

Innisfail Community Team - Pandemic Response

Case Study

Background

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the enforcement of physical distancing was a first line of defense. Although the physical safety of all persons was of utmost priority, the public health measures protecting us impacted individual mental health, and the psychosocial aspects of our lives. Due to broad impacts of the pandemic, and the nature of needs arising, community-level response was required in order to act quickly and efficiently. Multi-sector community teams became key in local response efforts. Through the pandemic's progression, older adults were identified as being one of the most susceptible, and disproportionately affected groups. Persons living with dementia and their care givers were, and continue to be, among some of the most vulnerable. As people were becoming more isolated in order to protect against COVID-19, their needs were evolving. In a time when physically 'being apart' was essential, it was imperative for individuals to find a way to 'come together' to ensure no one was alone, or struggling to meet basic human necessities. COVID-19 has impacted all communities, but rural communities were uniquely impacted due to their geographic location, and pre-existing realities of having limited resources. Communities have, in many ways, been left to adopt their own unique ways to respond to the pandemic. During these challenging times it is important to showcase how through leveraging and adapting existing community infrastructures and resources, multi-sector community teams were able to find creative ways of meeting emerging needs of those living in their respective communities affected by dementia.

Community Partners in Action

Innisfail, a rural community in central Alberta, was not immune to the challenges of COVID-19. Community members banded together to meet the needs of its most vulnerable residents. The *Community Partners in Action* team, consisting of local members from multiple sectors was an already established group prior to the pandemic. Their focus was on creating a dementia friendly community. Although they shifted their efforts as the pandemic continued, they remained focused on finding ways to support those living in the community affected by dementia, and other older adults. Wendy Evans, the Geriatric Nurse from the Wolf Creek Primary Care Network and an instrumental player in the creation of the Innisfail *Community Partners in Action* team, expressed the importance of meeting both the medical and psychosocial needs for each individual, as well as understanding what matters most to them. "People live in communities, not their medical home. It's vital that we work collaboratively as this would give us the opportunity to be successful in meeting those needs," Evans says. The *Community Partners in Action* team recognize the most efficient way to understand the needs of Innisfail residents was to engage with them. As members of the community, the multi-sector





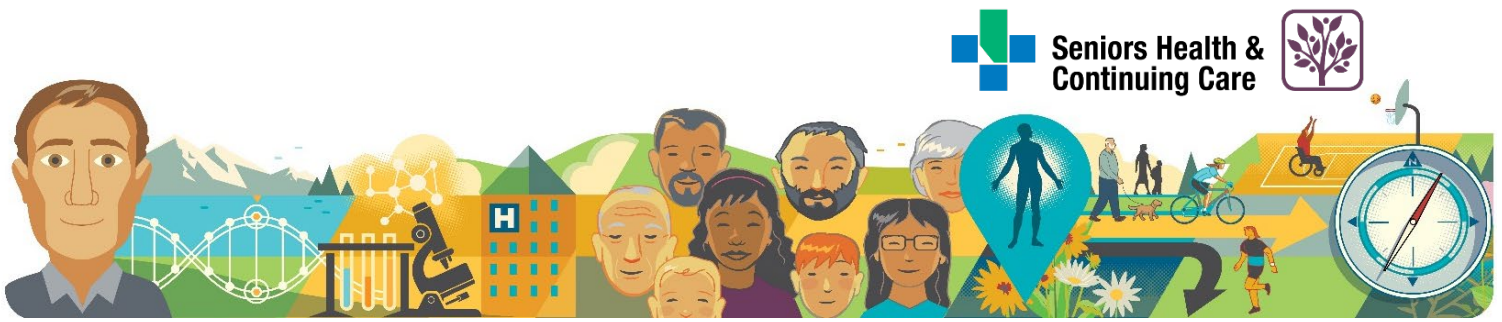
group members already had trusted connections with many local individuals and took a grassroots approach to understanding the local context. A rich understanding of community needs was achieved through a combination of pre-existing relationships, and a team which included partners from multiple sectors (i.e. health care, social, and community).

Preserving social outlets while promoting health and wellbeing were priorities and existing community programs recognized their ability to address these concerns. This meant the multi-sector team had to be creative when planning how to offer and support communal activities despite existing public health restrictions. The *Community Partners in Action* team surveyed community organizations to determine what resources and programs were available. It was important not to duplicate programs, and encourage participation and accessibility for each. On the team was the Alberta Health Services (AHS) Community Recreation Therapist, which was a unique position to Innisfail since no other central Alberta community had a similar role. This position was an added asset to the brainstorming sessions of the group due to their ability to develop sustainable programs, and form synergistic connections. By incorporating both a health focus and social focus, the Recreation Therapist was able to create and implement well-rounded programs accommodating health care needs and also respecting the participant's individuality, and connection to family and community.

Virtual Connections

With safety being of utmost priority, many programs switched to virtual platforms. Programs such as the *Falls Prevention Program* for people living with dementia and *Movers and Groovers* became virtual gatherings. These online programs not only supported individuals living locally, but also allowed friends/family who lived elsewhere to join in the activities as well. This further supported connections between participants and their social supports. One *Falls Prevention Program* family participant said, "What I have appreciated about the virtual meet-ups is that I get to see and visit mom at least twice a week... I can see for myself that she is doing okay. I feel like I am an active participant in her life." Another participant who joined the *Falls Prevention Program* virtually from St. Albert shared that, "When I sign into the Zoom class I not only get to see my sisters, but we always have fun and share a few laughs." These are only a few sentiments illustrating the importance of, and appreciation for the online program delivery.

Innisfail Connects was created to target adults 55 years and older who were looking for a way to stay connected with the community despite the realities of physical distancing restrictions. Activity calendars and information were circulated in the community by hand-delivery to key locations (i.e. grocery stores, hospital, local medical clinics, Family & Community Support Services, seniors' lodges/residences, pharmacies, town office, etc.) as well as through email and social media. Through the *Innisfail Connects* platform, individuals were provided with the opportunity to join a variety of interactive phone or online social and health programs in one easily accessible location. This resource allowed individuals to see what activities were being offered and participants were provided step-by-step instructions on how to access the services





by phone or online. Given the awareness that some may have difficulty setting up and/or using technology, technological supports were made readily available for assistance through local organizations. *Innisfail Connects* has since been expanded to be available to all residents of Innisfail, and multi-generational programming is encouraged. One example of this is through a partnership with the Calgary-based company, *Imagine Music Inc.*, individuals joined through *Innisfail Connects* and experienced the musical talents of children of all ages performing their Christmas concert online.

Supporting Engagement

Non-virtual activities were also recognized as being important tools to support the local residents. The *Community Partners in Action* team along with several other local service providers put together 1,000 *Winter Activity Engagement Kits* which included a variety of items to engage community members in positive activities either individually, within their cohort, or inter-generationally across families. The kits included things such like a deck of cards with suggested card games, dice and dice games, word search, Sudoku, Christmas crafts, coloring pencils, coloring sheets, as well as resources on mental health/wellness, exercise, healthy eating, social isolation and resources and phone numbers for community supports. To promote accessibility for all interested residents, the kits could either be picked-up at specified local locations or dropped off if transportation/mobility were an issue.

In person and online education sessions were conducted through the Dementia Friendly Community Initiative to provide an alternate approach to engagement and knowledge sharing. Information sharing was recognized as being important throughout the pandemic due to the ever changing understanding of the virus, and its unknowns. A *Community COVID Champion* was lobbied for, and attained through the local AHS Home Care office. This COVID Champion was able to provide residents receiving Home Care services with up-to-date information about COVID-19, influenza-like illness management, and resources to help address emerging concerns such as loneliness. Home Care services were also able to increase their service hours in response to the increasing risk of isolation for some of the most vulnerable individuals.

Summary

During a time of such uncertainty and social segregation, the *Community Partners in Action*, multi-sector team stepped up as a vital resource for older adults, especially those affected by dementia, in Innisfail and surrounding area. As a result of the pre-existing trusted relationships between partners from multiple sectors, this group leveraged their respective networks to understand the evolving needs, and efficiently, effectively and creatively advance efforts to fill in gaps in services. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the efforts and triumphs of community groups such as the *Community Partners in Action* team, as it successfully supported some of the community's most vulnerable demographic groups in such unprecedented times Ellen Helgason, the Innisfail AHS





Community Recreation Therapist, said, “Each day I have been amazed at how this working relationship with the Community Partners in Action has evolved and expanded to include others within the community, whether that is organizations, agencies, volunteers, or group participants. We are seeing the benefits of working together to provide a quick response to the needs of citizens in Innisfail while making sure that everyone’s voice is heard.”

February 19, 2021

