FORGING A FUTURE OF BELONGING

Building Awareness and Will
for a Canada-Wide Strategy

TAMARACK INSTITUTE

FORGING A FUTURE OF BELONGING:

Building Awareness and Will for a Canada-Wide Strategy

Belonging sits at the heart of strong, vibrant communities. In the face of loneliness, social isolation, and polarization, this publication sheds light on the insights, aspirations, and actions voiced by communities across Canada in 2024 on building belonging and shaping more equitable futures. Through stories of communities and practitioners in action, the Tamarack Institute hopes to ignite courageous partnerships to bring belonging to the forefront of Canada-wide efforts to end poverty in all its forms.

– Tamarack Institute

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Acronyms

- ABCD – Asset-Based Community Development
- CBB – Communities Building Belonging
- CBYF – Communities Building Youth Futures
- CCT – Community Climate Transitions
- CEP – Communities Ending Poverty
- CoA – Circle of Actions
- S4B – Strategy for Belonging
- STC – Systems Transformers Cohort (renamed in 2025 to Pathways for Change)

Executive Summary

At a time marked by division, polarization, and seemingly innumerable global crises, belonging is the cornerstone for societal well-being and prosperity. This report, Forging a Future of Belonging: Building Awareness and Will for a Canada-Wide Strategy, draws upon the collective insights of hundreds of individuals who have contributed towards shaping the Tamarack Institute's call for a Strategy for Belonging. It summarizes the insights, aspirations, and actions shared by communities in 2024 on building belonging and shaping more equitable futures.

The Urgent Need for Belonging

As articulated by Kim Samuel in a March 2025 Psychology Today article, a global **deficit** of belonging is evident (Samuel, 2025). This deficit manifests in heightened feelings of isolation, diminished social cohesion, and a weakened capacity for collective action.

The **consequences** are profound, impacting individual quality of life, community resilience, and the very fabric of our democratic institutions. In the face of public health emergencies, housing and affordability crises, climate disasters, and acts of extremism, the strength of our social bonds becomes paramount. Building belonging is not merely a social ideal; it is a fundamental necessity for creating communities that thrive.

Community Voices and Insights

This report synthesizes the rich tapestry of perspectives gathered through 8 community conversations and numerous workshops, interviews, and webinars. These dialogues have provided invaluable insights into individual and collective experiences and the aspirations for a more cohesive society. Participants across Canada have shared their reflections on the essential components of a Strategy for Belonging, emphasizing the need for collaboration rooted in trust and solidarity and the inclusion of diverse voices.

Youth Perspectives: A Focus on the Future

Recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities faced by young people, this report dedicates a section to youth perspectives. Drawing upon the findings of the Communities Building Youth Futures network (Tamarack Institute, 2024b), it highlights the profound impact of belonging on youth's sense of meaning and purpose. This focus underscores the importance of centring youth voices in the development of a Canada-wide belonging strategy, ensuring that their needs and aspirations are reflected in its design.

Key Strategy Design Considerations

The report offers critical considerations for the design of a robust and effective Strategy for Belonging. These include:

- **Equity and Justice:** Ensuring that the Strategy prioritizes the inclusion of equity-denied groups.

- **Community-Led Initiatives:** Enabling communities to develop and implement solutions that address their specific needs.

- **Mutual Aid and Solidarity:** Fostering community-driven support systems and collective action to address systemic inequities and build shared resilience and regenerative capacity.

- **Intersectional Approaches:** Recognizing the complex interplay of factors that influence belonging.

- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** Utilizing evidence-based research to inform strategy development and implementation.

- **Meeting in the Middle:** Finding common ground while collaborating across sectors.

Vision for 2025 and Beyond

Looking ahead, this report articulates a vision for a future where belonging is deeply embedded in our social fabric. This vision encompasses:

- **Building Awareness and Will:** The Strategy can promote community awareness and action by supporting context-specific initiatives and facilitating continuous dialogue and learning across community networks.

- **Transforming Skills and Knowledge:** The Strategy can contribute towards developing robust metrics to assess the impact of belonging initiatives and fostering next-generation leadership capabilities to build belonging through strategic plans and interventions.

- **Enabling Systems-Wide Support:** The Strategy can provide a Canada-wide framework for belonging that guides policy and practice.

Engagement Opportunities

The report outlines a range of engagement opportunities to contribute to informing the call for this Strategy. These include the Strategy for Belonging Working Group, webinar series, Communities of Practice, cohorts, and more.

Reimagining Our Social Contract

We hope the Strategy can serve as an invitation and a call to action to reimagine our social contract, envisioning a future where belonging is not merely an aspiration but a fundamental right for all. This requires a courageous commitment to dismantling systemic barriers, embracing possibilities, and building a society where everyone feels valued and experiences a sense of meaning and purpose.

Introduction

Context

The Tamarack Institute is a charitable organization with over 20 years of experience building the capacity of changemakers. We exist to end poverty in all of its forms: economic poverty, relational poverty, the poverty of education inequities, and the poverty of our relationship to our planet and other living beings.

Tamarack works with communities that are committed to redesigning ineffective systems, solving complex problems at multiple scales, and generating change that improves conditions of well-being for everyone in a given place. Tamarack's priority between 2025 and 2030 is to support communities in developing resident-driven, place-based approaches (Cabaj & Cheuy, 2024) to improve human and planetary well-being, making it not just the "bright spot," but the norm.

Tamarack also works to support local communities around six practice areas for impact: asset-based community development, collaboration, community engagement, collective leadership, community innovation and, evaluating impact.

Tamarack's expertise in building the capacity of changemakers received global recognition in 2022, when the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship named the Tamarack Institute as one of four inaugural recipients of its Collective Social Innovation Award. Tamarack's Communities Ending Poverty network was responsible for the largest public consultations in the development of Canada's first national poverty reduction strategy. Our work supporting Canada's early poverty reduction success, contributing to over 1 million Canadians exiting poverty, was recognized in the New York Times (Born, 2019) in the article "Winning the War on Poverty."

Since 2016, Tamarack has worked alongside municipalities, individuals, and organizations across North America to build more connected communities by strengthening belonging and addressing the root causes and impacts of loneliness, polarization, and social isolation. Over the years, our understanding and practice of belonging have been shaped by significant global and local events: climate emergencies, the COVID-19 pandemic, global conflicts, growing division and polarization, and many other micro- and macro-level shifts. Through these moments of disruption, belonging has consistently emerged as a profound aspiration – a shared human need to feel valued, respected, and able to shape our future.

Belonging can take many forms, shaped by individual, community, and cultural contexts.

At the Tamarack Institute, belonging is a practice with deep roots in equity principles. It is an ongoing effort that requires intentional actions at individual,

community, and systems levels to create more caring, connected, and just societies. Belonging is critical for deep social change efforts because it can enable individuals to experience a sense of purpose and agency. We invite you to view this report as the beginning of a dialogue to explore how belonging intersects with your own work.

> " Belonging is as a subjective feeling of connection to places, people, and collective experiences. It is the fundamental human need to be in relationship with others, to be known, noticed, and missed. More than a concept, belonging is a practice requiring intentional action at the individual, community, and systems levels.
>
> – Tamarack Institute

This publication reflects on our 2024 learning and action journey – what we did, what we learned, the implications for Tamarack's movement on belonging, the partners who joined this movement, and our aspirations for 2025 and beyond.
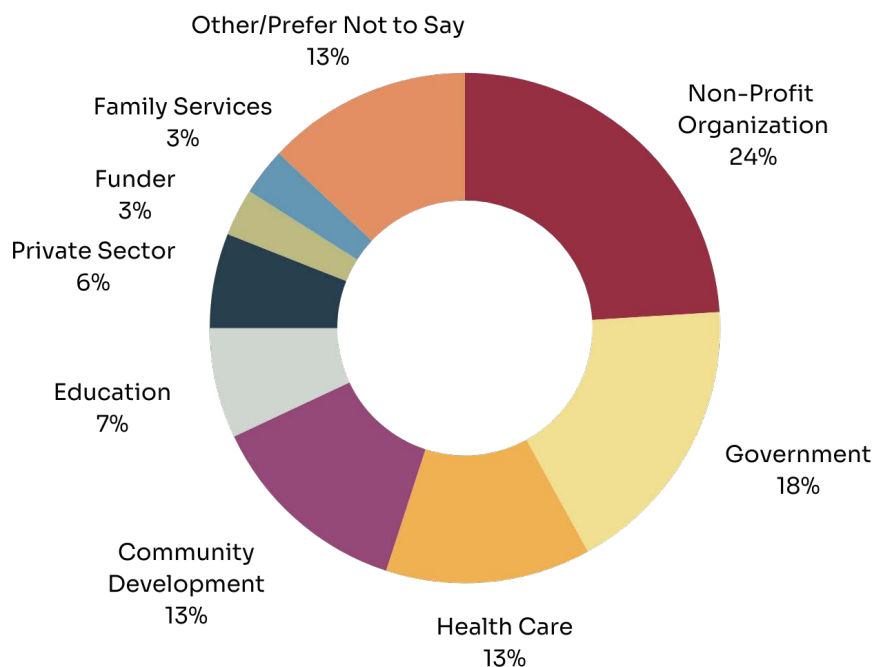
This publication also captures emerging themes from our 2024 conversations on the Strategy for Belonging and outlines the next steps for deepening collaboration across sectors to support this call to action.

We express our gratitude to all who contributed to the Strategy process and to those seeking to explore further their reflections on belonging as the antidote to loneliness, polarization, extremism, and social isolation. This publication, while not a research paper on the state of belonging in Canada, an impact report, or a public policy brief, initiates a dialogue that can lead to deeper conversations and action.

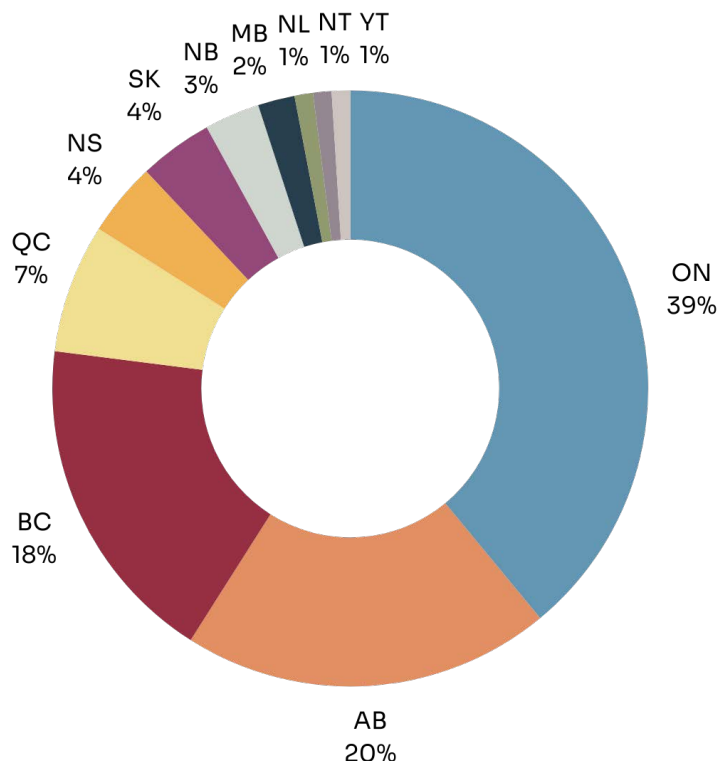**The Case for a Canada–Wide Strategy for Belonging**

In 2024, the movement for a Strategy for Belonging served as a platform for individuals to connect and collectively advocate for making belonging a fundamental policy priority and outcome. We convened virtual and in-person conversations across Canada, reaching over 7,000 learners and over 1,000 individuals who support this movement.

Pledge Supporters by Sector

Sector	%
Non-Profit Organization	24%
Government	18%
Health Care	13%
Community Development	13%
Other/Prefer Not to Say	13%
Education	7%
Private Sector	6%
Family Services	3%
Funder	3%

Pledge Supporters by Province/Territory

Province/Territory	%
ON	39%
AB	20%
BC	18%
QC	7%
NS	4%
SK	4%
NB	3%
MB	2%
NL	1%
NT	1%
YT	1%

Our Call for a Strategy in Numbers

1,230 Belonging Pledge Supporters

8 Workshops and Webinars

13 Circle of Actions Communities

5 Community Conversations

3 In-Person Conversations: Toronto (ON), St. Andrews (NB), Montreal (QC)

Through all of the activities we carried out as part of this work, we identified nine recurring themes that now guide our work and inform our next steps into 2025. These themes, which we will discuss in detail through this report, focus on:

1. **Belonging as a protective factor against poverty** and the vulnerabilities poverty brings.

2. **Community-led storytelling** holds transformative potential for fostering connection.

3. **Youth voices** must be centred in future-oriented conversations about belonging.

4. **Safe and affordable housing** is a key social determinant of belonging.

5. **Strategic social infrastructure investments** cultivate public spaces that build trust and strengthen community cohesion.

6. **Fostering belonging** is essential to **build resilience and enable regeneration** during climate, safety, or public health emergencies.

7. **Community finance infrastructure** is instrumental in supporting community-led belonging initiatives.

8. **Building courageous collaborations** means that governments, organizations, and institutions must serve as facilitators, amplifiers, and connectors, while centring the lived experiences of those impacted by exclusion to enable community-led change.

9. To authentically address these themes, we must dismantle power imbalances by providing equity-denied individuals with access to resources and leadership opportunities. Without **equity-centred collaboration**, belonging initiatives risk being perceived as performative, imposed, or programmatic, rather than authentic, relational, and trust-based.

We recognize that the conversations from 2024 are just a starting point. While more dialogue is essential, the urgency to act on issues such as polarization, poverty, extremism, and loneliness cannot be overstated. Dialogue must be coupled with bold action to create equitable conditions for all to thrive.

Our work is driven by a constant aspiration: **to cultivate communities where people know and care for each other, feel safe, and recognize their neighbours.** From movie nights in residential spaces to investments in third spaces, municipal plans for belonging, we aspire to have principles, policies, and practices that contribute to communities committed to solidarity, equity, and justice. The Strategy offers a transformative pathway to fulfil other key aspirations:

Steward Collaborative Leadership: A Canada-Wide Strategy for Belonging can bring together cross-sector collaboration to share resources and expertise. This synergy can enable communities to develop impactful plans and solutions, leveraging the collective wisdom and skills of leaders across sectors to tackle loneliness, polarization, and extremism.

Amplify Local Voices: At the heart of the Strategy lies a commitment to centring everyone's voices, particularly those of individuals with lived/living experience of othering. Doing so requires recognizing the role of individuals as co-creators of change rather than passive recipients. This participatory approach will ensure that solutions are not only relevant and effective but also deeply rooted in our shared aspirations.

Drive Population-Level Impact: A Strategy will enable population-level change by encouraging municipalities across Canada to commit towards having a plan for building belonging. Through these localized efforts, the Strategy could help municipalities achieve a measurable increase in the reported sense of belonging among individuals, fostering a healthy, prosperous, and equitable future.

Making Belonging a Policy Priority and Outcome

To ensure that belonging becomes a concrete policy priority and outcome, the following three conditions are essential:
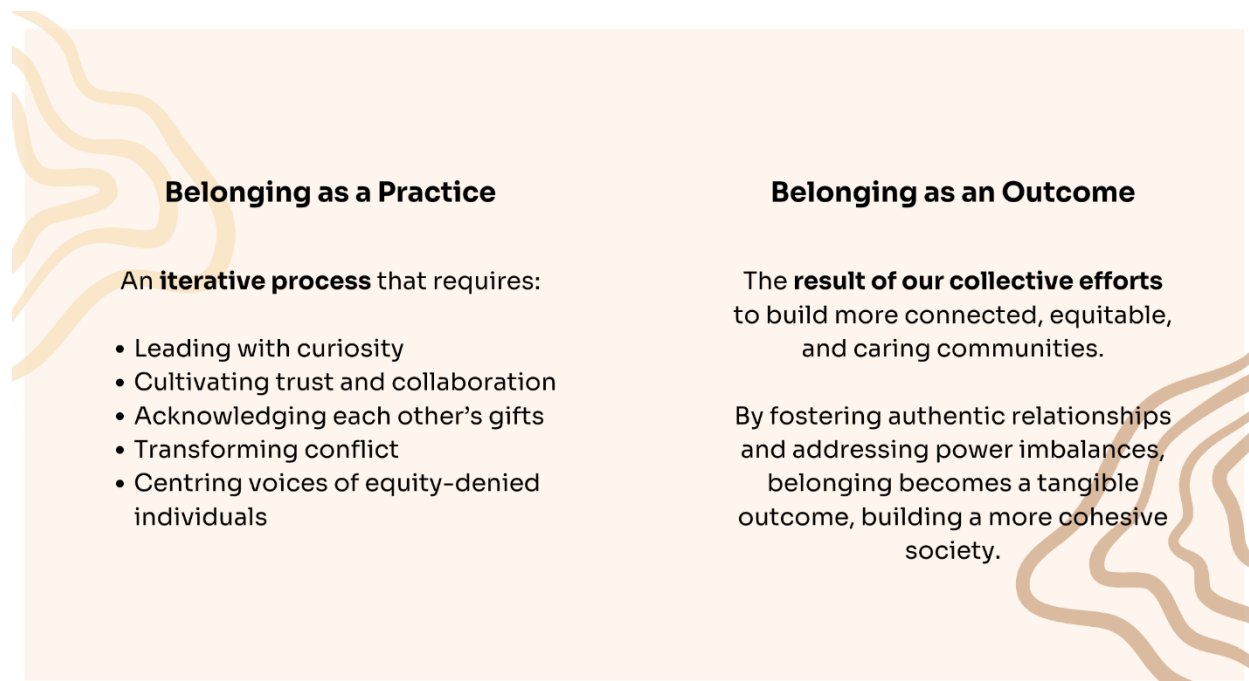
Steward power redistribution and democratic competencies: Governments, organizations, and institutions have a role to play as facilitators, amplifiers, and connectors. In assuming these roles, it's critical to address power imbalances. Deliberate power redistribution and increased democratic competencies (Laidler, 2021) are essential to making belonging accessible and equitable for all.

Find common ground: Reaching our goals for equity and accessibility requires that we meet people where they are at, understanding that individuals have unique skills, talents, and perspectives to bring.

Inspire leadership: The creation of a future of belonging hinges on our collective ability to inspire leadership in one another. We must build partnerships that shift power and sustain a vision of futures that are equitable, regenerative, and trust-centred.

Igniting Belonging through Collaboration and Action

Belonging is an "all hands-on deck" quest. **It not only requires all of us but also impacts all of us.** At the Tamarack Institute, we have shaped and been shaped by belonging. Amid major shifts and crises locally and internationally, we have been engaged in dialogue and action with the shared purpose of building awareness and will for a Canada-Wide Strategy for Belonging that centres local perspectives on belonging and turns them into conversations on economic prosperity and well-being. What has become apparent throughout this period is that belonging is a practice and an outcome.

Belonging as a Practice

An **iterative process** that requires:

- Leading with curiosity
- Cultivating trust and collaboration
- Acknowledging each other's gifts
- Transforming conflict
- Centring voices of equity-denied individuals

Belonging as an Outcome

The **result of our collective efforts** to build more connected, equitable, and caring communities.

By fostering authentic relationships and addressing power imbalances, belonging becomes a tangible outcome, building a more cohesive society.

As a practice, belonging is not about checking boxes or finding quick fixes for fractured societies. It is an iterative process that requires leading with curiosity, cultivating trust and collaboration (Weaver, 2024), acknowledging and leaning on each other's gifts and assets (Keam, 2019), transforming conflict (Hassen, 2024) and, most importantly, centring the voices and leadership of those who have been (and who still are) historically and systemically marginalized.

Such an iterative process requires an intentional allocation of time and labour, valuing multiple ways of learning and being, navigating nuance and contradiction, and committing to collaboration over competition. It should be noted that building belonging runs counter to the characteristics of white supremacy, as identified by Tema Okun in her article, White Supremacy Culture (2021). Specifically, fostering a sense of belonging runs counter to the characteristics of binary thinking (either/or approaches), urgency, perfectionism, individualism, and defensiveness.

As an outcome, belonging is the result of our collective efforts to build more connected, equitable, and caring communities. It can manifest as the result of a shared equity-driven aspiration in many of our current movements for change. It is the aspiration of municipal leaders who are co-developing plans for belonging and community safety with individuals with living experience of exclusion. It can also be the aspiration of champions for just climate transitions who want to ensure that no one is left behind through their advocacy work. And it can be the aspiration of many leaders from across sectors who are committed to ending poverty in all its forms by making room for those individuals who are most affected by poverty to lead change. Belonging as an outcome invites us to see our work as interconnected, reminding us that a future of belonging for all requires a shared effort.

Across Canada, individuals are driving change towards a more equitable future through diverse movements. We believe that intentionally integrating belonging as a core practice strengthens these efforts. By fostering authentic relationships and addressing power imbalances, belonging becomes a tangible outcome, building a more cohesive society.

At the Tamarack Institute we aim to **"learn in public."** This includes keeping our channels of communication open so we can receive feedback, holding open and unstructured conversations to respond to emergent questions, and reflecting on impact and lessons learned to share back with communities. We feel fortunate to have a wealth of partners alongside us to learn from – partners who are equally committed to building belonging across multiple contexts, particularly in this time of increased polarization and amidst a loneliness epidemic (Murthy, 2023).

Through learning in public, one of the key lessons we have gained is that belonging is both a non-linear process and a subjective feeling that – as Kim Samuel notes in *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (2023) – requires each of us to examine our relationship to people, power, place, and purpose. Leading from a connection to place and people is paramount and illuminates our purpose and understanding of power. The value of place-based work was aptly demonstrated in a 2024 Tamarack webinar on Belonging through Foodways and Community Economies (Tamarack Institute, 2024f). In it, speakers Lori McCarthy and Crystal Anstey detailed how growing, harvesting, and sharing food in their community had deepened their

sense of belonging to their community and to the land they live on – over generations. In their words, "Food and food stories remind people how similar we are."

Building on this sentiment of the role of connection to place in building belonging, we convened 13 teams from across Canada to develop plans and interventions for community belonging through our first Circle of Actions cohort in 2024. Informed by their unique contexts (places), communities (people), and curiosities (purpose), the participating teams gathered to build knowledge and skills to increase the impact of their on-the-ground efforts to address loneliness by building belonging, levelling power imbalances, and creating more equitable futures (power).

Communities Building Belonging
Circle of Actions
2024 Cohort Members

- City of Spruce Grove, AB
- Minivillage (Vancouver, BC)
- Vancouver, BC
- City of New Westminster, BC
- Happy Community Project (NS)
- Halifax, NS
- Winnipeg, MB
- City of Timmins, ON
- Sudbury, ON
- Independent (Laval, QC)
- Huron Perth Public Health (ON)
- KW Habilitation (Kitchener - Waterloo, ON)
- City of Cambridge, ON
- Toronto, ON:
  - Jane/Finch Centre
  - Reset (Little Jamaica)
  - marketcityTO

● 2024 Circle of Actions Members
● 2024 Circle of Actions Member: L'Arche Canada Coalition

Image: A map of the 13 Circle of Actions teams geographically distributed across Canada.

Connected to the Circle of Actions and acknowledging the uniqueness of each participating community, we concurrently facilitated a Systems Transformers Cohort to provide leadership training for individuals from participating Circle of Actions teams who have experienced othering.

What Is Othering?

Drawing on the work of Clint Curle (2020), former vice-president of Research and Exhibitions at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, we understand othering as the act of focusing on difference to erode the sense of shared humanity and connectedness. As Curle outlines, othering reduces empathy and hinders genuine dialogue, paving the way for discrimination or persecution.

Systems Transformers participants were nominated by their Circle of Actions teams to engage in a nine-month learning journey, building their leadership skills to support their respective communities. In addition to monthly personalized coaching sessions, Systems Transformers participants completed complementary training with community engagement practitioners. Choosing between Life.School.House folk-school training and Block Connectors (Hadekel, 2021) training, the participants developed relationships that extended their immediate circles and enhanced their skills in facilitation and community leadership.

> " I enjoy hearing people's ideas and finding ways to weave them together for action. It feels like magic.
>
> – Systems Transformers Cohort Participant

The Circle of Actions and Systems Transformers cohorts are vital threads in Canada's expanding movement for belonging. The collective experiences – successes, challenges, and lessons learned – have directly informed (Mbũrũ & Garza, 2024c) the call for a Strategy for Belonging. They have powerfully demonstrated the necessity for all levels of government to prioritize belonging and support community-led initiatives to foster it.

These community stories have ignited Canada-wide conversations, positioning belonging as a vital response to the crises of loneliness, polarization, and isolation. To translate this awareness into lasting change, we must build next-generation leadership skills grounded in equity, solidarity, and courage. By cultivating our collective capacity to lead change, we can shift societal norms, ultimately enabling system-wide support for belonging as a fundamental human right.

The Circle of Actions and Systems Transformers cohort conversations culminated with EngageFest!, Tamarack's annual event with virtual and in-person activities. The event took place in October 2024 and brought together cohort participants and movement supporters to engage in a series of conversations that were foundational in setting and shaping the language, clarity, and audacity to advocate for a Strategy for Belonging. Through this process, it became clear that storytelling and story-listening (The Communications Network, 2023) are key for connection.

In the same spirit, this report weaves in stories from movement supporters and colleagues. We honour them and all those who advocate and diligently work towards strengthening belonging and social cohesion.

Building Awareness and Will: Perspectives from Communities across Canada

The 2024 dialogues detailed here have been instrumental in developing our vision for a belonging strategy. We acknowledge the invaluable contributions of hundreds of local champions across Tamarack's Networks for Change whose foundational work enabled our progress, including our partners who have been providing valuable feedback since 2023, guiding our transition from Cities Deepening Community to Communities Building Belonging. Our gathering in St. Albert, Alberta, marked a key milestone, demonstrating the need to prioritize belonging to foster vibrant and welcoming communities. To further explore the connection between belonging and Tamarack's Networks for Change, we invite you to review the Communities Building Youth Futures Impact Report (Tamarack Institute, 2024b), as well as the Tamarack publications from Communities Climate Transitions and Communities Ending Poverty that link belonging to climate action and poverty reduction, respectively.

Reflections from Canada-Wide Conversations

> " I'm here because I think belonging is the solution to physical, social, spiritual distress many people are going through.
>
> – Participant in the November 6, 2024, Community Conversation

Between June and November 2024, Tamarack hosted five conversations where we invited people and organizations to respond to questions that would help guide the design of the call for a Strategy for Belonging and make policy recommendations. The conversations took place on June 12 and 28, September 19, October 31, and November 6 and 19, 2024.

Participants included public health practitioners, municipal staff in rural areas and large cities, community development managers, non-profit staff, anti-poverty advocates, artists, activists, educators, newly retired individuals, and more. As people joined the conversations, they also shared their reasons for coming.

> " I am an advocate for basic income and I'm here to learn more how to encourage people to consider themselves part of the solution to ensure everyone thrives in our society.
>
> – Participant in the November 6, 2024, Community Conversation

We asked the following guiding questions to frame the purpose and desired outcomes of our conversations:

- What would make this Strategy useful to you in the work that you do?

- What are key components of a Strategy for Belonging that are essential for it to be successful?

- Who is missing from this conversation that must be part of designing the Strategy for Belonging?

- What else should we include in the conversations to co-create a Strategy?

Through sharing data, stories, and visions of the future, the movement for belonging gained a life and momentum of its own, culminating with over 1,150 people as of February 2025 who have signed the pledge to support the work of co-creating a Strategy for Belonging.

Despite their diverse backgrounds, participants shared a common belief: belonging is key to addressing socio-economic and political stressors. They cited shared barriers – limited funding, time, institutional silos, and community priorities – and expressed enthusiasm for long-term belonging efforts.

> " This work takes time, it is not automatic for people to feel welcomed, but people are willing to build bonds quickly when adequately resourced.
>
> – Participant in the November 6, 2024, Community Conversation

Below is an overview of 10 key takeaways from participant reflections.

1. **Building Belonging Requires More Than Specific, One-Time Interventions**

While the idea of building a sense of belonging might sound simple for some, it can take effort, dedication, and investment of time. This brings awareness to the reality that building belonging does not thrive on quick fixes. Rather, it is a series of decisions and actions that, over time, facilitate connection between people and among groups.

> " It takes more than an event to build belonging.
>
> – Participant in the June 12, 2024, Community Conversation

Participants remarked on insufficient funding and time constraints, which impeded the sustainable design and execution of long-term belonging initiatives. Community-led, place-based initiatives are crucial to the resilience of local communities. However, without the support of governments, philanthropy, and other sectors, the impact and reach of these initiatives might be hampered. Cross-sector collaboration not only optimizes resource efficiency but also creates an opportunity for asset-based community building, where the strengths of individuals, communities, governments, and institutions are recognized and amplified.

> " Having a strategy document that highlights the importance of belonging is critical. However, we must also find ways to integrate belonging to existing strategies so that we do not duplicate and waste resources.
>
> – Participant in the June 12, 2024, Community Conversation

2. Funding and Time Constraints Undermine Sustainable Efforts to Build Belonging

Without adequate funding, dedicated staff, and flexible schedules, changemakers struggle to consistently deliver initiatives aimed at fostering belonging. These constraints force organizations to launch short-term programs, hindering their desire for a generational approach to belonging.

> " Groups and service organizations are already stretched. Bringing them to the table can be a challenge; it comes as another thing on their plate. Everyone can recognize the importance of having these voices at the table, but finding the time and the capacity is the challenge.
>
> – Participant in the June 12, 2024, Community Conversation

Limited resources also force several organizations to treat belonging as simply a program, rather than a continuous process of engagement and co-design. The work is relegated to one-time events, such as sporadic block parties. While these efforts contribute to strengthening our social fabric, we need longer-term horizon investments in relational infrastructure. What would it look like to focus on building relational infrastructure?

> Relational infrastructure refers to the social connections, interactions, and collective intelligence that underpin a community, network or group's ability to **collaborate, solve problems, and drive change**. It is an emergent framework of trust, shared values, and common goals that allows individuals, groups, and organizations to work together effectively, pool their resources, and amplify their impact. A strong relational infrastructure can enable organisations and communities to overcome challenges, build resilience, and create sustainable social, economic, and environmental value and outcomes. (Rye, 2024)

At Tamarack, we sometimes refer to this relational infrastructure as civic infrastructure, essential for a functional civic life. As Tamarack Institute President and CEO Danya Pastuszek pointed out in a 2023 *Together for Change* podcast episode (Jancarz, 2023), civic infrastructure is built through the stories and the relationships that are nurtured in community.

> " We see it at Tamarack … trusting relationships between people, committees, and collaboratives where we can voice possibilities and work collectively, using data and using lived experience to improve outcomes that a community knows matter. I see it as the messages and stories that a lot of people know that speak to the assets of our people and of our communities. All of these things are civic infrastructure.
>
> – Tamarack Institute President & CEO Danya Pastuszek, *Together for Change* podcast (2023)

Just like physical infrastructure requires ongoing maintenance and monitoring, the same occurs for civic infrastructure. Even though we all experienced what happened when relational infrastructure was damaged during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unfortunate that available investments in building and sustaining civic infrastructure are still limited.

> " Civic infrastructure … is so often unseen, and kind of like our electrical grids. It's something that we take for granted until it's not there.
>
> – Tamarack Institute President & CEO Danya Pastuszek, *Together for Change* podcast (2023)

3. The Housing Crisis Is Fuelling Exclusion

Without dignified housing, relationship-building becomes a struggle and youth, already feeling marginalized from our economy, see accessing affordable housing as unattainable. Ensuring access to affordable housing designed for community cohesion would be a powerful antidote to this stress.

> " Rising rents are making it hard to find an affordable place to call home and rising home prices are keeping homes out of reach for many first-time buyers. The ability of an entire generation of Canadians to achieve the promise of Canada is at risk, despite their sheer grit and hard work. Millennials and Gen Z are watching the middle-class dream become less and less achievable. They worry that they won't ever be able to afford the kinds of homes they grew up in. They deserve the same opportunity to own a place of their own as was enjoyed by generations before them.
>
> – Department of Finance Canada (2024a)

4. Newcomers and Belonging

Drawing from diverse experiences, participants reflected on how immigration influenced their sense of belonging, both personally and across generations. They stressed that fulfilling everyone's essential needs, including those of newcomers, is paramount for building belonging. When these needs are met, everyone is better equipped to contribute to strengthening our connections to each other. This also highlights the distinction between integration, settlement, and belonging, as integration and settlement alone do not guarantee a sense of belonging.

> " Montreal is our home, our place to belong.
>
> – Participant in the October 31, 2024, Community Conversation

> " When communities feel detached from decision-making and disempowered in finding solutions, there is a decrease in tolerance and lack of trust in democracy. To address this, it is important to promote local governance, empower community members in decision-making, and tailor poverty reduction strategies to meet the unique needs of different regions.
>
> – Heather Keam, Consulting Director, Tamarack Institute

5. Belonging as a Pathway to Ending Poverty

Because poverty stems from exclusion and isolation (Garza, Winter 2025), belonging is a powerful antidote. Knowing one another allows individuals to cultivate empathy, identify ways to support each other, and recognize their individual strengths. The conversations on belonging and poverty were crucial, as data reveals the impact of loneliness (Statistics Canada, 2022b) on low-income individuals.

Key considerations include:

- Lack of social connections is a form of immaterial poverty
- Loneliness can exacerbate precarious socio-economic conditions

The Canadian Poverty Institute defines "Social Poverty" as existing when "people are isolated and lack the formal and informal supports necessary for resilience." They further state that "when people are isolated or disconnected from community, they have fewer personal supports available to provide material, emotional or caregiving support particularly in times of stress or crisis" (Canadian Poverty Institute, n.d.).

Building on this, it is important to note that, when people experience poverty, they are also more likely to experience stigma and exclusion. This combination weakens resilience, especially during crises like health pandemics or climate disasters.

> " It can go both ways, when you're living with low income there may be a greater risk of being isolated, it goes the other way too. If and when you are isolated, you're also at greater risk of poverty, you don't have the supports around you that provide resilience if something happens.
>
> – Participant in the November 19, 2024, Community Conversation

The dual burden of loneliness and poverty reduces an individual's ability to recover from emergencies, both personal and public. The Public Health Agency of Canada substantiates this noting, "Stigma ... keeps people away from the resources they need to live a healthy life, such as having housing, an income, and accessible health services" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019).

> " Poverty has a significant role in social isolation. There's stigma and discrimination with people who live with low income.
>
> – Participant in the November 19, 2024, Community Conversation

When people feel seen, heard, and valued, they are more likely to contribute to a community's well-being, fostering a positive ripple effect. By intentionally addressing stigma and exclusion, we can create more welcoming spaces where everyone can thrive. As neighbours, we all play a role in fostering social cohesion.

> " When communities work together to create a sense of belonging, people find support and experience resilience, breaking free from the poverty cycle.
>
> – Heather Keam, Consulting Director, Tamarack Institute
>
> (Cundangan, 2024)

Recognizing the role of belonging in mitigating poverty and loneliness-related health risks affirms its status as a social determinant of health (Cusick, 2022). Community belonging strengthens individual health and wellbeing through essential resource sharing (e.g., food assistance), emotional support (e.g., counselling groups), advocacy (e.g., mobilizing to shift exclusionary laws), resilience building (e.g., bartering goods and services when tragedy strikes), and numerous other means.

> " Belonging is the foundation that all the other strategies are created from. This is the lens for affordable housing, poverty, etc.
>
> – Participant in the November 19, 2024, Community Conversation

Canada's National Advisory Council on Poverty's 2024 report on poverty reduction revealed a second consecutive year of rising poverty rates (National Advisory Council on Poverty, 2024). The 2022 rate increased by 2.5 percentage points from 2021 and 3.5 percentage points from 2020, accounting for 1.4 million more people experiencing poverty. This trend jeopardizes Canada's 2030 poverty reduction targets.

Simultaneously, rising costs of living – food (22.4%), healthcare (4.1%), transportation (20.6%), and housing (6.9%) – are compounded by increasing polarization and loneliness (Statistics Canada, 2024). The loneliness epidemic, highlighted by the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community (Murthy, 2023), coincides with significant economic inequities. This convergence of socioeconomic crises demands political action.

> " Social isolation has to be brought into the bigger forces that create change.
>
> – Participant in the November 19, 2024, Community Conversation

Municipal government representatives shared examples of their initiatives addressing the dual crisis of loneliness and poverty. The following example illustrates government efforts to build belonging and reduce poverty.

" In their Poverty Reduction Strategy, the City of New Westminster has named Social Connectedness as a pillar, committing to actions that help achieve belonging by building community spaces and strengthening local support networks: working to ensure adequate provision of open spaces, parks, playgrounds and trees in low-income and multi-family rental housing areas and neighbourhoods, and exploring additional ways to enhance access to and participation in leisure and recreational activities and programs, among the actions named. "Community Belonging and Connecting" is also named as one of the City's strategic priorities for 2023-2026, as they strive to "recognize, inspire, and empower all residents by developing and nurturing relationships with and across communities.

– Orpah Cundangan, *Renewing Our Commitment to Reducing Poverty* (2024)

6. Belonging and Social Infrastructure

Well-maintained social infrastructure, including third places (CBC Radio, 2022), is essential to foster belonging. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg defined third places as "public spaces crucial for neighbourhoods as a space to interact, gather, meet, and talk."

The decline of third places, coupled with urban planning that neglects connection, hinders the opportunity to make belonging a 'norm' in our daily interactions. Consequently, people must actively create events to cultivate belonging, rather than experiencing it naturally.

> " Conversations about belonging don't identify enough the way our built environment impacts what we can do and how we feel. Our cities lack infrastructure that cultivates belonging.
>
> – Participant in the October 31, 2024, Community Conversation

Local governments have an impact on community welfare (Zacharias, 2023) and are mandated to invest in structures and institutions that enhance resident well-being. These include schools, health facilities, clinics, roads, housing, and safety measures. Crucially, they also encompass cultural and social amenities that foster connection. Simply put, local governments also have a responsibility to build and maintain **social infrastructure.**

> " At the City we write memos based on reports that come out to educate city council members and our organizational leadership about issues in the community and why we need to be moving on certain things and adopting various strategies and actions. Through the Strategy [for Belonging] if we can provide some of this knowledge mobilization support and resources, we can use it for educating.
>
> – Participant in the November 19, 2024, Community Conversation

The City of Vancouver's Social Infrastructure Strategy highlights the need for government-non-profit collaboration to foster belonging and connectedness. Their 10-year plan (City of Vancouver, 2023) commits to supporting social infrastructure through various roles, including investor, regulator, and advocate. Understanding that community-informed social infrastructure bridges belonging and poverty gaps, governments must proactively seek community input in related strategies.

7. Belonging and (Political) Power

Participants identified a gap between elected officials and the communities they are elected to represent. Without community-centred leadership, belonging can feel imposed and programmatic rather than relational and trust-based. This top-down approach impedes community agency, transforming 'building belonging' into a mere political slogan.

> " Politicians are sometimes acting as managers in charge when they are supposed to be elected representatives of people, but they are not representatives of communities and people.
>
> – Participant in the October 31, 2024, Community Conversation

Reflecting deeper on the relationship between Belonging and Power, at Tamarack we are reminded of the critical writings of David Jay, Founder at Relationality Lab. In his book titled *Relationality: How Moving from Transactional to Transformational Relationships Can Reshape Our Lonely World*, David (Jay, 2024a) connects the rise of violent extremism and suppression to a lack of quality relationships and relationship-building skills.

> " Democracy is and always has been a messy relational project. If we feel more relational agency, then we feel like we can find a way to navigate the conflicts necessary to govern together, and democracy feels like a worthwhile project. It is when navigating those relationships feels impossible that we seek to dominate rather than collaborate with those around us. It is then that we seek the authoritarian strength to settle our disagreements through suppression.
>
> – David Jay, *Relationality: How Moving from Transactional to Transformational Relationships Can Reshape Our Lonely World* (2024a)

Building upon David's arguments, we observed that, without acknowledging power imbalances, even seemingly harmless relationship-building can lead to imposed power dynamics. When trust erodes due to unchecked power imbalances, people might lean towards "enforcing belonging" through biased regulation and laws. As David further warns, "A nation of lonely people, desperate to belong to something, will more readily embrace totalitarian rule" (Jay, 2024b). In this case, those in decision-making roles might be able to dictate *how* belonging *should* happen, *who* belongs, and even justify *why* some people ought to feel a sense of belonging while others should not.

> " Where / how do we create new cultural norms around belonging? How do we activate the desire to connect?
>
> – Participant in the November 6, 2024, Community Conversation

8. Belonging as a Journey of Iteration and Innovation

In response to the first three discussion questions, participants stressed that building belonging requires curiosity, creativity, and iteration. There are no quick fixes for trust and connection. In our rapidly changing world, belonging must be a context-sensitive and adaptive process.

> " We cannot set out to 'fix' this (social isolation) using a linear, project management kind of approach ... that we need to leave space for the complexity and the emergent in this work ... having support and ideas and access to good ideas that others have had can help us set the conditions in our own areas and with our own groups ... small, next wise actions and constant iterations towards a pattern that is fit for purpose.
>
> – Participant in the November 6, 2024, Community Conversation

Iteration in building belonging involves learning from past initiatives and related experiments. Community leaders improve initiatives by reflecting on their work and sharing knowledge. This fosters collaboration, agility, and breaks down silos. As a result, knowledge becomes a public, shared good.

Iteration and innovation are vital not merely for fresh perspectives, but to progressively centre equity. By directly engaging historically marginalized communities, collaboratives can drive equitable change. Deep listening ensures that all voices, not just the loudest, are heard.

> " Doing things differently – not just doing things because that's how we've always done them – especially knowing that obviously, lots of people have been left out by our practices.
>
> – Participant in the November 6, 2024, Community Conversation

9. Belonging and Asset-Based Community Development

At the Tamarack Institute, one of our core principles is that each person has strengths to contribute to their community. Through an Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) (Keam, 2019) lens, we emphasize that everyone is essential to creating the conditions for communities to thrive. ABCD invites us to consider how, when designing events and campaigns or even building movements, we can leverage each other's experiences, knowledge, and skills to create a sense of community ownership and broader positive changes. By leveraging these strengths, we recognize the community as the true catalyst for change (Keam, 2024a).

In K'jipuktuk (Halifax), Nova Scotia, community-engagement enthusiasts Jennifer and Scott DeCoste created Life.School.House, a model for building relationships through sharing resources and skills. This model draws inspiration from Folk Schools, which are informal spaces for neighbour-led skill-sharing workshops. Life.School.House creates a pathway for local facilitators to share skills through workshops. Facilitators barter their knowledge for participants' gifts, eliminating financial obstacles.

Despite people's willingness to share their experiences and skills, hidden barriers can hinder engagement. While leading with ABCD is vital to fostering community ownership and connection, we must also proactively design opportunities for engagement that consider people's needs first and foremost.

During the November 6 conversation, participants praised the concept of leveraging neighbours' strengths but noted that the same individuals attended events, limiting broader engagement.

> " [There are] lots of strategies to bring out people, but often the same people come around.
>
> – Participant in the November 6, 2024, Community Conversation

Limited event participation highlights structural barriers like time constraints, financial and language barriers, and transportation logistics. Scheduling events during holidays or work hours or hosting them in inaccessible locations hinders participation.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans, 2024) helps visualize these factors, illustrating how different environments influence an individual's sense of belonging.
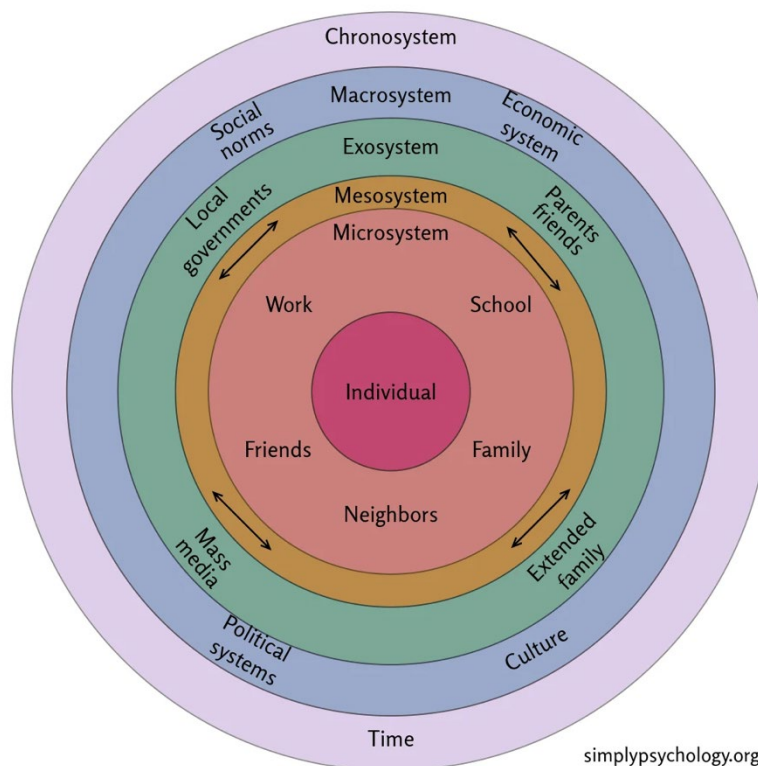
Below is a definition and visual representation of this theory and its ecological systems that can influence belonging.

> " Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory posits that an individual's development is influenced by a series of interconnected environmental systems, ranging from the immediate surroundings (e.g., family) to broad societal structures (e.g., culture).
>
> – Olivia Guy-Evans, *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory* (2024)

**Bronfenbrenner's Ecological
Systems Theory**

Chronosystem
Macrosystem
Social norms
Economic system
Exosystem
Local governments
Mesosystem
Parents friends
Microsystem
Work
School
Individual
Friends
Family
Neighbors
Mass media
Extended family
Political systems
Culture
Time

simplypsychology.org

Source: Guy-Evans, 2024

The five ecological systems include:

1. **Microsystem**: Immediate environments where direct interactions occur, such as family, friends, and school. Positive relationships foster a strong sense of belonging.

2. **Mesosystem**: Connections between microsystems, like the relationship between family experiences and school life. Harmonious interactions across these settings enhance belonging.

3. **Exosystem**: External settings that indirectly influence a person's development, such as a parent's workplace. Supportive policies here can affect an individual's well-being and sense of inclusion.

4. **Macrosystem**: Broader cultural and societal contexts, including socioeconomic factors and cultural values. Inclusive societal norms promote a collective sense of belonging.

5. **Chronosystem**: The dimension of time, reflecting life transitions and historical events. Changes over time can alter one's experiences of belonging.

Moving forward, we aim to explore these dimensions more intentionally to identify barriers and levers that can enable place-based collaboratives to deepen and broaden their engagement towards building belonging in Canada.

> " "[We need] conversations that do more than checking boxes …. The trust and community [we] built fuels people to continue to meet and engage with each other.
>
> – Participant in the November 6, 2024, Community Conversation

10. Belonging and Disaster Recovery

Participants highlighted the devastating impact of recent climate and health emergencies. These events have not only driven more individuals into poverty but also dramatically worsened the circumstances of those already struggling. The consequences – wildfires, displacement, property destruction, health issues, and economic instability – have created a new wave of poverty and exacerbated existing hardship.

Engagement Opportunity

At the Tamarack Institute, we steward a community of practice (CoP) focused on Community's Role in Emergency Preparedness.

This CoP aims to clarify community's role in emergencies, including climate disasters, public health emergencies, and acts of violent extremism.

> " Regarding job security, the impact on employment COVID-19 has disproportionately affected service and public sector jobs. In contrast, the scientific and technical sectors have seen a growth in employment rates in the same period. This disproportionate, developing impact on lower-income workers could potentially exacerbate poverty rates in the coming years.[4]
>
> – The Borgen Project (2022)

Statistics Canada data confirmed that COVID-19-related job insecurity disproportionately impacted low-wage, high-contact workers. In a report released in March 2022, Statistics Canada shared the following:

> Challenges to job and income stability continue to persist in lower-paying, high-contact sectors. While total employment rebounded to pre-COVID-19 levels in September 2021, employment in accommodation and food services remained 211,000 below pre-pandemic levels, as of December that year. This was before additional losses of 113,000 in January 2022, when tighter restrictions related to Omicron were in effect (Statistics Canada, 2022a).

Likelihood of Having a Triple-Protected Job*, by Wage Decile
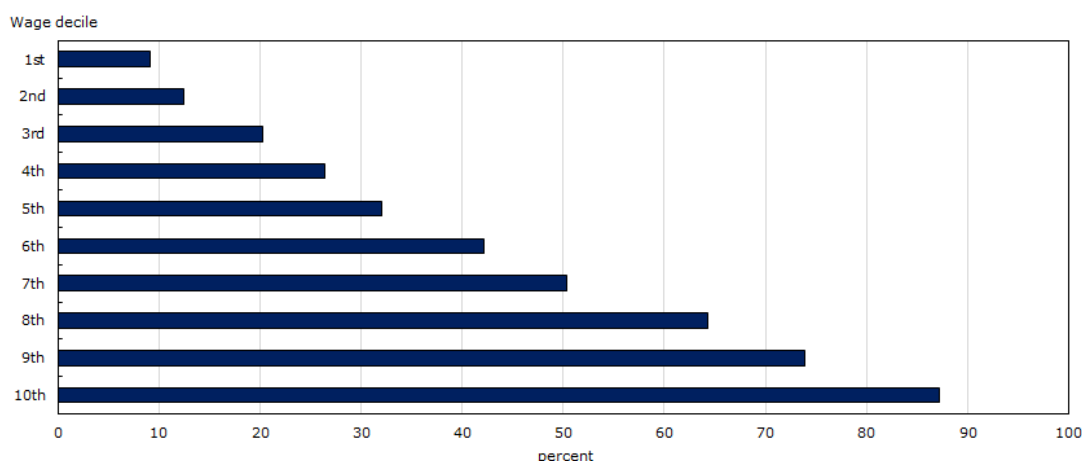
*Triple-projected jobs are those that have no predetermined end date, have a low risk of automation, and are resilient to pandemics (Statistics Canada, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, job insecurity disproportionately impacted low-wage, high-contact workers. Source: Statistics Canada, 2022a, based on the 2021 work of M. Frenette and R. Morissette.

Poverty reduction partners who joined the November 19 conversation highlighted how neighbourhood networks "fill the gap" during emergencies. Neighbours are often the first responders. A participant shared how a group of seniors created a one-stop shop close to the local mall, offering groceries, coffee, and services like tax clinics. They plan to expand their idea to rural areas. By supporting their neighbours, these seniors alleviated poverty and foster belonging through casual interactions and shared resources.

> " Those experiencing poverty/having low income want to feel like they're part of the community. We're trying to bring these things together and convene services in one place to make it easier for people to learn about what's available.
>
> – Participant in the November 16, 2024, Community Conversation

Belonging, therefore, helps mitigate the severe socioeconomic and health consequences of public emergencies like COVID-19 and wildfires.

> " Community resilience is an attribute of the community as a complex integrated system, describing the ability of its members to draw upon their own inherent strengths and capabilities to absorb the impact of a disruption, to reorganize, change, and learn from the disruption, and to adapt to emergent shocks.
>
> – Public Safety Canada, 2019

A compelling example of belonging's power in climate action is illustrated by an 18-month project (Arumae, 2024) in British Columbia coordinated by the Tamarack Institute with support from the Canadian Red Cross. This initiative equipped young people in communities impacted by the 2017 wildfires in BC with vital skills and connections, enabling them to transform climate grief into hope and action.

Belonging is crucial for recovery from climate grief and public health emergencies. When people see themselves and their neighbours as first responders, they are better equipped to withstand crises. The compounding impacts of emergencies on poverty underscore belonging's vital role in both mitigation and recovery.

Youth Perspectives: Unpacking the Significance of a Canada-Wide Strategy

It is often said that youth will inherit the work of building belonging. While this suggests continued progress, participants who joined the Canada-wide conversations also highlighted the critical lack of structural and funding supports needed for youth to carry on this work in our current moment – sustainably and with resilience, smatterings of joy, and pragmatic hope.

> " What I understood about the work that we're doing is that [youth] feel they don't belong here. Parents and organizations feel like they know more than [them].
>
> – Participant in the June 28, 2024, Community Conversation

One of our key takeaways from 2024 was the importance of understanding youth perspectives on belonging (Tamarack, 2024c). We interviewed youth champions who have shaped Tamarack's youth futures work, to hear their stories on building belonging and addressing loneliness. Their insights influenced our thinking and prompted a deeper exploration (Mbūrū & Garza, 2024a) of the unique (Tamarack Institute, 2024a) dynamics of youth belonging. Using three guiding questions, we analysed their feedback and identified key insights per question.

1. What challenges are youth champions facing in leading or supporting belonging-related efforts?

Tokenism: Youth expressed frustration with invitations to conversations where their influence was superficial, leading to feelings of devaluation and the perception that their voices were merely used for appearances. This undermines their potential contributions and reinforces negative community dynamics, as youth may withdraw from participation when their input is not genuinely valued.

Power Imbalances: Youth leaders frequently encounter situations where their needs and preferences are assumed or imposed, rather than being addressed through genuine dialogue. This dynamic compels youth to conform to the status quo, stifling their ability to foster meaningful connections and drive change.

Social Norms and Peer Influences exert significant pressure on youth, sometimes leading them to adopt behaviours that unintentionally hinder genuine connection and contribute to feelings of loneliness. This highlights the complex interplay between social dynamics and individual well-being.

Chronic Underfunding and resource scarcity faced by youth-led initiatives restricts their potential impact. This lack of sustainable support limits both the scale and longevity of projects.

Historical and Systemic Challenges: Indigenous youth referred to the enduring impact of colonial policies such as the residential school system. This intergenerational trauma continues to impact their engagement with formal institutions and their trust in leadership structures.

> " A strategy would facilitate more collaboration, ensuring no community is isolated in their efforts to foster belonging.
>
> – Youth participant, *Tamarack Institute Webinar: Building Authentic Connections for a More Equitable Future* (2024)

2. How could the Strategy support youth champions to build belonging?

Amplify Youth Voices: The Strategy must ensure that youth play an active role in shaping systems change. By engaging youth in the Strategy's design and development, we can create pathways for them to pursue policy-related work and assume decision-making roles. This enables youth to drive systems change, while simultaneously strengthening the Strategy's effectiveness.

Foster Long-Term Collaboration: A Canada-Wide Strategy for Belonging offers a transformative opportunity to establish coordinated, multi-organizational partnerships in communities that can provide sustained investment in youth-led initiatives. The Strategy could facilitate collaboration and prevent communities from working in isolation. This collaborative approach ensures not just funding but also robust backbone coordination that is critical for driving sustained impact. Through a Canada-wide platform, the Strategy could foster collaboration to facilitate the sharing of best practices and support efficient communication across organizations and collaboratives.

> " A strategy would provide the stability needed to ensure these projects can continue and grow.
>
> – Youth participant, *Tamarack Institute Webinar: Building Authentic Connections for a More Equitable Future* (2024)

Create a Springboard for Policy Advocacy: A Strategy that is rooted in community priorities can support youth policy advocacy efforts, enabling youth to collaborate with organizations working to foster belonging. This strategic alignment creates bridges for collaboration without compromising youth needs.

3. **Who is missing from this conversation that must be part of designing the Strategy?**

Implementing an impactful Strategy for Belonging requires a diverse network of champions: policymakers advocating for youth, local organizations providing operational support, Indigenous Elders stewarding and preserving cultural knowledge, and private sector leaders investing in equitable outcomes. This collaborative approach ensures the strategy's sustainability and impact.

Though our initial dialogues with youth leaders provided invaluable insights, we recognize they are merely the foundation for broader engagement. We are committed to fostering deeper, more inclusive conversations with youth in the coming years. As the architects of their own future, youth hold the essential power to shape a future where belonging is enshrined as a fundamental right.

> "
> Youth must be part of the conversation because they are the ones who will inherit the community spaces we are working to build.
>
> – Youth participant, *Tamarack Institute Webinar: Building Authentic Connections for a More Equitable Future* (2024)

Mobilizing Knowledge for Action: Insights from Workshops and Webinars

In 2024, we hosted eight workshops and webinars covering a range of topics. These sessions provided us with valuable context on the key themes related to belonging unfolding in communities across Canada. Detailed descriptions of each webinar are available by clicking on the titles provided below.

- Building Authentic Connections for a More Equitable Future

- The Role of Communities in Advancing Quality of Life

- Belonging through Foodways and Community Economies

- Developing a Sense of Belonging within the Canadian Francophonie outside of Quebec (available in French only)

- Homelessness and Belonging in Canada

- Fighting Poverty with Belonging

- Building Belonging in Canada: A Pan Canadian Strategy

- Debate to Dialogue: Conflict Transformation in Communities

Through these webinars, we explored two guiding questions:

- How could a Strategy for Belonging support participants in the work they are doing?

- What do participants envision for a future where belonging is central to their community?

We have distilled **three key themes** that offer valuable insights for the next stage of the call for a Strategy for Belonging. While numerous rich takeaways emerged and are available in the webinar recordings, we have focused on three to facilitate convergence.

1. **The Strategy Can Serve as a Platform for Housing and Anti-Poverty Advocacy**

Participants called for deeper dialogues that challenge prevailing narratives on property ownership and scrutinize long-standing policies fueling housing unaffordability. By examining the power dynamics shaping access to housing and dignity, the Strategy can spotlight the housing crisis as a Canada-wide emergency.

Moreover, the Strategy provides a mechanism to advocate not only for social infrastructure that fosters connection but also for affordable, dignified, and equitable housing for all. Participants envision the Strategy as a rallying point, creating communities where everyone has a safe home and experiences belonging.

2. **The Strategy Can Help Advance Data-Driven Initiatives and Investments**

In today's data-driven world, participants highlighted the critical importance of reliable, holistic, community-specific data (and capacity to analysis and action it) to inform decisions and strategies. They identified the need for consistent, disaggregated data – information that is broken down by meaningful categories such as demographics, geography, or socioeconomic indicators – to address local challenges and opportunities effectively.

This type of data, when accessible and presented in an understandable format, can enable collaboratives to identify pressing issues and advocate for targeted solutions, especially when we invest in collaboratives' capacity to make sense of it. For example, it can guide strategic investments in isolated or underserved communities, helping to build stronger networks of belonging.

Participants also emphasized the importance of connecting communities to broader data networks, fostering two-way feedback between local and provincial

levels. Translating this data into actionable policies was seen as a critical step. By including disaggregated, community-informed data in the Strategy, it can become a powerful tool for shaping equitable investments, policy development, and collective action.

3. The Strategy Can Serve as a Platform for Story-Listening and Storytelling

Sharing community stories on belonging enabled participants to get to know one another and build a sense of community. Participants also indicated that telling success stories on collaboration can inspire people to make progress on common goals.

> " When we share our stories, we can increase our sense of belonging and trust, which leads to an increased sense of belonging.
>
> – Youth participant, *Tamarack Institute Webinar: Building Authentic Connections for a More Equitable Future* (2024)

The Strategy has the potential to serve as a metaphorical gathering place for people across Canada to come together through story-listening and storytelling. As we facilitate conversations in organizations and neighborhoods and across regions and provinces – at various scales – we hope these exchanges not only foster understanding but also serve as opportunities for connection.

Stories are the essence of human experience, and we hope to guide communities from debate to dialogue – a transformative pathway to mutual understanding and progressive safety.

Dialogue is foundational to cultivating mutual understanding in our engagement processes. During our Debate to Dialogue workshop, we explored the significance of engaging people with differing perspectives in an increasingly polarized society. Participants learned techniques to reframe situations, promote inquiry and dialogue, build empathy, and focus on strengths. This engagement also introduced participants to a measurement framework for critically evaluating diversity within communities and tracking progress toward pluralism.

By creating intentional spaces for dialogue, we can more effectively collaborate on a Strategy that reflects the truths and lived experiences of all our stories. Through this collective effort, we aim to weave a more interconnected social fabric, ensuring that everyone feels heard, valued, and part of their community.

Below are **five takeaways** on the future aspirations for belonging as a central part of community.

Future of Belonging

Participant Aspirations

1 **Intergenerational**
connections among community members

2 **Sense of Agency**
for each person because they feel seen, heard, and valued

3 **Bottom-up Approaches**
in community governance and leadership

4 **Knowledge Mobilization**
and knowledge sharing with ease to create a culture of collaborative problem solving

5 **Prioritize Community Voices**
through authentic engagement from the beginning

Through each of these aspirations, what seems apparent is that the dream of a neighbourhood where there is a strong and shared sense of belonging. More specifically, people are keen to know each other, care about the needs of their neighbours, endeavour to keep each other safe, and, as a bare minimum, know the names of their neighbours. One name/greeting/story at a time, people desire to eventually build stable, resilient, and connected communities that feel vibrant, practice care, and centre equity and justice.

Strategy Design Considerations

Why These Conversations Matter

What has become increasingly clear is that **belonging is a universal, cross-cutting need.** Whether discussing climate grief, poverty, emergency preparedness, or the urgent housing affordability crisis, one sentiment resonates consistently:

People yearn to feel a sense of belonging in their communities.

This sense of belonging often begins in the intimate spaces of our lives – our homes, schools, and workplaces – and can ripple outward, creating possibilities for connection on broader scales such as towns, regional assemblies, and other collective arenas. These ripples mirror adrienne maree brown's theory of 'fractals,' as described in her book *Emergent Strategy* (2017): What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system.

Building belonging – as we are learning through ongoing dialogue, literature, and shared experiences – can be fulfilled through **healthy social infrastructure** and macro systems that create enabling conditions for individuals to catalyse connection and belonging.

Belonging extends beyond grand gestures or events. It's cultivated through micro-actions – small, intentional efforts that foster connection. Examples shared in our conversations include neighbours exchanging a cup of sugar, taking walks together, attending each other's religious or cultural celebrations, or simply checking in with a friendly message or call. Belonging is not a program or isolated event but a practice of intentionality, care, commitment, and authenticity.

When people feel seen, heard, and valued by those around them, they are naturally motivated to contribute to collective problem-solving. We care deeply about those who care about us. Belonging creates a powerful feedback loop – each act of connection inspires more acts, strengthening the fabric of our communities.

In an era marked by the increasing urgency of climate, socioeconomic, and political upheavals, the desire to belong – to a movement, to a cause, to one another – has never been greater. Widening the ripples of belonging means extending these

micro-actions from the kitchen table and the local neighbourhood to civic spaces, such as municipal meetings or voter outreach ahead of major provincial and federal elections.

The conversations we have facilitated represent just a fraction of the voices in our broader society. There is much more dialogue to be had. Yet we also recognise the urgency of acting on the pressing issues raised – polarization, mental health challenges, extremism, entrenched poverty, and loneliness. Dialogue must go together with courageous, collective action to address these challenges and create conditions where everyone can thrive equitably.

To facilitate movement from dialogue to action, we see this publication as a catalytic force for meaningful change. The events of 2024, combined with the renewed and strengthened relationships we have built with community members and network partners, lay a strong foundation for the future of this work.

However, conversations alone cannot deliver the future we envision – a future where everyone belongs. Achieving this requires structural and systemic support to fuel collective efforts, foster learning opportunities, and enable tangible action.

Design Principles and Considerations

We offer essential design principles and critical considerations for the design of a robust and effective Canada-wide Strategy for Belonging.

Our **six essential design principles** include:

1. **Equity and Justice:** Ensuring that the Strategy prioritizes the inclusion of equity-denied groups.

2. **Community-Led Initiatives:** Enabling communities to develop and implement solutions that address their specific needs.

3. **Mutual Aid and Solidarity:** Fostering community-driven support systems and collective action to address systemic inequities and build shared resilience and regenerative capacity.

4. **Intersectional Approaches:** Recognizing the complex interplay of factors that influence belonging.

5. **Data-Driven Decision Making:** Using evidence-based research to inform strategy development and implementation.

6. **Meeting in the Middle:** Finding common ground while collaborating across sectors.

99

The complexity of local challenges demands solutions that are nuanced, adaptive, and contextually relevant. We must resist the temptation to apply generic fixes and instead invest in empowering communities to find their own paths forward.

– Unknown

We outline **four practical considerations** below:

1. Develop Localized Approaches to Integrate Belonging into Existing Priorities

At the Tamarack Institute, we believe that when we invest in community leadership, encourage inclusive participation and tap local ingenuity (Cabaj & Cheuy, 2024) we unleash a powerful force capable of building more equitable futures.

A Canada-Wide Strategy for Belonging can provide a united framework to set standards on how collaboratives representing municipalities, public health practitioners, community advocates, institutions, and individuals with lived/living experience can develop place-based approaches (Cabaj & Cheuy, 2024) that integrate belonging into existing community priorities. These priorities could span across critical domains including community safety, climate action, wellbeing, placemaking, social infrastructure, and economic prosperity. Rather than treating belonging as a separate movement, we must recognize its interconnectedness with other vital aspects of community life.

By embedding belonging into these established priorities, we can create a more holistic and sustainable approach to community development. For example, housing initiatives can prioritize designs that encourage social interaction and neighbourly connections (Mbūrū & Garza, 2024), while climate action projects can foster a sense of shared responsibility and collective purpose. Similarly, integrating belonging into economic prosperity strategies can lead to more inclusive and equitable opportunities for all residents. Ultimately, this integrated approach recognizes that belonging is not a luxury but a fundamental component of a thriving, strong, and just community.

2. Ensure Sustainable and Sufficient Funding

We call on network partners to explore ways to expand the pool of available funding and financing for community collaboratives working to strengthen belonging as an outcome. Across Canada, we have heard how limited funding access and competitive grant environments create significant barriers to implementing and scaling belonging-focused and poverty-reduction initiatives.

We encourage funders to lead with trust by engaging in participatory grantmaking practices. By working directly with communities, funders can ensure that what the community identifies as essential – whether programs, infrastructure, or social services – is supported and sustained. This approach not only strengthens the trust between funders and communities but also ensures that investments align with on-the-ground needs, empowering communities to make lasting impacts.

3. Build Trust Through Risk Mitigation

Proactive risk mitigation is essential to unlock meaningful community engagement and foster a sense of belonging. The perceived risk surrounding civic engagement and social cohesion activities, particularly in today's divided climate, poses a significant barrier for funders, municipalities, and sector leaders. A Canada-wide Strategy for Belonging addresses this challenge by showcasing effective risk management strategies and championing coordinated collaboration rooted in local strengths. By providing tangible resources and nurturing collaborative partnerships, we can cultivate trust, enabling deeper engagement, and paving the way for lasting community belonging.

4. Advocate for Policy and Systems Change

Building belonging is not just a community-level effort – it requires systemic change supported by informed policy. This publication equips community leaders, advocates, and policymakers with the language, tools, and information needed to make a compelling case for belonging-focused policies. From housing affordability to equitable access to healthcare services, the insights and community testimonies within this document are intended to inspire action at every level of government.

We encourage policymakers to use this publication to better understand the intersectional nature of belonging and how it relates to pressing social issues like poverty, youth engagement, and community safety. By centring equity-denied groups and amplifying their voices, policy advocates can work toward creating systems that foster dignity and justice.

Through facilitating conversation and collaboration between governments, non-profits, and community networks, the Strategy for Belonging can be a powerful tool

for addressing systemic inequities and creating policies that prioritize belonging as a foundation for societal well-being. Specifically, belonging as a *practice* **and** an *outcome*.

We believe in the power of bold, collaborative problem-solving to transform systems of competition, despair, and division into frameworks of care, hope, and liberation. Wherever you are, we encourage you to reflect and ask yourself: *What else is possible?*

> "
>
> I have increased my practices of collaboration and storytelling as ways to share analysis, engaging, and facilitating deep small transformations that pick up and echo each other towards a tipping point, organizing based in love and care rather than burnout and competition.
>
> – adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017)

Transforming Skills and Knowledge: Our Vision for 2025 and Beyond
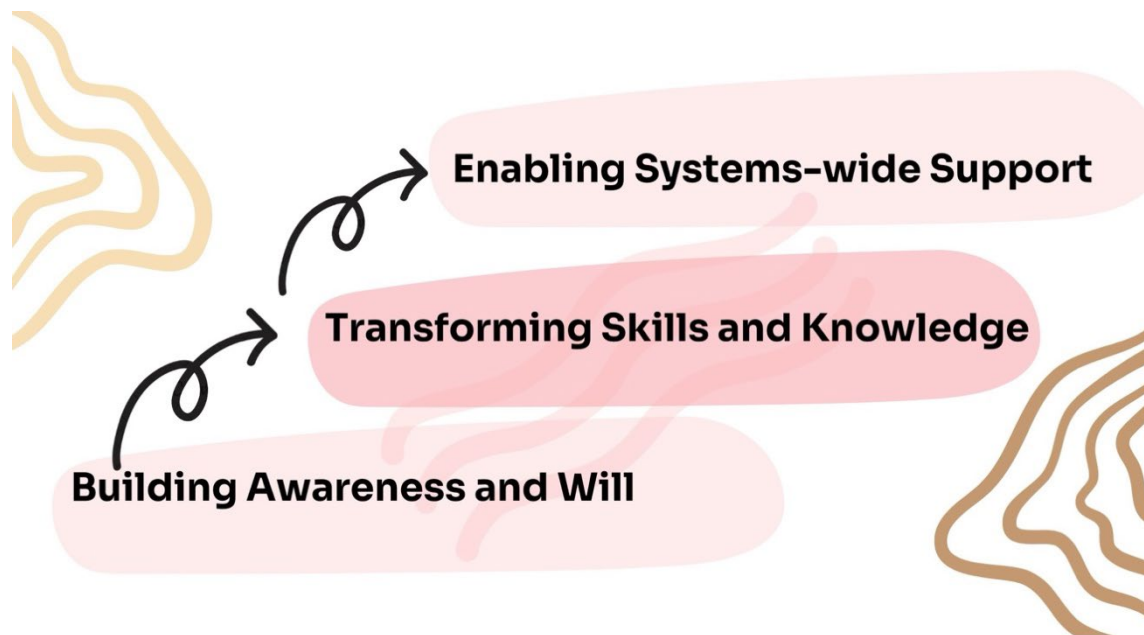
Looking ahead, the Strategy can be a transformational opportunity for a coordinated effort to build awareness and will, transform skills and knowledge, and enable systems-wide support, as outlined below.

Building Awareness and Will: The Strategy can promote community awareness and action by supporting context-specific initiatives and facilitating continuous dialogue and learning across networks.

A conversation guide was launched in 2024 to help changemakers across sectors host conversations on belonging as a priority to foster prosperity and wellbeing and include diverse voices. Hosting community conversations on belonging enables collaboratives to:

- Get a local perspective on the state of belonging.

- Discover what is already being done to address isolation, loneliness, and polarization.

- Identify challenges and potential solutions.

- Help define roles for participants across sectors.

A community conversation can take many forms and does not need to be complicated or formal. We invite people to be creative, tolerant, and welcoming. As we like to say, "You know your community best – enjoy the process!"

Transforming Skills and Knowledge: The Strategy can contribute towards developing robust metrics to assess the impact of belonging initiatives and fostering next-generation leadership capabilities to build belonging through strategic plans and interventions.

In 2025, the Tamarack Institute will provide several opportunities to mobilize knowledge and collective wisdom on skills for belonging through a diverse offering of webinars, cohorts, and Strategy co-creation opportunities. More information is available in the upcoming sections of this report.

Enabling Systems-Wide Support: The Strategy can provide a Canada-wide framework for belonging that guides policy and practice. Building on our work with place-based collaboratives across Canada, we will document best practices for policies that promote belonging and address power imbalances.

We will also continue to cultivate relationships with field catalysts and thought leaders across sectors whose contributions are critical to leverage opportunities for policy and systems change.

The Strategy for Belonging Working Group

We are launching a series of engaging dialogues, interactive workshops, and collaborative co-design sessions as we embark on the next phase of our journey towards making a call for a Canada-Wide Strategy for Belonging – the Strategy for Belonging Working Group.

A working group is a team of people who come together around a specific topic or problem to propose solutions and make recommendations for how to solve it or move forward.

The Strategy for Belonging (S4B) Working Group is an opportunity to contribute directly to making community belonging a policy priority and outcome in Canada. We invite all voices and perspectives to participate. The main expectation is that participants join with a willingness to share ideas and insights based on their unique expertise.

Participants will shape the development of localized strategies for belonging as part of four priority themes identified throughout the 2024 engagement activities:

1. **Cultivating Belonging: A Foundation for Leadership:** We will delve into the profound connection between personal experiences and an individual's sense of belonging. We will examine how cultivating a strong sense of belonging within ourselves and others can foster more empathetic, inclusive, and courageous leadership.

2. **Investing in Belonging: The Role of Social Infrastructure:** We will explore the crucial role of social infrastructure in fostering belonging and practical strategies for developing social infrastructure that supports belonging, emphasizing the importance of courageous leadership in navigating complex social dynamics.

3. **Enabling Policies for Belonging:** We will examine how policy development efforts can centre belonging to foster stronger, more inclusive communities. We will reflect on the policy levers that can help promote belonging, such as those related to housing, education, healthcare, and community development. We will also discuss innovative policy approaches that prioritize social cohesion, address systemic inequities that hinder belonging, and increase democratic competencies.

4. **Building on Our Momentum**: We will reflect on takeaways from our 2025 group conversations, while also looking ahead to the possibilities and strategic priorities that lie on the horizon for 2026. We will identify emerging trends, anticipate potential opportunities, and define clear pathways for continued growth and impact.

Webinar Series on Belonging and its Intersections with Public Health, Climate Action, and Poverty

Recognizing the multifaceted nature between belonging and these three themes, the Tamarack Institute is hosting three webinar series to bridge skills and knowledge across sectors and strengthen the case for belonging as a policy priority and outcome. The information on these webinar series and the instructions on how to register will be available through Tamarack's Learning Centre page.

Circle of Actions and Pathways for Change Cohorts

We are pleased to offer a second round of the learning and action cohorts through the Circle of Actions and Pathways for Change.

The Circle of Actions cohort is designed to catalyze local efforts to create plans and carry out interventions that foster a sense of belonging. Over one month, participating leaders will engage in workshop sessions, coaching support, and access to the latest thinking, tools, and resources, all designed to increase their skills and competencies in developing a local plan and an intervention for belonging. Through this learning journey, we hope to explore:

1. Who do we choose to be amidst the spread of polarization, loneliness, hate, and extremism in cities across Canada?

2. How can we build more equitable, regenerative, and caring communities for all living beings?

3. What does it take to build courageous, place-based, multisectoral collaboratives that advance belonging as an outcome and a policy priority?

4. How are leaders from across sectors already building belonging, and what conditions are needed to amplify and sustain it?

5. How can we create next-generation social infrastructure that is rooted in our individual gifts and amplifies a renewed sense of collective purpose?

Through Pathways for Change, we invite individuals with lived/living experience who are part of a Circle of Actions team to participate in a seven-month cohort to accelerate their leadership skills as changemakers. Through this opportunity, individuals will join a network that will support them in:

1. Cultivating relationships with other changemakers.

2. Learning approaches to systems change.

3. Identifying their local systems change and drafting a systems change plan.

4. Putting their plan into action.

The Circle of Actions and Pathways for Change cohorts are part of Tamarack's commitment to raising awareness and will for a Canada-Wide Strategy for Belonging.

As facilitators, designers, and community connectors, we are grateful for the opportunity to learn from and alongside these inspiring leaders. Their stories, questions, and bold aspirations have reinforced our shared purpose of building belonging. Amid a loneliness epidemic and deepening polarization, these leaders offer hope; they are a candle flame in the dark. They are turning strangers into

neighbours and neighbours into friends, all the while building resilient, vibrant communities.

> " Being a part of Tamarack's Building Belonging network makes me feel reassured, supported, and validated in the work I am doing to foster connection in my community. It offers sense and reason to prove that belonging matters.
>
> – 2024 Cohort Participant

Communities of Practice

Our Communities of Practice are recurring online meetups where people with a common interest discuss common problems or goals within their practice area.

In 2024, the Tamarack Institute hosted and facilitated three Communities of Practice (CoPs) connected to the Strategy for Belonging, which met on a quarterly basis:

- Neighbourhood Learning: Exploring strategies for building belonging and strengthening social infrastructure in neighbourhoods.

- Community's Role in Emergency Preparedness: Developing a better understanding of the role community can play in the event of an emergency.

- Community's Role in Community Safety: Examining the role of residents, governments, and institutions in creating community safety through peer-to-peer learning.

These spaces have contributed to encouraging conversations on relevant topics for practitioners and neighbours alike in relation to belonging. Moving forward, we will continue to facilitate vibrant discussions across these specific areas of community development.

With these evolving initiatives, we remain committed to iteratively refining our CoPs based on feedback from participants. By staying adaptable, we can ensure our programming remains relevant, impactful, and responsive to the changing needs of our communities.

A Note on Prospective Network Partners

We have been fortunate to build meaningful relationships with network partners whose missions closely align with ours. Several individuals and organizations have

approached us with an interest in exploring belonging within specific demographics. Notably, there have been inquiries about fostering belonging among seniors, youth, climate justice organizers, and volunteers. These expressions of interest in collaboration align with our vision for a Strategy that centres Indigenous, Black, and racialized peoples; people with low income; people with disabilities; members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community; official language minority communities; recent newcomers; youth; and people with intersections of these identities.

Recognising this emerging need for context-specific collaborations, our focus for 2025 and beyond is to spark deeper conversations and strengthen collaborations with both current and prospective partners as we continue to champion for belonging as a policy priority and outcome for wellbeing and prosperity. Together, we aim to explore how belonging can be nurtured by and for these specific demographics, ensuring that our efforts remain intersectional, mutually reinforcing, inclusive, and impactful.

Closing Thoughts: Reimagining Our Social Contract

Whether within households, across neighbourhood blocks, or across entire municipalities, people yearn to feel seen, heard, valued, and missed within their web of relationships. This need resonates through our work as we champion individual and collective efforts to turn strangers into neighbours and neighbours into friends.

Conversations about anti-poverty advocacy, climate grief, and the leadership challenges faced by youth have broadened our understanding of how belonging intersects with systemic issues. These dialogues have not only deepened our awareness but have also helped us better articulate the story of the call for a Strategy for Belonging.

Informed by these rich collaborations, we have continued to reflect on what it means to foster authentic connections and create spaces where people of all backgrounds and demographics feel they belong. With support from Tamarack Institute coaches, the participants in the Circle of Actions and System Transformers/Pathways for Change cohorts benefited from invaluable tools and frameworks to strengthen their initiatives. Through nuanced, energizing, and at times challenging discussions, we are shaping a coherent vision for why belonging matters, who must be involved in this movement, and what a future of belonging could look like for all.

As we look to the future, we are committed to shaping an irresistible movement for belonging, rooted in local strengths and aspirations. We also seek to initiate dialogue about a new social contract that enshrines belonging as a basic human

right. These challenging times call for courageous steps toward a profound societal transformation.

To realize this new social contract, we propose the development of a Belonging Commons – an ecosystem of resources stewarded by communities to address power imbalances and enable collective stewardship of belonging. The Belonging Commons would facilitate:

- **Regulatory Experimentation:** Developing innovative policies that prioritize belonging, well-being, and prosperity.

- **Regeneration:** Strengthening our our collective capacity to recover from a disaster, elevate our human consciousness, and assess what is needed to move from a state of destruction toward healing and trust-building.

- **Futuring:** Working with communities to create solutions that anticipate and address future challenges.

- **Unbreakable Solidarity:** Cultivating strong and resilient community bonds for mutual support.

- **Radical Interdependence:** Fostering respectful relationships with all living beings and our planet.

- **Deepened Social Cohesion:** Building collective leadership by finding common ground and stewarding local strengths.

We look forward to engaging in conversations with individuals across communities and sectors to continue shaping and validating assumptions on what the emergent concept of the Belonging Commons can look like as an invitation to reimagine our social contract and embed belonging into our policies and actions.

BELONGING COMMONS: REIMAGINING OUR SOCIAL CONTRACT

Regulatory Experimentation

Regeneration

Futuring

Unbreakable Solidarity

Radical Interdependence

Deepened Social Cohesion
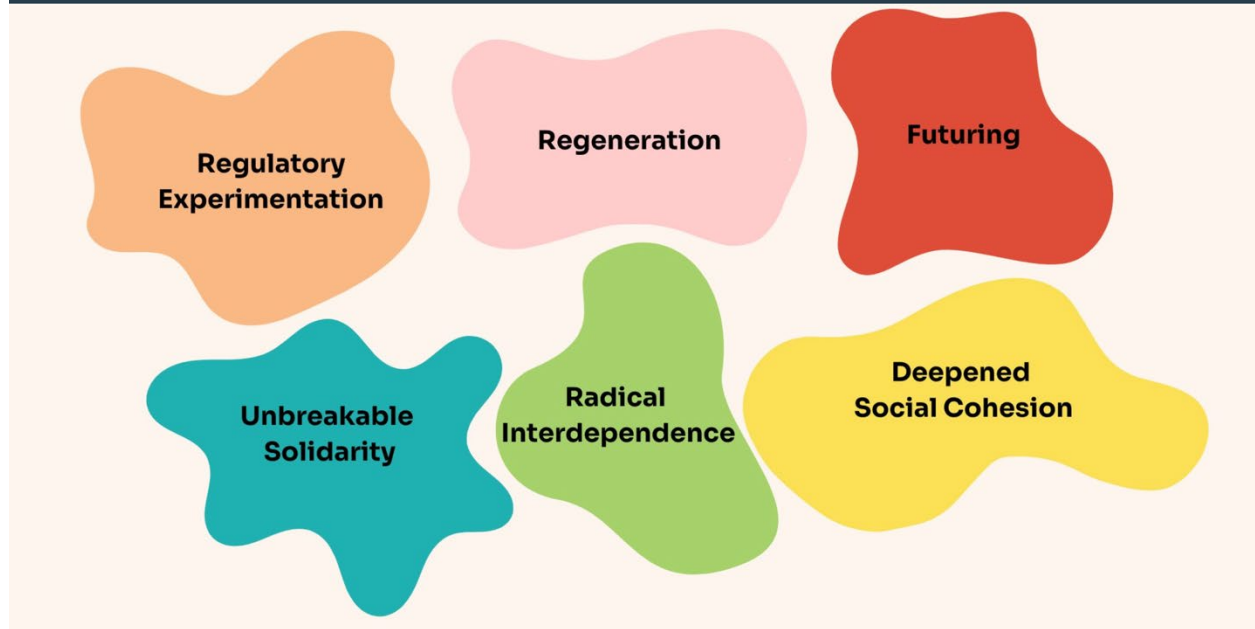
Gratitude

We are deeply grateful for the vibrant network of colleagues, place-based collaboratives, and allies spanning coast-to-coast. Our work has never been a solitary effort; it is enriched by the collective wisdom, resources, and generosity of those who choose to share and engage with us. By embracing a relational way of being and working, we aim to model the journey of building belonging – beginning within our team and rippling outward to the networks and communities we partner with.

We have been held up and supported by a multitude of people who all care about building belonging. We acknowledge with gratitude those in our lives whose love makes it possible for us to do this work with more ease, boldness, and expansive imagination.

A key lesson we have learned through collaboration is that belonging does not happen in siloes. For this invaluable reason, we also want to thank the movement supporters across Tamarack's work on ending poverty, building youth futures, and advancing climate transitions. The intersectional lens brought to this work has not only enriched our learning as a team but is what also makes the Strategy for Belonging conversations resilient and adaptive in the face of political and other systemic shifts.

In the background, but holding up this work, is our funder – the Samuel Family Foundation. Thank you for believing in our goal to cultivate an irresistible movement for belonging that is rooted in local strengths and aspirations. We feel fortunate to have the privilege to invest our skills and relationships into supporting communities across Canada to develop future-ready solutions, cultivate courageous leadership, and centre the voices of equity-denied individuals in advancing belonging as a policy outcome for wellbeing and economic prosperity.

Finally, we are thankful to have network partners with unmatched enthusiasm for all things belonging. Whether working at municipal levels, social enterprises, social finance, non-profits and more, we look to our network partners as allies in advocacy and activation. Through collaborations and conversations with our network partners, we refine our understanding of cross-cutting themes that impact people's sense of belonging, and in doing so, we can dream up ways to create a future where everyone belongs, with equity and care at the front and centre.

As we weave this message of gratitude, it's important to situate ourselves in relation to the Indigenous stewards of the lands we occupy, as well as the peoples whose displacement to Turtle Island was involuntary. We do this in acknowledgment of the legacies of colonialization, enslavement, and racism so that our work for community change promotes more equitable futures for all. Turtle Island (North America) is the ancestral homeland of Indigenous peoples of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit descent. We recognize that across this land Indigenous rights holders have endured historical oppression and continue to experience inequities that have resulted from the widespread colonialist systems and ideologies. We recognize the contributions of Indigenous people and support the ongoing struggle for self-determination and sovereignty. We work to understand the history of the lands upon which we are guests and to contribute to justice for all Indigenous peoples.

Recognizing the importance of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives, knowledge, and sovereignty, we commit to building intention, respect, reciprocity, collaboration and cultural humility into the relationships we hold with First Nations, Métis and Inuit rights holders. We seek to create opportunities for shared learning, co-creation, and collective action that honour First Nations, Métis and Inuit values, traditions, and aspirations and that promote reconciliation.

We also wish to acknowledge those who came to Turtle Island – as migrants either in this generation or in generations past – and those of us who came here involuntarily, particularly those brought to these lands as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery. Tamarack pays tribute to those ancestors of African origin and descent and thanks them for their contributions towards transforming systems in ways that promote everyone's sense of belonging and safety. At Tamarack, we are

taking action that allows us to be aware of, recognize and address the systemic ways in which anti-Black racism manifests.

Black and Indigenous communities demonstrate that we can work together in solidarity towards peace and equity as we use collective wisdom, knowledge, and gifts that promote healing within our communities.

Through self-reflection, and an organization-wide commitment to Equity and Reconciliation, we as staff of the Tamarack Institute dedicate to greater awareness, intentionality, respect, and reciprocity into the relationships we hold with Indigenous rights holders as we deepen our understanding, responsibilities, and commitments for reconciliation.

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