

Students help seniors combat isolation through connection at Mainstream

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A new common area is helping people make connections at Mainstream - Non-Profit Housing, thanks to a partnership with Niagara College's School of Community Services and a New Horizons Grant from the Government of Canada. Supplied photo

Upgraded technology is all about connection at Mainstream – Non-Profit Housing thanks to a partnership with NC's School of Community Services.

The St. Catharines-based charitable non-profit association, which assists Niagara residents with developmental differences, recently unveiled a new common room to help those they support to combat feelings of isolation, which have escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The room is now outfitted with computers, a virtual reality system, upgraded wi-fi, asnoezelen sensory room, new furniture and more.

The new space, and the opportunities for connection that come with it, are the result of the partnership between Mainstream and NC, financed by a \$25,000 New Horizons Grant from the Government of Canada. The one-year grant began in April 2021 with the goal of supporting social participation and inclusion for seniors and helping community-based organizations adapt to a virtual environment.

Over the span of three academic terms – Spring and Fall 2021 and Winter 2022 – the project involved students from the College’s Recreation Therapy program, as well as a few students from the Social Service Worker program.

Selena Boulianne, Manager, Residential Choices at Mainstream, said that the project has already begun to have positive effects on the people who Mainstream supports.

‘Jenn K’ now enjoys spending time with Alexa and getting involved with Cyber-Seniors. She has been exploring many different programs and has been connecting with Cyber-Seniors as often as she can.

‘Brent’ has been navigating YouTube and finding music online, with help of a Recreation Therapy student who has been assisting him with using the technology.

“The pandemic really trapped a lot of people at home and cut off a lot of social interaction. So many of the people we support didn’t have anywhere safe to go through the last two years,” she said. “Through this grant, the students were able to meet with the people we support and help connect them virtually to the community around them.”

Boulianne noted that the new common area – particularly the snoezelen sensory room – has been on Mainstream’s wish list for many years.

The computers provide a free space for people to come in, access the internet, or get help from staff on creating their resumes or using online resources. Many of the people supported by Mainstream have been using them to connect with Cyber-Seniors and have been making new connections with similar interests.

She recounted how they were able to get one man they support out of his house and into their building for the first time in a very long time, during the first days that the new common area was up and running.

“He was the happiest we had seen him and has been back almost every day since,” she said.

While Mainstream has had a long-standing relationship with NC – in fact, Boulianne’s work at Mainstream began in 1998 as a student in the Social Service Worker program – for this particular initiative, NC student involvement was vital.

“The students have been an integral part of this initiative. They have been the ones doing all the work with people we support as well as some of the setup and coordination of the resources,” said Boulianne. “These particular students have made real connections with the people we support and have engaged them in ways our staff often just don’t have the time to.”

Project success

Recreation Therapy Professor Debbie Ann Fender said she was grateful that students were able to support the project from its developmental stages to completion by using technology to reduce social isolation for the people supported by Mainstream. She is proud that all of the metrics outlined for the project have been met and that, over the past year, the project supported more than 45 people at Mainstream, with more than 70 Recreation Therapy students contributing in various capacities.

“Students demonstrated resilience, flexibility, and adaptability during the pandemic; tenets that the clients and staff at Mainstream sincerely appreciated. We had students who supported clients online using the Cyber-Seniors platform, and students who were able to provide one-to-one technological support to Mainstream clients in residential and day support service programs,” said Fender.

“The highlight for me was seeing the students work together to design the snoezelen room and then, watching the joy they felt when the clients would use the room.

“I remember one client sitting in the snoezelen room for over two hours just completely calm and contented.”

Fender said she hopes the partnership will continue. “We recognize that it offers an invaluable learning and interactive experience for the students and the clients at Mainstream,” she said.

Second-year Recreation Therapy student Stefanie Schmidt was one of the NC students involved with the project. From early March until the end of April, she spent every weekday at Mainstream, supporting individuals who have developmental delays by using their tech devices to help them use them as independently as possible. She also assisted with the set-up of the computer lab and sensory room.

Schmidt has found her field placement experiences to be valuable and rewarding.

“It is great to know that my involvement at Mainstream will be helping seniors with social participation and inclusion. Even before the pandemic, isolation has been negatively affecting seniors, but it is now more prevalent than ever,” she said. “Finding ways to lessen the negative effects of isolation is crucial and the use of technology has proven to be a great way of doing so.”

Schmidt, who attended the unveiling of the new common room on April 13, noted that the highlight of her placement has been the kindness and warmth she experienced from everyone involved with Mainstream, and she is grateful for the opportunity she had there.

“It has opened my eyes up to a career goal that I am very passionate about,” said Schmidt. “I have a passion for working with individuals who have special needs. And I love having a job where I can help others.”



A .snoezelen sensory room is a welcome new addition for the people who Mainstream supports.
(Supplied photo)

Student involvement

Spring 2021 term

- Nineteen Recreation Therapy students connected with 14 people supported by Mainstream and their social worker, and developed individualized technology-based intervention plans for them, based on their unique needs and interests. Each student dedicated three hours to the project (total: 57 hours).

Fall 2021

- One Social Service Worker student and one Recreation Therapy student worked with 12 people supported by Mainstream. The SSW student spent 184 direct contact hours. The RT student spent 120 hours planning and on virtual sessions. Students also used the Cyber-Seniors program to connect virtually.
- Thirty-three Recreation Therapy students spent 144 hours converting 48 program plans for Mainstream (previously offered in-person) to virtual delivery. The program plans were shared with another Recreation Therapy student to be implemented in March 2022.

Winter 2022 term

- One Social Service Worker student worked directly (in person and online) with 12 people supported by Mainstream.
- One Recreation Therapy student worked directly (in person) with at least 15 people who Mainstream supports.
- Fourteen Recreation Therapy students developed specific program plans for Mainstream to support the use of technology, computers, snoezelen/ sensory room, and virtual reality. Students were allotted three hours each to complete their projects.
- In March, 73 Recreation Therapy students gathered assessment info about people supported by Mainstream and developed intervention plans to support them. Intervention plans to be handed over to a Recreation Therapy field placement student who will develop plans to implement them with Mainstream.
- Social Service Worker and Recreation Therapy students will continue to work with Mainstream those they support with the use of the technologies and to help them reduce social isolation beyond the time parameters of the grant.