

Community Connect Final Evaluation Report

Executive Summary - March 2022

Community Connect is a short-term case management program for women transitioning from Withdrawal Management Services (WMS) to community-based support in Toronto, Ontario. The Community Connect Case Manager begins working with women during their WMS stay, drawing on gender- and trauma-informed approaches to help clients identify the support they need to begin or continue working towards their individual recovery journeys.

Development of Community Connect was guided by the principles of gender- and trauma-informed practice, and a recognition that women who use substances have been consistently underserved by the substance use system. Including trauma-informed practice principles in Community Connect reflects an appreciation that past experiences of trauma are closely correlated with problematic use of tobacco, alcohol, and other substances.

Community Connect enhances existing hospital-based WMS infrastructure by introducing experienced Case Managers who are employed by community-based organizations. Although the Case Manager works primarily from the WMS, they have flexibility to spend time offsite in ways that may not be possible or appropriate for WMS staff, such as conducting accompaniments, outreach, or engagement activities.

Pilot Project Evaluation and Findings

A one-year pilot project of Community Connect operated from December 2020 to December 2021. Partner organizations included the Glendale House WMS at Unity Health - St. Joseph's Health Centre, the Women's Own WMS at the University Health Network, the Neighbourhood Group - St. Stephen's Community House, and the Provincial System Support Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (PSSP), which provided project coordination and evaluation support.

A mixed methods approach was used to evaluate this pilot. Data was collected via a review of anonymized client service data, review of implementation documentation, monthly check-ins with the Case Manager, a focus group with Steering Committee members, and interviews with clients. Key findings have been organized by client outcomes, system outcomes, and implementation outcomes below.

Client Outcomes

Twelve women participated in Community Connect from December 2020 to December 2021. During the pilot project, clients received supports that aligned with their self-identified priorities and worked collaboratively with the Case Manager to set their own personal recovery goals. Presenting issues included substance use (n=7), mental health (n=5), treatment (n=4), housing (n=3), and employment (n=1).

Clients described the support they received from the Case Manager as aligning with client-centered, and gender- and trauma-informed care principles. Findings suggest the Case Manager cultivated comfortable service relationships that allowed clients to feel in charge of and engaged in decision making. The ability to work flexibly together to identify what supports were needed supported clients to pursue their goals. For example, the Case Manager was able to support some clients to improve their socio-economic status (e.g., connections with employment supports), safety (e.g., helping a client recover belongings from an abusive partner), or addressing systemic issues that create barriers for women (e.g., flexible hours for support).

System Outcomes

Findings suggest clients benefited most significantly from Community Connect's ability to assist in navigating substance use and social support systems that are uncoordinated and difficult to understand. As a result of their work with the Case Manager, clients reported improved knowledge of and connections to a variety of recovery support resources.

Clients were connected to a wide range of community-based services and supports based on their needs and goals. Of the 12 participants, eight (75%) women were connected to other community-based organizations, including the Glendale House Addictions Worker and a Jean Tweed online recovery group. Although many community-based services cut their service capacity in half or closed waitlists altogether during the height of the pandemic, the Case Manager was able to mitigate access barriers using strategies such as informal supportive counselling.

Implementation Outcomes

Findings indicate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for the implementation of the Community Connect pilot project. For example, infection prevention protocols at the Glendale House WMS limited the number of individuals allowed onsite and in rooms at the same time, which prevented piloting of a peer support person to enhance the service offered by the

Case Manager and limited the Case Manager's ability to be fully integrated with the daily functions of the WMS. Changes in the needs of women entering Glendale House compared to pre-pandemic expectations also led to slower than anticipated uptake of Community Connect's services. A partnership was formed with the now-closed Women's Own WMS, which expanded the availability of the program to a population group with more aligned service needs.

Challenges were mitigated by committed and consistent leadership from dedicated Steering Committee members and implementation partners. Data suggests partners were able to draw on existing knowledge and relationships to come up with creative solutions to the challenges being faced. They were guided by strong project management support from PSSP who ensured that project activities were properly documented with ample opportunity for collaborative problem-solving.

Resulting from the success of the pilot project, a partnership to offer Community Connect was established between the Neighbourhood Group and the newly opened women's WMS at Michael Garron Hospital. This partnership began operating in February 2022.

Opportunities for Action

The following opportunities for actions were identified based on the findings of the pilot project evaluation:

1. Preserve Focus on Prioritizing Support for Women
2. Prioritize Case Manager Integration with Existing WMS Structures and Practices
3. Create Space for Peer Support
4. Expand Scope of Community Connect to all WMS Locations
5. Establish an Oversight Group
6. Secure a Collaborative Funding Pathway
7. Negotiate Data Sharing Access

Details of these opportunities are found in the full pilot project evaluation report.