



# PATHWAYS TO FULLER LIVES

## *Design Process Report*

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### ***Core Design Team***

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**COLLEGE OF DESIGN**

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**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**

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# PATHWAYS TO FULLER LIVES

## *Design Process Report*

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# 1. Introductions

The design thinking work that we do aims directly at **policy and systems change**. In the “Pathways to Fuller Lives” project that we have done in partnership with Hennepin, Ramsey, Anoka, and Dakota counties, the Minnesota Design Center has facilitated the development of several collaborative pilot projects, now in various stages of implementation and testing, to address the statewide plan that calls for giving people living in adult corporate foster care settings greater choice in how, where, and with whom they live. This “systems design” project not only responds creatively to policy change, but also shows how the adult corporate foster care system itself may need to change, based on the prototypes that have emerged from those who have the greatest stake in the system.

**Tom Fisher, Director**  
*Minnesota Design Center*

In imagining how our two-pronged approach to design thinking would play out at the system-level and the service delivery-level, we have been delighted to recognize more learnings than were anticipated. They include: 1) It is important to remember that the organic nature of the process can sometimes feel obstructive and simultaneously invigorating. The interplay of the two throughout the process keeps it real, guarding against the default back to status quo; 2) The generative aspects of the work are contagious. We saw all of the seven stakeholder groups engage authentically in the empathize, define, and ideate stages, and their engagement fueled the prototyping and testing stages. Working collectively brought a new level of awareness of the importance of collaboration in systems change; and 3) Project management needs to be built into the entire process, and change management should be considered once a prototype is ready to pilot before fully embedding it into the organizational structure. The MDC’s mastery of design guided us along our pathway and is inextricably linked to our success.

**Jodi Beckstrom, Principal Planning Analyst**  
*Hennepin County HSPHD*

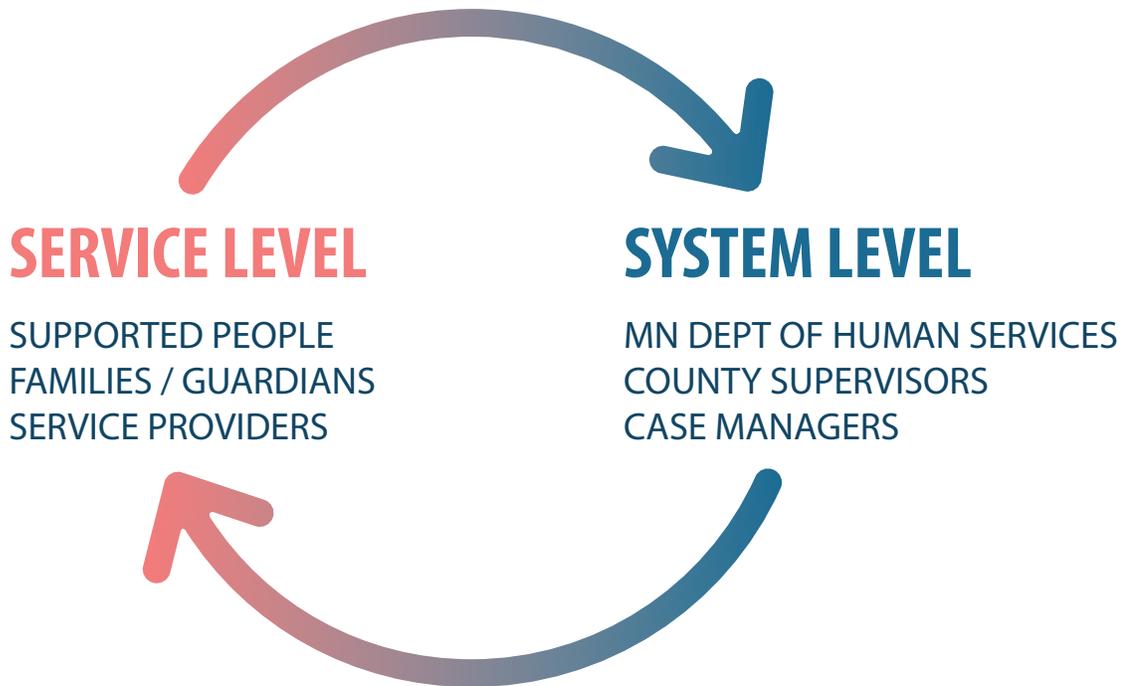
# 2. Overview

## Background

Pathways to Fuller Lives began as an initiative funded by the Minnesota Department of Human Services to create alternatives to corporate foster care, but by embracing strategic design thinking practices and diverse partnerships, this project has challenged its participants to approach the many concerns facing adult corporate foster care with a spirit of creativity and innovation. By working collaboratively to reframe problems and empower the various stakeholders to think differently, the year-long effort has built momentum with the potential to create lasting change in how people are seen and supported by the system.

After decades of increasing regulation and decreasing tolerance of risk, the adult corporate foster care system is now slowly learning to be more person-centered. Though each group of stakeholders, including people who live or have lived in corporate foster care, their families and guardians, case managers, county supervisors, service providers, and state officials, agreed that the current system is desperately in need of repair, there was no clear path forward through the overwhelming system-centered structures that are currently in place. The Pathways to Fuller Lives project worked with people to identify the core issues preventing success and develop creative interventions to test new ways of living and working, in hopes of furthering the process of change.



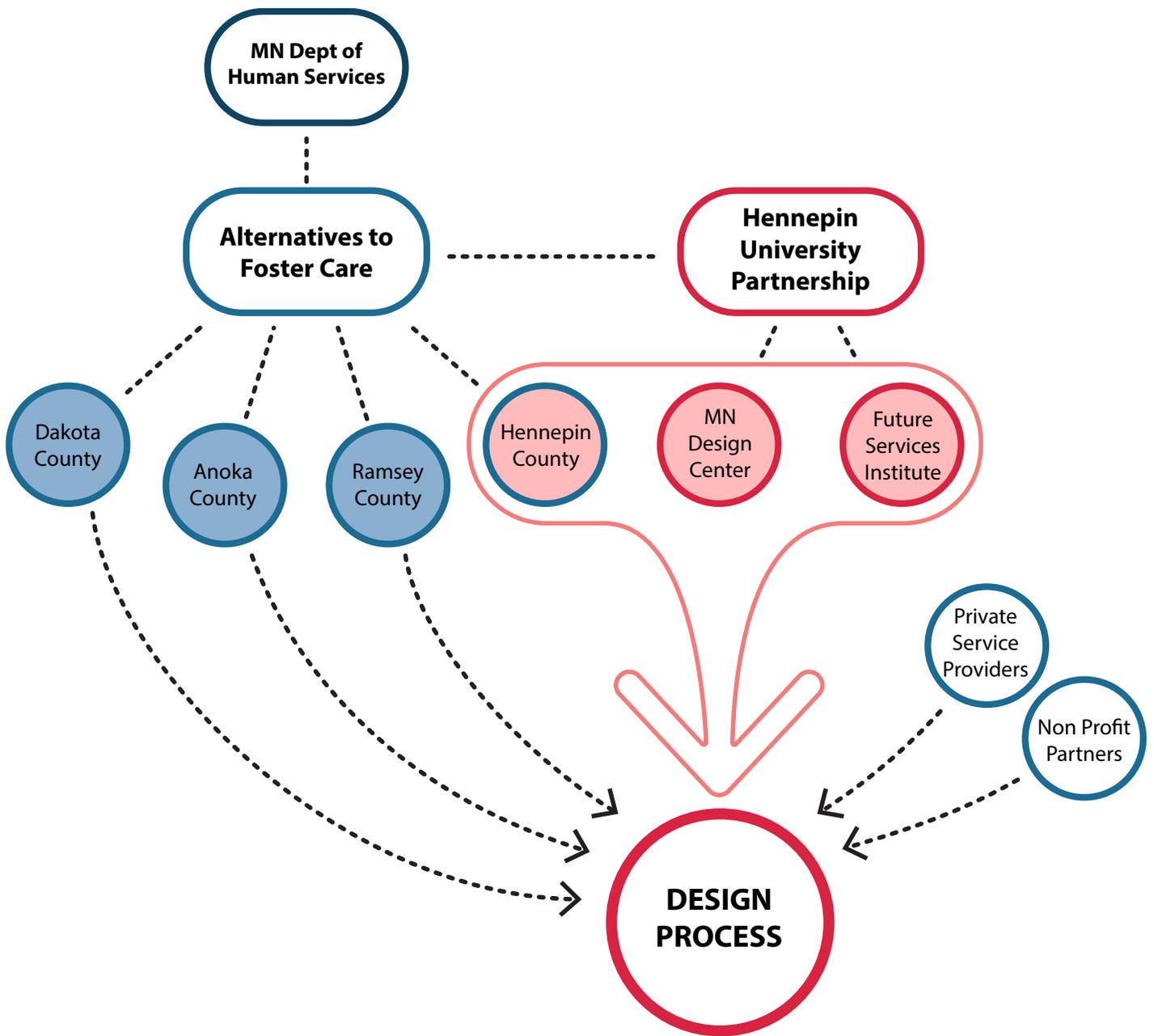


## Strategy

The Minnesota Design Center's philosophy is to create an engaging and results-oriented process that empowers people at all levels of a system, while giving them the tools and capacity to be innovators regardless of their role. This required that we balance the regulatory needs of people who are charged with administering the foster care system within the state and county governments with the expertise and desires of people who are directly involved in giving or receiving foster care services.

Because the existing adult corporate foster care system has developed to be, by its nature, resistant to change, we were careful to build consensus for a process that is more non-hierarchical and fluid than most of the decision-makers were used to. We created workshops that helped reach our project-specific design goals, while simultaneously reconnecting "system-level" people to the mission of their work and their own creative skill sets.

By contrast, "service-level" people, including those living in foster care, their families, guardians, and service providers, came to the project with the feeling that they were unable to influence the system in any positive way. Our hope was that, by building a leveled design process, they would leave with a renewed belief that their experience and input could effect real change.



## Partnership

This project was supported by the Alternatives to Foster Care grant given to a four-county partnership by the State of Minnesota Department of Human Services, a grant through the Hennepin University Partnership, and the McKnight Foundation. The core design team for Pathways to Fuller Lives was formed with project management based in Hennepin County, design process facilitation from the Minnesota Design Center at the University's College of Design, and developmental evaluation through the Future Services Institute at the University's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. Ramsey, Anoka, and Dakota Counties provided critical guidance and project-specific partnership throughout the design and prototyping process. In addition, the core team formed several working partnerships with private and non-profit sector organizations, who freely gave their time and experience to support this project and its mission.

# Design Process

The process began by posing the question “how can we help people move to settings of their choosing?”

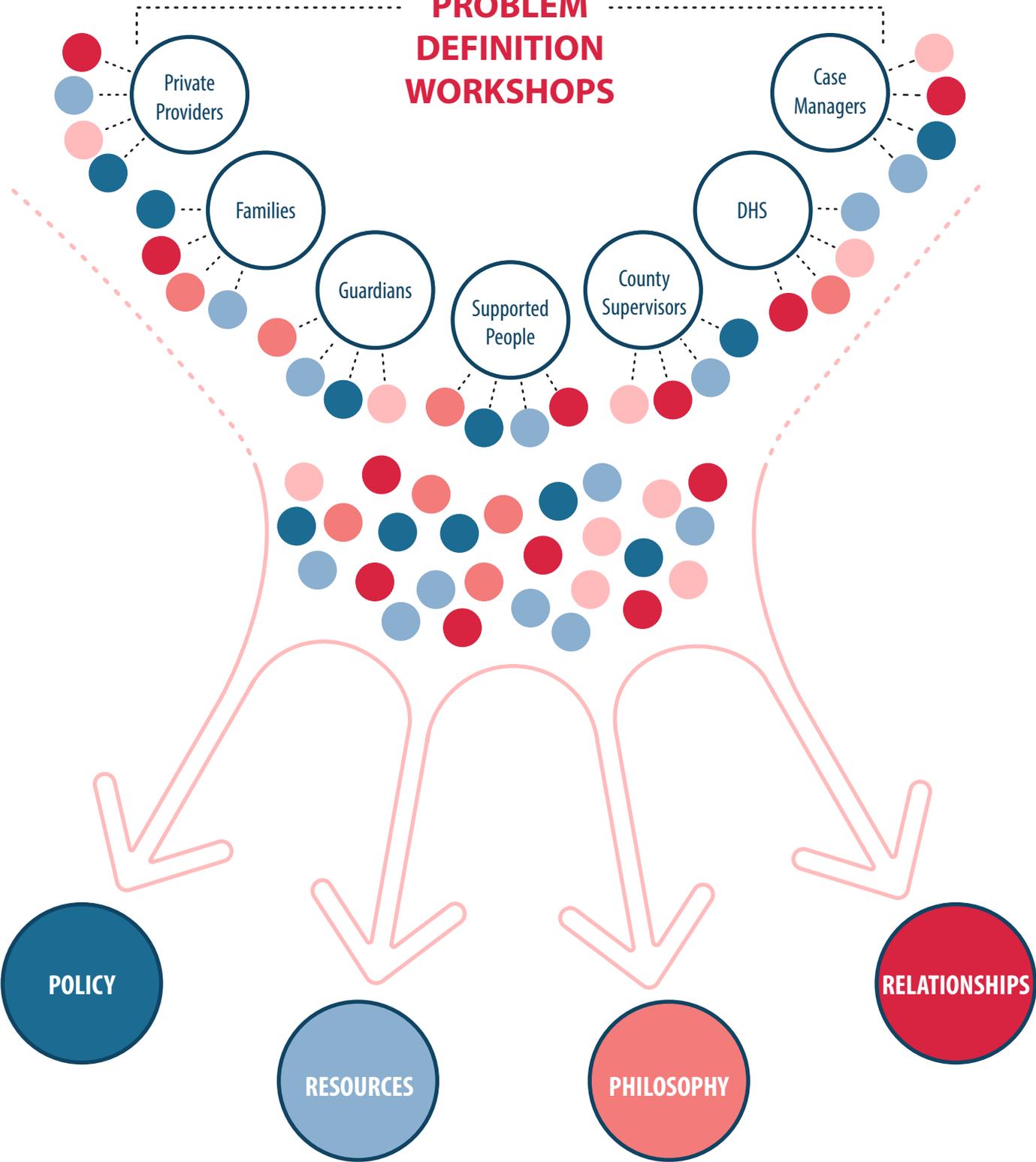
For this project, the Minnesota Design Center designed a system innovation process that:

- Called on multiple stakeholder groups to define existing problem for people wishing to move to more independent settings within the current adult corporate foster care system
- Convened an integrated group of representatives from the multiple stakeholder groups for developing design prototypes
- Created small-scale tests of proposals for feasibility and design development
- Regularly engaged county and state officials for concept feedback and implementation

## DESIGN PHASES



**PROBLEM  
DEFINITION  
WORKSHOPS**



## ***Problem Definition Workshops***

These nearly-identical workshops were intended to ask each of the seven identified stakeholder groups to clearly describe the complex problems at the core of the adult corporate foster care system. The typical session began with a divergent thinking exercise based around the people, spaces, and services that are part of the system, which were then used to create a map showing how a person moves through corporate foster care. Then, in order to understand the perceived constraints for each stakeholder group, participants were asked to “define the box” of adult foster care, putting concepts inside and outside of a square and giving their drawing a name. Finally, emerging themes were grouped into 3-4 “buckets”, each of which was developed into a problem definition. The problem definitions created by each workshop were then used to shape four overarching challenges that drove the second phase of the design process.

## ***Integrated Design Teams***

Individuals from each of the stakeholder groups were invited to be part of an integrated design team tasked with addressing each of the broader challenges, which included building relationships, changing philosophy, connecting with resources, and creating flexible policies. Beginning with a journey map, the integrated team identified areas where the system could be influenced, then created several design concepts as options. At the end of the first workshop, the team presented several workable concepts that were further developed at a second workshop, focused on ideas for prototyping and testing.

## ***Project Prototyping***

After refining the designs through a system-level working session, the core team requested that interested participants develop project proposals based in the six remaining concepts that we could assist in testing. Four projects emerged with people who were willing to drive the design process.

As a result of this approach, we feel that we have both developed authentic design interventions that equally address the concerns of service- and system-level stakeholders, while giving all participants design experience and greater capacity for innovation. Each of these projects is currently in a stage of design iteration, being tested and refined as they are developed.



## **POLICY**

Building flexible policies that can adapt to the individuality of supported people

## **RESOURCES**

Connecting everyone with the spectrum of available government and community resources

## **PHILOSOPHY**

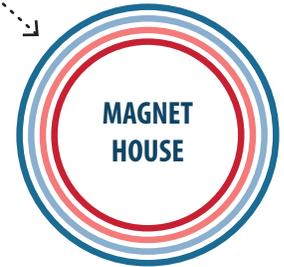
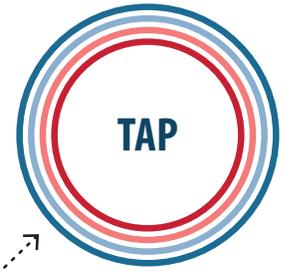
Supporting teams in creating meaningful choices and holistic solutions for people

## **RELATIONSHIPS**

Forming and maintaining healthy relationships and sustainable support systems

# **INTEGRATED DESIGN TEAMS**

REPRESENTATIVES FROM EACH STAKEHOLDER GROUP CONVENED TO DESIGN SOLUTIONS THAT ADDRESS EACH PROBLEM DEFINITION



# 3. Projects

As a result of the design process, four potential projects were refined from Integrated Design concepts into solutions ready for prototyping. The core team evaluated each idea based on feasibility, partner commitment, and potential to effect substantial change in each of the four broader problem areas.



**TAP:** a social space where supported people can meet each other, connect with their community, and find information about services.

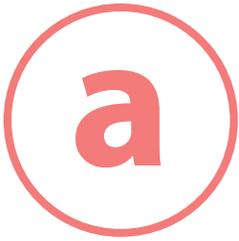
**Community Navigation:** a concept that allows in-person assistance to implement the action steps of an individual's person-centered plan.



**Window of Opportunity:** a housing transition option that will allow for people who feel they're ready for more independent settings to try something new without losing their current home.

**Magnet House:** a housing concept that would help supported individuals choose roommates with similar personal interests and goals.





**TAP (or Tapping All Potential)** is a provider-driven concept to create social spaces for supported people to meet each other, connect with people from the surrounding community, expand their interests and social skills, and receive social services in a neighborhood setting.



## TAP (Tapping All Potential)

### ***Problem***

Dan and Michelle Cashman, directors of AIM Services, frequently see supported people who rarely leave the house, don't have unpaid friends, and become isolated from their community. The Cashmans came to the Pathways project with a fully-formed idea for a multi-use residential building with social spaces and service providers on the first floor. Though the building program would be to house and support people with disabilities, the space would also attract nearby residents using first-floor retail. As a way of building informal supports and community inclusion,

***People need engaging spaces for making connections  
with each other and with neighbors***

### ***Design Process***

As part of the design development process, the Cashmans realized they had the interest and capacity to design a smaller, temporary version of their larger vision. They found an underused cafe space owned and managed by a church, and arranged for free use for test events. Dan and Michelle have created a series of events that have tested and improved their design theory, and are developing a body of feedback that makes a case for funding a permanent space. The TAP team is building support and recognition as an event series, and is looking to expand into a more permanent location. They are also exploring ways to provide access to and information about available services, and are hoping to discover funding avenues as a result. In particular, they would like to provide supported employment to persons with disabilities as a way of both financing the project, and testing their eventual goal of running neighborhood businesses that will increase job availability and community inclusion.



## ***Evaluation***

The TAP project, more than any other, depicts the creative power of private providers and how they can be harnessed for larger change. With minimal strategic support, the Cashmans were able to design and implement a pilot that prototypes one solution for larger systemic questions, like “how we can create a philosophy of inclusion,” “how can people build more durable relationships,” and “how can we better connect people to resources?” Their bi-monthly gatherings now include activities like dances, sports-watching, and open mic events, and have grown in size to an average of 50-60 people including those living in foster care or receive waivers, their friends and care staff, and community members who want to support the event. Though the design team has tracked and documented the TAP as it has been developed, this has been a provider-driven effort that is entirely self-funded. The Cashmans and AIM Services have reached their personal capacity to grow this work, and require outside funding from government or non-profit sources to continue offering this space for free.

## ***Next Steps***

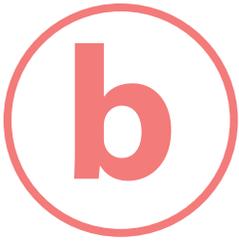
As the greater system shifts to focus on community inclusion and person-centeredness, models like the TAP can show how place-based service delivery can work well by increasing connections and diminishing isolation.

The TAP concept, in order to be sustainable, requires a reliable funding source. While the Cashmans are considering their next steps outside of the Pathways project, we hope that the system finds ways to support similar concepts, either through waived service delivery or a public/private partnership that can subsidize these spaces.

The Cashmans have found a need in the community they serve that isn't yet recognized by the larger adult corporate foster care system. Helping them communicate this project through established channels will build support for their work, and communicate the need for spaces like this system-wide.

## **Final Recommendations**

- 1. Develop a concept model for location-based service delivery in partnership with a private service provider that can support inclusive spaces like TAP**
- 2. Support the Cashmans as they look for ways to staff and fund events and grow the model**
- 3. Communicate the success of AIM Services and TAP at the system- and service-level.**



**Community navigation** allows in-person assistance for implementing the action steps of an individual's person-centered plan, providing necessary and customized support during periods of transition or higher need. Though it may be a focused activity during certain points in a person's path, "community navigation" is also a core competency that should be developed throughout a person's support team in order to promote inclusion and personal growth.



# Community Navigation

## ***Problem***

As part of the ideation process, the integrated team identified a gap in service delivery between the person-centered plan and the person's desired transition. After identifying their goals, assets, and action steps, the plan is usually passed directly to the person and their existing support system to implement, as the typical service agreement doesn't allow enough paid time to help develop informal supports or connect to a person's community. Individuals with a poor support system or weak community connections often fail to make progress, and continue to live in problematic conditions and in isolation from their neighborhood.

***People need help implementing their plans  
in order to achieve their ideal living situation.***

## ***Design Process***

Through the integrated team, we identified a number of planners and providers who, independent from each other, have a method of developing a Person-Centered Plan while simultaneously coaching a person and their supporters in taking goal-oriented action, with the support of their case manager. We met regularly to follow their process and identify specific activities or interventions that constitute what came to be called "Community Navigation".

## **Evaluation**

By tracking the activities and successes of our partners, we see anecdotal evidence of success in supporting people while they build friendships, find jobs, and locate suitable housing in their chosen neighborhoods. The largest roadblocks to successful navigation were identified as inadequate timeframe for growing relationships and community, a resistance to trying new things and taking calculated risks, and dysfunctional team dynamics.

Rather than an additional service or a support role, this process netted a list of successful tactics that any member of a person's team can utilize including:

- Assuming the role of point-person
- Taking clear and immediate action
- Being consistent and flexible
- "Straight Talk" while facing challenges
- Providing hope and inspiration
- Facilitating durable social connections
- Coordinating and sharing responsibilities with all team members

With these skills and tactics, "community navigation" allows for the organic, iterative, and collaborative process of helping a person develop their ideal level of independence.

## **Next Steps**

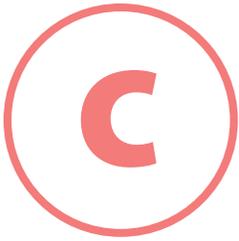
Community Navigation is a concept that is still being refined, and we believe that the competencies identified during the design process can assist the counties and state as they develop some related initiatives, including Person-Centered Planning guidelines and certification, and case management protocols. In addition, we believe there would be advantages in integrating navigation work with other waiver services, like housing access and supported employment, due to the demonstrated benefits we observed.

These tactics are currently implemented by service providers who have a demonstrated history of successful outcomes, especially in difficult cases. In order for their navigation skills to become adopted more widely, there must be a sustained communication and training effort throughout the service delivery system, including case managers, providers, planners, and personal care staff. We believe that as individuals on a person's team become more creative in using navigation skills, teams will become more functional in supporting a person's growth.

As a design team, we came to realize that the task of community inclusion cannot be solely focused on developing the individual receiving services and their team. We believe that neighborhoods must be systematically prepared to welcome people with disabilities for there to be reliable success in building community relationships and a sense of inclusion.

## **Final Recommendations**

1. **Integrate Community Navigation concept into current PCP and case management initiatives, and explore how other waived services can be used to support time for additional navigation work.**
2. **Develop a communication strategy for Navigation skills, and identify a team for training and testing the competencies, determining their success both in helping a person build relationships and community and in developing a functional support team.**
3. **Explore and develop concrete methods for preparing communities to receive people with disabilities.**



**Window of Opportunity** is a housing transition option that will allow for people who feel they're ready for more independent settings to try something new without losing their former residence, in order to build both capacity and confidence in living with a more appropriate level of service.



## Window of Opportunity

### **Problem**

During conversations in both problem definition workshops and integrated design sessions, it became clear that there wasn't a defined process for transition to more independent settings, even when an individual had the life skills to thrive with fewer supports. Due to a less person-centered approach to service delivery, many people with disabilities have been living with more services than they require. This seems to result in over-reliance and a lack of confidence in their abilities, both from the individual and their guardians and loved ones. In addition, the process of securing a waiver and suitable housing can be so long and difficult that many families and guardians resist any change in living situation, in fear that their loved one will be destabilized, and will have to start from the beginning. In order to confidently make transitions to more independence,

***People need a way to try a new living situation  
without risking their current home and friendships.***

### **Design Process**

Originally developed as "Independence Vacation" during a design session, Blake Elliott from Bridges, a private service provider, developed a proposal that would give a number of individuals in his care a 90-day window in which they can transition to an "independent setting" while keeping their ability to return to their former home if it doesn't work. During a project review meeting with state and county stakeholders, the opportunity to fund a test was offered via a federally-funded program to find housing options for people leaving institutional settings, in the hopes that facilitating transitions will create more space in existing foster care residences. Blake has been working with planners in Ramsey County to create a standardized informed choice session that identified individuals who are ideal candidates for the pilot.



## **Evaluation**

As the pilot project begins to transition people to new housing, the project team will document the successes and failures in finding the appropriate level of supportive services for the people who have chosen to move. For this process to be more widely implemented, specific transition steps and supports must be identified, and ongoing evaluation will be critical to defining Window as an option for people hoping to find a more independent setting.

## **Next Steps**

Upon funding, residents will be slowly moved to a new home of their choice as part of this process. We believe that a critical review of this project's outcomes will assist in creating a scalable version that can be offered system-wide. While Window of Opportunity is likely to smooth the moving process for many people, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of supporting safer transitions. It will be most successful if developed as one of a suite of options available when an individual is making an informed choice.

Though we believe many individuals with disabilities can benefit from living more independently, complete independence without proper supports can result in more isolation and less fulfilling living conditions. Any transition option should be accompanied with a person-centered approach to determine their service needs, and every effort should be made to maintain existing relationships and build community in their new home. As these processes are developed, people and their care teams should be regularly informed that transition options exist. Clearly communicating the programs to potential candidates and the people who help them make decisions will not just inform their choices, but will promote a culture that supports flexibility and growth.

## **Final Recommendations**

- 1. Build the findings from the pilot into a transition option widely available to people who may be ready to live more independently, with a transparent and streamlined process.**
- 2. Consider Windows of Opportunity one of a series of transition options that can be presented as part of informed choice.**
- 3. Create a reliable method for ensuring that people becoming more independent aren't left without needed services during and after their move, and that they keep existing relationships while building new ones.**
- 4. Develop a sustained communications plan to ensure that people, families, guardians, and other team members know that safe and supported transition options exist.**



**Magnet House** is a residential concept that would give supported people the ability to choose roommates with similar personal interests and goals, instead of finding housing options based only on availability and the individuals' shared disabilities.



# Magnet House

## **Problem**

Consistently through problem definition workshops and design sessions, participants voiced frustration with the lack of choice in housing for supported people, and in the unstable quality of life in many settings. Space in foster care residences is scarce, roommates are frequently incompatible and even detrimental, and some care staff described as unengaged with extremely high rates of turnover. Even when living with others, supported people can become isolated, and feel as if they don't have durable friendships with the people they interact with on a daily basis. Since housing choices are often based on people's diagnoses, roommates may have no common interests and goals. Though there are many factors contributing to this situation,

***People need a way to find compatible housing and roommate options in order to live and thrive in settings of their choosing.***

## **Design Process**

First developed during a conversation between a person who was both a former resident and a former foster care provider, and a Ramsey County planner, Magnet House was conceived as a residential model that would match roommates with common passions, which could then attract and retain care staff who shared the same interest. House activities would be centered on the "magnet" topic, and could even be the basis for skill development and employment opportunities. This concept has been further developed as a conversation between the design team and a workshop participant currently receiving services, who wanted to help charter a magnet house for people who shared his interest in spiritual development and life coaching. Another partnership is being developed with Ramsey County and a private foster care provider with some empty residential properties that could be part of a design pilot. In addition, Ramsey County is working with a software development company to potentially provide an online roommate matching service based on the platform "Cooperate".

## **Next Steps**

As a way of testing the concept, the partnerships between Ramsey County, the corporate provider, and the software platform should be formalized as a pilot project with a management framework, goals and milestones, and a funding structure. Understanding the viability of the model, and realizing the successes and failures by testing a prototype, will build a proof of concept that can be referenced for future projects, or for a scaled network of magnet houses.

The core design team believes that Magnet House could also be a model for community inclusion and building relationships by testing a way for non-supported people to be roommates with supported people. We see opportunities to tap into university service requirements, as well as older community members who may have empty space and an interest in helping people with special needs.

## **Final Recommendations**

- 1. Design and implement a pilot project, which can be developed with existing buildings and a standard funding structure but using interests, as opposed to diagnoses, to match roommates.**
- 2. Develop and test an online platform for matching people with housing options.**
- 3. Investigate opportunities for including non-supported people in the matching process.**



# 4. Outcomes

## Next Steps

Throughout our work on this project, we have come to define some core issues that, if addressed, can make the next iteration of the work even more successful.

As we've worked to implement a test of each design concept, we have found that:

- Each of these pilot projects are only possible because of a creative partnership with private providers, and the design development process has been largely informed by their experiences with individuals in their care.
- Many people working on the service- and system-levels are expert innovators, but find an institutional resistance to trying new ideas. The people who are successful are often the ones that aren't afraid to "get in trouble" or fail, or who have been given permission to be innovative by someone they report to.
- People working in the system level are disconnected from the reality of the conditions on the system level, which creates a decision-making process that is often not about the individuals being served.
- Though we believe each of these projects will eventually save money by easing housing transitions, improving informal supports, and reducing crises, there has been a reluctance to see any concept testing as an investment.

In addition to further developing one or all of the projects that emerged from this first grant cycle, our team recommends the following for the next phase of the work:

### Focus on creating partnerships with private service providers to innovate the system

Though the existing adult corporate foster care model is not adequate to meet the complex and individual needs of all of its residents, a continuing partnership with private service providers (including person-centered planners and other contract service providers) seems essential to creating more fulfilling life settings for the people in their care. Those who directly provide services to supported individuals have valuable insights into what needs to change, and are expert creative problem solvers when they are able to work flexibly. We hope that the larger system recognizes this asset, and works to develop and fund ideas that come from these private sector partners.

### Address the fear of change or risk at both the service- and system-level, and allow room for experimentation and failure.

Throughout the adult foster care system, there is a deeply entrenched culture of fear and resistance that should be addressed as part of future work. This culture will not change overnight, but by continuing to incorporate elements of the creative process into the daily conversation we believe it will quickly begin to shift. The participants in this project were, almost to a person, innovative thinkers who are passionate about their work. Giving people working at all levels of foster care the space to solve problems creatively, experiment in their job, and objectively track both successes and failures without risking their employment will have positive effects on both quality of service and career satisfaction.

### Implement an empathy-building communications component for people working at the system-level

We believe that clearly communicating the stories of this work can be a powerful tool for changing the way people approach solving the problems in adult corporate foster care. Regardless of whether it's a story about success or failure, or on the service- or system-level, emotionally reconnecting people to the why and the how of the work will begin to slowly overcome the inflexible and impersonal structures of the current system. In addition, the lack of awareness between different stakeholder groups, or even awareness about available services, creates a sense of confusion about what is happening or what is even possible. Learning more about the work of others will begin to break down silos, and encourage collaboration throughout the system. We recommend that future design efforts incorporate an empathy-building communications plan that talks about this work to both internal and external audiences in a way that is simple and compelling.

### Assign value to these changes to increase the sense of investment

As service-driven design initiatives are considered, there should be a clear process of projecting cost savings over time to mitigate the short-term pain of spending valuable time and money on a project. Though ideas can often be quickly tested in a low-cost way, substantial and systemic change will require a willingness to invest. We found that the perceived outlay of resources was a frequent obstacle, and one that could likely be overcome with a more comprehensive and long-term cost/savings analysis. We recommend that future proposals include provisions for this work.

## Conclusion

The Pathways to Fuller Lives project has been an experiment in using design thinking techniques to not just solve for a set of problems, but to build creative capacity throughout a public sector organization. As the next steps of this project are considered, we hope that our partners at the state and in the counties recognize that their support for this work has been a critical step to innovating the adult corporate foster care system and helping people receiving support live fulfilling lives. This willingness to make space for change should be commended.

