



Social Return On Investment (SROI) Case Study: LINKages Society

Fast Facts

- 700 youth and seniors are involved in LINKages programming each year
- More than 9000 volunteer hours are contributed by LINKages volunteers annually
- 50% of LINKages youth volunteer for three or more years
- In 2011, demand for involvement by potential youth volunteers exceeded supply by more than 100%
- LINKages has trained dozens of rural communities in Alberta which are now connecting generations
- In 2012, LINKages delivered three cross-generational/cross-cultural programs in Calgary.

LINKages programs are designed to:

- build bridges between the generations;
- decrease negative attitudes and myths;
- promote a greater understanding and respect for generations;
- instil benefits of citizen engagement.

One-Year SROI: \$1 : \$ 4.80

Contact Details:

Debra Armstrong
Phone: (403) 249-0853
Email: info@link-ages.ca

www.link-ages.ca

“Somehow, we have to get older people back close to growing children, if we are to restore a sense of community, a knowledge of the past, and a sense of the future.” ~ Margaret Mead

Program Background

LINKages Society of Alberta is a Calgary based, non-profit organization that provides programs and services that connect youth and seniors in meaningful ways.

The program is designed to develop mutually-beneficial relationships between seniors and young people to address and diminish negative stigmas that too often result when youth and seniors do not have the chance to know each other. Activities involve the sharing of skills, knowledge, and experience between young and old to build respect and understanding.

For instance, in some cases, youth exercise leadership and teach new computer skills to seniors. In other cases, a senior provides mentoring support to a troubled youth. Typically, there is no ‘giver’ nor ‘receiver’ as both parties benefit from the opportunity to connect and to share their experience.

LINKages carefully matches participants to facilitate the most meaningful exchanges. When a meaningful exchange is experienced, both parties are more likely to participate in breaking down negative stigmas that result from misunderstanding between generations. Many LINKages participants develop long term intergenerational friendships.

Social Value Created

The development of community cohesion and the ability to transfer wisdom between ages is becoming increasingly challenging.

When people are separated by age, this can cause an unhealthy isolation for older adults. It can also prevent young people from understanding the full cycle of life or experiencing the wisdom of their elders. As the aging population continues to rise in the next decade, age separation and

isolation are expected to increase between older and younger generations.

For a senior, the program can reduce feelings of depression, social isolation, and loneliness. Reduction or absence of these emotions enhances ability to live independently for longer periods of time as it improves social networks and a general sense of belonging. These improvements can also contribute to a reduction in the rate of health decline.

For youth, the program provides healthy opportunities to develop leadership and communication skills during hours where they are most at risk of engaging in delinquent activities, and to gain a more robust perspective of the world they live in.

**Theory of Change
Summary Statement**
If seniors and youth are connected in the exchange of knowledge, skills and life experiences, their encounters will reduce generational stereotypes, develop social skills, increase social supports, and promote a healthy view of aging throughout our communities.

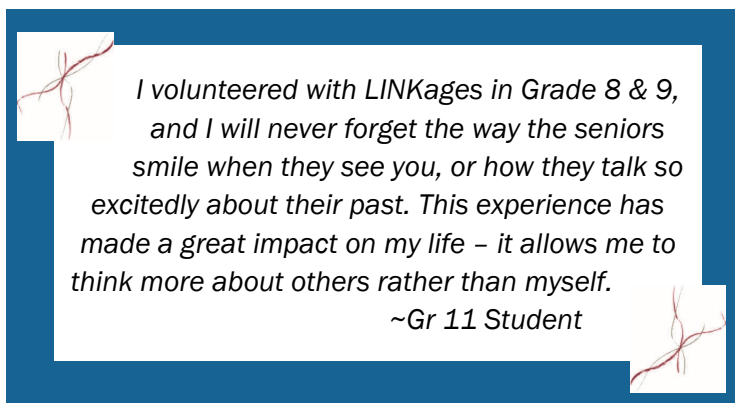
Changing Attitudes, Improving Lives, and Building Communities

The risk of depression for a senior who no longer feels a sense of purpose or connection to anyone is significantly high. As they struggle with their changing abilities and roles in a rapidly changing society, seniors often become apathetic, and feel under-valued. When seniors are able to interact with an active young listener, they realize their important role of providing council and sharing knowledge with young people to equip them to build a better future. As this role is realized, the senior's sense of self-worth and optimism for the future is significantly improved.

When generations do not have the opportunity to interact, stereotypes, misunderstandings and negative perceptions too easily result. For a senior, these misunderstandings can cause an unhealthy and often irrational fear of young people in their community. Unfortunately, this fear can cause some seniors living independently to be reluctant to leave their homes, which in turn deprives them of social contact and contributes to isolation. When afraid to leave the home, a senior can place additional burdens on family, friends, or care services as they require additional support to provide for basic needs such as grocery shopping, doctor visits or other routine activities.

The youth also benefit from this exchange. They too can hold negative stereotypes about the elderly people in their community. By connecting them one-on-one, youth are able to build empathy and change their perspective not only of the seniors, but of people outside of their familiar network of peers in general. The result is a wider perspective on life and a higher tolerance for difference. A broader vision of the world encourages youth to be less judgemental and more open to their potential opportunities and connections for their future.

For both the senior and the youth, volunteering and reaching out through the LINKages program enhances their sense of belonging and feeling valued. The interactions exchanged by the participants foster long term friendships and understanding between youth and older adults. Not only is this a positive change for a person's self-esteem, but it is also a strong motivator to continue to contribute and volunteer in the community in other ways. Participants from both sides become more outgoing and engaged in community events and social gatherings, leading to increased sense of belonging, and a more active and cohesive community. This translates not only into enhanced personal growth, but also into a more compassionate, cohesive, and healthy community for all residents to grow up, and grow old in.



I volunteered with LINKages in Grade 8 & 9, and I will never forget the way the seniors smile when they see you, or how they talk so excitedly about their past. This experience has made a great impact on my life – it allows me to think more about others rather than myself.
~Gr 11 Student

The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness



Research identifies social isolation and loneliness in seniors as serious contributors to health risks such as stroke, heart failure, increased susceptibility to disease, and accelerated decline in cognitive function. (Molloy, 2010)

By engaging seniors and youth in frequent and meaningful exchanges, seniors become connected to people outside of their home, and spend more time interacting with people in general.

For seniors living independently, they begin to increase social and community participation and broaden their support networks. This enables

them to reduce stress-related health risks and live independently for longer, while providing a valuable service as youth mentors in the community.

Seniors living in care centers with no regular outside contact are at risk of decline in healthy communication skills and social interaction abilities. This loss perpetuates social isolation and loneliness, and also puts the senior at an increased risk of disease such as dementia due to the lack of mental stimulation. (Norris, 2007)

Through frequent meetings with empathetic youth, these senior participants regain communication and social skills to decrease loneliness while engaging in activities such as memory games to promote healthy cognitive function. The recuperation of social and communication skills allows seniors to maintain relationships with their peers inside the care facility, reduce loneliness and increase mental stimulation, thereby reducing health risks.

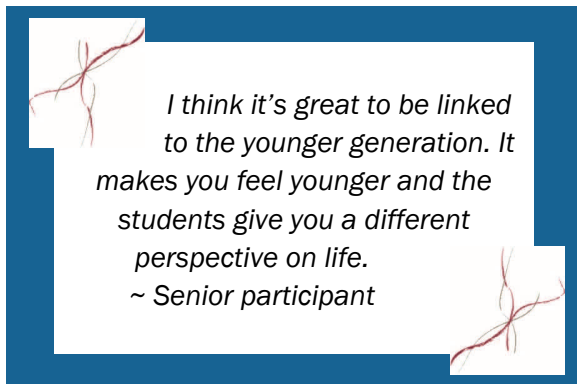


Table 1 below offers examples of desired outcomes for seniors living in care facilities, who were involved in the LINKages program. Of a potential 146 participants, the outcomes experienced by each person will vary, i.e. not every person will experience every outcome. For the SROI process, those outcomes have been assigned a financial proxy to represent the value of the outcome being achieved.

Table 1: Sample Desired Outcomes and Financial Proxies linked to Participants Living in Care Homes

Outcome	Quantity	Proxy Description	Proxy Value per Person Per Year	Calculation Notes	Proxy Source	Total Value Yr1
Increase use of communication skills causing increase sense of belonging and social connectedness	1	Cost of having a stroke	\$11,563	Hospital stay only (person over 70, 2009/2010, Ontario)	ICI	\$ 2,891
Sense of self worth and self-motivation	116	extra time or resources required to care for unmotivated client avoided	\$1,315.80	Center staff indicate 2 hours per day avoided for each day a student comes to visit (average 18 visits)	H48	\$153,685
More frequent participation in social activities and a higher level of perceived social support associated with higher level of cognitive functioning	1	Avoidance of higher level in continuum of care (Provincial health care research: Supported living vs. dementia care)	\$10,680	Difference in cost per month from entry level care to high level care at Bethany Care Centre in Alberta	ICI	\$1,175

*** Please note ** The financial proxies with a alpha-numeric code are sourced from the SROI Canada Financial Proxy database, found at www.sroi-canada.ca. Proxy source ICI refers to an indicator that is so unique to the community partner that the proxy source will be within community partner files.*

An Opportunity for Youth to Grow

While the LINKages program is highly informed and dedicated to meeting and understanding the needs of seniors, it is equally beneficial for the youth participants. The program is run on weekdays between 3pm and 6pm, which have been identified by Family Community and Support Services of Alberta as the hours where youth are most at risk of engaging in delinquent activities. Meeting with the senior gives them a positive and constructive way to fill their time during those higher risk hours.

For many youth in the program, the senior provides an important mentor for them. They are able to build a friendship with a positive role model who allows them to feel safe to confide in about personal issues, and receive positive advice. Their emotional well-being and social competencies become more developed, contributing to an increased capacity to thrive in school and other areas of life. This relieves pressure on mentoring programs or school counsellors to fill this important role in a youth's life. It also greatly contributes to a decrease in the risk of the youth to becoming prey to negative peer pressures and engaging in delinquent activities.

Overall, the youth participants demonstrate an increase in resiliency and leadership abilities as a result of the program. They learn to be more effective communicators with people who are different from themselves, and effectively express themselves to a larger audience. They enhance their personal development by gaining new assets such as empathy, leadership, self-confidence, and problem solving skills, empowering them to become leaders in other areas of life.

Table 2 below offers examples of desired outcomes for youth involved in the LINKages program. Of a potential 234 participants, the outcomes experienced by each person will vary, i.e. not every person will experience every outcome. As stated earlier, those outcomes have been assigned a financial proxy to represent the value of the outcome being achieved.

Table 2: Sample Desired Outcomes and Financial Proxies linked to Youth Participants

Outcome	Quantity	Proxy Description	Proxy Value per Person Per Year	Calculation Notes	Proxy Source	Total Value Yr1
Build friendship and gain positive role model	70	Petty vandalism or property damage avoided	\$ 638.00	Average property crime cost -mischief (vandalism). Assuming 1 incident/yr.	J13	\$ 11,197.00

Conclusion

LINKages' programs work to relieve pressure on the healthcare system and senior care programs and to support youth during formative development stages while enhancing community volunteerism and engagement.

As a result, for every one dollar invested into LINKages' programs, **\$4.80** of social value is created. As the gap between generations is bridged, members of the community, both young and old, are able to reach a common ground of understanding and compassion that will support and sustain an active healthy lifestyle today, and in the future.

It is important to remember that a SROI is a story, not a number, i.e. the ratio presented is not intended to be an absolute statement on the value of LINKages. The ratio does represent social value that can be effectively represented by a financial proxy, to emphasize value described in the whole LINKages story.