

Building Relationships at the Population Level

The Population Health Needs Framework

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Imagine Alice. She's just had knee surgery. At first glance, you might think that a prescription for physiotherapy is a fail-safe part of her health solution. But what if Alice is a single mom who just lost her job? What if her stress level makes it hard to juggle responsibilities? That prescription might just gather dust because for Alice, physiotherapy is too hard to manage.

For Alice, health is about more than just medicine.

In fact, health is about more than just medicine for all of us. The World Health Organization's constitution notes that "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

[The Population Health Needs Framework \(PHNF\)](#) can help healthcare professionals see health from this holistic perspective. Based on findings from peer-reviewed literature and 80 informant interviews, the framework helps primary care health professionals identify and address population health needs and co-design services through a wellness-focused approach.

The framework includes a [user's guide](#) that helps partners from AHS Zones, Primary Care Networks (PCNs) and community services collaborate on the wellness services most needed by their residents.



Participants in a framework testing session prioritize health needs. Participants included community service organizations, healthcare professionals, patients and families.

PHCIN scientist Dr. Mary Modayil, who led the framework development team, says, "population health is about big-picture data, but it's also deeply personal. You have to understand what matters most to the individual people who live, work and play in a given location."

Population health in the neighbourhood

A look at the Wood Buffalo Health Neighbourhood in northeastern Alberta shows how this approach can promote population-level wellness tailored to particular communities. Launched in 2019, it's one of three [Health Neighbourhoods in the North Zone](#) that help primary healthcare professionals, along with their community, anticipate and address issues that affect their community's health.



Consultant Ping Mason-Lai is one of the Health Neighbourhood's founders and facilitators. "It's a collaborative network of many different stakeholders—AHS, PCNs, Tribal Council, patients, and lots of agencies," says Mason-Lai. "We're trying to address issues before they translate into illnesses," she says. "Why wait till people are really sick and struggling? Why not put in the effort up front on preventing things like financial issues, food insecurity, mental health issues?"

The Wood Buffalo Health Neighbourhood began by assessing its community's needs, then formed two mini-working groups supporting addictions and mental health, and transitions in care.

Building relationships that benefit patients and providers

Anna Foley, a professional practice lead at Wood Buffalo PCN, co-chairs the addictions and mental health group. It draws from organizations like AHS, PCNs, Salvation Army, Wood Buffalo Wellness Society, the Center for Hope homeless shelter and private industry. What makes the working groups so effective is the shared decision-making model. "It's not like the healthcare people in the group are driving the decisions," Foley says. "It's really the whole group that has input and decides what we're going to do and how we will do it."

In such a diverse group, strong, productive relationships are crucial. Mason-Lai says, "you have to build a solid circle of working relationships and get to know each other—get beyond the title, the role—and figure out the priorities from a social determinants of health perspective. Then we can bridge the gaps we see in our communities."

Recognizing that this collaborative, multisectoral approach to healthcare requires a strong network, the mental health and addictions working group launched Connect-Relate-Collaborate, a series of gatherings where the team can share resources and develop trusting relationships across professional boundaries.

"Getting to know service providers in the community outside of traditional healthcare providers has definitely been the biggest benefit of the Health Neighbourhoods," says Foley. "I may get a call from one of our PCN member clinicians saying, 'I have a patient who needs this particular resource.' And oftentimes, from the Health Neighbourhood, we can get the patient connected and of course that benefits the patient. So those relationships have definitely had a huge impact."

And that impact extends to the working group members themselves. "We always come away from these events super-hyped," says Foley. "I mean, you feel good when you meet with other people in the community who are passionate about the work they're doing."

So for Albertans like our imaginary Alice, the Population Health Needs Framework approach can help primary care providers take a more holistic approach to care. As Mason-Lai notes, "This shared decision-making model really opens your eyes to thinking about different ways to solve issues in a community, beyond the focus on disease."