

2014 Annual General Meeting

June 22, 2015

Report from the Agency Director

I would like to start a report on 2014 with a thank you to the many who make Connections what it is, now in our 25th anniversary year. To our amazing In-Home team, our partners and funders, to our Board of Directors and many additional volunteers, and to our peer agencies, we are stronger because of the community that supports us.

There is tremendous support for families, with referrals, funding and programs led by the Alberta Government departments, Child and Family Services and Persons with Developmental Disabilities. In 2014, Connections' support to families was recognized as never before and it showed in our ability to derive funding for families that better align with the supports they need.

Connections was able to support a record 109 families during the year, maintaining a long-term relationship with 70 families at the end of 2014 and continuing into 2015. The reasons we were able to achieve this significant level of support are two-fold: we have an incredibly talented and devoted team of In-Home support people and we have growing and strengthening relationships with referring agencies and funders.

The families we support are gradually, and finally, more likely to be recognized as offering the best home for their children, relative to the alternatives of foster care and other unstable situations. The scales are now tipping towards the benefit of helping a family to be stable and successful against the cost of breaking the family up – through the courts and into foster care – with poor outcomes that result.

There are two additional reasons for Connections success in 2014. Connections has become a stronger organization over the past years. On top of the foundation of increasingly recognized, effective support to families is an organization that is growing its reputation without adding undue process or costs. We've not increased our infrastructure, like office or administrative costs despite more than tripling the amount of services being delivered.

There are many complexities in policy and in the government programs on which our families depend. But Connections is simple. We're focused on the simplicity of good parenting and strong families. We start with the basic idea that people who choose to be parents, who love their children, should be supported if needed to maintain a stable home. And that is all we do.

Through 2014, we were able to realize a new level of awareness of our agency and the issues for which we advocate. We were able to do this through:

- ◆ A new website, thanks to the creative talent of Freshwater Creative and the financial support of The Calgary Foundation, plus funding from the Community Initiatives Program;
- ◆ Invitations to speak at conferences, present to various government department teams and referrals from new sources, indicating the ripple effects of our work.

The result of our evolution and a more favourable funding climate was a surplus at year-end. We were under-funding our administrative support and had a thin front-line team for the amount of work being carried out through the year, a side effect of years of limited resources. Now with our funding in a more comfortable place, we've been able to invite two In-Home team members to expand their hours, a third In-Home team member has returned to the fold. We've augmented our administrative support with a more experienced person plus adding a contract accountant. We'll therefore see higher salary and contracting costs in 2015, more appropriate for the number of families we support.

New initiatives are now being evaluated and two will be pursued. First, we've expanded the hours of our contract counsellor so that she can head up a counselling group program to focus on healthy relationships. Most of the mothers we support are extremely vulnerable to abusive partners and often the threat to their parenting status is this.

Second, a program of Financial Coaching/Counselling has been evaluated with the idea of adding that expertise to the team.

When 95 percent of our families live in poverty, and financial instability reflects on their parenting capacity, it only makes sense to help our families with this aspect of their lives. However, this expertise is separate from social work in parenting and disability and the actual support is much more directive in style than is our parenting supports. It therefore is more likely to be a specific individual with the appropriate skills who will be sought for this role.

The opportunity to add this expertise could offer exciting potential for our client families, it is very welcome by our In-Home team who struggle with this aspect of families' challenges and there is potential to partner with United Way of Calgary and Prosper Canada who are championing this expertise as part of their mandate to end poverty. From another angle, this addition would mean that we offer counselling for emotional health and counselling for financial health.

Finally, 2015 offers a few opportunities to highlight Connections' 25th anniversary. We hosted a book event for "A Special Hell" that is the history of Michener Institution and eugenics in Alberta. We won support from The Calgary Foundation to scale up our annual picnic in August with more entertainment and the ability to host friends, supporters and members of the SunAlta community. We are conducting original research which we will present at a conference in August. We are hosting our first, annual Family Dinner fundraiser in September.

With a more solid financial footing, a brighter profile for Connections, a talented team and an augmented capacity, Connections had a remarkable year in 2014 which is reflected in our impact.

Thank you.

Erin Waite,
Agency Director