

## Reflections on 'The Blueprint' prototype

By Adrian Colp, HAL-Lab team member

Of all the prototype elements necessary for the successful implementation of this project, I would say that the element which most excites and interests me is that of Physical, Emotional and Social Safety. This element, in my opinion, can be coupled with another element of Community Care, Positive Relationships and Social Connection.

If these elements could be implemented in an affordable housing complex, they would have a wide array of benefits. It would mean that the affordable housing units for autistic adults would provide more than just "bricks and mortar." A roof over people's heads, while necessary, is far from enough. When physical, emotional and social safety are integral, it means that the tenants can relax to some degree and concentrate on other parts of their lives, other than just surviving. Housing security, together with trust that there will be safety and support, are the foundation of everything else.

When various aspects of safety and support are emphasized, it leaves room for individuals to grow and thrive, to put energy into developing social connection, positive relationships, be involved in job training, work and the learning of other skills, the fabric of normalcy and everyday life.

A housing complex that offers this safety and support would feel like a small village, a type of community that nourishes talents, abilities and energy of those who live there. Many autistic adults, especially older ones, may feel as though they are not really fully part of the general community, not totally accepted, treated as "other" and therefore may not really believe in themselves and in their power to contribute.

Many would have experienced bullying and felt ostracized. This is especially true in the case of autistic members of the LGBT community. There seems to be a higher number of people in this community who are also on the autism spectrum.

An all-welcoming place where autistic people of various races, genders, orientations, faiths and levels of functioning, that emphasized understanding and acceptance of differences, would help create a sense of community and family.

A safe, supportive environment would promote mental and physical health. Many people on the autism spectrum suffer from problems with mental illness such as anxiety and depression. At least some of these issues would be exacerbated by stress and lack of acceptance. So a secure, supportive environment would be likely to reduce the incidence and severity of these health issues, allowing them to have more energy and drive for relationships and possible work life.

The people involved would be a diverse mix. We would need funding from government, with an emphasis on the fact that autistic people who are securely housed and healthier both mentally and physically are likely to require less in the way of costly mental and physical health services and many could contribute by holding down full- or part-time jobs.

Organizations which are involved in the understanding and support of autistic people would be approached to help with fundraising ideas, a list of therapists educated in autism issues, organizations interested in training and hiring autistic people, and public education so that people do not have misinformation and any fears are allayed, possibly avoiding protests concerning housing a number of autistic people in their neighbourhood.

Private individuals such as parents of autistic children, especially in their teens and above, could be approached. Many of these young adults might like to move out of the family home and achieve as

much independence as possible, to live on their own in a supportive environment. Aging parents of adult children who live at home may be very concerned as to what will happen to their children when they pass away and would be eager to see the creation of a housing complex in which their adult child is happy, supported and secure after they are gone.

To be successful, the buildings would obviously require the money for construction, or refurbishment of existing buildings and funding to allow them to continue as affordable.

This might mean that not all of the units would house autistic people. Some might be occupied by informed, accepting, non-neurodivergent tenants, who can afford to pay market rent. The complex should have a screening requirement for all prospective tenants, to make certain that they are a good fit for safety and security reasons.

There should also be people to contact in the event of issues that will make certain that these are worked out in a prompt way. For community care, there should be a centralized list of available services, such as for therapy, medical doctors and job and training opportunities. And to promote social connection and positive relationships, there should be a common area for people to meet, as well as a room for activities such as fitness classes, art groups, perhaps video games, board games and ping pong.

If possible, there should be outside, surrounding space, or roof space, for a community garden. This would allow people to socialize in a comfortable way, do something satisfying, be productive and help reduce food costs.

Since I came in “in the middle of the movie,” with this project, I found it to be initially a little overwhelming, but exciting and filled with hope. Attending the meetings has allowed me to hear ideas and viewpoints from many people, from diverse lines of work.

It is becoming increasingly exciting and energizing. The more I hear, the more positive and hopeful I become.

As far as where this project goes next, I hope that testing of the prototype can soon be started, that a housing complex can be found and that funding and support can be raised to test the success of the blueprint. Success, I’m sure, would require adjustments and changes but could provide a new and better way of life, a new positive reality for many uncertain autistic adults because somebody cared.