, now what do you really want to do?

–Bruce Anderson

* My experience with Core Gift work is limited. Too many more years ago than I can pin-point I took an early workshop with Bruce. I'm unfamiliar with his current teaching and the processes that he offers now. I'm sure that the way his work is developing has much more to offer than I know. I have appropriated the anchor from the Core Gift website as an icon for the Core Gift.

Maybe...

.. further explore how the *My Core Gift in Action offerings* can add even more to the Core Gift work, especially as people Community Living supports engage with them.

.. get acquainted with Starfire, an innovator in supporting people with intellectual disabilities to build community. Their blog is at <https://cincibility.wordpress.com> Their You Tube Channel , with 50 short community building stories s at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCieSIPrc1tkL8f_X6-zawZw

.. get acquainted with Urban Innovations, a community building effort that engages people with intellectual disabilities with their Harlem neighborhood <http://urbaninnovationsharlem.org>

.. review current iterations of the MAPS and PATH processes. The point is not to add or replace what works for Community Living now. The point is to see if any of the practices might add something, especially the practices that build graphic images of gifts and highest purpose.

.. review the list of actions that build community from page 26 of *Pathfinders* (inclusion.com) as a reminder of the many ways a connections can grow across boundaries.

implies much more than receiving the results of an interest inventory or personality test. It reflects a felt sense of purpose integral to a person's identity. It energizes a sense of responsibility for the Gift and activates desire to develop the Gift by bringing it to others. In this way the gift animates purposeful relationships. Purpose finds the soil and nourishment to take root and flourish.

Gifts are many and diverse. Not all of them will lead to visible civic action, although the principles are confident that people's gifts, given, will improve the quality of community life and that some people's life purpose will lead them to engagement with community issues. The desired picture is not one that shows everyone constantly busy in civic life. It is of people with diverse gifts active in different community settings in different ways that have particular meaning because they express people's best current answer to the question, ***Now that you know the purpose of your life, what are you going to do?***

Possible next steps.

- Share and reflect on stories of the ways that discovering Core Gifts has led some of the diverse people who have done the work into new or renewed commitments to action. Identify as many ways as possible that the shift from claiming the Gift moves into Animating purposeful action.
- Review some Core Gift Statements to identify language that generates a search for more diverse relationships or new valued roles. See if there are any examples of Core Gift statements that might inadvertently reinforce a person's marginalization. Consider what implications these reflections might have for the Core Gift process.
- Ask each team to review their own Core Gift statements and reflect on how their engagement with the person they support allows them to serve the purpose in their life.
- Ask each team to review the way they support the person and identify how their support encourages the development and expression of the person's Core Gift.
- Invite the people Community Living supports into individual conversations that renew shared appreciation of the person's Core Gift and explores next steps in expressing the purpose of their lives.

The Promise of Community Living

Establishing and sustaining meaningful community engagement remains the most difficult work that people with intellectual disabilities and their families and allies have to do. Within the social orbit created by family and those committed to their support, people reveal unimagined gifts and surprising capabilities. Relationships and memberships in wider social circles remain rare and the result of persistent, courageous creative work.

Human service systems call for natural support and valued roles and at the same time distract from the necessary work with demands for accountability and insufficient funds that exhaust self-directing families and occupy agency

leadership with making up the shortfall and taking up the system imposed burden on family life.

No where I know can say that valued social roles in community settings are reliably available to everyone whose life purpose calls for them.

And no place I know is better situated to continue learning how to offer what it takes to see people's gifts in action than St Marys is. The assets that Community Living has accrued over many years of offering individualized support in the context of community building provide the means to keep moving deeper into the life of a changing community. The principles provide clear direction and inspiring expectations.

What is necessary is to remain grounded in the real gifts of people with intellectual disabilities, focused on the mission and committed to the principles. To understand this commitment, its worth thinking of the principles as promises to people, family, and community. Promises of the sort that Wendell Berry describes in his essay, *Standing By Words*.

Making a promise binds one to someone else's future. If the promise is serious enough, one is brought to it by love and in awe and fear. Fear, awe, and love bind us to no selfish aims but to each other. And they enforce a speech more exact, more clarifying, and more binding than any speech that can be used to sell or advocate some 'future.' For when we promise in love and awe and fear there is a certain kind of mobility that we give up. We give up the romance of a program that is always shifting its terms to fit its occasions. We are speaking where we stand, and we shall stand afterwards in the presence of what we have said.