Episode 71: "Applying BI to Community Services Challenges"

with Brianne Kirkpatrick, Principal Advisor with BIT Canada, & Ansley Dawson, Senior Manager, Financial Empowerment Program at WoodGreen Community Services.

Ansley Dawson and Brianne Kirkpatrick tell us about their joint work using BI to support folks on social assistance. We focus on the innovative Income Transition Project, which is free social worker counselling to help folks understand the financial process of transitioning to employment. This project is a great illustration of how scoping, evaluation, and scaling can be tackled in a complex problem involving multiple partners, datasets, and outcomes that matter.

Transcript:

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short. Today we're calling DIBS on Ansley Dawson and Brianne Kirkpatrick.

Ansley is Senior Manager, Financial Empowerment Program at WoodGreen Community Services, and Brianne is Principal Advisor at the Behavioural Insights Team's Canada office.

Brianne and Ansley have been working together on a very cool project and I've heard a little teaser and I'm excited to dive in deeper today and hear more about the great work they're doing together. So, welcome to the podcast, Ansley and Brianne.

ANSLEY DAWSON, GUEST: Thank you!

BRIANNE KIRKPATRICK, GUEST: Hello.

APPELT: And maybe you can each take a moment to say hello and introduce yourselves. Maybe we'll pass it to Ansley first.

DAWSON: Hi. Yes, as mentioned, I'm Ansley Dawson, and I'm with the Financial Empowerment Program at WoodGreen in Toronto.

APPELT: Wonderful. And Brianne?

KIRKPATRICK: I'm Brianne Kirkpatrick. I'm a Principal Advisor with the Behavioral Insights Team's Canadian office.

APPELT: Wonderful. So, our overarching topic today is exploring how applied behavioural science can make an impact, partnering with the non-profit sector. But I thought it would be great if we start with a specific project and then we can zoom out to talk a bit more generally.

So Brianne, I think almost everyone is familiar with BIT these days, but do you want to refresh us in this context a little bit about BIT?

KIRKPATRICK: Yeah, definitely. So, we are a research consultancy. We started in the UK's Cabinet Office in 2010 before spinning out of government to become a social purpose company. So, what that means is that we now have offices all over the world.

I joined to help open the Canadian office in 2019, and now we get to partner with a range of different organizations, governments, nonprofit, private sector organizations on a wide variety of design and evaluation and research opportunities.

APPELT: Such cool work that BIT does. I'm excited we're getting to hear a small snippet today. Ansley, can you tell us a little bit about WoodGreen, something users and listeners might not be as familiar with?

DAWSON: Sure. Yeah. WoodGreen Community Services is a large umbrella service agency located in Toronto. We serve about 37,000 clients per year through a whole variety of different services. We offer newcomer settlements, employment services, senior care, subsidized housing, child care services, with over 75 programs in total.

But my program specifically is the Financial Empowerment Program, where we provide financial counselling and tax filing services for people who are living on a low income. So predominantly people who are living on social assistance income, or government pensions of different variety as well as, of course, lower employment income as well.

It's rather unusual for a community service agency to offer financial empowerment services. This is not something people have typically heard of before. There isn't any core government funding currently in Canada for this type of work, which is why we feel really strongly about engaging in innovation and research to demonstrate the impact of our services within the Canadian context. We're very excited to have the opportunity to partner with BIT on this project for sure.

APPELT: Yeah. Wow. WoodGreen does such amazing work. It's just such a huge part of a community. I can't imagine having a more perfect umbrella of services. Wow. And really neat to hear that financial empowerment because that's such a huge piece of the puzzle for folks, and something, like you said, that often gets kind of overlooked in the face of more urgent in the moment obstacles.

But financial is urgent in the background, even if it's not always in the foreground. And so you two have partnered together in a really neat way. Brianne, can you tell us a little bit about the behavioural challenge that you partnered together on?

KIRKPATRICK: So, before I get to that, let me just give you a quick outline of the program that WoodGreen is delivering. So, this program is offered to people who are typically unemployed or underemployed. They're receiving social assistance. Because we're in Ontario, it's specifically a program called Ontario Works. But really, we think that this program could actually eventually be relevant to anybody on a fixed income.

But for this sort of context, we're focused on people receiving social assistance. Among other things, the program aims to help people transition back to work, if that's what's right for them. And that includes helping people understand really clearly what happens to their social assistance benefits, as they start to work more hours. And that's where we get to the behaviour challenge.

The social assistance system, the broader benefits system is really complex, really complex to navigate. There's clawbacks if people start working. There's benefits that people might not be aware of that could be being left on the table. And really there's just uncertainty about what happens to somebody's benefits if they start working and earning more.

And we know in behavioural science that uncertainty can be quite paralyzing. So people can also underestimate gains. They can lean towards the status quo rather than venture into the scary unknown, even if the status quo isn't meeting their needs. So, it's not that people don't want to work. It's that it's really not clear to everybody what their life and what their finances will look like if they start working more.

So this program that WoodGreen is delivering, it offers a lot of things for people which Ansley can tell you more about. But to address the sort of specific behavioural challenge, it's meant to really empower people by providing them with a very tangible, certain view, or as certain as possible, of what will happen if they start to work or work more.

APPELT: Wow, that's such a massive problem for folks who are in that situation. There's just so many elements. I can see how that is a problem that's ripe for BI and also one that's really complex to tackle and it makes total sense that WoodGreen and BIT would partner together on this. So, Ansley, I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the solution you thought might be appropriate and what you worked together to develop.

DAWSON: What we were seeing on the front line at WoodGreen, working regularly with people who are living on social assistance to specifically talk about their finances, was we were hearing very much about their incomplete information that they received about how the benefits program works.

Generally, when you're enrolled in our social assistance programs in Ontario, there's Ontario Works and ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program), you meet briefly with a caseworker when you're first enrolled, and they generally go over the whole program and how it works and whether it is that the caseworker didn't necessarily provide complete information or the client who was attending just wasn't able to absorb it all, it's a very stressful time when you're first needing to go on social assistance, so we can understand might be hard to process all that information, but there's definitely a lot of misconceptions that happen.

And then there's also the ways in which people can become further confused by other conflicting messages that may be coming from family or friends as well, generally in the community. And people don't know about the additional benefits that they could receive to help cover the costs of transitioning to employment.

They definitely, there's a lot of concern about how employment reporting, employment income reporting works, or how the actual benefit clawbacks will function on a monthly basis. Specific questions like when they'll lose access to extended health benefits that are offered through the social assistance programs, or how they're going to manage money when the employment income may be inconsistent or unstable at first.

There's a lot of concerns there and the social assistance caseworkers are overburdened. They don't have time to spend with each of their clients on these issues. And so overall, people end up with a high level of uncertainty and fear around social assistance. And frankly, even us, as financial empowerment professionals, we really struggle to get it totally clear, when working with clients. And so, we really felt like, "Okay, this is a huge gap. This is a big, big concern here. It's time for us to really face this head on".

APPELT: Yeah, that is such a challenge. I think, like you said, there's the challenge itself of finding work and all of that. Just the literal challenges, the more surface level challenges. And then when you add in the things like

uncertainty, it just really complicates the picture. And uncertainty, when you have it, it's not like that's the only facet of uncertainty in their lives, so that's compounding whatever other uncertainties, and then it really just can be quite paralyzing.

And I think what you're saying, too, about the assistance workers are trying to help, but it can also be hard when you know a program so well to understand what, from someone else's perspective, they're not understanding. And so I can see where there would be a lot of challenges there. So that sounds like a very ripe challenge, but also a, to be redundant, challenging challenge. So what solutions are you testing to help folks overcome this? And maybe I'll pass it to Ansley first on this one.

DAWSON: What we call the Income Transition Project, which is a financial counselling program for people who are living on social assistance income. And clients have the opportunity to meet one on one with a financial social worker to complete a series of activities aimed at building financial skills and confidence around the transition to employment. And the model, right now, takes approximately four sessions with a counsellor, sometimes a fifth session.

In the first session, we're really focussing on the social worker doing a benefit screening with the client. We want to make sure that the client's accessing everything they can in the way of income or reducing expenses through subsidies, to access everything that we can to help them maximize their financial stability in the here and now.

In the second session, we focus on doing budgeting with the client in order to explore their current financial situation in kind of its best possible case and to discuss how they might be able to achieve financial goals.

In the third session, the social worker is then able to use a calculator with the client, and this is something that we created specifically for this project that allows us to demonstrate to the client exactly what happens to their social assistance income benefits with each dollar of employment income that they could earn in a month. So it functions very much like a budgeting worksheet and can show on a monthly basis, based on how much employment income comes in, exactly what happens to their benefits. It allows us to demonstrate the tipping point, really, when the client would lose all of their benefits entirely and gives us a jumping off point to explain transitional benefits that would also be available to help through that process.

The fourth session, it really focuses on action planning, where for clients who are really interested in moving towards employment, we provide the opportunity for a warm handoff to WoodGreen's Employment Services and for people who may not be interested or ready for employment, we focus on referrals for any other additional supports that could help them in the meantime.

We know overall that through client feedback, this program has been yielding some transformational outcomes. But we also know that funding really relies on what the data can prove. And Ontario is going through a major transformation in how we structure employment programing for people on social assistance. So there is a lot of interest right now on whether this intervention could help motivate people to engage with employment supports. So we're really curious to see what the data might be able to show for the impacts of this intervention.

APPELT: Such a neat project. Brianne, did you want to add anything there?

KIRKPATRICK: I would just say something that's really impressed me about this program from the beginning is something I learned from Ansley and her team. The program really endeavours to meet people where they're at. It's a very sort of human-first, empathetic approach to a program like this. And I think that what we're

seeing anecdotally from client feedback, etc., is an appreciation for that sort of level of respect and flexibility in how the service is delivered. I think WoodGreen really cares about developing really genuine and productive relationships with the people that they're trying to serve. And that sort of is woven kind of throughout the sessions that that Ansley described.

APPELT: Yeah, I love how it's this series of sessions and that the calculator, which is so important, doesn't make its appearance at the beginning. You build the support and the relationship and then it's you know that just in time providing it when it's available.

But I think that calculator is so important. I haven't worked in this specific context, but I worked in the health benefits space and watching people try to calculate, in the US, if I was paying this amount of co-insurance and this many premiums and these many co-pay benefits, how much am I paying? And just technically it's solvable, but it just feels insurmountable when you're trying to add all these different numbers together and you don't know the jargon that's attached to them.

And I think that's part of the magic of BI, because coming from a more economic standpoint, you would say, well, the information's there, people can calculate it, but having a calculator do it for you and one where you don't have to program an Excel sheet with all the formulas, it just cuts so much sludge, and for a lot of people there's that fear of numbers as well, it just removes that from the equation.

So I think that's such an amazing addition and it's going to be such a service for the population to just have that as a resource. And then when you layer that on top of all the sessions, that's just super, super cool. And I'm so excited to hear that it's resonating and that it's being tested. And just speaking of kind of the multiplicity of components of the program, and I know that as a social services agency, WoodGreen offers, that's just a very tiny, tiny slice of what's going on.

And I know you're all passionate about finding and trying new solutions, but it can be hard to narrow down, when there are so many problems, where do you focus for any given project? So is that something, Ansley, that BIT was able to support with, with scoping? And how did that work?

DAWSON: Absolutely. The development of this project was something that I found very exciting. And when my enthusiasm kind of runs away with me, you suddenly end up with too many ideas and you end up with something that ends up being not very functional.

So we know that with the Income Transition Project, we specifically we knew that we did want to target how to motivate people who are living on social assistance to connect with employment supports or to move towards employment. This has been a problem that we have been dealing within our services where our financial empowerment social workers have really struggled with having these conversations, not feeling as confident and feeling the clients really wanted and really needed to go there.

So, we knew that the misconceptions and confusion around the financial benefits are a core concern for people to be confident in transitioning to employment. But there are so many other barriers, of course, that keep people on social assistance. And social workers have a skillset to touch on so many of those barriers.

And so my initial instincts were to build in a service that was going to be more sessions for sure. That was going to include aspects of counselling and motivational interviewing to attempt to address more deeply rooted beliefs that would be present in situations of intergenerational poverty. Really, I just wanted to throw the whole kitchen sink of skills at the problem and quickly got lost in the design.

And so BIT really helped to articulate really the Theory of Change, and that specifically we believe that it's a meaningful proportion of social assistance clients, Ontario Works clients that are underestimating the gains of employment, and just that issue is enough of a barrier that makes it harder to transition to employment and that it is a worthwhile intervention for us to just hone in on that piece. And so that really greatly helped to make it so much easier to design an intervention to target that issue and ultimately, of course, to evaluate it as well.

APPELT: Yeah, I think it's so important. We often get, as we get deeper into a problem, we get so excited about the many different ways to tackle it, and then you can come up with this monster that you can't actually do anything with. And so the idea of like figuring out which chunks to work on and then it's not like you can't work on those other chunks, it'll just be part of the next project. So, I always find that it's helpful to have someone else remind you of that when you're in the thick of a problem.

Well, one of the other pieces I really wanted to chat about is evaluation. And BIT, of course, excels in many pieces, but I think one of them is evaluating solutions, which is often quite complicated, especially in projects that are not in a lab setting. So, I was curious how BIT tackled evaluation for this complex challenge and this innovative program. So, could you speak a little bit about that, Brianne?

KIRKPATRICK: Yes, I can speak a lot about that. So, here I go. So, for any challenge, for any research or evaluation challenge, we tackle it as a team. I would say for this project, it's been tackled, as a village. So, we've just been picking up important perspectives and viewpoints along the way that have been shaping this evaluation beyond WoodGreen and BIT with any evaluation.

You know, we started looking at what our research questions were, choosing a method to best sort of answer those research questions. We knew from the beginning that we wanted to evaluate impact of this program. That put us into the RCT category of research designs. We are interested in the causal impact of participating in this program and making moves towards employment. But beyond that, you know, we weren't sure what outcomes would be relevant to other groups. And so, we actually kicked this off, largely based on some great advice from WoodGreen, with a round of stakeholder consultation.

So, we, the sort of universal 'we', WoodGreen and BIT, we met with financial empowerment providers, employment service providers, service system managers, which is sort of an Ontario word within the social service delivery space, the relevant policy owners in government and so on and so on. We wanted to really pressure test the research questions that we had in mind. We wanted to know what these groups cared about. We also wanted to start to figure out how we were going to get the data to answer these questions.

And then in addition to this, because this is a large, complex program, we needed to come up with an outreach strategy that would enable us to recruit people into the program, but also figure out how to fairly form treatment and control groups. And that's a huge thanks to Toronto Employment and Social Services, who was one of the early partners on this. And so, we ended up running an expression of interest.

So basically, Toronto Employment and Social Services sent out a really simple email to Ontario Works recipients, letting them know that this opportunity was available. And then we randomly assigned people who had expressed that initial interest to receiving the program or not. Then, of course, we get into the development of trial protocols. I think Ansley can attest, that the documentation and all the paper associated with this evaluation is sort of never ending.

Before we were even able to get there, though, we basically had this huge shared spreadsheet internally on our BIT team, basically following the journey from expression of interest through the program and beyond,

and listing out, at these different points, along this kind of linear journey, what questions we had and what data we wanted to collect along the way. It was really the only way we could sort of wrap our arms and minds around evaluating something so complex in a meaningful way, but also doing it in a way that's practical, right? Because we can't ask all the questions that all the points. We want to make sure we're not asking the same thing twice. We're designing something that works with WoodGreen's intake and program delivery, because it is a lot of effort, right, to layer an evaluation on top of program delivery. And we want to be mindful of that as much as we could.

And so, we ended up with these three research questions. So one: "Did participating in the ITP increase efforts to pursue employment or employment itself?". And so that we're measuring with our comparison groups, the treatment and control. We'll be using administrative data for that and looking at that outcome you know, six months to a year after the program wraps up. So it's a longer term outcome.

There's also this intermediate step around increasing employment efforts as somebody finishes the program, and then what do they do? Do they take advantage of some training that they didn't know about before? Do they sign up with an Employment Ontario service provider that they might not have known about or had been thinking about, but maybe there were other barriers to signing up?

And then we have this research question around "Did participating in the ITP increase financial well-being?". And that's really an immediate outcome of the program, right? So, for that, we're not looking across comparison groups, we're doing within group pre-post survey, before somebody starts the program, after the program, how are they doing in terms of financial well-being, money-related stress, life stabilization, some behavioural intent measures, some sort of financial empowerment and knowledge measures, which are all very valuable outcomes in their own right, kind of as soon as the program wraps.

Just to sort of recap, we've got these two different tracks within our impact evaluation. One is the pre-post survey of our treatment group only, to understand the immediate program effects. And then the other is the treatment control comparison using administrative data and some of these other behaviours that we're thinking we might see.

APPELT: It's so exciting when you get to connect different data sets like that, and I'm really excited to see what you end up finding and we'll have to bring you all back in some amount of time to see what the results have been. But I also at the same time don't envy the task of correlating datasets and bringing everything together. Having just worked on a project with four different datasets, where you're trying to amalgamate, I know it's a lot of work, but it's such exciting work.

So, one of the other things I was curious about is the idea of scaling. So, I know this project is still being tested right now, but if it's successful, it's such an important service. Is there potential to scale it at WoodGreen, Ansley?

DAWSON: Yeah, this is kind of our immediate question of once we're through the service delivery phase of this project, we don't want to lose the momentum. We're ready to start rolling this out as more of an intervention integrated within our employment services. It's likely where we are going to be going next. And to make it more scalable, the question, of course, is "What can be taken out of just these intensive one to one, multi-session counselling relationships and maybe taken into a group workshop format?". And to us, the piece that seems most obviously beneficial, potentially to teach that way, would be the calculator.

So our hope is that we would like to get our calculator up and web-hosted because as of right now, of course it being an Excel spreadsheet format, and we share it with clients, we share it as an actual file, and we have

great concerns obviously about people relying on it too long, even when benefit calculations change. And so, we need something to be web-hosted so people can always be accessing the most up-to-date version.

And so our hope would be that we can run workshops to educate people really on how to use it, run some kind of fairly common case scenarios that we've developed that can do a lot to dispel specific myths that we regularly encounter about people misunderstanding how the benefit clawback calculations function, about if overall at the end of the month, even if you reach the point where you're losing your benefits entirely, are you actually better off overall? And different scenarios with different family sizes and to then give them the opportunity to really play with it themselves and to encourage them to feel confident, to refer back to it and to not be afraid to think about how these transitions function when they're coming up with their own plans moving forward.

And we feel this would be particularly beneficial actually, like a really great leverage point, would be to educate professionals. So the employment service staff, the job coaches, even the social assistance workers that we regularly work with, have definitely remarked upon how valuable being able to have access to a calculator like this would be, so that they can feel more confident to have these discussions with their clients. Really, there's generally this sense of how does this thing not already exist, that we regularly hear. And so the idea of us being able to web host it and really teach people to use it, feels like a very ripe opportunity.

APPELT: Yeah, I think this is really neat and I just kind of want to call it out because I think it's a different way of scaling than we often hear. And such a powerful idea. If the calculator is really effective, it's not just about how do we have these sessions with as many people, but how do we make the calculator available in the different possible ways? And that also goes to this conversation that's happening in the behavioural sciences right now about heterogeneity and different things work for different people.

So this idea that maybe for some people the calculator in a one on one session works, but for other people the calculator in a workshop works or for some people they used the calculator before and now they just want to be able to refer back to it, so they don't need to go through all the sessions again. But it's having access to it on an ongoing basis or like you said, having it in the hands of other professionals, which would help the clients, but also it can help some of those conversations and potentially folks won't need the really intensive set of sessions because they'll be doing these other interventions.

So I think that's a really amazing way to scale something and do so in a way that is really helpful, but also mindful of WoodGreen's bandwidth because, you know, with an organization offering as many services as you are, you can't do individual sessions for everyone and it wouldn't be the right fit for everyone either. So I think that's really, really neat. So that's scaling within the organization.

But I'm curious about scaling across organizations because WoodGreen is local, and other communities are served by other organizations, is this a place where there's interest in scaling across organizations and communities? Is that something that BIT's been thinking about, Brianne?

KIRKPATRICK: Yeah, that's definitely something we've been thinking about with WoodGreen. And this is an evaluation method that we haven't been as famous for using as something like an RCT, which is a formative evaluation, and it's running alongside the impact evaluation tracks in this case. And it's the last sort of puzzle piece we're talking about today, but certainly not the least important in the sort of whole picture of evaluation. Just like you said, Kirstin, WoodGreen is only ever going to deliver this program in Toronto, that's the local community that they know really well and serve really well.

And if we want to see social impact at scale across Ontario, across Canada, we need other providers to know about the program, to know how to adopt it or to know how to adapt it in whatever way makes sense for their delivery. So this formative evaluation, the kind of animating question, kind of the umbrella question above all of our research questions within it is what do other organizations need to know or need to do to adopt or adapt the program?

So we've been collecting data to help inform this along the way from the program managers from the frontline social workers delivering the program. We've been surveying clients coming up, doing interviews with clients, taking a sort of systematic approach to measuring, you know, inputs like funding and time and lessons learned kind of along the way.

And just like Ansley was saying earlier, this will be a really key input to figuring out what those 'need to haves' versus 'nice to haves' are. So if it does scale, what are the critical components that we think should remain the same or the same ish?

All of this, I think, can also help put our impact evaluation findings into context for a variety of different audiences. So it'll be, I think, quite a nice compliment to see it all together when it's sort of all said and done. Yeah, it's really exciting to think about. Like I said, it's in some ways a different way of thinking of scaling, but I think it's such an important one that works in context. And so, I'm hopeful that you find good things in the evaluation. And then like I said, we can touch base again in the future on this.

APPELT: Well, you've done a really neat, deep dive on this project, but I'd also like to see if there's any more lessons learned that would work across projects. And in this case, I think the partnership has worked so well because of the complementary expertise WoodGreen and BIT have been bringing to the table.

WoodGreen has the subject matter expertise on the behavioural challenges people are facing, some of the solution that might help. BIT has the subject matter expertise on how to scope programs for evaluation, how to evaluate impact, how to determine which components are critical for scaling. So, it seems like a partnership set up for success.

But I know that most partnerships and projects have some surprises along the way, whether it's just different styles of paperwork or amounts of clearance needed. So, I was curious if there's any obstacles along the project journey that you think would make for useful lessons learned for other folks trying to partner across organizations? And maybe I'll pass this one to Brianne first.

KIRKPATRICK: So maybe one sort of general challenge that we've experienced, not just on this project, but in other project contexts, this sort of misalignment between the pots of funds that are available and the work that needs to be done in the sector. So, understanding infrastructure and the sort of bureaucracy around funding is a pretty key enabler to doing this sort of multi-partner behavioural science work and, you know, shouldn't be left to the end of an ambitious project like this.

Beyond that, though, it's very easy to partner with an organization that is largely made up of social workers or people with sort of related backgrounds. They don't shy away from a challenge and they just make things happen. And this is the part of the podcast where it's just like a love letter to WoodGreen for taking this on. Their willingness to tackle this tough challenge to serve the people that they serve in Toronto, in new and we think, hopefully, better ways combined with their vision for evaluation, which is going to inform their own sort of service delivery, but is quite extraordinary, the potential to inform other service providers in Canada, and globally.

So, we get that every program can't be sort of evaluated to this degree. Although wouldn't it be nice to live in a world where at least we're more aware? But, you know, it takes a certain commitment of time of funding and leadership that WoodGreen has really taken on. So it's just been really impressive to see a single community organization like WoodGreen identify this challenge, you know, work to develop a solution and then pilot and evaluate. It's been quite an extraordinary journey working with them.

And like I think we've both mentioned a few times, the work can really only happen if we have a lot of organizations in that kind of supporting partnership role as well, an enabling partnership role. So like working with tests on the recruitment and outreach, help with data and data sharing, help understanding what matters to the sector and help understanding what the sector can and can't scale all makes the research sort of as meaningful as it can be.

APPELT: Amazing. It sounds like such a great opportunity to work with such great folks. And Ansley, I know for folks in your position, sometimes, even though this is part of the day job, it feels like something you're doing off the side of the desk or something that you're adding to an already impossibly full schedule. So what were some of the challenges or lessons learned for you in tackling something that's not part of the usual day-to-day?

DAWSON: That's a good question. Honestly, I think that this has been such an excellent project to work on because the evaluation questions are still in our hands in community services, we're still being constantly asked as we do different funding proposals like what's your data? How can you prove the impact of this intervention that you're proposing, prove that it's needed?

We don't really have the right tools to be able to answer to those questions in a lot of circumstances. And so it can be a real struggle because essentially it's not totally off the side of my desk that this just really is a demand that is on us in order to be able to maintain the sustainability of our services, is to be able to produce this sort of data. And it just feels like we're kind of doing it with one hand tied behind our back, when we just don't have the training and the skill sets and the resources in order to put proper time into it. It's such a 'Catch-22'. You can only get the funding if you have the data, but you can only figure out how to produce the data when you have adequate funding for it.

And so, we were incredibly lucky in this opportunity that WoodGreen does have an internal foundation team that was able to do fundraising in order to support this round of the project, really just because the agencies feel so strongly about it, about figuring out how are we helping people who are living on social assistance to move towards employment, as a financial empowerment service provider and as an employment service provider?

So yeah, it's been really, really exciting to have this opportunity, we definitely feel the pressure to try to get this right because we don't typically have this sort of opportunity in community services, and we really want to be sure that we've evaluated this thing really well to tell the story.

APPELT: Yeah, that's so neat that it's worked out so well. And like you said, it is such a 'Catch-22' of you need the data to get funded, but you need funding to get the data, and then it's nice that you were able to have these partnerships to help crack that puzzle. And then maybe, maybe the podcast you can share with some funders who can hear the 'Catch-22' they're putting you in, to cut through some of that red tape. That's going back to Brianne's point about our ideal world, where data is always there, and funding is available for the key projects that need it.

Well, I know I have used up a lot of your time today, so I thought I'd move into our wrap-up questions and ask if you have a message for our new BI practitioners in training or just folks who are curious about sticking a toe in the Applied Behavioural Science waters from any perspective. And maybe I'll pass this one first to Ansley.

DAWSON: That's an excellent question, being that I'm not a behavioural science practitioner, my background is I'm a registered social worker. I regularly do interact with people who have a background in evaluation. I would say that I really enjoy working with people who have such a strong grounding in behavioural sciences and to really help us to take these leaps ahead in social service design.

I would heartily encourage people to feel just as passionate about working with community service agencies who are trying to figure out how to tackle these challenging issues on the small scale, within smaller communities. I can only assume that in the behavioural sciences, people are trying to likely get roles within policy development or with larger institutions. And I hope that they would know that there's a lot of very interesting and exciting work that can be happening even within smaller agencies that can really yield some massive impact for people's lives.

APPELT: That's such a great message and I think such an important one, because of the way employment services and community services often work, they may not be on people's radar in the same way as opportunities in which to do behavioural science or find roles. So I think that's a great point that those opportunities are there and those organizations have really great partnerships with behaviorual scientists. So I love that. Brianne, anything from you?

KIRKPATRICK: Just briefly, I guess RCTs are not just for comms interventions and evaluation is not just about impact.

APPELT: Short and sweet. I love it. And very important. Yeah, I was just reading something about impact and evaluation and that puzzle. So I think that that's a good message as well, and very timely in this time when behavioural science is trying to get out of some of just the traditional, these are the projects we do, but trying out different projects in different capacities.

Well, thank you so much, Brianne and Ansley. You're doing such amazing work. I think I've overused the word 'amazing' today, but it's just so applicable both individually and together. You're just really moving the ball forward on really important issues. So Ansley, thank you for all you do to support the people of Toronto. Brianne, thank you for all your work using BI to tackle a variety of challenges and thank you both for joining today and being generous with your time and insights. It's been a pleasure to have this conversation together. And thank you to our listeners for Calling DIBS.