



Strengthening Care: A Toolkit for Caregiver-Focused Social Prescribing

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This toolkit is produced by the Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing (CISP). CISP is a national collaborative, anchored by the Canadian Red Cross, that works with stakeholders across the country to connect people and practices, foster knowledge, build evidence, and influence policies to strengthen health and community care systems.



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SECTION 1:

Introduction

The **Strengthening Care: A Toolkit for Caregiver-Focused Social Prescribing** is designed to support and empower current and potential social prescribing implementers to understand, integrate, and communicate the value of social prescribing for caregivers. Caregivers are unpaid individuals—such as a family member, friend, or other natural support—who provide care due to a personal relationship, not as a job or career. They support people with physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities; medical conditions; mental illness; or age-related needs. Caregivers can receive tremendous benefits through social prescribing.

Whether you are a provincial lead, community partner, healthcare provider, or link worker, this toolkit will equip you with tools, resources, and key messages necessary to advocate for and implement social prescribing in your respective role, fostering a more compassionate, connected, and supportive care system for caregivers.

Purpose of This Toolkit

- **Provide a Common Understanding:** Establish a shared understanding of social prescribing within the caregiving sector, ensuring all relevant groups are aligned on its purpose, how it can be integrated into caregiver support pathways, and the roles they can play in its implementation.
- **Create Effective and Impactful Messaging:** Equip you with key messages tailored for different stakeholders—healthcare providers, community organizations, and caregivers themselves, highlighting the impact of social prescribing on caregivers, community and health system as well as how each sector can leverage social prescribing to support caregivers.
- **Outline Available Resources:** Offer a comprehensive list of resources to facilitate a more inclusive and empathetic care system that values the mental, emotional, and physical needs of caregivers through implementation of social prescribing.

Who is This Toolkit For?

This toolkit is designed to support a wide range of key players currently involved in or are exploring implementation and advocacy of social prescribing for caregivers:

- **Provincial Leads/Champions:** Leaders who are steering caregiver-focused social prescribing initiatives at a provincial level.
- **Community Leads/Partners:** Local organizations and leaders working to implement social prescribing for caregivers within their communities.
- **Social Prescribing Connectors/Link Workers:** Key professionals who journey along with caregivers, connecting them to appropriate community resources and ensuring they receive the right support, at the right time, for their specific needs.
- **Healthcare Providers/Clinicians:** Medical and healthcare professionals who are integrating or considering integration of social prescribing into their care plans, recognizing that supporting caregivers' non-medical needs is essential for the well-being of their patients.

How to Use This Toolkit

- **Connect with Key Players:** Use this toolkit to foster meaningful relationships with healthcare providers, community partners, and caregivers. This kit provides guidance on how to introduce and explain social prescribing, the benefits for caregivers, and how to engage each group in ways that reflect their personal experiences, creating conversations that go beyond data and policy to emphasize human stories and the real-life impact of caregiving.
- **Demonstrate Social Prescribing in Action:** Showcase how healthcare providers, community organizations, and caregivers collaborate through social prescribing. Highlight how this integrated approach can be tailored to meet the unique needs of caregivers and each sector's role in health and social care delivery.
- **Highlight the Significance:** Emphasize the positive impact social prescribing can have on caregivers and communities, and the overall health system. This includes improved health outcomes for caregivers, stronger community ties, and reduced strain on healthcare resources.
- **Access Training and Resources:** Use the training opportunities and resources included in this toolkit to support ongoing learning and facilitate the widespread adoption of social prescribing for caregivers.

A close-up photograph of a woman with curly brown hair hugging an older man with grey hair from behind. The woman's eyes are closed and she has a peaceful expression. The man is wearing a light-colored sweater. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

SECTION 2:

Common Understanding of Social Prescribing

What is Social Prescribing?

Social prescribing is a holistic, person-centred approach that enables trusted clinical and community health providers to identify an individual's non-medical needs and goals, including those of caregivers who play a crucial role in supporting health and well-being. Through this process, providers can refer individuals to dedicated navigation support to co-create person-centred prescriptions leveraging community resources, and connecting them with social interventions, community supports, and services that enhance overall health and well-being. Through intentional collaboration and co-creation between people, communities, and health systems, social prescribing addresses the social determinants of health, improving well-being and enhancing community resilience.

As a formal referral pathway, social prescribing bridges the gap between health/clinical care and social services. It emphasizes person-centred care, co-creation, and equity empowering individuals to take charge of their health and well-being. By encouraging self-determination and building resilience, social prescribing enables individuals to shape their care in ways that reflect their personal needs and values. This model also supports community development, advocating for local leadership and capacity-building to strengthen the collective well-being.

An Asset-Based Approach is central to social prescribing, focusing on leveraging and empowering existing community resources—such as local groups, volunteers, and public spaces—rather than concentrating on deficits. This promotes a sense of ownership, long-term commitment, and trust among community members.

WHAT MATTERS TO YOU?

Social prescribing marks a fundamental shift in supporting caregivers and their care recipients by transforming the conversation from:

WHAT'S THE MATTER
WITH YOU?



WHAT MATTERS
TO YOU?



Each person's needs and preferences are unique and complex. This personalized, holistic approach addresses the root causes of health challenges by tackling the social determinants of health and fostering long-term connections that support well-being.

Core Principles

Social prescribing is built on six core principles that enhance its effectiveness across diverse populations and needs:

It is grounded in **collaborative** partnerships between healthcare, social services, and community organizations, ensuring seamless integration of services to provide comprehensive support tailored to individual needs.

Collaborative

At its core, it is **community-led**, leveraging local leadership to develop culturally sensitive programs that utilize community resources, ensuring relevance and sustainability.

Community-led

Social prescribing is rooted in **equity**, aiming to ensure interventions are accessible to all while prioritizing underserved and marginalized groups to reduce health disparities.

Equity

It takes a **holistic** approach, considering the full spectrum of an individual's well-being—mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual—and recognizing the interconnectedness of these aspects.

Holistic

A **person-centred** approach prioritizes each individual's goals, needs, and preferences, empowering them to actively participate in decision-making.

Person-centred

Its **relational** foundation emphasizes building strong, empathetic connections between service users and providers. These relationships foster trust, offer support, and create a sense of belonging—essential elements for achieving sustainable health outcomes.

Relational

Social Prescribing Pathway

Social Prescribing bridges healthcare, community resources, and individual needs—including those of caregivers—through a collaborative pathway.



1 IDENTIFICATION

A healthcare or community provider identifies an individual with a non-medical need or interest and refers them to a link worker.



2 CONNECTION

The individual collaborates with the link worker to assess needs and co-produce goals. Together, they identify appropriate community services and supports, ensuring solutions are tailored to individual preferences and circumstances.



3 SUPPORTED PARTICIPATION & FOLLOW-UP

As the individual accesses community-based services and supports, the link worker plays a vital role in providing ongoing support and progress monitoring. This includes activating, mobilizing, and empowering individuals to take leadership roles and contribute to building their communities.

SUPPORT PATHWAYS

Low Intensity

Individual connected to a few community services through simple signposting or a warm hand-off.

Medium Intensity

Individual connected to community services with dedicated short-term support, coordination and follow up.

High Intensity

Individual connected to a range of services and support with longer-term support, coordination across sectors and ongoing follow-up.



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Social prescribing link workers, staff, and community partners map local assets, advocate for needed services, and strengthen connections between health and social care. They work to ensure communities have access to appropriate, culturally responsive supports that enhance overall well-being.

Through social prescribing, people and communities take a lead on their own health and wellbeing, create connection across health and social sectors, and together foster more resilient and connected communities.

What is a Social Prescribing Link Worker?

A social prescribing link worker—also known as a navigator, connector, coordinator, or similar title—is a dedicated individual who bridges health and social care through tailored, co-creative support. These link workers play a vital role in the social prescribing pathway by identifying individuals’ needs, interests, and goals and co-creating personalized care plans.

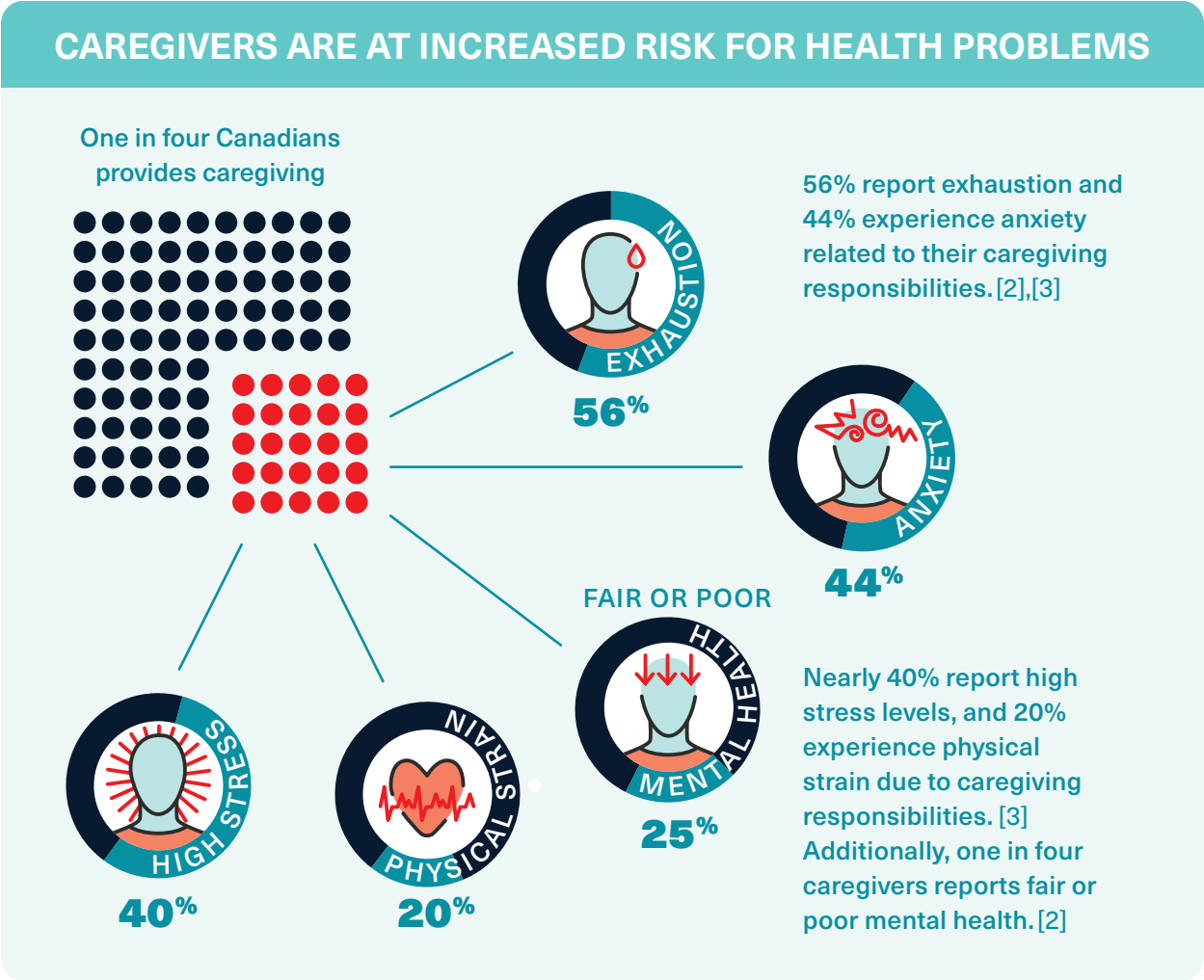
Central to their role is building strong, trusting relationships with caregivers, fostering understanding and support that enables caregivers to engage more fully with services. Through supported navigation, they facilitate access to a wide range of social and community resources. With diverse professional backgrounds and lived experiences, social prescribing link workers complement the roles of healthcare and social service providers by delivering comprehensive, wrap-around support. As vital members of interprofessional and community care teams they ensure a cohesive, person-centred approach to health and well-being.

Link Worker Competency Domains:		
Individual Support	Community Engagement	Program Administration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Effective communication ✓ Cultural safety and competence ✓ Person-centred care planning ✓ Behaviour change support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Partnership building ✓ Local resource knowledge ✓ Community development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Population health monitoring ✓ Data collection and monitoring ✓ Quality and safety compliance

The Role of Social Prescribing in Supporting Individuals, Communities, and the Healthcare System

Impact on Caregivers and Their Well-being

Caregivers provide 75% of the care within the healthcare system and contribute \$97.1 billion annually to the Canadian care economy [1]. Caregiving is a critical social determinant of health, yet many caregivers struggle to access the support they need. The demands of caregiving can take a significant toll on mental, emotional, and physical well-being, leading to stress, burnout, and social isolation. [4], [5]



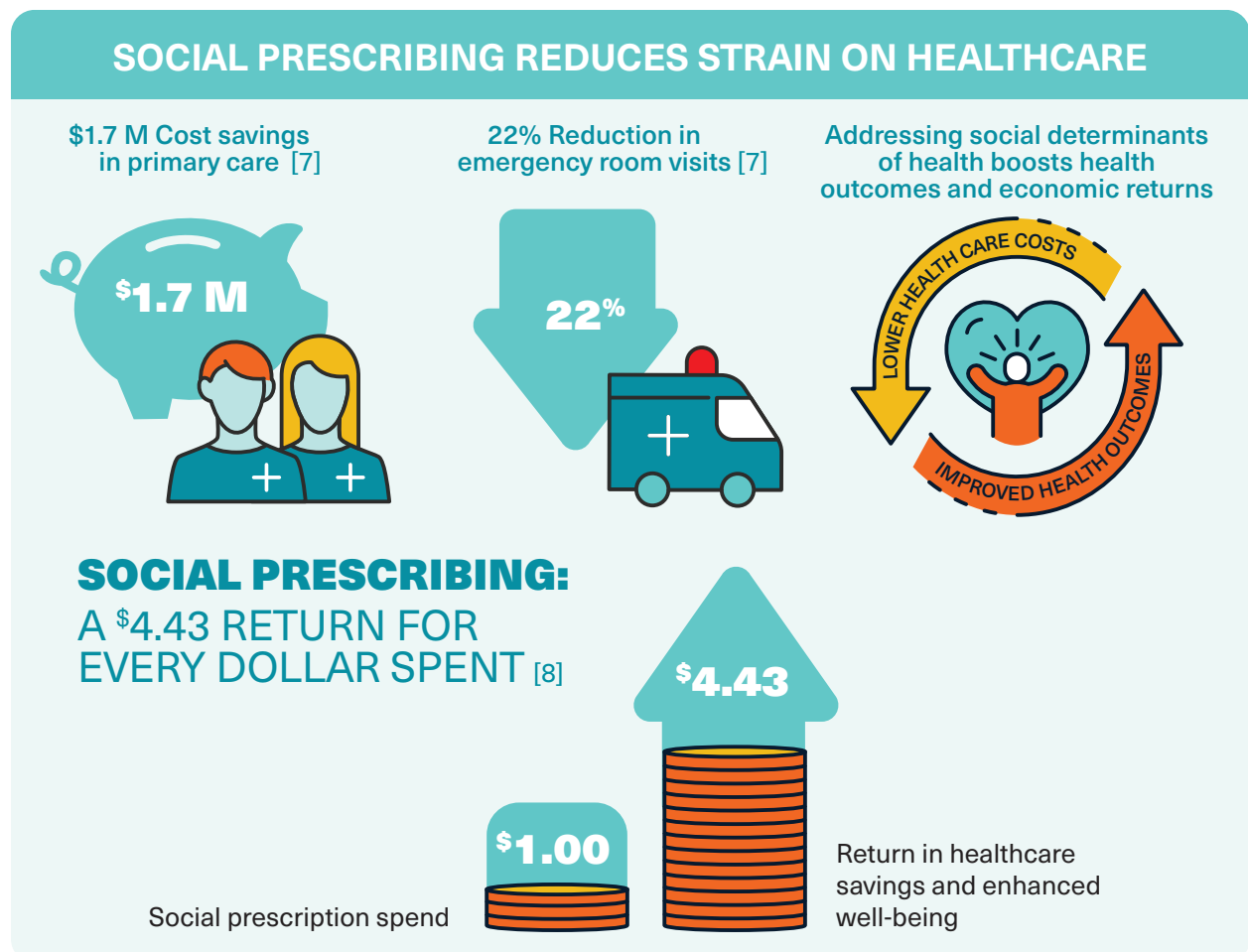
Social prescribing provides a proactive solution by bridging health and social care, connecting caregivers to essential supports such as mental health services, respite care, and peer networks. By reducing emotional strain and fostering meaningful connections, social prescribing not only enhances caregivers' well-being but also strengthens their capacity to sustain their caregiving roles while maintaining their own health.[6]

Impact on Communities and Support Networks

At the community level, social prescribing strengthens local support networks by linking caregivers to non-clinical resources such as support groups, arts programs, and recreational activities. Given that one-third of caregivers face barriers to accessing support [1], structured referral pathways and dedicated Link Workers help caregivers navigate available services. This coordinated, person-centered approach enhances social connections, fosters resilience, and builds a stronger sense of belonging among caregivers [6].

Impact on the Healthcare System

When caregivers lack proper support, patient outcomes suffer, leading to increased emergency room visits and hospital admissions. Social prescribing helps alleviate pressures on the healthcare system by reducing unnecessary healthcare utilization. By addressing social factors like loneliness, social prescribing has contributed to significant cost savings through reduced primary care visits and emergency room admissions. Additionally, investing in social prescribing has demonstrated strong returns in societal benefits, improving overall health outcomes while easing strain on healthcare resources. By proactively addressing social determinants of health, social prescribing ensures caregivers receive the right support at the right time, leading to better health outcomes, reduced healthcare burdens, and a more sustainable, integrated system of care [6], [7].





SECTION 3:

Key Messages

Key Messages for Healthcare Providers

Why Healthcare Providers Should Prioritize Social Prescribing for Caregivers

Healthcare providers play a pivotal role in supporting caregivers, as they are often the first to identify signs of caregiver stress and can initiate timely interventions that significantly impact caregivers' well-being. By integrating social prescribing into their practice, healthcare providers can directly connect caregivers with community-based resources that address these challenges. Access to support groups, mental health services, and respite care through social prescribing not only alleviates caregivers' strain but also enhances their overall well-being. This holistic approach empowers caregivers to maintain their health, continue providing essential care, and improve outcomes for those they support, ultimately reducing the strain on the healthcare system.

How Social Prescribing Benefits Healthcare Providers

Social prescribing for caregivers benefits providers by reducing physician and healthcare provider burden, improving patient outcomes, and boosting job satisfaction. Although integrating social prescribing requires an initial investment in understanding local non-clinical resources, the long-term impact is substantial. By connecting caregivers to community resources, social prescribing reduces the frequency of hospital visits and medical interventions, allowing physicians to focus more on acute and preventive care. This lightens their workload and enhances the efficiency of healthcare delivery. Additionally, seeing improvements in caregiver well-being and patient outcomes leads to greater job satisfaction for healthcare providers, as they experience less burnout and can deliver more targeted care.

Taking the First Steps in Social Prescribing

Healthcare providers are essential in integrating social prescribing into practice to meet the holistic needs of caregivers and patients and offers a pathway to address non-medical factors affecting health, such as social isolation, food insecurity, respite, and emotional well-being, while also reducing the strain on the primary care system. By connecting caregivers and patients to community-based social services (CBSS) and other supports such as a social prescribing connector, healthcare providers can enhance well-being and reduce the reliance on medical interventions. Here's how healthcare providers can start incorporating social prescribing into their practice:

- **Identify Caregivers and Patients Who May Benefit from Social Prescribing**

Look for signs like social isolation, recent bereavement, difficulty accessing food due to mobility or income, and frequent appointments for non-medical concerns.

- **Make Referrals to Community-Based Services**

Where available, connect caregivers directly with link workers or social prescribing connectors who can assess their needs and co-create personalized care plans. In communities without designated link workers, healthcare providers can direct caregivers to social activities or supports that align with their specific needs. For example, refer them to mental health services, caregiver support groups, or local programs designed to reduce isolation. Healthcare providers can also advocate for social prescribing by:

- Educating caregivers about available resources.
- Making direct referrals to community organizations via phone, email, or electronic systems.
- Collaborating with community partners to enhance access to local resources.

- **Follow Up on Referrals**

When possible, ask caregivers about their experience with referred services and monitor any health improvement. Regular follow-ups reinforce the importance of these services and demonstrate a continued commitment to their well-being.

- **Become a Social Prescribing Champion**

Healthcare providers can advocate for the integration of social prescribing into everyday practice. Share success stories and evidence of its benefits with colleagues and allied health professionals. Collaborate with local community organizations and social prescribing provincial champions to broaden the range of available social prescribing options.

- **Foster Partnerships for a Resilient Social Prescribing Pathway**

Collaborating with local community organizations and social prescribing networks is vital to establishing strong and effective pathways. These partnerships leverage community assets, such as support networks and tailored resources, to address caregivers' specific needs. By embedding social prescribing into practice, healthcare providers enhance individual and caregiver well-being while fostering a more sustainable, equitable, and compassionate healthcare system.

Key Messages for Community Organizations

How Can Community Organizations Influence Caregivers' Health Through Social Prescribing?

Many caregiver-focused organizations are ready to support the implementation of social prescribing, offering service navigation as well as a wide range of services, including support groups, mental health services, respite care, and educational workshops. With the help of link workers, healthcare providers can easily refer caregivers to these services, ensuring they receive comprehensive support for their emotional, social, and practical needs. Here are a few strategies in which community organizations can support caregivers through social prescribing.

- **Partnering to Increase Resource Availability**

Community organizations can enhance social prescribing's impact by partnering with community resources and supports and healthcare providers to make programs more accessible through structured referral systems. Collaborating to integrate these services within systems accessible to link workers maximizes the use of community resources, facilitating smooth coordination between healthcare and community services to better support caregiver needs.

- **Community organizations can enhance caregiver support by integrating Link Workers, who facilitate structured referrals and provide person-centered care.**

Link Workers can receive referrals from healthcare and community services, co-create tailored social prescriptions, and offer supported participation in programs that align with caregivers' specific needs and preferences. This individualized approach fosters deeper engagement, ensures meaningful support, and empowers caregivers to maintain their well-being while sustaining their caregiving roles.

- **Collaboration with Healthcare to Improve Access and Utilization**

Collaboration with healthcare providers opens doorway to identify caregivers who need social support, making timely, seamless referrals to community programs. This collaboration enhances access to community organization services, increases program utilization, and strengthens the network of care that supports caregivers' health and well-being.

- **Effective Communication for Improved Access**

Clear communication is key to helping caregivers understand the benefits of social prescribing and how to access relevant resources. When caregivers are unfamiliar with the terminology or concept of social prescribing, link workers can remove potential barriers by avoiding jargon and using simple, everyday language. By communicating in a welcoming and familiar way, link workers can create a supportive environment where caregivers feel safe and included, increasing their willingness to participate and engage with services in the long term.

How Can Social Prescribing Help Community Organizations Maximize Utilization and Demonstrate the Impact of their Programs and Services?

Social prescribing empowers community organizations to maximize the utilization of their programs and services by establishing formal referral pathways that connect individuals directly to community resources. This structured approach raises awareness of the organization's offerings, resulting in higher participation rates and more effective use of community assets. By being integrated into the social prescribing network, community organizations become essential partners in a collaborative care model, enhancing their visibility among healthcare providers and other stakeholders.

Additionally, social prescribing enables community organizations to better demonstrate the impact of their programs through intentional data collection and outcome tracking. By systematically recording outcomes for individuals referred to through social prescribing—such as improved well-being, reduced social isolation, or increased caregiver resilience—organizations can provide concrete evidence of their effectiveness. This data-driven approach not only showcases the value of their services to funders and policymakers but also supports continuous program improvements to better meet the evolving needs of the community.

How Can Community Organizations Initiate Social Prescribing?

As a community organization, you play a crucial role in the social prescribing pathway, helping to connect individuals and caregivers to essential non-clinical support. By implementing a few key steps, community organizations can become integral parts of the social prescribing pathway and strengthen the support network for caregivers in their area. When possible, organizations can also integrate into existing social prescribing initiatives to expand their reach and impact within established frameworks.

- **Integrate Programs into Asset Maps:** Ensure your services are listed in local asset maps to enhance visibility and facilitate referrals from healthcare providers.
- **Build Partnerships and Referral Processes:** Establish relationships with healthcare providers and social prescribing champions to streamline referral pathways and align your services with community needs.
- **Collaborate with Link Workers:** Integrate or build connections with regional/local link workers to ensure individuals are referred to the most relevant services and receive personalized support.
- **Provide Feedback:** Share data on outcomes to help refine the referral process and demonstrate the effectiveness of your programs.
- **Stay Engaged:** Participate in regional networks and learning opportunities to stay updated on best practices and strengthen your organization's approach.

Key Messages for Caregivers

How Can Caregivers Benefit from Social Prescribing to Improve Their Health and Well-Being?

Social prescribing can positively impact caregivers' health and well-being by connecting them to tailored, non-medical supports that address their unique needs. Caregivers frequently face emotional and physical challenges, including stress, fatigue, and isolation. Social prescribing offers solutions by linking caregivers to community-based services such as support groups, mental health resources, and respite care.

This holistic approach helps caregivers manage their own health while fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities, reducing burnout and improving their overall quality of life. For example, caregivers who participate in peer support groups report a significant decrease in feelings of isolation and stress.

By collaborating with healthcare providers and community organizations, caregivers can receive personalized care plans with the assistance of link workers, who guide them to the most suitable services and support throughout their journey. These professionals can identify their most pressing needs and connect them with their most relevant resources. Link workers provide ongoing support, ensuring that caregivers remain engaged in their communities. This approach not only improves caregivers' quality of life but also alleviates strain on the healthcare system by reducing avoidable visits to healthcare facilities for non-medical issues.

How Does Social Prescribing Help Caregivers Be Better Equipped to Care?

Social prescribing equips caregivers with the tools and resources needed to provide effective care while safeguarding their own well-being. In Canada, caregiving responsibilities often lead to financial strain, with one-third of caregivers reporting out-of-pocket expenses [1]. Social prescribing helps address this by connecting caregivers to affordable or free services, including mental health support, skill-building programs, and stress management tools.

Through personalized care plans co-created with link workers, caregivers are able to access services that enhance their resilience and reduce the risk of burnout. Peer support groups, a key component of social prescribing, offer emotional support from others with similar experiences, fostering a sense of community and shared understanding.

This network of tailored support not only improves caregivers' well-being but also strengthens their ability to provide care. Studies show that caregivers with access to support services are more likely to maintain their caregiving roles long-term without compromising their own health.

By reducing feelings of isolation and connecting caregivers with practical tools and services, social prescribing empowers them to continue providing care effectively while maintaining their own health. This dual benefit strengthens the caregiving ecosystem, ensuring that caregivers can sustain their roles without compromising their well-being.

As a Caregiver, How Can You Get Involved?

Caregivers can engage with social prescribing through healthcare providers, community organizations, or link workers, who help connect them to essential resources. Here are some steps to get started:

- **Speak with your Healthcare Provider:** Discuss your non-medical needs such as physical and emotional well-being, stress, fatigue, or isolation to explore the potential of social prescribing.
- **Connect with a Link Worker:** Work with a link worker to develop a personalized care plan based on your individual needs and goals.
- **Access Community Organizations:** Reach out to local community organizations that may offer social prescribing programs or connect you to programs that provide services tailored to caregivers. You can also contact provincial or national caregiving organizations.

Resources and Tools

Additional Resources to support your Social Prescribing and Caregiver Support Initiative

- **Social Prescribing Training Roadmap**

Comprehensive guide to equip healthcare providers, community organizations, and Link Workers with the knowledge, trainings and other practical tools to implement and enhance social prescribing programs effectively, fostering collaboration and better health outcomes.

[Explore the Training Roadmap](#)

- **Link worker Competency Framework**

A framework outlining the domains, competencies, essential skills and knowledge required for Link Workers and equivalent roles for organizations, training providers, and practitioners aiming to standardize and enhance the delivery of social prescribing initiatives.

[Access the Framework here](#)

- **Potential Economic and Social Impacts of Social Prescribing**

A report making a case for social prescribing by highlighting the potential economic and social benefits of social prescribing in Canada. This report is an essential tool for policymakers, healthcare providers, and community organizations seeking evidence-based insights to advocate for and implement social prescribing initiatives.

[Find the full report here](#)

- **Giving Care: Insights into the Canadian Caregiving Landscape**

A white paper that offers a comprehensive overview of caregiving in Canada by highlighting caregiver contributions, key challenges, and the need for integrated support strategies to enhance well-being and sustain the care system. Policymakers, healthcare providers, and caregiver organizations can use this report to inform policy decisions, improve support services, and advocate for meaningful change.

[Find the full report here](#)

Learn more about Social Prescribing and Caregivers

Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing (CISP)

A national hub supporting the integration of social prescribing into health and social care systems, with a dedicated focus on caregivers. Access resources, case studies, and tools to enhance caregiver health through social prescribing.

[Visit CISP](#)

Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (CCCE)

A national organization dedicated to strengthening support for caregivers and care providers through policy advocacy, research, funding, and community-driven initiatives to enhance the well-being of caregivers across Canada.

[Visit CCCE](#)

Connect with your provincial Caregiving Organization

Family Caregivers of British Columbia

Offers programs and resources tailored to caregivers in BC.

[Visit FCBC](#)

Caregivers Alberta

Provides supports like the Caregiver Navigator and COMPASS for the Caregiver.

[Visit Caregivers Alberta](#)

Ontario Caregiver Organization

Resources include the 24/7 Caregiver Helpline and specialized programs for caregivers in Ontario.

[Visit OCO](#)

Caregivers Nova Scotia

Delivers caregiver-focused supports and workshops to enhance well-being.

[Visit Caregivers Nova Scotia](#)

Stay connected with Social Prescribing Network

The Canadian Social Prescribing Exchange

A dedicated space to share ideas and be a part of the growing social prescribing movement.

[Join the Canadian Social Prescribing Exchange](#)

For further inquiry

Contact us at CISP@redcross.ca

SECTION 5:

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