COMMUNITY CORNER: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) program at Algoma University College was contracted to evaluate an innovative prevention model that has been developed in Sault Ste. Marie, and is a collaborative effort initiated by the Children's Aid Society of Algoma (CAS) in conjunction with the Sault Ste. Marie Housing Corporation (SSMHC). This family preservation model is designed to provide community-based family support programs in neighbourhoods with a relatively high density of at-risk families (e.g., Community Corner).

This project was a multi-method evaluation that adopted a utilization-focused approach. Qualitative data in the form of interviews and focus groups with stakeholders was gathered. In addition, a comprehensive literature review provided a context for analysis of the strengths, gaps, and opportunities for further development of the program and for the application of the model to other neighbourhoods and rural areas.

The findings of the study indicate that Community Corner staff engaged most tenants and facilitated empowerment by providing an opening for the neighbourhood to further develop the core values necessary for healthy children and communities. The research identified a number of areas of practice that were critical for providing tenants with a sense of belonging and an opportunity to establish trusting connections: respecting local culture by providing many access points to program participation and creating a comfortable atmosphere; ensuring that staff are respectful of all participants; allocating sufficient time for relationship building; identifying opportunities for different types of engagement that includes children and flexible formal and informal activities. The community partnership model of service delivery also provided an opportunity for the tenants to develop relationships with many other service providers, accessing resources, developing new skills and/or increasing their capacities.

The Family Preservation Program adopts a strengths-based and ecological approach to families and the neighbourhood, which has helped to facilitate self-esteem development for tenants and positive interactions in the community. Community Corner is a safe venue for parents to talk about their issues where staff are available to mediate. The research shows that tenants have developed conflict resolution skills and parenting skills, and that the relationships formed or strengthened at Community Corner have led to mutual aid and cooperation amongst tenants, including teenagers and children. Tenants have reported caring more about their neighbourhood, participating more frequently in community life, an increased sense of safety, and feeling less shame about living in a subsidized housing complex since Community Corner opened. The program has helped to develop social capital (i.e., trusting social relations) in the neighbourhood of Chapple/Albion by connecting people in the neighbourhood and from different positions and backgrounds, thereby linking disadvantaged communities with external resources and information. Community Corner has also facilitated capacity building as staff from partnering agencies learn community development skills and share these new skills with their respective agencies.

There are ongoing challenges for the program including the lack of permanent funding, the layout of the neighbourhood, the stigma associated with living in subsidized housing, and the degree of power and authority over clients that social work service agencies (particularly child

welfare) have. The density of the housing is one of the most stressful elements in tenants' lives and a barrier to establishing trusting connections and participation. It is important for service providers to consider that strategically putting services in at-risk neighbourhoods may further stigmatize the people living there or may lead to negative feelings (e.g., anger, shame) and disempowerment.

When considering expanding the program into other neighbourhoods in the city and/or rural areas, it is critical to include tenants in the development process to provide them an opportunity to voice whether they are interested in the development of a community hub and what programming or activities would be useful to them.

Tenants in the neighbourhood of Chapple/Albion were initially sceptical and concerned about CAS coming in to the area, due to concerns regarding the power that CAS may have over their lives. This research identified important strategies for helping to balance the power relationship:

- Allowing tenants to have power in decision-making for Community Corner and the neighbourhood;
- Developing trusting relationships through engagement; and
- Staffing the program with individuals who are collaborative, non-judgemental, and non-authoritarian.

The research provides a number of recommendations designed to assist in the further development of the program and possible development of the program into other neighbourhoods or rural areas. Four themes of effective practice emerged:

1. A strengths-based approach that is culturally appropriate and consistent with an ecological model of human development;
2. The community hub model which supports the development of social capital;
3. Community development to build upon positive initiatives and capacities already present in a community and to facilitate empowerment; and
4. Regular, ongoing reflective practice that includes staff, community partners, and participating tenants.

The research provides a glimpse of the strong network of agencies within the City of Sault Ste. Marie that provide support to children and families. The research has also provided an opportunity for reflection by the staff, the community partners and the participating tenants and their participation in the research was extraordinary and highly cooperative. Through these strong partnerships, an innovative strengths-based alternative to traditional child welfare involvement has been established that is helping to facilitate empowerment and community development in an at-risk neighbourhood.

Evaluation of Community Corner:
A Holistic Approach to Community Empowerment in Child and Family Services

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1998 and 2000, Ontario's Ministry of Community and Social Services responded to calls for changes in child welfare based on the recognition that the earlier model of family intervention and apprehension of children into care was not working well. Based on a system-wide evaluation and consultations, a child welfare transformation agenda was developed which focuses on an expanded array of intervention options that will better meet the increasingly complex needs of children and families across the province.

The vision of the newly-created Ministry of Child and Youth Services (MCYS) is for Ontario's children and youth to be: safe from harm; healthy and active; ready to learn; valued, involved, and responsible; and economically secure. This holistic vision is founded on the belief that "early intervention will reduce the need for more intrusive and costly public services later and will lead to better outcomes for children and youth" (MCYS, 2005, p. 1). As a result, while still addressing the critical needs of children and youth, the Ministry emphasizes early detection, intervention, and prevention.

This new vision requires new models for the provision of services to at-risk families. An innovative model has been developed in Sault Ste. Marie, a small Northern Ontario city of 80,000 people, and is a collaborative effort initiated by the CAS in conjunction with the Sault Ste. Marie Housing Corporation (SSMHC). This family preservation model, called Community Corner, is designed to provide community-based family support programs in neighbourhoods with a relatively high density of at-risk families.

Clearly, finding ways to support families so that children are safe within their own family units is a highly desirable societal goal from both social and economic standpoints. Not only is child apprehension emotionally traumatic for the entire family and sometimes community; it is also costly, with estimates of maintaining one child in foster care ranging from $35,000 to $40,000 annually. Programs which can reduce the number of children in care would therefore prove highly valuable in both social and economic terms. Based on this premise, the CAS of Algoma believed that an evaluation of its new program would be useful to determine its viability as a model and approached the CESD program at Algoma University College to assist with assessing the impact of Community Corner.

Collaborations between academics and service providers are viewed as a new standard in child welfare evaluations. Combining the research expertise of an academic institution, with the practical knowledge of service delivery, provides an excellent opportunity to develop new theory, and/or improve current theory and practice. The CESD program had experience in conducting program evaluations and substantial experience in community-based research, and also had a previous relationship with the CAS of Algoma. Funding was obtained from the City of Sault Ste. Marie and Algoma District Social Services Boards to finance the study.

Together the CESD program and the CAS of Algoma developed a qualitative research design to address the following questions:

- What is the nature and extent of the impact of the Community Corner program on children and their families?
- How have the partnerships between social service agencies involved in the service delivery contributed to or hindered the program?
- Can the Community Corner program be adapted for use in rural areas, and if so, what would be the key design factors?

The research also aimed to develop a framework to assess the further development of the program and build the research capacity of employees from CAS of Algoma and partnering agencies by determining effective ways to continue to reflect on and improve their program.

The research report contains the following components:

- A brief outline of the Community Corner program
- The research methodology
- Findings from the literature review, upon which a framework was developed for use in assessing the Community Corner program
- Findings from the interviews and focus groups including:
       (a) Challenges and Opportunities for Growth
- Future directions based on the findings and conclusions

1.1 History of Community Corner

The CAS was first incorporated in 1912 and has been working in the community and the District of Algoma ever since with a mandate to protect children and provide supportive services to families to assist them in parenting their children well. Throughout its long history, the CAS has continuously improved the quality of service, introducing innovative programming to address such issues as the parenting of teens, foster care, and more recently, its "Family Preservation program". The Family Preservation program attempts to reach at-risk parents before children come into care, and assist them in developing the skills required to retain their children in the family home.

As outlined in the Family Preservation program brochure, the following beliefs guide the interventions provided by the program:

- Children and families have many strengths and skills upon which to build, even when faced with many barriers
- All people can grow, learn, and change
- Children learn from consistent and skilful parenting
- Children and families must be empowered to make changes in their lives and take responsibility for themselves
- Intervention programs must be effective, individualized, and satisfactory to participants

The goals of the Family Preservation program include: prevent the admission of children into the care of the CAS; facilitate the strengthening of support systems for families with children; and provide intensive intervention to the family, by promoting a sense of belonging, nurturing and implementation of effective strategies. There are four components to the Family Preservation program: (1) a 10-week in home support program, (2) community events (e.g., Family Fun Day), (3) educational groups (e.g., parenting), and (4) more recently, community-based family support programs (i.e., drop-in centres in three housing communities with at-risk families).

About two years ago, the Family Preservation program began working with the Sault Ste. Marie Housing Corporation (SSMHC) to provide a drop-in service in neighbourhoods with a high density of at-risk families. The neighbourhood-based program was named "Community Corner[1]" and was based on a model developed in Brantford, Ontario, but tailored to the needs of the Chapple/Albion Streets neighbourhood. The Family Preservation program provided the staffing while the SSMHC has provided a two-bedroom housing unit for the program space. Once the site was secured, a survey was distributed to everyone in the neighbourhood and a focus group was conducted so that tenants had the opportunity to give insight into what topics they would be interested in for programming and what age ranges were prevalent in the neighbourhood.

Currently, there is one full time staff that is consistently working at Community Corner with five other Family Preservation staff who assist with program delivery, activities, childcare, supervision, and other duties. The program aims to increase an awareness of healthy families, successful parenting, and neighbourhood pride. On-site programming is offered in an effort to support and encourage participation in services. The physical space is designed to provide a homey, welcoming, nurturing environment.

The Community Corner program has developed more than thirteen community partnerships that provide a variety of educational programs, activities, and/or participate in the working group which governs Community Corner and includes staff, tenants and agency partners. These include: Canadian Red Cross Society, Sault Ste. Marie Housing Corporation, Sault Ste. Marie Public Library, YMCA, Algoma Health Unit, Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association, Ontario Works, Women in Crisis, Ontario Early Years, Sault Ste. Marie Department of Social Services, Healthy Babies Healthy Children, Indian Friendship Centre, and the Family Métis Resource Centre. These agencies offer services on site at Community Corner because transportation and childcare are often barriers for the attendance of Chapple/Albion residents at their main offices.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology and design incorporated a number of components based on previous research experience of the CESD program and the identification of best practices. In brief, the methodology was based on the following components: (1) the development of a community-university collaboration using local researchers with evaluation experience; (2) the development of an evaluative framework based on an extensive literature review; and (3) qualitative methods including data collection in the form of interviews and focus groups, and analysis of important

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[1] There are now three of these community-based family support programs. However, this evaluation will focus on Community Corner (located on Chapple St.) because it has been in operation for more than one year. The other community-based family support programs, located on Second Line/Goulais Avenue and Boston Avenue have been in operation since October 2005 and June 2006, respectively.

themes and response categories using standard qualitative research techniques (i.e., thematic analysis and grounded theory).

2.1 Community-University Collaboration

The CAS partnered with the CESD research program at Algoma University College to conduct the research. In conducting child welfare research in Canada, collaborations between academics and service providers are emerging as a new standard (Raschick & Critchley, 1998; Trocmé, 2005). "Integrating the researcher's expertise in the areas of epidemiology, program evaluation, and needs assessment with the extensive client and case management knowledge within child welfare can create a new and more effective level of skill in working with families." (Vandermeulen et al., 2005, p. 3). Collaborative research provides participants with opportunities to learn from each other and to potentially modify their opinions and/or attitudes (Van Wilgenburg, 2005).

With respect to Children's Aid Societies, Leslie (2005) noted "a constructive partnering of CAS agencies and academic institutions can bring together resources and ideas through the medium of research fostering a greater readiness for change and capacity building – producing improved outcomes for children and families" (p. 23). Such a partnering stimulates creative approaches to service delivery by linking researchers with practitioners. These approaches are sensitive to service realities and better match the needs of children and families (Leslie, 2005) than those formulated by researchers in isolation from service providers, while providers are more likely to incorporate changes into their work, when they have been a part of discovering the benefits of a particular approach. "Collaborative research is regarded as philosophically and methodologically sound in furthering social work objectives of emancipation of oppressed and disadvantaged groups" (D'Cruz & Gillingham, 2005, p. 52).

There is also research that identifies benefits in the use of local researchers in program evaluation, when the local researcher has previous evaluation research experience (Broad, 2004). Meghan Boston, MSW, had previously worked with CESD in the evaluation of a number of programs related to the delivery of homelessness services, and was therefore able to bring that experience, together with her community networks, to the research for the CAS of Algoma.

This project was a multi-method evaluation that adopted a utilization-focused approach, where stakeholders (employees of the Family Preservation Unit) participated in identifying evaluation questions, and methods were transparent to participants.

2.2 Literature Review and Framework Development

The literature review included a comprehensive review of five types of literature: (1) literature regarding child welfare; (2) literature about family-centred services, family preservation programs, and community-based family support programs, including program descriptions and research about their effectiveness; (3) literature about child welfare and Indigenous communities; (4) literature about community development and social capital; and (5) documents about the CAS's Community Corner program (e.g., program description, brochures).

To assess the validity of the Community Corner as a community-based family support program, this project developed an evaluation framework. The "*Framework for Evaluation of Empowerment in Child and Family Services*" was developed through a literature review of best practices in community-based family support programs. The framework tool served as a guide both for the development of the research, as well as in assessing its validity as a community-based family support program. The researchers used the evaluation framework to ensure that the program's model, design, and delivery responded to best practices outlined by the tool. The development of the tool also allowed the staff members to meet to go over the framework questions, to reflect on the program, to solidify the program goals and objectives, and to reflect on priority areas for further development.

2.3 Qualitative Methods

The literature suggests that qualitative methods are useful for studies that aim to understand how important groups perceive programs (e.g., community hub) because they produce a comprehensive view of what is important from the perspectives of the major participants in the helping process (Berg, 2004). Quantitative methods may not garner the type of data that this type of complex assessment requires although this is still the most common method of data collection (Moliner, 1997). The literature suggests that qualitative studies can both confirm quantitative information as well as collect data not otherwise available (Cader, 2002).

Qualitative methods are also consistent with empowerment, strengths-based approaches (Saleebey, 2002) that allow maximum power to remain with the participants, which are critical in interventions for vulnerable families and communities. Qualitative methodologies allow us to look at intangible issues of importance to practitioners, including the 'meaning' of service; how families and communities experience services; and whether they feel empowered by them (Pecora et al., 1995). With qualitative methods of evaluation, we may be able to begin to understand important community-based phenomena such as the nature of the empowerment process as experienced from a multiplicity of perspectives (Pecora et al., 1995).

Qualitative methodology was also selected for this project because it is helpful for studies that aim to understand the internal dynamics of program operations (e.g., What factors are important in making this family-based service what it is? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program?) and to understand how the program is perceived by important groups (e.g., What are the expectations of partnering agencies and families?) (Pecora et al., 1995). The qualitative study included individual interviews and focus groups with employees of the Community Corner program, employees of the partnering agencies, and the parents that utilize the Community Corner program. Separate focus groups were held for the employees of the Community Corner, employees of the partnering agencies, and parents that utilize the Community Corner program, respectively.

The subjects were voluntarily recruited through social service agencies. A poster was provided to the Community Corner program and SSMHC, which invited consumers of the program to participate in an interview and/or focus group about the services offered. A snowball sampling technique was also used with consumers in order to recruit other participants. The employees of the Community Corner program and partnering agencies were telephoned to request their

participation in the individual interviews and/or focus groups. Three different sets of questions were designed for each of the respective stakeholders. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in a mutually agreed upon private location in the neighbourhood of Chapple/Albion. There were a total of 36 participants: 8 staff, 13 partners, and 15 tenants (including parents and teenagers). Interviews and focus groups took place between June 1, 2006 and August 31, 2006.

Interviews and focus groups were tape-recorded and then transcribed and entered into a computer. The investigator utilized a qualitative research software program N6 to review the transcripts and code important themes and response categories using standard qualitative research techniques, which include thematic analysis and grounded theory. Following the identification of important themes, the findings were organized within an adapted version of the evaluation framework that provides a conceptual framework for community development processes and the universal growth needs necessary for empowerment (adapted from Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2005; Martel (1988); Ninacs, 2002). In the findings section, examples of participants' responses are included under each identified theme. Some minor changes were made to participants' responses to ensure their anonymity.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review included a comprehensive review of five types of literature: (1) literature about child welfare and strengths-based practice; (2) literature about family-centred services, family preservation programs, and community-based family support programs, including program descriptions and research about their effectiveness; (3) literature about child welfare and Indigenous communities; (4) literature about community development and social capital; and (5) documents about the CAS's Community Corner program (e.g., program description, brochures).

Three themes of effective practice emerged from the literature review:

1) **A Strengths based approach** that is consistent with an ecological model of human development, which highlights the need to work with children and families in a holistic (whole-of-community) manner that is culturally appropriate;

2) **Benefits of the community hub model** including: accessible social support; the development of trusting social relations, commonly called social capital; and agency collaborations to strive to enhance what is available in the community; and

3) **Community development** to build upon positive initiatives and capacities already present in a community and to facilitate empowerment.

3.1 Strengths-Based Approach to Child Welfare

One of the serious flaws in child welfare services has been "its focus on child protection at the expense of the family" (Austin, 2005, p. 115) and its preference for this delivery method over providing the services to the family in the community (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). Since most child welfare agencies have been focused on protecting children from 'dysfunctional' families, they have sometimes been unable to identify the strengths in the family system (Noble,

Perkins, Fatout, 2000). Child welfare, like other fields of social work/service, has focused on disease- and disorder-based thinking based on a past in which there was a distinction between 'deserving' and 'non-deserving' poor; the mentally ill were viewed as deviant; and the medical model was dominant (Saleebey, 2002).

Leading child welfare researchers, practitioners, and advocates have expressed that empowerment, strengths-based approaches are critical in interventions for vulnerable families (Kivnick, Jeffreys, & Heier, 2003; MacLeod & Nelson, 2000; Trivette et al., 1996). Strengths-based practice builds a foundation for change by:

1. "Fostering (in both practitioner and client) a favourable view of the client;

2. Enabling the client first to see and then to move beyond her/his problems and diagnoses;

3. Encouraging the client to exercise exciting skills and competencies;

4. Supporting the development of further clients strengths; and

5. Meaningfully linking client capacities and needs to needs and supports in her/his community" (Kivnick, Jeffreys, & Heier, 2003, p. 194).

Kivnick, Jeffreys, and Heier (2003) proposed that all quadrants need to be part of social work preparation and practice in the child welfare system (see Figure 1). That is, practice should attend to both the clients and also to multiple levels of the environment (vertical axis: i.e., ecological approach) and should strive both to remediate problems and eliminate risk and also to promote strengths and competencies (horizontal axis).

Figure 1: Envisioned Child Welfare/Social Work Practice Concerns
(Kivnick, Jeffreys, & Heier, 2003, p. 200)
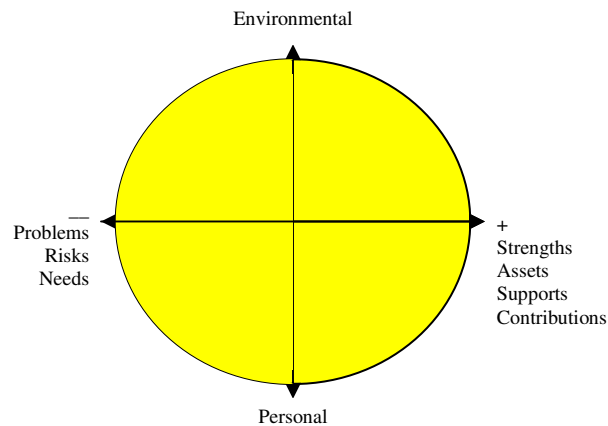
Family preservation programs have become a popular approach to working with families in the child welfare system because of their focus on strengthening families versus depending upon formal helping systems to assume parenting responsibilities for children (Raschick & Critchley, 1998). As reviewed in Staudt (1999), program goals include: protecting children, maintaining and strengthening family bonds, stabilizing the crisis situation, increasing the family's skills and competencies, and facilitating the family's use of a variety of formal and informal helping

resources. These services are also based on the principle that "families are doing the best they can do and that families, even when in crisis and need, bring resources to bear on problem solving" (Staudt, 1999, p. 39).

In sum, identifying and working with the family's strengths and resources to assist the family to build its capacity to better care for the child, is now viewed as the best option for service provision to at-risk families. The key factors in such a model include assisting the family in identification of their strengths, and in accessing the services available to them so that they can maximize their choices (Saleebey, 2002; Staudt, 1999).

3.1.1 The Ecological Model

"From the perspective of family support work, the significance of the ecological model is the need to work with children and families in a holistic manner" (Smythe, 2004, p. 7). The ecological perspective highlights that every event or phenomenon must be seen as part of a whole and that it can only properly be understood with reference to every other part of the larger system (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). That is, "there is a dynamic connection between the individual, the family, and the environment in which they live" (Smythe, 2004, p.7). The nature of human experience and interaction in the community is complex and it is therefore essential to adopt a holistic approach when working with children and families (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006; Smythe, 2004). The strengths-based approach encourages ecological accounts of individuals, families, and communities:

> Problem-based assessments encourage individualistic rather than ecological accounts of clients. When we transform persons into cases, we often see only them and how well they fit into a category. In this way, we miss important elements of the client's life—cultural, social, political, ethnic, spiritual, and economic (Saleebey, 2002, p. 5).

3.1.2 Culturally Appropriate Services for Indigenous Families

A strengths-based "whole of community" approach is critical for working with Indigenous families (Libesman, 2004) because of the historical context of child welfare in Canada. There was a pronounced lack of confidence in Indigenous ways of raising children in child welfare policy during the first hundred years after Confederation. Gough et al. (2005) noted:

> Over many decades, government policies generally reflected a belief that child raising based on European cultural traditions was superior to all other ways of parenting, and this led to practices such as the establishment of tenantial schools as well as the widespread adoption of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous families (p. 2).

It is now widely recognized that First Nations children and communities were harmed by the dislocations of the residential schools and adoptions (Gough et al., 2005). In fact, "many children experienced significant erosion of their cultural identity, and suffered profound, long-term negative psychological consequences that continue today" (Gough et al., 2005, p. 2).

The current overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system in Canada is well documented (Gough et al., 2005) and the number of Indigenous children placed in out-of-home care continues to rise (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). Trocmé et al.

(2004) note that a complex set of factors underlies the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the Canadian child welfare system. The results of their study (Trocmé et al., 2004) suggest that the disproportionate presence of risk factors among Indigenous families contributes significantly to decisions regarding case substantiation and out-of-home placement. For example, compared to Caucasian families, Indigenous families had less stable housing, higher rates of poverty, younger parents, higher rates of alcohol and drug use, and historical experiences of abuse and discrimination, particularly in residential schools (Trocmé et al., 2004).

Across Indigenous communities, there is a preference for holistic, multifaceted approaches that heal all sections of the community and address the underlying causes of health and social problems (Libesman, 2004). Conventional individually focused models applied by child and family service agencies are often culturally inappropriate for use with Indigenous client groups because they disregard the complexities of extended family networks in First Nations communities and the differences in the nature of personal and communal identity (Libesman, 2004). Libesman (2004) explained that:

> It is contended that statutory child protection services be based on an understanding of communal identity and a "whole-of-community" rather than individually-focused response. Further, they require a more collaborative, community-based "grass-roots" approach. This should be based in part on the development of comprehensive neighbourhood-based supports and services, which draw on family networks and other informal resources (p. 1).

3.2 Benefits of the Community Hub Model

The literature review outlines benefits of the community hub model including: accessible social support; the development of trusting social relations, commonly called social capital; and agency collaborations to strive to enhance what is available in the community.

3.2.1 Accessible Family Support

The guiding philosophies of family-centred services, which aim to provide support to families, are consistent with the strengths perspective. As reviewed in Scott (2005), family-centred practice has been defined in terms of the following characteristics:

1. the centrality of the family as the unit of attention;

2. an emphasis on maximising families' choices;

3. a strengths rather than a deficits perspective; and

4. cultural sensitivity (Allen & Petr, 1998

Family-centred practice implies that there is a partnership between practitioners and families, supportive and respectful treatment, the exchange of information, and family empowerment (King, Rosenbaum, & King, 1997).

There are many barriers for families accessing services outside of their local community or neighbourhood (Staudt, 1999) and substantial evidence that healthy communities are crucial to the well-being of families (Anderson & Doherty, 2005). There is a need for a greater integration

between community development work and direct service in child welfare (Hudson, 1999). This integration is a challenge because community development is seen as a luxury add-on to the primary mandate of child protection (Hudson, 1999). As a result, the opportunity for the two functions to compliment, reinforce, and support one another is lost (Hudson, 1999).

In the past two decades there has been a dramatic rise in community initiatives, and more recently, community-level interventions to combat social problems have become accepted modes for prevention and intervention (Anderson & Doherty, 2005). Hess, McGowan, and Botsko (2000) noted that there have been efforts to develop community-based programs that support families, primarily in the fields of early childhood education and health care (e.g., McCroskey & Meezan, 1997).

Family support programs attempt to connect families with positive external systems that support the family and its functioning like community agencies, schools, mental health agencies, health care systems, and religious organizations (Smythe, 2004). There are two types of family support: (1) formal supports (i.e., professional organizations like counselling services) and (2) informal supports (i.e., family, neighbourhood, and religious organizations) (Smythe, 2004). "While formal supports provide important resources to families, it is the informal supports that most positively relate to family, child and parent functioning" (Smythe, 2004, p.8). In addition, these approaches can be suitable for child welfare with Indigenous communities when using a "whole-of-community" approach that draws on family networks and informal resources (Libesman, 2004).

Family support programs focus on (1) providing continuous support to families in an attempt to prevent and resolve difficulties before they become serious problems or crises; (2) building on families' strengths and serving all families in a community; and (3) flexible programming, location, and goals (Zigler & Black, 1989). Many authors (e.g., Annie E. Casey foundation, 1996; Zigler & Black, 1989) have identified beneficial outcomes from the programs (Hess, McGowan, & Botsko, 2000). The research suggests that locating, developing, and maintaining a range of comprehensive, continuously accessible family preservation and support services in the community for families who either self-identify or are recognized by others as needing such services is a viable means to support families (Hess et al., 2000).

Researchers in Canada (Frensch, Cameron, & Hazineh, 2005) studied three local CASs that were all attempting to modify front-line child protection practices by bringing services to where families and children lived and attended school. In general, the parents involved with the three programs were connected to a broader array of treatment and supportive services than those typically offered in mainstream child protection settings. Parents talked about significant positive shifts in their perceptions of the CAS following first contacts because the service providers were more visible in the community and were not "strangers" at first contact. The value of cooperative relationships between parents and service providers were important. Frensch et al. (2005) noted that feedback from parents, service providers, and community organizations suggested that:

> These alternative service delivery models are…illustrating elements of a more 'positive' and appreciated child welfare paradigm. In particular…when service providers are nearby and familiar to people in a community, the assistance provided by child welfare personnel can be less adversarial and more congruent with daily living realities… (p. 37)

In addition, informal contacts with parents and the community allowed service providers to respond in meaningful ways since they had knowledge of the families and their history. That is, "when workers know families and their neighbours and related support systems, they can mobilize more prevention, early intervention, and social support" (Austin, 2005, p. 112). The authors (Frencsh et al., 2005) concluded that school and community-based models of service delivery illustrate that it is possible to create a more constructive and welcoming approach to child welfare without compromising the protection of children, in which service providers have greater access to information about families and are more aware of community resources and strengths.

3.2.2 Building Social Capital

Social capital inheres in the relationship among and between persons (Coleman, 1988) and refers to the generalized trust embedded in informal networks and associations (Grootaert, 1998). The more people are engaged together in a variety of associations (e.g., singing groups), the higher the level of generalized trust and cooperative problem solving in the system and the greater strength and productivity of that community (Helliwell & Putnam, 1995). The concept of social capital helps to reveal what it is about the social organization and interactions in different neighbourhoods that may be responsible for the area effects identified (e.g., family issues, number move outs or evictions, and community pride) (Jack, 2005). There is a growing consensus in the literature that social capital provides an important means of understanding how individuals can benefit from the formal and informal interactions and norms of trust and reciprocity that exits, to varying degrees, within different communities (Portes, 1998).

Researchers have identified two main forms of social capital in recent years: (1) '**Bridging'** social capital, which helps to connect people from different positions and backgrounds, thereby linking disadvantaged communities with external resources and information; and (2) '**Bonding'** social capital, which tends to reinforce existing social identities, helping to protect disadvantaged groups from the negative effects of living in adverse circumstances (Putman, 2000).

In sum, social capital "captures the idea that social connection, social activity, and social bonding have value for individuals and society" (Smythe, 2004, p.8). There is evidence that higher levels of social capital, in the form of social trust, reciprocity and active social networks, are correlated with lower rates of crime and child abuse, better health and educational attainment, longer life, and improved economic performance (Harper, 2001). Family support programs can build social capital by:

1. Working to mobilize social networks and providing a context for social connection in families and communities; and

2. Finding ways to link families to institutions of power (e.g., schools, health care systems) to address the structures of marginalization and exclusion that contribute to poverty (Smythe, 2004, p. 8).

3.2.3 Agency Collaborations

Austin (2005) noted that "the challenges facing children and families involved with the child welfare system cannot be solved by child welfare agencies alone. They require the concerted

efforts of tenants and collaboration among a range of human service agencies" (p. 105). As reviewed in Darlington, Feeney, and Rixon (2005), timely and effective interagency collaboration can have many benefits for both clients and workers such as: faster and more proactive responses, reduced anxiety for workers (Hetherington, Baistow, Katz, Mesie, & Trowell, 2002), reduced family separations (Seneviratne, Conroy, & Marks, 2003), greater continuity of care, more holistic services (Williamson, 2001), faster access to services (Cottrell, Lucey, Porter, & Walker, 2000), and improved cost-effectiveness (Johnson, Wistow, Schulz, & Hardy, 2003). Many community-based programs partner with other local social service agencies in order to provide a wider array of services relevant to families' needs.

3.3 Community Development: A Means of Empowerment

Both children and parents feel powerless when a child welfare worker intervenes to protect children whereas the worker is backed by strong community power (Noble, Perkins, & Fatout, 2000). When social control systems, such as the child welfare organization intervene in family life, families may feel that the situation is out of their control, which can result in feelings of hopelessness, disempowerment, and failure.

The purpose of community development is to "re-establish the community as the location of significant human experience and the meeting of human need, rather than to rely on the larger more inhuman and less accessible structures of the welfare state, the global economy, bureaucracy, professional elites and so on" (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, p. 209). Community development rests on two principles: an ecological perspective, and a social justice and human rights perspective.

For effective community development, it is essential that the idea of change is from below, or 'bottom-up' development therefore valuing the local knowledge, culture, resources, skills, processes, and participation rather than "privileging knowledge, skills, processes, and resources that are 'imposed' on a community from 'above'" (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, p. 267).

The process of community development involves community members (1) coming together (i.e., meet) and over time (2) developing trust, which leads to them (3) identifying issues in the community, and (4) developing solutions (i.e., acting). There is always a tension in community work between the achievement of immediate goals (e.g., prevent child apprehensions) and the ultimate vision of a better society (or community). Consciousness-raising is an important part of the process where community workers can informally explore with people their personal experiences of life, and the links between their experiences and the structures or discourses of power and oppression to create space for effective action for change (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006).

As reviewed in Ife and Tesoriero (2006), cooperative structures rather than competitive structures should be used and the community itself must determine the pace at which development occurs. It is important to be inclusive of all people even if they have opposing views so that all people are valued and are allowed the space to change their position on issues. Community development workers must be prepared to examine their own positions and mutually learn with community members. Fundamental to community development is bringing people together to emphasize interdependence and strengthen the connections between community

members. In understanding a community the global and the local must be understood as well as their interaction.

"Empowerment should be an aim of all community development...empowerment means providing people with the resources, opportunities, vocabulary, knowledge, and skills to increase their capacity to determine their own future, and to participate in and affect the life of their community" (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, p. 265). The concept of empowerment is multidimensional because it occurs within the sociological, psychological, economic, political and other dimensions, and it occurs at various levels, such as individual, group, and community (Hur, 2006). The four elements of empowerment are (1) participation, (2) abilities, (3) self-esteem and communication, and (4) critical consciousness and community capital.

4. AN EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The literature review provided guidance to effective practices and was used to develop a framework for the evaluation of the Community Corner program.

Community-based family support programs like Community Corner aim to facilitate community development and empowerment. In order to identify effective practices for programmers and service providers to use with families and communities, and to facilitate these processes, it is essential to first review the elements of empowerment at both the individual and community levels:

1. **Participation** (individual) means the right to speak, the right to be heard, and the right to give or refuse consent. Participation (community) means all members of the community have the opportunity to participate in community life and systems, there is an integration of individuals not recognized as natural leaders into decision-making spaces, and there is equality in the redistribution of power.

2. **Abilities** (individual) mean there is an opportunity for the acquisition of the practical and technical skills and knowledge required for action and participation. Abilities (community) means there is recognition of local strengths, a strengthening of networks supporting individuals, a capacity to link to local resources, an expansion of consensus-building and decision-making skills, and a growing capacity and will to self-manage development.

3. **Self-Esteem** (individual) **and Communication** (community): Self esteem is the self-recognition of abilities and recognition of one's own abilities by others, while communication includes positive interaction, efficient circulation of information, access to information necessary for the success of specific projects, and transparency in decision-making processes.

4. **Critical Consciousness** (individual) **and Community Capital** (community): Critical consciousness is when individuals recognize that they are not alone with the problem, individual and collective problems are influenced by the way society is organized, and the solution to structural problems comes through social change. The opportunity for reflection is an important piece of empowerment and social transformation. Community Capital is when the community ensures individual self-help and allows for action on larger social questions, there is a sense of belonging to both the community and the environment, and there is an awareness of citizenship among each member (Ninacs, 2002).

For individuals and communities to be empowered, they must have the opportunity to experience a set of universal growth needs that apply all people, which are identified in the work of Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2005) with youth. The Circle of Courage (see Figure 2) depicts the core values necessary for healthy children and communities including:

1. **Belonging**: Opportunity to establish trusting connections ("I am loved")
2. **Mastery**: Opportunity to solve problems and meet goals ("I can succeed")
3. **Independence**: Opportunity to build self control and responsibility ("I have power to make decisions")
4. **Generosity**: Opportunity to show respect and concern ("I have a purpose in my life")

The elements of empowerment fit with the *Circle of Courage* and offer an explanation for subsidized housing neighbourhoods becoming 'hot-spots' for at-risk families. As reviewed in Brokenleg & Van Bockern (2003), when these four universal needs of children (or communities) are not met, they result in problems for youth and troubled adults (i.e., broken circle of courage) For example, children who do not belong may become angry, guarded, or withdrawn; children who do not experience mastery may develop a failure identity; youth or adults who lack independence may exhibit helplessness or react with defiance; and lacking generosity may lead to children and adults who are egocentric, selfish, and exploit others.
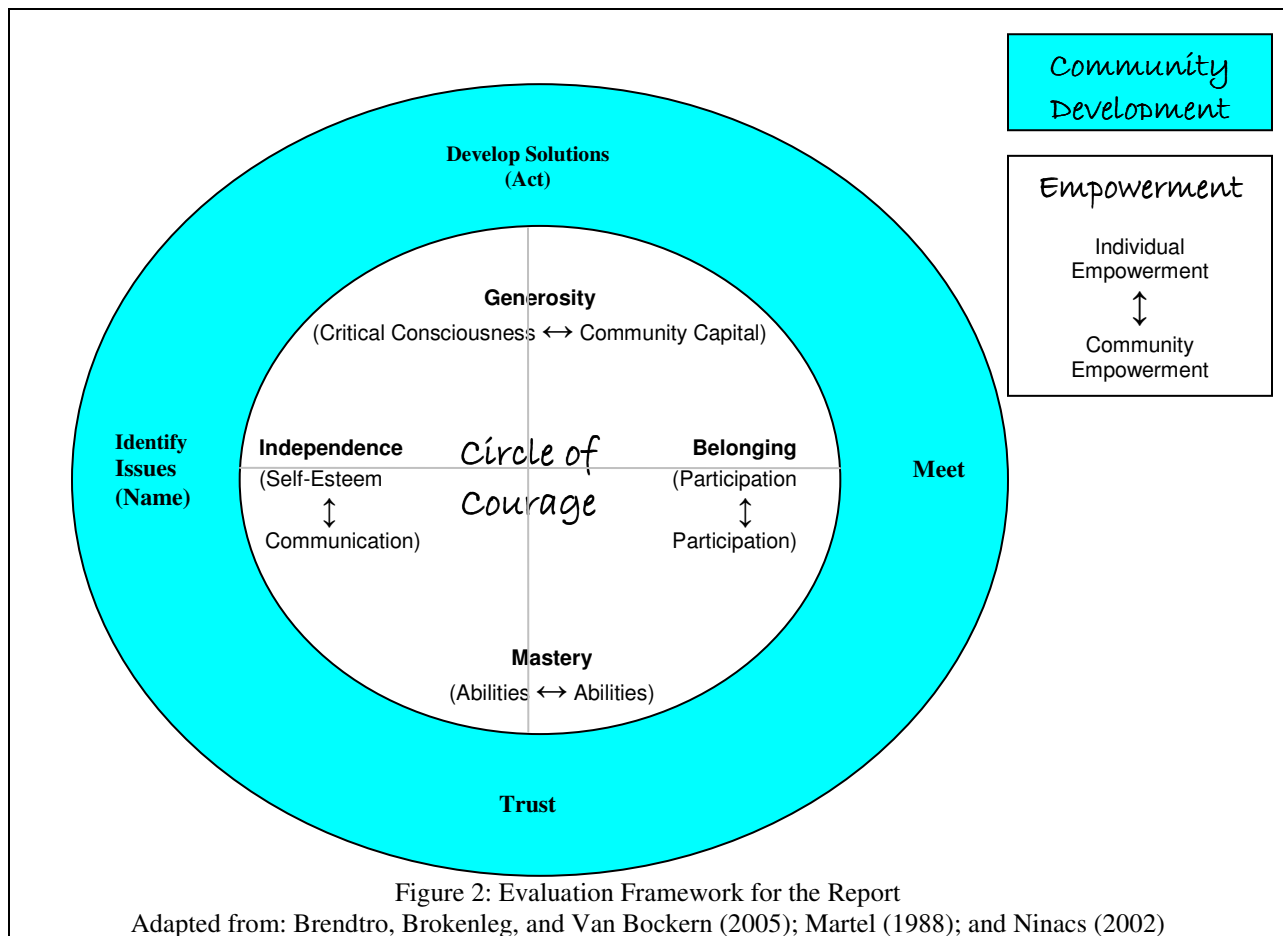
Figure 2: Evaluation Framework for the Report
Adapted from: Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2005); Martel (1988); and Ninacs (2002)

Social service providers should use interventions that provide residents of the neighbourhood with the opportunity to experience the universal growth needs thereby gradually repairing the 'broken *Circle of Courage*'. The literature review suggests that a successful intervention model would employ the following:

- A strengths-based, ecological, and holistic approach;
- Provide accessible support and resources;
- Foster individual and community empowerment;
- Build social capital; and
- Community-driven development that values local culture, knowledge, resources, skills and processes.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS: EMPOWERING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

As one of the tenants interviewed in the research illustrates, Community Corner has created a space in an at-risk neighbourhood for the core values necessary for healthy children and communities to develop:

> *Community Corner has become a really big **anchor** in our little community because it's sort of **the heart of the operation** now.*

The research revealed that tenants, staff, and community partners were able to identify a host of ways in which Community Corner contributes to the four factors key to building healthy families and communities. It also revealed areas which could be improved or expanded to further the achievement of the program's goals. The research findings have been organized according to the four major areas of healthy individual and community development: belonging (opportunity to establish trusting connections); mastery (opportunity to solve problems, meet goals, and acquire new skills and knowledge); independence (opportunity to build self-control and responsibility, which includes building self-esteem and effective communication); and generosity (opportunity to show respect and concern, which includes critical consciousness and the community ensuring self-help, i.e., community capital) (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2005).

The research also identified a number of areas (i.e., challenges) where further development could contribute to fuller engagement with the community, and these have been identified in the section of the findings. As a program which is only 1.5 years old, and has had very limited resources available to it, the achievements of Community Corner have been remarkable, and these areas for expansion should be viewed solely as suggestions for further development.

5.1 Belonging: Opportunity to Establish Trusting Connections

The research identified a number of areas of practice that were critical for providing tenants with a sense of belonging and an opportunity to establish trusting connections: respecting local culture by providing many access points to program participation and creating a comfortable atmosphere; ensuring that staff are respectful of all participants; allocating sufficient time for

relationship building; identifying opportunities for different types of engagement that includes children and formal and informal activities. The community partnership model of service delivery also provided an opportunity for the tenants to develop relationships with many other service providers, accessing resources, developing new skills and/or increasing their capacities.

5.1.1 Initiating Community Corner and Overcoming Mistrust

Before Community Corner opened, a survey was distributed to everyone in the neighbourhood and a focus group was conducted so that tenants had the opportunity to give insight into what topics they would be interested in for programming, what age ranges were prevalent in the neighbourhood, and what kinds of needs tenants had. Using the data collected, the staff of the Family Preservation program developed the programming and approached potential agency partners to develop a wide range of programming so that there is something of interest for everyone in the neighbourhood. The research shows that Community Corner links tenants to many other services in the community both ones that come onsite and offsite agencies.

Muffin mornings, yoga, they do parenting classes. We do all sorts of stuff at Community Corner. The kids are there during the day. The teens are there in the evenings. And like I said there's a lot of different – like they're constantly trying to make sure that there's a lot going on that covers almost everybody in the place so that they would feel comfortable to come in and just be in the groups.

This research showed that Community Corner demonstrated its respect for the community culture by identifying a variety of ways that people could become involved in the program. Tenants are notified about the programming and events at Community Corner but are not pressured to attend and are invited to attend all activities regardless of whether they have participated in events in the past**.** This approach tells tenants that they are valued members of the community, whether they choose to participate in Community Corner or not.

Everyone will always be informed about it [activities or groups going on at Community Corner]. The flyers will keep going out to every house even if they don't attend. The invitation is consistently open…every flyer will say "Everyone is welcome. Come on and give it a try."

Staff have adjusted their approaches to the specific context and culture of the neighbourhood. For example, one of the best ways to reach families in the Chapple/Albion area has been through door-knocking whereas in other neighbourhoods families responded better to canvassing at the bus stop when parents were seeing their children off to school.

Although not all tenants attend the formal programming, many tenants indicated that they make use of Community Corner for the more informal aspects of the program (e.g., support, mediation, advocacy, and resources). In addition, most tenants attend the large recreational events that are hosted by Community Corner. This non-traditional programming brings the community together

in a positive way that facilitates community development, fosters positive relationships and networking, and provides an opportunity for positive interactions between children and parents.

Engaging the children and developing the children's programming was a key factor for engaging with the neighbourhood and building trust.

> *I was very nervous because CAS was attached. As we got to know the staff and some of the things [programs and activities] started happening and how much fun the kids were having, I eased up a little bit. And now it's my kids that love it.*

A very significant barrier to the start-up of the program was that CAS was the hosting agency. The research indicates that many tenants were sceptical and nervous about CAS's agenda when Community Corner first entered the neighbourhood. Tenants wondered if CAS was placing a worker in the neighbourhood to spy on them and felt that they were being scrutinized. Tenants' perceptions of CAS gradually changed as they developed a rapport with staff.

> *That was one of the things that scared a lot of the people here was when they saw the little CAS sticker on the bottom of all of the letters [Community Corner flyers]. Because the staff couldn't figure out, "why doesn't anybody come?" I said, "Do you see what's on the bottom of that page? Nobody wants anything to do with CAS."*
>
> *Some people are nervous about it [Community Corner]. They think "oh they're only there to spy on us and making sure that we're not doing anything to our kids. They're going to take our kids away". It's not true. It's a totally different unit of CAS, which I don't think a lot of people understand.*
>
> *I think other tenants don't realize they're not really CAS. They are CAS but they're not CAS. They're not there to take your kids away. They're there to give you information and help you if you need help. That's what I keep telling people.*
>
> *We have enough scrutiny in our neighbourhood as it is without CAS's name attached to something. But, I'm the first one now to say that it's one of the best things that could have happened in our community.*

In the first few months of the opening of Community Corner, there were not a high number of tenants accessing services; it was only after the staff had developed relationships and trust with tenants that they began going to Community Corner and participating in programming. This research supports the findings in the literature that **taking time** is critical for the development of trust.

> *[Staff] Taking time – that's what actually helped develop relationships was really taking time. So what I found was just being really positive with them all the time and taking time to talk initially…so listening to the parents.*

5.1.2 Learning from the Staff at Community Corner: How to Develop Trust

The development of trust with the staff was critical for changing the perception of Community Corner and CAS and for participation in programming. The research showed that the listening skills and the consistency of staff were important in the community development (i.e., meet → trust → identify issues → develop solutions) and empowerment processes.

Trust

You really have to put that trust out there. It's trust with your words and your children. And the staff here are people that you can trust.

I think people may have been a bit leery in the beginning but now since the staff has been around. She's not your typical CAS worker. So everybody kind of feels more comfortable around her and feel like they can talk to her without feeling manipulated.

The research indicated that the right staff combined with a welcoming atmosphere, did much to assist the community members in overcoming their initial apprehension about accessing the program. The following traits of the staff were crucial for the development of trust: caring, patience, understanding, down to earth, friendly, and non-judgemental. These characteristics were also essential for the community development process.

Importance of key staff

If it wasn't for this staff person I don't think Community Corner would have been as successful...She is friendly. She's down to earth. She's more than willing to bend over backwards to help. I think if they had put someone else in there I don't think it would have been so successful because she really busted her butt to get out there and meet everybody and make herself known. And if it wasn't for that I don't think anybody would really be involved.

Traits of staff – Respectful of everyone, non-judgemental, hardworking, calm, confidential

She doesn't judge. Like she's not there to tell you "I'm better than you". She just doesn't have that in her. Everybody trusts her.

That's what I like most about it. You don't feel like two feet tall. Nobody judges you – nobody. It's just perfect.

You feel like you can be totally open and honest in Community Corner. You're not going to be reprimanded for it. You're not going to be judged…

They're not afraid to take on any issue. And that's good. They're not just brushing it off and hoping somebody will just forget about it. No – concerns are being attended to…things are getting done. It's just excellent to see a program working like this.

I think because no matter what you say to her – she doesn't blow a gasket. She stays calm and she kind of tries to like "well you don't know the other side of this."

We can go to Community Corner…where people are comfortable to go in and discuss what's going on because you already sort of know what's going on because everybody is so right on top of each other but at least… the doors are closed [at Community Corner] and you can discuss whatever you need to discuss and it stays there.

Atmosphere

It is basically a really easy sort of place to go to. You go and you don't feel uncomfortable and you can talk to them [staff] about anything. It's just really sort of like you're going home instead of going to some office where you feel all uncomfortable.

When I'm really stressed and I don't want to yell at my kid anymore. I need to get out. I want to come somewhere where I feel safe and calm.

We have to work together at Community Corner and in the park. Our kids know that when Community Corner is open if there's any kind of an issue whether they're pissed off or hurt or whatever. They know that they can go to Community corner and they know that they're safe there.

We can openly discuss the program and get things done or make the issues come out and deal with them…and when I'm frustrated, not just with the kids, but even with myself, I'm bipolar. It's a lot for me that I can just come over here and say "Ah!" and then I don't have to worry about anything for the rest of the day.

It's somewhere that you can just sit and talk with someone.

5.1.3 Social Capital: Networks and Associations of Trust

The research shows that Community Corner is facilitating the development of social capital in a variety of ways: through linking the individuals within the Chapple/Albion neighbourhood and beyond; through engaging health and social service agencies in a collaborative program delivery; and by forging links between the neighbourhood and the City of Sault Ste. Marie. From the literature review, it is clear that this type of development will have long-lasting and positive effects on the individuals, neighbourhood, and larger community.

Community Corner has helped to connect people from different positions and backgrounds who live within the neighbourhood - and even some who live outside it - through the wide variety of activities, especially the recreational activities.

[Parent] But my nieces, they come here all the time and they know that they can come and hang out at Shack.

[Teen] One of my friends from the P Patch [an area of single-family, non-subsidized housing] where my grandpa lives [comes to Community Corner]. [He comes because] there's nothing really to do over there…because it's fun [here].

Agencies often work rather independently because working collaboratively takes effort and time. It is important to note that although the partnering agencies have come together to facilitate offering a program in the neighbourhood or Community Corner, they are simultaneously building social capital among health and social service agencies in Sault Ste. Marie. Community Corner and the partners are also building capacity in Sault Ste. Marie because the staff are developing skills in community development and empowerment and are bringing those skills back to their respective agencies. There are also a number of students who are completing their field placements at Community Corner, which is also building capacity in Sault Ste. Marie.

By bringing agencies and services on-site, the program is linking the disadvantaged community with external resources and information and has helped to reinforce existing social identities, helping to protect disadvantaged groups from the negative effects of living in adverse circumstances. A clear example of how social capital can contribute to making community-wide change was provided by a recreational activity that Community Corner initiated. Some of the parents and children began playing volleyball in the neighbourhood; the staff brought them a flyer about a volleyball tournament at RYTAC, a local organization more usually accessed by upper middle-class youth and adults. The tenants decided to enter a team.

Example of community development

So that's a really big deal because they don't feel part of the community [of Sault Ste. Marie] so they're going into the community and doing something not with Housing, not with Children's Aid, not with anything but they're reclaiming their rightful place in society. Like participating and being outside of what is organized for them. They enrolled in Ontario Early Years program on their own or enrolled in the Red Cross Community Kitchens on their own…doing those things and really being proud of it – "like look, these are me and my neighbours. We're going to do these things together – these healthy things."

[After volleyball at RYTAC] I came back and everyone was happy and it was like it was so bonded. I don't know. It just felt so good and I think that having the opportunity to actually leave here as a community.

> **_Benefits of building social capital_**
>
> _The benefits of community work like building a stronger community. The networks that people can have in their own front door is huge and to see that forming is great because their support may be three doors down. And everyone doesn't have to live so isolated. People have so many skills around you and you can be using them. They like being a part, what positive influences they can have on people. They like being a part of that and seeing people come together and work together. People really like that._

Before Community Corner was initiated tenants had the opportunity to provide feedback about their interests for programming. All tenants and the local culture was valued by providing tenants with the opportunity to express their interests, the continued opportunity to participate in a variety of programming, and adapting to the specific context of the neighbourhood. Although having CAS as the hosting agency was a barrier to tenant participation, staffs' ongoing respect for tenants and relationship building efforts helped to change tenants' perceptions of the agency. Community Corner's welcoming atmosphere and collaborative program delivery model has led to the establishment of trusting relationships (i.e., social capital).

5.2 Mastery: Opportunity to Solve Problems and Meet Goals

The research shows that adopting a strengths perspective and ecological approach was helpful for facilitating the development of a sense of mastery for tenants. The research indicates that tenants had greater opportunity to solve problems and meet goals by having access to support, parental relief, mediation services, programming for skills development, and resources.

5.2.1 Strengths Perspective

> _[Staff] It's the philosophy of our program. It's something that we live and breathe everyday. We talk about strengths based values, beliefs, practices._

The program philosophy of Community Corner is to focus on the strengths, assets, and competencies of individuals, families, and the neighbourhood, which the literature shows is a critical component of individual and community empowerment. As noted previously, social work has constructed much of its theory and practice around the supposition that clients become clients because they have deficits, problems, pathologies, and diseases (Saleebey, 2002), which, for clients involved with many social services, may result in disempowerment and feelings of hopelessness (Saleebey, 2002). In fact, clients may become so accustomed to deficits-focused thinking thereby becoming disempowered and unable to recognize their own strengths and assets.

[Staff] Getting to know people and their strengths…and highlighting what they do well…they're shocked when someone says that to them.

[Tenant] She [staff] wants everyone to get along. She reminds everybody to be positive.

Staff's willingness to spend time meeting tenants and becoming acquainted was critical in this process of identifying and building on individual and community strengths, as was their availability outside of a period of crisis intervention. The research identified that most resources are only available when the family or community is in acute need, whereas Community Corner's creates the space for families to sort things out before they reach the crisis, thus helping them develop their skills and avoid the crisis situation.

Child welfare agencies] instead of being proactive and kind of dealing with some of the smaller issues that come up in families or with people and not letting it build up from that to a crisis point. Because you can never return from that crisis point. Families never come back from that. What's happening is families are coming to a crisis point and still not being helped. For having to go months and years down the road in crisis before they're really given any sort of support that they need. So really just providing spaces for people to access support and whatever they need is important.

I think empowerment has a lot to do with time and attention – paying attention to people and validating peoples' strengths. My perception of empowerment now is spending time with people and validating them as a person and learning about them and what their strengths are and encouraging them, like supporting them in what they do. And not being so directive.

5.2.2 Ecological Approach

Community Corner adopts the two principle foundations of community development: an ecological or holistic approach and a social justice and human rights perspective. The staff are conscious of the six fundamentally important dimensions in human experience and interaction: social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, and personal/spiritual. For example, the staff discuss their perspectives of the neighbourhood as well as some of the issues affecting tenants on these dimensions such as income levels and health.

[Staff] We really are conscious of the social environment, the extended families environment, all the factors that influence a family…We always talk about that with families, acknowledging: school, spirituality, kids, their health, all the variables that affect people and I think especially with the staff who is pretty political. The staff has a real appreciation for oppression from a political perspective, from a social perspective. I think the role of women in society; the staff has a good handle on. So the staff just really believes also holistically.

[Staff] Poverty is increasing and the gaps are increasing as far as income levels and people going into poverty and poverty levels increasing.

[Staff] Money is out of control. The stress of money that we [service providers] I think acknowledge it, but I don't think we really get it. People stress about money all the time but this is different.

[Staff] I cannot tell you how pathetic the dental health of so many adults in Sault Ste. Marie is. And I'm just looking – and this has all come from my Community Corner involvement. There are teeth still in their mouth and they're rotting. Or their teeth – young people with not a tooth in their mouth and no replacement teeth, no dentures. I'm thinking, "What's going on here? This is a major social issue."

Although staff are limited in addressing all of the issues, they do address poverty through the provision of some resources such as diapers and milk coupons.

Well I mean they've got different things where Vicki's got diapers and milk coupons in there. And you get closer to the end of the month toward baby bonus for a lot of people that are on assistance checks or whatever and you tend to run short. It's not hard to run out of money. If you need any information…

5.2.3 Parenting Skills

One of the goals of the program is of course to prevent children from coming into the care of the CAS through improved parenting skills. The research showed that parents have learned conflict resolution strategies and parenting skills through staff modelling or the formal groups. Tenants have also increased their self confidence and their confidence in the parenting skills of one another, and have more collaboration with other parents.

<u>**Conflict**</u>

And I was rational about it and I went home. I went home and cooled down and came back.

<u>**Parenting**</u>

They had one [formal group] about discipline and behaviour and how to handle that when they're lashing out. And it's really helped with the way that I react to the way that he's [child] acting. So I'm going, "That's pretty good."

I used to scream at my kids instead of talk to my kids…it's [skills learned in parenting group] got my kid into his own bed. They helped me out with that. I was having trouble with that. Just setting goals of what you want to have this kid do by the age of 2 or the age of 3 or whatever.

> *I'm 24 years old. I have 2 kids. It's not easy to be parent, just by trying to wing it. So it's good to have those extra people come in and help out and discuss with you and things on how to be a parent.*

Parents are now spending more time interacting with their children and watching their kids since Community Corner opened.

> *There's more people out there [in the playground] watching their kids than there was last year.*
>
> *The kids behaved a little better because they've got more of a structured playtime after school everyday. They're not just running wild because nobody is watching them. More people are watching the kids now...*

Community Corner also provides parental relief and support for parents. Many tenants are single parents without access to any parental relief and appreciate support in care giving.

> *And they're [staff] so understanding. They'll take him [child] no problem. They'll watch him. He came here yesterday and watched a movie and it was great because I got to sit here with him. It gives me a break. It gives me a chance.*

As Community Corner's programs are accessed more frequently, and parents deepen their trust in the program, they are willing to take greater risks.

> **<u>Increased confidence – Case example</u>**
>
> A discussion took place with two tenants where one tenant explained that asking for help is difficult (e.g., milk coupon) because it impacts her sense of pride. She explained that the staff are very discreet and she is now willing to ask for help because of her relationship with the staff. This tenant's friend who was present at the focus group explained how this individual has changed:
>
> *She wouldn't do that before. And I even notice with her [other tenant], she's just more at ease. Like she will ask.*

5.2.4 Support, Advocacy, and Mediation

The research showed that the provision of support, advocacy and mediation by Community Corner, based on a strengths-based, holistic philosophy, provided tenants with increased

confidence in their capacity to support, advocate and mediate amongst themselves. These are all skills which contribute to building the neighbourhood's capacity.

The research indicated that one of the most helpful resources that Community Corner offers is support, both formally through the different groups and informally by just listening. Tenants appreciated having someone consistently in their neighbourhood that they could talk to confidentially and from whom there was an immediate response.

Well I'm for any kind of support that anyone can offer a parent and a child. So I thought it was excellent because I don't attend a lot of the meetings – but things that I am concerned about I will come and attend and hear what has to be said.

I think I'd be kind of more lost if they shut this place down even though I don't attend a huge amount right in here [formal programs] but I'm still – you know, the program's here and I rely on these guys just for support myself.

People still have their disagreements and they have their spats and they have their fights but it's not as bad as it was last year or 3 years ago because they have someone they can talk to where they know it's not going to go from place to place to place.

A lot of support from the people that work here. And if something needs to be said, if there's concerns, we can call and we do get calls back – and it's not a week later!

The research shows that Community Corner is a safe place for people to talk about issues and disagreements. Tenants have expressed feelings of relief knowing that staff are available to mediate situations so that issues do not escalate. The research also indicated that although the staff certainly help to resolve the issues, the program participants are also developing skills.

When there are issues and the other two parents can't come together and talk about their problems and their issues, they can do it here at Community Corner in a caring atmosphere. They can discuss their issues. They would rather feel comfortable that the staff is here or somebody's here with them.

Now there is someone onsite to step in and try to mediate the situation so that things don't escalate out of control.

And I've never seen it done as far as she [other tenant] is concerned. The staff just calmed her right down. And they [other parents] had the meeting with the staff sitting there and she was so calm and mellow after that. And it's great because you need someone like that around because it does escalate a bit over here.

The staff resolve a lot of issues that say myself and another parent are having a problem; she'll mediate so that we can work things out because we all have to live in the community together. It's better to be friends than to always be fighting.

5.2.5 Community Development

Community Corner's impact is not restricted to individuals; it has extended to the neighbourhood as more skilled parenting, conflict resolution, and mediation all contribute to better neighbourhood interactions. The research found many instances of overall improvement in relations between adults and children, adults and adults, and children and children.

There was so much animosity and it just seems like it just all sort of went down after all this began.

And because of being leery about that more people started sort of watching their kids [in playground] and now it's just become: "well o.k. it's not so bad to sit out here [playground]. There's moms that I can sit and talk with."

People are coming out of their homes more like that isolation, the apathy, the sadness – just like these clouds that hang over people, they're breaking up a little bit. People are coming out. Neighbours are supporting one another. People are being more respectful to one another.

It's good to be able to have everybody get along a little bit better….especially out in the park you see the difference. From 4 years ago I used to just baby-sit up here and you could see the problems, they were HUGE. And this year, it's calmed down a lot.

It's more of a positive reinforcement instead of "oh that kid is so bad. Don't you hate that kid?"

The kids are more at ease.

It may sound really corny but just to see the smiles and the excitement in those kids after a day with Shack. When I first got them [children] they were so closed off. They weren't used to kids. Now they're just thriving.

The younger kids are more polite. They have more respect and they listen better but they're not so aggressive and mean. There's not so much fighting and swearing and stuff like that going on like how it was before. There's hardly any more stealing.

I've had kids practically all summer long staying at my house whereas last year she [daughter who was bullied] wouldn't even go outside the door. It's a major major major improvement. I had her in counselling because she wanted to kill herself. I was on the verge of a nervous collapse.

Community Corner provided tenants with an opportunity to acquire the practical and technical skills and knowledge required for parenting and relating to their neighbours. A strengths perspective and ecological approach to families and communities, and access to support, advocacy, and mediation was helpful for facilitating the development of self-esteem and positive communication for both individuals and the neighbourhood.

5.3 Independence: Opportunity to Build Self Control and Responsibility

The literature demonstrated that the opportunity to choose and participate in decision-making are crucial elements of healthy individual and community development. At Community Corner, tenants are involved in deciding what programming and activities are offered, all tenants are informed about the programming and they decide individually whether they are interested in participating. The formal groups also operate in a flexible and adaptive manner so that tenants are free to explore subjects of interest.

There's a theme of always choice. Like what they want to do. It's never pushed on them. It's up to you. It's what you want to do. This is your Community Corner. This is what you want. You do have a choice about what kinds of things you'd like to get.

You can't just say, "Great, that's a partner. Let's bring them in" because people might not be responsive and that's not what they want. We're not really strict in the structure of the [formal] groups. It's not really too formal so that people are comfortable and so that if it takes them a while to come then that's o.k. And if they come half way through the group, we try to be really accommodating and work them into it. And sometimes we'll abandon the format of the group, the information that we're supposed to cover. We have to sometimes move away from that and move towards more relationship building or addressing an issue. So we don't need to follow this really strictly it's more to make it a comfortable environment for people.

Once again, staff contributed to encouraging tenants – including teens – to take responsibility for the program, by providing choices about using the centre.

Case example:

During a visit to Community Corner, there were three teenage boys helping the staff member clean the house. They had approached staff about using a room for the afternoon to play videogames. The staff explained that once the cleaning was complete they could use the family room for the purpose. The teenage boys finished the cleaning, brought their videogame equipment to Community Corner, and played videogames.

The research showed that communication was a key component for tenants being able to take more responsibility for their own actions, as well as to resolving problems in the program.

For example, when tenants understand how the larger systemic issues and challenges in service delivery affect the social service agencies, they feel more empowered to voice their ideas. For example, tenants became frustrated and angry with SSMHC when they were expecting a playground to be built and it did not arrive right away. Once staff from Community Corner explained the process of getting playground equipment and the delay at the company that builds the equipment, tenants understood the delay.

5.3.1 Governance and Tenant Participation in Decision-Making

Community Corner has established a formal structure for tenant participation in decision-making through the Working Group. The working group is composed of Community Corner staff, partnering agency staff, and neighbourhood representatives. The neighbourhood representatives are leaders in the community that bring the voices of the tenants to the working group meetings. On a less formal basis many tenants talk to the staff throughout the day and express their ideas and concerns. The staff then brings the concerns and thoughts of the neighbourhood to the working groups.

Working Group – Monthly meetings of staff from Community Corner and partnering agencies and neighbourhood representatives. The working group enables stakeholders to coordinate services and exchange information and ideas. It is also a venue for guidance, support, networking, and sharing resources. The working group's decision-making processes have been rather informal (not explicitly defined).

S = Staff of Community Corner
P = partnering agencies staff
T = Tenants
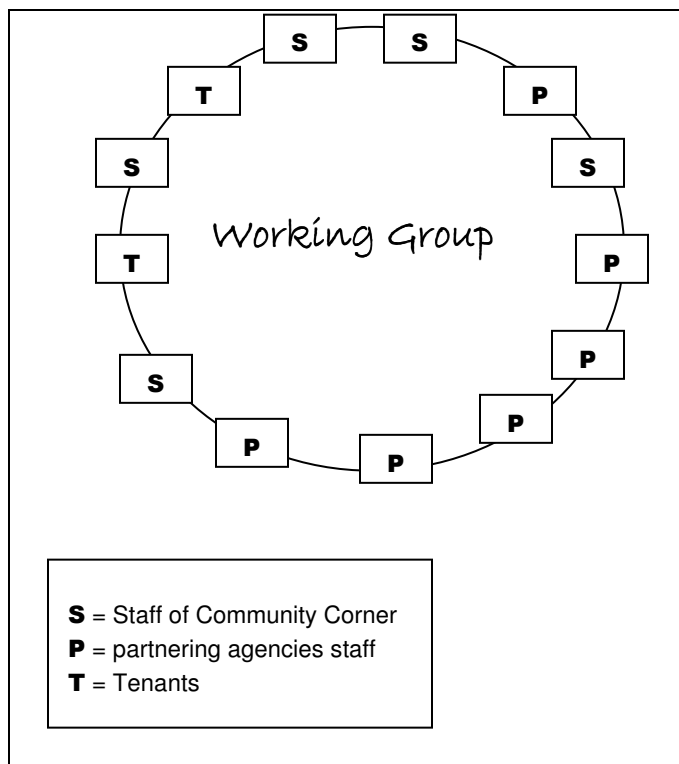
"We're all allowed to have the say as to what we do at community meetings before any more decisions are being made. You show up to the meeting then you have a say in the meeting. That's pretty important too because that makes people feel they want to take care of the place that they live in because they have a say in what goes on – as to where before it was like the agencies decided "we make this decision and we don't really care what you guys think".

"I think everybody's heard… Everybody's entitled to their own opinion. And everybody is entitled to listen to everybody else's opinion too."

[Teen] "Before we even make a decision if we want to go to someplace, the staff will talk to all the kids on teen time. And say, 'Do you think this would be a good idea for the young kids? Do you think this would be a good idea for the older kids?' and if we do we say 'sure' and we have like a vote."

5.3.2 Changes in Behaviours

One of the remarkable findings of the research occurred early in the research process, when a child was apprehended by a CAS child protection worker. This event could have resulted in a major loss of trust, and potentially could have significantly reduced participation in the activities of Community Corner by the neighbourhood residents. Instead, residents demonstrated their feelings of ownership for the program going to Community Corner to talk to the staff about the incident. They also demonstrated their confidence in their own capacity to address the issue by providing advice on how to handle it and by taking action.

[After the apprehension] I said to the staff that we needed to do some sort of damage control because people are still a little bit leery and there were rumours flying around that the staff at Community Corner knew[about the apprehension prior to its occurrence]. [People were saying] It was the staff that called CAS and had them [children] removed. And that's what we were trying to get a handle on. To kind of get the pressure off the staff at Community Corner because straight up, we stood up and we went. "I did it. The staff didn't know anything about it. I called CAS."… We took a lot of flack because people were freaking out. I got yelled at.

This kind of independent decision-making and action has been encouraged by staff, through a variety of skills development, but also by encouraging tenants to advocate on their own behalf, demonstrating confidence in their capacity to succeed. The following case example demonstrates how staff, rather than deciding and acting on behalf of the tenants, have instead implemented an empowerment model that encourages self-advocacy.

__Encouraging self-advocacy [Case example]:__

There was a parent that was having a problem with the school. Rather than the staff calling the school, the staff explained that sometimes teachers get frustrated if they think that nobody is supporting the child at home and that maybe it would show the parent's dedication to the child if the mother called the school. The parent thought it over and decided to call the teacher. She then returned to Community Corner to tell the staff that she had called the teacher and that they had worked out a plan together for the child and that she felt really good about it.

Tenants have the opportunity to choose and participate in decision-making about Community Corner and programming and are encouraged by staff to self-advocate in their lives. Tenants illustrated growing levels of involvement with the program, a sense of ownership of Community Corner, and increased confidence in their own capacity.

5.4 Generosity: Opportunity to Show Respect and Concern

To be willing to share one's views, skills, resources and time with others, requires a respect both for oneself and for one another. The networking and relationships that have been formed, and the

resulting community empowerment has led to mutual respect and mutual aid amongst tenants in parenting and in crisis situations. There is also more cooperation among the children since the launch of Community Corner. Overall tenants are reporting more respect for their neighbours and the neighbourhood, an increased sense of safety, and feeling less shame about living in a subsidized housing complex.

One of the significant changes that has occurred through the program is the respect that parents have not only for their own ability to discern good parenting techniques, but also that they have for one another's opinions regarding parenting.

The group gives people more of an insight of what others parents are like. When they have the parent groups they go "o.k. this is how I discipline my child". And then sometimes there's bad tips and then you can help them with your tips that you have or they're really good tips that can help you with your situations.

We did a toilet training and that's perfect because my son is coming up to be toilet trained. We have parent groups just to let out you know what our situations are at home, just to get everyone else's advice.

5.4.1 Mutual Aid and Cooperation

The research provided many examples of mutual aid and cooperation that demonstrate the formation of a real community. Tenants gave numerous examples of sharing responsibility for child care, supporting each other in dealing with their children, and even sharing scarce financial resources.

[Parents] We take shifts in the park. We have all kind of worked it out where one mom eats early, one mom eats in the middle, we eat late. So we've all kind of worked it out where we watch each other's kids and there's at least one adult in the park at all times.

[Parents] It's nice because you can say watch my kid, I have to go in. I don't feel good and I'm going in. Just watch him for one hour. Come and get me in one hour and then you can go do what you have to do and I'll take your daughter.

[Parents] That woman [other tenant] cried and she cried lots. And we dealt with temper tantrums [of child] and backed her up when that kid was flipping out.

[Parent helping with teen programming] I did a couple of things with the Teen Night like for mother's day. They didn't know what to do for mother's day so I came in and helped them make vases for their moms to bring home.

> *[Crisis] She hurt herself and needed to go to emergency…there was only her and her kid – she had no one to help her. She had no money to get to the hospital. She was able – through her relationships she built here [Community Corner] to go to one of the mothers and ask her for help. And that mother gave her money, which is a huge deal, to take a cab to the hospital. And that woman who was hurt was so touched by it that she got her cast, came home, went to the bank, and returned it [money] that night to that woman…*
>
> *[Children] The kids are calming down a bit. There's more of them wanting to participate in the activities that they do at Shack and the after school program…they're starting to listen. They're working as a group and they're boosting each other's confidence.*
>
> *[Teenager] Before I would see someone in trouble, they would fall down and I would just leave them there and not ask if they were o.k. but now I would run up to them, ask them if they're O.K., help them up. Tell them if it was something that I did, say "I'm sorry". And if they're really little I'd bring them to whoever's home.*

There was a child in the neighbourhood that was ostracized because of false rumours that were spread by both children and parents. Through relationships built at Community Corner, the mother of the child that was tormented met other mothers who then supported her and helped to dismantle the rumours. The impact of this has been tremendous for this family.

> ### *Case example*
>
> One kid started dragging all of the other children away from my daughter, segregating her…and they started calling her names and that and then eventually the parents got involved in it too and they were harassing my daughter. It got really bad. My daughter wouldn't even go outside by herself…I could afford to move money wise but I also could not afford to not move emotionally for my daughter's sake because she was at the point where she wanted to die because it was so bad…Community Corner saved my daughter's life…me and my daughter are getting out a lot more than we used to. We practically never really left the house last summer. Like we're outside more. I've been out barbecuing. She's at the pool. We've been sitting outside. She's been playing in her pool with other kids. We've been doing lots of stuff.

The research shows that tenants (including children) are beginning to care more about their neighbourhood and neighbours than they did before Community Corner opened.

> ### *Caring about the neighbourhood and tenants*
>
> ***Parents***
> *We have to set a good example. We want to have a good community. We are all together. Everyone has a right to everything. No one can be excluded from anything…we have to treat everybody with respect*

Children
The kids are calming down a bit. There's more of them wanting to participate in the activities that they do at Shack and the after school program…they're starting to listen. They're working as a group. And they're boosting each other's confidence. They still fight. They're kids. You can see the kids are starting to pick up after the adults because before the adults were acting like the kids. Screaming and yelling and fighting over stupid things in front of the kids. And now that's not happening as much.

The sharing issue has gotten so much better. One of them wanted to share it was hitting, and kicking, and biting, and fighting. Now it's "Here, I brought you this to play with." They will take turns and "when you're done with that, let me know and I'll give you my toy". And we [parents] were just looking at each other going "WHAT?!"

The kids are learning to work together with each other. And you'll hear them now out in the playground "Hey! Hey! Hands off policy" or "Get down off there [top of slide]!" They're reminding each other what they're supposed to be doing.

The kids are definitely way nicer. Kids don't litter like they did. Like they'd take things they'd always drop it but now since Community Corner doing all sorts of clean up, kids are definitely throwing things in the trash or going outside to pick them up.

Teenagers
I definitely have more respect for everybody around because we do talk about respect [at teen time]…SO I'm definitely getting a better outlook on respecting people

They have more respect for people around them. Objects like toys and bikes, they have more respect for them as well.

Not so destructive. You are smashing things just for the sake of smashing them.

5.4.2 Feelings about Living in the Neighbourhood

There is also an increased sense of safety, less shame about living in the neighbourhood, and increasing community involvement compared to before Community Corner opened.

<u>Less shame and increased involvement</u>

We don't exactly feel like we're living in the slums [anymore].

The staff brings them [new tenants] a welcome package and introduce themselves. And they take one of us with them. And if somebody [longer term tenants] knows them [new tenant] or has met them already, "well why don't you come with me?" It makes it a little bit easier. And then we can introduce them to the staff and tell them what goes on.

<u>*Safety*</u>

The amount of violence and the vandalism has gone down considerably. We've noticed a really big change... Before it was – it was a bunch of riff raff. You didn't want to walk outside after dark because you didn't know what was going to happen.

Unless they were with me [dad] I wouldn't let them walk around much far past where I could see them. Some people aren't nice. And so just to make sure that they were safe…

It's bringing down the fighting; the noise levels and stuff like that. There's not so much conflict. And last summer I was like "oh my God, I'm not going to be able to live here another summer. I am going to have to be gone all summer [this year]. It was brutal last summer. It was nasty. The people were nasty. They were mean to the kids. And now it's starting to die down.

It's safer. It's safer.

I'm getting more comfortable.

The trusting relationships that have been formed and the resulting empowerment has led to mutual respect, mutual aid, and cooperation amongst tenants thereby ensuring individual self-help and support within the neighbourhood. As continued trusting relationships are developed and there are more positive interactions in the neighbourhood, tenants are feeling safer and less shame about living in the subsidized housing complex, and are more willing to become involved in community life.

5.5 Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

Despite the tremendous contribution that Community Corner has made to the Chapple/Albion neighbourhood, there are still a number of challenges facing the program's ability to develop full participation and trusting relationships with the residents. The research shows that there are still some tenants who are have not been engaged by Community Corner; the involvement of CAS continues to inhibit some from participating; and the size of the physical space actually challenges the program expansion.

5.5.1 *Expanding Participation*

Some residents indicated that they are not interested in the program topics, formal programming, or the timing is unsuitable. For example, some tenants work during the day or attend school and cannot attend programs. In the summer, many tenants prefer to enjoy the nice weather outside rather than be indoors at a group session. Research participants also identified that gossiping continues to inhibit the participation of some tenants.

Indigenous people are attending Community Corner's formal and recreational events as well as seeking informal support, but their participation rates appear to be lower than expected given the

number of tenants in the neighbourhood of Indigenous ancestry. Although there are some Indigenous agency partners, Community Corner could further develop partnerships with Indigenous service providers. It is important to consider the historical context of CAS with Indigenous families (see literature review), which may result in less trust of service providers and less participation in activities. Further research with the families to determine the type of programming, timing, etc., could assist Community Corner in developing culturally appropriate activities and approaches that would improve the service for this tenant group.

Community Corner has been effective at engaging the mothers, children, and teenagers in the neighbourhood but there are few fathers that take part in activities. It is important to note, however, that fathers often attend the recreational events and there are far fewer fathers in the neighbourhood than mothers (i.e., high population of single mothers in the area).

The Family Action Centre (University of Newcastle Australia, 2006) has identified a number of principles of father-inclusive practice that could serve as a guide to Community Corner to improve its participation rates for fathers.

5.5.2 The Power of CAS

Although some tenants' perceptions of CAS have changed, there are tenants that may still be afraid to be involved with Community Corner because of its association with CAS.

> *[Why some tenants are not participating] Just CAS. That scares them all. It's an awful thing to say but it's true. That's just what it boils down to.*

> *…Just being a person – not a worker…*
>
> *…Talk to someone as a person – not as someone from CAS…*

These findings are consistent with the social work literature. As reviewed in Heinonen & Spearman (2006), social work, particularly in child welfare, is associated with a degree of power or authority over clients. This authority may be seen as a threat by clients in cases where the actions taken by a social worker (e.g., CAS worker) determine their access to their children. Tenants in the neighbourhood of Community Corner were certainly sceptical and concerned about CAS coming into the area because they were fearful of losing their children. It is critical that staff acknowledge the authority and power of the agency and how it is used. This is occurring at Community Corner through ongoing education about the mandate of CAS and the Family Preservation Program.

This research identified some important strategies for helping to balance the power relationship: allowing tenants to have power in decision-making for Community Corner and the

neighbourhood, developing trusting relationships through engagement, and really focusing staff to be collaborative, non-judgemental, and non-authoritarian (i.e., see staff traits above).

To help balance the power relationship and engage tenants in decision-making in a non-authoritarian and collaborative way, other approaches to governance (e.g., Woodydell model) could be used. The Tenant Advisory Committee approach may be more comfortable for tenants to openly express their views. For example, the following model is based on the *Woodydell Family Resource Centre* in Winnipeg Manitoba. The Tenant Advisory Committee drives the Woodydell Family Resource Centre whereas the Steering Committee enables the coordination of services and the regular exchange of information and ideas (Tottle & Bright, 2006).

S = Staff of Community Corner
P = Partnering agencies staff
T = Tenants
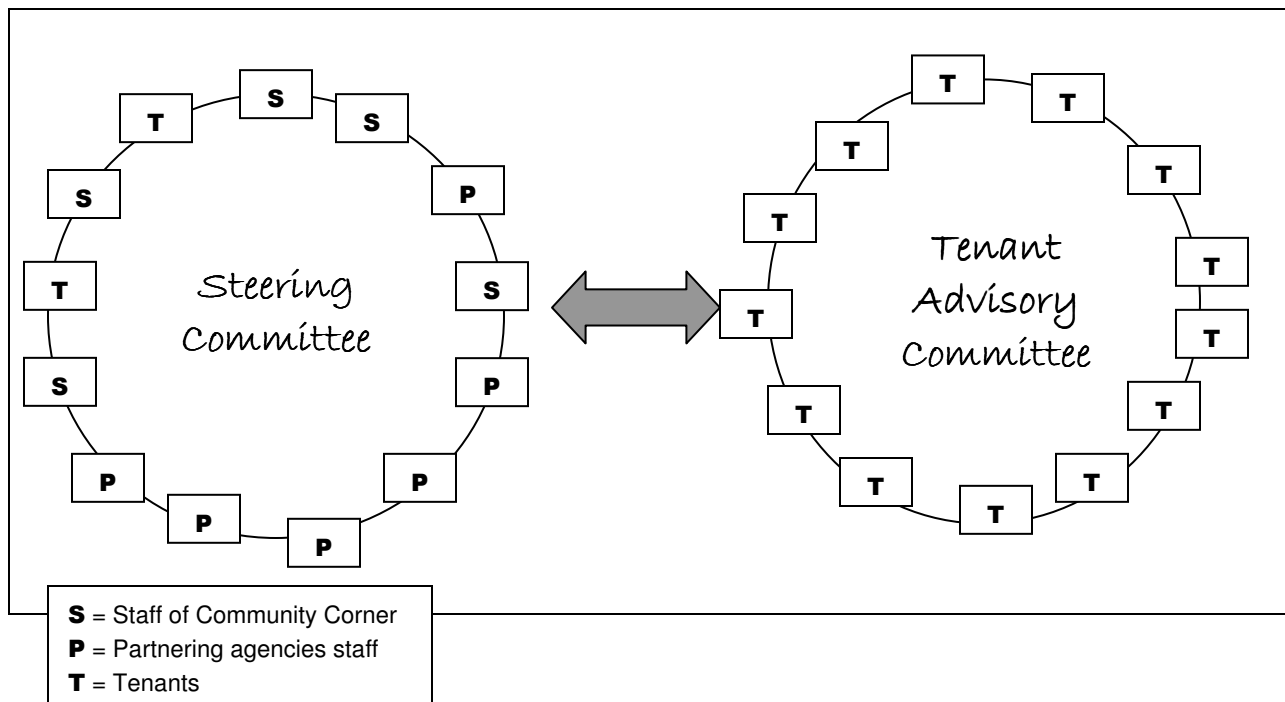
Tenant Advisory Committee – The Family Resource Centre is completely driven by this group. Membership is open to anyone that tenants in the development and they meet bi-weekly. Any issue affecting the community is open for discussion and the committee operates on a consensus model with no philosophies of equal opportunity/access and respect as the basic premises. No decision is made at the Family Resource Centre without the approval of the community. All ideas for programs and projects are initiated at this level. The Tenant Advisory Committee is also an entry point for many tenants to develop leadership skills. Core staff from the Family Resource Centre oversee the meetings.

Steering Committee – Monthly meetings of service providers/stakeholders enable the coordination of services and the regular exchange of information and ideas. Membership is open to anyone that is interested.

Community Corner's governance model provides a venue for tenant participation in decision making, however, an approach like the Woodydell model, tailored to the needs of the

Chapple/Albion community may foster greater tenant participation and empowerment. For example, if tenants wished to offer their views, ideas, and suggestions, they would want to attend the Tenant Advisory Committee meeting, thereby encouraging participation and less reliance on the staff to relay their thoughts. In addition, tenants would be more likely to attend because they would feel more open to express their views in the presence of other tenants rather than "professionals" (i.e., Family Preservation program staff and partnering agency staff). The consensus model would foster cooperation because no one group could drive Community Corner's services through majority voting. Overall, this type of model would allow for more tenant ownership and participation in the neighbourhood. It may be valuable for the working group to have a meeting and discuss the direction that they would like to take, particularly to define its goals, governance, and decision-making processes. To facilitate empowerment and community development, it is essential that tenants are a part of this meeting and it would be useful to have youth participate in the working group.

5.5.3 Neighbourhood and Stigma

In Sault Ste. Marie, as in many other cities across Canada, subsidized housing is clustered in neighbourhoods, which become 'hot-spots' for at-risk families. These neighbourhoods often become stereotyped (Broad & Date, 2006), resulting in both children and adults taking little pride in their home or address, and frequently resulting in higher rates of damage, vandalism and move-outs and/or evictions. These findings are consistent with the broken circle of courage (Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2003), that is, when the four universal needs of children (or communities) are not met, they result in problems for youth and troubled adults.

The research shows that the density of the housing area itself is one of the most stressful elements in tenants' lives and a barrier to establishing trusting connections and participation. The housing units are located in close proximity to each other, which results in little privacy for families.

Like that's all we need [CAS in neighbourhood]. Because we're already so close together. Everybody is already in everybody's business.

The stress of living in this environment [housing complex] is equal if not more than anything else that's going on in their lives.

At first you never think it's a problem. Move into a small, tightly packed, very very very packed area – and small personality conflicts erupt into huge personality conflicts.

There's really no privacy. You can't sit in your backyard without people seeing you. If you have company, people know when you have company. People know when you're home. People know when you're not home. …If I want to try and just close my curtains and not have anybody, they haven't seen anybody leave the house so that they know that you're home. It's like knock, knock, knock. And some people acknowledge that you're home and you just want to be left alone or whatever but some don't... It's very hard. It's very hard. It takes a lot of time to get used to. I really don't want to live there anymore but I'm pulling though. We're doing all right now.

Like when I'm in the building I can't tell if that's the person next door's phone ringing or mine. That's how thin the walls are. You can't spend any time with your family. You can't sit outside for dinner. Kids harass you and bombard you. There's no, there's absolutely no privacy, none. A big culture forms of gossip and all this stuff.

Some tenants choose to avoid Community Corner or developing relationships with any tenants in the neighbourhood because of fear. The neighbourhood has been associated with gossip and "drama" and therefore people choose to stick to themselves and not socialize with others. Sometimes the extent of the oppression is simply overwhelming, and feelings of powerlessness against such odds defeat the tenants.

We used to have a joke "You live in the northern Bronx".

I never really got involved when I first moved in because I really didn't know a lot of people. I really didn't know much about it [Community Corner]. I was kind of nervous. I really didn't want to know a whole lot of people because I've heard different things about things that go on here. People calling Housing on you for silly little things, people calling CAS on you, and I just didn't want to be involved with anyone because I didn't want my family [to be at risk of harm].

There are just so many forms of oppression: poverty, the lack of resources, and the lack of the practical stuff, the systems that are oppressive to families. People feel like they have to grovel and beg. It's humiliating to be on social assistance. It's not easy to access the system. It's not easy to get resources. Families get discouraged so they quit advocating so they become apathetic and they quit trying. I think emotionally families get burnt out.

Placing services in at-risk neighbourhoods may further stigmatize the people living there or may lead to negative feelings and disempowerment. Research participants expressed mixed feelings when they first heard that Community Corner was coming to their neighbourhood; some feeling good about previous experiences with social service agencies while others questioned the intentions of the service providers, wondering if they were there to spy on them.

It doesn't make them feel good that they're always needing services…

We really didn't want anything to do with CAS's name attached to it in our neighbourhood because there's enough workers in and out of that neighbourhood. But I mean it has turned out to be a blessing, especially in the community where we live.

Over time and with the development of trust, many tenants began to view Community Corner and the staff in a new way. They felt that it was beneficial for their neighbourhood, "an anchor in their community" or the "heart of their community". They felt that the staff person was not a

'typical' CAS worker and they demonstrated a new understanding of CAS. For example, they illustrated that they understood the difference between the Family Preservation Program and other departments of CAS, and recognized that CAS would prefer that children remain in their homes, with apprehension only as a last resort.

Since clearly there are at-risk neighbourhoods in Sault Ste. Marie, in which social problems are highly associated with poverty, the community hub model appears to offer a viable option, when it is delivered in a manner which supports collective action, community empowerment, and demand-driven local service delivery. As noted previously, allowing the tenant advisory committee to have the power to drive the programming and activities at Community Corner is such a means.

5.5.4 Leaders in the Neighbourhood

The research indicates that there are many tenants that are concerned about and motivated to improve their community. They have many innovative ideas for future development such as having a substance abuse counsellor and a nurse onsite and developing more teen programming. Many tenants have also identified that gossip is a major issue in their neighbourhood. The current Working Group or a Tenant Advisory Committee like the Woodydell Family Resource Centre could be a viable venue for developing ideas, solutions, and means of acting.

A group of tenants have come together and have a relationship where they feel that they can speak about issues that they would like to address in the neighbourhood. To complete the community develop process for this issue, the tenants must come together to agree on a solution and to plan implementation.

> *As far as we're concerned…we work together to correct the situation if our kids are having issues…So we just need more parents working together…*

In addition, when considering expanding the program into other neighbourhoods in the city, it is critical to meet with the tenants in the area and provide them with an opportunity to have a say whether they are interested in the development of a community hub and what programming or activities would be useful to them.

As Community Corner grows, people from within the neighbourhood could be hired. For example, at Woodydell, people in the neighbourhood work to help maintain the family resource centre, run large events and the store (i.e., store that sold household items they bought as a neighbourhood in bulk and sold at a discounted rate).

5.5.5 *Staffing and Sustainability*

> *I was very opposed to Community Corner coming in and I think that it's a very important part of our community now. I'd really hate to see us lose Community Corner because it would really damage our neighbourhood once again. It's just leaps and bounds of process since Community Corner has come in and people are starting to get comfortable with the thought that CAS's name is on it.*

As outlined above, the community is concerned about the ongoing viability of the program, due to funding constraints. The community needs to be assured that the program will continue and be adequately funded.

Staff have developed strong, trusting relationships with tenants. It would be detrimental to the program if the staff that has this strong connection to the neighbourhood were lost. It would also be helpful for staff to have access to fully operational equipment for running the program such as individual voicemail boxes for privacy issues, access to email, photocopiers and all office supplies needed for programming onsite.

One of the greatest strengths of Community Corner was that a staff member was available to work fulltime onsite. The staff members have many roles and responsibilities at Community Corner aside from their social work practice responsibilities such as cleaning and maintaining the housing unit and administrative work (e.g., organizing events, printing flyers). Although a cleaning person could be contracted to assist with the maintenance of the house, which would allow the staff to spend more time with the tenants, the cleaning may be an important path to community engagement and community development. For example, tenants may view the staff as more a part of their neighbourhood because they also have to clean their housing unit and perform chores, as a result, they are less of "professionals" and more like community members. Similarly, cleaning in Community Corner can be a shared responsibility of the neighbourhood tenants and illustrates that tenants are in fact feeling a part of Community Corner and taking some ownership. It can also be a means of skill development in a more "informal way", like much of the learning, support, and skill development in the neighbourhood.

Space has been a barrier to participation for tenants and to the expansion and success of programming. There is a school that is across the street from the neighbourhood that Community Corner has used in the past for activities that could not be held at Community Corner because of the space.

> *They're in a little 2-bedroom row house and they should have a 4 bedroom. I know those are hard to come by but to run something successfully sometimes you do need the space.*
>
> *They need a bigger space. The kitchen – a bigger kitchen. A place for the kids to go and play. That little room, that little bedroom isn't very big for them to go and play. The group when you get a big group, there's a lot of people and it's – it's a small room.*

There's not a whole lot of room in that place [Community Corner]…they have folding chairs; well you can only put so many in there. Where do the rest of them [tenants] go [fit]?

It gets loud in here really quickly. You have 15 kids in here and just the noise once they're talking. You have to talk over them.

5.5.6 Strengthening Agency Collaborations

The research shows that Community Corner staff and partnering agencies have worked collaboratively in a creative and resourceful manner. They worked together on events and cases and each partner came up with innovative and productive ways to make their programs work in the neighbourhood and in the space available at Community Corner. The research also showed that Community Corner staff were very appreciative of the partners who have remained dedicated to and supportive of Community Corner through the challenges in initiating the program (e.g., low participation rates when program first offered).

In order to continue to work in such positive ways with partners and develop positive relationships with new partners, an orientation to the neighbourhood, and to the processes of community development would be helpful. For example, some partners were discouraged because they would come to Community Corner to offer programming and nobody would attend.

We would not have a turn out for some things [programs] and that had a significant impact on the partnership as well because they were thinking, "geez, we're sending a staff person there to do programming but nobody's coming". So that's a barrier for sure.

An orientation to community development and empowerment would also be helpful because agency partners should practice using philosophies that are consistent with the Family Preservation program.

There is also a church in the neighbourhood and Community Corner could build the relationships with them and other organizations in the area. The research shows that the tenants have many ideas and are eager to develop more programs and activities at Community Corner. Community Corner has a good relationship with some of the stores in the area where they purchase a lot of supplies and these stores have been generous with donations. There should be continued efforts to raise awareness of Community Corner among other social service agencies, schools, churches, and organizations throughout the entire City including political leaders. It is important that all departments of CAS are aware of the Community Corner; understand the values of the Family Preservation program and community practice, and that all departments are respectful of Family Preservation program values and the innovative work that is being done.

There's a lot of things that we [tenants] would like to do regarding Community Corner. We would like to have coats and mitts and hats and ski pants were if you need it you could go and get it. There just isn't the room to do it. We would like to set up like a Salvation Army type thing but if you had extra hangers to donate them…That's one of the biggest issues is there just isn't enough room to do all the things that we would like to be done here.

5.5.7 Allotting Time for Reflection and Support

Community Corner has a strong program philosophy that focuses on strengths and assets, a holistic approach, and looks at the person in the environment. While this has given the program a solid foundation, there also needs to be ongoing evaluation, and this research provided a critical space for assessing the program's progress towards its goals. However, in the rush to get the program up and running, and the day-to-day demands on a small staff, there is little time for reflection and planning.

In some ways it feels like everything with Community Corner happened so fast and just kind of fly by the seat of your pants.

The staff of the Family Preservation program spend time checking their values in order to make sure that they are working within the program's values and mandate. A similar process should be developed to reflect about Community Corner with the agency partners and tenants.

It's important that we're always checking our own values and we're not bestowing whatever value or history or lens or worldview we bring from our own life experience on the people in that neighbourhood…

The research shows that hope is an important aspect of community practice in the neighbourhood of Community Corner. Community practice can be exhausting and draining for staff so it is important that they have adequate supports in place and time for reflection, debriefing, and re-energizing.

It's [community-based practice] really different – like you are out there living some else's life. You're not sitting in your office and behind a desk doing paperwork. This is hands on going into homes, being exposed to poverty and neglect and all kinds of barriers. And trying to be hopeful about it, trying to encourage people…

I guess on a personal level, it has been just such an eye-opener. It was an eye-opener for me coming from office-based social work through the CAS and just learning about a whole other level of society. Just even further oppressed than the oppressed I thought I knew and seeing that families have it so hard. And then it was still from the safety and comfort of my office but now doing the community based work that we do – you're there. There's no turning away.

6. FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Community Corner staff have successfully engaged tenants and facilitated empowerment by creating a safe neighbourhood space in partnership with SSMHC and other health and social service agencies. Although there are certainly challenges facing the program, it has achieved remarkable success in the short time of its operation and the research shows evidence of significant community development. There was evidence in all areas identified by the *Framework for Evaluation of Empowerment in Child and Family Services*.

The research also identified some challenges facing the program and opportunities for growth. The reflections resulting from this research have suggested a number of potential future directions for Community Corner staff, participants, and community partners to consider. It is important to note, however, that given the program is only 1.5 years old with very limited resources available to it, the achievements of Community Corner have been remarkable, and these areas for expansion should be viewed solely as suggestions for further development.

6.1 Future Directions Based on Findings

The research identified areas of effective practice to be considered when further developing Community Corner and the expanding the community hubs to other neighbourhoods and rural areas. The following potential areas of effective practice were identified based on the findings from the research:

Program Model

a. Maintain the strengths perspective and ecological (i.e., holistic) approach to individuals, families, and the community.

Program Delivery and Governance

b. Provide many access points to program participation (e.g., a range of flexible formal and informal programming), adapting to the specific context of the neighbourhood, creating a comfortable atmosphere in the community hub, allowing the community to determine the pace of development, and providing tenants with the opportunity to choose to participate.

c. Ensure that the space in the community hub is sufficient for offering a range of activities and programming and that required resources for program operations are available.

d. Offer confidential support, role-modeling and skills development, advocacy, mediation, resources, and encourage self-advocacy and positive communication.

e. Allot time and space for tenants, staff, and community partners' to reflect about the neighbourhood, community hub activities, program evaluation, future directions, and support.

f. Value local culture by inviting all tenants to participate in decision-making from initiation and on an ongoing basis through transparent practices that encourage collaboration (e.g., Woodydell model).

Building Relationships and Community Partnerships

g. Allot time to build new community partnerships and strengthen existing ones according to the tenants' interests and needs.

h. Ensure staff are carefully selected and are trained to be respectful of tenants, collaborative, and non-judgemental.

i. Communicate with tenants about the power of CAS and the agency mandate. Ensure that staff are transparent about the community hub's goals, programs, and activities.

j. Provide a space for tenants to reflect about their lives and the neighbourhood.

Staff and Sustainability

k. Support staff and community partner training in the strengths perspective, ecological approach, and community development processes and practices so that staff are aware of the time and ongoing efforts required for engagement, building trusting relationships, and empowerment.

l. Adequate resources to support consistent, sustainable staffing and funding for the program.

6.2 Conclusions

Community Corner is a remarkable success story of a tiny program that is making a very big difference in a neighbourhood identified as a 'hot-spot' for social ills. There are many learnings that can be taken from this example of community empowerment. The collaboration by the university and CAS in this research provides an opportunity to share these learnings broadly within both practitioner and academic communities to benefit both. CAS and the Family Preservation Program are to be congratulated for demonstrating in such a concrete way community empowerment practices in child and family services.

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