

Program that helps intellectually disabled adults live independently gets provincial funding

The program, called Lights, finds 'house mentors' for adults who need them

By Philip Lee-Shanok, CBC News Posted: Apr 23, 2016 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Apr 23, 2016 5:00 AM ET



A unique program in Toronto that connects young adults with intellectual disabilities with "house mentors" so they can move out and learn to live on their own has received permanent funding from the Ontario government.

Started about five years ago, the Lights program grew out of one parent's the frustration over long waits for residential programs for adults with developmental disabilities.

In 2003, Mary Pat Armstrong decided to do make her own arrangements so her then 27-year-old daughter, Jenny, could live independently. But it wasn't cheap.

"I bought a home, hired a caregiver and found two other housemates to live in the house with her," said Armstrong.

The results were almost immediate, she said.

"She developed her own independence... she just thrived. It was so wonderful to see."

Knowing there were thousands of others on waiting lists for residential living — 27-hundred people in the City of Toronto alone —

'I seriously don't know if I'd be living independently if not for Lights.'

Karen Denton, 28

Armstrong wanted to offer an affordable way to allow independent living for these adult children and relief for aging and financially stressed parents.

So, she partnered with Community Living Toronto to set up Lights. The organization, funded by the United Way, provides services for thousands of intellectually disabled residents. It helped Armstrong with office, website and fundraising support.

The provincial government initially paid for a sole staff member temporarily. That position has recently been made permanent and Lights hired its second staff member on contract days ago.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Community and Social Services says its contribution to the Lights program is \$130,000 this year.

"They realized that Lights is now a proven program, that is not only working but highly desired by families who want to take control of their son or daughters' lives," said Armstrong.

The program has helped 33 families so far, and another 40 families hope to have sons and daughters out living on their own within the year. On top of that, Armstrong says another 150 families are interested.

"I seriously don't know if I'd be living independently if not for Lights," says Karen Denton, 28. "I don't know if I am ready yet to live out on my own without any support."

Denton has lived with a roommate, who is also intellectually disabled, and a house mentor for the past year and a half. They are in the middle of moving to a new rental and looking for a new mentor, said Denton.

"Somebody fun, somebody who likes to try new things, somebody who's open who I can talk to pretty much about anything."

A posting on Facebook reads: "Wanted: Female House Mentor working approximately 10 hours a week upstairs in a vital, community-based part-time job coaching two to three high-functioning young women with mild intellectual delay. Enjoy subsidized rent, unlimited Internet, free utilities and in-house laundry facilities. This position is perfect for university/college students or young working adults."

Her mother, Margaret Harper, is glad there is another option for caring for her daughter that allows her to be independent.

'Very safe environment'

"I know Karen is in a very safe environment with the support person around and her other

room mates around and she's in a happy living place and she's happy not living with a parent. She's said to me: 'Mum, I'm never moving home,'" said Harper.

Staff estimate the Lights program costs between \$30,000 to \$35,000 per person. The family is expected to shoulder 20 per cent of the cost, Lights and Community Living Toronto make up the remainder with fundraising.

Government allowances such as the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Passport help with the individual's portion of the household budget. Compare that to an estimated \$80-100,000 per person in for those specialized residences requiring intensive staff supports.

But Lights senior facilitator Laura Starret says it's not about cost cutting, since every individual has a unique set of requirements.

"The ministry provides supported independent living on one end and home residential settings with 24-7 care at the other end of the spectrum," she says. "Lights is filling a gap in a continuum of support."

The Ministry of Community and Social Services says innovative and affordable programs like Lights are part of a range of residential initiatives it funds for adults with developmental disabilities.

"Every individual has different needs. There is no one solution to those needs, which is why we also support a whole range of supports," said a spokesperson.

It says approximately 18,000 people get funding for living arrangements, such as, Supported Group Living, Supported Independent Living and Host Family residences, where people are paid for billeting adults with disabilities.

All these programs have evolved as government institutions that once cared for the intellectually disabled from cradle to grave were shut down.