

# I A Global Evaluation of In the Company of Friends: A Synthesis Report

## Academic Research and Evaluation of ICOF

Researchers from the University of Manitoba and Kaplan Research Associates Inc. evaluated Manitoba's *In the Company of Friends* model of funding (ICOF). ICOF is implemented by LIFE Inc. to improve the quality of life of adults who live in Manitoba, and who are considered to be 'vulnerable' under the Vulnerable Persons Living with a Mental Disability Act. ICOF is designed to improve the quality of life of its participants through targeted and person-specific application of resources using innovative means at an average cost not in excess of services provided to other Manitobans with intellectual disabilities who reside in the community. ICOF's participants are referred to as Employers because of the unique ICOF individualized funding model that allows the person receiving the funding to choose how to employ resources to support them to lead a meaningful and full life.

The three main objectives of the evaluation were to:

1. Describe the ICOF model of funding and its Employers;
2. Identify the strengths of the ICOF model of funding and areas for improvement; and
3. Review the outcomes and impacts of the ICOF model of funding on the Employers.

Researchers conducted a comprehensive document review and reviewed organizational information describing ICOF's history, principles, goals, desired outcomes, modes of service delivery, accountability structure, and resources. In addition, they analyzed the existing administrative data for the Employers to describe their socio-demographic and health-related characteristics (Objective 1) with identifying information removed.

To identify the strengths of the ICOF model of funding and areas for improvement (Objective 2), the researchers conducted an online survey and analyzed the collected data provided by 45 Employers' key network members (out of 65 ICOF networks). In addition, they conducted telephone interviews with nine ICOF Employers, in keeping with restrictions at that time related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To assess the outcomes and impacts of the ICOF model of funding on the Employers (Objective 3), the same nine Employers were interviewed using an interview guide with open-ended questions focused on their quality of life (QoL). In addition,

the Employers completed a set of standardized assessment tools to self-rate their QoL, life satisfaction, and financial well-being.

## RESEARCH Results

### The ICOF Participants

At the time of the study in 2020, a total of 65 persons with intellectual disabilities were participating in the ICOF model of funding. The main characteristics of these employers are:

- They were living in 18 communities in all regions of Manitoba, including Winnipeg Region (26.2%); Westman (23.1%); Central (16.9%); Interlake (12.3%); Parkland (12.3%); Eastman (7.7%); and Northern Region (1.5%).
- The majority of the Employers were males (n = 41, 63.1%).
- The mean age of the Employers was 45.9 years, with their ages ranged from 24 to 76 years.
- The majority of the Employers (73.8%) were participating in the program for 11 or more years. Length of time participating in the ICOF program ranged from six months to 27 years.
- About half of the Employers (n = 30, 46.0%) were unemployed. However, 18.8% were employed; 18.8% were retired; 10.9% were self-employed; and 4.7% were volunteers.
- They used a range of methods to communicate, with 60.9% communicating in English. Other methods included gesturing (12.5%); using American Sign Language (ASL) (10.9%); using some English along with Low German (6.3%); using Augmented Communication Systems (4.7%); and using English with the support of other devices (4.7%).
- 23.4% of all Employers used a wheelchair for mobility.
- 35.9% had sensory disabilities.
- One-third attended a day program.
- Global mean per diem for Employers was calculated as the sum of the five allocated budget areas (financial and administrative, health, housing, daily living, and staff wages and related costs). This amounted to a mean of \$355.36 (SD=168.87), with a median of \$400.02 for all Employers. There was a broad range of global per diems reported: from \$70.30 to \$724.04.
- Employers in the three lowest levels of the Support Intensity Scale (SIS) had relatively low global per diems, ranging from \$126.00 to \$194.00. Employers in the highest SIS levels had global per diems ranging from \$321.00

to \$469.00 (SIS Levels Four, Six and Seven). There were statistically significant differences in Employers' mean global per diems for the five cost centres combined, based on SIS levels.

On average the Employers' social networks had 6 volunteer members. On average each network provided 8.6 (SD=2.28) different supports with a median of 9.0. The supports most frequently provided on behalf of Employers were, in ranked order: decision-making supports (100%); friendship (93.3%); healthcare supports (93.3%); staffing supports (88.9%); communication supports (82.2%); and supporting community connections (77.8%). Approximately 70% of the support networks had at least one family member, most of whom were the respondents to this evaluation.

### Strengths of the ICOF Model of Funding

#### *Perspective of the Support Network Members*

A total of 44 members of the Employers' support networks responded to a survey about the strengths of the ICOF model of funding, and the opportunities for improvement. Most of the respondents reported the following:

- The composition of the supports they provide and the network members at least somewhat meet the Employer's needs (97.8%).
- Additional supports would benefit Employers, with providing more friendship (35.6%), skills development supports (31.1%), support for community connections (26.7%), financial supports (20.0%) and staffing supports (20.0%) being the top five type of supports reported.
- Living expenses were at least somewhat sufficient (86.6%), but only 44.5% felt that the funds available for staff wages and related costs were at least somewhat sufficient.
- As for challenges experienced by the Employers, 48.9% reported that their Employers had experienced challenges or problems related to their involvement with ICOF. Of those who had, 66.7% had their problems resolved. The most frequently reported challenge for the Employers was "finding and/or retaining staff" followed by "Employers' mental health needs or conditions", and "involving family members".

From the perspective of the support network members the greatest strengths of the ICOF model of funding were that it is person-centred and individualized (35.7%); the Employers are able to live the lives they choose (35.7%); it encourages their independence and self-sufficiency (30.9%); and allows to provide valuable support on behalf of their Employers (23.8%).

They also reported that the model has a "balanced mandate" (2.4%) and focuses on relationships (2.4%).

Members of the Employers' support networks had several suggestions to improve the ICOF model of funding, with the top three being:

1. Increase staff wages and related costs;
2. Increase the number of network supports; and
3. Stay with the original ICOF format.

#### *Perspective of the Employers*

Nine ICOF Employers who had already been in the program for several years (between 10-23 years) provided their perspective on the ICOF model of funding. All nine study participants reported that they are:

- Extremely happy and satisfied about their involvement in the ICOF model of funding;
- Very passionate about supporting this model, which they all liked very much; and
- Recommending ICOF as the best life option for persons with intellectual disabilities.

Most of the study participants stated that their lives had improved since joining ICOF. When they were asked what they liked about being part of the ICOF model of funding, the following three themes emerged: self-determination and independence, personal development, and social connections.

“...I just like that I am an individual. So, when I hire staff, I just like the ability that I can be the person that interviews them, the person that hires them, the person that can let them go. I just like that it just gives people like independence and all that kinda stuff, instead of having the company like... Like... Be put in a place or something like that. That's where my boyfriend lives and they just basically... The company just basically takes over and I think... I think, in a way, if people wanna live independently, it makes other people feel like... Like they can accomplish what they need to accomplish. I like that I can make my own decisions and I like that I can hire my own staff and all that kind of stuff. - Judy

“I like this program because I choose the people I want to keep around and I can choose my own diet and go see the doctor when I need to. - Mike

“I like how I can manage my money and that I can hire my own staff because it gives me the opportunity to make my own decisions on who to hire so that I can have around people who get along with me... People I like... "I like the people [in my network and in ICOF]. They are very friendly and nice. - Sara

**“ Just being independent, learning my own skills. Maybe, having some opportunities for job interviews... Posting job at LIFE. Oh yes, I like being part of ICOF. I will be part of it until I die. Oh yeah, [my life] it's perfect! - Matthew**

Only one study participant discussed some issues she was experiencing with her support network as one aspect of the ICOF model that could be improved.

### **Impacts and Outcomes of the ICOF Model of Funding on the Employers**

Quantitative data on quality of life (QoL), life satisfaction and financial well-being of 42 Employers were collected and we learned that:

- The Employers scored well above what was expected for similar populations of persons with intellectual disabilities, meaning having higher than average quality of life. The QoL domains in which the ICOF Employers scored the highest included self-determination, material well-being, rights, and social inclusion. They also scored average in the domains of emotional well-being, physical well-being, personal development, and interpersonal relations.
- All of the Employers were satisfied with their lives. Most of the ICOF Employers who participated in this study reported being extremely satisfied with their lives (57%), 38% reported being satisfied with their current life, 5% reported being slightly satisfied with their life, and none of the study participants evaluated their life satisfaction in a neutral or negative fashion.
- All of the Employers reported enjoying a good financial standing.

The qualitative interviews investigating study participants' own perspectives on their QoL. We learned that the Employers who participated in this study enjoyed excellent quality of life. All study participants:

- Provided accounts of lives full of opportunities to pursue their own interests, and opportunities to independently perform activities that promote their personal development.
- Reported having people in their lives who provide them with the emotional support they need in difficult times, including friends, family members, the people in their support networks, and even a counselor.
- Provided a very positive description of their material well-being and access to the medications and technical devices needed.

Some study participants, at the end of their interviews, provided the following comments:

**“I think I basically summed it up that it's a nice program to be in.” - Judy**

**“I'm just happy! I'm a lucky guy. I'm a very lucky guy. I came a long way. I'm doing very well.” - Scott**

**“My life is good right now.” - Fred**

**“I'm happy with my life. I won't change anything.” - Sara**

**“I think my quality of life has improved [since I join ICOF]. So far, everything is going good.” - David**

In summary, the nine ICOF Employers who were interviewed provided a very positive portrait of their current QoL and very positive subjective evaluations of their QoL in most of the eight domains investigated in the interviews. The only area that was highlighted as a challenge was related to social inclusion. Many of the study participants reported not having many ties to their surrounding communities and to rarely have opportunities to meet new people. It is important to note that at the time of data collection (December 2020 – January 2021), the Province of Manitoba was following the code red restrictions imposed by the Provincial Government due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Conclusions And Recommendations**

Persons with intellectual disabilities participating in and supported by the ICOF model of funding benefit greatly from this model and have their needs met. They enjoy high quality of life, satisfied with their lives and are in good financial wellbeing. The following recommendations were made by the members of the Evaluation Working Group:

1. That consideration be given to returning to one stream funding for ICOF.
2. That Innovative LIFE Options advocate to government that ICOF be presented in its menu of options for people with intellectual disabilities who may benefit by becoming involved with the ICOF model of funding.
3. That Innovative LIFE Options promote the ICOF model of funding throughout Manitoba, based on the positive findings from this evaluation.