



## A Counterpoint to Dealing with Newcomer Stress



## BUILDING STRENGTH THROUGH CARING CONNECTIONS

### A Counterpoint to traditional services

Recent studies show that roughly 29% of immigrants report having emotional problems and 16% report high levels of stress.

Refugees are considerably more likely to report experiencing emotional problems and high levels of stress.

Immigrants with lower incomes are significantly more likely to report experiencing high levels of stress and emotional problems compared to those with higher incomes.

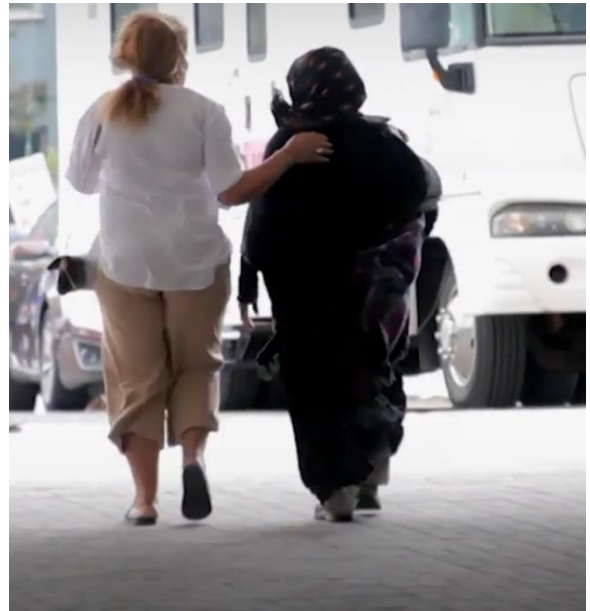
These statistics mirror our personal experience. We arrive in Canada facing new languages, customs, traditions and culture to which we must adapt without the traditional support from back home. We can feel isolated and many will not seek help from established Canadian services.

Our stress and mental health challenges vary but are always present. We can turn in and become isolated, fail to participate in the community or reach out. We experience physical illness and in extreme cases suicide. We have and do experience all of these in our neighbourhood too frequently.

**The Friendship Bench provides Equity and Culturally Appropriate Access to counselling support at a time when access other Canadian professionals and services is more difficult**

**Our approach provides immediate access in a local friendly environment.**

**Both the Zimbabwe Friendship Bench, upon which this project is based, as well as our own, less formal approaches at Community Matters, have documented improvements in the areas of mental, physical and emotional health.**



Having an accepted, precise, cost-effective way to help our friends we now will work with skilled neighbours who

are knowledgeable and practiced in methods from “back home”. They will extend their knowledge with training and mentoring by professionals from established Canadian mental health services.

This project formalizes processes which we have evolved over 20 years, provides specialized training and connects us with highly qualified mental health professionals.

Safe space, created through friendships, constant presence, support over extended periods of time and culturally sensitivity create the right atmosphere.

In the long term we see a community able to recognize and address its mental health challenges, combining respect for cultural and spiritual sensitives with established Canadian approaches.

## Impact of the Friendship Bench in St. James Town

Financial support for The Friendship Bench in St. James Town will, in the short-term help, establish a community-based system in which the neighbourhood will be strengthened by a reciprocal network of trained residents with similar experiences, supporting others with mental health challenges in an organized, systematic approach. The long-term will see a knowledgeable neighbourhood, resourced and experienced in addressing challenging mental health issues from within. Residents, trained and mentored by established Canadian mental health professionals, will offer a structured approach providing, precise, safe, cost-effective alternatives in a solution tailored to the uniqueness of the neighbourhood in which it exists. Reciprocally, the community will provide direct knowledge to established Canadian mental health professionals of the roles of culture and spirituality in reaching newcomer communities,

At a time of significant cutbacks in mental health services and related financial support, we will demonstrate an alternative or counterpoint to the professional, service organizational approach. Contributions will fund extensive training and mentorship of residents by qualified Canadian mental health professionals as well as uninterrupted emotional and physical access to caring, trained and supervised friends and neighbours for those experiencing stress or are in stress creating environments. At the end of the project we will have a documented counterpoint to existing mental health models.

The meeting of culturally and spiritually sensitive practices from back home with established Canadian mental health practices practiced by community leaders will reach the previously unseen populations who resist traditional approaches from fear, lack of understanding, language and culture. These unseen, are never included in statistics or surveys but exist and suffer within the fabric of the community. Reached by trusted residents this project will impact the most vulnerable within the community.

Over time, this project will be an example to our community of ways in which, as new commers, we can successfully address challenges we face, in spite of the unfamiliarity with new languages and customs. We will weave a fabric of established Canadians, institutions and

newcomers resolving challenges in their formative state.

As we learn lessons and gain successes the project methods and processes will be available to others who are seeking soltions to similar results.



## Friendship Bench in St. James Town Overview

We begin in the neighbourhood with a core group of neighbours, dedicated to seeing their community grow, strengthen and become self-reliant. This group organizes community gatherings, festivals and events which draw the cross section of the community. These events may last an hour or an afternoon. In addition, the group makes themselves available to help where necessary through their presence in our ground floor apartment in the centre of the community. Our doors are open all day as we make ourselves available after hours on holidays and weekends. Specific gatherings are organized for such things as language, cooking or help with forms as requests are made. All of these events reflect the cultures and habits of the community.

This availability draws those who may have more challenging issues into a further, more personal conversation. In the vast majority of cases discussions begin to address various levels of stress that residents may be experiencing

in their lives. Stress comes from a broad variety of circumstances and can vary up to the extreme.

Each of us directly support up to 25 neighbours. The need for support varies with most needing general contact, some needing to participate with us more in the community and then fewer with more significant mental health challenges. Our process is to engage on the general level, encourage community involvement at the next level, deal with more significant issues where necessary and then, once addressed, encourage on going community participation.

Our group responds based on personal experience and past practice. For more difficult situations we are trained and mentored by professional mental health and community service agencies. We will be trained in Friendship Bench methods using the **Friendship Training Manual for Health Promoters** provided by the Friendship Bench We meet weekly for training and to review challenges our neighbours are facing.

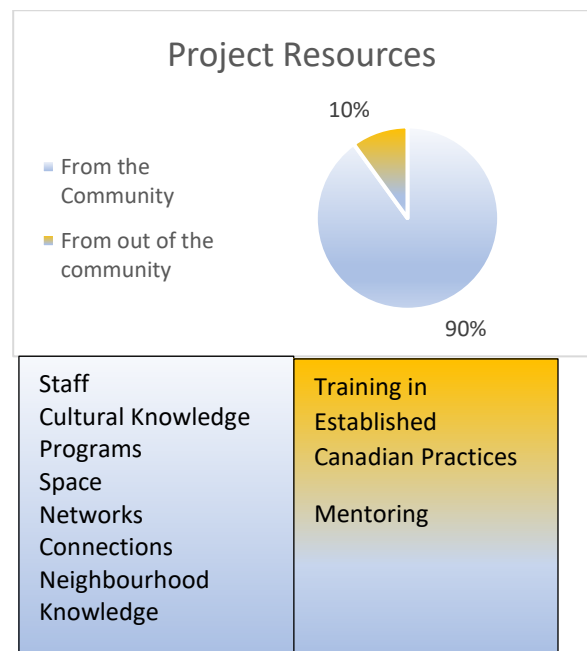
When first engaging we will conduct an oral assessment, progressing through a series of pre-determined questions over several get togethers. Depending on the comfort level of our neighbour, once we have agreed on the issue, we create a plan (oral or written).

Developing strong personal networks to address emotional issues, especially the feeling of isolation and loneliness, we feel is crucial in this work. Recognizing the reciprocal nature of networks, we encourage our neighbours, find out what skills they may have or likenesses and suggest they volunteer or help others in the community.

This process continues as the need demands. Our goal is an open-ended activity of neighbours and professional partners working together and learning from each other. We envisage new neighbours joining our community, contributing and being trained and mentored in a process which supports the stress and mental health challenges we are all experiencing.

In addition to work with our neighbours we are also documenting our processes and creating written and online learning modules for other interested groups.

Finally, we are talking about this process directly with service agencies as well as through on-line videos to present an alternative approach to existing service/professionally oriented models.



## THE ST. JAMES TOWN FRIENDSHIP BENCH BY THE NUMBERS

Expected Result	Indicator	Target	Comments
General Community Contact	Annual number of community events	12	A variety of festivals, celebrations and community discussions
Residents seek help with mental health issues	Number of Neighbours	125	25 residents for each staff annually
	Number of events each neighbour participates in	4	Annual
Residents requiring combined support of neighbours and professionals	Number of Neighbours	20	Annual
Neighbours trained in Friendship Bench methods and by Mental Health professionals	Number of Neighbours	5	Annual
Formal partnerships developed with professional services	Number of Professional Services	3	On Going
Neighbours improve their mental health	Size of local network	8	
	Neighbours report a feeling of sustainable improved mental health	Average increase of 4 points on a 1-7 scale	
Friendship Bench is scaled up	Number of communities/neighbourhoods seeking to explore concept	3	Over a 4 year period

## ANNUAL BUDGET FOR THE ST. JAMES TOWN FRIENDSHIP BENCH

<b>Operating Costs</b>		
Training Community Assistants		\$12,000
Engaging the community		\$38,000
Counselling neighbours and mentoring Community Assistants		\$50,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$100,000</b>
<b>In Kind Costs supported by Community Matters and its Partners</b>		
Mentoring		\$5,000
Project Management and Reporting		\$10,000
Facilities		\$7,500
Data and Web Site Management		\$12,000
Insurance and accounting		\$2,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$36,500</b>
<b>Annual Project Total</b>		<b>\$136,500</b>



### **Thank you for your consideration**

The Friendship Bench is the culmination of over 20 years uncovering the uniqueness, skills and sense of community held by the residents of St. James Town. This is an amazing neighbourhood in which one is continuously amazed at the sense of spirit, hard work and spirit newcomers bring to their Canadian experience.

This project brings with it a unique opportunity for both newcomers and established Canadians to learn from each other and build a combined solution combining learning, experience and cultures to improve the mental health of the community.

Your support for this project will be a vote of confidence in our neighbourhood and its desire to take the lead in addressing the challenges it faces.

Thank you for your consideration of our proposal

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### **References and Links**

<https://www.friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org/>

<http://communitymatterstoronto.org/>

<http://communitymatterstoronto.org/about-us/>

<http://communitymatterstoronto.org/developing-a-voice/>

<http://communitymatterstoronto.org/community-assistants/>

<http://communitymatterstoronto.org/program-tools/>