

Building Data Capacity in Community Services

Case Study

In July 2021, **The Neighbourhood Group Community Services** (TNGCS) joined the Practitioner Data Initiative (PDI). Their aim was to enhance their data management capabilities, facilitating informed program development and improving service delivery across their community support services.

TNGCS joined PDI to better track and respond to community needs, optimize efficiency, improve data-informed decision-making and strengthen advocacy efforts. They also aimed to address the challenges of merging with two organizations and a major transformation of Employment Ontario, Ontario's provincially-funded employment and training service network.

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FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

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About TNGCS

Founded in 1911, TNGCS stands as a cornerstone of Toronto's community services sector, consistently expanding its reach and impact. TNGCS's programs range from childcare and community development to employment services and supportive housing, all designed to engage the skills and talents of community members and foster a vibrant and inclusive society. TNGCS's mission is to support individuals at every stage of their lives, promote independence and dignity, and enhance community engagement.

47,000+

people improve their lives each year through TNGCS's services

1,000

staff

600

volunteers

40

locations across the Greater Toronto Area

By providing tailored support and advocacy, TNGCS helps individuals set and achieve their personal and professional goals, contributing to the building of a resilient and thriving community.



CENTRAL NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE
NEIGHBOURHOOD LINK
ST. STEPHEN'S COMMUNITY HOUSE

What is the Practitioner Data Initiative (PDI)?

PDI is a pan-Canadian initiative that combines Blueprint's expert consultation and strategic support with a one-time financial investment of \$100-200K from the Future Skills Centre (FSC).

PDI responds to the challenges nonprofits face in harnessing the power of their own data to improve their services and impact. As part of PDI, Blueprint marries financial investment with trusted and technology-neutral advice grounded in deep expertise with program data, technology solutions and nonprofit service delivery.

Through a series of collaborative workshops and capacity-building activities, PDI:

- Articulates an organization's goals for data storytelling and how their data collection is tied to outcomes and impact
- Assesses an organization's current data capacity, with a review of processes, technologies and skills, culminating in a roadmap for improving data capacity
- Provides ongoing coaching and support as the implementation of the roadmap begins

PDI engagements last 12-24 months with opportunities to participate in peer learning events with other PDI partners.

“This is my first example of completing a project, seeing the benefits and continue its momentum forward. It's because Blueprint knows what they're talking about. They have all the right tools and all the right advice. It works—the magic works.”

– Angela Barrass, Quality Assurance and Customer Service Manager



Challenges

When TNGCS joined PDI, they encountered challenges that are common in the nonprofit sector, especially among organizations undergoing structural changes or integration processes. A recent merger brought together two organizations, each at different stages of their data capacity journey:

- **Disparate Systems:** There was significant disparity in the data management capabilities between the merged employment sites. This imbalance made it difficult to harmonize operations and effectively leverage data across the organization. The Covid-19 pandemic further strained these integration efforts, which fueled staff resistance due to increased workload and rapid changes.
- **Pending Employment Ontario Transformation:** Anticipating Employment Ontario's transition, TNGCS moved to a centralized management and data integration models. They prepared for significant disruptions and elimination of programs and funding. This is especially crucial given Employment Ontario services comprise a large component of their work. This preparation included the adoption of comprehensive digital platforms and enhanced data analytics capabilities. Previously the lack of advanced tools—including personalized reports and dashboards—hindered performance tracking and compliance demonstration.

Impact of PDI

Shifting to a Data Culture

With the strategic support of PDI, TNGCS effectively established crucial roles within their organizational structure, specifically initiating the Data Champion role, which was pivotal in spearheading efforts to enhance data quality and literacy across the organization. This role served as a central point for fostering a data culture, catalyzed by PDI funding. As momentum built, the role evolved and transitioned into a Quality Assurance Manager, and the team expanded to also include a Data Strategy Manager role. This evolution was instrumental in enhancing TNGCS's data governance and management capabilities:

- **New Functions:** The Quality Assurance Manager role focused on standardizing data practices across the newly merged sites, ensuring data privacy and alignment with industry best practices. Meanwhile, the Data Strategy Manager has been pivotal in developing strategies that leverage data to inform decision-making and operational improvements.
- **Culture Shift:** These new roles facilitated a cultural shift within TNGCS, where data-driven decision-making became a core organizational value. Regular training sessions, workshops, standing agenda items at team meetings and individualized support meetings were introduced to engage staff at all levels, making data a central element of daily operations. These activities not only increased staff competency in handling data but also enhanced their appreciation of how data can impact service delivery and client outcomes.



“Now everybody can have their own dashboard [...] where they can identify clients who are struggling and provide the right support. [...] We were able to look at our data and say: “this is who you’re serving and here are strategies to help them move closer to the labour market.” Without PDI, we would be more behind in that.”

– **Kim Patel, Vice President, Employment and Training Services**

Enhanced Data Processes and Strategic Alignment for Service Improvement

The leveraging of their existing SharePoint systems to support automation and the introduction of a sophisticated data reporting tools marked a significant enhancement in TNGCS's operational efficiency and strategic planning:

- **Process Improvements:** Automation of previously manual data processes has significantly reduced the time and effort required to manage data, freeing up resources to focus on core service delivery. This change has been crucial in preparing for the Employment Ontario transformation by ensuring that TNGCS can meet new compliance standards efficiently.
- **Strategic Reporting and Dashboards:** The deployment of personalized staff results reports and dynamic dashboards has transformed TNGCS's approach to performance tracking. These tools provide real-time insights into service effectiveness, client engagement and program outcomes, facilitating rapid adjustments to service delivery as needed.

With enhanced data processes, TNGCS is now better positioned to analyze the effectiveness of their programs, identify service gaps and make informed decisions to tailor services to client needs. This strategic alignment is crucial for TNGCS to continue providing the best possible outcomes for clients.

What's Next?

As TNGCS moves forward, their strategic initiatives are clear:

- With the critical roles of Data Strategy Manager and Quality Assurance Manager now well-established, TNGCS plans to deepen the integration of data into everyday decision-making. This will support ongoing organizational alignment and help maintain data-driven practices across the organization.
- TNGCS plans to use their enhanced data insights to respond to evolving client needs in the face of employment sector shifts. This includes adapting their services to better align with the latest trends and demands, ensuring they remain at the forefront of service provision.

Sustainability

TNGCS is confident that they will be able to sustain the enhancements and initiatives developed through PDI. TNGCS has demonstrated the value of enhanced data processes, which has garnered internal support and strengthened their case for funding going forward. The systems and structures now in place allow TNGCS to adapt to changes in employment services, especially when it comes to new funding models and compliance requirements. As the groundwork is laid for robust data management, TNGCS now has evidence and language to articulate the benefits of enhanced data practices, strengthening their case for future funding opportunities.

As a consortium partner of the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint works with partners and stakeholders to collaboratively generate and use evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges. To learn more about how Blueprint is helping to build data capacity among frontline nonprofits across Canada, visit: www.blueprint-ade.ca. To learn more about the Future Skills Centre, a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development, www.fsc-ccf.ca.