



Pathways to Independence: Making Lives Better, Together



Article by Jennifer Shea
Photography by Daniel Vaughan

Adults living with developmental challenges or acquired brain injuries often require support to manage their daily lives and integrate into the community. Pathways to Independence is a local organization committed to enabling individuals with challenges to realize their potential and achieve self-empowerment.

Children and youth under the age of 18 with developmental disabilities or acquired brain injuries are supported with community programming provided by several Ontario government-funded agencies. When these young people reach 18 years of age, the number of services available to them declines dramatically. That's where Pathways steps in.



“We deal with each individual person, trying to put together what they want in their life,” said Chief Executive Officer Lorrie Heffernan, describing how Pathways supports its more than 280 clients. “When we work with this person, it might be they want to volunteer, and they want to swim, and they like to go to church. We put that together. When we talk about it from that level, it’s a lot easier to explain what we do.”

Pathways provides community-based living support to adults with developmental challenges, acquired brain injury, or a combination of developmental disability and mental health/behavioural challenges (dual diagnosis). This could include supportive housing options, day, vocational and recreation programs, psychiatric counselling and behaviour therapy, court and justice-related services, and short-term respite.

The Pathways headquarters and office for the Hastings, Prince Edward and Quinte region is located on Pinnacle Street in Belleville, but the organization also serves the Ottawa Renfrew region from an office in Ottawa. More than 300 employees work with Pathways clients.

As Lorrie notes, “Adult services are not mandated by the province of Ontario, so if there’s nothing available for you, you don’t get anything. When we’re at capacity, without somebody else moving on or (without) getting new funding from the province, things get rather stagnant.

Clients go on a wait list. That, in Ontario, is huge – for both populations.”

“It’s really hard working with families who are so desperate for services,” adds Lorrie. “There are two areas where it’s particularly heart-wrenching. One is where they age out of children’s services and have nothing. Families have to quit their jobs because they don’t have a place for their child to go. The quality of life, their income, everything just changes. The other point that’s so sad is when parents age and they just cannot take care of their 40- or 50-year old child anymore and there’s no place for them to go. It’s really hard to watch those families struggle.”

There are three types of accommodation programs available through Pathways. Group living is one option, where clients live together in housing with Pathways support staff on-site. Another option is semi-independent living, where clients live in their own apartments and Pathways staff comes and goes based upon needs. The third option is the family home program, where Pathways clients live with a family in the community. The final option is outreach, where clients with acquired brain injuries live with their own extended family and Pathways staff meets specific needs, like transportation to community programs or work.

The family home program is currently challenged because many of the family caregivers in the program are at

retirement age or beyond and can no longer accommodate the needs of the Pathways clients living with them. Fewer families are willing to take on the role of family home provider, which creates a large gap in accommodations.

Donna Lott and Bill Saunders have been family home providers for Pathways for about nine years. Donna used to work with Pathways as a supervisor with the family home provider program, so she was very familiar with how it worked. She had never planned to become a family home provider herself until she met Eddie Novosad, a Pathways client whose foster father had taken ill and could no longer have Eddie live with him. “I was working with the family to try to find something and it was really important for Ed to remain in the Belleville area because of all of his connections,” says Donna. “I just saw something in Ed and thought there’s great potential there and he could be a lot more independent. I thought we could offer that for him and he would fit into our lifestyle as well. It was a good match.”

When Eddie first joined Donna and Bill, they were living in Prince Edward County. The lack of public transit was a big challenge for the family. “Without access to public transit, you’re now required to drive him everywhere,” says Bill. “If you don’t do that, then the lifestyle is you stay home. Staying home usually means video games or television or something like that, not that much interaction with the public or friends, so that was a really big challenge.”

LARGE SELECTION OF LIGHTS, LAMPS AND CEILING FANS



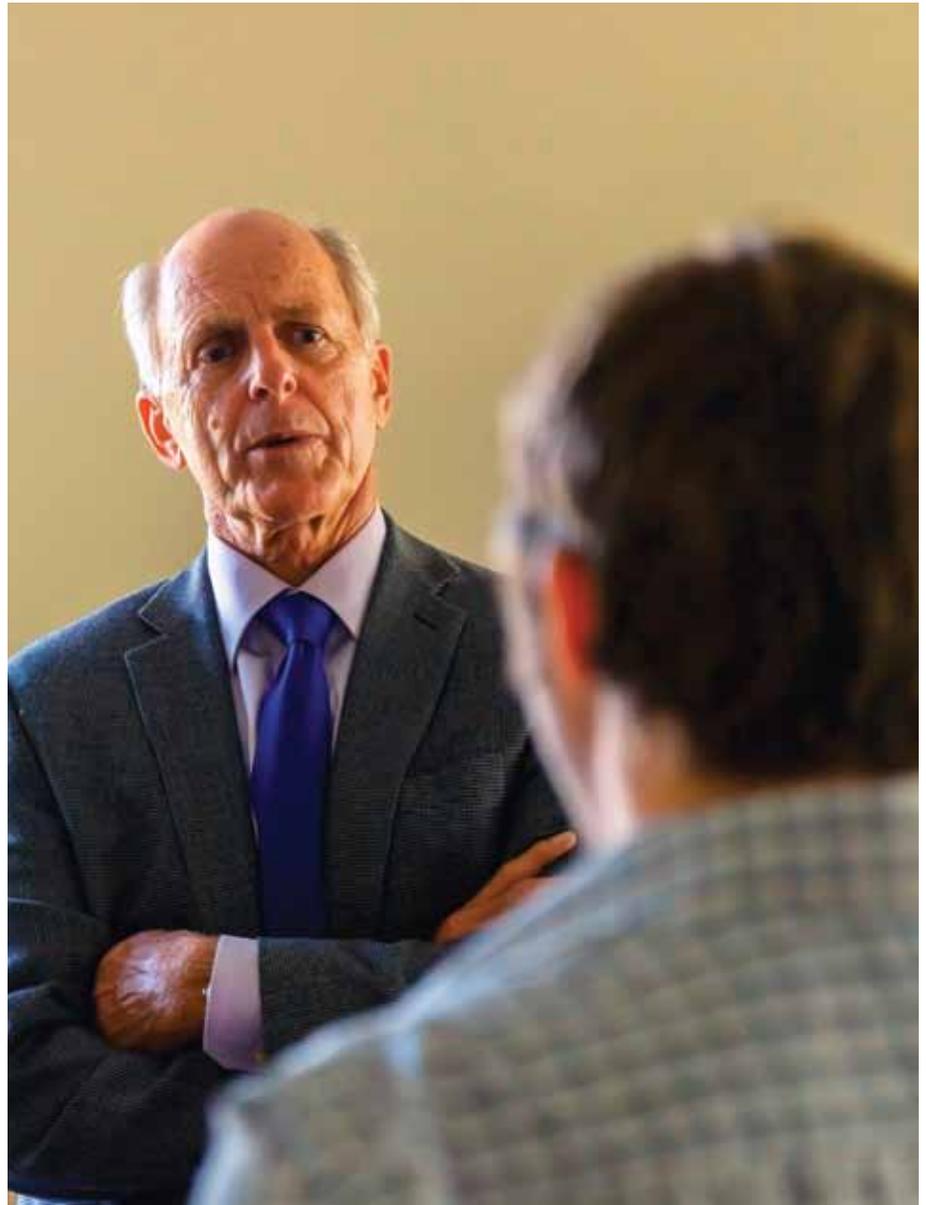
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The family now resides in Belleville, which is much better for Eddie's independence. "I take the bus to work," says Eddie proudly. He works three days a week at Pizza Hut, and may be starting a second job soon. In his free time, Eddie enjoys bowling, swimming, YMCA, poker and movie nights, and golfing with his friends. Eddie is also an active volunteer, including packing food boxes for the Community Development Council and helping a vendor at the Belleville Farmer's Market. "He gets his own volunteer jobs in the community," says Donna. "You can't go anywhere without him knowing someone," adds Bill.

When asked what makes him happiest, Eddie quickly replies, "Those two (Donna and Bill) are great to me; great friends at Pathways; great staff at work. Sundays, I go to a show at the mall." Eddie has even managed to take a few trips to Jamaica and Cuba, through Quinte Vocational Support Services. Says Bill, "With this arrangement (living in a family home), he's able to save enough that he's able to take these trips. Financially, those options wouldn't be available to him if he was living on his own with a fixed income, even with some support from Pathways."

When asked what advice they would give to others considering joining Pathways as family home providers, Bill and Donna suggested anyone who's interested should go in to Pathways and



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discuss what's involved. "Maybe just and volunteer or try offering respite – having someone coming and spending time with you – and see how that goes," says Donna.

Bill adds there can be a good fit on multiple levels, especially for empty-nesters. "This could almost be an antidote, an extension for those people who just love to raise kids and family and whose children have moved on. I think that could easily be a fit." Pathways supports family home providers with remuneration, respite services, case worker services, and monthly check-in visits.

Another Pathways housing challenge relates to accessing affordable and safe community housing for Pathways clients who are able to live independently. Many of these individuals are just entering the adult system and are seeking options to group living. "Apartments aren't cheap. It's really hard to live off an Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) income and afford your own rent," says Lorrie. "We are always looking for ways to either get into relationships with other landlords for apartment rentals or we have some of our own apartments we are able to rent out at a reasonable rate."

Pathways client Tom Hill has first-hand experience with this situation. He has been with Pathways for 10 years and has lived in several different places in the community, initially relying on Pathways to help him find a place to live and resources to move in. "They



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helped me find a place and work and money management too,” says Tom. “They do a lot of that; coach me on life situations, so I get a lot of ‘don’t do this, don’t do that’ and they give me some relationship advice too, when I need it.”

Tom and his girlfriend are expecting a baby in December, and their current apartment is less than suitable. At \$950 per month in rent, and currently relying on the ODSP as he is between jobs, Tom says there’s very little left at the end of each month. “It’s tricky sometimes having barely anything to get by. It’s hard at the end of the month, thinking about all the bills you have to pay and you’re looking through and it’s like ‘which one do I pay this month and which one can wait?’ It gets a little tricky then. After you pay one bill, you only have like maybe 50 bucks left or something like that.”

Tom is on the search for more affordable housing, but he’s hoping for a place where the rent is all-inclusive. He is also investigating some job training to obtain a forklift operator license, which he hopes will lead to new employment. “I really do want to work. I have no problems working. I just need the licensing behind what I can do. Once I get that, then I can do a lot more. Being out of work makes you kind of stir crazy.”

Although not all the Pathways clients are able to work, if they are interested in employment, Pathways is there to help them. “There are degrees of ability and interest and skill amongst the people we provide services for,” says Lorrie. “At the one end of the spectrum, we have a group of people for whom our goal is competitive employment. It’s usually somewhere around the minimum wage level because of the kinds of jobs they go for. We have job coaches who support them in getting the skills and dealing with any issues they might run into at work. We have staff who try to find jobs for people.”

Lorrie continues, “Then there are various degrees of that, right down to volunteering at the food bank. We also have supported employment, so if you can only do a little piece of the job, you can still go and work and get paid. That whole idea of ‘I’m going to work’ is so important.”

The Pathways strategic plan uses the slogan, “Making Lives Better, Together.” This makes sense when considering the needs of Pathways clients and the many ways individuals, families, businesses and the community can make lives better by contributing to Pathways.

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