Report to Community
Research & Policy Hub: Systems Change to Support Families

Background

In April 2019, Dr. Katrina Milaney, an Assistant Professor in Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies at the University of Calgary met with Andrea Wall to explore if and how Katrina's research interests might align with Innovate Calgary's interests and offerings in the Social Innovation space. Based on observations from her community-engaged research over the past number of years, Katrina suggested a scoping project to assess the need for a **community-led research and policy hub for vulnerable families.**

The original idea was to see if there was community interest and readiness for a partnership with the university where community agencies who work with families could receive support:
- Creating research agendas and questions
- Accessing small research grants
- Moving research findings into action (staff support in developing policy briefs, government relations plans, proposals for program funding, etc)

After leveraging interest and funding support from the O'Brien Institute for Public Health, in May 2019, BSW students Kendal David and Laura Lee joined the project as part of Innovate Calgary's summer incubator program, CATALYZE. We created a multi-disciplinary Advisory Committee to provide strategic direction and guidance to the project. The Advisory Committee met monthly between May and August 2019. We identified three key deliverables for the summer:
- Conduct an environmental scan to learn of other similar projects and models
- Design and lead a stakeholder engagement strategy to solicit community feedback on the project
- Create a possible model for the hub which reflected what we learned

Interviews

In June, Kendal and Laura completed interviews with 19 individuals representing 19 different organizations and collectives as part of our stakeholder engagement strategy to solicit community feedback. The specific purpose of the individual interviews was to develop a more comprehensive understanding of system-level gaps and obstacles that make life harder for families and the organizations that support them in Calgary. Further, the interviews helped us to develop a better understanding of the great work that is already being done to address challenges that families face, which in the long run will help us avoid duplicating, and enable us to leverage existing efforts.

Focus Groups: What We Heard

In July 2019, we held 3 focus group sessions with 39 unique participants representing 36 organizations, and 20 Master of Social Work students from the University of Calgary. Participants included representatives from service provider organizations, universities, research institutes, government staff, and collective/collaborative groups.

At the first two sessions on July 10 and 18, Kendal and Laura presented on four themes identified during the individual interviews conducted in June; they asked participants to share their experiences with the themes and begin to discuss the ways this project could address them. At the session on July 23, Katrina presented the initial themes from the first two sessions and explored the possibilities for this project moving forward in greater detail.

We heard so much great feedback from stakeholders at the three sessions in July in addition to the ample information gathered through individual interviews. This report reflects just a brief summary of the recurring themes from our sessions, and is in no way a complete report of everything we heard. For further clarification or discussion about any of these points, or anything you don't see reflected in this report please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Operationalizing a Model

- **There is a need to more specifically define the key concepts of this project.** Some of the concepts we are working on creating functional definitions for include: families, community, service provider, policy, policy advocacy, and policy change.

- **There is lots of great work already happening to address systems-level gaps and obstacles;** we heard recommendations to **leverage existing models and relationships**, and **avoid duplication**/creating more competition for funding. We heard about a number of community groups and stakeholders that participants would like for us to explore partnership possibilities with, including Burns/Max Bell Policy Fellows, accreditation bodies (e.g. CARF, ACSW), Social Policy Collaborative, the School of Public Policy, and the O'Brien Institute.

  There is a need to clarify the target population or issue that this project will focus on. We heard feedback that taking a population approach to this project (i.e.: family-centred) could be exclusionary, and that redirecting the focus to community-engaged research may be better aligned with the overall intent and approach of the project.

Research Partnerships

- There is an **opportunity** for this project to **play a key role in leveraging, developing, and sustaining equitable and reciprocal partnerships between researchers and service providers**. We heard from participants that there would be

great value in this project acting as an intermediary or broker in research partnerships between researchers situated in universities and community organizations. Some of the responsibilities of this brokerage role might include: setting best practices for research partnerships, support with negotiation of values and responsibilities in partnerships, and 'match-making' between researchers and organizations.

- There is an opportunity to **leverage student resources through practicum placements and internship opportunities** to support existing research and evaluation projects in community.

- Some of our initial findings from the individual interviews were further validated and explained, including:
    o It can be challenging for service providers and academic researchers to align interests, priorities, and approaches when partnering on research projects.
    o There are lots of examples of successful shared research projects between academics and community organizations, but there is a need for more of them.
    o Community research needs are not always prioritized, and often academics with access to research funding drive priority-setting and the approach to projects. Researchers need to be more responsive to the needs of service providers and better focused on **practical** solutions.

Sharing and learning from existing data

- We heard that this project should **prioritize knowledge mobilization and translation** and that existing evidence/data isn't always accessible; there may not be a need for this project to prioritize the creation of new research projects and evidence/data. There is an opportunity to facilitate greater access to existing evidence and data for the community, which may include an online platform/website.

- We heard that there is an opportunity to support organizations by facilitating shared measurement tools, and by sharing existing measurement tools.

- Some of our initial findings from the individual interviews were further validated and explained, including:
    o We heard that the evaluation priorities for some service providers can be driven by funder needs and reporting requirements; this seems to be far more relevant for smaller organizations, and more relevant with government funders than private ones.
    o We also heard that funder driven evaluation priorities can be a good thing, by providing checks and balances and keeping service provision at the forefront of organizations' mandates (rather than research and advocacy work).

Translating research and evidence into change

- Influencing public policy: We heard that using the **word 'lobbying' doesn't always resonate with our intended stakeholders** for a number of reasons. We heard that lobbying causes concern for many stakeholders and that lobbying/advocacy requires a particular skill set and takes time.

- We heard that many community organizations are already part of collaboratives or collectives working on advocacy issues/projects, but that external support with specific advocacy projects would be of great value to many organizations.

- We heard that there is a gap between the **translation of research and advocacy into actual policy change**, and participants saw an opportunity for this project to address this gap. Recommendations for effective advocacy included: support with drafting well structured policy proposals/asks, plain language messaging when seeking support, establishing long-term and effective relationships with government officials.

- We heard recommendations to frame high investment projects for funders as "money-saved at a systems-level"

Next Steps

Kendal and Laura's student internships will be complete at the end of August; before their contracts end, they will draft a model for this project to move forward in September, and will support with hosting a Town Hall on August 28 to report back to community members and gather feedback on the draft model. Dr. Katrina Milaney and our partners at Innovate Calgary will take all of the learnings from this summer and begin moving into implementation. Dr. Katrina Milaney will be seeking a funding plan and support for an evaluation framework, and Dr. Meaghan Edwards will be working with students on the next steps of implementation for this project. **We are so grateful for your support and contributions to the project thus far and are looking forward to staying engaged with you as this project progresses.**

Contact Info

Dr. Katrina Milaney – Project Lead
Associate Professor, Community Rehabilitation & Disability
Studies Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary
katrina.milaney@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Meaghan Edwards
Instructor, Community Rehabilitation & Disability Studies
Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary
meaghan.edwards@ucalgary.ca

This report was prepared by Kendal David and Laura Lee in August 2019.