Summer Foundation

An environmental scan of initiatives that increase belonging and community inclusion for people with disability

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Introduction

Social isolation and loneliness are significant and persistent issues for people with disability, especially for those with high support needs[1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]. People with high support needs often experience restricted opportunities for meaningful social participation due to a variety of factors, including reliance on paid support workers, limited access to transport, lack of community infrastructure, communication barriers, service systems that prioritise care and risk management over social inclusion, poverty and unemployment [8] [9] [10]. As a result, social networks are frequently small and dominated by family members and service providers rather than reciprocal friendships or community relationships[11]. Australian research also highlights that housing type, location and choice can further entrench experiences of social isolation and loneliness for people with complex disability or can act as an enabler for social connectedness and belonging[12] [13] [14].

Across the Summer Foundation's own research and innovation work with people with high support needs, and consistent with research evidence, there are strong indications that

[1] Kersey, J., Alimi, E., McArthur, A. R., Marquez, H., Baum, C., Skidmore, E., & Hammel, J. (2025). ENGAGE-TBI: adaptation of a community-based intervention to improve social participation after brain injury. Brain Injury, 39(6), 518–525. **https://doi.org/10.1080/02699052.2025.2449927**

[2] Leeson, R., Collins, M., & Douglas, J. (2024). Interventions that aim to increase social participation through recreation or leisure activity for adults with moderate to severe traumatic brain injury: a scoping review. Disability and Rehabilitation, 46(15), 3286–3302. **https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2023.2246377**

[3] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2024) People with disability in Australia 2024, catalogue number DIS 72, AIHW, Australian Government.

[4] Douglas J. Loss of friendship following traumatic brain injury: a model grounded in the experience of adults with severe injury. Neuropsychological Rehabilitation, 30(7), 1277–1302. **https://doi.org/10.1080/09602011.2019.1574589**

[5] Emerson, E., Fortune, N., Llewellyn, G., & Stancliffe, R. (2021). Loneliness, social support, social isolation and wellbeing among working age adults with and without disability: Cross-sectional study. Disability and Health Journal, 14(1), 100965. **https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.100965**

[6] World Health Organization. (2011). World report on disability. World Health Organization. **https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564182**

[7] Robinson, S., & Idle, J. (2023). Loneliness and how to counter it: People with intellectual disability share their experiences and ideas. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, *48*(1), 58–70. **https://doi.org/10.3109/13668250.2022.2112510**

[8] Currie, S., Douglas, J., D'Cruz, K. & Winkler, D. (2025). 'Thrown in the deep end': A qualitative study of community participation during inpatient rehabilitation and transition to community living from the perspective of family members of people with severe brain injury. Brain Impairment, 26(4), IB25061. **https://doi.org/10.1071/IB25061**

[9] Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2023) Voices of people with disability. Final report, Book 1.

[10] Verdonschot, M. M. L., de Witte, L. P., Reichrath, E., Buntinx, W. H. E., & Curfs, L. M. G. (2009). Community participation of people with an intellectual disability: A review of the literature. Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 53(4), 303–318. **https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2788.2008.01144.x**

[11] Bigby, C. (2008). Known well by no-one: Trends in the informal social networks of middle-aged people with intellectual disability five years after moving to the community. Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability, 33(2), 148–157. **https://doi.org/10.1080/13668250802094141**

[12] Oliver, S., Carey, F., Mulherin, P., Witts, L., Winkler, D. & Douglas, J. (2025a). An updated review of international literature on the outcomes of individualised housing for people with disability and complex needs. Disability and Rehabilitation, 1–19. **https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2025.2579487**

[13] Oliver, S., Jamwal, R., D'Cruz, K., Jacqui, N., Winkler, D. & Douglas, J. (2025b). How do people with disability and complex needs experience the built environment in apartments designed for people with disability? Australian Occupational Therapy Journal, 72(5), e70051. **https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.70051**

[14] Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2023) Voices of people with disability. Final report, Book 1.

social isolation is a consistent theme (see for example [15] [16] [17]). While people with high support needs who are NDIS participants may have adequate and appropriate housing and sufficient paid support, emerging evidence indicates that some NDIS participants with high support needs living in Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) rely on paid workers to meet their needs for social connection and may have few or no other social connections.

In the NDIS ecosystem, more needs to be understood about which initiatives and approaches provide the most effective basis for social inclusion and belonging for people with disability. Nonetheless, there are initiatives (programs, approaches and interventions) that aim to deliver community inclusion outcomes for people with disability but little is known about the scope and reach of these.

As such, this environmental scan sought to map current and recent initiatives that actively support and connect people with disability, particularly those with high support needs, with people and places in the wider community. It aimed to:

- Identify one-to-one initiatives that aim to address social isolation and support the development of unpaid relationships and community connection for NDIS participants
- Identify community- and group-based initiatives that address social isolation and support social connection and inclusion for NDIS participants, including those living in SDA.

The scan focuses specifically on initiatives whose primary purpose was to create friendship, social connection, belonging or inclusion in the wider community. Initiatives were outside of scope where these were secondary or incidental outcomes. This included initiatives primarily focused on recreation, employment, social enterprise, peer support, leadership, advocacy, safeguarding, paid companionship or the provision of formal support. Disability-specific activities that did not facilitate connection with the wider community and initiatives operating mainly at a systems level were also excluded.

Those initiatives that were primarily guides to building friendship and belonging for / with people with disability, including those developed by academics (such as Angela Amado[18]) and capacity building organisations (such as Belonging Matters[19]), were also excluded because the scan focused on identifiable programs, models and structured initiatives that had already been implemented or delivered or where these guides had published evidence of wrap around implementation support or initiatives. General guidance and practice resources were excluded unless they described an identifiable implemented initiative.

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[15] Kersey, J., Alimi, E., McArthur, A. R., Marquez, H., Baum, C., Skidmore, E., & Hammel, J. (2025). ENGAGE-TBI: adaptation of a community-based intervention to improve social participation after brain injury. Brain Injury, 39(6), 518–525. **https://doi.org/10.1080/02699052.2025.2449927**

[16] Leeson, R., Collins, M., & Douglas, J. (2024). Interventions that aim to increase social participation through recreation or leisure activity for adults with moderate to severe traumatic brain injury: a scoping review. Disability and Rehabilitation, 46(15), 3286–3302. **https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2023.2246377**

[17] Leeson, R., Collins, M. and Douglas, J. (2021). Finding Goal Focus With People With Severe Traumatic Brain Injury in a Person-Centered Multi-Component Community Connection Program (M-ComConnect). Front. Rehabilit. Sci. 2:786445. **https://doi.org/10.3389/fresc.2021.786445**

[18] Amado, A. N. (2013). Friends: Connecting People With Disabilities and Community Members. Research and Training Center on Community Living. **https://ici.umn.edu/products/579**

[19] Belonging Matters Inc. (n.d.). Belonging Matters. **https://www.belongingmatters.org/**

Methods

This environmental scan examined on grey literature and publicly available web-based resources from:

- Australia
- New Zealand
- United Kingdom
- Canada
- United States

The environmental scan consisted of three search stages:

- Targeted website search
- Snowball search
- Advanced Google search

Methods applied to all three searches

Across all three search stages, resources were screened to identify initiatives whose primary purpose was to support friendship, belonging, social connection or inclusion in the wider community for adults with disability.

The websites included in the targeted search were identified through sector knowledge, consultation with Summer Foundation staff, existing project materials and a preliminary internet search.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria for all three searches

Initiatives identified across the three search stages were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Initiatives

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus	Intentionally supports friendship, belonging, social connection or inclusion in the wider community.	Primarily provides advocacy, safeguarding, care, companionship or practical support.
Population	Includes adults with disability or adults in disability-inclusive settings.	Has no clear disability relevance or focuses only on children or older adults (65+).
Initiative Type	Describes an identifiable program, model or structured initiative.	Provides general guidance or resources without describing

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
		an implemented initiative.[18]
Community Connection	Actively connects participants with mainstream community members, groups, activities or places.	Operates only within disability-specific or segregated settings, or does not actively facilitate wider community connection.
Relationships	Creates opportunities to develop unpaid, reciprocal relationships or community membership.	Relies only on paid relationships or provides an assigned support relationship without a broader friendship or inclusion purpose.
Participation	Involves direct one-to-one or group-based interaction through shared activities or community participation.	Relies only on a passive app, directory, referral service or information platform.
Support Model	Uses purposeful support to establish community participation and incrementally decreases that support as appropriate.	Is not designed specifically to develop informal community participation with gradual decrease of support over time
Documentation	Provides enough information to understand the initiative's purpose and core approach.	Provides insufficient information to determine what the initiative involves.
Location and Language	Is based in an included country and is available in English.	Is based outside the included countries or is not available in English.
Timeframe	Was operating/published from 2016–2026 or was included because of historical significance.	Was operating/published before 2016 without clear historical significance.
Evidence of outcomes or impact	May be included with or without reported outcomes or impact.	Is not excluded solely because there are no reported outcomes or impact.

Note: If the initiative met the other criteria well but didn't report outcomes nor have evidence of impact, it was still included.

Information extracted from initiatives across all three searches

All initiatives included in the report had the following information collected:

- Name of the organisation OR Website

[18] While tools, frameworks and resources (that contain general guidance to support inclusion) were excluded from the report, they have nonetheless been included in Appendix 2 because many offer valuable insights for establishing more inclusive communities for people with disability.



- URL
- Title of the initiative
- Year of report or initiative
- Date of initiative (where listed)
- Country where the initiative is/was based
- Type or format of the resource
- Delivery Agent
- Delivery Setting
- Model of participation
- Type of initiative
- Aim of initiative
- Brief Summary
- Audience Type
- Age Group

Method for 1. Targeted website search

Each identified website was manually searched to identify relevant initiatives. Terminology developed during this stage was recorded and used to inform subsequent Google searches.

The initial focus for the targeted search was people living in Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) with high and/or complex support needs. However, due to the limited availability of resources specific to this population, the scope was broadened to include adults with disability more generally.

Each identified website was manually searched to identify relevant programs, resources, program information, evidence and publications. Search terminology was organised across three concepts: initiative type, population and focus. The terms used are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Terms used for targeted website searches

Initiative	Population	Focus of initiative
approach framework intervention program report resource	adults with disability disability people living in SDA people living in supported accommodation people with disability	belonging community participation loneliness social connection social inclusion social isolation

Terminology identified during this stage was recorded and used to inform subsequent Google searches.



Each targeted website was manually searched for sections where initiatives were located. Initiatives were of a variety of modes, such as general descriptions, videos or reports. Details of each initiative were recorded on a spreadsheet with the relevant information extracted, as per the above list, as well as notes and reasons for exclusion or inclusion. All extracted data were manually checked against the original source to ensure accuracy. Any issues, such as duplicates, inaccessible inks or missing information, were recorded in the spreadsheet.

Each targeted website was manually hand-searched using available navigation features (e.g. menus, directories and internal links) to locate relevant resources. Materials identified through this process were then reviewed against the inclusion criteria.

For each potentially relevant resource, key details were recorded in the spreadsheet, including the organisation or website, search date, the resource title, URL, screening decision, reason for decision, glossary terms for later Google searching, additional notes and snowball flagging.

Where a website linked to potential / relevant resources outside of its own page / domain, these were identified as snowball resources and recorded for further screening under snowball flagging. Resources were screened and classified as Include, Possible or Exclude, based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. For those classified as Include or Possible, the full text or transcript was copied into an AI environment. Each resource was processed individually using predefined extraction fields aligned with the spreadsheet (see Appendix 1 for the extraction prompt). All extracted data were manually checked against the original source to ensure accuracy.

Method for 2. Snowball searching

After the targeted website search was finished, a snowball search was conducted with the aim of locating additional sources, using links to other relevant initiatives listed in the targeted websites. The same inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during this stage. Linked websites were hand-searched using available navigation features (e.g. menus, directories and internal links). Materials identified through this process were then reviewed against the inclusion criteria.

As per stage 1, for each potentially relevant resource, key details were recorded in the spreadsheet, including the organisation or website, search date, the original targeted website resource title, the snowball resource title, URL, screening decision, reason for decision, glossary terms for later Google searching and additional notes.

Resources were screened and classified as Include, Possible or Exclude, based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, with duplicates or inaccessible links also assessed during this process. For those classified as Include or Possible, the full text or transcript was copied into the AI environment. Each resource was processed individually and one at a time using predefined extraction fields aligned with the spreadsheet (see Appendix 1 for the extraction prompt). All extracted data were manually checked against the original source to ensure accuracy. Snowball searching was limited to one level. This meant that only resources

within the directly linked website were reviewed, and no further links from those sites were followed.

Method for 3. Advanced Google search

An advanced Google search was conducted to identify publicly available resources on belonging, social connection and inclusion for people with disability. Searches were conducted in incognito mode to reduce the influence of prior search history and personalisation.

Search queries were developed using combinations of terms across three aspects: population, concept and initiative. Google operators (e.g. quotation marks and OR) were used to structure searches.

Key terminology identified during the targeted website and snowball searching stages was recorded under snowball flagging and used to inform the development of these search queries. Table 3 shows the terms used for the search:

Table 3: Search terms used for advanced Google search

Search Topic	Search Terms
Population	(“disability”) (“people with disability” OR “people with disabilities”) (“intellectual disability” OR “intellectual disabilities”) (“physical disability” OR “physical disabilities”) (“acquired disability” OR “acquired disabilities”) (“acquired brain injury” OR “acquired brain injuries”) (“complex need” OR “complex needs”) (“complex support need” OR “complex support needs”) (“high support need” OR “high support needs”) (“ndis participant” OR “ndis participants”) (“disability housing”) (“specialist disability accommodation”) (“sda”)
Concept	(“belonging”) (“connection” OR “connections” OR “connectedness”) (“relationship” OR “relationships”) (“network” OR “networks”) (“participation” OR “involvement”) (“inclusion” OR “inclusivity”) (“engagement”) (“community” OR “communities”) (“group” OR “groups”) (“isolation” OR “social isolation”) (“loneliness”) (“peer” OR “peers”) (“social”) (“support” OR “supports”) (“1:1” OR “one-to-one” OR “one to one” OR “one-on-one”)
Initiative	(“program” OR “programs” OR “programme” OR “programmes”) (“group” OR “groups”) (“activity” OR “activities”)

Search Topic	Search Terms
	(“toolkit” OR “toolkits”) (“guide” OR “guides”) (“framework” OR “frameworks”) (“resource” OR “resources”) (“training”) (“story” OR “stories”) (“video” OR “videos”) (“podcast” OR “podcasts”) (“capacity building” OR “capacity-building”) (“initiative” OR “initiatives”) (“report” OR “reports”) (“workshop” OR “workshops”)

Searches were run in small, repeatable combinations (“chunks”), typically using one or two population terms alongside a concept and initiative term. Terms were rotated across searches to capture a non-exhaustive range of combinations. A total of 30 searches were conducted. Searches ceased when results became repetitive.

For each search, the query was entered into Google and approximately the first 50 results (around five pages) were screened. Identified materials were reviewed against the inclusion criteria and duplicates were identified and excluded at this stage. No site or file-type limits were applied to allow broad coverage. For each potentially relevant resource, key details were recorded in the excel spreadsheet. Resources were screened and classified as Include, Possible or Exclude, based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Potential issues, such as duplicates or inaccessible links, were also assessed during this process. For those classified as Include or Possible, the full text or transcript was copied into the AI environment. Each resource was processed individually using predefined extraction fields aligned with the spreadsheet (see Appendix 1 for the extraction prompt). All extracted data were manually checked against the original source to ensure accuracy.

Results

Results across all three search types were amassed in two stages. The first stage had more expanded criteria and yielded a final total of 212 initiatives. The second stage, with the more refined criteria (as per Table 1), yielded 17 initiatives. Of these 17, 11 were found to meet all the criteria while seven were found to meet most of the criteria. The main missing criterion was evidence of impact or outcomes. Table 4 summarises the 17 identified initiatives, with longer descriptions of each following that.



Table 4: Summary of the final 18 initiatives

Name of Resource	Organisation	URL	Country	Brief Resource Summary	Delivery Agent	Participation Format	Outcomes or Impact
M-ComConnect	La Trobe University and Summer Foundation	https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/rehabilitation-sciences/articles/10.3389/fresc.2021.786445/full	Australia	M-ComConnect is an individualised community participation program for adults with severe traumatic brain injury experiencing social isolation and limited community engagement. Delivered by clinicians, it combines person-centred goal setting, tailored supports and community-based activities to help participants identify meaningful leisure opportunities, build social relationships and increase community participation. Disability-specific.	Allied Health Professionals	1:1 & group-based	Published Evidence
The Befriend Social Network	Befriend Inc.	https://befriend.org.au/meet/social-network/	Australia	The Befriend Social Network is a Greater Perth community initiative that reduces social isolation through informal group activities for adults. Volunteer Hosts organise small gatherings, supported by paid Community Builders and promoted via Meetup. The model emphasises accessibility, community-led participation and relationship-building but depends on volunteer capacity and remains concentrated in metropolitan Perth. Not disability-specific.	Volunteers, Organisational Staff / Facilitators	Group-based	Published Evidence
Men's Sheds	Australian Men's Shed Association (AMSA)	https://mensshed.org/	Australia	Men's Sheds are community-based workshops that support social inclusion, well-being, and peer connection through practical group activities in informal, male-friendly settings. The model relies on local volunteers, funding, facilities, and participant involvement. Not disability-specific.	Volunteers	Group-based	Published Evidence
Chatty Cafe Scheme	Chatty Cafe Australia	https://chattycafeaustralia.org.au/	Australia	The Chatty Café Scheme encourages informal social interaction through designated chat spaces in community venues to reduce loneliness and promote community connection. The low-cost, volunteer-supported model is broadly scalable but is not disability-specific and may be less suitable for individuals requiring structured or specialist support. Not disability-specific.	Volunteers, Community Partners / External Facilitators	Group-based	Published Evidence
Community Circles	Community Circles Australia	https://communitycirclesaustralia.com.au/	Australia	Community Circles Australia uses volunteer-supported social circles to improve social connection, well-being, and community participation for people experiencing isolation, including older adults and people with disability. The	Volunteers, Community Partners / External	Group-based	Published Evidence

Name of Resource	Organisation	URL	Country	Brief Resource Summary	Delivery Agent	Participation Format	Outcomes or Impact
				programme relies on local facilitators, volunteers, funding, and community engagement, which may affect scalability and consistency across settings. Disability-specific.	Facilitators		
Leisure Buddies	Inclusion Melbourne	https://inclusionmelbourne.org.au/services/leisure-buddies-for-ndis-participants/	Australia	The Leisure Buddies program matches adults with cognitive disability to trained community volunteers for regular social and leisure activities, aiming to reduce isolation and increase community participation. Program success depends on volunteer recruitment, participant matching and ongoing coordination support. Disability-specific.	Volunteers	1:1	Published Evidence
Transition to Retirement (TTR)	AFFORD and Sydney University Press	https://www.afford.com.au/	Australia	The Transition to Retirement (TTR) program facilitates an inclusive retirement lifestyle for older workers with disability by supporting their transition into mainstream community or volunteer groups through person-centred planning, careful matching, and ongoing, coordinated support. Disability-specific.	Volunteers, Organisational Staff / Facilitators	1:1 & group-based	Published Evidence
Neighbourhood Houses	Neighbourhood Houses Victoria	https://www.nhvic.org.au/	Australia	Neighbourhood Houses are inclusive, place-based community hubs offering a wide range of social, educational, and recreational activities that provide mainstream community participation opportunities for people of all ages and abilities. Not disability-specific.	Volunteers, Organisational Staff / Facilitators	Group-based	Published Evidence
Best Buddies Colleges	Best Buddies International	https://www.bestbuddies.org/	United States	Best Buddies Colleges fosters inclusive friendships by pairing college students with peers who have intellectual and developmental disability for year-long activities. Disability-specific.	Volunteers, Organisational Staff / Facilitators	1:1 & group-based	Published Evidence
Best Buddies Citizens	Best Buddies International	https://www.bestbuddies.org/	United States	Best Buddies Citizens matches adults with and without intellectual or developmental disability to build lasting friendships through regular community activities. Disability-specific.	Volunteers, Organisational Staff / Facilitators	1:1 & group-based	Claims to evidence based on unpublished surveys

Name of Resource	Organisation	URL	Country	Brief Resource Summary	Delivery Agent	Participation Format	Outcomes or Impact
Connecting People to People	University of Minnesota	https://rtc.umn.edu/docs/MSOCS_2008_final_report.pdf	United States	From 2003–2008, Connecting People to People trained staff to support group home residents in building friendships and engaging in local community roles. Disability-specific.	Organisational Staff / Facilitators; Disability Support Workers	1:1 & group-based	Published Evidence
Community Friendship Program	Melbourne City Mission (MCM)	https://www.mcm.org.au/services/disability-and-ndis/community-friendship	Australia	Melbourne City Mission's Community Friendship program matches adults with disability with volunteers for regular social activities and group outings to reduce isolation and support community participation. The program relies on volunteer recruitment and coordinator support, and may be less suitable for individuals requiring higher levels of support or specialised care. Disability specific.	Volunteers	1:1	No Evidence
Gig Buddies Sydney	ACL Disability Services	https://www.gigbuddiessydney.org/	Australia	Gig Buddies Sydney matches adults with intellectual disability or autism with volunteers who share similar interests to support social participation, community inclusion and informal friendships through mainstream cultural and social activities. The program relies heavily on volunteer recruitment, matching and retention, and participant access may be limited by volunteer availability and personal event costs. Disability-specific.	Volunteers	1:1	No Evidence
IHC Friendship Programme	IHC New Zealand	https://www.ihc.org.nz/how-we-can-help/ihc-friendship-programme	New Zealand	The IHC Friendship Programme matches adults with intellectual disability with volunteers for participant-led social and community activities to reduce isolation and support independence and community participation. The program relies on volunteer recruitment, effective matching and coordinator support, with participants responsible for their own activity costs. Disability-specific.	Volunteers	1:1	No Evidence
Social Buddies Programme	Building Circles	https://www.buildingcircles.org.uk/social-buddies	United Kingdom	Building Circles' Social Buddies programme matches adults with learning disabilities or autism with volunteers for regular social activities that promote friendship, reduce isolation and support community participation. The programme depends on ongoing volunteer recruitment and support, and participant	Volunteers	1:1	No Evidence

Name of Resource	Organisation	URL	Country	Brief Resource Summary	Delivery Agent	Participation Format	Outcomes or Impact
				responsibility for activity costs may limit accessibility for some individuals. Disability-specific.			
Best Buddies Citizens Program	Best Buddies Canada	https://bestbuddies.ca/citizens-program/	Canada	Best Buddies' Citizens Program pairs adults with and without intellectual or developmental disabilities in long-term friendships to promote social inclusion, reduce isolation and support community participation through shared activities and events. The program relies on ongoing volunteer recruitment, training and engagement, and may be less suitable for individuals requiring more structured or specialised support. Disability-specific.	Volunteers, Organisational Staff / Facilitators	1:1	No Evidence
Community Amigos Program	Heads Up for Inclusion	https://www.headsupforinclusion.ca/community-program/	Canada	The Community Amigos Program supports social inclusion for adults with and without disabilities through group activities, volunteer mentorship and community participation opportunities designed to build friendships and confidence. The program relies on volunteers, accessible venues and ongoing event coordination, and may be less suitable for individuals requiring structured or specialised support. Disability-specific.	Volunteers, Organisational Staff / Facilitators	1:1 & group-based	No Evidence
Friends: Connecting People with Disabilities and Community Members	University of Minnesota	https://ici.umn.edu/products/579	United States	Friends is a practical community-building manual that guides people with disability in fostering meaningful community relationships and belonging through tools like relationship mapping and interest identification. Disability-specific.	Organisational Staff / Facilitators	1:1	No Evidence

Descriptions of initiatives

The following 18 initiatives are divided into two groups, those that report outcomes or impact and those that don't.

Programs that report outcomes or impact

Name of Program: M-ComConnect (Multi-Component Community Connection Program)

Name of Organisation: La Trobe University and Summer Foundation

Country: Australia (Melbourne, Australia)

Website URL: https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/rehabilitation-sciences/articles/10.3389/fresc.2021.786445/full

Description of Initiative: M-ComConnect is an individualised multi-component community connection program designed for people with severe traumatic brain injury (TBI) who experience social isolation and limited community participation. The program supports participants to identify meaningful leisure and recreational activities, build social relationships and increase community engagement through person-centred goal setting and tailored supports. It is designed around three personal domains: functioning, relationships and social connections, and community participation.

Population Served: Adults with severe traumatic brain injury living in the community who experience reduced social connections and difficulty participating in social activities. Participants in the study ranged from 24 to 75 years of age and often had complex cognitive, communication or behavioural support needs.

Delivery Agent and Setting: The program was delivered by five clinicians, including four speech pathologists and one neuropsychologist. Activities and interventions were delivered in community settings and participants' homes, with supports tailored to individual goals and circumstances.

Participation Format: One-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: A feasibility trial found statistically significant improvements in quality of life, wellbeing and community integration, with gains maintained at three-month follow-up. Nine of ten participants continued participating in social activities after phase one and reported increased confidence, choice and control, valued community involvement and opportunity for social connection.

Challenges and Limitations: Evidence is based on a small feasibility study with ten participants. Participants were already motivated to increase social participation, which may limit generalisability. The authors note that further research is needed to evaluate implementation in routine clinical practice and from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

Funding: Funded by the Transport Accident Commission (TAC Project T032), directly and through the Institute for Safety Compensation and Recovery Research (ISCRR Project 155).

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Not specified.

Name of Program: The Befriend Social Network

Name of Organisation: Befriend Inc.

Country: Australia (Perth, Western Australia)

Website URL: https://befriend.org.au/meet/social-network/

Description of Initiative: The Befriend Social Network is a Perth-based community initiative launched in 2010 to reduce social isolation. It fosters inclusive, informal gatherings where people can meet new friends and share activities. The program provides a calendar of small social experiences, such as coffee catch-ups, bowling or community walks, hosted by volunteer "Hosts" and supported by Befriend staff. All gatherings are listed on a free Meetup platform.

Population Served: The network is open to adults of all backgrounds and abilities. Befriend connects older Australians, young adults, people with and without disabilities, individuals experiencing mental ill-health, families and newcomers to Perth.

Delivery Agent and Setting: The initiative relies on community members who organise and facilitate groups on a volunteer basis. A small team of paid Community Builders, located in various suburbs, provides mentoring and logistical support. This combination of grassroots volunteer "Hosts" and professional "Community Builders" ensures gatherings are community-led but supported. Activities take place in public spaces such as cafes, community centres and parks across Greater Perth.

Participation Format: Group-Based.

Outcomes: Befriend's 2025 network impact survey reports positive social outcomes. Among respondents, 84% agreed they felt more confident attending community activities, 88% said they had made new friends, 60% reported friendships they maintain outside of Befriend events and 71% felt they were making a valuable contribution to their community. Qualitative feedback highlights an increased sense of belonging, self-worth and social inclusion. Participants often move from isolation to active community contribution.

Challenges and Limitations: Evidence of outcomes is based largely on short-term self-reported survey data and stories from participants. The network operates primarily in Perth; replicability in other locations may require resources and local partnerships. Events are mostly for adults and rely on volunteer hosts, which may lead to variability in group quality and availability.

Funding: Befriend is a registered not-for-profit organisation. The impact report acknowledges contributions from funders and partners but does not specify funding sources.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: There are no membership fees or sign-up costs. Most gatherings are free, though participants may pay for their own refreshments or activity costs, and occasionally contribute small donations to cover room hire.

Name of Program: Men's Shed

Name of Organisation: Australian Men's Shed Association (AMSA)

Country: Australia (Newcastle, New South Wales)

Website URL: https://mensshed.org/

Description of Initiative: Men's Sheds are community-based workshops where men participate in practical activities such as woodwork, metalwork and repair-projects while socialising and providing informal peer support. The model emphasises "mateship," social connection and creating a safe, non-judgemental environment for men to share experiences. Each shed operates independently as a non-profit community organisation and is managed locally by volunteers or management committees.

Population Served: Primarily adult men, including older, retired or socially isolated men. Some sheds are tailored to specific cultural groups or aged-care residents. Some men's sheds offer specific activities for people with disabilities however each shed runs differently.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by local community-run Men's Sheds and volunteer management committees in community workshop settings.

Participation Format: Group-Based.

Outcomes: Reported outcomes include improved mental health, increased subjective well-being and reduced social isolation, particularly among older men and men with existing mental health concerns. A 2022 mixed-methods systematic review identified consistent positive qualitative findings. However, the evidence base is limited by small study sizes, lack of control groups and limited use of validated outcome measures.

Challenges and Limitations: Program quality and participant experience may vary between sheds due to the informal, volunteer-led model. Scalability may depend on volunteer availability, suitable facilities and ongoing funding.

Funding: Primarily supported through membership fees, donations, community fundraising and local funding sources.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Modest membership fees or voluntary donations may apply. Exact costs vary between sheds.

Name of Program: Chatty Cafe Scheme

Name of Organisation: Chatty Cafe Australia

Country: Australia (Melbourne, Victoria)

Website URL: https://chattycafeaustralia.org.au/

Description of Initiative: The Chatty Cafe Scheme is a community initiative that encourages cafes, libraries, clubs and other venues to create informal spaces for conversation and social connection. Participating venues host "Have a Chat" tables or display "Sip/Chat/Share/Care" stickers to signal that patrons are welcome to talk with others. Some venues host scheduled chat sessions supported by volunteers, while others encourage casual interaction throughout the venue. While international, there are now instances in Australia.

Population Served: The initiative is open to the general community, particularly people experiencing loneliness or social isolation. Reported participants in evaluations were mainly older adults, including people living alone.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by community and commercial venues, including cafés, libraries, churches, schools and aged-care facilities, with support from volunteers in some locations. Activities occur in community-based social settings.

Participation Format: Group-based.

Outcomes: Reported outcomes include reduced loneliness, improved mood, increased social connection and enhanced well-being. An external UK evaluation was conducted and it reported high levels of perceived reductions in social isolation and improved happiness among participants, while an Australian pilot found positive short-term mood and connection outcomes.

Challenges and Limitations: There is limited evidence regarding effectiveness for people with cognitive or developmental disabilities. Sustainability depends on volunteer recruitment, venue participation and community awareness. The only existing evaluation relied on small samples, self-selection and limited methodological rigour.

Funding: Supported through participating venue membership fees and donations.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Generally low-cost; some venues may involve modest purchase costs. Exact participant costs are not specified.

Name of Program: Community Circles

Name of Organisation: Community Circles Australia

Country: Australia (Drummoyne, New South Wales)

Website URL: https://communitycirclesaustralia.com.au/

Description of Initiative: Community Circles Australia is a social initiative from the Touched by Olivia Foundation which brings together family members, friends, neighbours and volunteers to support a person to live a more connected and independent life. Local Community Connectors recruit and train facilitators who help identify personal goals and coordinate practical and social support. Circles meet regularly and may assist participants to access community activities, build skills or reduce isolation.

Population Served: Older adults, people with disabilities including NDIS participants, people experiencing mental health challenges, and carers.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by Community Connectors, volunteer facilitators and local support networks in community settings across local government areas.

Participation Format: Both one-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: Reported outcomes come from one UK evaluation of a UK Circles program, which showed increased independence, improved mental well-being, reduced loneliness and stronger social connections. Volunteers also reported benefits to well-being and community connection. However, evidence is limited by small sample sizes, uncontrolled study designs and limited quantitative follow-up. No outcomes nor published evaluations of the Australian programme were identified.

Challenges & Limitations: The programme relies heavily on recruiting, training and retaining volunteers, which has been identified as a major implementation challenge. Scalability may be constrained by the need for ongoing coordination, facilitator support and sustained funding. Existing evidence primarily relates to older adults, with limited quantitative evidence for NDIS participants or people with developmental disabilities.

Funding: Not specified.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Not specified.

Name of Program: Leisure Buddies

Name of Organisation: Inclusion Melbourne

Country: Australia (Melbourne, Victoria)

Website URL: https://inclusionmelbourne.org.au/services/leisure-buddies-for-ndis-participants/

Description of Initiative: Leisure Buddies matches adult NDIS participants with cognitive disability to screened community volunteers based on shared interests and location. The program aims to reduce social isolation and increase community participation through regular social and leisure activities such as walks, coffee outings, board games and gym sessions. Volunteers receive training and supervision, while participants receive ongoing support from a community support coordinator.

Population Served: Adults with cognitive or intellectual disability who are NDIS participants.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by Inclusion Melbourne through trained community volunteers in community-based settings.

Participation Format: One-to-one.

Outcomes: The intended outcomes are increased social participation, reduced loneliness, improved confidence and stronger informal social connections. The program aligns with NDIS objectives relating to independence and inclusion. However, there are no reported outcomes nor published evaluations of the Leisure Buddies program specifically, so evidence of effectiveness is limited, however there are testimonials on the website (at the above link).

Challenges & Limitations: The program relies heavily on volunteer recruitment, matching and retention, which may affect scalability and consistency. There are no reported outcomes nor published program evaluations, and evidence from comparable international studies may not fully apply to the Australian NDIS context. Participant disappointment may occur if volunteer matches are unsuccessful or relationships end early.

Funding: Participants use their NDIS funding to cover the service-delivery costs; fees follow NDIS price guidelines. Specific funding details are not publicly disclosed.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Not specified publicly; participants are advised to contact the provider for fee information.

Name of Program: Transition to Retirement (TTR)

Name of Organisation: Australian Foundation for Disability (AFFORD) and Sydney University Press

Country: Australia (Parramatta, New South Wales)

Website URL: https://www.afford.com.au/

Description of Initiative: The Transition to Retirement (TTR) program helps older workers with disabilities transition from supported employment by dedicating one non-work day to local community or volunteer groups. The model supports participants through person-centred planning, community matching, routine building, mentor training, travel assistance, and ongoing monitoring.

Population Served: Workers aged 45+ with intellectual, physical, psychosocial, or sensory disabilities, or acquired brain injury, particularly those in supported employment or Australian Disability Enterprises.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by TTR coordinators and disability service providers in collaboration with community groups, volunteers, families, and support services.

Participation Format: Both one-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: Reported outcomes suggest the TTR program is feasible and effective. It provides enduring benefits for people with disabilities, mentors, and community groups, specifically by fostering inclusive retirement lifestyles and building friendships outside of work.

Challenges & Limitations: This model requires substantial skilled coordination for community matching, travel planning, and long-term monitoring. Participants are supported through 45-170 hours of coordination support, depending on their needs. This means it can be resource-intensive, though its cost effectiveness has not been measured.

Funding: The research was funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage Projects scheme, in partnership with AFFORD and St John of God Accord. AFFORD's TTR program also received partial funding from the NSW Department of Family and Community Services, Ageing, Disability and Home Care.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Variable and low; participants may incur minor costs for travel or activities, though many options, such as community gardens, are affordable on a disability pension.

Name of Program: Neighbourhood Houses

Name of Organisation: Neighbourhood Houses Victoria

Country: Australia (Melbourne, Victoria)

Website URL: https://www.nhvic.org.au/

Description of Initiative: Neighbourhood Houses are inclusive, place-based community organisations where people of all ages and abilities can connect, learn and contribute. They offer social, educational, recreational and support activities, such as short courses, arts and crafts, music, language classes, health and well-being programs, community gardens, social groups, shared meals, special interest groups, volunteering, community events, training pathways and links to local services. They function as local hubs for skill development, informal learning, community support, participation and relationship-building.

Population Served: Neighbourhood Houses serve the broader local community, including people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds and identities, and are often advertised as inclusive of people with disability.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by volunteers, organisational staff, and facilitators. Delivered through local Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres across Victoria.

Participation Format: Group-based

Outcomes: Reported outcomes come from an evaluation of Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, which found they are inclusive, supportive spaces that foster social connection, relationship-building and community participation, helping to address social isolation.

Challenges & Limitations: Suitability for people with disability would depend on the individual house, activity, accessibility, staff/volunteer capacity, transport, and support needs.

Funding: Neighbourhood Houses are supported by the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program, government grants, low-cost activity fees, and volunteer contributions.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Participation costs are variable and generally low, depending on the specific house and activity.

Name of Program: Best Buddies Colleges

Name of Organisation: Best Buddies International

Country: United States (Miami, Florida)

Website URL: https://www.bestbuddies.org/

Description of Initiative: Best Buddies Colleges pairs college (university) students with peers who have intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) for at least one academic year to build friendships and inclusion. Through weekly communication and regular in-person activities, the program fosters meaningful social connections and community participation.

Population Served: The program explicitly targets college students without IDD and people with IDD who are on campus or living in the surrounding community. The official US webpage does not specify particular diagnoses, age limits for participants with IDD, or eligibility requirements beyond the program's focus on people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Best Buddies chapters at participating colleges manage the program through student-led events and supported friendship matches, with ongoing staff oversight. Activities occur on campus and within the surrounding community.

Participation Format: One-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: Reported outcomes come from their only conducted survey in 2006, which indicated that participants generally enjoyed the program and found the friendships mutually beneficial, though findings were based on self-reports rather than controlled measures. The program aims to foster meaningful friendships, increase social interaction, and promote inclusion for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities on campus.

Challenges & Limitations: The program's evidence is limited, relying on self-reported survey data. Reliance on student volunteers for consistent, long-term participation may impact scalability and accessibility for individuals with complex support needs.

Funding: Not specified. Best Buddies International receives organisational support from donations, corporate partners, foundations and government partners, but no funding source or funding model specifically for Best Buddies Colleges was identified in the sources reviewed

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Not specified.

Name of Program: Best Buddies Citizens

Name of Organisation: Best Buddies International

Country: United States (Miami, Florida)

Website URL: https://www.bestbuddies.org/

Description of Initiative: Best Buddies Citizens matches adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) with adults without IDD from the community or workplaces to foster year-long friendships. Through weekly contact and monthly in-person activities, participants build social connections based on shared interests and compatibility.

Population Served: The program is open to adults aged 18 and older with and without intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) who are interested in forming new friendships. Applicants undergo an interview and background screening process to determine program eligibility.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Best Buddies staff coordinate recruitment, screening, matching, and ongoing support, often collaborating with local disability organisations or workplaces to manage chapters. Participants connect in community and workplace settings of their choice, complemented by organised chapter and national events.

Participation Format: One-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: Reported outcomes come from an unpublished survey, which claims that participants often experience reduced isolation and improved well-being. The program aims to foster mutually enriching friendships, increased social inclusion, and a stronger sense of belonging for adults with IDD.

Challenges & Limitations: The program relies on limited, non-independent survey data and faces operational challenges regarding volunteer recruitment, participant matching, and the accessibility of transport and ongoing support. Additionally, potential wait times and personal outing expenses may impact participant accessibility and engagement.

Funding: Funding for this specific program is not publicly specified. Best Buddies International relies on general organisational fundraising, grants, and partnerships.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: There is no general program fee, although participants may cover incidental costs like background screening and personal activity expenses. Financial assistance is available to help with these costs.

Name of Program: Connecting People to People

Name of Organisation: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, in partnership with Minnesota State Operated Community Services (MSOCS)

Country: United States (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

Website URL: https://rtc.umn.edu/docs/MSOCS_2008_final_report.pdf

Description of Initiative: Connecting People to People was a 2003–2008 project that trained disability-service staff to support group home residents to build friendships, join community groups and engage in socially valued community roles. Through targeted strategies and ongoing support, staff helped participants build connections with neighbours, local organisations and community members.

Population Served: The project supported 59 residents with intellectual or developmental disability in Minnesota group homes, using a cluster-based selection method to pair well-connected individuals with those seeking deeper community ties. Staff applied these connection strategies to both the selected participants and other residents, broadening the project's impact.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Trained direct-support staff and coordinators facilitated this initiative, helping group home residents build community connections within local settings like churches and workplaces. These interactions relied on leveraging existing relationships rather than a standardised volunteer-matching service.

Participation Format: One-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: The project reported that 92% of participants experienced positive changes in community connections, including significant increases in friendships, group memberships, and social roles. These findings are based on an internal project report rather than an independent, peer-reviewed evaluation.

Challenges & Limitations: This time-bound project (2003–2008) lacked independent evaluation. Implementation was further hindered by practical barriers such as limited staff capacity, transport issues and a lack of ongoing organisational support.

Funding: This project was funded by the United States federal National Institute on Disability Research and Rehabilitation.

Programs that don't report outcomes or impact

Name of Program: Community Friendship Program

Name of Organisation: Melbourne City Mission (MCM)

Country: Australia (Melbourne, Victoria)

Website URL: https://www.mcm.org.au/services/disability-and-ndis/community-friendship

Description of Initiative: The Community Friend Program is a volunteer-based social participation program that matches adults with disabilities with volunteers to build one-to-one friendships and increase community involvement. Participants meet regularly with volunteers for social and recreational activities of their choice and may also attend facilitated small-group outings such as bowling, movies and arts activities. The programme provides coordinator support and focuses on developing social connection, communication skills and independence.

Population Served: Adults aged 18–64 with mild physical, intellectual, psychosocial or sensory disabilities.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by Melbourne City Mission through volunteers and program coordinators in community settings across selected Melbourne local government areas.

Participation Format: One-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: The program says it aims to reduce social isolation, support friendship development and increase confidence and community participation, and that participants are supported to build communication skills and engage in inclusive social activities. However, there are no reported outcomes nor published evaluations.

Challenges & Limitations: The program relies on recruiting and retaining volunteers, which may affect continuity and scalability. Volunteers are not trained carers and cannot provide personal care, limiting suitability for individuals with higher support needs. The program operates only in selected areas, and participants must cover their own activity expenses. Evidence regarding effectiveness for the target population is limited.

Funding: currently funded through the Home and Community Care Program for Younger People.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Participants are responsible for paying their own activity costs.

Name of Program: Gig Buddies Sydney

Name of Organisation: ACL Disability Services

Country: Australia, (Sydney,)

Website URL: https://www.gigbuddiessydney.org/

Description of Initiative: Gig Buddies Sydney is a volunteer befriending program that matches adults with intellectual disability or autism with volunteers who share similar interests. Participants attend mainstream music, cultural and social events together to support social inclusion, confidence and independence. The program includes one-to-one buddying as well as organised group social events, with ongoing coordination and volunteer support provided by the organisation.

Population Served: Adults with intellectual disability or autism, including NDIS participants.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by ACL Disability Services through trained volunteers and programme coordinators in community and cultural settings across Sydney.

Participation Format: One-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: The program aims to increase community participation, social confidence, independence and access to mainstream social opportunities. It also seeks to support friendship development and social skill-building through shared-interest activities. However, there are no reported outcomes nor published evaluations.

Challenges & Limitations: The program depends heavily on recruiting, training and retaining suitable volunteers, and not all applicants can be matched. Volunteer matching may take time, and participant experience may vary depending on volunteer availability and relationship quality. Volunteers are not trained carers and cannot provide personal care or substitute for paid supports. Evidence for befriending interventions suggests only modest improvements in mental health and social networks.

Funding: Funded through participant NDIS plans (either core supports or capacity building) via a fixed monthly administrative fee.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Participants pay a monthly NDIS administrative fee and are also responsible for personal event costs such as tickets, food and drinks.

Name of Program: IHC Friendship Programme

Name of Organisation: IHC New Zealand

Country: New Zealand (Wellington, North Island)

Website URL: https://www.ihc.org.nz/how-we-can-help/ihc-friendship-programme

Description of Initiative: The IHC Friendship Programme is a volunteer-based initiative that matches adults with intellectual disability with volunteers to build one-to-one friendships and increase social connection. Participants choose activities together based on shared interests, including community outings, learning new skills and social catch-ups. The programme also offers online friendship options and short-term skill-based learning partnerships focused on activities such as cooking, budgeting and gardening.

Population Served: Adults aged 18 years and older with intellectual disability.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by IHC New Zealand through trained volunteers and volunteer coordinators in community settings and online.

Participation Format: One-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: The program aims to reduce social isolation, improve well-being and support autonomy through participant-led friendships and social engagement. It also seeks to build confidence and practical skills through shared activities and learning opportunities. However, there are no reported outcomes nor published evaluations.

Challenges & Limitations: The programme relies on recruiting, training and retaining volunteers, which may limit scalability and continuity of support. Evidence from related befriending research suggests recruitment and volunteer retention can be challenging, and evidence of effectiveness for people with more complex disabilities remains limited. Participant costs for activities may also create access barriers for some individuals.

Funding: Not specified.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Participants pay their own activity costs. Exact programme costs are not specified.

Name of Program: Social Buddies Programme

Name of Organisation: Building Circles

Country: United Kingdom (Stonehouse, Gloucestershire)

Website URL: https://www.buildingcircles.org.uk/social-buddies

Description of Initiative: The Social Buddies Programme matches adults with learning disabilities or autism with volunteers who share similar interests and personalities. Pairs meet regularly to participate in community and social activities such as shopping, walks, meals and entertainment outings. The program focuses on building friendships, reducing loneliness and increasing community participation through shared interests and informal peer support.

Population Served: Adults with learning disabilities or autism.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by Building Circles through trained volunteers and program staff in community settings across Gloucestershire.

Participation Format: Primarily one-to-one, with additional group activities and volunteer-led projects available.

Outcomes: The program aims to reduce social isolation, improve well-being and increase confidence and community participation through friendship-based support. Activities are intended to foster meaningful social connections and shared experiences. However, there are no reported outcomes nor published evaluations.

Challenges & Limitations: The program depends on recruiting, training and retaining suitable volunteers, which may limit scalability and continuity of support. Evidence regarding effectiveness for people with higher support needs or multiple disabilities is limited. Participants are responsible for their own activity costs, which may create financial barriers. Risks include unsuccessful matches or volunteer withdrawal, although ongoing coordinator support is provided.

Funding: Not specified.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Participants pay their own activity costs. Exact programme costs are not specified.



Name of Program: Best Buddies Citizens Program

Name of Organisation: Best Buddies Canada

Country: Canada (Toronto, Ontario)

Website URL: https://bestbuddies.ca/citizens-program/

Description of Initiative: The Citizens Program is a volunteer friendship initiative that pairs adults with and without intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) in one-to-one friendships. Participants commit to regular contact over a one-year period, including weekly communication and twice-monthly in-person meetings. The program also provides training, matching support and organised group events such as social gatherings, bowling nights and coffee chats to encourage broader community participation.

Population Served: Adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities who have transitioned out of school-based programs.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Delivered by Best Buddies through local host sites, volunteers and program coordinators in community settings in Calgary and Winnipeg.

Participation Format: One-to-one and group-based.

Outcomes: The program aims to reduce social isolation, increase friendship opportunities and support independence and community inclusion. A cross-sectional survey of the related Best Buddies College Program reported positive participant experiences and perceived benefits for many participants with IDD. However, outcomes are self-reported and there are no published evaluations of the Canada Citizens Program itself.

Challenges & Limitations: The program relies on recruiting, screening and retaining volunteers, which may affect consistency and scalability. It may not meet the needs of people requiring structured or personal-care supports, as volunteers are not professional carers. Evidence regarding long-term effectiveness is limited, and participant experiences may vary depending on volunteer commitment and match quality.

Funding: Not specified.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Not specified.

Name of Program: Community Amigos Program

Name of Organisation: Heads Up for Inclusion

Country: Canada (Peterborough, Ontario)

Website URL: https://www.headsupforinclusion.ca/community-program/

Description of Initiative: The Community Amigos Program is a social-inclusion initiative in Peterborough, Ontario. It invites adults, both with and without disabilities, to participate in monthly group activities such as live music nights, art workshops and social events. The program is founded on the belief that disability rights are human rights and that people of all abilities can form mutually fulfilling friendships. Volunteers ("Amigo Connectors") help create an inclusive environment where differences are celebrated and participants can build relationships, develop skills and enjoy community life.

Population Served: Adults aged 18 and over who face barriers to inclusion, including individuals with physical, intellectual, sensory or psychosocial disabilities, as well as peers without disabilities.

Delivery Agent and Setting: The program is delivered by volunteer "Amigo Connectors" under the oversight of Heads Up for Inclusion staff. Activities are conducted in community settings around Peterborough, such as local venues for live music, art spaces, or other accessible public locations. There is also an online portal that supports virtual engagement.

Participation Format: Primarily group-based. Participants attend monthly gatherings and public events, often supported by volunteers. While "Connectors" provide individual mentorship, the emphasis is on shared activities rather than structured one-to-one mentoring.

Outcomes: Intended outcomes include increased social connection, development of friendships, greater confidence, improved communication and social skills, and a sense of belonging. The program also aims to provide opportunities for volunteers to develop empathy and community awareness. However, there are no reported outcomes nor published evaluations.

Challenges & Limitations: The absence of reported outcomes and published evaluations means the effectiveness of the program remains unverified. Scaling the initiative would require recruitment and retention of additional trained volunteers, securing accessible venues and sustained funding. Applicability to participants with higher support needs is uncertain. Volunteers may vary in availability and training, and there is limited information on safeguarding procedures.

Funding: Not specified.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Not specified.

Name of Program: Friends: Connecting People with Disabilities and Community Members

Name of Organisation: Research & Training Center on Community Living, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota.

Country: United States (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

Website URL: https://ici.umn.edu/products/579

Description of Initiative: Friends is a community-building manual that helps people with disabilities foster belonging and relationships. It offers practical tools, including relationship mapping, strategies for identifying personal interests, and guidance on connecting with community members and establishing ongoing support.

Population Served: Primarily people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, though strategies are adaptable for those with other disabilities, including mental health conditions.

Delivery Agent and Setting: Designed primarily for agency staff, individuals, families and support networks. Implemented across diverse community settings, including workplaces, social clubs, faith communities and informal networks.

Participation Format: One-to-one

Outcomes: While the manual lacks formal independent evaluation, it is practice- and research-informed. Intended outcomes include increased community membership, deeper relationships, belonging, reduced social isolation, and stronger social networks.

Challenges & Limitations: Success relies on organisational commitment, time for planning, and persistence. The manual notes that not all connections succeed and emphasises the need for ongoing support to sustain relationships.

Funding: Provided by a grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research to the University of Minnesota's Research and Training Center on Community Living.

Cost of Initiative to Participant: Not specified.

Discussion

Social inclusion and belonging are a fundamental part of human life, and dedicated efforts are required to ensure that people with disability and high support needs are supported to connect with others and be part of their local communities.

This environmental scan found a small number of initiatives that are dedicated to supporting people with disability to overcome social isolation and build social connections which have published evidence of impact. While this initial Google search yielded many initiatives that promote social inclusion more generally, when the more strict screening criteria (contained within Table 1) were applied, most of these were screened out.

Of those that were included in the final yield, many use volunteer-based (or befriending) models, where activities are built around shared interests and informal social interaction.

Initiatives exist on a continuum, with disability-specific programs (e.g. M-ComConnect, Gig Buddies Sydney, Leisure Balance, Best Buddies Citizens Program) at one end and broader community "mainstream" inclusion models (e.g. Befriend, Men's Shed, Chatty Cafe) at the other, with the latter often noted as less suitable for people requiring structured or specialised support.

Some initiatives, such as Men's Sheds, do have a focus on activities and use these as a basis for promoting social inclusion and community participation. However, while Men's Sheds are activity based, their main aim is to support men to build social connections so they were included. In contrast to this, we screened out many initiatives because while social connections would likely be developed through participation, their main aim was more to support people to engage with activities with people who had the same interests. We question this choice to screen these out because having support to join activities with others is likely to provide the opportunity to develop social connections, and even friendships, providing the aim of the support is to build those social connections through the activity.

Many initiatives appear to welcome everyone, supporting people to participate when they can in mainstream settings in local communities. Many initiatives prioritise "natural relationships" and informal companionship over professional support (e.g. Befriend, Building Circles Social Buddies, Gig Buddies Sydney), with the aim to increase confidence, independence and community belonging.

There is evidence of several initiatives having a natural or implicit tapering off or reduction of support, where formal coordination decreases over time as natural friendships and community connections are meant to develop (e.g. Building Circles Social Buddies, Best Buddies Citizens Program). Many buddy and friendship models aim to facilitate independent relationships rather than ongoing service dependence (e.g. Leisure Buddies).

While many programs have limited published evidence on or evaluations of outcomes (Men's Shed, Chatty Cafe, Community Circle, Leisure Buddies), many programs report their "intended" benefits related to well-being, confidence and belonging/community participation. Many also have very limited information on costs.

While it was not our brief to evaluate initiatives, participation in many seems to often assume people can manage transport, costs and communication independently. Additionally, across the initiatives, we often identified sustainability and scalability as challenges due to dependence on volunteers, funding, accessible venues and staff capacity.

Conclusion

This hybrid environmental scan focused on approaches that foster belonging and social inclusion for people with disability in mainstream community settings, excluding segregated day programs for people with disability, app-only platforms, directories and models based primarily on paid companionship. Overall, the scan identified several promising community-based and largely volunteer-supported initiatives, but only a small number appeared to have strong evidence.

The most relevant approaches shared several features: they were low barrier, person-led, embedded in the mainstream/ordinary community settings and aimed to build sustainable social connection and community participation rather than ongoing service dependence. Strong models used coordination or facilitation to help socially isolated people explore local groups, activities and places to belong, while also building the capacity of mainstream organisations to be more inclusive. Several programs also showed evidence of tapered support, where formal support reduced over time as natural relationships and community engagement strengthened.

However, many programs identified in the scan were limited by weak outcome evidence, insufficient documentation, reliance on volunteers or lack of clear model implementation guidance. Some models offered useful lessons, specifically around matching, supported introductions, safeguarding, community connector roles, group facilitation, and sustaining participation in mainstream/ordinary settings.

Overall, the scan demonstrates that focused effort is required to connect people with disability and high support needs to social and community life. This is often done through volunteers, who choose to spend their time with people with disability. The scan points to the need to nurture places and spaces that enable mutual connections while also having structured approaches to support these relationships so that people with disability with high support needs can get the best out of, and contribute to, community life.

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Appendix 1 - AI extraction prompt

Prompt 1 – Initialise Extraction & Load Rules

You are assisting with a hybrid environmental scan of publicly available resources.

The purpose of this scan is to identify and extract neutral, factual information about programs, approaches, models, and interventions that support people with disability to build social connection, belonging, and community participation.

You will NOT conduct searching, browsing, or discovery.

Your role is to extract structured information from website resources already screened by the researcher as “Include” or “Possible.”

All outputs must be neutral, descriptive, and based only on explicit statements in the provided content.

Aim

Identify publicly available programs, approaches, models, tools, or initiatives that support social connection, belonging, inclusion, or community participation for people with disability.

Extract consistent structured information to support systematic comparison, synthesis, and analysis.

Scope of Initiatives

Resources may describe:

- Community Development Approaches – Initiatives that strengthen inclusive and connected communities.
- Individual Capacity-Building Approaches (1:1) – Initiatives that build individual skills, relationships, or participation opportunities.
- Community Connection Approaches – Initiatives that actively link individuals with local people, groups, or activities.

Inclusion Criteria

Phenomenon Of Interest

Include resources that aim to facilitate or strengthen social connection, belonging, inclusion, or community participation for people with disability.

Eligible resources may describe initiatives that:

- Promote friendship or social connection
- Reduce loneliness or social isolation
- Support inclusive community activities or events
- Build community capacity for disability inclusion
- Provide tools, frameworks, training, or guidance supporting inclusion
- Describe structured approaches to fostering belonging or participation

Resources Must:

- Explicitly reference people with disability, OR
- Describe inclusion approaches clearly transferable to disability contexts

Population

Adults aged 18–64 with disability, including:

- Intellectual disability
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Psychosocial disability
- Physical disability
- Neurological disability
    - Traumatic brain injury
- Sensory disability

Includes people with minor, moderate, or high support needs.

Countries

- Australia
- New Zealand
- United Kingdom
- Republic of Ireland
- United States
- Canada
- Sweden

- Norway
- Denmark

Language

- English

Timeframe

- 2016–2026
- Resources published before 2016 may be included if historically significant.

Outcomes of Interest

Programs or initiatives that report or aim to influence:

- Social connection
- Belonging
- Social inclusion
- Community participation
- Community integration
- Reduction in loneliness
- Strengthening informal networks
- Reduced reliance on paid supports
- Participation-related quality of life

Classification Categories

Resource Format

- Organisational website / webpage
- Program or service description page
- Resource hub
- Report or formal document
- Program material or promotional document
- Learning or training resource
- Not Specified

Delivery Setting

- Community-based
- Home, living, or residential setting
- Workplace or employment
- Online / virtual
- Not Specified

Participation Format

- Group-based
- 1:1 (one-on-one)
- Not Specified

Delivery Agent

- Organisational staff or facilitators
- Disability support workers
- Peer workers / lived experience facilitators
- Volunteers
- Allied health professionals
- Community partners / external facilitators
- Not Specified

Intervention Type

Capacity Building

Structured initiatives that intentionally develop knowledge, skills, or practices related to inclusion.

Examples include training, workshops, coaching, or facilitated learning.

Key question:

Does the initiative teach or build inclusion capacity?

Opportunity Creation

Programs that create opportunities for social participation without structured learning components.



Examples include social groups, events, or befriending programs.

Key question:

Does the initiative provide participation opportunities without training?

Tools, Frameworks, or Resources

Tools or systems that support connection or inclusion but do not deliver training directly.

Examples include apps, platforms, toolkits, or structured guidance materials.

Key question:

Does the initiative enable connection without teaching inclusion skills?

Classification Rule

Select one primary intervention type.

If multiple categories appear relevant, prioritise:

1. Capacity Building
2. Opportunity Creation
3. Tools / Frameworks / Resources

If the primary function cannot be determined → Not Specified.

Audience Type

- People with disability
- Families, carers, or support networks
- Disability workforce / service providers
- Community / general public
- Not Specified

Age Group

- Under 18
- 18–64
- 65+
- Not Specified



- Exclusion Criteria

Exclude resources that:

- Focus exclusively on children (under 18)
- Focus exclusively on older adults (65+) or aged care populations
- Are not available in English
- Target the general population with no disability relevance or transferability

Extraction Fields

Extract information for the following fields only:

- Organisation / Website
- Resource Title
- Resource URL
- Publication Year
- Country
- Resource Format
- Delivery Agent
- Delivery Setting
- Participation Format
- Intervention Type
- Aim
- Brief Summary (Max One Short Paragraph)
- Audience Type
- Age Group
- Inclusion Notes (Re. Screening Criteria)

Evidence Anchor Rule

All extracted information must be based only on explicit statements in the provided content.

Do NOT:

- infer intentions or outcomes
- assume program impacts
- interpret implied information



If information cannot be clearly determined from the resource:

- Publication Year → Year Not Stated
- All other fields → Not Specified

Output Structure Rule

When extraction occurs, responses must follow this exact field order:

- Organisation / Website:
- Resource Title:
- Resource URL:
- Publication Year:
- Country:
- Resource Format:
- Delivery Agent:
- Delivery Setting:
- Participation Format:
- Intervention Type:
- Aim:
- Brief Summary:
- Audience Type:
- Age Group:
- Inclusion Notes:

General Constraints

- Never hallucinate information.
- Never generate URLs.
- Do not follow external links.
- Do not conduct snowball searching.

System Instruction

Respond ONLY with:

- Stored. Ready For Extraction.

Prompt 2 – Extract Approved Targeted Website Resource

You will now extract structured information from one approved targeted website resource provided by the researcher.

Follow all rules, definitions, and constraints loaded in Prompt 1.

Your task is to extract factual information only and populate all predefined extraction fields.

Extraction Instructions

- Review the provided resource content carefully.
- Identify information explicitly stated in the text.
- Extract information only when clearly supported by the content provided.
- Use only the content provided in the researcher's message or attached file.
- Do not infer, interpret, assume, or rely on external knowledge.
- If information is missing or unclear, state this explicitly rather than inferring.
- If information is missing, record Not Specified.
- If the publication year cannot be identified, record Year Not Stated.
- If the resource is a hub or collection, extract at the hub level only and note this in Inclusion Notes.

Evidence Anchor Rule

All extracted fields must be supported by explicit statements in the resource.

Do NOT:

- infer program purpose
- infer outcomes
- assume delivery models
- rely on external knowledge

If a classification cannot be determined due to limited information, record Not Specified.

Neutrality Requirement

All responses must be:

- Neutral
- Descriptive



- Non-evaluative

Avoid language that implies effectiveness, impact, or outcomes unless this is explicitly stated in the resource.

Example:

- ✓ "The program connects participants with community groups and activities."
- ✗ "The program helps reduce loneliness by connecting participants with community groups."

Output Requirements

Present the extracted information under each field heading exactly as defined.

Use this exact structure and order:

- Organisation / Website:
- Resource Title:
- Resource URL:
- Publication Year:
- Country:
- Resource Format:
- Delivery Agent:
- Delivery Setting:
- Participation Format:
- Intervention Type:
- Aim:
- Brief Summary:
- Audience Type:
- Age Group:
- Inclusion Notes:

Additional Constraints

- Extract information for all predefined extraction fields.
- Do not add commentary.
- Do not add interpretation.
- Do not add additional sections.



- Do not change field names.
- Do not change field order.
- Do not provide analysis outside the template.

System Instruction

Respond ONLY with the extracted fields.



Prompt 3 – Reminder Prompt For Extraction Drift

The previous response did not follow the required output format.

Please extract the appropriate fields:

- Organisation / Website:
- Resource Title:
- Resource URL:
- Publication Year: (If Missing, Then “Year Not Stated”)
- Country: (If Missing, Then “Not Specified”)
- Resource Format:
- Delivery Agent:
- Delivery Setting:
- Participation Format:
- Intervention Type:
- Aim:
- Brief Summary: (Max One Short Paragraph)
- Audience Type:
- Age Group:
- Inclusion Notes: (Re. Screening Criteria)

No additional sections, categories, or restructuring

Re-extract the same resource using the original extraction criteria and respond in the correct format only.

Appendix 2 - Tools, frameworks and resources

Table 5: Tools, frameworks and resources for guiding social inclusion

Name of Resource	Organisation	URL	Country	Target Audience	Brief Resource Summary	Focus / Intended Outcome	Reason for Appendix Placement
Friends: Connecting People with Disabilities and Community Members	University of Minnesota	https://ici.umn.edu/products/579	United States	Agency staff, support coordinators, teachers, parents, and people with disability	A manual with accompanying activity worksheets, providing *how-to* strategies, including relationship mapping and interest identification, for building relationships between people with disability, the community and community members. Disability-specific.	A practical toolkit / curriculum for fostering community belonging and membership; not itself a delivered program.	A manual/ curriculum rather than an implemented initiative
Transition to Retirement: A Guide to Inclusive Practice	Australian Foundation for Disability (AFFORD) and Sydney University Press	https://www-jstor-org.ez.library.latrobe.edu.au/stable/j.ctt1cfr7ht	Australia	Support workers, mentors, and organisations planning a transition-to-retirement pathway for adults with disability	A practice manual with an accompanying DVD and downloadable forms, covering planning, locating community groups, recruiting / training mentors, and monitoring and ongoing support for transitioning older workers with disability into mainstream community or volunteer groups. Disability-specific.	A step by step implementation guide for the TTR model, rather than a description of the program's outcomes	A distinct how-to resource rather than a program entry
How can I support someone to feel more connected?	Befriend Inc.	https://befriend.org.au/articles/how-can-i-support-someone-to-feel-more-connected/	Australia	Family, friends, or paid support workers helping someone build connection	An article outlining Janet Klees' Four Pillars framework; shared interests, welcoming context, regularity, and meaningful contribution as a way to help a supporter nurture someone's connection. Not disability-specific.	Building friendship / belonging through intentional, everyday support; a framework rather than a specific initiative	General guidance / framework rather than a described initiative
Circles of Support for people with ABI; A guide to forming and resourcing	Inclusion Melbourne	https://inclusionmelbourne.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/CoS-for-	Australia	Adults with acquired brain injury; their families/allies; support	A practice guide to the Circles of Support model. 5–10 mostly unpaid members meeting regularly with a paid Facilitator to support goal-setting, decision making and connection. Disability-specific.	Natural, reciprocal relationships and community connection, with paid facilitation	A broader planning / safeguarding model

Name of Resource	Organisation	URL	Country	Target Audience	Brief Resource Summary	Focus / Intended Outcome	Reason for Appendix Placement
Circles of Support		ABI-info-brochure-page-spreads.pdf		coordinators; funders		designed to decrease over time	
The Inclusion Project	Hawks Community Foundation	https://www.hawkscommunityfoundation.org.au/the_inclusion_project	Australia	People with disability and their families attending AFL games (Hawthorn FC/MCG)	Provides sunflower lanyards, sensory maps and social stories, plus paid Inclusion Officers with lived experience of disability, to support attendees. Disability-specific.	Accessibility and reduced sensory stress at mainstream sporting events; also creates employment for staff with disability	Focus is accessibility support, not intentional friendship-building
Community Programs	Disability Gateway (Australian Government)	https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/leisure/community	Australia	People with disability, all states / territories	A government directory signposting to state-based community and leisure programs (sport, art, camps, online meetups). Disability-specific.	General participation and engagement signposting	Passive directory / referral service, not a single identifiable initiative.
The power of connection in brain injury recovery	Synapse	https://synapse.org.au/news/the-power-of-connection-in-brain-injury-recovery/	Australia	People with acquired brain injury and their support network / carers	An educational article on why social connection aids ABI recovery, citing peer-reviewed research; briefly references Synapse's own Reconnection Groups. Disability-specific.	Emotional / psychological support and reduced isolation during recovery	Insufficient detail provided on the referenced program itself