

The Value and Potential of Natural Supports in Calgary Communities

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Foreword

This research report was developed in collaboration with the Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University (MRU) and United Way of Calgary and Area to explore how we might inspire a natural supports movement in Calgary. United Way of Calgary and Area is a charitable organisation, the mission of which is to mobilise communities for lasting social change and to create resilient communities where everyone thrives (United Way Calgary, About Us). My Catamount journey began in September of 2021 when I first met with my faculty mentor, Dr. Janet Miller, and my United Way community partner, Susan Brooke (later joined by Heather Hayes). At that time I was just being introduced to the concept of natural support, I am still in a position where there is much I can learn about the potential of reciprocal support and relationships. As a result, I chose to explore in what ways natural supports can be made into a movement that improves the lives of everyone in Calgary (and hopefully far beyond).



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Introduction

“The value of wholeness speaks to the totality of creation, the group as opposed to the individual, the forest as opposed to the individual trees. It focuses on the totality of constant flux rather than on individual patterns. This value is reflected in the customs and organisation of Plains Indian tribes, where the locus of social organisation is the extended family, not the immediate, biological family. Several extended families combine to form a band. Several bands combine to form a tribe or nation; several tribes or nations combine to form confederacies...”

(Leroy Little Bear, 2000).

In the words of Joanne Pinnow, a Strategy Lead of the United Way Calgary, “natural supports is the way Indigenous communities operate by default, particularly before colonisation.” The concept of natural supports is not a “new” idea. It is a way of being in the world that perhaps we need now more than ever. Over time many communities have become more individualistic, and studies show that loneliness is on the rise. The Canadian Mental Health Association (2020) notes that loneliness is hurting Canadians at unprecedented levels. Additionally, around 60% of Albertans polled by Ipsos were identified as being in the high risk category with regards to mental health (Boynton, 2021).

United Way of Calgary and Area has dedicated resources to the development of natural supports as a way to “help children and youth access supports, increase overall community well-being, and create a network of caring citizens who have the supportive skills to help, which is even more important as we experience a global pandemic” (Natural Supports YYC). Stress and exhaustion are conditions that have become very familiar to people all around the world.

The negative experience index tracked by Gallup showed that globally, people were experiencing “negative emotions” like anger and intense sadness more than at any point in the last fifteen years (Gallup). This trend has resonated with many Calgarians as well. For example, 47% of those aged 18 to 24 years reported feeling frequently stressed in 2021, which is an increase from the previous year (Vital Signs). Academic research supports the sentiment that COVID-19 related stressors have eroded family cohesion and exacerbated negative effectors, like family conflicts (Mohanty et al., 2022). Additionally, most low-income Calgarians’ financial stability has been disproportionately affected, and they reported feeling as though they are barely ‘getting by’ in the physical, emotional, and mental sense (Enough for All Advisory Committee, 2021).

It is important to acknowledge the importance of one’s community and how it contributes to the overall sense of wellbeing. As discussed earlier, isolation and lack of socialisation can be great detriments to one’s health. Additionally, half of the Albertans surveyed by the CMHA (2020) identified close connections with family as being significant to their mental health or resiliency. As such, this issue needs to be considered from a systems thinking lens, and a natural supports approach is a great way to consider the aspects of this complex problem.



For the purposes of this paper, the definition of natural supports that will be used is the one coined by the Max Bell Foundation & Burns Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship: “Natural Supports are informal reciprocal connections that consist of close relationships with friends and family, and broader associations, including neighbours, organisations and local businesses” (p.4 of Connections First Guide). In order to remain consistent with the definition, it should also be understood that the strongest and most common natural support forms are on the individual level; they are usually family members, friends and mentors, and those from school/work environments. As of March 2022, there is a ‘work-in-progress’ comprehensive guide on common language around natural supports created by the Calgary-based leadership table on natural supports. As the document is not complete yet, it is recommended that readers familiarise themselves with the Connections First website, as it is one of the most relevant sources on natural supports work in the Calgary region. (<https://www.connectionsfirst.ca>). This output will be focused on examining the system at the community level, including barriers to implementation and the positive impact that natural supports could have on local communities.

Research Methods and Methodology

This scholarly output was written by a third-year undergraduate Criminal Justice Studies student and Catamount Fellow at Mount Royal University (Calgary, Alberta). The initial stages of the research for this project included many community learning opportunities facilitated by the United Way of Calgary and Area, as well as a literature review. The review was composed of various academic sources, such as journal articles, case studies, and a government report. The non-academic sources mostly included reports compiled by local and worldwide not-for-profit organisations. An effort was made to focus on local and Canadian studies and reports, but this was not always possible due to the lack of literature available on the subject of natural supports. This scholarly output is also informed by a series of consultation meetings conducted with professionals knowledgeable about natural supports initiatives in Calgary, and by an online community engagement session, which was hosted in January, 2022. The session was attended by 36 professionals working in the human and community services organisations who are either interested or are already engaged in local natural support efforts. Themes were identified from this process which has led to systemic gaps being identified. Recommendations for addressing those gaps will be provided as part of this paper. The result of this process was a diverse array of recommendations and concerns targeting different gaps of natural supports, as well as potential ways of overcoming these gaps. Common ideas from the conversation will be used in this report, but not concrete recommendations, as the purpose of this report is a systems-thinking examination rather than a 'to-do list'. For clarity, systems-thinking refers to a world view that the "foundation for understanding lies in interpreting relationships within systems" (Johnson, et al., 2020). It is necessary to use a systems thinking approach in order to attempt understanding complex issues, such as the need for natural supports.

Barriers to Natural Supports

Results from this research clearly showed that natural supports have a positive and significant impact on individuals, families, communities, and systems. Further, this project identified four kinds of barriers that when addressed, will create even stronger frameworks of natural support. Taken together, these findings point to recommended actions that individuals, communities, and organisations may take to further create a robust natural supports movement in Calgary.

1.1 Use of Resources

One commonality that was observed throughout the literature review, as well as the community engagement session is the idea that informal resources are a mostly untapped avenue for the betterment of local communities. Researchers like Frank Baker (1977) state that there are multiple benefits to implementation of natural supports in different sectors, one of them being that it offers a different alternative to the "dehumanising, bureaucratic, and often slow responses of professional care-givers" (p. 140). This observation may appear harsh at first, but it reveals a systematic gap which can be solved through methods that the system actors are mostly unaware of. Other research highlights the fact that certain populations benefit from community resources more than others. For example, it was found that parents with children find community resources more beneficial than parents without children (Young, 2019). It is possible that populations with extra stressors, such as single-parent households are in more need of informal community resources than dual-parent households.. With increased accessibility and use of informal resources, people's physical, social, and mental health needs will be met with a much lesser reliance on professional and formal systems.

Another example related to resource allocation is the interface between crime and drugs, and the way its criminalization has a significant social and financial cost to our society (Deitch et al., 2000). “Drug recovery treatment”, in a common understanding, is usually thought to be a professional program facilitated by a formal health service. However, not many recognize that a criminal social circle and lifestyle may be as problematic as the drug consumption itself. Therefore, the social factors connected to the criminality and consumption of drugs must be addressed. It is said that “the greater the physical, psychological, and cultural distance between a treatment institution and the natural environments of its clients, the greater is the problem of transfer of learning from the institutional to the natural environment” (White, 2002). It is clear that support resources that are understood to be community-based services need to become more aware of the healing potential of the communities from which their very clients seek support. When the institutions that task themselves with treatment of drug addictions and recovery make an effort to move back into the communities which they serve, the boundaries that have artificially separated primary prevention, early intervention, treatment, and recovery will start decreasing (White, 2009). It is not difficult to see that channelling funders’ support towards the creation of community-based programs can create more freedom in how the system gaps are addressed.

1.2 Inclusion and Virtual Engagement

A lot can be said about what diversity and inclusion mean in the context of building natural supports. Ideally, this would mean that the diversity of different people in the system is recognized and included and that individuals have their needs met. Their inclusion and reliance on informal support is independent of factors such as their ethnicity, religion, age, and social status.

One non-physical way of building better inclusive environments is through organisation of events and active programs that are accessible to everyone, and that appropriate accommodations have been provided to any that need them. A successful example of a campaign that engages communities and that is accessible to many is the ‘Social Snacking’ campaign launched by Connections First. This organisation, in collaboration with a local community arts organisation (Antyx Community Arts) and the Calgary Public Library, provided a free toolkit for the practice of social snacking, as well as a social media campaign (Social snacking website). In this way, Connections First was able to promote community unity and social interaction to many Calgarians, which is a great step towards making communities more self sustainable. Expanding on programs such as this, and making them more accessible would undoubtedly increase the sense of belonging in Calgarians.

Covid-19 caused many programs to shift online. With this shift there are two important points to note regarding the use of natural supports online. While some community members, like youth, may find this step to be more usable and convenient, others may not, such as older adults. Studies suggest that although older people might be engaging in internet use less than younger people, developing methods of encouraging the older population may be crucial in improving their quality of life and integration to their social environment (Boz & Karatas, 2015). Since one of the goals of natural supports is to overcome social isolation and loneliness, breaching a generational gap through the use of technology might be one way of accomplishing the task. Furthermore, adapting natural support ways of thinking to school environments should not be overlooked. A local study has shown that in the past five years, youth have been struggling with mental health issues and social connection (Calgary Vital Signs). Promoting virtual natural supports for high-school and university students is another untapped source of support.

1.3 Awareness of Natural Supports

A crucial component of the system is how aware the system actors are of potential benefits of natural supports. In order to grow confidence in the approach, awareness needs to be raised through various promotion and engagement campaigns. Online tools can be effective in reaching the demographic of people who are more likely to engage with online content. The aforementioned social snacking toolkit, or the projects created by the Social Impact Lab of United Way of Calgary and Area are great examples of this.

One such project, “Natural Supports YYC”, is provided as a free online simulation tool that allows the quiz taker to explore a combination of three different support roles (Parent or Caregiver, Teacher or Coach, and Friend or Relative) and three different areas of mental health concerns. Upon the completion of the online simulation, the participant is then provided with feedback and resources on how to be better equipped as a natural support. Online sources like this could be further expanded to include other demographics and ways of mental health support, and then further disseminated to affect more communities.

‘Community champions’ is a concept that was mentioned frequently during the community engagement session. The common consensus was that there needs to be an effort to identify community leaders, or ‘champions,’ who will be able to effectively disseminate natural supports strategies and resources into their communities. Identifying and enlisting the help of such champions would certainly make a difference, as this method of delivery would be more reliant on in-person involvement rather than online delivery. Diversification of methods of delivery could be key in reaching out to as many demographics as possible. The creation of such leadership positions could also work harmoniously with existing formal community organisations and new, proposed informal ones. Once community gathering and events become more of a priority in community members’ minds, they will be more encouraged to participate in local events that could be co-hosted by the chosen community champion.

These community champions would not just be volunteer leaders, but also positive role models and educators with practical experience in natural supports. In this way, people would be learning the importance and usefulness of natural supports organically, without explicitly realising that they are engaging in specific natural supports strategies.

Another potential strategy of overcoming the gap in confidence is the creation of a mass media movement. Such a campaign would focus around the common language of natural supports, useful strategies and resources, and potentially supporting data to reassure the public about the effectiveness of the approach. As it stands, not many local residents know what is meant by natural supports. If a comprehensive and accessible guide was available and advertised to them, they would be considerably more aware of the benefits. This campaign does not have to only exist in the virtual and media space either, involving various stakeholders, such as schools, universities, formal community associations, non-profit organisations could be a great boost to overall engagement. The more people that feel invited and welcomed by the movement, the more trust and confidence will be enhanced.

Creating Community Change Through a Natural Support Movement

The systemic barriers to creating a natural supports movement do not seem impenetrable when analysed with a systems-thinking lens. Engaging all system actors and stakeholders, being open to various solutions and measuring positive outcomes are sure ways of growing the natural supports movement (Johnson, et al., 2020)

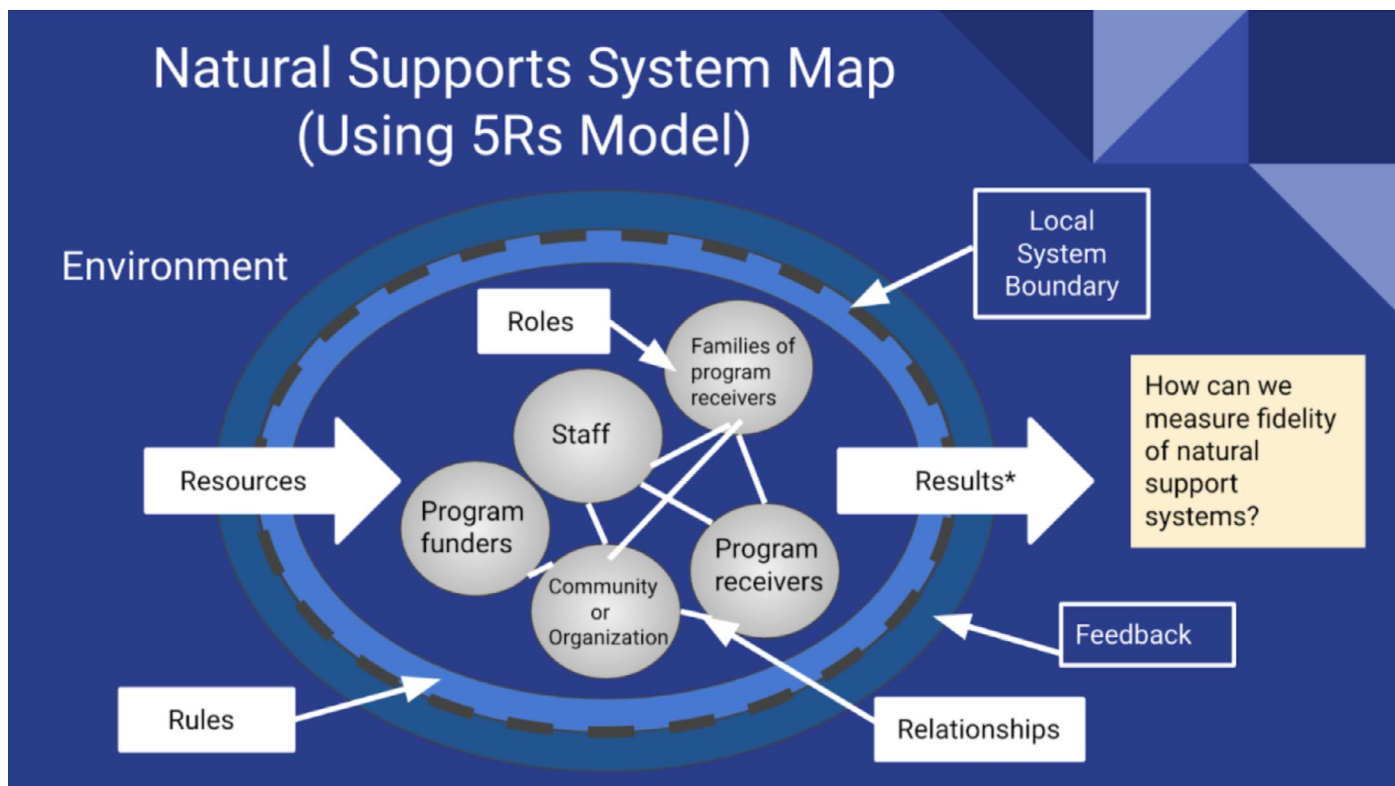


Figure 1.

In a naturally supportive environment, all the actors assigned to the 'roles' in Figure 1 would feel safe, supported, socially engaged, and have access to a strong network of help. They are aware of resources that are available to them in a time of need, and they have someone to go to in time of trouble. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships that occur in a naturally supportive environment. The 'reciprocal supports' role includes those that are helping and those that are being helped, as any person in the community is capable of taking on either role. The line is connected with a professional 'organisation', their local 'community', as well as their close natural support (family and friends). The map makes an effort to distinguish naturally supportive and reciprocal relationships from help provided by a professional organisation or actor.

The Impact of Natural Supports on Communities

Higher feeling of safety and stability

Focus on friendliness, kindness, inclusion

Reciprocal support, social connectedness

Utilising resources, volunteering, and building programs

The potential of increased investment into naturally supportive social infrastructure should not be underestimated, as it can have a direct positive effect on the overall wellbeing of individuals and the community as a whole. The state of social infrastructure in a given neighbourhood has been proven to be relevant in contributing to people's health, with factors such as fear of crime and stigma of the area affecting people's mental and physical well-being negatively (Ziersch, 2011). **As such, investing in the informal social infrastructure of stigmatised communities affected by high crime rates would prove effective in tackling the root cause of the issue.** In the short term, it is possible that reports in domestic violence or child abuse might increase as a result of exposure of previously unreported crimes.

Not only that, but it is possible that other crimes that are known as 'dark figures of crime' might receive more exposure. 'Dark figures of crime' are used to describe criminal statistics which are difficult to record, for one reason or another (Scott, 2015). For some crimes, such as stalking, the issue of underreporting is quite widespread across many communities (Brady & Nobles, 2015). Although researchers seem to support the idea that a reorganisation of the criminal justice system would fix the issue of dark figures of crime, such as stalking, it is possible that being open to more community centred natural support solutions could help in a major way. Creating a stronger sense of community connection would in turn increase the feeling of overall safety. The criminal justice system is just one actor in the web of community interaction.

Recommendations Moving Forward

There are many observed benefits to natural social support systems to various populations. For example, a study done by Welsh et. al (2015) has shown that the presence of natural supports in an active military duty personnel's life has been linked to "fewer depressive symptoms, heightened perceptions of mission readiness, and greater satisfaction with military life" (p. 76). Natural Supports have also been shown to be effective for populations going through drastic life changes. According to an exploratory study conducted by Barton Hirsch (1980), natural support systems "may significantly affect how successfully one copes with major life changes" (p.161). In this study, Hirsch examined two different groups of women (widows and students), and concluded that both groups were able to complete a smoother and less drastic reorganisation of their lives with the help of natural support systems. Other benefits of natural supports are clearly outlined in the Connections First Guide, developed by Reynolds, Tough, Walsh and Aquis (2020). Building on this work, Alberta's Natural Supports Leadership Table and members of the Council of Champions' Natural Supports Stream hope to strengthen natural supports systems and bring their value into the mainstream.

Although social circumstances and dynamics may vary greatly between communities, there is still a common need for social participation and natural supports. Almost everyone, regardless of their demographic, wishes to feel safe, supported, welcomed, and connected to their community. Evidently, there are still gaps between people's social wellness and the situation in which they are currently in. As was described before, the Covid-19 pandemic has only exposed these issues to the public eye. Thus, action at an individual and systemic level needs to be taken to better people's lives and improve their wellness.

Recommendations that have resulted from the literature review, individual consultations and the community consultation can be summarised as the following (organised by time order):

Now (12-24 months)

- Identify champions in communities who already exemplify the power of natural supports (nominate a natural support in your community; community awards for natural helpers; develop resource banks within communities, etc.)
- Capture stories that illustrate the positive impact natural supports have on individuals and communities.
- Broaden membership on the natural supports leadership table to include new stakeholders.
- Identify successful campaigns or programs that use natural supports, and consider how they could be scaled up or used to model the way to further success.
- Introduce new campaigns based on the knowledge and plans of the natural supports leadership tables.
- Promote consistent and common language for natural supports.

Next (24-48 months)

- Measure the effectiveness (and fidelity) of natural support approaches.
- Help communities to label their activities and efforts as part of the natural supports movement (e.g., local ice rinks, community clean ups).
- Help individuals to identify the help that they might offer to another person (e.g., effective listening skills, practical support, knowledge, information, tangible resources) and promote learning resources to them, such as Natural Supports YYC.
- Ensure that the natural supports movement is aligned with the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Decolonizing the concept of "help" will promote assistance by all people, thus lessening pressure on professional services.
- Create a mass media campaign movement to promote the value of using natural supports.

Later (48-96 months)

- Consider how successful natural support programs might be scaled up and broadened out to other cities.
- Engage with urban planners to create intentional spaces (socially positive infrastructure).

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