



# **Creating Inclusive Lives**

## **Blue Sky Conference**

### **Report**

Alberta Association for Community Living

Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD)  
Alberta Human Services



## Key Points

- People with developmental disabilities have a substantially greater potential to contribute to building welcoming and inclusive communities than they or their communities currently realize. Supporting people who are vulnerable to exclusion to successfully and sustainably fill contributing community roles through relationships and friendships over their life span is the work of inclusion.
- Progress toward inclusion requires social innovation: new ways to actively support communities and families to create opportunities for people who are historically likely to be marginalized.
- The social innovations necessary to inclusion are created by a willing collaboration of people with disabilities and their families and allies and other citizens in their ordinary schools and post-secondary educational settings, workplaces, and civic life. These collaborations multiply and grow stronger when they are supported, as invisibly as possible, by service providers who use available resources flexibly to respond to individual needs for accommodation and assistance to play valued community roles.
- Currently there are diverse understandings of inclusion. The differences among these understandings can be mapped on two dimensions: the degree of responsibility people and organizations accept for change and the extent to which the understanding of inclusion disrupts current mindsets, practices and policies and demands deep change.
- Progress is best made by making room for those most committed to the deep change needed to advance inclusion to learn by taking action. The stories of what they accomplish and the lessons they learn will increase the number of people and families who want to work for inclusion and the number of service providers who choose to support them. Making room for social innovation means reliable investments of money, time and talent over time as well as flexibility in discovering new approaches to using and being accountable for public funds in situations where resources are shared across the boundaries that define current practice.
- A set of social innovations will promote learning by developing stronger networks and building capacities to mobilize communities.

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On 19 and 20 November 2012, [The Alberta Association for Community Living](#) and [Persons with Developmental Disabilities \(PDD\)](#), [Alberta Human Services](#) hosted about 100 people from communities around Alberta whose efforts are critical to creating inclusive lives for children and adults with developmental disabilities. Participants included family members, people with disabilities, advocates, service providers and those responsible for regional and provincial service systems, and representatives of education, health, and family support.

Participants in the Blue Sky Conference were invited to work together in small, cross-boundary groups to...

**imagine new possibilities for the inclusion of  
children and adults in community life**

and explore the changes in relationships, mindset, practice, structure, and policy needed to realize those possibilities.

The ideal of inclusion is reflected in the mission and vision of both host organizations and in the Alberta Government's Vision for Social Policy (quoted on the facing page). Over the last generation Alberta families and their allies have opened new pathways to inclusion. The conference offered an opportunity to reflect on what has been learned from efforts to increase opportunities for inclusion and to consider what it will take to establish and sustain people with disabilities as contributing citizens who benefit from their connections to community life.

Throughout the conference, work group participants shared key ideas with the whole group and wrote some of their key ideas on posters and post-it notes. I facilitated the conference and prepared this report based on contributions to the large group and identification of common themes in the written materials people produced, so not every idea discussed in the work groups is reflected here. Participants have diverse views of inclusion and the changes necessary to realize new possibilities, so not every participant would agree with every idea presented here. Some of the key organizing ideas and opinions in the report came from my reflections after the event. Those with different perspectives could arrive at a very different summary and conclusions.

I hope this report will aid continuing exploration of the many ways people with disabilities can actively contribute to making Alberta's communities inclusive and welcoming.

–John O'Brien  
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“Alberta is a place where everyone contributes to making our communities inclusive and welcoming; where all people enjoy opportunities to fulfill their potential and benefit from our strong social, economic and cultural life.”

*Let's Turn Ideas Into Action*  
*Social Policy Framework*  
*Fall 2012 Working Paper*

## Seeing people with disabilities as contributors

**“Alberta is a place where everyone contributes to making our communities inclusive and welcoming; where all people enjoy opportunities to fulfill their potential and benefit from our strong social, economic and cultural life.”**

*We should not be limited by the way things currently are but should imagine where we want things to be and create a system that allows this.\**

*There is a need for all Albertans to accept and understand the responsibility to create inclusive communities.*

It's easy to think of inclusion as something done for people with disabilities by community members. It is also common to consider inclusion a right. A careful reading of the Alberta Government's Vision for Social Policy draws attention to the idea **everyone** has a contribution they can make to building inclusive and welcoming communities. This provides an additional angle on what inclusion means for people with disabilities. This perspective emphasizes the person with a disability as an actor, not just a recipient; a contributor to inclusion, not just a beneficiary; someone who is invited to take responsibility, not just assert a right.

Conference participants identified the array of different social roles on the facing page as some of the channels for contribution through which Albertans with developmental disabilities can bring their interests and capacities to their communities. When fellow citizens who would not otherwise benefit from these contributions relate to people with disabilities who occupy these roles in their common social, economic and cultural life, all have a greater opportunity to benefit.

These are ordinary roles and some people with disabilities have assumed many of them without intentional support. But there are many people who will only have the chance to grow fully into these roles with conscious, creative action by committed allies who choose to learn what it takes to mobilize community support for their participation.

Those who have already moved into contributing community roles have important stories to tell. Many of those stories have at least one chapter about overcoming underestimations of what could be accomplished and too low expectations of the possibilities of welcome in the many places of community life. Many tell of everyday social innovations created to build bridges into community settings and sustain contribution there.

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\* Quotations are from participants' responses to the invitation to share key messages; some have been edited for clarity. Most of the messages participants submitted have been incorporated in the body of the report.

friend • athlete • artist • musician • actor • club member • good neighbour • playmate • student • classmate • employee • employer • business owner • entrepreneur • tax payer • volunteer • gym member • customer • caregiver • roommate • home owner • life-long learner • teacher • mentor • board member • leader • son • daughter • brother • sister • aunt • uncle • cousin • spouse/partner • parent • church member • team member • elected official • agent of change • driver • traveler • pet owner • coach • story teller

## We have different understandings of inclusion

*We don't agree about what inclusion is or how to get there. And it's become clear to me that is OK. What is hopeful is the realization of our interdependence and the many possibilities some of us see for people with disabilities to participate more in our communities.*

It may be reasonable to think of creating inclusive lives by following a technical route: promulgate an operational definition of inclusion, measure its current levels, design incentives to encourage application of evidence based methods and experiment systematically to develop and disseminate new techniques, measure the improvement and redo. Reasonable, but far from the reality in practice or in the room at the Blue Sky Conference.

Despite its usage in the disability field over many years, participants struggled with important differences in their understanding of what inclusion is, how much to value it in relation to other desirable things, and especially what it means for the future of services.

The diagram on the facing page maps different understandings of inclusion expressed among conference participants in two dimensions:

**Responsibility** – the demand for organizational action required by inclusion. Low responsibility means that, however important inclusion may be, it is primarily someone else's task. **Low responsibility** for inclusion

(Quadrant I & Q II) often means putting higher priorities on other concerns like using scarce resources to provide current services to as many people as possible or respecting people's or families' expressed choice for current arrangements, or providing specialized interventions for underserved groups. Priority on action for inclusion might increase if funding increased to exceed perceived need for adequate pay and absorption of those who are not fully served. **High responsibility** (Q III & Q IV) sees inclusion as a moral and practical imperative, a matter of social justice and a measure of social responsibility. A service can't produce inclusion alone, but getting much better at the work of building relationships that cross boundaries is central to its mission and high among its priorities.

Inclusion is important, but it's not our main task

**Responsibility**

Inclusion is the core of our identity

We have just scratched the surface. Deep & challenging learning is necessary

**Disruption**

We know how to support inclusion when the necessary resources are available

**Disruption** – the extent of innovation that inclusion demands. **Low disruption** (Q II & Q III) holds that current practice is generally on track to offer as much support for inclusion as people and families desire. Under all but the most unusual circumstances (exceptional levels of funding or heroic levels of family effort) inclusion outside the family circle is unrealistic for people who require high levels of accommodation and assistance. Participants in a sheltered workshop can be seen as included in community because they are performing a typical social role (worker) in a local building; residents of a group home who experience group outings are as included as it is realistic to expect them to be. **High disruption** (Q I & Q IV) recognizes that inclusion demands deep change. Services

\* This conceptual map is only an aid to understanding and discussion. It was constructed from my sense of participants' contributions rather than by any formal method. It tries to reflect different positions from the flow of discussion rather than classify any particular person's position or estimate the prevalence of any view.



**Disruption**

**Q I**

**Influence the Public**

- It's up to legislation and policy makers, influenced by advocates, to shape a more inclusive community by educating the public and discouraging discrimination.
- Services can play a part in community change but are already very heavily committed to providing day-to-day support.

**Q IV**

**Invest in Social innovation**

- Systematically build active collaboration with community to open new pathways to active participation
- Personalize support to valued social roles in community.
- Reinvest existing service resources: deliberately move away from services that group people based on disability.

**Responsibility**

**Q II**

**Maintain Course**

- Inclusion is one value among several. The higher priority now is protecting funding for existing services and meeting expanding need in a climate of fiscal restraint
- The degree of inclusion a person experiences is a matter of individual choice and abilities; those for whom it is not realistic or desired need the option of good local services that provide opportunities for meaningful life among disabled peers. It's wrong to judge those who choose less inclusion.

**Q III**

**Refine Current Practices**

- Work within boundaries of current service options; find ways to ease transitions among human services
- Creatively improve techniques for connecting people, one person at a time.
- As new resources become available, consider adding new options specifically designed to support inclusion.

*The tools we have are not the right tools for what we want today.*

*We need a different skill set in the sector: how to network; how to engage community; the role of facilitation; how to maximize the skills and talents of those we are working for and those we employ.*

*If we want different results, we need to do different things.*

must shift from a mostly inward focus and learn how to engage employers, mainstream resources like post-secondary education, and community associations in ways that build collaborative relationships of support for contributing roles. Higher levels of collaboration with people and their families and far more flexible use of service resources are necessary to offer personalized support to individuals as they pursue a normative pathway through life. Much current investment needs to shift away from settings that congregate people in a marginal, special world—even if that special world is physically located in a community—and be reinvested in ways that promote inclusion. From this perspective, inclusion is understood as people occupying a variety of valued social roles in typical settings that allow them to be contributing citizens and to build a more extensive and diverse network of friends, allies, memberships and contacts.

These differences are challenging because commitment matters more in the pursuit of inclusion than compliance does. Law and policy can discourage the forms of exclusion that result from discrimination on the basis of disability, and this matters. But the experience of inclusion wants more than cold toleration of a person's presence. It wants genuine progress toward the welcome and opportunities identified by the Social Policy Vision quoted on page 5. And supporting the journey from exclusion to inclusion is more than the correct interpretation of policy and accurate implementation of technique. It demands the kind of social innovation that creatively engages uncertainty and risk and draws strength from personal commitment. It is more important for policy makers to refrain from making inclusion harder than for them to try to mandate it. Because organizations powerfully resist authority's attempts to require what must be achieved through commitment, those who want to raise the level of inclusion will focus more on demonstrating new possibilities, building relationships, persuading and negotiating than on manipulating requirements and incentives.

Much can be done without trying to force consensus on these diverse understandings.

- It makes sense to advance inclusion by actively supporting those committed to the most disruptive understanding (Q IV). Real and consistent but relatively modest investments of political support, money and regulatory and fiscal flexibility in social innovation will produce great learning and real benefits to individuals, families and communities at a pace determined by the growth of practical knowledge.
- The high responsibility/high disruption inclusion agenda can continue to move forward at a manageable cost to services that work from an understanding that demands less change.\*
- Progress on many issues that will make inclusion easier will also have other benefits important to the system.

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\* Accelerating success at providing personalized support for inclusion could reduce the demand for existing group based services to the point of threatening their viability. It seems unlikely that that point will be reached in the next few years.

Inclusion is a valuable result of intentional action focused on particular people and communities. It is also an expression of the whole systems\* relationships, resources, structures, and policies. The level of contribution people with disabilities make to Alberta's communities, and the number of people with disabilities who contribute, depends on learning by making changes in practice. The necessary changes will encounter many constraints that limit action and learning. Some of these issues may be better managed than they are now.\*\* Because they are interrelated, even modest progress on any of them will not only increase the chances for people to create inclusive lives, it will also improve the quality of other aspects of the whole system's performance.

### Free energy for learning.

**Families** are crucial to social innovation in services and in community life. Family participants in the Blue Sky Conference report that the continuing effort to get and maintain the basic supports they need from funded services significantly reduces the energy they have for promoting the inclusion of their own family members as well as other people in their communities. The cost to families, for example in time lost and anxiety, often rises when they seek funding for more innovative, less familiar forms of support. The availability of family mentors and guides multiplies the number of families able to move toward inclusion.

**Direct support workers** can make a key contribution when people require personal assistance to participate. Their desire and ability to create positive relationships and learn how to facilitate inclusion with a person whose participation they have made a commitment to support over time deserves adequate compensation and active support. Increasing opportunities for direct support staff to develop their understanding and commitment to inclusion, to capitalize on their own networks, talents and interests and to grow the pool of capable people are important system contributions.

**Service providing organizations** can use their resources to create new ways for people to participate in community life when they can achieve a balance that allows them to manage existing commitments in a way that frees time for learning new ways to engage community. One approach to learning is adopting a strategic goal to pro-actively seek people and families who want a high level of community participation and actively collaborate with them to develop supports that match the person's interests and capacities and a specific

*Its important that families, individuals, and governments develop strong learning networks to challenge, encompass, and enjoy community.*

*Services that work from the idea that people need to be fixed or controlled will have a hard time with inclusion. The mindset that works best sees people first as whole, valuable & beautiful just as they are & then considers the unique supports they need to show who they are at their best.*

\* "System" often refers to the government authority responsible for services, in this case Alberta Human Services. As its used here it includes all the people and groups whose interactions create supports for people with disabilities: people with disabilities and their families, advocates, and service providers as well as those responsible for managing services regionally and provincially.

\*\* What follows is a summary of the issues identified on post-it notes as conflicting with or inhibiting efforts to increase inclusion. Each requires much exploration and consideration than it is given here. There is no attempt here to suggest solutions; this account just identifies some potential leverage points for advancing inclusion.

community setting rather than simply offering them a place in the services the organization is most accustomed to provide. Pursuing this goal might involve engaging local educators in encouraging higher expectations for community participation. Even two or three collaborative efforts would generate valuable learning if an organization is willing to stretch outside its comfort zone.

**Sharing powerful stories** based on what people, families and communities have already accomplished in Alberta shifts the sense of what is possible, encourages high expectations for contributing community roles and energizes action.

### **Build trust and reduce fear**

Much of our society has not learned to value the dignity and capacities of people with disabilities. When efforts to include people are thoughtfully done, many people break through this socially created barrier and engage the person respectfully and some people come to appreciate the person and their gifts deeply. But even careful efforts can get stuck in awkward or disrespectful treatment that reenacts stereotypes about people with disabilities, lead to disappointment, rejection and even to exploitation or abuse. When people with disabilities, their families and service providers are gripped by discouragement or fear they can perpetuate a negative cycle. Less inclusion means less personal experience of people with disabilities. Less personal experience means that stereotypes and prejudices go unchallenged and unchanged.

Trust is an essential resource in building more welcoming and inclusive communities. It grows when a person and family build relationships that reach beyond their family boundaries and connect them to others who will treat them respectfully, identify with their sense of what matters, act to support their contribution and expect respectful responses in return. When these relationships include people in community as valued and participating members, possibilities for inclusion grow. When these relationships include the people who provide necessary personal assistance and facilitative support, possibilities grow.

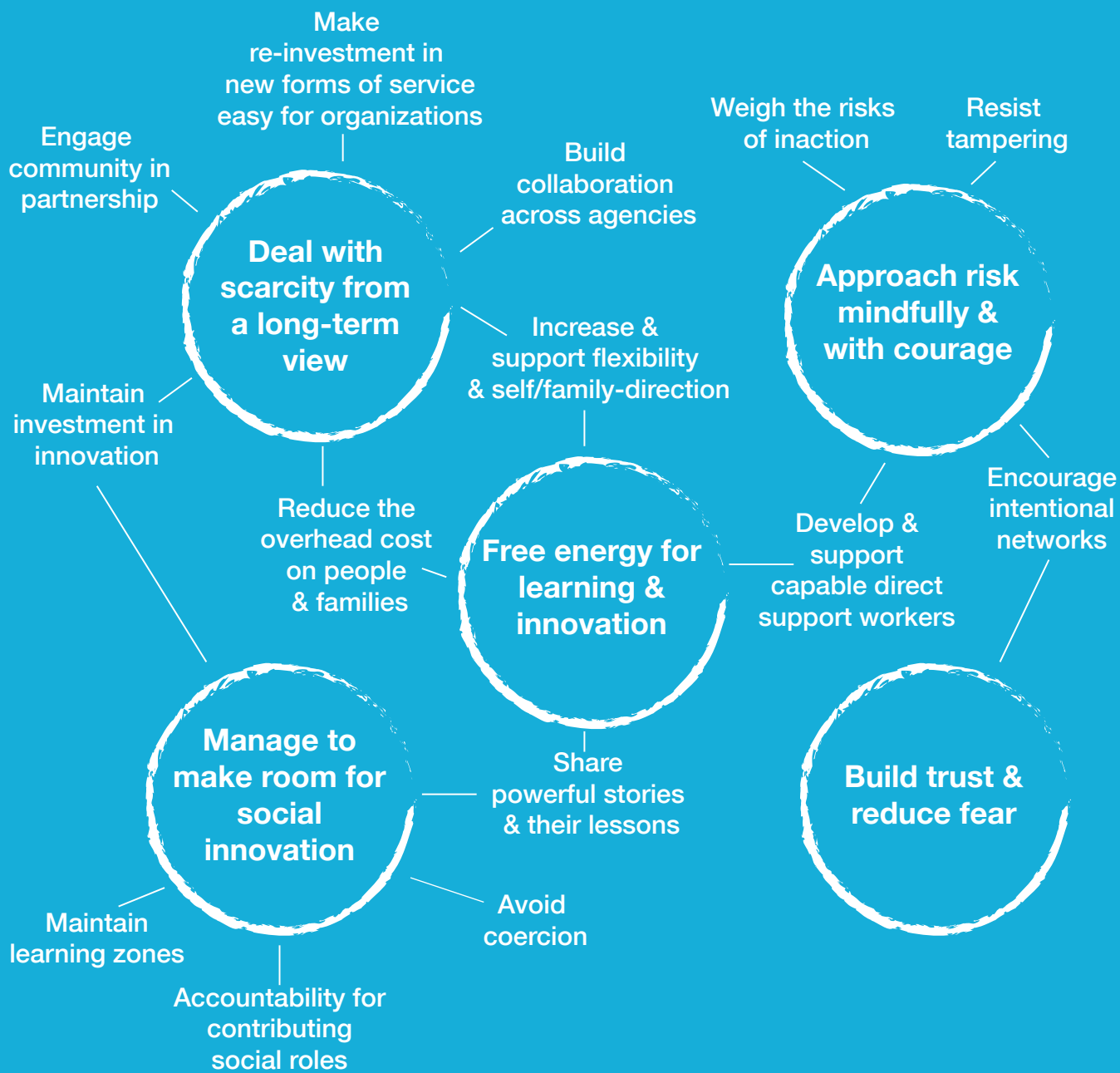
Organizations can become infected with fear and locked onto compliance with rules and protective routines. Fear enforces impersonal boundaries and creates distance between people that makes building trust and creating bridges to contributing roles beyond family and service world very difficult. Driving out fear is a key management responsibility.

### **Deal with scarcity from a long-term view**

Wise management is critical when public funds for services decrease. The system risks freezing as threatened people focus on protecting what is and making a case for more of the same.

Some Conference participants feel that changing eligibility criteria and imposing measures to allocate funds and assess performance with the claim that they provide an objective assurance of fairness creates suspicion and

*Building inclusive communities requires identifying “felt need” for everyone, not just people with developmental disabilities. We are too small and specialized to create the momentum we need to compel change. But the issue we represent resonates for everyone: compassion, caring support when it’s needed and good opportunities to work, live and play matter for everyone. Learning to be creative to resolve issues and developing interdependence to survive and thrive matters for everyone.*



distrust among some people and resigned compliance for others. They note that these measures increase uncertainty and demand substantial attention and resources and that a number of families experience this as an unwelcome increase in the costs to them of getting needed supports. These measures may prove themselves in time, but for now they drain energy, decrease trust, and increase fear among those who could otherwise be building inclusive lives.

Blue Sky Conference participants did not convene to consider wise approaches to scarcity. They did however identify some approaches to scarcity that would also serve to advance inclusion.

- Purposeful investments send a powerful message when money is scarce. The system should inhibit the defensive reflex to cut funds for social innovation or concentrate on more of the same. Modest and consistent funds to support the growing edges of inclusion are critical, especially in life defining roles such as those offered in integrated employment.
- Most families and many people with disabilities can make good decisions about best use of available funds, especially when they have access to guidance from experienced families, people with disabilities and socially innovative practitioners. Increasing self-direction and the range of options for support even further is prudent.
- A growing number of service providers want to increase the level of individualized support they provide. It would be worthwhile to identify cost-neutral ways to make it easier for those provider organizations that choose to re-invest in new forms of support to do so.
- Cross agency collaboration becomes even more important as funds become more scarce.
- Active partnerships with community organizations that collaboratively push the limits of accommodation to people's impairments and offers opportunities for community to grow in the arts of welcome and inclusion can redistribute, and sometimes reduce, the costs of support while multiplying benefits.

### Approach risk mindfully and with courage

*It is important not to romanticize community.*

People with disabilities are vulnerable to neglect and abuse. They are also vulnerable to underestimation, over-protection, and deprivation of opportunities to participate and learn. Understandably, there is far more public concern for the much lower incidence of abuse and neglect when it happens in publicly funded services than for the more common chronically detrimental consequences of low expectations and over-protection. Increased vulnerability to neglect creates an enhanced duty of care and greater potential legal liability.

Risk management can straitjacket efforts at inclusion. The responses of people beyond the boundaries of the service world are uncertain and outside direct accountability to organizational rules and policies. The actions of

people with disabilities in community activities and organizations are hard to predict, especially if they are trying something new. A person's success in a contributing community role depends on the person's capacities and the goodwill of other community members. Working out the support the person needs and negotiating the accommodations a person might require takes staff into unfamiliar territory. This shapes a timid sensibility that communicates easily to many people with developmental disabilities, who have likely experienced disrespectful and prejudiced treatment. The safe bet is to stay with what is familiar and decide that risk management dictates less exposure to the potential threats of community life.

Slipping out of the straitjacket of risk management driven by fear and low expectations in favor of a responsible consideration of risks calls for a mindful approach.

Encouraging intentional, diverse networks of people who commit to supporting a person increases resilience, multiplies the chances of good judgments about risks, offers more leads to safe and potentially welcoming community places, and safeguards courageous action.

- Managers can decrease the bias to overprotect if they avoid tampering by multiplying regulatory measures in response to very low incidence occurrences, such as an accidental death. It makes sense to carefully investigate and respond to the particulars of each situation rather than preempting the whole system's attention and imposing blanket changes before careful consideration.
- Investing in developing and retaining direct support workers who are willing to form respectful relationships and improve their competence and judgment through reflection on their decisions improves the odds of effective responses to uncertain situations.
- In deliberations about risk, it is as important to weigh the potential costs of not taking an action as well as the potential for trouble. Devaluing assumptions create a powerful pull to ignore the negative effects of low expectations and a bias toward overprotection. There are costs to the person of lost opportunity for learning and contribution, costs to the community of lost contributions, and costs to service providers who avoid improving their competence by addressing the task of effectively supporting a person's inclusion.

### Manage to make room for social innovation

Increasing opportunities for inclusion requires social innovation. We need to discover new ways to partner with community employers, association leaders and local resources. We need to discover more ways to build relationships strong enough to overcome exclusion, one person and family at a time. We need to find effective ways to raise consciousness and expectations by sharing powerful stories and frameworks for understanding that break through pessimism about what people in particular places can

*We need to get better at supporting innovative solutions that might break rules.*

create together in the way of welcome and inclusion. We can seek these discoveries in disciplined ways –observing with care, listening, planning, trying, reflecting, building on what works– but what we need to learn lies on the other side of familiar boundaries in interaction with people we have no organizational authority to direct. Significant results and the methods to achieve them seldom match predictions.

Most of the social innovations necessary to increase welcome and inclusion take time to develop, require many cycles of learning and tolerance for uncertainty. Their creation fits uneasily with management approaches that require detailed specification of objectives, milestones and methods and assurance of compliance with rules and procedures developed to regulate generations of services whose limitations we are seeking to surpass.

*Keep it up –don't give up five minutes before the celebration appears.*

Making room for innovations while keeping existing commitments is a worthy challenge for people who accept the responsibility for managing service providing organizations and the whole service provision structure. Conference participants offer this advice.

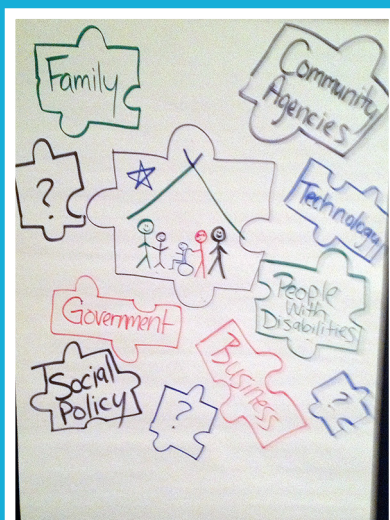
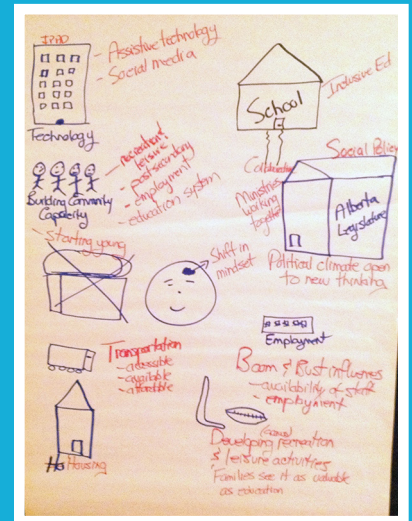
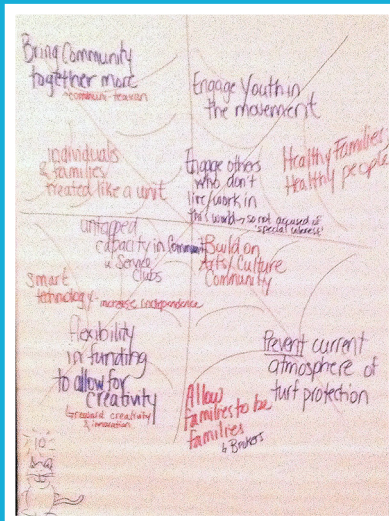
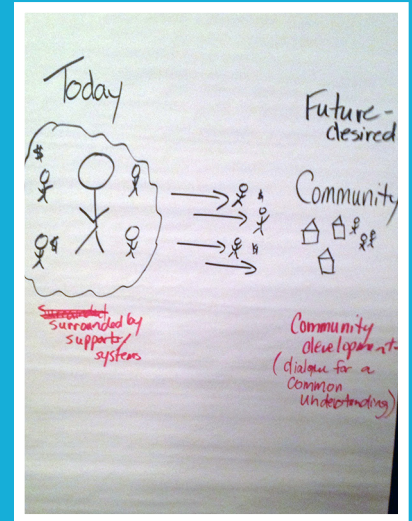
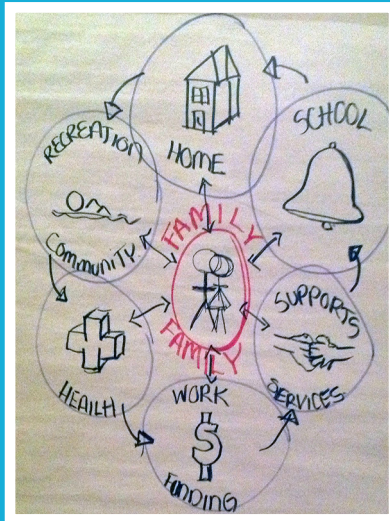
- Continue to invest money in innovation that holds promise of further increases in welcome and inclusion.
- Make room in regulation, quality improvement and fiscal management for responsible experimentation. Hold innovators accountable over 3-5 years for increasing numbers of people in life-defining, contributing social roles such as inclusive employment.
- Avoid coercion. Social innovation is motivated by what people find meaningful and difficult; it can't be assigned to unwilling people who have other important desires in their hearts. Create many ways for people to hear and learn from those who are creating inclusive lives, but avoid the temptation to turn what has worked into recipes and requirements. Accept an extended period of uneven access to support for inclusion as a necessary cost of innovation.
- Maintain learning zones. One way to provide for the innovation necessary to advance inclusion without disrupting the whole system would be to develop a way to designate willing participants as members of inclusion learning zones. Such a space would offer greater flexibility with rules and funds and system funds to support innovation through learning opportunities for families, people with disabilities, community members, and service providers; the development of mutual help networks and communities of practice; and ways to reflect on and consider how to scale up successful social innovations.

*Learn to breath; it's a journey. I first thought the road to justice was a sprint; in midlife, a marathon; now I realize it's a relay.*



# Images of Movement Toward Inclusion

Small groups created posters to summarize their sense of the changes that will increase opportunities for inclusion. Here, without interpretation, is a sample of these images.



## How might we...

If more people with disabilities are to have real options for holding contributing roles in ordinary community life, our system will need to invest talent and time to create a wider range of capacities. Students of social innovation recommend framing the necessary tasks as design challenges, stated in sentences that begin with the phrase, **How might we...**\*

...learn from people & families who pursue an inclusive life path, & share their stories in powerful ways to inspire & inform change

...build family desire & ability to follow an inclusive path throughout the lifespan, from earliest years on

...significantly increase the network of family members who act as guides & resources to other families

...build & strengthen networks of people who choose to push the edges of inclusion (people & families, community members, advocates, providers, policy people)

...engage families across cultural, language & class differences

...assure that people who need very substantial accommodation & assistance are purposely included in inclusion efforts

...learn from organizations that support contributing community roles & share "what it takes" in ways that influence practice & policy

...assure that people who have been separated from their families have good opportunities for inclusion

...actively explore inclusion in communities of different sizes & identities

...play an active role in the world wide movement toward inclusion

...encourage organizations designed to serve groups who choose to make changes to individualize support to people in community roles

...change culture to encourage responsibility for inclusion without depending on more rules & regulations

...promote reflective practice as the way to learn deeply from experiences of inclusion

...develop ways of holding ourselves accountable for progress toward inclusion that clearly reflect its biggest challenges (e.g. integrated employment for all adults)

...make sure that we hear as much of what we don't want to hear as we can

\* See Tim Brown (2009) *Change by design*. New York: Harper Business.

...create many more personal networks/circles of support

...encourage many more people with disabilities to take responsibility for actively contributing to their communities

...mobilize support for individuals among people in community settings

...promote family visions of inclusion & creation of plans to realize those visions

...encourage support workers to commit to learning with people & families to practice connecting to & supporting valued roles

...encourage inclusion in every committed person's whole circle of influence (not just in service world roles but in whole life)

...discover & actively contribute to diverse local agendas to improve community life (service groups, local government, etc)

...practice inquiry & conversation as ways to cross boundaries rather than trying to sell our version of inclusion

...make best use of technologies -assistive tech & social media- be thoughtful about how technology can help & how it might detract

...make the most of the Social Policy Framework; look especially for opportunities outside Human Services

...find images & words that catch the imagination of citizens outside service world & open doors; a common language that values people's participation

...draw on art, music, theatre as a source of opportunities & resources for communicating the importance of inclusion

...decrease the causes of people & organizations protecting their turf by tightening their boundaries

...look at administrative changes in PDD from the point of view of inclusion: which changes might be closely aligned? could any detract?

...shift the ways funds for support flow to make individualized support for inclusion easier for families

...better align AISH with the inclusion agenda

...encourage cross boundary work that dissolves the effects of structural silos

*In Alberta, everyone contributes to making our communities inclusive and welcoming. Everyone has opportunities to fulfill their potential and to benefit from our thriving social, economic and cultural life.*

*–Alberta’s Social Policy Framework*

## New Possibilities\*

Blue Skies Conference participants are well positioned to make progress on increasing welcome and inclusion in Alberta’s communities and supporting people with developmental disabilities and their families to play constructive roles in social, economic and cultural life. This work will not be done in a year or in ten years, but real change is desired and possible. Conference participants share a sense that inclusion is valuable, that there is great potential for improvement in their communities’ capacity to include and support people with developmental disabilities, and that transformational change in the developmental disabilities system is necessary to facilitate inclusion.

System transformation has several dimensions and building capacity to support inclusion is one; the one that is the focus of this report. In its concern for inclusion, the purpose of transformation in the developmental disabilities system is transformation of community life, in line with the Social Policy Vision. The test of system transformation is its impact on the community lives of people with developmental disabilities and their families.

### Three challenges for system transformation

Conference participants identify three challenges to system transformation that are relevant to promoting inclusion, each of which calls for purposeful investment in social innovations that build on existing accomplishments:

- I. Engage in active partnership with civic groups, schools, post-secondary educational institutions, and employers. Their collective actions shape community life and their resources can multiply opportunities for inclusion.
- II. Positively influence local and province-wide demand for inclusion by organizing and mobilizing families, people with developmental disabilities, and allies among service providers and citizens.
- III. Develop the sustainable capacity to offer flexible individualized support. This includes increasing the supply of support workers who understand and are committed to inclusion, capable of supporting people as they fill community roles, and willing and able continue the struggle over time.

### Advice on transformation

Conference participant’s deliberations provide good advice by identifying two key considerations to guide those who lead necessary system transformation efforts.

**ONE: An effective transformation is paced by respect for differing priorities.** Inclusion is one value for all Blue Skies Conference Participants, but

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\* After the conference, organizers and a number of the table discussion facilitators gathered to consider what the conference had to say about the possibilities for transformation in the lives of people with developmental disabilities, their families and those who serve them. This is a summary of their conclusions.

a significant number have other priorities that they place higher. A number of family participants want greater community acceptance and the option for more inclusive roles for others but judge that their own family member is currently well served and do not want any significant change. A number of service providers see the need to build a competent and committed workforce and a sustainable fiscal foundation to meet expanding demand for services as more immediate than the work of inclusion. Other service providers say that valuing individual and family choice means offering a range of choices, of which support to individual participation in a community role is only one. Some also note that, in their experience, support for personal inclusion involves additional costs that PDD is not currently able to meet.

The changes necessary to support inclusion won't result from coercion or manipulation. Efforts to push transformation beyond real demand and deep understanding are likely to produce superficial compliance if not outright opposition. As successful innovations open more pathways to inclusion, more people with developmental disabilities, their families, and service providers will choose to do the necessary work.

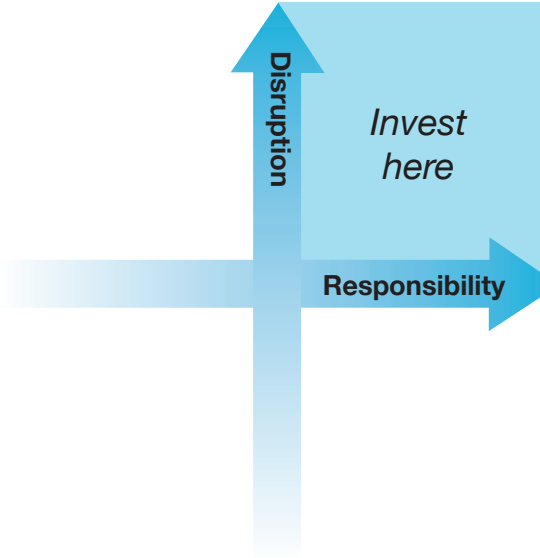
All of these concerns are legitimate and a competent transition will take account of each of them. Making the best of the current diversity of understandings of inclusion counsels a long term view of the transformation process. The task for transition leaders concerned with inclusion can be framed by this question:

**What can we invest in today that will contribute most to meeting the three challenges in the longer term?**

Targeted, sustained investment in the most disruptive and responsible efforts at inclusion will have the greatest long term impact if it can grow as capacity and demand from people with developmental disabilities and their families grows. Investment includes not only targeted and sustained funding but the willingness for the administration to be innovative in taking risk in allowing the flexibility to learn from action.

**TWO: An effective transformation effort builds on and broadens existing strengths.** The conference included a number of family members, people with developmental disabilities and service providers who are fully committed to pushing the boundaries of inclusion forward and are doing so under current policies and funding. Their experience should inform investments in transformation.

During the Conference they said, and demonstrated, that the real stories of people's inclusion, shared person-to-person, are powerful in recruiting and guiding people in the pursuit of an inclusive life path. They shared the practical results of current, innovative efforts to engage their communities in active partnership. They also made it plain that their own journeys to full



membership in thriving communities are far from complete and that each of the three challenges to transformation affects them significantly.

The knowledge that can be discovered by investment in deeply understanding the experience of these social innovators is a crucial resource for transformation. New possibilities can be identified. Strategies that work can be described and shared. System policies, procedures and practices that help innovator's efforts can be identified and strengthened; those that inhibit their efforts or make them unnecessarily difficult can be identified and put on the agenda for revision. Building the capacity to gather and communicate this knowledge and encouraging further innovation is itself a worthwhile investment.

### **In conclusion**

The Social Policy Framework offers a vision, goals and principles that demand and can guide deep, long term change in the social position and contribution of people with developmental disabilities. A reorganized Alberta Human Services focuses attention on socially valued outcomes and intends to make collaboration within the system easier and more productive across the life-span. Across the province, there is a strong foundation of innovation to build on, laid by the sustained efforts of Alberta families who seek a good life and their allies. There is wide desire for real change. There are many people committed to inclusion who are able and willing to share leadership.

The challenges to inclusion are formidable, but participants in the Blue Skies Conference show the desire and ability to meet them.