Application for 2018 RSIG conference

**COMMUNITY BUILDING AND INFORMAL SUPPORT: THE FRIENDLY HOUSEMATES PROJECT**

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**Objective:** Since the decline of large-scale, formal institutional living, there has been a relatively rapid push to personalized living options that foster autonomy among individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Faced with a variety of challenges in accessing semi-independent living - including long wait times, insufficient funds, and little choice in where individuals may live – families are increasingly likely to turn to non-traditional housing and support options. Friendly Housemates seeks to offer a viable semi-independent living alternative to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities by pairing them with post-secondary students as housemates, allowing not only for a relief of financial strain on both the student and the housemate, but also fostering the development of positive relationships and community presence for all members of the household.

**Method:** Developed in conjunction between Centennial College and Community Living Toronto, Friendly Housemates launched as a formalized project in 2015, pairing well-suited and thoroughly vetted post-secondary students with individuals involved in CLToronto’s LIGHTS housing program. Students are recruited from post-secondary institutions from across Toronto, and matched with individuals who are ready to move to semi-independent living. In order to participate, the families must provide a separate living space in which their loved one can reside, that includes a separate bedroom for the student who lives there free of charge. In return, the student spends 10 hours per week building a relationship with and informally supporting their housemate, and commits to being at home from 10 pm to 7 am daily in order to relieve the family from the costs of overnight staff.

The research methodology employed was a qualitative Appreciative Inquiry approach, using semi-structured interviews with all participants in the family cluster (housemate, student, parent, and staff member) to explore their experience. Data were collected from each cluster at three points and a content analysis was conducted to identify major themes. To date, Friendly Housemates has created and tracked six housemate pairings.

**Results:**  Results suggest that Friendly Housemates can be a successful strategy for some individuals who are ready to move to semi-independent living. Our participants have developed strong relationships and fostered community engagement, and some students have continued to reside in their shared home even after their contracts with Friendly Housemates expired. Of course, as with any living arrangements, some experienced more challenges than others. Important factors for success include student commitment, ongoing organizational involvement and support, clear role definition, and the fostering of a living situation in which both student and housemate are comfortable considering their shared living space to be “home.”

**Discussion/Conclusion:** Although not well suited for everyone, Friendly Housemates has shown itself to be a viable and enjoyable semi-independent living option for some individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and post-secondary students. This arrangement helps to alleviate financial burden on both families and students, and allows for the development of two-way informal care relationships between the housemates.

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