Connecting People & Community for Living Well
Health Canada Grant 2020 to 2023 – Lessons Learned

CONTEXT

The Health Canada funded portion of the *Connecting People & Community for Living Well* work began in January of 2020 and was completed March 31, 2023. The work is grounded in wellbeing, and the 2020-2023 phase of the work sought to understand what contributed to the wellbeing for three groups:
- People living in the community with a diagnosis of dementia,
- Their carers and,
- The multi-sector teams that provide health and social supports to community members affected by dementia.

The *Connecting People and Community for Living Well* model (See Figure 1) and its five components function in tandem and guide the work at both a project level and community level. Fundamentally, the goal of the *Connecting People & Community for Living Well* work is to transform how those living in communities are supported across their life course.

PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT

Significant impact was achieved at both provincial and community levels. Over the course of the grant, learnings arose from a variety of sources and activities, including:
- Discussions with and learnings from the AHS Health System Knowledge and Evaluation (HSKE) team who supported the evaluation of the project.
- Information captured in formal evaluation activities by the HSKE team (e.g., focus groups with the participating community teams and provincial grant team, final project evaluation).
- Activities undertaken by the grant team such as completion of the applied research activities, building and refining the Wellbeing Guide, work with local teams to complete their Wellbeing Guide and work plan, and regular touch bases with the community teams.
- A return on investment (ROI) economic analysis and forecast social return on investment (SROI) completed on the work.
- Learnings from the International Conference on Integrated Care 2023.

LESSONS LEARNED

An overarching theme that arose throughout this work is that efforts are needed at community, provincial and system levels to build infrastructure that will better enable multi-sector community teams to serve and support their community members. As such, the lessons learned are geared toward the organizations and teams involved at those levels in this grant. These include:
- **Community teams** participating in the work,
- **Provincial grant team** supporting the work,
- **Alberta Health Services (AHS)** as an organization.

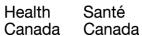The lessons learned indicate where action is needed and who needs to be involved. The **eight lessons** are (see Table 1):
1) Ongoing and meaningful engagement with lived experience is essential.
2) A grounding in wellbeing promotes a wholistic and strengths-based approach which can help build change opportunities for individuals, communities, and systems.
3) Trust and relationship building is central to impacting wellbeing at both an individual and collective level.
4) Consistent resources are needed.
5) Leveraging existing strengths (e.g., expertise, relationships, and resources) at the provincial and community levels supports sustainability.
6) Evaluation is complex and necessitates a multi-faceted approach.
7) Broad communication of progress & learnings adds to the evidence base of community level work.
8) Building working partnerships across sectors supports sustainability and ensures relevance of approaches.

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Table 1: Lessons Learned

#1 Lesson Learned: Ongoing and meaningful engagement of those with lived experience is essential	

Grant team	- At its foundation, the *Connecting People & Community for Living Well* work was intended to ensure those affected by dementia (both those with a diagnosis, and carers) living in the communities participating had access to programs and supports which build and sustain their wellbeing. To do so, the grant team worked directly with multi-sector community teams. The grant deliverables, including the Wellbeing Guide and Competency Framework, were developed as a resource for these community teams. Learnings from the applied research activities informed the content of these resources. This included:
	    o Interviews with people with a diagnosis of dementia living in the community,
	    o Interviews with carers of those with a diagnosis of dementia
	    o Focus groups with members of multi-sector community teams
	- Once built, getting input on the usability of the Wellbeing Guide, and Competency Framework was essential.
	- Regular check-ins with participating community teams created an opportunity to hear directly from those with lived experience either from carers who were members of the group, or from those who held both a professional role on the community team and were either supporting or had previously supported someone with dementia.
	- Gathering the voice of lived experience is not a "one and done", but an ongoing process and aim. *Due to its importance and relevance to each stakeholder, this has been repeated in the AHS and Community Team sections.*
	    o Consistent incorporation of the voice of lived experience helps ensure that what is delivered is pertinent to those it is intended to support. This includes at the beginning when understanding strengths and gaps, identifying priorities, and creating plans to address unmet needs, in the middle when plans are being rolled out, and at the end when understanding impact.
	    o There is a role for a provincial level team to raise awareness of the need for lived experience to be central to the work and support teams in achieving this involvement.

AHS	- Decisions made at a zone or provincial level can have profound impact on local work. Only through intentional engagement with those directly involved (e.g. community teams, those affected by dementia) can there be a genuine understanding of the impact the decision may have. - Gathering the voice of lived experience is not a "one and done". o Consistent incorporation of the voice of lived experience helps ensure that what is delivered is pertinent to those it is intended to support. This includes at the beginning when understanding strengths and gaps, identifying priorities, and creating plans to address unmet needs, in the middle when plans are being rolled out, and at the end when understanding impact.

Community teams	- Gathering the voice of lived experience is not a "one and done".
	    o Consistent incorporation of the voice of lived experience helps ensure that what is delivered is pertinent to those it is intended to support. This includes at the beginning when understanding strengths and gaps, identifying priorities, and creating plans to address unmet needs, in the middle when plans are being rolled out, and at the end when understanding impact.
	- Creativity is required when seeking the voice of lived experience. Examples of rich sources of information include:
	    o Having someone with lived experience be part of the community team adds rich context to planning and decision making.

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	o Taking time at programs or events to check-in with participants is critical. This can be done through both formal (e.g. program surveys or evaluations), and informal (conversations and discussions) approaches.
#2 Lesson Learned: A grounding in wellbeing promotes a wholistic and strengths-based approach which can help build change opportunities for individuals, communities, and systems	

Grant Team	- A wellbeing focus:
	   o Keeps outcomes focused on those it is intended to support. In this work, it created opportunity to support individuals (e.g., people with a diagnosis of dementia, and carers), as well as groups (e.g., multi-sector community teams).
	   o Creates the environment which supports a strength-based approach.
	   o Can support advancing equity, and inclusion for those most underserved when actions are taken at community, provincial and system levels.
	- The McGregor Wellbeing Framework (2007) provides a foundation for linking wellbeing impacts across community, provincial and system levels.

AHS	- A wellbeing philosophy builds on strengths and defines outcomes for individuals first, communities second, and systems third.
	- Adopting a wellbeing philosophy can support AHS in:
	   o Honouring the essential role of social and community sectors to contribute their areas of expertise.
	   o Collaborating to share decision making, accountability, planning and evaluating with other sectors to provide necessary services.

Community Teams	- A wellbeing focus:
	   o Is useful to apply to other work happening in the community.
	   o Expands the scope beyond medical organizations or healthcare, and brings in other possible collaborative partners (i.e. from the social sector). This helps break down 'silos' between organizations that are trying to support similar groups/individuals.
	- The Wellbeing Guide is a tool that can promote change with local decision makers with potential to generate additional and/or sustainable funding.

#3 Lesson Learned: Trust and relationship building is central to impacting wellbeing at both an individual and collective level	
Grant Team	- Learn first about what is happening in the communities before addressing project goals. In that way, the proposed work can be approached within the context of what is already underway in the community. - There needs to be concerted effort to understand the goals of the community if the initiative is truly going to be community-driven in nature. Amorphous/non-specific understanding of community team context/goals/needs may contribute to a misalignment in support. - Community team members describe their involvement in this type of work as "off the side of their desk". As such, it is important to honor the multiple things community partners are involved with and respect their time through designing meetings with a realistic duration and frequency, and a clear purpose. - It is important to streamline communication by limiting the number of emails coming from multiple members of the team, and creating documents which outline in a clear and succinct way information the community team needs to know. - Celebrating achievements and consistent support are key in sustaining interest and commitment to the work. - Clearly outlining for community teams what support can be expected from the Grant Team is imperative. - Trust and relationship building is seen as a long process, but the investment in these elements, both early on and on an ongoing basis, builds a foundation for action.

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	- Facilitating opportunities for regular engagement between the evaluation team and people participating in the work allows evaluators to build shared understanding and ensure data collection and analysis is sensitive to, and appropriate for, diverse contexts. Building familiarity with the community teams may also encourage participation in evaluation activities.
AHS	- There is much work to be done to re-build trust with partners from the community. o Communities, and community partners openly shared they have not always had positive working experiences with AHS, and this has resulted in erosion of trust. - Trust and relationship building is seen as a long process, but the investment in these elements, both early on and on an ongoing basis, builds a foundation for action. - Lengthy and cumbersome organizational processes and bureaucratic structure are perceived as barriers to community partners.
Community Teams	- Expanding resources and knowledge can be achieved through building relationships across sectors, collaboration, and diverse membership. - Relationships built with provincial organizations and/or teams serves as a linkage to resources to support advancing local work. - Trust and relationship building is seen as a long process, but the investment in these elements, both early on and on an ongoing basis, builds a foundation for action. - Engaging meaningfully within the community to understand unmet needs helps to develop trust. Following up on requests and commitments helps sustain trust. Sharing local successes creates awareness and builds credibility for local efforts.
#4 Lesson Learned: Consistent resources are needed	
Grant Team	- Community team members express appreciation for the support of the grant team. In some cases, they shared that the grant team was the only consistent support and advocacy for them and their local work from AHS as an organization. The absence of operational dollars to sustain a team which can support community teams can further add to community partners distrust in AHS as an organization. - Important to have simple application and reporting requirements when funds are provided. - Capacity of community teams increases exponentially with consistent resources (both financial and human).
AHS	- Financial contribution which is consistent over the course of time to support this type of work yields a significant return on investment for the organization and creates value for Albertan's. - Across the globe, sustained funding to support integrated cross sector work is lacking. An opportunity exists for AHS to be a world leader by incorporating operational funding into budget.
Community Teams	- Great strides are accomplished with designated resources (financial and human) for this work. - Reliance on grant funding disrupts momentum and does not adequately address ongoing and new needs within the community. Sustainable funding would help address these concerns and challenges. - The workload needs to match the amount of seed funding offered.

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#5 Lesson Learned: Leveraging existing strengths (e.g., expertise, relationships, and resources) at the provincial and community levels supports sustainability	
Grant Team	- Accessing existing expertise from AHS can support evaluation, learning and communication for community teams. - Resources can be found locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally which can support advancing and sustaining this type of work.
AHS	- Opening access to existing expertise in AHS builds trust, creates an active partner role, and increases AHS understanding of what it means to be a trusted partner in community-led initiatives. - Removing AHS resources that are recognized locally as being effective creates great distrust of AHS within communities. - Acknowledging that resources in communities vary significantly across Alberta (especially rurally) underscores the need to understand each local context individually to provide the appropriate supports. There is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to rural communities.

Community Teams	- Leveraging the provincial grant team for:
	   o Access to subject matter experts to support local education.
	   o Advocacy and exposure of local work and successes
	   o Support in addressing local challenges.
	- Building and sustaining non-traditional partners can support accessing resources not otherwise available.

#6 Lesson Learned: Evaluating this type of work is complex and necessitates a multi-faceted approach	
Grant Team	- Evaluation should not only demonstrate impact to the health care system, but also show impact to the community, to the individuals involved, as well as other stakeholders involved in the work. Investing in a SROI analysis is an effective approach to demonstrate value for these multiple parties. - Community teams benefit from support to conduct evaluation and these results contribute to the evidence base of community work. - Focusing on evaluation methods that are suited to this work is more effective in generating interest across sectors than restricting methods to AHS traditional evaluation methods. - There are resource considerations for the principle focused evaluation approach. - In a developmental project, the evaluation team needs to be kept apprised of changes that will impact the evaluation. - Support to develop evaluation approaches benefits community teams' ability to describe the impact of their actions.
AHS	- Evaluation support is a resource that AHS could bring as a partner on community teams. - Multiple types of evaluation methods are needed to describe impact of this complex work, i.e., Principle focused, ROI, SROI, Evidence of Impact, Wellbeing Guide ratings.
Community Teams	- Leverage provincial partners and experts to define desired outcomes and tailor data collection approaches or activities implemented. - The Wellbeing Guide can be used as a tool to apply for other grant opportunities. It also complements the outcome measures for evaluation processes with some community stakeholders.

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#7 Lesson Learned: Broad communication of progress & learnings adds to the evidence base of community level work	
Grant Team	- Creating space like the Partners' Meeting is considered valuable by community partners and others interested in similar work. This venue supports meeting education needs, networking, and increasing awareness of resources and opportunities. - Documents/emails created should be useful for all involved including community teams, grant team, AHS leadership, Non-profit organizations (i.e., Healthy Aging Alberta, Alzheimer's Societies). - Clearer communication of the 10 Core Principles to those participating in the work may enhance collaboration across sectors by increasing understanding of the work needed at local, provincial, and system levels. - Developing documents into a format which can be made available on the AHS website may support reaching a wider audience. - To support knowledge translation, incorporate presentations about the learnings, evaluation, and/or outcomes to those involved in, or interested in the project.
AHS	- When AHS branding dominates shared communication, it diminishes the contribution of all other partners. When in partnership with local teams, it is imperative for AHS to recognize their role as equal partner, not only in action but in how branding is displayed. - AHS needs to provide communication support which puts community teams (including AHS as a partner) first, and AHS (as an organization) second. - Providing communication support is a resource AHS could offer as a partner within community teams.
Community Teams	- Leverage the documents created by the grant team to tell the story of local work, and its impact. This includes using stories, infographics, case studies etc. to inform the public, municipal governments, and organizational leaders. This increases awareness of the work and can help increase support for the work. - Multiple methods of communication (e.g., radio, newspaper, online) are needed to share information about supports and programs.
#8 Lesson Learned: Building working partnerships across sectors supports sustainability and ensures relevance of approaches	
Grant Team	- Contributing to the collective efforts across partners is key to effecting change for individuals. - Continual change is expected as well as ongoing learning
AHS	- Lengthy and cumbersome organizational processes and bureaucratic structure are perceived as barriers to community partners. This greatly limits the participation of AHS as a partner with community teams. - There is a need for AHS to move away from a referral-based relationship with communities, to being a trusted and contributing partner in community-based work. - There is a need to increase understanding of how AHS staff can be supported to be active members of community teams, both at provincial and operational levels.
Community Teams	- Navigation of programs and services is supported by developing relationships across sectors. This creates a 'no door is the wrong door' approach. - Partnership is identified as being key to a successful program in any rural community. Maximizing available resources, both financial and human, creates a well-rounded program that serves the community and presents more opportunities for sustainability.

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Figure 1: Connecting People and Community for Living Well Model