

January 11, 2012

Follow AHS_Media on Twitter 

Between Friends volunteer program expands to Cardston *Alberta Health Services program teaches students empathy*

CARDSTON —Alberta Health Services (AHS) is expanding a pilot program to Cardston to promote empathy and acceptance in teens through volunteering with residents of long-term care.

Launched in Fort Macleod in 2009, the Between Friends program helps youth interested in health careers with volunteer opportunities in Fort Macleod Health Centre's Special Development Unit.

"Empathy and acceptance can be hard concepts for young people to grasp," says Carrie Bust, AHS Volunteer Resources coordinator for Cardston and Fort Macleod. "We want to help young people to become positive role models."

This year, four students in Grades 8 and 9 at Cardston Junior High participated in Between Friends. Since October, they have been visiting long-term care residents at the Cardston Health Centre for one hour a week. As they engage in various games and crafts, the students converse with the residents, many of whom live with disabilities.

Naomi Caldwell, 13, says the program has taught her about people who live with conditions like Alzheimer's disease and multiple sclerosis. "Learning about the residents and what life is like for them has really opened my eyes. It has been a really good experience for me."

With Between Friends operating in Cardston, the teens get the added benefit of bonding with elders, as many long-term care residents are members of the local First Nations community.

"It is really rewarding to see members of the local First Nations community, young and old, come together and make connections," says Bust.

Cardston Junior High School teacher Jennifer Scout teaches language arts and fine arts, but it's in her role as learning support and student counselor that she sees the program's positive effect. "I am really happy that this program is available to us in Cardston," says Scout. "The girls are enjoying themselves and are showing they have positive attitudes about building relationships with people who do not live as independently as they do."

Both Bust and Scout say they look forward to more students participating in Between Friends. To date, 16 students have taken part.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than 3.7 million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

- 30 -

For media inquiries, contact:
Kelsey Meehan
AHS Communications
403-502-8648 ext. 1473