

The Future of Social Innovation Alberta 2016



We become peacemakers when we are no longer struggling for power, to be at the top, but just working to serve each other... We cannot all do big things, but all of us can kneel at each other's feet and say, "I trust you and I believe in you."

Jean Vanier

THE FELLOWS

KATE LETIZIA
Calgary



ALEEYA VELJI
Edmonton



LESLEY CORNELISSE
Policy



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to our funding partners, hosts and advisors who made this initiative happen.

As coaches and collaborators, they rapidly expanded our networks to help us dive into Alberta's social innovation ecosystem, discover what is emerging and find an effective way to share it with others.

Because of their kind support, and the openness of Alberta's impact community in general, we found

ourselves surrounded and inspired by people who care deeply and passionately about their community, and this Province.

It was a privileged position to be in and a gift to us all moving forward.

Sincerely,

Kate Letizia
Aleeya Velji
Lesley Cornelisse

THANK YOU TO OUR FUNDING PARTNERS



SUNCOR
ENERGY
FOUNDATION



Institute for
Community Prosperity



TRICO
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

THANK YOU TO OUR HOSTS



Institute for
Community Prosperity



Supporting the citizenship
of people with disabilities



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Edmonton



United Way
Alberta Capital Region

A UNIQUE APPROACH

The ABSI Connect Fellows formed in August 2015. Every aspect of the Fellowship embodied the spirit of the collective action and intent that inspired this experiment.

The Fellows were funded by a collaborative of partners, were institutionally agnostic, and worked out of 'hotdesks' at a variety of host institutions to be exposed to diverse perspectives. Each host offered incredible in-kind support and mentorship to the Fellows.

The fellowships embodied an open, diverse experience in service to all social innovation action in Alberta.

To administer the Fellowship, Social Innovation Generation (SIG) National served as the initial backbone organization, helping to coordinate the Fellowship and providing weekly mentorship to the inaugural cohort.

THANK YOU TO OUR ADVISORS

Tim Draimin and Kelsey Spitz	<u>Social Innovation Generation (SIG) National</u>
Terry Rock	<u>Rock Strategy & Leadership</u>
Tracy Wood	<u>Agents for Change Partners</u>
Gena Rotstein	<u>Dexterity Ventures</u>
Colin Jackson	<u>imagiNation 150</u>
Katharine McGowan	<u>Mount Royal University</u>
James Stauch	<u>Mount Royal University Institute for Community Prosperity</u>
Jill Andres	<u>Creating Value Inc.</u>
Danielle Carruthers	<u>The Sedge</u>
Russ Dahms	<u>Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (ECVO)</u>
Ben Weinlick	<u>Skills Society</u> <u>Think Jar Collective</u>
Ione Challborn	<u>Canadian Mental Health Association Edmonton</u>
Chad Park	<u>The Natural Step</u> <u>Energy Futures Lab</u>
Allan Undheim	<u>United Way Alberta Capital Region</u>
Nora Smith	<u>Delburne Stone Soup</u> <u>Red Deer FCSS</u> Systems Change LSD
Cheryl Rose	<u>WISIR & J.W. McConnell Foundation Senior Fellow</u>

FORWARD

The [ABSI Connect Fellows](#) are a timely experiment crafted in response to an emergent need, opportunity and collective interest for social innovation in Alberta.

As the Fellows are quick to point out, Alberta has a long history of social innovation, from the 'Famous 5' to [Alberta Innovates](#). It is a long tradition of open-minded determination and a willingness to step forward in a different direction, adapting along the way, to pursue better outcomes, and the best future, for Albertan communities.

Albertan social innovation is a journey that depends on shared learning, deep trust and a tenacious belief in our fellow travelers.

In keeping with this tradition, the Fellows and their partners set out on a seven-month inquiry to explore what innovative action and activities are already underway, setting new precedents and pathways for impactful social and environmental change.

None of us knew what three Fellows could accomplish or discover in such a short time frame. None of us knew the true value of this kind of role: independent, institutionally agnostic, part ecosystem mapping, part resource, part relationship broker, part cheerleader, part translator - all in service to a diverse community of social action.

Now we do. It has been a privilege to be part of this journey of discovery, friendship, inspiration and deep community building.

In this report, the Fellows will share the richness of Albertan social innovation. It is present and thriving - a unique and inspiring worldview that ignores the status quo in favour of what we can do together every day to walk toward a shared future.

Now is the time to keep walking, taking up Alberta's legacy of social innovation and going further than previously thought possible.

Kelsey Spitz

Senior Associate, SiG National
Administrator of ABSI Connect

FORWARD

At [Skills Society](#), we couldn't be happier with being part of the ABSI Connect Fellowship. One of our core values at Skills Society is Seeking Creative Collaborations because it pushes us to look outside our silos, learn, and carve new pathways forward in tackling complex social challenges. The creative collaboration with the ABSI Connect Fellowship has helped us deepen our learning about what patterns help social innovation to emerge.

Noticing the deep learning and expertise around social innovation that the stellar fellow we worked with has developed in a short period of time, I'm starting to wonder if maybe one of the promising patterns of impact to grow deeper leadership capacity around stewarding social innovation, is to design more fellowships in social innovation...

Ben Weinlick

Senior Leader of Research and Social Innovation, [Skills Society Action Lab](#)



In a short period of time, the ABSI Connect Fellows have provided significant new insights into social innovation in Alberta. They have illuminated initiatives and ideas that are being led by passionate, creative and courageous Albertans.

They have also surfaced cultural, public policy and systems-level issues that need to be addressed in order to support transformative community change and shared prosperity in these difficult times. Implicit in this, is a challenge to those of us who support the innovation ecosystem - government, philanthropic foundations, corporate community investors, consultants and post-secondary institutions - to be better connected to the grassroots - i.e. to empathize with and support the actual innovators working on the ground to make this province a better place for us all to live and thrive.

As hosts and partners on ABSI Connect, we take this challenge seriously. It should - and will - change the way we all work.

James Stauch

Director, [Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University](#)

INTRODUCTION

In early 2015, a common question was emerging among organizations, initiatives and frontline activists working on social and environmental change in Alberta:

How can we do better at solving complex social and environmental problems in our province?

Inspiring this question was the specter of the now cancelled Government of Alberta's Social Innovation Endowment. Before its demise, the Endowment motivated an active interest in social innovation, as many prepared to build off the energy of this nationally unprecedented opportunity. Among them was a collaboration between

- [Social Innovation Generation \(SiG\) National](#)
- [Suncor Energy Foundation](#) (SEF)
- [Trico Charitable Foundation](#), and
- Terry Rock of [Rock Strategy and Consulting](#).

Despite losing the Endowment, Terry Rock, with support from his collaborators, continued to facilitate province-wide discussions to explore a shared approach to "put social innovation to work" for Alberta. His resulting [report](#) recommended that the next step forward be the creation of 'community builder fellowships' to meaningfully enrich the social impact community with a shared capacity to embrace and accelerate social innovation.

The ABSI Connect Fellows were born!

As Fellows, we were given a big and bold mandate that included the following goals:

- To deeply and critically explore the 'social innovation ecosystem' in Alberta;
- To provide capacity - resources, time, convening, connecting, storytelling - to nurture the growing social innovation movement and tell a shared story of social innovation in Alberta; and,
- To develop a common agenda for moving forward on social innovation together.

To fulfill this mandate, we looked for those who were going beyond the status quo to better understand and address the root causes of our province's most complex economic, social and environmental challenges.

We learned from people quietly pursuing radical opportunities leading to incredible impact, and we were surprised, challenged, inspired, humbled and honoured by what we heard.

To all those who we were lucky to connect with, thank you for your time, your openness, and your honesty. To all who we have yet to have the honour to speak with, thank you as well for doing what you do.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE 'ECOSYSTEM OF SOCIAL INNOVATION'

The 'ecosystem of social innovation' - as we call it in this report - describes the people, practices, policies, resources, relationships, and capacities interweaving to support social innovation in Alberta.

By exploring all these moving parts, we set out to learn: What is Albertan social innovation? How can we help enrich it?

We also set out to weave the elements of the ecosystem together, developing stronger relationships between the disparate parts to support social innovation in action. We knew people were keen to see the ecosystem evolve, but also how difficult it is to try and support field building off the side of your desk.

So we put it in the middle of our desk.

Now, it is our pleasure to share - from our desk to yours - what we heard, learned and see as opportunities for us to put our desks together to pursue some radically, fruitful social change.

METHODOLOGY

Before we began our work, a wide circle of local funders, advisors and host institutions came together to support our journey. These dedicated allies acted as critical intermediaries and partnership brokers across the province, enabling us to learn from diverse people, perspectives and approaches, and to expand the scope of our inquiry.

To achieve our ambitious goals in a short time period, we spoke to these people first and asked them:

Who is working on transformational social and/or environmental change in Alberta that we should talk to?

This question began the storm of discovery that 'snowballed' us toward uncovering what we came to understand as Alberta's social innovation ecosystem.



In total, we collected:

- Over 70 in-depth interviews with active and aspiring social innovators, as well as key supporters of the social innovation ecosystem in Alberta;
- Over 40 informal conversations with social innovation leaders in Alberta and throughout the country; and
- Insights specifically related to public policy and social innovation.

Please see Appendix 1 for a full list of contributors.

Gaps

We set out to explore the entire province of Alberta and develop a geographically and sectorally balanced understanding of our social innovation ecosystem.

Unfortunately, our ambitions significantly exceeded our resources, leading us to focus on central and southern Alberta's urban centres: Calgary, Edmonton, and to some extent Medicine Hat, Red Deer and Banff.

Beyond a geographic imbalance, important sectors and perspectives also remain underrepresented. A more intentional in-depth inquiry of social innovation amongst Indigenous, immigrant, and rural communities, as well as various sub-sectors within the larger 'problem areas' we examined, is required for a complete picture.

In the end, while we were unable to fully represent the rich diversity of Alberta, *we did explore critical and informative hotspots* (both in terms of population and social innovation activity) within the province, and we unveiled key evidence to help paint a picture of what is happening and where we can go next.

Please note that statements and quotes from our interviewees have intentionally been kept anonymous. We made this choice to keep honesty and openness at the forefront of our dialogue, to explore our collective reality and our need to work together to make change, and to avoid singling people out.

HOW WE TALK

Before diving into an examination of how the social innovation ecosystem in Alberta operates, we need to address the challenges we uncovered related to how we talk about social innovation in this province.

Albertans describe, understand and regard social innovation in multiple ways. There are those weary of the language altogether, some that use alternative terms to describe their work, and others who embrace the language and theories behind it wholeheartedly.

In addition to this sometimes spirited definitional debate, there is uncertainty around what is or should be included under the 'banner' of social innovation. The variance lies around ideas like scaling, getting to the 'root causes' of a problem, and how to include business, environmental, or economic realities in the term 'social.'

While there is great creativity and diversity in how we define social innovation, without a shared language we can get stuck fighting a language debate, rather than reinforcing our shared journey towards positive and lasting impact.

"The terms we use that have huge implications on transforming systems aren't being used the same way by everyone, or properly by everyone. This is a problem."

Where Can We Go Next?

Another definition for social innovation isn't going to help Alberta move forward. The fact of the matter is this: we don't need to agree on the perfect combination of words to describe this work in order to get better at solving social and environmental problems.

Instead, after witnessing and recording the variety of definitions, ideas and ideals held by Albertan social innovators, we found that thinking about social innovation on a continuum - with an agreed upon end goal - may be our most helpful compass.

The Continuum



INTENTION

Becoming aware that a problem exists
(no turning back now)



INVOLVEMENT

Doing SOMETHING about the problem
(actively participating)



INVENTION

Finding new ways to address the problem
(faster, better, stronger...)



INNOVATION

Addressing the root causes of the problem
(changing rules and relationships)

Image adapted from '[Nesting Social Innovation](#)' by Cheryl Rose

The continuum we've found most helpful is the brainchild of J.W. McConnell Family Foundation Senior Fellow Cheryl Rose. Cheryl emphasizes that social innovation isn't about passing judgment or devaluing different types of change work. Instead, she argues that the interconnections between various forms of engagement and participation (from an intention to get involved, all the way to social innovation) tell a story about how to honour all actors, with each contribution unifying toward a common end goal.

Over the past seven-months, this continuum resonated with what we heard from community, leading to one critical conclusion: **while we don't need to agree on a definition for social innovation and 'who's in or out', we do need to agree that we will not be satisfied until our social change work truly speaks to our original intent.**

HOW WE TALK

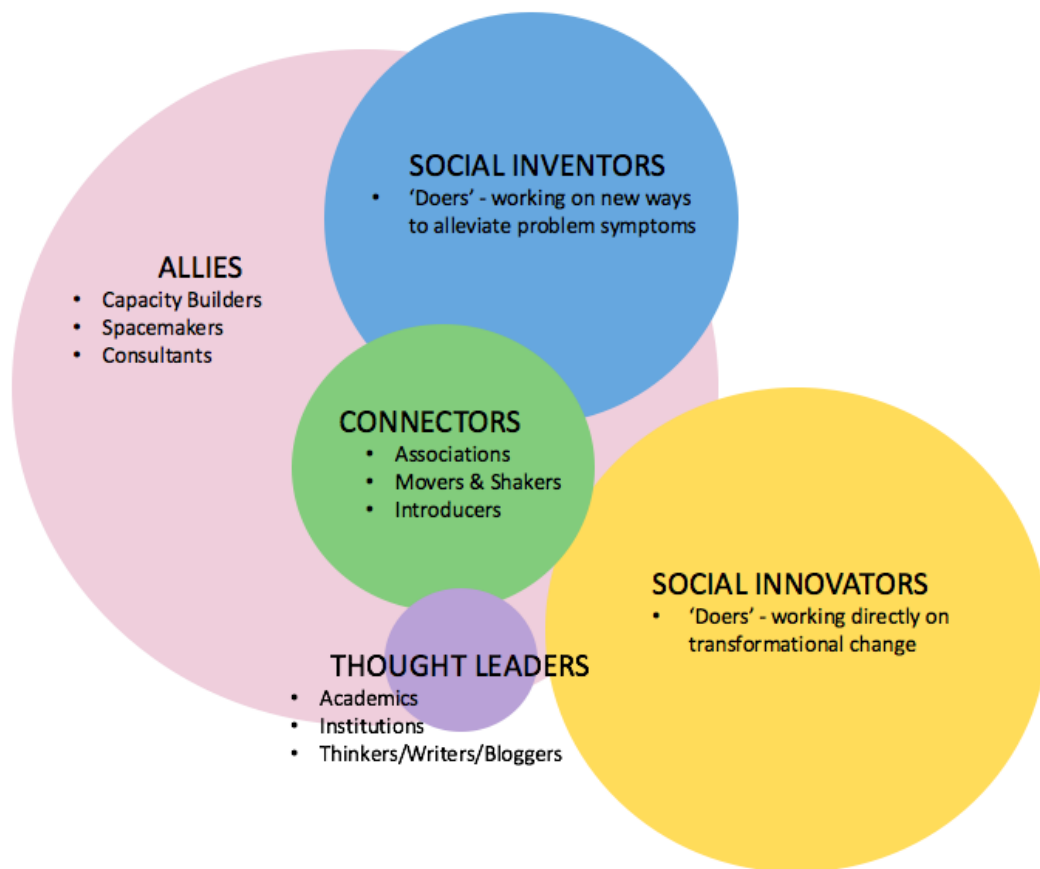
We think that Albertans involved in social and/or environmental change work should deeply and honestly assess where their actions fit in along this continuum and decide:

Is this where we stay?

- IF NO: where do we plan to go next, and how do we plan to get there?
- IF YES: how do we support and collaborate with others in different stages of action, but working on solving the same problem?

No matter where you or your organization identify on the continuum, we believe that Alberta can, and should, collectively strive to address problems at their root. This requires consistent and connected work at all levels of the continuum until we get there!

WHAT WE LOOK LIKE



Alberta's social innovation ecosystem is unique. We play distinct roles and interact with one another in a way that could only work in our province and for us as Albertans.

The image is an incomplete and rough interpretation of who we are and how we work together - as we saw it. The different bubbles represent the different roles and relative population of actors.

The way the bubbles connect represents the amount and quality of connections typically occurring between the groups.

While this is a static representation of a fluid system of connections, we have found it useful over the course of our inquiry to illustrate the complexity of our dynamic and continually evolving ecosystem.

MOVING FORWARD

There is no predetermined formula for social innovation. Our inquiry proved that social innovation looks different everywhere.

In the next section, we share both the powerful and daunting patterns that exist within the province of Alberta as we've seen them:

- 1. How We Work Together**
- 2. How We Take Risks**
- 3. How We Plan**
- 4. How We Grow**
- 5. How We Fund**

We believe that to really put social innovation to work in Alberta - to move that elusive 'needle' on major problems - the patterns must be named, noticed and either responded to or enriched.

To that end, we suggest pathways forward for each pattern as a starting place to move forward together.

SOCIAL INNOVATION:

PATTERNS
&
PATHWAYS

HOW WE WORK TOGETHER

Connection is Key

We work together through distinct roles and relationships. There is a large, highly connected community of actors in Alberta who support and connect intention, involvement and invention in social change. There is also a smaller group of others who don't seem to know about or understand the dynamics of the wider group and another subset who struggle to connect at all, despite a deep desire to.

Of particular note: active social innovators appear to be largely isolated or disconnected from the rest of the ecosystem.

One organization explained to us that the risks they took made them feel misunderstood and alone, "people can't speak our language or understand where we're coming from, we feel so alone all the time. It's hard to find support systems or networks that can relate or help in any way."

In other words, social innovation 'early adopters', while making great strides and doing exciting work, are missing out on the connection and support experienced by other actors on the continuum.

"How do we measure our social connectedness? On one measure, we're high! Because we connect often. On another, more critical measure, we're very weak because our connections lack depth."

Depth Demands Duration

Across Alberta, there is an emerging network of social labs and intentional exploration of design approaches to support how people work together to solve messy problems.

As described by one interviewee, the combination of social lab tools and design "are the convergence of appreciative inquiry, ethnography, design thinking, world cafe storytelling, and participatory action-based research that begin to show the interconnected nature of our messy problems.

When we utilize all of these things together, we begin to shake people out of their ways towards thinking differently." As we begin to think differently, resources like social labs begin to "support the development of people working together in effective ways."

That said, while tools like social labs help 'shake things up' and lead us towards a new path together, we often struggle to establish these new skills and ideas into our 'everyday' organizational cultures. We need to push ourselves to keep working deeply together and not default to our siloes after a social lab is over.

"We need consistent collaboration, people working toward common goals. Leave your ego and organization behind."

Collectively Making Impact

It is very tempting to become attached to one process model, applying it as our 'go to' solution.

One such solution we heard many interviewees get excited about was [Collective Impact](#), a method that involves "a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants" (Kania and Kramer, [SSIR Winter 2011](#)).

Collective impact can be an innovative solution to the challenge of effective collaboration. But like any process model, it will not be the best platform in every instance. We can't simply adapt our problem to our favourite solution and we can't make the act of collaborating an increasingly big hill to climb.

While there is no single model for tackling complex problems collectively, we uncovered 3 core principles common to successful collaboration models of all stripes in Alberta:

- Dedicated time and/or people to the collaboration;
- 'Outcomes before organizations'; and
- Deep investment in relationship building.

PATHWAY FORWARD

Working Deeper Together

Let's make the words 'partnership' and 'collaboration' mean something again!

Our shared goals and desires already exist - we know there are serious and important social problems to solve, and we know we want to dedicate our time and resources to solving them!

Something else we already know? No individual or single organization is going to solve any of the problems we're all working on alone.

Logically - we know this to be true, yet we consistently struggle to leave our egos and organizational loyalties in the background and put the problems at the forefront.

Moving forward, breaking the one organization/one solution mold, prioritizing how we find the space to build new processes together, test new solutions together, and eventually solve problems together will be essential.

This will require putting time and effort into building relationships, fostering trust and acknowledging that we need to deeply care about one another, as well as the problems we're trying to solve.

How to Do it

Build a requirement, as well as incentives, for deeper connections into a great number of the processes we already go through on a daily basis. Try:

1. Introducing an opportunity (or requirement) for applicants to apply for funding support in groups and collaboratives when working on similar problems.
1. Offering training courses that build skills and capacity for better problem solving with the same requirement - "Come learn this new skill as a group, and leave your 'hats' at the door."

3. Directing rewards and recognition for achievements toward collectives and collaborations - signaling a shift toward the acceptance of heroic communities, instead of communities of heroes.

IT IS POSSIBLE: WHAT WE DO

[Project Blue Thumb](#) is Alberta's first social innovation lab dedicated to addressing water quality issues. Launched in 2015, the lab brings together a diverse (and growing) team of people to design, test, and iterate solutions to water quality challenges in the Red Deer River watershed.

Convened in partnership by the [Red Deer River Watershed Alliance](#) and the [Alberta Ecotrust Foundation](#), Project Blue Thumb was launched to bring people together and actively co-develop solutions. Despite clear links between human activities on the landscape and the degradation of watershed health and water quality, many initiatives attempting to address water challenges were stuck on a "planning treadmill."

Approximately 30 stakeholders from diverse spaces are part of the lab, including: industry, community groups, municipal and provincial governments, academia, and nonprofits. The participatory, experimental, and systemic approach of the lab has shown participants that systems transformation is ultimately about the transformation of relationships.

In fact, "[participants] knowledge of the relationships has changed and what [they] thought were the issues are not the issues at all."

Intended to be a long term platform for collaboration around water, Project Blue Thumb is still underway and is revealing that many people want to see similar approaches to solving complex watershed challenges in Alberta. The convening of the lab has been a catalyst for beginning to imagine and develop projects with larger impact and various prototypes to improve water quality are underway.

HOW WE TAKE RISKS

We're Too Cautious

The social innovation ecosystem in Alberta is not lacking good, creative and potentially systems-shifting ideas. We're a creative and curious people, but tend to value and praise changemakers that disrupt a system only after any risk taking proves successful.

We noticed a widespread undervaluing and lack of support for people, organizations and ideas in the 'getting there' period. Avoiding taking risks continues to be prioritized over testing ideas that may move, nudge or shove the needle on solving problems.

Isn't the risk of maintaining the status quo actually greater in the long term than the risk of trying to do things differently, with great intentionality, today?

"People say they want systems change - but they are actually fairly scared of it"

We are Tenacious

Fear of risk aside, when we have an idea and we're confident that it could be a 'game-changer,' we don't let go without a fight. Even if it means 'cracking' or 'chipping' away at walls or barriers before the game changes.

"We are taking a crack in a cookie cutter system...and turning that crack into a wedge to open an institutional system that would normally have no space for unconventional ideas." In some cases, individuals or organizations even admitted to having to 'crack' or 'chip' for years, and even decades, before their approach gained acceptance.

A solution for speeding things up, according to one interviewee?

"Find the change-comfortable people, and start there - not everyone is comfortable with change. Some people actively avoid and try and stand in the way of it. Don't work with those people. Especially at first."

PATHWAY FORWARD

Making Room for Risk Taking and Experimentation

Social innovation is inherently risky. It involves trying and testing different ideas, models, programs and practices to find ways to actually solve our problems. Not knowing whether or not the new things we try will manifest - and the possibility we will have to admit it and try again and again - is what makes stepping out of our comfort zones and accountability structures so terribly intimidating.

An even bigger risk? The potential that homelessness, poverty, climate change (you name it!), will continue as part of our collective reality, and may even worsen. If we can accept that smart, calculated experimentation is required for success in just about any other aspect of society - why can't we do so in the sphere where positive impact and good results are most urgent?

In Alberta, the proof is in the pudding, as small groups across sectors are exploring a variety of processes for facilitating inclusive, responsive, and just experimentation.



Disturbance is never popular - nobody ever really loved an alarm clock in action - no matter how grateful they may have been afterwards for its kind service.

Nellie McClung

How to Do It

Build partnerships that share risk of the liability for innovation programs, projects and ideas among a group of partners. Try:

1. Encouraging smart risk taking by making literal and theoretical space for experimentation throughout the problem solving process **within your organization**. Collect the insights from failed experiments and use them to inform a new path forward. Funders? Find a problem that seems stuck and try giving out grants focused on experimentation only!
2. Enabling risk-taking by sharing the liability. Leverage long-term staged gate challenge prizes with multiple funding stakeholders, where each stage reduces the pool, but adds further funding to support ideation through to testing over one to two years. Build in community action and other parameters to shape the results towards collective action that is iterated, tested and launched!

Learn more from [Centre for Challenge Prizes](#) (UK).

IT IS POSSIBLE: WHAT WE DO

Calgary's [Beakerhead](#) is an organization whose innovative roots go far deeper than what Calgarians might see on the surface when their exposition takes over the city every September. The core inspiration that led Beakerhead to where they are now was a concern that Calgary's public was unable to connect to important scientific advancements being practiced in 'ivory towers' and educational institutions. They knew that the barriers between science research, and real life needed to be broken down in order for that to change.

To do just that, Beakerhead's fierce and hard working team have taken many risks! Risks like choosing to shift from the way the science and engineering world typically share information (technical reports, scientific journals etc.) to find ways to communicate knowledge to Calgarians "in a way they can understand and in a way that excites them."

Seeing a gap between scientific knowledge and creativity, they began experimenting with art and culture mash-ups. The result? Science became more accessible to the everyday Calgarian by the building of a bridge between technical knowledge, creative ingenuity and behaviour change.

As an organization that didn't fit the charitable mold, resourcing was initially difficult to come by. However, as they kept on experimenting and eventually building a recognizable local brand and movement, they were able to build a strong and sustainable foundation of support. Beakerhead is now celebrated for their risk tolerance and creative approach.

HOW WE PLAN

Where We Start Matters

One of the most common and critical traits inherent to social innovators' success in Alberta relates to where and how they started their change work.

Different from a traditional, solutions-first model, they are inspired by a problem that needs to be solved and ready to adapt or respond as they understand the problem more and more. Typically, they are also personally driven to see a solution through.

"People don't start out wanting to be a social innovator – they want to solve a ludicrous, nagging problem. The issue is – everyone goes to the solution first – not the problem... we need to start with the problem, then with measuring how our solution is affecting it."

They take the time to examine and deeply understand the system within which the problem exists – and the landscape of solutions already in play in that system.

Unfortunately, more often than not in Alberta, we get started without trying to truly know the problem, getting attached to our instinctive ideas for solutions and then looking for funding to turn those ideas into reality.

The result is a fragmented shot gun of responses that often don't get at the heart of the problem we were initially inspired by.

All Hands On Deck

While the dominant form of organization in Alberta, and across the globe, is hierarchical, some of Alberta's most successful social innovators recognize that innovative thinking and creative 'ways of doing' thrive in environments where all voices are heard equally.

"Equality is super important – everyone doesn't necessarily have to have exact equal influence, but

everyone's expertise needs to be respected equally and everyone needs to be supported equally."

It's a pretty simple formula – the greater the diversity and varied experiences welcomed, the more creative input for innovation, leading to unprecedented convergence and collision of ideas. It also rebalances power, which may fundamentally begin to solve the problem in the first place.

Giving an equal voice to all participants in problem solving is especially important when shifting toward more experimental, generative processes or tools – such as prototyping.

"When you enter a room where free-thinking and creativity reign, it doesn't matter how long you've been with an organization or how much you get paid, it's the ideas you come up with and the way you connect with other perspectives that matter."

We Like a 5 Year Plan

While 'strategic planning' appears to be lessening its grip, especially with an uptake of social innovation throughout the province, making static long-term plans is still our dominant process.

Many successful innovators firmly stated that their key to making progress on complex problems was their ability to be nimble with regard to planning and program development.

"You need to course correct on the spot. Make a plan try it, and when things change, change with them, instead of blindly sticking to the plan or waiting 5 years until your next strategic planning session to deal with it."

Or, as another more elegantly put it:

"Strategy doesn't mean s*#@!"

HOW WE PLAN

Patience Grasshopper...

Albertans don't like taking no for an answer, and we work hard to achieve our goals...but when it comes to achieving the transformation we were looking for in the first place are we in it for the long run? A number of our interviewees argued that the answer, unfortunately, is no. Those that have held on and made strides have often been 'at it' for years or decades and are just now starting to see the benefits of their commitment.

What these patient changemakers are telling us is something most people already know deep-down: change takes time.

Systems can't be shifted in a few days, months or even years.

It's ok to think big, win small and press repeat until the scale starts to tip!

"Everyone wants to start big, but it'll never work! Big change needs to start small...it's a 25-30 year journey at least."

So get ready folks! We're going to be here awhile!

PATHWAY FORWARD

Replace Strategic Plans with Adaptive Processes

The problems we're trying to solve are too dynamic and complex for the rigidity and attachment embedded in long-term, strategic planning processes. This doesn't mean we can't set goals for ourselves or develop thoughtful plans to get us there. It means that we need to accept that we can't predict the future when it comes to social behavior (especially not in 5 year increments)!

Instead, we can take the time to:

- Deeply and collaboratively understand our problems in their complexity;
- Work with the people affected by them to evolve solutions;
- Build/Measure/Learn until we achieve our goals.

Let's make problem solving less about planning and more about process. Processes that give us the space to dream, adapt and evolve.

How To Do It

Changing how we plan is going to need a plan! Try:

1. Looking to experts in adaptive problem solving (such as [InWithForward](#) or Alberta CoLab) to develop courses, workshops, residencies, or permanent shared spaces to understand the how-to of (a) using common sense and feedback loops to make real-time decisions and (b) rolling with where human nature takes us and with what it teaches us.
2. Carving out intentional investment (time!) for staff to learn or practice adaptive processes (human centred design, prototyping, ethnography etc). Build this into job descriptions!
3. Building the capacity of nonprofit boards to be comfortable with leaning into change and being leaders in adaptive process. Include them and their unique skills as part of an "all hands on deck" mindset. Introduce them to shared learning and insights. Onboard the skills you're looking for to support an innovative organizational approach.

IT IS POSSIBLE: WHAT WE DO

In the early 2000s [Medicine Hat Community Housing Society](#) sought to tackle a huge problem that had been causing suffering and frustration in every city in Canada for decades: homelessness. While rooted in a 'housing first philosophy' in line with the rest of the province, their approach to solving the problem was successful for a very different reason than most cities – they “just did it”.

Of course, there's a bit more to it than that, but “just doing it” is something that their Manager of Homeless & Housing Development, Jaime Rogers, is extremely proud of! According to her, “the innovative part of our work is that we actually took action instead of just talking about it.” Meaning - they housed almost [1,000 people in approximately six years](#) - the equivalent of 20,000 people in the same time period in a larger city like Calgary.

How? By being bold, adaptive and agile. While developing a strategic vision and outlining various goals for the future was certainly a part of their process, they refused to prioritize sticking to their 'plan,' over responding to new opportunities and challenges as they arose. As Rogers puts it, “If things change, you change” regardless of what your plan says.

Their audacious and action-oriented approach, combined with a commitment to being nimble and iterative to reach their goals, is what made Medicine Hat the first city in North America to reach “striking distance of ending homelessness” (Tim Richter, President & CEO Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness).

HOW WE GROW

We Create Heroes

"I think part of the tension with social innovation is that it creates 'celebrity' when it works - and all the other efforts and programs (i.e. good & necessary work) by your agency or other agencies starts to get ignored."

Our collective strategy for 'growing' innovation in social change is to champion individuals. The emphasis skews our attention to their individual character and valorizes their independent trailblazing - which is rarely an accurate account of how they succeed. We tell stories that role model a distortion of the attributes of success.

Exacerbating this problem, the current popularity of 'innovation competitions' sprouting up throughout the province rewards individuals or single organizations for various forms of originality. While a useful source of funding for the winners, these awards create a real conundrum:

- If social innovation requires deep partnership and shared value amongst partners, how can we 'get there together' if credit and funding are only rewarded for getting there alone and by our own bootstraps?
- If we know that social innovation requires deep connection and trust, how do we shift to a culture that is supported and enriched by community capital rather than overshadowed by individualism and heroism?

Alberta has a really interesting dual history of hyper individualism and hyper cooperation...there is a history of constant interplay between 'myself and what's good for me,' and 'what's good for my society and my community'."

Not Enough Time In The World

Finding the time to do all the basic tasks an organization or program needs to do to keep their

doors open - let alone be thought of as innovators was a foundational and consistent concern. Feeling "completely overwhelmed" by the volume of work and huge expectations was a confession made by many.

How can we be expected to innovate and collaborate when both depend on consistent investment of time? By resigning to 12-hour days and working weekends as "what is required to make social innovation happen?"

Burnout is a huge fear, often a reality, and finding the time to connect with others and scale a successful social innovation seemed implausible to many under current conditions.

"We simply can't move fast enough."

We Need Local Know-How

Many of the social innovation 'bright spots' we found throughout Alberta had to reach out beyond our province's borders to find the technical and skills-based support they needed to move their new ideas forward. The majority of social innovators and thought-leaders we spoke to expressed concern that our ecosystem is lacking the knowledge, skills and space required to advance effective problem solving within our borders.

Training and travel budgets have dwindled or disappeared in many organizations, leaving people to teach themselves new ways of doing - even though the learning and knowhow are out there - or to just keep doing things the way they've always been done....

"We are sloppy - who in Alberta is an expert in prototyping? We can talk about the ideas and have strong advocates for social innovation, but we are terrible at building capacity for social innovation work."

PATHWAY FORWARD

Master Our Social Innovation 'Craft'

The 'craft' of social innovation refers to an ability to understand the various tools and processes emerging from social innovation (think: [human centered design](#), [social labs](#), [prototyping](#), [social finance](#) etc.), and both how and when to apply, adopt, or extract core principles from them to get to positive outcomes.

Tools alone cannot solve our most complex problems, but when used properly and thoughtfully, they can act as extremely effective guides.

We are at a point in Alberta where new spaces for craft development are already emerging, but traditional mindsets and methods still dominates. Let's support an even deeper shift!

How to Do It

Build a supportive community of social innovation mentors that are committed to nourishing the evolution of new approaches! Social innovators are hard pressed to find the time, tools and resources they need to feel emotionally and financially supported in the early stages of new ideas.

Strong mentorship and training can close this gap by making sure social innovation is rooted into the development of emergent projects or programs. Try:

1. Building on creative and open spaces across the province where the craft social innovation is already flourishing. Develop it into training and connecting community centres for budding or stuck social innovators. Cycle local and international 'masters of the craft' through these spaces so we can collectively strengthen capacity.
2. Where space is lacking, harness the power of physical location and connection by building new places for people to gather, learn collaboratively and work on shared outcomes. Fund, design and inhabit the spaces collectively. Instead of a 'Social Innovation Hub,' how about a 'Social Change Co-Op?'

3. Inviting government and capacity building organizations to offer accessible and affordable training courses (learning journeys) to increase and support involvement and action in social innovation across Alberta.

IT IS POSSIBLE: WHAT WE DO

There is a sprouting trend in larger nonprofits in Alberta for specific staff roles designated to promoting, mentoring or doing 'social innovation.'

For example, at the [Skills Society](#), there is a full time research and social innovation staff role focused on discovering and implementing design tools and systemic approaches for Skills' work to continually evolve towards its mission. Skills has also taken a leadership role in disseminating what they are 'learning by doing' with community, and training people in the tools and processes they are iterating.

Furthermore, [Volunteer Alberta](#) is experimenting with what a social innovation staff role could look like for them. The designation of resources for these roles signals a green light for investment into people with strong, creative, and out of the box thinking to support organizations in solving problems in different ways.

In a way, these roles are prototypes for figuring out how to root social innovation principles into organizational culture, as well as into our broader systems. Most importantly, what is happening is the embrace of the leadership qualities, courageous dedication, focus it takes to carve out new ways forward and a license to innovate within the organization.

These leadership roles value the ability to understand complexity, work collaboratively, honour difference, and look for long term solutions to our most complex problems.

HOW WE FUND

Competition Trumps Collaboration

Funding cycles don't match the cycles of social innovation. The trouble is, adaptive funding support - let alone funding for untested ideas - is hard to come by, especially without a long-standing reputation to inspire confidence.

"You need a longstanding track record to get funding without proof of concept."

Without social innovation funding cycles, the vast majority of organizations in Alberta are forced to puzzle together resources to keep their doors open, limiting their ability to put the problem at the centre of their work.

Ultimately, many organizations working in the same sector are competing for the same dollars and the damage that causes to relationships between should-be-allies isn't the only concern we heard.

While competitive granting allows funders to distribute resources fairly and openly, and push for specific outcomes, our interviewees have been left feeling as though "good grant writers, strong relationships, and a reputation" is what often brings the dollars in; not necessarily the highest potential for impact.

"There's not nearly enough long term, sustainable funding available and no one wants to fund operations. The kind of problems that we're being asked to deal with took hundreds of years to develop, so we need the resources, commitment and staff to take the time to solve them!"

It is evident Albertans want an overhaul of the funding system to support innovation and long term impact, yet, as one interviewee reminded us,

"The funders are not there to enable an environment for innovation all by themselves...it can only happen if we all work to frame it in a new way."

Out-of-the-Box versus Outcomes

There is an exasperation related to our current funding system's reliance on predictable, output-based reporting. There is less interest or opportunity to invest in outcomes - a different kind of metric that looks at the experience and goals of the principal stakeholders and what success looks like to them.

The work of social innovation requires building the road, while driving on it, and the majority of our funding structures do not allow for this or are not prepared for this.

"We need a funding runway that enables experimentation and has a tolerance for risk and failure. We do that really well in the commercial sector, but there's zero tolerance in the nonprofit sector. So everyone pretends that it's all right, all the time."



PATHWAY FORWARD

Fund the Problem

Riddled with competition for funding based on specific projects and pre-determined solutions, what if we reimagined our funding system as a collective resource to address root causes of key issue areas, as opposed to specific projects?

This means funds flow through a systems-lens, supporting collective efforts to tackle complex social and environmental problems at their root causes.

Instead of offering agency-based support, what might it look like to provide support for a system to work together on a specific, enduring and commonly prioritized issue?

How To Do It

Move toward more integrated, deep collaboration beyond a project-based mindset. Try:

1. Directing funding towards a problem area, with our available resources focused on mutually supportive problem solving with a root cause or preventative lens. We could develop an online, open challenge framework where funders commit resources to specific challenges, creating a space for individuals and organizations to contribute

to a solution and build off of one another's ideas. See [Open Ideo](#) for a great example of how to do this.

2. Funding as a collaborative system of coordinated action to support the whole continuum of social change and the evolution of social innovations from idea to scale. This is something they are trying out in the UK - an [ecology of funding](#).

IT IS POSSIBLE: WHAT WE DO

Canadian Oil Sands Limited (since acquired by Suncor Energy) was a for-profit Canadian company that generated income from oil sands investment in Alberta. When their community investment team realized they wanted to focus their impact on problem solving - they decided to delve deeply into one area of significant social need.

As a firm with a vested interest in the advancements in science and engineering, one area of need stood out: elementary math literacy. It turns out that Canadian math scores had been in decline for years. Staff quickly connected to this big issue with how it might affect the future of their industry and how critical math education is to the healthy development of confident, capable children.

Instead of finding an organization that already works on elementary numeracy and giving them funding to try and solve the problem in a pre-determined way, they directed their funding to actual challenge itself and convened key stakeholders in math and children's education to collaborate to find a solution.

[Canadian Oil Sands](#) opened up a table for systemic collaboration and ultimately brought together [Calgary Public Library](#), [Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary](#), [JUMP Math](#), [Calgary Catholic School District](#) and the [Werklund School of Education](#) at the University of Calgary to co-produce shared outcomes.

The result? [Math Minds](#) - a multi-partner initiative that focuses on the development and communication of key principles of math instruction and student learning through evidence-based research, so that teachers and children can excel and love math. Canadian Oil Sands looked at the complexity of the problem and responded in kind, convening an interdependent community of actors around a shared vision.

SOCIAL INNOVATION

&

POLICY

WHO WE ARE

Why does public policy matter when we talk about social innovation?

Public policies are a formal vehicle through which the rules, relationships and routines of our systems are often developed, implemented and governed.

Unfortunately, many of our interviews with nonprofit organizations working on or in social innovation surfaced a strong aversion to policy 'work' as an avenue through which to achieve transformational change:

"I never think about policy as a tool for us - we just don't get how to use it. It's not part of our world."

The incentives to pursue transformational change without, ahead of, or perhaps even in spite of government seem to arise from either a lack of time and resources to understand or engage in the systems of public governance, or from frustration with the real and perceived pace of change within government.

These concerns are valid and challenging to overcome, but as one public servant noted, once you find "key levers in the system, you can unlock greater outcomes."

The ability to unlock the full potential of social innovation, therefore, requires attention to public policy.

HOW WE SEE POLICY

Policies Talk

Beyond reflecting the priorities of government and our cultural assumptions and values, policies also 'talk' to each other. We heard repeatedly through our interviews that departmental mandates, constructed divisions between policy issues, and political interests make the ways in which policies interact extremely complex. There are a number of 'pinch points' where that interaction results in a confusing and difficult to navigate system for the users of a policy or set of policies.

"The Social Housing Act and Income Supports Act are immobilizing people. Moving out of lower income brackets jeopardizes access to social housing and other kinds of supports. This is a case of not fully understanding 'how policies talk to each other.'"

Policies Can Hinder Progress

A concern that surfaced several times throughout our interviews was that certain policies, such as those related to subsidized housing, income supports, and poverty alleviation, can place their target populations in Catch-22 situations. Subsidized housing was commonly provided as an example, where beneficiaries are required to have income below a certain threshold to qualify dissipating the incentive to pursue sustained employment that would not enable access to market-rate housing.

If improved employment status jeopardizes your housing, why bother? This tension between employment and housing is just one example of the "poverty trap" that results from a suite of poverty-related policies governed by different departments across multiple levels of government.

"Policies talk to each other in ways that are not user-friendly, and can actually make people more precarious."

We Are Looking For Levers

We found that those who advocate for policy change connected to the problems they are trying to solve tend to see their role as helping government to identify, define and address 'key levers' for change within policy systems. That said,

"Having people with the time, energy, expertise and mandate to work on policy is extremely rare in the nonprofit sector."

Those who do have the resources and mandate are starting to gather. Cross-sector networks are emerging to build bridges between government and those with other insight, expertise and interest in a range of issues. We found well-established and newly forming groups in both Calgary and Edmonton working across sector boundaries to better understand the inter-related problems that need to be tackled and the ways in which we can design solutions more collectively and effectively.

"We need to have more integrated, cross-sectoral policy, and more systems focused/aware policies! And for them to be effective, we'll have to make them together."

Engaging policy teams from the public service and for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike, we saw these initiatives as building on the history of the Alberta Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Initiative (ANVSI), a formalized provincial vehicle for relationship building and information sharing that has been strengthening the links between government and the charitable sector for the past decade.

ANVSI was the first provincial initiative to formalize such collaboration channels in Canada. It is also a cross-ministry initiative, advancing the cross-ministry agenda related to social policy and increasing the opportunity for intentional, cross-sector, silo-busting public policy.

HOW POLICY SUPPORTS OR CONSTRAINS

Pillars of Support

Throughout our inquiry, public policy arose as one component of the foundational supports that our social innovation ecosystem needs in place in order to thrive and grow...and there is action in the air.

[Open Government](#) is one approach transforming the way government interacts with those it is intended to serve and starting to introduce a more cohesive policy system by altering the norms of consultation, data sharing, and policy design.

Alberta was the first sub-national government to develop an open government policy with the ultimate goal of transforming not just consultation and design, but public governance itself.

The Social Enterprise Pandora

A clear example of how government can support social innovation that surfaced through our interviews related to an increasing engagement with the emerging landscape of social enterprises in Alberta.

Social enterprise can transform service delivery and have lasting impacts on organizations' target populations. The question is, when is it most appropriate?

"When we don't have enough funding, we start to look for different things to fill that gap, i.e. social enterprises...when we have no business sense or time to run a good business."

There currently exist no legal definitions or guidelines related to social enterprise in Alberta to help us understand its utility and potential as a tool.

Instead, individuals and organizations are required to sort out for themselves, or through the use of consultants, whether social enterprise is right for them, and then whether or not theirs should be governed by the Societies Act or for-profit business laws and regulations.

One participant indicated, "we need a shared definition for social enterprise in order to provide greater clarity for public discourse, and hopefully for the development of greater benefits for social entrepreneurs." This is one place where timely, appropriate regulation could help set the stage for a flourishing social innovation ecosystem.



HOW OUR POLICIES INNOVATE

"There also needs to be a willingness to float alternative or innovative policy ideas... things like guaranteed annual income and universal child care."

Throughout our inquiry, the impact of policy on social innovation was an essential consideration. Most exciting, however, were the possibilities of policies that in and of themselves could unlock transformational change. One such opportunity is the Welcome to Parenthood (W2P) study. A provincially-funded, community-university partnership based in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary W2P is assessing the potential of "Baby Boxes" (supplies provided without cost to families- particularly low income and at-risk families) as a vehicle through which to increase critical access to evidence-based supports for parents and children. Part collective impact, part prototype, part scientific study, W2P is a prime example of building an evidence-informed system with the issue - not the intervention - at the centre.

"My hope is that the evidence will tell us what we need to do next to improve outcomes for children and families... We don't know if W2P is better than what's already out there, and until we have the evidence, we ought not to do it."

We discovered many other opportunities for policies to support and/or drive social innovations themselves in Alberta. By insulating the policy realm from these bold opportunities, we risk losing an essential partnership and intensifying a blame game, by allowing it to remain a stuck system.

PATHWAY FORWARD

Design Policies That Talk Better Together

Integrated service delivery, wrap-around supports, person-centered approaches...these methodologies are gaining evidence for their long term impact on complex problems and all require policies that align and talk to each other in ways that facilitate movement toward shared vision for all involved, including different branches of government, service agencies, other nonprofits, and those directly impacted by policies.

How To Do It

We need to move from consultation to intentional co-design, placing the issue and the people affected at the center of our policies. Try:

1. Normalizing the application of the social innovation toolkit - prototyping, systems thinking, and human centered design - in the public policy realm. Increasing and supporting opportunities to test or prototype policy, for example, before it is enacted as law or regulation will allow for a deeper understanding of the lived experience of policy options.
2. Acting beyond administrative silos. Policies that work to achieve transformational change will require us to think outside of our administrative silos to enable cross-ministry, user-centered policy.
3. Being open to our government partnering with us to experiment. It is up to all Albertans to create a space of government itself to participate as an innovator.

IT IS POSSIBLE: WHAT WE DO

And it's happening in Alberta! Design labs within government, such as the Government of Alberta's CoLab, are starting to create spaces where adaptive policy development processes like prototyping, and human-centered policy design are welcome, and where those outside of government with valuable insight are being invited to deepen a shared understanding of the user experience of policy.

The CoLab "is [a space, a team, and an approach](#)" not only facilitating the use of these processes, but crafting and adapting them to Alberta's specific context. CoLab's unique mix combines systemic design and strategic foresight to redesign the way the Government of Alberta 'does policy.' The CoLab signals a shift in the culture of policy making, and an invitation to support new behaviors, mindsets and approaches in government.

CONCLUSION

We had the privilege of putting the task of understanding the social innovation ecosystem in Alberta in the middle of our desks, so we could 'dive deep,' find where the energy is, and share our learning with you.

One Small Step for the Present

The next steps are to tease out the full diversity of experience in this province: the qualities of our ecosystem outside our major urban centres, the breadth and depth of knowledge within indigenous and immigrant communities, and a better understanding of what the lived experience of the problems we are trying to solve can teach us about solutions.

Engagement with youth - the next generation of social innovators, inventors, allies, connectors, and thought leaders - will also be a key step to ensure that the insights of the current ecosystem are not lost and can be strengthened with new learning and approaches.

We invite each of you to consider undertaking part of this work and challenge you to find other ways to build on the work we have done.

One Giant Leap for the Future: Our Common Agenda

The path forward may be long and it may continue to challenge us. But there's an opportunity for countless small wins and micro-shifts along the way. To make sure we're headed in the same direction, we've developed what we see as a common agenda for moving Alberta toward a stronger and more resilient social innovation ecosystem:

1. **Working Deeper Together**
2. **Making Room for Risk Taking and Experimentation**
3. **Replace Strategic Plans with Adaptive Processes**
4. **Master Our Social Innovation 'Craft'**
5. **Fund the Problem**
6. **Design Policies that Talk Better Together**

We invite Albertans to take up this agenda and consider our shared vision for the future: **to collectively strive to address social and environmental problems at their root, stopping them from existing in the first place.**

Join in accelerating a heroic community of diverse actors and a rich ecosystem for social innovation. We believe Alberta can be a social impact leader for Canada and that we are already well on our way, thanks to all of you. Let's take the next steps together towards boldness, patience, and inclusive innovation.

WHATEVER WE DO, WE NEED TO DO IT TOGETHER.

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To each and every person who contributed to this journey;
To all those named here and those who wished to remain anonymous;
Our sincere thanks for your time, honesty, care and passion.

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