



Community Navigators

Evidence Report



Purpose of this paper

Telethon Kids Institute has been asked to provide an Evidence Report on community navigators, in anticipation that Early Years Initiative partner communities may wish to use them to support their Community Plans.

This Report gives an overview of the range of navigator programs and looks at the evidence for effective community-based, lay navigator programs. Factors communities should consider when contemplating establishing a navigator program are also explored.

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Overview

Terminology

In our examination of the literature, the term ‘community navigator’ was used loosely and interchangeably with a range of like-terms, including ‘community connector’. This paper has adopted ‘navigator’ terminology, as it is used more commonly in the literature, and appears to be a more inclusive term.

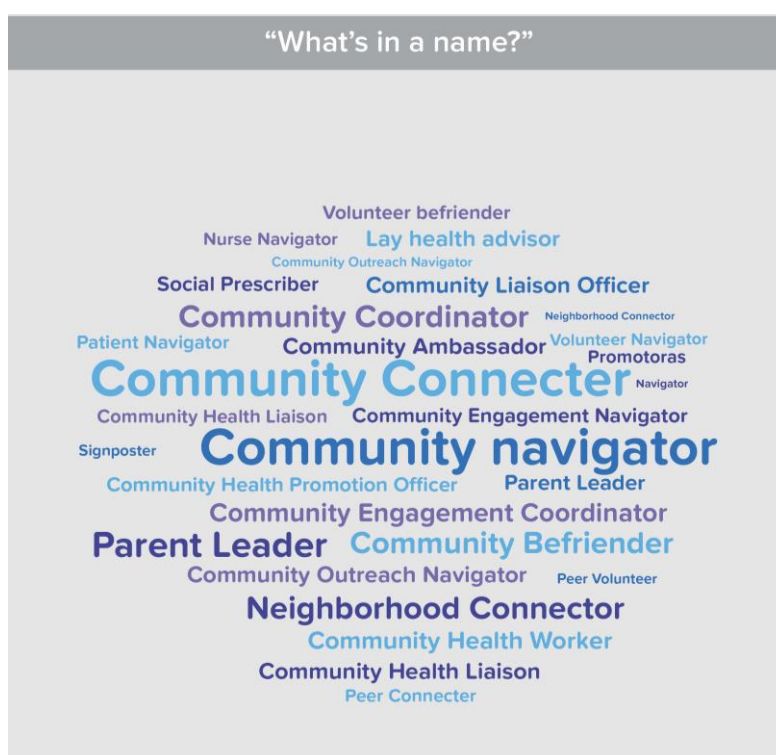


Figure A

Background

Community navigators, connectors and other like-roles are utilised in a wide range of community, health and social support settings [1-11].

Such programs are frequently a response to recognition that people with complex needs or diverse backgrounds are not accessing the services they need. This inequity in access may occur because:- people feel disenfranchised [12]; people do not feel socio-culturally comfortable because of barriers such as language, beliefs, practices or discrimination [1, 9, 13-15]; the complexity and fragmentation of service systems acts as a barrier to service utilisation [12], or because people simply do not know about them.

Many benefits arising from community navigator programs have been documented for individuals and service provider organisations, both in terms of improved health outcomes and improved access to, and quality of, services [1, 5, 8, 15-19].

Other benefits for individuals include an increased sense of empowerment, social support, self sufficiency and hope [1]. 'Ripple effects' beyond intended program outcomes have also been reported [3]. Benefits have also been identified for navigators themselves, including feelings of increased self esteem, competence, autonomy and fulfilment, as well as improved health related behaviors [3].

Accounts of community navigator programs in the literature mostly apply to clinic-based health settings, and reflect a diverse range of approaches, target populations, program design and implementation mechanisms.

This diversity means it is difficult to make definitive statements on how a navigator approach could apply to the Early Years Initiative, however a number of common themes can be identified.

What is a community navigator?

Consistent with the diversity of approaches, the terminology of 'community navigator' is not well defined in the literature. However a common thread across approaches for the role is of a trusted individual who act as a 'bridge' to services, and the community more broadly, for hardly reached populations.

Peer or lay navigators are often "citizens who already who already connect with hardly reached people to improve social inclusion in communities ... socially engaged citizens who facilitate flows of connection, relationships and access to resources between different and disconnected parts of the community" [2].

The navigator role commonly includes: knowledge brokerage; fostering social supports by connecting to community resources; facilitating access to resources and services; identifying, navigating and removing barriers to community or services, and advocacy [5, 8, 10, 11, 16].

Navigators may also contribute to social planning, broker relationships with service provider organisations and government, and advise stakeholders on appropriate community engagement strategies. Their role may extend to mobilising individuals and families around a shared vision and strategy for the future [7].

Figure B depicts these role elements, as well as the principles that commonly guide the work of navigators.



Figure B – Navigator Roles and Principles

Navigators also work with a diverse range of target populations, including the following (adapted from [2]).

- individuals experiencing specific issues, for example: youth mental health, addictions, cancer;
- culturally and linguistically diverse communities or remote communities;
- age based populations such as older people or parents of young children;
- vulnerable populations such as those experiencing homelessness or domestic violence, or
- hardly reached populations.

There is also a wide range of potential navigator activities, summarised in Figure C.

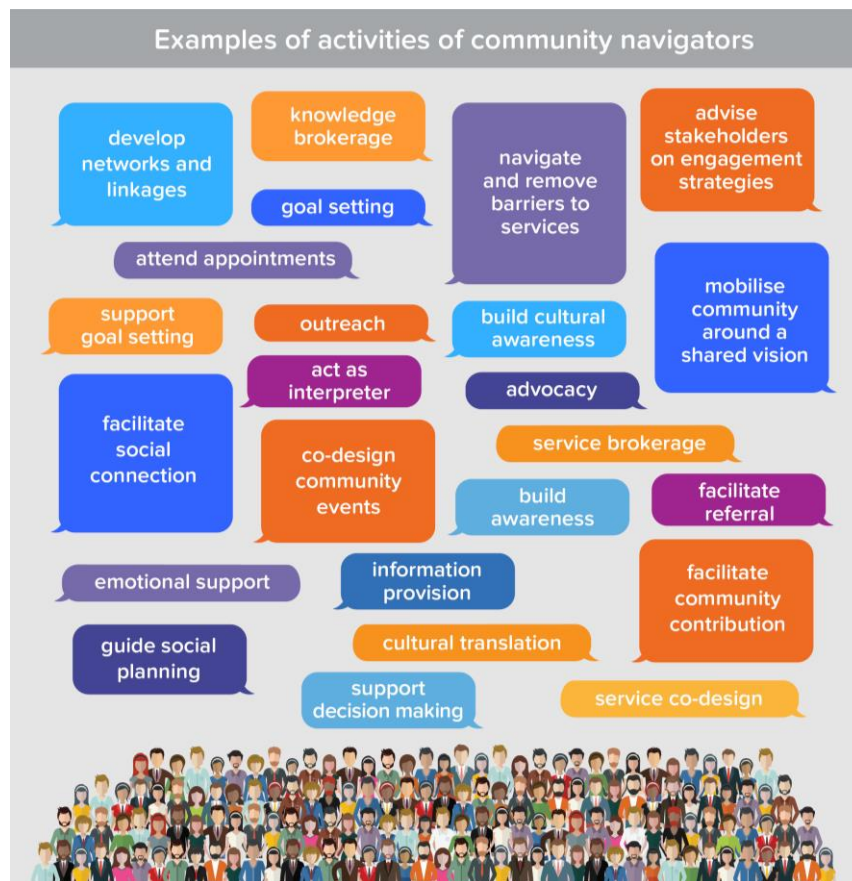


Figure C

There is a strong relationship between the scope and nature of the community navigator role and the way it is used within a given program - the “model”. The next section outlines the range of community navigator models addressed in the literature.

Navigator models

Reflective of the diversity of approaches, there is no single model of community navigation or community navigators. Nevertheless, some general distinctions can be made across broad model-types. Broadly speaking, navigators are either:

- professionals i.e. those with academic credentials such as social workers or nurses, often employed in programmatic settings [20], or
- individuals with lived experience and socio-cultural links to the target community, often described as peer or lay navigators, who may be either volunteers or paid employees [3, 7, 13, 17, 21, 22].

Peer or lay navigator ties to the local or cultural community and/or relevant lived experience have been noted as an important point of differentiation from case management driven programs [1], and have been demonstrated to be useful where target populations are dealing with cultural barriers or stigma [3, 9, 14, 16]. Peer and navigator models tend to value community connections above academic credentials [1].

Another model described in a study of community navigators in Ireland and Australia [12] explores the role of ‘emergent citizens’:- individuals who naturally cause connections between community members and services, but who are self-directed and unaffiliated with service provider organisations. Wallace and colleagues [13] describe this model as a ‘collaboration’ between service provider organisations and such unaffiliated ‘citizen’ connectors. In this scenario, ‘citizen’ connectors are not co-opted into a program, but remain ‘self-directed actors’. Effort is given to strengthening the ‘collaboration’ by providing opportunities for service provider staff and connectors to themselves connect, as well as through activities that enable collaboration, while continuing to systematically address barriers.

To further illustrate community navigator models that may be relevant for the Early Years Initiative, a selection of three programs from Australian and New Zealand have been summarised and provided as an Appendix A to this Report.

What does the evidence say?

While there is little empirical evidence in the literature on the effectiveness of community navigators [22], or their implementation and sustainability [19], social interventions such as community navigators are widely advocated. The lack of empirical evidence is likely to be a result of the diversity of community navigator roles, models and terminology.

The value of lived experience

The importance of utilising navigators who have lived experience is highlighted consistently in the literature [7, 16, 22]. Shared lived experience is also a factor that navigators themselves have stressed as essential to their role [1].

Drawing upon community navigators who share the social, economic, cultural or linguistic characteristics with populations of interest is important to promoting cultural and linguistic sensitivity, and community acceptance (Henderson, 2017). Lived experience has also been observed to promote trust, help validate advice, and aid in the setting of boundaries in a culturally appropriate way [1].

Having pre-existing relationships within the target community deepens the navigator’s knowledge of the quality of services and how to access them, promoting relevance and credibility. Their familiarity with community norms and methods of communication also engenders a sense of trust and familiarity on the user’s part [1, 16].

Implementation

Recruitment, selection, support, training and incentivisation are all consistently highlighted in the navigator literature as key implementation issues.

Community based lay navigator programs have been observed to ‘outreach’ their members [20]. Utilising diverse, word of mouth recruitment methods in preference to advertised positions is highlighted as positively supporting program uptake and buy-in by end users of the program [23].

Incentivisation for navigators is another important consideration. This may be monetary, but can also be in the form of a stipend or gift card, or through worker recognition, expressions of respect, opportunities for career advancement and supportive supervision [16].

Training and support for navigators is routinely cited as important for the effectiveness and sustainability of navigator programs [20, 23]. This includes peer-based learning and support; role definition; topical training; support for experimentation and adaptation [5], and ensuring there are adequate opportunities for navigators to be recognised and heard.

Clear articulation of the navigator role (purpose, scope, responsibilities – and things they are *not* responsible for) and the management of role boundaries, are highlighted in the literature [21, 23]. Paradoxically however, research undertaken within multi-cultural communities in Queensland suggests that training around role clarity may place navigators under greater pressure, as they realise they will be unable to meet their own or community expectations [14].

Other factors noted to be critical for implementation include fostering strong inter- and intra-organisational relationships and partnerships to support the navigator program [8, 23]. Strategies to strengthen these commitments may include: developing a communication strategy about the navigator program; developing a community charter; establishing a community based steering committee, and building community partnerships [8, 23].

Community support for navigator programs and buy-in by the end users of the program are also critically important features of implementation [23]. Co-designing the program with the target community will help to ensure community support and buy-in from inception [7], as will utilisation of diverse strategies for recruitment to programs [23].

Sustainability

The demonstrated value of community navigators needs to be balanced with recognition of the inherent stressors and challenges that arise when navigators are themselves part of the community; issues which can limit their participation and impact program sustainability [10, 11].

This may include tensions arising from the navigators’ own altruistic sense of commitment and the level of expectations they hold of themselves. It may result in ‘unlimitless access’ to their time, beyond what they are engaged to provide [4]. Navigators focus on the ‘whole person’ [5], and are

likely to be drawn into responding to a broader set of social determinants [4, 10]. Navigators with shared lived experience are also likely to be experiencing the same issues - such as racism, discrimination and mistrust - as the populations they serve, all of which can contribute to burnout. They may also fear that community expectations of their role will continue once their formal navigator role has ceased [4].

Research by Henderson and Kendall [14, 17] identified strategies that could work to address issues of navigator burnout and program sustainability. They suggest that rather than focusing on individual navigators, a focus on a 'whole-of-community' approach is needed both to lessen the burden on individual navigators, and to build a broader community accountability for change. They also suggest the 'staggering' of navigator employment. A further issue identified in this study is how to support/balance grassroots approaches as opposed to managing risk in bureaucratic settings. No solutions are suggested, other than being clear from the start and ensuring that there is a flexibility in the navigator role.

Cautions

While community navigator models appear to be a valuable strategy within communities, the literature also suggests several cautions.

Much of the value derived from community navigators stems from their 'natural' role as connectors and navigators in the community, and an instinctive ability to operate from their own lived experience. A point of reflection is whether 'institutionalising' navigator roles within formalised programs may detract from their intrinsic nature [13] or potentially negatively impact community relationships [19]. Other researchers have observed that navigator programs may distract from reforms needed to achieve systemic change, and that utilisation of navigators should not be at the expense of 'fixing the system' [2, 23].

Conclusion

Our review of community navigator literature suggests that community navigators are best thought of as a strategy to address an identified issue, or issues within a community.

Being clear about the need that exists and the outcome that a community wants to achieve is the first step. The second is to decide if community navigators can help address that need, and then co-design an appropriate model that is focused on the need or problem for the community's unique context.

The key questions that communities need to ask are: what is the evidence of need; what is the full range of available strategies to address that need; what is already going on within the community and what factors could affect the proposed program, and what is the evidence that a navigator program could help to bring about the communities' intended outcome? Answering these questions may help you decide on a particular way of working that is most likely to bring about the changes you want to see.

Case Studies

Harakeke

The [Harakeke](#) model operates in two locations in Auckland, New Zealand. The program aims to reduce social isolation of parents with children aged 0-5 years and improve their ability to parent positively, based on the hypothesis that 'when you're connected to and supported by other parents, you parent better'.

The program emerged through a social innovation process that started in 2014 to develop community-led initiatives in Waitakere, with support from Government and a social enterprise organisation. The process identified that many parents were mistrustful of existing services, and that they wanted a program that was informal and community-led. The resulting co-design process included looking at research on parenting; training and supporting local parents to interview each other, and holding a community event. Subsequently a group of parents - 'creative provocateurs' - became part of the process to develop an initial peer-support model that was trialed, evaluated, scaled to a second location with financial support from a philanthropic organisation, and eventually open-sourced.

The model involves locally recruited Parent Leaders holding weekly, hour long, 'meet-up' sessions for other families in their area. This could include cups tea at the Parent Leader's home, guitar lessons, community cook-ups, crafting or park, cafe and library visits. Parent Leaders are provided a \$100 shopping voucher for each activity session they run.

Pod Leaders - who may also be Parent Leaders - are responsible for recruiting, supporting and co-ordinating their 'pod' of Parent Leaders, receiving a shopping voucher of \$120 per week. A Coach is also employed part time to provide 'light touch' coaching to Pod Leaders and facilitate events for 'pods' to connect and learn across locations.

A Website and Facebook are used to inform community of activities and locations. Consideration is also being given to how the initiative can become financially self-sufficient rather than relying on external government and philanthropic funding which may not be sustainable or reliable in the long term.

Woombooriny Amboon Angarriya Partnership Initiative (WAAPI)

[WAAPI's](#) aim is to improve outcomes for children, young people and families living across the Dampier Peninsula. WAAPI is a collective impact project, operating within an Indigenous governance, family empowerment model which facilitates local decision making and ensures Aboriginal led, designed and delivered positive social change.

This Aboriginal-led, place-based approach also enhances the ability of the community to work with government to stimulate policy and systematic change.

Locally employed community navigators, who are responsible for driving grassroots change, are a key feature of the WAAP model. Their role includes informing and guiding social planning; ensuring a focus on community priorities; brokering government agency and service provider relationships, and advising stakeholders on appropriate community engagement.

Navigators initially developed household surveys and carried out research and consultation to determine the real needs within communities. This 'place-based data' was then presented back to community at 'pocket sessions' and special family cultural events. This has helped to build a transparent, whole-of-community understanding of the issues facing the community and momentum for change, as well as directly impacting the accountability of visiting service provider organisations and resource allocation. Navigator work has also helped to build Family Steering Committees which are part of the overall governance of WAAP.

The navigators are supported with specialised training, coaching and mentoring from Aaranja Ltd (Empowered communities) and Save the Children.

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Community Connector Program

The NDIS is available to all people with a disability who meet eligibility requirements. However the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) recognises that there may be significant social, cultural, economic or other discriminatory barriers to full participation in the scheme.

[NDIS Community Connectors](#) are employed as trusted resources to improve linkages between people, communities and resources as part of the NDIS. The target group of the program includes hard-to-reach populations; culturally diverse groups; remote and very remote communities, as well as specific cohorts such as ageing parents and carers of children with a disability.

The roles do not require specific qualifications or experience, however there is an emphasis on connectors being representative of the target group they are supporting, or having relevant lived experience.

A Remote Community Connectors (RCC) program operates to support remote and very remote Aboriginal communities to implement the NDIS. The program also provides the cultural brokerage necessary for individuals to understand and effectively engage with the relationships, infrastructure, organisational capacity and networks that exist with communities.

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