



Learning from the Community Connectors

Practice guide for implementing resident-led social programming in multi-unit rental housing

October 2022



 Happy Cities

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NEIGHBOUR!
Collective

Key learnings from the report

1. The pandemic created barriers that led to creative solutions.
2. Building design matters for sociability.
3. There is an opportunity to leverage people's desire to get to know neighbours.
4. Diverse activities and Connectors support greater accessibility and inclusion.
5. Light-touch activities can lead to enduring engagement.
6. "People support" is critical for success.
7. Social programming benefits building managers and the company overall.

Social connectedness outcomes:

Even after participating in just one Community Connectors event, residents reported positive impacts related to building social connections with neighbours:

90% *of participants said that they felt more likely or certain to ask for a small favour from a neighbour in the future*

100% *of the participants surveyed said that they had met three or more new neighbours*



Overall, participation in the Community Connectors program was associated with **five times greater odds** of wanting to get to know neighbours better, indicating a positive self-reinforcing cycle of social activity.

"Since participating in the program I talk more to my neighbours. I'm excited to host more events. I see neighbours wanting to make a connection."

— Community Connector

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Land acknowledgment

This project took place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), sḵwxwú7mesh (Squamish), seííwítulh (Tseil Waututh), and Lkwungen (Lekwungen) Coast Salish peoples.

Project contributors

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A special thank you to the Community Connectors and residents who participated in interviews, surveys, and engaged in activities with their neighbours.

Thank you to Hanna Negami of Perkins Eastman for her work and analysis of the wellbeing survey.



Happy Cities is an urban planning, design, and research firm that uses an evidence-based approach to create happier, healthier, more inclusive communities. We harness the science of wellbeing to advise housing providers, municipalities, developers, and organizations around the world on how to design buildings and urban spaces that support people's health and happiness.

Our firm has spent over a decade collecting evidence on the links between wellbeing and the built environment. Our Happy Homes research shows how intentional design can reduce social isolation and boost community resilience in buildings. As part of our housing practice, we also advise housing providers on how to support resident wellbeing through programming.



Using a collective impact approach, Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC) brings together housing providers, non-profits, researchers, local and regional governments, housing associations and health authorities. Together with residents of multi-unit housing, our mission is to experiment with and learn about ways of alleviating loneliness and social isolation while building capacity for neighbourly support and mutual aid.

Background

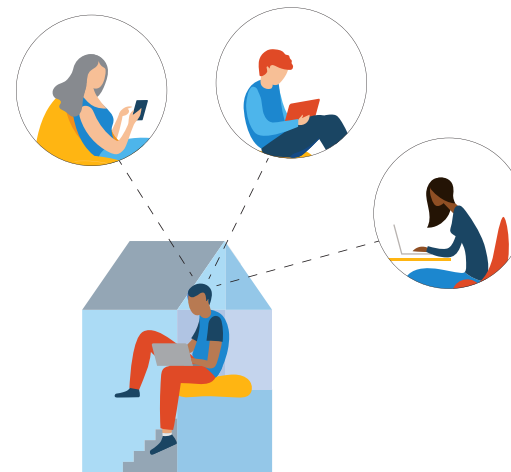
Social connectedness is key to supporting wellbeing

Humans are fundamentally social beings. Feeling connected to our community, neighbours, friends, and family is essential to our wellbeing.

Research shows that when we feel connected to others, we are more likely to be healthy, develop a sense of belonging and self-worth, and participate in and help our community. All of these factors contribute to social capital, which encompasses the social networks that bond people together to form reciprocal relationships.

Social capital contributes to resilience, by ensuring that people can receive community support when navigating difficult situations. In order to build social capital, having opportunities for diverse social connections is key.

As cities grow and densify, more people are living in multi-unit housing. In Canada, [almost 50% of the population lives in a form of multi-unit housing, and this number is rising every year.](#) Many socio-economic factors create higher vulnerability to loneliness and social isolation, including where and how we live. Some studies



show that residents of multi-unit housing are less likely to know their neighbours or do small favours for them than residents of less dense housing types, and that they report higher levels of loneliness and lower levels of trust in neighbours.

As a result, many housing stakeholders—including operators, architects, researchers, developers, and governments—are turning their attention to identifying strategies for how multi-unit housing can support social connectedness.

1 | Introduction

Through design and programming, we can boost social connectedness between neighbours in multi-unit housing and support resident wellbeing.

One way to support social connection in multi-unit buildings is through resident-led social activities. Recognizing that social connectedness benefits both landlords and tenants alike, housing providers can play a key role in encouraging residents to organize and participate in social activities that connect neighbours.



This report examines Concert Properties' Community Connectors program, an innovative initiative in which Concert staff supported resident volunteers to organize social activities that facilitate connections with neighbours. The program set out to foster social capital, with the recognition that this can be nurtured and grown over time with the right opportunities for positive social interactions.

Goals of this report:

1. Share evidence, best practices, and innovative ideas on how to promote wellbeing and social connectedness in multi-unit housing through programming and design.
2. Understand the wellbeing impacts of Concert Properties' Community Connectors program on landlords, staff, residents, and resident volunteers (Connectors).
3. Share learnings and recommendations for implementing programming to support neighbourly social connections in multi-unit housing.



This report is intended for:

- *Landlords and housing operators, particularly in the rental sector.*
- *Building managers.*
- *Residents.*
- *Organizations who work with landlords to deliver social programming in multi-unit housing.*

2 | The Community Connectors program

In 2018, Concert Properties partnered with the City of Vancouver on the [Hey Neighbour! pilot](#) project, which aimed to create more socially connected rental housing. The Vancouver pilot ran at Concert's Remington rental building in Collingwood Village, where residents were encouraged to organize fun social activities to connect neighbours with each other. The pilot was such a success that it expanded to form the Hey Neighbour Collective, a group of organizations and housing operators working to support the sociable design and programming of multi-unit housing.

In 2020, this approach to social sustainability had been identified as a key goal within Concert's Sustainability Framework. In collaboration with Hey Neighbour Collective and Happy Cities, Concert launched the Community Connectors program and began scaling it across 11 rental properties in British Columbia.

The role of Community Connectors:

In this phase of the program, Concert engaged 18 residents as Community Connectors who worked together to co-create community activities to bring neighbours together with the goals of:

- Creating and promoting involvement in social activities, with a focus on providing opportunities for residents who feel especially isolated.
- Working with building staff to develop and utilize communications channels for residents to engage.
- Creating opportunities for other residents to assist in community building through sharing their skills and talents.

Community Connectors were asked to make a six-month commitment to their role and host small monthly or larger bi-monthly activities in their buildings. At the end of these first six months, the majority of Connectors expressed interest in continuing to play this role on an ongoing basis.

2 | The Community Connectors program

Support, peer learning, & community building across Concert communities:

Community Connectors were supported by Concert's Social Sustainability Coordinator, who contributed regular resources, check ins, and coordination assistance. The Social Sustainability Coordinator also provided an important bridge linking Community Connectors with their Resident Services Manager and building manager. Building managers assisted Community Connectors by communicating with other residents and promoting Connectors' activities.

Most participating buildings had at least two or more Community Connectors, and these volunteers often collaborated and supported each other to plan and implement initiatives together.

Who are the Community Connectors?



Average length of tenure:

1 - 3 years



Age range:

11 - 59



Primary language spoken:

English

Immigration status:

55%

Newcomer
(immigrated less than 10 years ago)

28%

Immigrant
(immigrated over 10 years ago)

18%

Long-time resident
(Born in Canada)



National Housing Strategy priority populations represented:

Veterans

Racialized
persons

Older adults

Recent immigrants
and refugees

People with
disabilities

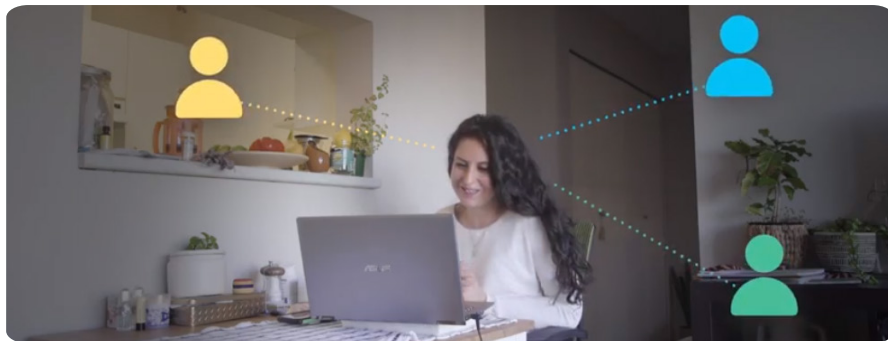
2 | The Community Connectors program

Program activities

Activities that took place as part of the Community Connectors program fell into four types of activities:

- 1** Online
- 2** Passive
- 3** Indoors
- 4** Outdoors

The following pages contain some examples of the activities that took place between 2021 and 2022.



Collingwood Village speed friending event. (Image credit: Happy Cities)

 Collingwood Village

Online

Zoom “Speed friending”

Connectors created breakout rooms for participants with fun questions to spark light-hearted discussion and connection. They also shared a survey to introduce the program and themselves through an email campaign.

 Fraser Pointe

Online

Neighbour to neighbour survey

Two Community Connectors, along with the support of another resident volunteer, created a survey for Fraser Pointe residents asking for feedback on the types of activities they would like to participate in and how they can make the Connecting Connectors program a success.

 The Q

Online

Cinco de Mayo Zoom Bingo

Community Connectors hosted an online Bingo Fiesta to connect neighbours during the pandemic.

2 | The Community Connectors program



Westridge

Passive

Easter basket contest

Community Connectors created three Easter baskets to give away to one lucky resident who answered the question: “What types of community activities would you like to see at the Westridge?”



Easter basket and seed giveaway. Passive activities allowed residents to have low-barrier fun while staying safe during the pandemic. (Image credit: Westridge Connectors)



Capital Park

Passive

Easter Egg Hunt

Mother and daughter (age 11) Community Connectors organized an Easter Egg Hunt that included Easter eggs with jokes inside which were hidden on each floor of the building.



Capital Park

Passive

Lobby Puzzle Table

Connectors set up a puzzle table in the lobby for neighbours to contribute to, along with a questionnaire asking what other types of puzzles neighbours would like.



600 Drake

Passive

Spring seedling give-away

Two Community Connectors organized a spring seedling giveaway, inviting residents to take a packet and to later share photos of their growing seedlings. Fraser Pointe Connectors also did a Thanksgiving giveaway of coffee and tea.




Collingwood Village

Passive

Neighbour Slack Channel

Connectors set up a voluntary Slack channel for neighbours to communicate with each other and spontaneously organize activities together such as walking groups.

2 | The Community Connectors program

 Fraser Pointe

Passive

Lobby Whiteboard

Connectors animated a whiteboard with questions in the lobby for neighbours to share their thoughts and engage passively with each other.

 The Q

Indoors

Recipe Board

Connectors created an interactive recipe board beside the laundry room where people could post and share their favourite dishes.

 600 Drake

Passive

3D Cart Coins

A Connector engaged in the practice of “gifting” to neighbours during the pandemic and created “grocery cart coins” and other items using a 3D printer.



Fall-themed lobby board at the Q. The board became a hub for sharing events, recipes, and connecting with neighbours passively during the pandemic. (Image credit: The Q Connectors)

 Capital Park

Passive

Candy Art Contest

Community Connectors organized a “candy art” contest by distributing packages of candy and toothpicks when neighbours registered online. Neighbours were then invited to make an artistic candy “sculpture” and display it on the puzzle table in the lobby. The lobby table became a “hub” for neighbours to communicate with each other.

2 | The Community Connectors program

 Collingwood Village **Indoors + Outdoors**

Coffee Chat

At Halloween, Connectors organized a social gathering in the common room where kids could show off their costumes while adults socialized together.

 Collingwood Village **Outdoors**

Walking Group

Connectors organized a walking group of neighbours. This activity aligned with an ongoing “eye-spy” game in the neighbourhood, which was shared through the Slack Channel.


 Collingwood Village + Fraser Pointe **Outdoors**

Outdoor Games

Connectors hosted outdoor games including volleyball, giant Jenga and more. These activities engaged people of all ages.



Community Connectors organized a doggy play date. Pets are great icebreakers. (Image credit: The Q Connectors)

 The Q **Outdoors**

Doggy Play Date

Connectors invited dogs to meet their canine neighbours (and bring their humans along, too) at a nearby park.

2 | The Community Connectors program



Westridge

Outdoors

Mural Painting

At the Westridge, Connectors contributed to a Building mural where they could all add their mark through “paint by numbers”.



Community Connectors organized outdoor events centered around sharing food with neighbours. (Image credit: Westridge Connectors)



Westridge

Outdoors

Ice Cream & Food Trucks

Residents at the Westridge were invited to socialize and celebrate with neighbours through a partnership with a local ice cream truck operator.



Community Connectors organized a ghost walk to learn paranormal tales from around their Neighbourhood! (Image credit: The Q Connectors)



The Q

Outdoors

Local Ghost Walk

Leading up to Halloween, Community Connectors partnered with a local business to host a Ghost Walk within their neighbourhood.

3 | Measuring the wellbeing impacts

The success of any social programming initiative in multi-unit housing requires buy-in, interest, and support from residents, housing operators, and staff alike. This research and evaluation sought to assess community wellbeing at all levels of the housing ecosystem—not only the wellbeing of residents, but also that of housing operators, building managers, and Community Connectors. It also focused on understanding and supporting “real-time” adaptations to the program structure and operations, based on learnings that emerged throughout the program’s implementation. By identifying ways to support wellbeing for all the actors involved in social programming, housing providers can ensure that such initiatives succeed through self-sustaining momentum.

Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective each completed separate wellbeing-focused assessments on Concert’s Community Connectors program. These complementary research and evaluation processes are outlined on the following page.

“I truly believe that through gifting, I was able to help others feel appreciated... By chatting with neighbours, giving gifts in the lobby, and through small get togethers, I could feel neighbours becoming much more open.”

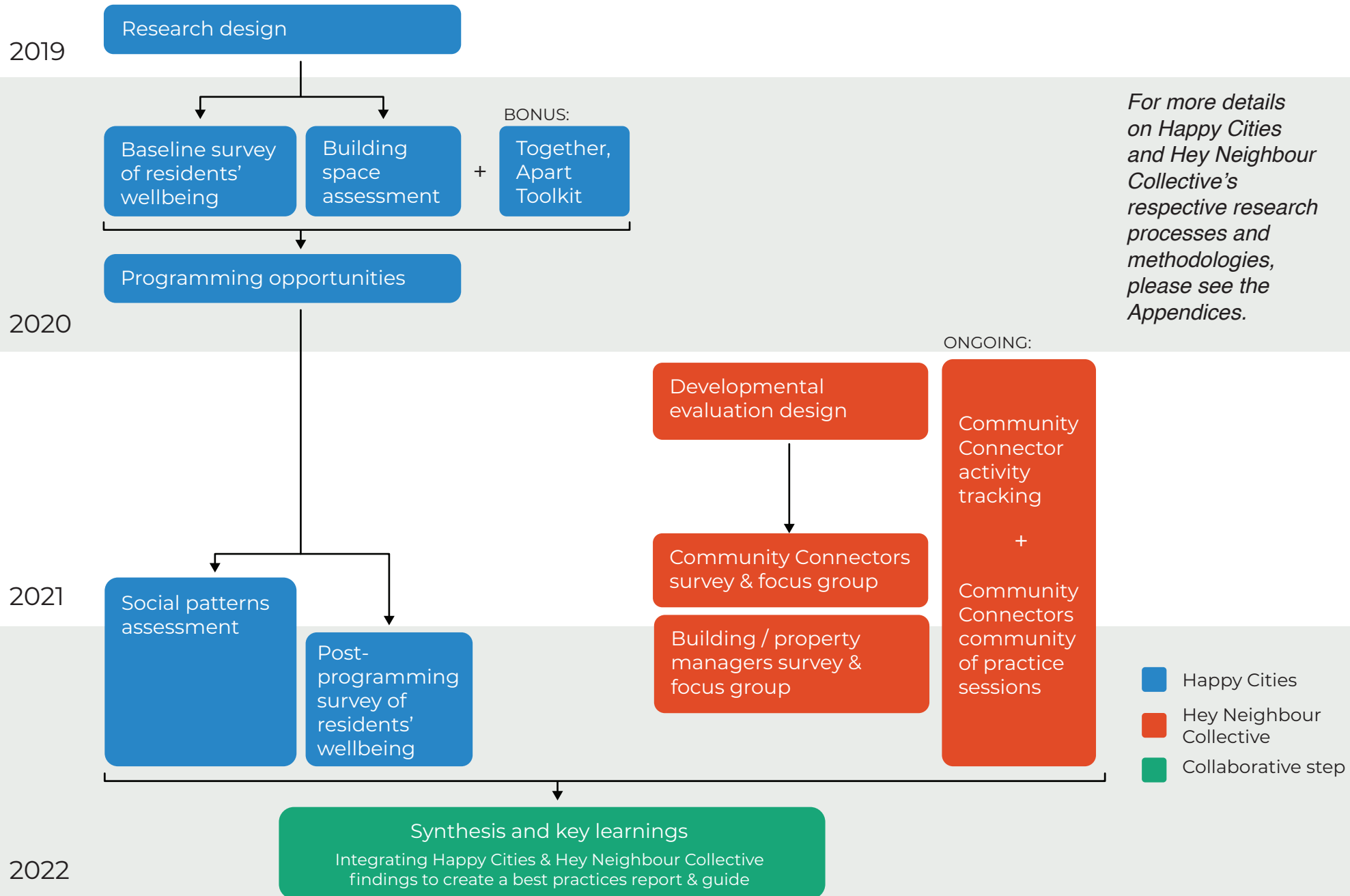
— Community Connector

“Since participating in the program I talk more to my neighbours. I’m excited to host more events. I see neighbours wanting to make a connection.”

— Community Connector



3 | Measuring the wellbeing impacts



3 | Measuring the wellbeing impacts

Wellbeing variables

Early in the process, Happy Cities worked with Concert Properties to identify key elements that are important to resident wellbeing. We drew on our extensive research into the science of wellbeing to identify the most impactful variables. We then set out to measure resident experiences at Collingwood Village in relation to these variables, to help us understand any changes to their overall wellbeing.

The findings in this report focus on eight key variables that relate to the impact housing can have on a person's wellbeing. These wellbeing variables explore how people feel, move, and behave in the building in which they live.



1. Spatial inclusion:

Safe, comfortable, and equal access to shared spaces



2. Tenure:

The length of time that someone lives in their home, building, or community



3. Sense of belonging:

Feeling welcome and at ease in a space or community



4. Social connectedness:

Meaningful relationships and casual interactions with other people, including neighbours, family, and friends



5. Resilience:

The capacity to quickly recover from difficult events or circumstances



6. Level of engagement:

Working in a collaborative and inclusive way to solve problems, make decisions, and help others; Providing input on decisions about one's home or community



7. Perceived health:

A person's assessment of their physical and mental state



8. Sense of safety:

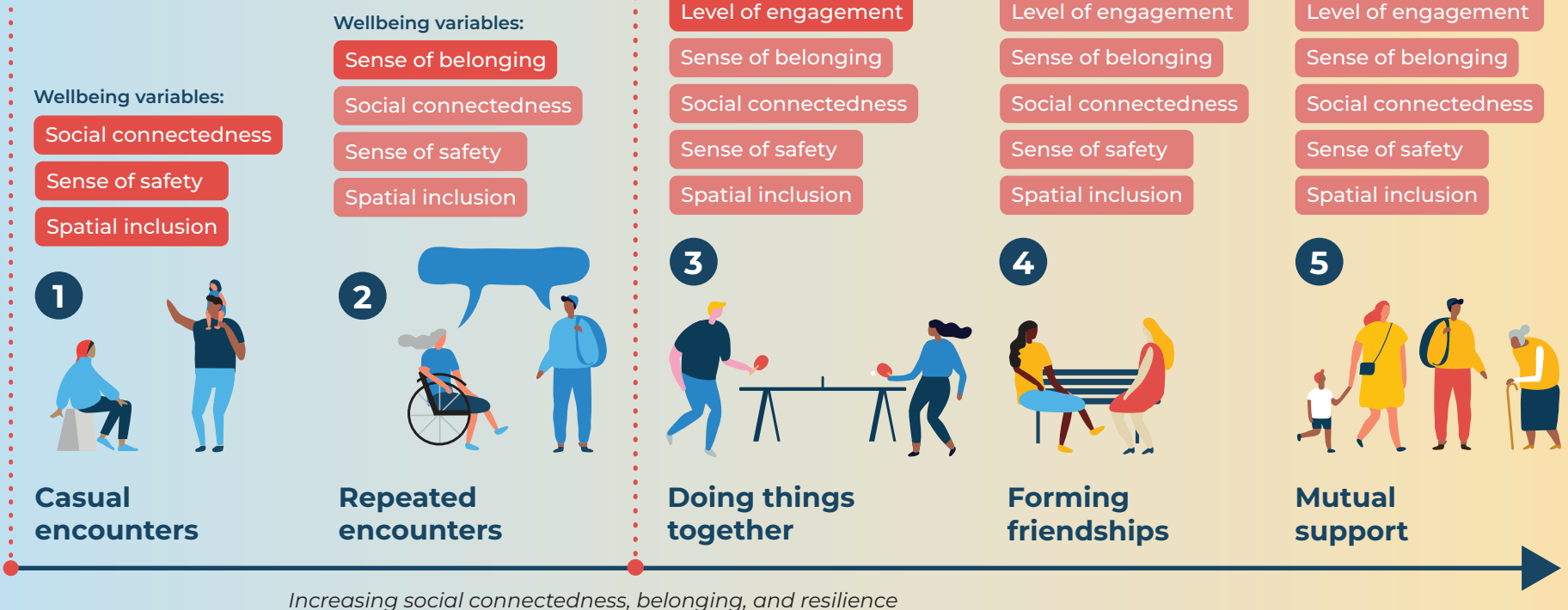
Feeling comfortable and free from threats to one's physical and mental wellbeing

3 | Measuring the wellbeing impacts

Understanding the spectrum of social connections

Building design

Buildings can be designed to encourage residents to bump into each other and linger in common spaces.



Building design & programming

Social programming can help residents make the jump from casual encounters to meaningful relationships. The design of physical spaces facilitates successful programming.

3 | Measuring the wellbeing impacts

A few Connectors can have a big wellbeing impact

The Community Connectors contributed immensely to boosting resident wellbeing variables. The infographic to the right outlines the key wellbeing findings that Connectors reported.

Connector Spotlight: Hana's Story

Eleven-year-old Hana was the youngest (and often one of the most active!) Community Connectors. Working with her mother during the pandemic, Hana spearheaded many “passive” activities in the Capital Park building’s lobby and lounge. She set up puzzles for passers-by to help complete, candy giveaways, and communication boards.

“It’s been a lot of fun!” said Hana. “And everyone felt more connected even when we weren’t seeing each other so much.”

- 100 %** Talk to their neighbours more often than before.
Believe their activities contributed to connecting and engaging neighbours for the first time.
- 90%** Feel that they made a difference in their building.
Report that activities deepened existing connections between neighbours.
- 80%** Report that activities connected people from different backgrounds or ages.
Feel that they created a lasting resource or tradition in their building.
- 70%** Report that activities supported neighbours in sharing knowledge and skills.
- 60%** Believe that activities increase the potential for neighbours to help each other in the future.

Wellbeing impacts of the Community Connector Activities at Collingwood Village

Happy Cities measured the wellbeing impacts of several activities that took place at Collingwood Village. We used surveys, interviews, wellbeing intercepts, passive engagement, and observation. These research methods were applied before, during, and after the events to gauge impact.



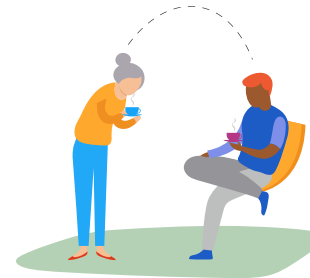
Volleyball

100% said they met three or more new neighbours at the event.

100% felt that doing things together helped them build relationships with neighbours.

90% felt welcomed at the event.

90% thought it was easy to participate.



Coffee Chats

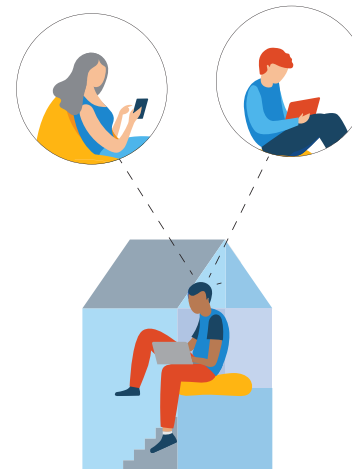
100% felt welcomed at the event.

90% said they met at least one new person at the event.

70% thought it was easy to participate.



Indoor activities faced the highest barriers to participation, due to COVID-19 as well as physical access to indoor amenity spaces.



Speed friending

100% said it was a good first step to connect.

80% reported that the activity made them feel happier.

60% believed that, after the activity, they would consider asking for a small favour from their neighbours.

4 | Key learnings

The Community Connectors program made a positive start despite facing challenges in its first years, primarily due to COVID-19.

Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective worked together to identify key learnings and challenges from both resident and staff perspectives. Happy Cities' focused its engagement and research on resident wellbeing at the Collingwood Village site, while Hey Neighbour Collective engaged directly with Connectors and building managers across the 11 participating buildings to understand the program at an operational level.

The following section represents our consolidated learnings, which recognize that resident wellbeing needs to be understood within the operational context of a given building or housing provider, as well as with reference to the unique makeup of residents in each building. Each of the seven learnings include supporting qualitative and quantitative evidence and high-level recommendations. The recommendations and learnings aim to help Concert Properties, other landlords or housing operators, and other interested organizations consider how social programming initiatives in multi-unit housing can be successfully implemented and improved upon in future.

Key learnings in this section:

1. The pandemic created barriers that led to creative solutions (p. 23).
2. Building design matters for sociability (p. 25).
3. There is an opportunity to leverage people's desire to get to know neighbours (p. 28).
4. Diverse activities and Connectors support greater accessibility and inclusion (p. 30).
5. Light-touch activities can lead to enduring engagement (p. 32).
6. "People support" is critical for success (p. 34).
7. Social programming benefits building managers and the company overall (p. 36).

4 | Key learnings

Learning 1:

The pandemic created barriers that led to creative solutions.

The Community Connectors program started in 2020. Shortly after, the COVID-19 pandemic began, bringing community-wide lockdowns. The coinciding of this program with the pandemic highlighted how vital social capital among neighbours is to fostering community resilience.

Physical distancing measures reduced the number of Community Connectors events that were possible, and made it challenging to build momentum around the program. Enforced social isolation greatly impacted many residents' wellbeing and sense of connection to their neighbours, beyond the influence of Community Connectors.

Happy Cities originally aimed to measure the impact of the Community Connectors program on resident wellbeing, by conducting wellbeing surveys before and after the program was implemented and comparing the results. However, given the impacts of COVID-19, it has proven difficult to use data from the wellbeing surveys to make direct correlations between the program itself and changes to overall resident wellbeing.

Wellbeing survey findings:

35% *of respondents noted that COVID-19 had worsened their ability to meet with neighbours*

30% *expressed that COVID-19 had worsened their sense of community in their building*

However, the survey results do highlight the importance of the Community Connectors program in the face of the pandemic. For instance, we found that residents who chose to participate in the Community Connectors program were more likely to feel negatively affected by COVID-19, indicating that the program provided a social outlet for people who may have experienced heightened loneliness or isolation during the pandemic.

Although the program was not able to achieve its full intended impact within the study timeline, its adaptability during pandemic restrictions was key to its success. The COVID-19 pandemic paved the way for the development of creative and flexible resident-led programming activities that respected public health guidelines, such as those in the [Together, Apart Toolkit](#).

“Because of COVID [leading to] continued isolation and hidden frustrations, I think [the programming] activities could lead to bigger and better things [for the community].”

— Community Connector

4 | Key learnings

Learning 1:

The pandemic created barriers that led to creative solutions.

Recommendations:

1 Measure long-term outcomes:

This study measured wellbeing outcomes over the course of two years. However, because of COVID-19 restrictions, the quantity of events and activities was lower than originally expected. We recommend that future iterations of research continue measuring the outcomes of the program, in particular as pandemic restrictions ease and in-person gatherings become more frequent.

2 Provide Community Connector toolkits, training, and peer learning opportunities:

Toolkits and peer learning sessions – such as the Community of Practice which was hosted for Community Connectors – can help them brainstorm ideas and plan activities under different kinds of circumstances and for different demographics. Having a Community of Practice helped mitigate unexpected challenges that arose. We recommend that future programming continue to support peer learning and capacity building for Connectors.

COVID-19 and social cohesion:

Multiple studies suggest that communities with greater social cohesion are more resilient in the face of crises, such as COVID-19.

Some recent research findings include:

- Neighbours who trust and rely on each other reported better mental health outcomes throughout the pandemic. Those who perceive better social cohesion may find staying at home less stressful, and are more likely to engage in physical activity, which improves mental health.¹
- Experiencing lower social cohesion and higher loneliness is associated with a poorer antibody response to COVID-19 vaccines.²
- During the pandemic, people living in market rental housing were more likely to report a decrease in social interactions than people living in cohousing or co-ops, which tend to be more socially connected. Cohousing and co-op housing tenants also reported higher mental and social wellbeing, showing the power of socially connected housing to boost wellbeing during difficult times.³

¹ Robinette et al., 2021

² Gallagher, Howard, Muldoon, & Whittaker, 2022

³ Zhu, Mahdavi, & Holden, 2022

4 | Key learnings

Learning 2: Building design matters for sociability.

Most multi-unit residential buildings contain unnoticed spaces that can be activated to bring people together.

Shared amenities, such as media rooms, lounges, storage, bicycle rooms, and outdoor areas, are important for encouraging social connections. However, Happy Cities' [space assessment](#) of Collingwood Village found that even seemingly unremarkable spaces—like entrances, walls, elevator foyers, and parkades—represent some of the biggest opportunities to create places where people can pause and interact with neighbours.

When planning resident activities, there are several important considerations for assessing what types of social programming a building can support. One critical item is accessibility: for example, shared spaces that don't have a washroom nearby pose equity challenges for participation, particularly for children and seniors.

Access to both indoor and outdoor spaces is also important for enabling a diverse range of activities. Outdoor courtyards, balconies, and terraces facilitate physically distant socializing and contact with nature, supporting residents' mental wellbeing. Due to the restrictions, Community Connectors organized several activities in adjoining parks and surrounding neighbourhoods, which is a great alternative if a building does not feature any common outdoor areas.

Wellbeing survey findings:

Between May 2020 and May 2022, resident satisfaction with the variety of amenity spaces at Collingwood Village buildings decreased:

2020:

50%

*satisfaction with
the variety of
amenity spaces*

2022:

37%

*satisfaction with
the variety of
amenity spaces*



This data reflects the COVID-19 context, during which **physical distancing measures limited the use of shared amenities in multi-unit buildings**. Other studies support this correlation between housing satisfaction and access to amenity spaces.

4 | Key learnings

Learning 2: Building design matters for sociability.

Finally, spaces that are well-maintained and comfortable promote a sense of safety and encourage people to spend more time there, allowing for more social interactions to occur. By animating common spaces with features like murals or message boards, Connectors can promote spontaneous interactions among diverse neighbours who may otherwise not meet, which in turn helps bridge gaps and build trust.

“I absolutely loved volunteering at the Westridge Mural coloring event! I got a chance to meet a lot of people and realized that an outdoor activity with minor participation requirements actually attracts people!”

— Community Connector



Community Connectors at Collingwood Village organized an outdoor volleyball game in a nearby park, showing how social programming can involve spaces beyond the building itself. (Image credit: Shelly Schnee)



Community Connectors at Westridge organized a paint by numbers mural. Having an opportunity to shape spaces is important for sense of belonging and social connectedness. (Image credit: Westridge Connectors)

4 | Key learnings

Learning 2: Building design matters for sociability.

Recommendations:

1 Enable informal social interactions:

Building entrances, corridors, parkades, and blank exterior facades offer great opportunities to create places where people can pause and interact. Actions can include resident-painted murals, message boards, and allowing residents to personalize shared spaces. Flexible furniture and organized storage systems can also help maximize the social potential of indoor spaces.

2 Make use of diverse outdoor spaces:

Outdoor areas such as courtyards, balconies, and terraces can support physically distant socializing and mental wellbeing. Adding small features like flexible seating, picnic solutions, giant games, weather-protected areas, and opportunities for art expression will attract more neighbours. If a building does not have its own outdoor shared spaces, residents can organize events in nearby neighbourhood parks or public spaces.

3 Consider accessibility when planning social activities:

When organizing social activities, consider whether spaces are accessible to all users. This includes both physical accessibility for people with different needs, and access to amenities such as a washroom and water fountain.



4 | Key learnings

Learning 3:

There is an opportunity to leverage people's desire to get to know neighbours.

Around 50% of the wellbeing survey respondents said they were interested in getting to know their neighbours better. Housing providers can build on this widespread desire by supporting residents to initiate social programming.

Through our engagement with residents, we uncovered commonly cited barriers to participating in social activities. These included a perception that efforts will not lead to lasting social connections, a belief that one has little in common with one's neighbours, and a sense of lack of time or resources. Interestingly, these barriers seem to disappear quickly once residents had a few structured opportunities to meet with their neighbours.

For the Connectors, the desire to get to know neighbours better and to build a strong community were the central motivators for participation. Significantly, half of the Connectors had lived in Canada for less than 10 years and identified as recent immigrants, indicating how the program can support social connection for newcomers who may be looking to build support networks.



Wellbeing survey findings (2022):

20% of respondents had participated in the Community Connectors program

20% had not yet participated, but were interested in doing so in the future



Overall, participation in the Community Connectors program was associated with **five times greater odds** of wanting to get to know neighbours better, indicating a self-reinforcing cycle of social activity.

“Personally, I experienced a big mindset shift in terms of how I see my neighbours [since I became a Connector]. It was encouraging to realize that there are a lot of interesting people around [who are] eager to connect with others. Basically, [many neighbours are just] awaiting an opportunity.”

— Community Connector

Evidently, the program attracted residents who were interested in getting to know their neighbours better. We also observed a positive reinforcement cycle, whereby people who participated in Community Connector activities continued wanting to do so. The Community Connectors program built the foundation needed to translate people's existing desire for social activity into ongoing neighbourly connections.

4 | Key learnings

Learning 3:

There is an opportunity to leverage people’s desire to get to know neighbours.

Recommendations:

1 Leverage people’s innate desire to connect with neighbours:

Housing providers can offer an enabling structure for Community Connectors to organize activities, which in turn fosters further participation, deeper relationships, and self-sustaining resident-led programming.



How often do residents talk to their neighbours?



50% of wellbeing survey respondents indicated that they were interested in knowing their neighbours better.

Residents who described having **1 or 2 friends** in the building were more likely to feel welcome than people who report having no friends in the building.



Through the survey, we found that residents who have been **living in the building for less than one year** tend to want to get to know their neighbours better.

4 | Key learnings

Learning 4: Diverse activities and Connectors support greater accessibility and inclusion.

By hosting a wide range of activities, Connectors were able to attract residents with different interests and backgrounds.

Activities with low barriers and requirements for participation are accessible to a greater range of people. It was helpful when the Connectors themselves reflect the diversity of the building resident populations; that is, for example, an older person could sometimes be more successful at getting older people to attend an event, or a person with children more effective at reaching out to other families, and so forth.

There was also a little “art” to creating such opportunities. Connectors reported that patience in hosting diverse events with greater frequency or consistency allowed time for people to establish meaningful connections with each other. Avoiding too much structure and formality was also a positive, because it left space for spontaneous connections to occur.

“There were 35 people at the Halloween coffee chat [at Collingwood Village]... It was interesting to see how people organically connect when they have a reason to come together.”

— Community Connector

Community Connectors reported that...



Newcomers to Canada participated in
100% of activities



Older adults (55-64) participated in
90% of activities



Seniors (65+) participated in
80% of activities



Children & youth participated in
60% of activities



Young adults participated in
60% of activities



People with disabilities participated in
20% of activities



Indigenous peoples participated in
10% of activities

4 | Key learnings

Learning 4:

Diverse activities and Connectors support greater accessibility and inclusion.

Recommendations:

1 Encourage and support diversity among Connectors:

Social programming will be more likely to reach a wide range of residents when it is organized by a diverse group of Connectors, who represent the diversity of residents living in a building.

2 Encourage and support a diversity of activities and events:

A diversity of activities will help support participation from a wider range of residents.

3 Collect data on demographics, leadership, and activities:

By collecting data over time, housing providers can evaluate who is participating in different types of activities, and how social programming impacts wellbeing for people of different backgrounds.

“Participants were pretty diverse across age groups and cultures, from young kids to older adults. A mix of old and new residents as well.”

— Community Connector



4 | Key learnings

Learning 5: Light-touch activities can lead to enduring engagement.

Many of the initial events that Connectors organized were casual, easy to run, “one-off” activities. Many participants commented that these “light-touch” events often spontaneously jump-started deeper or more lasting connections among neighbours.

In response to the pandemic and lock-downs, Connectors also employed simple communication exchanges, puzzles, or games that residents could participate in as they passed by bulletin boards or through lobbies. These “passive” activities reportedly contributed towards a growing sense of connection and community even without in-person events or video conferencing.

“I learned we should practice consistency and patience, respecting differences and allowing time to establish meaningful connections with others. Start small and allow people to do things at their own pace.”

— Community Connector

Social patterns assessment findings:

Even after participating in just one event, residents reported positive impacts related to building social connections with neighbours:

After one Community Connectors event,

60% *of participants said that they felt more likely to ask for a small favour from a neighbour*

30% *felt certain that they would ask for a small favour from a neighbour*

After another event,

100% *of the participants surveyed said that they had met three or more new neighbours*

80% *of the participants surveyed said that they definitely or very possibly would follow up to connect again with some of the neighbors that they'd met*

4 | Key learnings

Learning 5: Light-touch activities can lead to enduring engagement.

Recommendations:

1 Support diverse, “light-touch” activities:
Light-touch activities do not demand a lot of organizers or participants, and can be done frequently enough to create a ‘climate’ of regular social engagement opportunities.

2 Allow and encourage residents to utilize shared spaces:

Courtyards and terraces can bring residents together. Even spaces such as lobbies and laundry rooms are ripe for low-impact, “passive” activities that engage residents and encourage interactions between neighbours.

3 Implement and support resident-led communication channels:

Connectors at Collingwood Village created a Slack channel to share events, photos, and games such as an “eye-spy” in the neighbourhood. By not relying on building management to facilitate these communications, it created an opportunity for more spontaneous, neighbour-to-neighbour communication. Housing operators can support organic community building by providing accessible platforms for residents to use and connect with each other on a voluntary basis.



Thanksgiving “tea exchange” in the lobby of 600 Drake. This was one of many passive activities that took place near the newly installed whiteboard that helped residents communicate with each other. (Image credit: Community Connectors at 600 Drake)

4 | Key learnings

Learning 6: “People support” is critical for success.

More consistently than financial assistance, resources, equipment, or other factors, Community Connectors valued “people support” in helping to launch activities and maintain their own energy and commitment.

Connectors repeatedly pointed to Concert’s Sustainability Coordinator, as well as to their building managers, fellow Connectors, and residents, as vital sustainers. This further suggests that it is important to continue to guide and train Connectors, to help them learn to inspire other residents to take on leading roles of different kinds. Connectors also expressed strong support for the value of the facilitated video meetings with their fellow Connectors at other buildings, in which they shared experiences, learnings, and new ideas.

Concert building managers similarly highlighted the value of collaborating with the Connectors, and having encouragement and support from company staff. At the same time, both the Connectors and building managers highlighted a tension point: On the one hand, it was extremely helpful for Connectors and managers to collaborate, but on the other hand, there were some challenges around navigating those collaborations. For example, the Connectors at times felt constrained by managers who, for privacy reasons, exerted tight control over their ability to communicate with residents, yet were not always readily available to facilitate communications.

Community Connectors survey findings:

Top five support resources identified by the Community Connectors (resident volunteers):

90%

Support from my building or property manager

70%

Collaborating with other Connectors in my building

70%

Support from Concert Social Sustainability Coordinator

60%

Facilitated online gatherings with Community Connectors

40%

Monthly honorarium

Only 10 per cent of building managers said they were “very involved” in helping Connectors, yet Connectors overwhelmingly identified support from their building manager as the most important support resource.

4 | Key learnings

Learning 6:

“People support” is critical for success.

For their part, managers sometimes felt unsure about the level of support they had from more senior staff—that is, how much of their Concert work time they were allowed or expected to direct towards helping Connectors, and what, if any, limitations on activities they should be imposing on resident-led activities based on Concert values or liability concerns. The program provided robust supports to Connectors; however, Concert’s investment was based on the company’s general support for social sustainability, rather than in clearly articulated policy, and guidance documents that precisely outlined the levels of investment that would occur over time, the expectations on all of the people involved in different capacities, and the ideal outcomes. Both Connectors and managers felt that more guidance for all parties would have been helpful.

“The logistical aspect of getting the word out to residents has been challenging, not only directly to the residents but also coordinating with the management team as they are so busy with several buildings.”

— Community Connector

Recommendations:

- 1 Provide clear guidance, direction, and instructions to building managers:**

Building managers require information regarding the time and resources that they are allowed, expected, or encouraged to give to enabling, supporting, and/or limiting Connector activities.
- 2 Develop a small repository of support materials:**

Simple templates and forms, which Connectors can fill out and submit to managers for prospective events, can highlight what’s acceptable, roles, expectations, budgets, and more.
- 3 Sustain a separate coordinating position:**

If possible, this person should be able to liaise between and bridge the roles of the landlord, building managers, and Connectors, and support peer sharing and learning across Connectors and buildings.

4 | Key learnings

Learning 7: Social programming benefits building managers and the company overall.

Many of Concert’s building managers expressed support for the program and said that they believed it increased the “marketability” of Concert residences to prospective tenants as well as to investors.

Even after only eight months of program implementation, and despite the set-backs of COVID-19, the managers pointed to having personally witnessed improved relationships between staff and residents, reduced conflicts between tenants, increased safety and belonging, and improved care of building property. One could expect that over time with ongoing program implementation, these benefits would continue to increase.

“There has been a noticeable increase in connection between residents. Prospective tenants really appreciate the initiative as well.”

— Building manager

“It’s about bringing neighbours together. It’s about making each one feel a sense of belonging, that they are welcome and safe.”

— Building manager

Building managers survey findings:

The percentage of building managers surveyed who reported having seen positive impacts related to the Community Connectors program:

57%

Saw an increased sense of belonging for residents

57%

Saw greater mutual aid or support between neighbours

43%

Saw increased community safety

43%

Saw residents accessing community resources or services

43%

Saw greater care of property

14%

Saw decreased conflict between residents

14%

Saw decreased conflict between residents and staff

4 | Key learnings

Learning 7:**Social programming benefits building managers and the company overall.**

“It is true to its name. It connects residents and gives residents a platform to be heard. For my site, the community connectors that were chosen help me with logistics for events. I work alone so having someone assist is super helpful.”

— Building manager

“There will be a sense of ownership with the building. Residents will take care of property more because a stronger relationship with residents and staff is being fostered.”

— Building manager

“It may benefit single or elderly residents to build relationships and interact with other neighbours. It could also be beneficial for new immigrants or people new to the city that don’t have a lot of other family or friends locally.”

— Building manager

“Concert will be known as a ‘people-first’ company. We won’t be just one of those real estate companies, but what will set us apart is our being proactive with how we can make our clients feel like a family.”

— Building manager

Recommendations:

1 Communicate the value of social programming and connectedness:

Social programming fosters neighbourly connections, which in turn generates not only financial value, but benefits the company as a whole and has positive impacts on residents. Measuring and communicating this value is important for sustaining social programming in the long run.

2 Measure the impacts and benefits over time:

Housing providers can measure impacts in relation to organizational values and goals, such as increased staff satisfaction, improved building safety or reduced tenant conflicts.

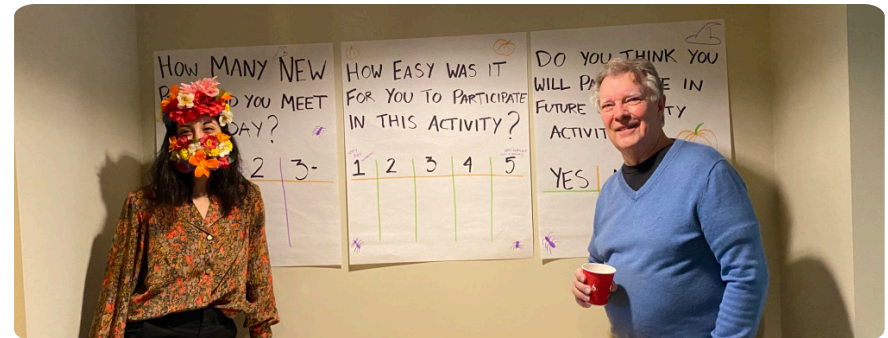
5 | Conclusion

Our evaluation shows that the Community Connectors program was, for most of its participants, extremely successful and impactful, even though its reach was severely constrained by the pandemic.

Encouraging connectedness between neighbours may seem simple at first glance, but in the context of modern multi-unit housing there are still many gaps in our understanding. Further, social connectedness and wellbeing have been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. What we do know is that residents are innately interested in connecting, but this is unlikely to happen without a catalyst. This spark can come from the built environment and from programming initiatives. Importantly, programs like the Community Connectors evidently will need “buy-in” from relevant actors across organizations and municipalities to become mainstreamed across Canada.

Policies and strategies need to consider where to optimally strike the balance between landlord or manager-led activities and resident leadership, and how that might ideally shift over time (*please refer to the diagram on the next page*).

Through our engagement with residents, Connectors, building managers and organizations, we’ve found that helping grow connections in multi-unit housing requires two very different, in some ways contrasting dimensions: It requires a bottom-up, resident-centered, “grassroots” approach, but it must also be founded on a solid framework of organizational commitment. Landlords and building managers can take a lead to start, but sustainability requires that residents themselves ultimately show interest in leading while landlords and building managers simply provide a supportive, “enabling” environment.



Evaluating Community Connectors events at Collingwood Village. (Image credit: Shelly Schnee)

Building successful social programming for residents

Initial investment from landlord

Social programming often requires up-front time and investment from housing operators or landlords.



Community Connectors drive program forward

Once housing providers can rely on a group of committed resident connectors, they can begin taking more of a background role. Community Connectors act as champions for the program and encourage resident participation.



Self-sustaining momentum

As residents get more involved in programming, the housing provider can reduce efforts and allow residents to drive the program forward on their own.



Time

Decreased time and investment needed from landlords



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