



# Enhancing Belonging

A Guidebook for Individuals, Organizations, and Communities

New Story Group of  
Waterloo Region



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## FORWARD

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**New Story Group of Waterloo Region**  
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## THE NEW STORY GROUP

The New Story Group of Waterloo Region is a grassroots organization dedicated to building inclusive communities where every community member has an opportunity to experience belonging. The values that guide the work of the New Story Group are:

- Inclusion and Belonging – Full involvement in community for all
- Choice – The opportunity to make self-determined choices
- Respect – Mutual respect and kindness for all
- Full Citizenship – Valued membership in community
- Collaboration/Partnerships – Working well together with others
- Relationships – Social networks and friendships
- Uniqueness – The individuality of each person



**New Story Group of Waterloo Region**

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BELONG

For many, the terms *belonging* and *inclusion* are inter-changeable. However, it can be argued that simply including people who are susceptible to exclusion does not go far enough to overcome feelings of loneliness, alienation and stigmatization. In recent years, people concerned about inclusion have begun to focus their attention on practices that contribute to a sense of belonging among community citizens. In this sense, belonging is about *full* inclusion, where people are seen, known, welcomed, accepted, connected, cared for, and valued. To belong means to feel attached and to have a sense of being in close proximity to others in terms of activities, networks and spaces. Close, interdependent relationships, in which people are dependent on each other, are key features of belonging.



*“We are recognizing that every life in community is, by definition, interdependent — filled with trusting relationships and empowered by the collective wisdom of citizens in discourse.”*

**John McKnight**

*Author and leader in Asset Based Community Development*



## WHY BELONGING MATTERS

Our desire to belong can be seen throughout history in our drive to gather together, to form groups, and to associate with others. Paul Born, in his book *Deepening Community*, says, “Taking care of one another and looking out for one another has been an evolutionary prerequisite. It is why we survived.” Ancient civilizations formed tribes and clans; today people join clubs, sports teams, church groups, and online communities. Our cities and towns are organized around community centres, town squares, church halls, community groups, neighbourhood associations, and other places of gathering. People have an innate desire to gather together with others, and to belong. Belonging is so fundamental to human existence that the United Nations formally recognizes it as an essential human need and right of all individuals.<sup>1</sup>

A sense of belonging is associated with a number of positive outcomes. Research has shown that individuals who belong to supportive networks of friends, families, colleagues, and/or community groups have higher levels of both mental and physical health.<sup>1</sup> People with a greater sense of belonging report being happier and having higher levels of wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> Belonging is also connected with positive social outcomes such as elevated levels of productivity, larger social circles, and peer support.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, a lack of belonging has been shown to have detrimental consequences for both individuals and communities. It is associated with lower levels of health;<sup>4</sup> lower household income,<sup>5</sup>

poorer physical and mental well-being,<sup>2</sup> and lower levels of life satisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

While much evidence highlights the importance of belonging, many people do not experience what it means to belong. Statistics Canada reports that approximately 32% of all Canadians identify a weak or somewhat weak sense of belonging to community.<sup>6</sup> Locally, the *Waterloo Region's Vital Signs Report* noted declining rates of belonging since the year 2003 and that these rates are especially low amongst those aged 20 to 34.<sup>7</sup>

More and more non-profit organizations are using the determinants of health to guide how they approach well being. Social networks, relationships, inclusion, and belonging are important determinants of health. People who are connected and part of community life are much more likely to be healthier than people who are isolated or disconnected. Belonging matters because it is essential for the vitality and success of our communities and community organizations. When people feel that they belong they are happier and contribute more to society and community. A sense of belonging provides people with purpose, meaning, and perhaps most importantly a source of mutual support. Enhancing people's sense of belonging will contribute to healthier, more vibrant, and connected communities.

## WHO THIS GUIDEBOOK IS FOR

This guidebook can be used by anyone who is looking to foster a deeper sense of belonging within their communities, the organizations in which they work or volunteer, and in their personal lives. It is principally designed for people working with and supporting members of the community who are most susceptible to marginalization and exclusion. Our hope is that the information and strategies shared in this guidebook will assist community organizations and neighbourhoods in their efforts to enhance the community dynamic of belonging so that all people, especially individuals who are most marginalized, feel a sense of belonging.

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## HOW THE ENHANCING BELONGING PROJECT UNFOLDED

The New Story Group initiated the *Enhancing Belonging Project* in 2013 when our members started thinking about how social inclusion could be deepened in Waterloo Region. We wanted to create a process and a document that would be helpful to individuals, organizations, and workers who provide assistance and support to people in our community.

There have been four phases of the *Enhancing Belonging Project*. Each of these phases involved engaging the community, collaborating around emerging ideas, and exploring stories and approaches that can make a difference to the way people experience belonging. Each of the four phases is described in more detail in Appendix A.

## THEMES CONNECTED TO BELONGING

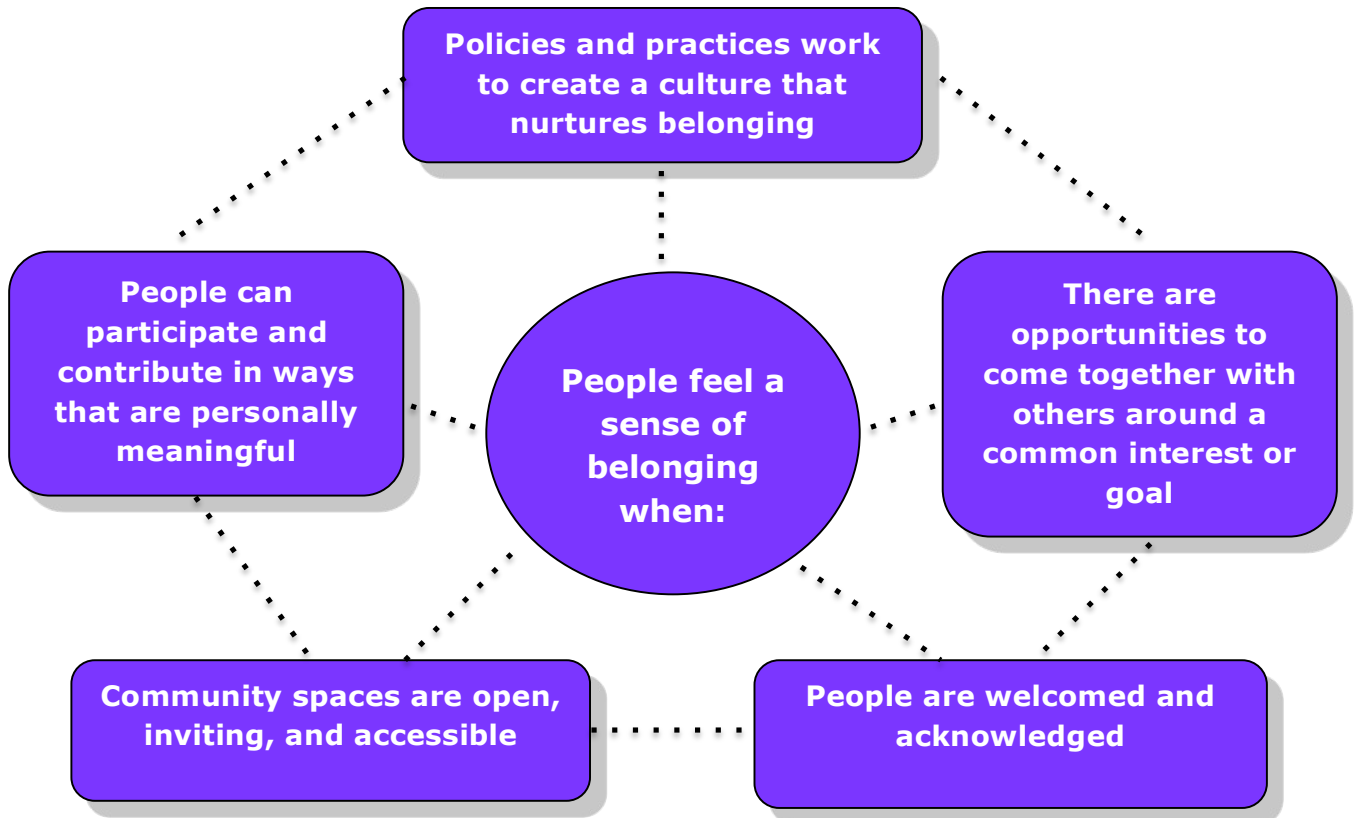
Our research and community work to date has led to the development of five themes, which when put into action, can contribute to enhanced feelings of belonging. Each theme is accompanied by a list of helpful strategies. We realize that achieving a deep sense of belonging takes time and involves a more complex process than can be captured in any guidebook. We believe, however, that to address the weak sense of belonging that too many community members experience, this is an important starting point.

**Our five themes** have helped us to discover that a sense of belonging is more likely to be achieved when:



- Community spaces are open, inviting, and accessible
- People are welcomed and acknowledged
- People can participate and contribute in ways that are personally meaningful
- There are opportunities to come together with others around a common interest or goal
- Policies and practices work to create a culture that nurtures belonging

The diagram below illustrates how these five themes are interrelated and can build in any order. As a whole, these themes can be used to enhance belonging in our organizations and communities. Readers are encouraged to review all the themes and consider how they may want to proceed within their community or organization.



**Figure 1: Belonging Themes and Their Relationship**

*“To be included, you need to be present. To belong, you need to be missed”*

**John Swinton**

*Professor of Practical Theology and Pastoral Care*

# DESCRIPTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR PUTTING THE FIVE THEMES INTO ACTION



*“It is not enough that human beings are included within communities, they need to belong.”*

**John Swinton**

**THEME #1:**  
**CREATING**  
**COMMUNITY**  
**SPACES THAT**  
**ARE OPEN,**  
**INVITING AND**  
**ACCESSIBLE**

This theme is about the importance of place and the meaning of space. Place refers to a physical location that serves to draw people together. It can be a neighbourhood or home, either brick and mortar, or online, or both. Space describes the relational and emotional significance associated with a place, and includes shared values and interests. A sense of belonging is facilitated when we create community spaces that are inviting and welcoming, when barriers are eliminated, and when people feel comfortable to be themselves without fear of judgment. Community spaces of belonging are those to which people want to return.

**We can create community spaces that are open, inviting and accessible by putting into action the following strategies:**

**Strategies for developing community spaces that are free from barriers**

- Ensuring community spaces are physically accessible (e.g. wide entrance ways, ramps)
- Ensuring people are not financially prevented from being in the space (e.g. spaces that have no or low cost)
- Asking people to share what they experience as barriers in order to understand how these differ for each person (e.g. conduct regular assessments; ask for regular feedback)
- Ensuring community spaces are accessible by public transportation (e.g. check transit schedules, offer bus tickets/passes)

- Ensuring hours are flexible and can accommodate people’s different schedules (e.g. programs, services, and activities are available on weekends)

### Helpful strategies for providing welcoming and comfortable physical spaces

- Greeting people in a cheerful, hospitable manner
- Providing food and/or refreshments
- Orientating new people to the space (e.g. offer a tour, provide instruction for a program or activity, explain how “things” work)
- Ensuring community spaces have pleasing physical elements (e.g. plants, pictures) and sensory appeal (e.g. comfortable temperature, warm lighting)
- Creating social spaces that have no single fixed use, can be adapted by people using them, and invite many different forms of social interaction (e.g. a space where the furniture can easily be moved; a space that can accommodate a group activity as well as offer individuals a quiet place to sit and chat)



### Strategies for ensuring that community spaces reflect the people who use them:

- Getting to know people who use the space and celebrating their diversity (e.g. acknowledge major religious holidays and celebrations, organize an intercultural potluck)



- Encouraging people to have a say about the physical and social elements within the space and what they would like to see (e.g. co-design a space, create a shared mural)
- Ensuring the space will be inclusive of diversity (e.g. there are opportunities for interaction between people of differing socio-economic backgrounds, ages, cultures and abilities)

**Helpful strategies for creating opportunities for people to experience a sense of attachment to a space:**

- Fostering emotional connections to a space by having it become a place where people are known to one another or can get to know each other easily
- Expressing appreciation through comments like, "It was good to see you; please come back" and "We missed you last week"
- Creating opportunities for people to have enjoyable experiences in the space (e.g. having regular get togethers, providing a range of leisure activities that people can enjoy together)
- Supporting the development of relationships with other users of the space (e.g. offering programs that bring people together to learn about one another)
- Supporting the creation of happy memories in the space (e.g. hang photographs and collages, share stories)

## Local Stories That Demonstrate Open, Inviting, and Accessible Spaces Being Created

### **Providing welcoming and comfortable spaces:**

There is a local community centre that has greeters. They welcome people and invite newcomers to ask questions. They let people know what to expect. By offering information and engaging people, the greeters play a key role in enhancing a sense of belonging. The design of the space also contributes to this feeling of welcoming. The chairs are comfortable and there is artwork on the walls that symbolizes inclusion. Music is playing to help make the space feel comfortable.

### **Getting to know people who use the space and celebrating diversity:**

We were told about a welcoming place for older adults to come together. It is physically accessible for everyone and located right in the middle of the city. Students spend time with participants so there is a mix of different ages. Other groups are run at the same time, so a lot of different people are mixing and mingling in the same space. The staff working there know everyone by name and act as connectors for everyone coming in.

**Creating spaces that are free from barriers:** A local non-profit organization is intentional about how they use their space. There are no desks at the front door because it is felt that a desk creates a barrier between them and people coming in. The office also uses what is known as 'open concept' so there are no doors to act as barriers to conversation.

**Welcoming visitors and newcomers:** A staff member who works at a Shelter spoke about how she welcomes visitors: “When people first come, they are often filled with fear. We welcome people when they come in because they do not know what to expect. We give them a tour of the shelter. Authentic hospitality is very important because it takes away fear.”



*“For communities to exist, people must encounter one another in person. These encounters must include more than best friends or colleagues at work. They must include diverse people who share the neighbourhood, and often share its needs.”*

**Jane Jacobs**

*Author and activist for urban renewal*

**THEME #2:**  
**WELCOMING AND**  
**ACKNOWLEDGING**  
**OTHERS**

This theme is about the way people interact with one another and intentionally make others feel welcomed. Being welcomed and acknowledged happens when people take time to extend personal greetings, show a genuine interest in others, and offer hospitality in an authentic and caring manner. When people are welcomed and acknowledged in ways that show compassion and understanding, relationships are enhanced, and a deeper sense of belonging and trust are developed.

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*“Hospitality is not only the signature of an abundant community, but a confident one. The extent of hospitality becomes a measure of the belief that people have in their community...When you have a life in a connected and confident community, it is welcoming: hospitality is generated because people feel so good about themselves that they want others to share and they want to share the joy of others...Welcoming strangers is not just an act of generosity; it is also a source of hospitality and learning.”*

**John McKnight and Peter Block**

*Authors of The Abundant Community*

**We can welcome and acknowledge others by putting into action the following strategies:**

**Helpful strategies for offering hospitality**

- Extending invitations - more than once if necessary
- Following up on invitations
- Inviting people for coffee or to share a meal
- Bringing people together and facilitating introductions and connections
- Initiating potlucks and other food-related gatherings (food is a glue for hospitality)

### Helpful strategies for modeling understanding and compassion

- Being empathetic to people's experiences (e.g. be open to listen and share)
- Encouraging people to share their experiences and needs
- Learning the norms associated with a person's culture (particularly in relation to greetings and touch)
- Seeking to understand and value differences (e.g. be interested and ask questions)

### Helpful strategies for extending personal greetings

- Referring to people by their name and ensuring names are used correctly (e.g. use name tags, ask about pronunciation)
- Initiating a warm welcoming (e.g. eye contact, a handshake, a hug – depending on how culturally appropriate)
- Reaching out to newcomers and individuals who find it difficult to connect with others
- Acknowledging something specific about a person (e.g. remembering one of their specific skills or something they are passionate about)

### Helpful strategies for making efforts to connect on a deeper level

- Refraining from making assumptions that shut down opportunities to get to know a person (e.g. assuming a person who is quiet does not want to connect with others)

- Engaging in reciprocal conversations by sharing aspects of ourselves (e.g. be open about our interests, look for things we share in common with others)
  - Creating opportunities for people to come together who may initially see themselves as different (e.g. mixing people from different ethnic backgrounds, age groups, etc.)
  - Showing a genuine interest by trying to learn about people (e.g. ask questions and listen attentively)
- 

### Local Stories That Demonstrate People Being Welcomed and Acknowledged

**Extending personal greetings:** A gentleman with a developmental disability described how he feels welcomed when he arrives at his place of work each day. He cherishes how co-workers take an interest in him and ask him about his life. He also feels regularly appreciated and respected for the work he does which makes him love his work even more. His sense of belonging is increased each time people show him respect and are happy to see him.

**Extending invitation to others:** We heard from a woman who recalled moving to a new community where she was immediately invited out to neighbours' homes for suppers and evening visits. She explained that often someone would get out the guitar and there would be a sing along, or

people would share local stories. She reflected on this experience when trying to be more intentional about creating social networks in her new neighbourhood. Today she sees belonging being intentionally fostered through porch parties, neighbourhood walking groups, moms' groups, and other associations.

**Making efforts to connect on a deeper level:** A new mother shared her experience at an early years learning centre. She described it as a non-judgmental place where she can go to ask questions and seek advice without being rushed out the door. More than that, she explains, "The staff know me and my children by name and often approach me to recommend a program they feel could benefit us". The centre has many of the conveniences of home so she can bring a lunch, spend the day, connect with other moms, and feel like she is surrounded by a supportive family.



**THEME #3:**  
**CREATING**  
**OPPORTUNITIES FOR**  
**PARTICIPATION AND**  
**CONTRIBUTION**

This theme is about the need people have to participate in meaningful activities or pursuits and feel like what they have to contribute is valued. This theme recognizes that everyone contributes at different times and in different ways but that all contributions are valuable and recognized. Since people may not always realize that they have something to contribute, it is necessary to create opportunities that help them unleash their strengths and gifts. When people participate and contribute in ways that are meaningful to them, their sense of belonging is enhanced.

**We can create opportunities for people to participate and contribute in personally meaningful ways by putting into action the following strategies:**

**Helpful strategies for recognizing that everyone has strengths and personal gifts to share**

- Seeking to understand the whole person and discovering ways they want to contribute
- Discovering people's unique strengths, gifts, and abilities (recognizing that this takes time)
- Creating opportunities for people to experience and share their gifts (e.g. explore places and people that would understand and support this gift; arrange for older adults to teach young people a new skill and vice versa)
- Providing opportunities for co-creation so people are part of what they are contributing to (e.g. share leadership roles, engage in democratic processes)
- Acknowledging the value of each person's contribution (e.g. expressing gratitude and appreciation in person and/or in writing)



### Helpful strategies for valuing all levels of participation (e.g. active participation, quiet participation, and the contribution of presence)

- Removing pressure to actively participate by appreciating and accommodating people's different preferences when it comes to participation (e.g. create options for different levels and frequency of participation)
- Looking for opportunities to participate that may not be readily apparent (e.g. think of activities that are outside mainstream)
- Working to eliminate barriers that may prevent people from participating (e.g. offer training, peer mentorship, appropriate information, etc.)
- Letting people know their participation is appreciated (e.g. thanking them for being involved, letting them know how their participation is making a difference)

### Helpful strategies for encouraging and supporting people to be present

- Inviting with intentionality to build connections and promote inclusion (e.g. getting to know people well enough to know how to match their strengths with opportunities for participation)
- Accompanying people when they are entering new and unfamiliar situations
- Linking people with mentors and connectors, who can facilitate introductions and connections

## Local Stories That Demonstrate Opportunities for Participation and Contribution

**Eliminating barriers that may prevent people from participating:** We heard from a gentleman who immigrated to Canada and quickly felt like he was being accepted and had something to offer. "The Working Centre in Kitchener embraced me when I immigrated to Canada," he recounted. "They offered me a job and gave me responsibilities that helped strengthen me."

*"Community is strengthened when people work together to combat inequalities and improve their collective conditions of existence."*

**Tony Blackshaw**

*Author and leisure scholar*

**Creating opportunities for people to share their gifts and experiences:** A woman new to Canada spoke about her appreciation for the support she received from an organization that helped her settle into her new community. As a way of giving back for the support she received, she began volunteering with this organization and using her language skills to be a translator and interpreter for other newcomers. Feeling good about helping others and building relationships with employers and other volunteers and newcomers made her feel like she'd found a new home. "Now I do not feel so different. I feel like I belong to a great community of Canadians," she shared.

**Feeling valued for contributions:** We heard from a person living with dementia who partnered with a non-profit organization to do work around educating about dementia. This partnership was rewarding and made her feel like she belonged because she felt listened to and validated. Through this experience her confidence grew, she found her voice, and was able to fight for the rights of persons with dementia. As she explained, “Since they encouraged a partnership approach, I felt valued and dignified. That's a big key to feeling like you belong.”



**THEME #4**  
**CONNECTING**  
**PEOPLE AROUND**  
**A COMMON**  
**INTEREST**

This theme is about the way we connect with others when we share something in common. Various kinds of common interests (e.g. arts, politics, sports, hobbies) bring people together and through these interests, relationships often develop and grow. In some cases, a common interest can spark a connection between people. Strong communities are built in part through the practice of people coming together in many different ways around common interests. When people turn to community before seeking services, they discover the interests they have in common with fellow citizens. Connections through common interests enhances belonging.

**We can connect people around common interests by putting into action the following strategies:**

**Helpful strategies for turning to community before seeking services**

- Believing in the power of community to support citizens from all walks of life (e.g. not turning to government for help when fellow citizens are there for mutual support)
- Being intentional about using available community options that are accessible to all (e.g. accessing public leisure services rather than private alternatives, letting people know about the shared resources available)
- Resisting the tendency to seek formal services first when experiencing a problem or difficulty

- Recognizing how shared experiences can bring people together and foster mutual support (e.g. rather than developing separate groups based on age or disability, work to bring people together around commonalities so they begin to naturally support one another)

### Helpful strategies for identifying and creating opportunities for mutual connection

- Developing strong neighbourhoods with active community centres (e.g. advocate for walkable neighbourhoods where people can meet and spaces where people can gather)
- Providing on-going support to neighbourhoods by making funding and resources available (e.g. municipalities offering funding for neighbourhood-driven projects)
- Creating social opportunities for people to come together and get to know each other (e.g. plan a block party, host a potluck, meet your neighbours)
- Establishing programs and supports aimed at fostering connections (e.g. initiate friendly visiting programs, walking groups, book clubs, etc.)

### Helpful strategies for providing support and encouragement for people to discover and/or develop their interests and passions

- Discovering people's leisure interests (e.g. ask “What do you like to do for fun?”)
- Focusing on people's strengths, gifts and abilities
- Inviting people to participate in things that interest them and that build on gifts (e.g. extending personal invitations based on your knowledge of the person)
- Providing facilitation for people who may need support to connect with others around shared interests (e.g. make introductions, accompany people to new or unfamiliar settings)

*“Participation in culture, leisure, and recreational activities not only enriches us personally, but collectively. It is inevitably social in nature — it brings us into regular contact with others who share similar interests and values.”*

**Canadian Index of Wellbeing**

## Local Stories That Demonstrate Connecting Around Common Interests:

**Focusing on strengths, gifts and abilities:** There is an organization that assists people with disabilities and their families to plan for and build a good life in community. A facilitator works with an individual and spends time getting to know the person and their strengths, gifts and abilities. The facilitator assists the person to connect with associations of common interest that enable their strengths to flourish. Facilitators have connected many people who had been isolated to a range of groups and activities, such as neighbourhood groups, art classes, potluck groups, and jobs.

**Creating social opportunities for people to come together:** A woman shared her story about moving into a vibrant neighbourhood after living for a few years in a place where she didn't know her neighbours. In her new neighbourhood a social hub is created when a neighbour opens his garage door and invites people to drop by. Some stop for a quick chat, others linger, but everyone is made to feel welcome. Food and drink are shared, neighbourhood children play close by, and the friendly banter never ends.

*“Effective guides (or connectors) do not just introduce one person to another. They bring a person into the web of associational life that can act as a powerful force in that person’s life.”*

**John McKnight**

**Establishing programs and supports aimed at fostering connections:** There is a local charitable organization that helps establish social networks for its members. The mother of a boy who has a social network explained that her son is a different person now that he has some friends who check in and chat with him. He has been to a drumming circle and often spends time drawing with a friend. According to his mother, her son enjoys life in a way she would never have thought possible. She says, “He’s more engaged with what is happening around him and interested in doing new things”.





**THEME #5:**  
**NURTURING**  
**BELONGING**  
**THROUGH**  
**POLICIES AND**  
**PRACTICES**

This theme is about the power and importance of leadership. Belonging is enhanced when leaders of organizations and municipalities promote belonging through inclusive practices. This means leaders take time to work with colleagues to develop policies designed to create practices that encourage belonging. Such policies help develop a culture where belonging is both nurtured and facilitated through relationships. In organizations where policies and practices contribute to a culture of belonging, staff and volunteers play the role of catalyst, connector, or inviter, and model inclusive approaches.

**We can create policies and practices that nurture belonging by putting into action the following strategies:**

**Helpful strategies for supporting leaders, staff, and volunteers to understand and nurture inclusion and belonging**

- Making inclusion and belonging part of an organization's vision, mission, and values (e.g. examine the language being used to ensure that it communicates the importance of inclusion and belonging)
- Ensuring staff and volunteers are prepared to notice when people need welcoming and support (e.g. provide training so people know how to notice when support is needed)
- Developing the capacity of staff and supporting them to connect with people in community (e.g. taking a community

development approach that involves learning from community members about their needs and priorities)

- Providing training on diversity, inclusion, and belonging
- Adopting welcoming strategies and inclusive language (e.g. use welcoming and inclusive language in pamphlets)

### Helpful strategies for weaving policies into practices that create a culture of belonging

- Inviting participants and users to be involved in the development of policies that impact their lives
- Reviewing policies and practices on an ongoing basis and revising them as needed
- Developing policies that communicate the value of difference and diversity
- Ensuring policies and practices focus on participants and users' gifts, strengths, and possibilities
- Organizing systems to create opportunities that foster participation (e.g. minimize 'red tape' and open up more opportunities for people to participate and contribute)

### Helpful strategies for ensuring that relationships are central within policy and practices

- Valuing and celebrating personal connections and relationships

- Ensuring leaders, staff and volunteers can take time to nurture and renew relationships
- Providing connectors who can meet people where they are in the moment and support them in building relationships
- Ensuring that “we all belong” and “relationships matter” are part of the workplace culture (e.g. model behaviour that shows people relationships matter, encourage staff and volunteers to put relationships before tasks)



**Local Stories That  
Demonstrate  
Belonging Being  
Nurtured Through  
Policies and  
Practices**

**Making inclusion and belonging part of the organizational vision, mission, and values:** The Region of Waterloo has initiated STEP Home Programs designed to end persistent homelessness. STEP Home is an interrelated set of 12 person-centred programs at 10 organizations across 19 sites. This work is guided by principles that stress the importance of relationships and walking alongside people to build community. The organizations involved have a clear commitment to inclusion and walk with the person at the point where they are at in their life. Early results of the STEP Home Program show positive outcomes. People who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, have expressed appreciation for the respectful support and focus on relationships.

*“Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren’t always comfortable, but they are never weakness.”*

**Brene Brown**

*Author, **Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way we Live, Love, Parent, and Lead***

**Providing connectors who can meet people where they are at and support them in building a**

**community life:** Bridges to Belonging is a program that has belonging and inclusion at the heart of its policies, practices, and culture. Now in its fifth year, this community program supports people with disabilities to build on their unique abilities and gifts to create the kind of life in the community that the person wants. A facilitator assists the person to build a life of meaning and value in the community by connecting the person with people and places that nurture the person's sense of belonging. One family member expressed what many Bridges families have noticed: "Having a facilitator in our lives has made a world of difference. All of a sudden I don't have to do everything myself, I'm not the one always asking for help, and I'm discovering everyday things my son can succeed at that he might not have had the opportunity to try before."

## CONCLUSION

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS – A CALL TO ACTION

The five themes outline ways for organizations and communities to enhance belonging. We hope you also find the strategies helpful to you personally. The themes all highlight the strong relationship between the personal and the social.

As we argued, there are many reasons why belonging and inclusion need attention, including the social isolation, dis-connection, and loneliness that many people experience in our communities. Loneliness, for example, has been identified as a serious issue for people who feel that they do not belong in families or communities. We know that loneliness impacts us emotionally, socially, and spiritually. A focus on inclusion and belonging can bring significant change to people who are isolated or lonely.



**New Story Group of Waterloo Region**

In conclusion, we highlight the important ways that people, organizations, and communities can implement the themes in this Guidebook. This is a call to action.

- ***Be intentional about belonging and inclusion.*** Our themes and stories reflect that being intentional is central to personal and social change. For some of us, being intentional might mean selecting one theme and beginning to work on it very consciously. For others, it might mean developing a plan of action for implementing all five themes. Intentionality has been shown to be a key catalyst for personal and social change.
- ***Engage other people in discerning how belonging can be enhanced in your organization or neighbourhood.*** It is often difficult to implement new ideas by ourselves. The experience of social innovators shows that they always engage others to implement their ideas. Bringing a small group together to discuss the belonging themes and strategies can quickly move us to action. You may decide to start with one theme, or perhaps analyze your organization or neighbourhood to decide which theme makes most sense to start with.
- ***Involve people in “inside-out” conversations.*** In many ways, belonging is deeply personal and impacts our emotions and motivations. For this reason, we have found that exploring “what does this theme or strategy mean to you?” enables

people to think about their own life situation. This “inside-out” approach supports people to reflect on their own sense of belonging prior to thinking about how to facilitate belonging with others. These “inside-out” conversations can be powerful and life altering.

- ***Be mindful and heart-felt as you embark on this belonging journey.*** Most likely you have experienced a strong sense of belonging in a variety of contexts. As you initiate some of the strategies in this Resource Guide for others, it is important to be mindful about their usage. How would others feel if we made this change? Do we need to engage others in reflecting on this strategy? Mindfulness has been shown to be a powerful approach to any change approach.
- ***Start small, but get started!*** We encourage you to begin using the Guide, on your own, with a small team of people in your organization or neighbourhood, or with people in your community who are trying to make inclusion and belonging a priority.

We hope this call to action can inspire you to work on belonging and inclusion in your community. Let us know about your progress.



**APPENDIX A:**  
**FOUR PHASE**  
**APPROACH TO**  
**DEVELOPING**  
**BELONGING**  
**THEMES**

Our four-phase approach to developing the belonging themes presented in this guidebook included the following:

**1. Phase one: Hosting belonging conversations**

We held two conversation events for about 100 representatives from local non-profit organizations, neighbourhood associations, and interested citizens. A very diverse group attended the conversations, including staff, volunteers, board members, faculty from colleges and universities, users of support services, and local neighbourhood activists.

Participants at the belonging conversations offered comments and insights about what it means to belong and shared stories that highlight experiences of belonging. A report on the belonging conversations can be found on the New Story Group website.

<http://www.newstorygroup.ca>

**2. Phase two: Conducting a comprehensive literature review**

Two researchers with the New Story Group completed a comprehensive literature review on belonging that highlighted key definitions and features associated with belonging. We drew from the belonging conversations and the literature review to create a first draft of belonging themes.

### **3. Phase three: Reviewing and revising belonging themes**

We met with 18 local leaders to review the themes associated with belonging. The purpose of the gathering was to confirm and critique the themes, and to add stories and questions. This gathering was attended by non-profit leaders, academics, and users of support services. We used the feedback provided to revise the draft of our themes.

### **4. Phase four: Deepening the belonging themes**

We consulted the community again to review and deepen our belonging themes. We held seven focus groups with representatives from the non-profit sector, including faith groups, older adults, new Canadians and recent immigrants, persons experiencing homelessness, persons with physical and developmental disabilities, and persons with mental health issues. Participants were asked to review each of the five themes and discuss ways the themes could be enriched or expanded. Participants were also asked to share stories about belonging. Our analysis of the focus group data enabled us to further develop and deepen our themes and provide strategies for how each theme could be achieved.

**APPENDIX B:****STRATEGY  
CHECKLIST**

The following is a quick reference checklist, which summarizes the belonging strategies listed throughout this publication. Individuals and organizations can use this checklist to evaluate how well they are implementing belonging strategies and in doing so potentially identify areas for improvement.



## Belonging Strategy Checklist

For each strategy designed to foster belonging indicate whether you or your organization/group is currently employing or are actively working to implement it on a regular basis.

**YES    NO    NA**

### **SPACES ARE OPEN, INVITING, AND ACCESSIBLE**

*Developing Spaces that are Free from Barriers*

Spaces are physically accessible (e.g. wide entrance ways, ramps)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People are not financially prevented from being in the space (e.g. spaces that have no or low cost)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Asking people to share what they experience as barriers (e.g. conduct regular assessments; ask for regular feedback)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spaces are accessible by public transportation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ensuring hours are flexible to accommodate people (e.g. available on evenings and weekends, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Providing Welcoming and Comfortable Physical Spaces*

Greeting people in a cheerful, hospitable manner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing food and/or refreshments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Orientating new people to the space (e.g. offer a tour)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spaces have pleasing physical elements and sensory appeal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creating social spaces that have no single fixed use	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Ensuring that Spaces Reflect the People Who Use Them*

Getting to know people and celebrating their diversity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Encouraging people to have a say about the physical and social elements within the space and what they would like to see	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ensuring the space will be inclusive of diversity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Creating Opportunities to Experience a Sense of Attachment to a Space*

Fostering emotional connections to a space by having it become a place where people are known to one another	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Expressing appreciation through comments like, "It was good to see you; please come back" and "We missed you last week"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creating opportunities for people to have enjoyable experiences in the space	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supporting the development of relationships with other users of the space	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supporting the creation of happy memories in the space (e.g. hang photographs and collages, share stories)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

\*\*NA = Not Applicable\*\*

**New Story Group of Waterloo Region**

YES NO NA

**WELCOMING AND ACKNOWLEDGING OTHERS**

*Offering Hospitality*

Extending invitations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Following up on invitations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inviting people for coffee or to share a meal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bringing people together and facilitating introductions and connections	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Initiating potlucks and other food-related gatherings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Modeling Understanding and Compassion*

Being empathetic to people’s experiences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Encouraging people to share their experiences and needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning the norms associated with a person’s culture (particularly in relation to greetings and touch)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seeking to understand and value differences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Extending Personal Greetings*

Referring to people by their name and ensuring names are used correctly (e.g. use name tags, ask about pronunciation)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Initiate a warm welcoming (e.g. eye contact, a handshake, a hug)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reaching out to newcomers and individuals who find it difficult to connect with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Acknowledging something specific about a person (e.g. remembering one fact or something they are passionate about)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Making Efforts to Connect on a Deeper Level*

Refraining from making assumptions (e.g. assuming a person who is quiet does not want to connect with others)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Engaging in reciprocal conversations by sharing aspects of ourselves (e.g.: look for things we share in common with others)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creating opportunities for people to come together who may initially see themselves as different	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Showing a genuine interest by trying to learn about people (e.g. ask questions and listen attentively)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

\*\*NA = Not Applicable\*\*

YES NO NA

**CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION  
AND CONTRIBUTION**

*Recognizing that Everyone has Strengths and Personal Gifts to Share*

Seeking to understand the whole person and discovering ways they want to contribute	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discovering people’s unique gifts and abilities and suggesting ways they can be involved in their community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creating opportunities for people to share their gifts and experiences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing opportunities for co-creation (e.g. share leadership roles, engage in a democratic process)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Acknowledging the value of each person’s contribution (e.g. expressing gratitude and appreciation in person and/or in writing)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seeking to understand the whole person and discovering ways they want to contribute	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discovering people’s unique gifts and abilities and suggesting ways they can be involved in their community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Valuing all Levels of Participation*

Removing pressure to actively participate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accommodating people’s different preferences when it comes to participation (e.g.: options for different levels of participation)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Looking for opportunities to participate that may not be readily apparent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working to eliminate barriers that may prevent people from participating (e.g. offer training, peer mentorship, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Letting people know their participation is appreciated	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Encouraging and Supporting People to be Present*

Inviting with intentionality to build connections and promote inclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accompanying people when they are entering new and unfamiliar situations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Linking people with mentors and connectors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

\*\*NA = Not Applicable\*\*

YES NO NA

**CONNECTING PEOPLE AROUND A COMMON INTEREST**

*Turning to Community Before Seeking Services*

Believing in the power of community to support citizens from all walks of life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Being intentional about using available community options that are available to all	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Resisting the tendency to seek formal services first when experiencing a problem or difficulty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recognizing how shared experiences can bring people together and foster mutual support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Identifying and Creating Opportunities for Mutual Connection*

Developing strong neighbourhoods with active community centres	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing on-going support to neighbourhoods by making funding and resources available	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creating social opportunities for people to come together and get to know each other (e.g. plan a block party, host a potluck)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Establishing programs and supports aimed at fostering connections (e.g. friendly visiting programs, walking groups, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Support for People to Discover and/or Develop their Interests and Passions*

Discovering people's leisure interests (e.g. ask "What do you like to do for fun?")	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Focusing on people's strengths, gifts and abilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inviting people to participate in things that interest them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing facilitation for people who may need support (e.g. make introductions, accompany people to unfamiliar settings)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

\*\*NA = Not Applicable\*\*

YES NO NA

**NURTURING BELONGING THROUGH POLICES AND PRACTICES**

*Supporting Leaders, Staff, and Volunteers to Understand and Nurture Inclusion and Belonging*

Making inclusion and belonging part of an organization’s vision, mission, and values	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ensuring staff and volunteers are prepared to notice when people need welcoming and support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developing the capacity of staff and supporting them to connect with people in community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing training on diversity, inclusion, and belonging	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adopting welcoming strategies and inclusive language	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Weaving Policies into Practices that Create a Culture of Belonging*

Inviting people to be involved in the development of policies that impact their lives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reviewing policies and practices on an ongoing basis and revising them as needed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developing policies that communicate the value of difference	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ensuring policies and practices focus on strengths and possibilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organizing systems to create opportunities that foster participation (e.g. minimize ‘red tape’)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Ensuring that Relationships are Central within Policy and Practices*

Valuing and celebrating personal connections and relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ensuring leaders, staff and volunteers can take time to nurture and re-new relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing connectors who can meet people where they are in the moment and support them in building a community life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ensuring that “we all belong” is part of the workplace culture	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

\*\*NA = Not Applicable\*\*



## Checklist Summary

Fill in the table below based on the results of the belonging strategy checklist above. This quick summary allows you to evaluate at a glance at how well you/your organization/group are doing at fostering belonging and identify potential areas for improvement.

The calculated percentage (%) score represents the number of belonging strategies identified herein, which you or your organization is currently implementing.

Theme	# Yes	# NA	% Score
<b>SPACES ARE OPEN, INVITING, AND ACCESSIBLE</b>			$(\# \text{ Yes}) \div (18 - \# \text{ NA})$ ( _____ ) ÷ ( _____ ) = _____ %
<b>WELCOMING AND ACKNOWLEDGING OTHERS</b>			$(\# \text{ Yes}) \div (17 - \# \text{ NA})$ ( _____ ) ÷ ( _____ ) = _____ %
<b>CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTION</b>			$(\# \text{ Yes}) \div (13 - \# \text{ NA})$ ( _____ ) ÷ ( _____ ) = _____ %
<b>CONNECTING PEOPLE AROUND A COMMON INTEREST</b>			$(\# \text{ Yes}) \div (12 - \# \text{ NA})$ ( _____ ) ÷ ( _____ ) = _____ %
<b>NURTURING BELONGING THROUGH POLICES AND PRACTICES</b>			$(\# \text{ Yes}) \div (14 - \# \text{ NA})$ ( _____ ) ÷ ( _____ ) = _____ %
<b>Totals</b>			

*Areas Doing Well*

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*Areas for Improvement*

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Ad Hoc Committee on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities (2007). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Choenarom, C., Williams, R., & Hagerty, B. (2005). The Role of Sense of Belonging and Social Support on Stress and Depression in Individuals with Depression. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing, 19*(1), 18-29. doi:10.1016/j.apnu.2004.11.003

<sup>3</sup> Kitchen, P., Williams, A., & Chowhan, J. (2011). Sense of Community Belonging and Health in Canada: A Regional Analysis. *Social Indicators Research, 107*(1), 103-126. doi:10.1007/s11205011-9830-9

<sup>4</sup> Cacioppo, J.T. & Patrick, C.W. (2008). *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Baumeister, R.F., Twenge, G.M. & Nuss, C.K. (2002). Effects of Social Exclusion on Cognitive Processes: Anticipated Aloneness Reduces Intelligent Thought. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83* (4), 817–827.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada (2013). *Sense of Belonging to Local Community*. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/health100b-eng.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation. (2013). *Waterloo Region's Vital Signs*. Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation: Waterloo, Ontario.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**The New Story Group** website includes a regular newsletter that focuses on themes of belonging and inclusion – [www.newstorygroup.ca](http://www.newstorygroup.ca)

**Abundant Community** is a project of John McKnight and Peter Block, prolific authors about community and the power of neighbourhoods. Their website is full of ideas and strategies that can enhance belonging – [www.abundantcommunity.com](http://www.abundantcommunity.com)

**Bridges to Belonging** is a dynamic, Waterloo Region initiative that provides a facilitator for people with disabilities who want to enhance their connections, build meaningful relationships, and pursue a life in community. They have a very useful newsletter - [www.bridgestobelonging.ca](http://www.bridgestobelonging.ca)

**A New Story** – John Lord’s website has numerous resources for building a New Story with people and communities. The New Story includes creating relationships and supports that enable a sense of community and belonging – [www.johnlord.net](http://www.johnlord.net)

**Tamarack Institute** is a leader in community engagement and collaborative leadership. Based in Waterloo, Tamarack hosts training events and workshops with community as the core of their work. Their website has extensive resources for building strong communities – [www.tamarackcommunity.ca](http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca)

**Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council** has developed numerous campaigns designed to create safe and welcoming communities. Their “say hi” campaign encourages connections and hospitality – [www.preventingcrime.ca](http://www.preventingcrime.ca)

**The Working Centre** is an innovative resource centre that provides a wide range of tools and resources for people in downtown Kitchener. Their website highlights access to housing, job search, community tools, and community development, all with a focus on relationships – [www.theworkingcentre.org](http://www.theworkingcentre.org)

**New Story Group of Waterloo Region**

**New Story Group of Waterloo Region**