



# **SOCIAL PRESCRIBING**

A holistic approach to healthcare in Alberta

**Partner Toolkit**

# INTRODUCTION

## Support Matters

Maintaining good health and well-being is important at every stage of life – especially for older adults.

Research shows that nearly 100 per cent of Canadians above 65 plan on supporting themselves to live safely and independently in their own home.<sup>1</sup> However, some lack natural supports like family relationships, friends and other community connections, which are needed to age in place well. As a result, many older adults rely on community-based programs to provide the social support they need to complement their medical care.

**Social prescribing** is a holistic approach to healthcare that provides a formal referral pathway for healthcare providers to connect patients to community-based services. This provides much-needed assistance – to doctors and patients alike – and bridges the gap between medical and social care services. With access to adequate food, housing, transportation and mental health support, older adults can maintain their health in the long term.

**Healthy Aging Alberta (HAA)** is a rich network of community-based, senior-serving organizations and allies across our province united by a shared vision: to make Alberta one of the best places in the world to grow older.

Through the support of donors and partners like you, HAA facilitates social prescribing programs for older adults throughout the province. HAA also assesses the impact of community-based programs and services offered through a social prescribing model.

<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Ageing (NIA)/TELUS Health Survey (2020)

## Stronger Together

As a partner in this initiative, you play a key role in promoting social prescribing within your community. In this document, you'll find the information and resources you need to effectively communicate with key stakeholders in your region.

**Together, we can support healthy aging and enhance the quality of life for older adults in Alberta.**





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**“I recently had a client call me to thank me for the referral to the social prescribing program and said that the Link Worker was an ‘absolute angel.’ I highly recommend this program and will continue to refer my clients, as needed.”**

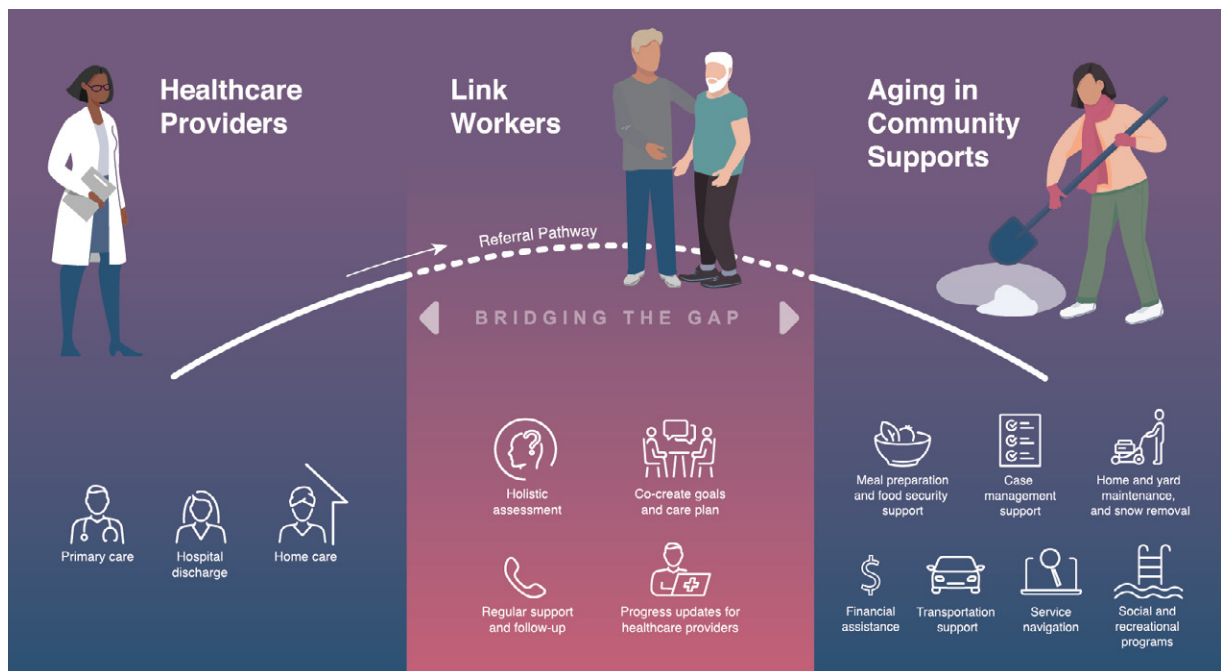
*– Alberta Health Services Homecare Case Manager*



# WHAT IS SOCIAL PRESCRIBING?

Social prescribing is a holistic approach to healthcare that bridges the gap between medical and social care services. Through this approach, healthcare providers refer clients to community-based programs to improve their health and enhance their quality of life.

## How it Works



### STEP 1 Social Prescription

A primary healthcare provider identifies a non-medical need that is affecting the health and well-being of their client. After obtaining consent from the client, the healthcare provider fills out a form to make a social prescription (referral to a Link Worker).

### STEP 2 Link Worker

A Link Worker\* receives the referral and partners with the older adult to develop key health and social goals through community resources.

*\*A Link Worker is a non-clinical professional employed by a community-based, senior-serving organization. This individual builds relationships with older adults under their care and monitors their progress.*

### STEP 3 Support

The older adult gains access to community-based supports to improve their health and well-being.

## 8 Principles of Social Prescribing

### 1) Social prescribing requires a formal pathway to connect medical care to community-based services.

- The formal pathway supports evidence-building for the role of community-based services in supporting health outcomes.

### 2) Social prescribing begins with an identifier.

- A healthcare professional identifies a client with non-medical, health-related social needs and makes the social prescription.
- A Link Worker (or equivalent), who is a non-clinical professional, receives the social prescription from the healthcare professional. This individual can then partner with the client to develop key health and social goals.

### 3) Social prescribing is a holistic, person-centred approach.

- Clients have complex needs, but they also have unique goals, passions and gifts.

### 4) Social prescribing is strength-based.

- Clients are encouraged and supported to share their strengths through peer groups, volunteering with community partners, and even leading group classes. Social prescribing empowers clients to take a more active role in managing their own health.

### 5) Social prescribing is co-creative.

- Clients work in partnership with providers and Link Workers to design a social care plan that meets their needs and utilizes their gifts.

### 6) Social prescribing is community-led.

- Supporting clients to become more connected to their communities and peers builds resilience.

### 7) Social prescribing is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

- Some clients may require more support from a Link Worker to address multiple goals.

### 8) Social prescribing is rooted in health equity.

- Effective social prescribing includes working with clients to remove the barriers they face to health and well-being.



## CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Social prescribing is an approach to healthcare that views older adults holistically. It recognizes that clients are more than their current challenges and needs – they also have unique goals, passions and gifts.

Integrating medical care and community-based services, social prescribing represents a culture change. It offers a new way to think about and deliver healthcare and social care services.

When it comes to healthcare providers caring for older adults, here's how social prescribing shifts the conversation:



BEFORE

“What’s the matter with you?”



AFTER

“What matters to you?”

**“I like the program because it can connect the clients with the best possible agency to assist them, rather than me guessing what that might be and sending them to the wrong place.”**

*– Primary Care Network Registered Social Worker*



# KEY MESSAGES

## Healthcare Providers

Please use the following messages when communicating with healthcare providers in your community about social prescribing.

### 1) Older adults need community-based services to complement their medical care.

Over 80 per cent of a person's health depends on social determinants of health like adequate food, housing, income and relations with others.<sup>2</sup> Social prescribing bridges the gap between medical and social care services. This allows healthcare professionals to easily refer patients to community-based programs to improve their health and enhance their quality of life.

### 2) Social prescribing allows healthcare providers to focus on what they do best – caring for the medical needs of their patients.

Healthcare providers are often the first to identify when an older adult has a non-medical need like loneliness that is affecting their health and well-being. For busy healthcare providers, it can be challenging and time-consuming to find community-based programs for older adults.

Through social prescribing, healthcare providers can connect clients to a Link Worker for support. This individual partners with older adults to develop key goals and access community-based resources. Social prescribing reduces the demand on healthcare providers and better equips them to support older adults.

### 3) Older adults deserve a life of independence and dignity.

In Canada, nearly 100 per cent of seniors aged 65 and older plan on supporting themselves to live safely and independently in their own home for as long as possible.<sup>3</sup> Social prescribing empowers older adults to age in place and avoid the need for higher levels of care prematurely. For those who live alone and lack natural supports like family relationships, access to community-based services helps reduce the need for reactive healthcare. This ensures that older adults can thrive in community.

2 Hood CM, Gennuso KP, Swain GR, et al. County health rankings: relationships between determinant factors and health outcomes. *Am J Prev Med* 2016;50:129–35.doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2015.08.024

3 National Institute of Ageing (NIA)/TELUS Health Survey (2020)

## Government Representatives

Please use the following messages when communicating with municipal, provincial or federal government representatives about social prescribing. You can also share these messages with elected officials in your community.

- 1) **Social prescribing helps reduce the length and frequency of hospital stays. This results in significant cost savings for the province and alleviates pressure on the healthcare system.**

In Alberta, the average cost of a hospital stay is \$9,000. Social prescribing is a holistic approach to healthcare that prevents costly emergency room visits and premature reliance on long-term care facilities. Through this formal referral pathway, healthcare providers can refer older adults to community-based resources to support their overall health. This preventative intervention helps improve both short- and long-term health. As a result, older adults are better supported to live safely at home with less reliance on the healthcare system.

- 2) **Alberta's aging population needs more community-based programs to stay healthy.**

Investing in more community-based programs and resources helps older adults to live safely in their own homes for longer. This decreases the demand for long-term care facilities, reactive healthcare services, and preventable emergency room visits. However, there is a significant gap between cost pressures and current funding for community-based, senior-serving organizations. Sustainable funding is needed to ensure the workforce can keep up with the current demand and prepare for the future needs of Alberta's aging population.

- 3) **Social prescribing promotes health equity.**

Non-medical factors like loneliness and poverty can have a significant impact on the overall health of an individual – especially older adults. Social prescribing promotes health equity by addressing social needs that affect health and well-being. This includes access to adequate housing, food, transportation, income and social support. Everyone deserves to reach their full health potential.



## Community-Based Organizations

Please use the following messages when communicating with staff from other community-based organizations or programs about social prescribing.

### **1) Social prescribing helps community-based organizations to better demonstrate the impacts of their current programs and services.**

Through social prescribing programs across the province, Healthy Aging Alberta is assessing the impact of community-based programs and services. As a formal referral pathway with intentional data collection, social prescribing helps to improve the coordination of non-medical services that support healthy aging in community and enhance the quality of life for older adults. Based on the evidence demonstrated through social prescribing programs, HAA is advocating for a sustained investment in community-based programs and services that are crucial for a robust social prescribing model.

### **2) Community-based, senior-serving organizations empower older adults to age in place and participate in their community.**

Social prescribing programs require a network of organizations to provide holistic, wraparound supports to older adults. In each community, multiple organizations with different services and expertise partner together to best meet their needs. This support helps older adults to live safely at home longer and avoid dependency on the healthcare system.

In addition, social prescribing offers a more relational approach to care, as older adults work directly with an assigned Link Worker. This individual builds relationships with older adults under their care and monitors their progress. As a trusted resource, the Link Worker can also attend appointments, make exercise group referrals or help older adults to complete a benefits application form.

### **3) Social prescribing integrates community-based services into the continuum of care for seniors.**

Healthy Aging Alberta brings together community-based organizations around a common framework for action – to improve health and social outcomes for older adults. HAA also facilitates collaborative action to integrate community-based services into the larger seniors' continuum of care, alongside systems such as health and housing. Through social prescribing programs across the province, healthcare providers can connect older adults to community-based programs as a holistic and preventative form of care.

# RESOURCES

Looking for resources and information to share with stakeholders? Healthy Aging Alberta has prepared infographics and documents you can use in your presentations, meetings and email communications.

## Educational Documents

**A PRESCRIPTION FOR CHANGE**

**Aging in Community Supports Program**  
Facilitated by Healthy Aging Alberta's Social Prescribing for Older Adults Program

In every community, older adults play an important role and make a positive impact on society. They serve as mentors, volunteers and loving grandparents. After a lifetime of working hard and raising families, they continue to share their wisdom and experience with the next generation.

**Older adults deserve a life of independence and dignity.** But this is not a reality for many Albertans. Older adults – especially those who live alone – often lack access to community-based resources needed to complement their medical care. Social supports like food and housing programs help ensure those over 55 can age in place and avoid the need for higher levels of care.

**Bridging the Gap**

**Aging in Community Supports** is a social prescribing program facilitated by community-based organizations in Calgary. This document contains the information you need to promote social prescribing in your community and make referrals for patients and clients.

**WHAT IS SOCIAL PRESCRIBING?**

Social prescribing is a holistic approach to healthcare that bridges the gap between medical and social care services. Through this approach, healthcare professionals refer patients to community-based programs to improve their health and enhance their quality of life.

**Everyone should have the opportunity to reach their full health potential.**

Social prescribing promotes health equity by addressing social needs that affect health and well-being – like access to adequate housing, food, transportation, income and social support. This helps older adults with limited natural supports to thrive.

**A Prescription for Change**  
(General Audience)

**SOCIAL PRESCRIBING: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO HEALTH**

**Social Prescribing Outcomes**

- +57% Improves patient rating of health and well-being\*
- 41% Decreases the number of repeat clinic visits\*\*

\*Three months post social prescription  
\*\*Three months post social prescription

In Canada, nearly 100% of seniors aged 65 and older plan on supporting themselves to live safely and independently in their own home for as long as possible. For those who lack natural supports like family relationships, community-based programs help complement their medical care. This allows older adults to experience greater independence and helps reduce the length and frequency of hospital stays.

Over 80% of a person's health depends on social determinants of health like adequate food, housing, income and relationships with others.<sup>3</sup>

Social prescribing bridges the gap between medical and social care services. When older adults present with non-medical symptoms like loneliness, healthcare professionals can refer them to community-based programs to enhance their quality of life.

**START SOCIAL PRESCRIBING TODAY!**

**Aging in Community Supports** is a social prescribing program that links the healthcare system to senior-serving organizations in Calgary. This reduces the demand on healthcare professionals and better equips them to support older patients (55+). Through the program, doctors, nurse practitioners and other regulated health professionals alike, can promote healthy aging and resilience in their communities.

Here's how to get started:

**STEP 1 Make an Assessment**  
After your medical examination, determine whether your patient has a non-medical need that is affecting their health and well-being.

**STEP 2 Write a Social Prescription**  
Complete the **Calgary Social Prescribing Referral Form** at [mysage.ca](http://mysage.ca).

**STEP 3 Submit a Referral Form**  
Submit your completed referral form to [info@mysage.ca](mailto:info@mysage.ca) or by fax to **780-425-5775** (Attention: Social Prescribing). Please ensure patient consent before making a submission.

**Social Prescribing: A Holistic Approach to Health**  
(Information for Healthcare Providers)

## Infographics

**HOW DOES SOCIAL PRESCRIBING WORK?**

**Meet George**  
Last month, George sadly lost his wife of 50 years.

When George started losing his appetite and energy, he visited his family doctor. She identified a need for social supports to complement his medical care. After discussing this with George, she made a social prescription to refer him to a Link Worker.

**Step 1: Social Prescription**  
A primary healthcare provider fills out a form to make a social prescription (referral to a Link Worker).

The Link Worker meets with George to assess his social needs.

**Step 2: Link Worker**  
A Link Worker receives the referral and partners with the older adult to develop key health and social goals through community resources.

Today, George receives transportation support in his community so he can participate in a retirement group. He is also involved in a local recreation program and consults with a caregiver regularly.

**Step 3: Support**  
The older adult accesses community-based supports to improve their health and well-being.

**How Does Social Prescribing Work?**  
(Practical Example)

**SOCIAL PRESCRIBING: A FORMAL REFERRAL PATHWAY**  
Connecting healthcare providers to community-based services for older adults

Healthcare Providers → Link Workers → Aging in Community Supports


BRIDGING THE GAP

Services provided by community-based organizations:

- Food bank
- Transportation support
- Social support and caregiver programs
- Home care services
- Case management support
- Meal preparation and food security support
- Financial resources
- Home care and occupational and home repair
- Service navigation
- Build and maintain programs

**Social Prescribing: A Formal Referral Pathway**  
(How Healthcare Providers Connect to Community-Based Services)

## FAQs



### SOCIAL PRESCRIBING: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Contents**

**SOCIAL PRESCRIBING**

- What is social prescribing?
- Who can make a social prescription?
- How does a healthcare professional make a social prescription?
- What happens after a social prescription is made?
- Are there any risks associated with social prescribing?
- What evidence is there to support the effectiveness of social prescribing?

**LINK WORKERS**

- What is a Link Worker?
- Are Link Workers employed by the health system?
- What qualifications are needed to become a Link Worker?
- What types of non-clinical supports can Link Workers assist with?
- My community doesn't have a Link Worker. Can local healthcare providers still make a social prescription?

**COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS**

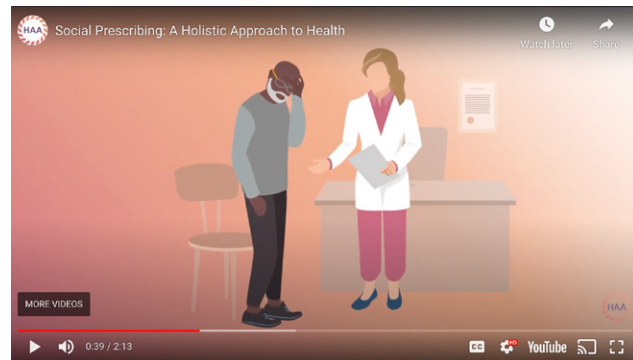
- What organizations are involved in social prescribing programs?
- Who is funding these social prescribing programs?
- How can social prescribing help social service professionals already practicing within healthcare settings?
- How does a social prescription parallel a medical prescription or treatment plan?
- How does social prescribing fit with existing community resource programs?
- Why does social prescribing place such an emphasis on referrals from healthcare providers? If someone doesn't have a family physician, how do they access the model?
- What is the difference between a Link Worker and a social worker/outreach worker or a LINC worker?
- Is social prescribing driven by the health sector or the social sector?

**HOW TO GET INVOLVED**

- How can I help promote or advocate for social prescribing in my community?

### Social Prescribing: Frequently Asked Questions

## Video



### Social Prescribing: A Holistic Approach to Health

## Websites

- **Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing**  
[www.socialprescribing.ca](http://www.socialprescribing.ca)
- **Healthy Aging Alberta Social Prescribing**  
<https://calgaryunitedway.org/healthy-aging-alberta/social-prescribing>
- **World Health Organization**  
A Toolkit on How to Implement Social Prescribing  
[www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789290619765](http://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789290619765)
- **National Center for Biotechnology Information**  
Establishing Internationally Accepted Conceptual and Operational Definitions of Social Prescribing Through Expert Consensus: A Delphi Study Protocol  
[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9881447](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9881447)

## PARTNER OVERVIEW

**Healthy Aging Alberta** is a rich network of community-based, senior-serving organizations and allies across our province united by a shared vision: to make Alberta one of the best places in the world to grow older.

HAA serves as a convener and an advocate for organizations that provide community-based, senior-serving supports and programs. As a network, HAA ensures the needs of the sector are better understood within government and among members of the public.

In Alberta, HAA is supporting 10 communities to establish a provincial programmatic approach to social prescribing service delivery for older adults. Through the Social Prescribing for Older Adults Program, HAA is responsible for the following:

- Establishing shared principles
- Ensuring that social prescribing programs focused on older adults are aligned through best practice guidelines
- Developing a shared evaluation framework
- Collecting and analyzing data
- Reporting to funders on outcomes and impact
- Liaising with various provincial stakeholders, including Alberta Health Services, the Government of Alberta, and the Health Quality Council of Alberta
- Convening a provincial community of practice
- Advocating and facilitating future investment in social prescribing programs for older adults across Alberta
- Working with the Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing to ensure that work in Alberta is aligned with the National Social Prescribing Framework

## HAA currently supports the following programs in Alberta:

- Edmonton Seniors 55+ Social Prescribing Program
- Lethbridge: Seniors Community Services Partnership – Seniors System Navigation Team
- Calgary: Aging in Community Supports Program
- Jasper Seniors 55+ Social Prescribing Program
- Innisfail RX Living Well Social Prescribing Program
- Red Deer: The Golden Circle's 50+ Circle of Support Social Prescribing Program
- Strathmore/Wheatland County: Link Care 55+: Bridging Health with Social Prescribing Program
- Sylvan Lake Aging Well Social Prescribing Program
- Vulcan Social Prescribing Program: Live Long & Live Well



**“It has been a long time since I breathed clean air in my apartment and talking to other seniors in the Seniors Centre Without Walls program has made me feel that I am not alone.”**

*– Jummie, participant in the Edmonton 55+ Social Prescribing Program*

## **STAY CONNECTED**

**For more information, contact:**

Beth Mansell, Provincial Social Prescribing Project Manager  
[beth.mansell@healthyagingalberta.ca](mailto:beth.mansell@healthyagingalberta.ca)

**Visit our website to learn more:**

[calgaryunitedway.org/healthy-aging-alberta/social-prescribing](https://calgaryunitedway.org/healthy-aging-alberta/social-prescribing)

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**A network of  
community allies  
for older adults.**