

# TESTING A HOUSING SOLUTION

## For Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

A nagging worry for the parents of live-at-home adults with intellectual disabilities is “What will happen to our son or daughter after we are gone?” It is an issue that currently engages an Ottawa non-profit group called LiveWorkPlay (LWP).

Lacking any off-the-shelf model it can adopt as a solution, the group is building its own from the ground up through a trial-and-error method that has actually put its clientele in experimental independent living situations.

LWP helps young people with mild intellectual disabilities live in society as contributing citizens. The group selected its name to reflect a balanced interconnection between home life, work life and community activity. Support for its housing project has come from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, United Way Ottawa and more recently from CMHC through its Seed Funding program.

### Trying for a Painless Transition

“We are looking ahead at independent living for today’s young adults before they find themselves in the situation of losing their parents and having no place to go,” explained Julie Kingstone, a co-founder of LWP. “Both the young adults and their parents want to be in a situation where the transition can be smooth, happy and voluntary rather than something suddenly forced on them by circumstances.”



*The 2004 Gang Moves In*

*On move-in day, May 8, 2004, participants in LiveWorkPlay’s live-in experiment pose outside the Carleton University residence they would occupy for the next 50 days.*

Ms. Kingstone explained that young adults with mild intellectual disabilities are typically torn between the normal desires of people that age to live independently and the reality that they need someone, such as their parents, to help them keep to their daily routines and to offer moral and financial support as required. Many of their parents feel the children could do a lot for themselves with the proper support in place but are fearful of sending them into a situation where they would fail and be unhappy.

Through dialogue with its clientele and their families, LWP began to put some basic concepts into place. The group determined that the ideal environment would allow for a combination of private and public space where the individual is choosing to be with other individuals with whom they are comfortable—an adaptation of co-housing principles.

### Had to Become Creative

Ms. Kingstone said “LWP examined existing housing options in Ottawa and found there are no appropriate choices for the desired type of independent living. With nothing available locally, LWP had to become creative.”

But what should it create? How much independence should there be and how much support? What type of physical layout facilitated a proper balance between the two? LWP needs answers to these questions before it embarks on a costly housing project.

Through an arrangement with Carleton University, LWP embarked on a two-phase living-in experiment to get answers. In the spring of 2003, after Carleton students had departed for the summer, 10 young adults moved into a residence that resembled the sort of layout LWP wanted. The participants had individual bedrooms

with a common kitchen and living room shared by four people. These four-person units were connected via a hallway to other four-person units and a common lounge. In 2004, 14 persons, including the original 10, took part.

The 2003 experiment lasted 28 days but LWP found that was too short. The participants were just getting into a rhythm when it was over. So this year it was stretched to 50 days.

### Support Staff Essential

From the Carleton experiments LWP has a better handle on the appropriate level of supports that are required and the realistic expectations for self-reliance on the part of the participants. For example, LWP learned that on-site staff was not necessary at night. It is clear to LWP that residents need support staff to help them organize their days and that some sort of food service arrangement is required, and a lot of support is needed in the areas of problem solving and social skills.

“There are some people who are interested in having their own suite, like a small bachelor apartment that would lead to a communal dining area,” said Ms Kingstone. “They may not want to do too much of their own cooking because that just adds an extra layer of stress on top of a hugely stressful day. Nutrition is another crucially important area where support is needed. Most of the participants in the Carleton experiment can do basic cooking but it can take them three or four hours to prepare a balanced meal.

“While independent living may seem like it is about doing everything on your own, do individuals want to spend their entire evening cooking dinner or would they like to spend their time differently? We find that most participants would like to spend their time differently.”

The next step is to do an audit of the Carleton project as part of preparing a final assessment of participants’ longer term needs if they were to move into a residential environment like the one they experienced at Carleton.

### Own Building Definite Need

“I think we will be directing our energy now at building something. We are not yet sure exactly what sort of living arrangements we will end up with. But it looks we need a place that supports 16 individuals in a combination of shared accommodations and private suites, with access to a dining area, common lounge areas and common exercise rooms,” said Ms. Kingstone.

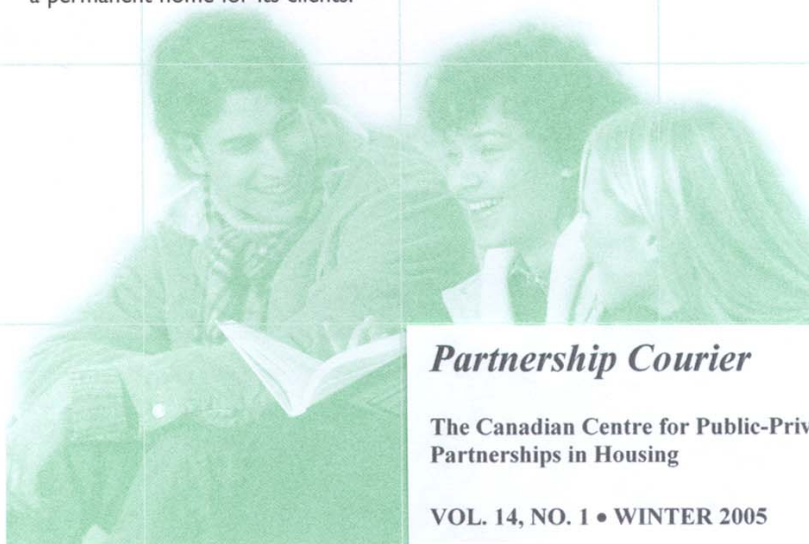
Having a place of its own would let LWP continue the experiments at a site that may in the long term become a permanent home for its clients.

Ms. Kingstone said “that for some people the transition from home to a place of their own will be difficult. LWP may need to create a situation where people live in a congregated setting for specified periods and then go home for awhile—in effect having two homes as they learn to cope with being on their own.” Further experimentation will reveal if these options are needed but this kind of testing requires longer-term access to the right kind of residential setting than is possible during Carleton University’s off season.

CMHC has approved a \$10,000 Seed Funding grant that helps LWP pay for a formal needs assessment and a business plan for a 16-unit residence. LWP is entitled to a \$10,000 Seed Funding loan as well but Ms. Kingstone said “they have not worked out yet if or how that will be used.” ■

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