

**BUILDING A GOOD LIFE  
IN COMMUNITY**

***TEN LESSONS FROM PROMISING  
INITIATIVES ACROSS CANADA***

Building a good life in community is not an easy task for vulnerable people. Many systems have been created that “place” people in community residences and programs. Yet, building a good life looks and feels very different. The focus is on dreaming and personal goals, individualized support, and connections with community life that are meaningful and fulfilling.

I have been honoured the last few years to have travelled across Canada to study and visit several projects that have enabled vulnerable citizens to build a good life in community. This summary is a brief outline of some of the things we are learning from these promising projects. A book on the full research is expected to be completed sometime in 2006.

The first thing we learn is that building a good life in community must be *intentional*. It does not just happen, and it certainly will not happen if people do not have a clear vision and sense of purpose. We are also learning that it does not happen alone. People need other people in their lives in order to build a life that in many ways goes against the typical service approaches of compliance and clienthood. *We are learning that people in promising projects are focusing on citizenship and self-determination.*

Here are ten lessons from more than twenty promising projects across Canada. A quotation from a promising project leader is also presented with each lesson.

**1. People think in new ways that reflect new paradigm approaches.**

*“We think beyond bricks and mortar. We stay focused on community.”*

**2. There is clear vision and set of values.**

*“Our vision of community is based on the values of citizenship, hospitality, rights, and participation.”*

**3. The voice and choice of individuals is the basis for all planning and support – self-determination is honoured.**

*“All of our work begins with valuing each person and honouring their wishes.”*

**4. Dreams and gifts guide the person-centred or person-directed planning.**

*“Many people with disabilities have had little chance to dream, let alone actually act on their dreams.”*

**5. Relationships are nurtured through participation and invitation, including building support networks.**

*“When connecting a person with community life, we look for people and places that would support the person’s dreams and gifts.”*

*“Intentionally building a support network with a person has many surprises and positive outcomes.”*

**6. Facilitation is key to making it happen, and focuses on community and individualized support, and shows the importance of independent planning and facilitation.**

*“Our facilitator planners enable people to plan a life in community and, equally important, assist people in implementing their plan.”*

**7. Individualized funding is a key mechanism for building creative supports with vulnerable people.**

*“Individualized funding enabled us to build individualized supports and hire our own staff. It has been empowering for our son.”*

**8. Individualized support is built creatively with family, friends, professionals and community.**

*“We thought that 1:1 support was the answer until we learned how to really connect our daughter with friends and community groups that valued her strengths.”*

**9. People work together for change.**

*“It has been hard work, but now we feel such support from other families, our friends, from the facilitator, and from the wider community.”*

**10. Good principles and policy matter, whether it is organizational or provincial government principles and policy.**

*“Our initiative is driven by principles. This the key to staying grounded in the lives of people. Fortunately, government policy is consistent with our principles, which ensures that we can make progress together.”*

Our research with these promising initiatives show that *change toward citizenship and inclusion is a journey*. In many ways, the journey is like a pathway. "Pathways" is an ancient archetype for ways to find inner peace. Thomas Mails, a North American native person, reminds us that these pathways are not passive; they are filled with power and action. In visiting many promising projects across Canada, I have been struck by the strong community vision, commitment to partnership, and

genuine participation in the change process. The Mondragon Co-operative in Spain has a saying that "we create our path by walking it." Or, as many of the promising projects say, you must "learn as you go." People involved with promising initiatives tell us of the joy and energy of participating in an innovation. At the same time, new ways of working bring new kinds of tensions and dilemmas. However, as a citizen in one project remarked, "Perhaps it is better to have struggles which we own, rather than to assume others are taking care of the problems for us."

Many of the promising approaches we have studied are *relatively small* initiatives. Can the examination of small promising approaches really make a difference to inclusion and new ways of supporting vulnerable people? Are large-scale changes and system changes not a better way to proceed? Much evidence indicates that large-scale change is often unsuccessful. In fact, the failure of large system change in human services has stimulated people to look at small local projects as a catalyst for change. As Robert Theobald reminds us, there is evidence that the connections between small-scale shifts in thinking and action are the building blocks for more fundamental change we need. Other research shows that small-scale community projects lend themselves to the building of social capital, which refers to relationships, trust, and cohesion in a community. Lessons from small initiatives then become the basis for learning how to transform larger systems.