

Drumheller Community Team - Pandemic Response

Case Study

Background

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the enforcement of physical distancing was a first line of defense. Although the physical safety of all persons was of utmost priority, the public health measures intended to protect also impacted mental health, and the psychosocial aspects of our lives. Due to broad impacts of the pandemic, and the nature of needs arising, community-level response was required in order to act quickly and efficiently. Multisector community teams became key in local response efforts. Older adults, especially those with a chronic health condition were identified as being one of the most susceptible, and disproportionately affected groups. Persons living with dementia and their carers were and continue to be, among some of the most at-risk for adverse outcomes. As people became more isolated in an effort to protect against COVID-19, their needs evolved. In a time when physically 'being apart' was essential, it was imperative for individuals to find a way to 'come together' to ensure no one was alone or struggling to meet basic human necessities. COVID-19 has impacted all communities, but rural communities have been especially impacted due to their geographic location, and the pre-existing reality of having limited resources. Communities have in many ways, been left to adopt their own unique responses to the pandemic. During these challenging times it is important to showcase how through leveraging and adapting existing community infrastructures and resources, multi-sector community teams were able to find creative ways of meeting emerging needs of those living in their respective communities who were affected by dementia.

Drumheller Dementia Coalition

Similar to all Albertans, individuals residing in the town of Drumheller have not been immune to COVID-19 and the resulting impacts of the virus or its prevailing restrictions. The Drumheller Dementia Coalition was an already established team of dedicated multisector community organizations prior to the pandemic. Participants included individuals from organizations such as the Big Country Primary Care Network (PCN), Alberta Health Services Seniors Mental Health Outreach and the Drumheller Family & Community Support Services (FCSS). As the pandemic ensued, team members, their respective organizations and their community encountered numerous challenges which impacted whether support options were available. Although they saw the need for a unified force to help counteract the challenges, especially for some of their most vulnerable citizens, their hands were tied with respect to how supports could be delivered. A *COVID Uplift* initiative was developed through Alberta Health Services in response to the need for added community supports in rural Alberta. The initiative involved creating a shared



community Recreation Therapist position to help address some of the local needs. The role proved invaluable as they integrated seamlessly with the already established multisector team and added their expertise and resources to the group. By nature, being embedded in the community fostered their ability to see a need, and then use their expanding network to brainstorm on ideas and then implement various local initiatives in hopes of filling the gaps COVID-19 highlighted. The team also welcomed the skills and services of Alberta Health Services Home Care to assist in determining and addressing local concerns for older adults, especially those individuals affected by dementia in the community.

Local Endeavors

As COVID-19 restrictions continued to impede community services, the Drumheller Dementia Coalition understood creative actions were required to provide constituents with the supports and resources needed. Members connected with persons living with dementia and their carers through their day-to-day encounters to hear their needs and identify ways to facilitate support. The newly appointed Community Recreation Therapists' took on calling residents, with a goal of building trust, awareness of their role and to seek input on what would be most useful to individuals. This network of touchpoints for persons living with dementia and carers allowed for multiple sources of dialogue and information sharing. One need identified was to enhance awareness of resources and services available in the community, and how to access them. A *Seniors Resource Guide* was created to provide up-to-date information about local initiatives and services. The guide was circulated through various means including adding them to the Seniors Activity Bags created and distributed through the Drumheller FCSS. FCSS also had a seniors' distribution list of around 150 households that was used as a means to communicate different local happenings. Home maintenance and supports (i.e. light housekeeping, laundry, meal preparation, and snow removal) were identified as a need for older adults living at home. Relationships between coalition members and organizations such as Helping Hands, Subsidized Hot Meals through Badlands Express Meals on the GO, and Grace House promoted the ability to connect persons with the appropriate services.

The community-run Day Program for people living with dementia which was closed due to COVID-19 restrictions has resumed weekly. Although at a limited capacity, it allows for persons living with dementia to enjoy safe activities in an inviting environment. With respite options severely decreased, the Day Program also offered carers a much needed reprieve. Monthly education sessions were also being offered for carers virtually and in person, based on topics of interest. The virtual format provided an added option to access. To support virtual connections, coalition team members directed people to the local library's iPad's loaner technology support program. The demands on Home Care intensified leaving less resources for an increased demand. To assist with improving person-centered interactions, the Community Recreation Therapists began to complete *All About Me* information with Home Care clients to incorporate





the individuals' voice and provide opportunity to guide a more person-centered approach. When restrictions allowed, coalition members offered a *Senior's Day* at Barney's Outdoor Adventure Park in Drumheller. This was a safe and entertaining opportunity to get outside and enjoy a unique local attraction, which included interactive farm animal encounters, including horses along with hearing stories from a local 'cowboy', while in the company of others. Many participants had not taken part in a recreational activity for almost two years and feedback from local seniors was extremely positive. One older adult expressed that his favorite part of the day was "hunting in the forest during his gator ride through the live animated dinosaur trail". It is important to note that these are just a few of the many valiant efforts conducted by this group of dedicated individuals - the impacts were significant for those they served.

Summary

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and its various constraints, the Drumheller Dementia Coalition, bolstered by it's mosaic of community members was able to find ways to support those most vulnerable in the Drumheller area, persons living with dementia and carers. Through the many relationships they built extending beyond their core group, persons affected by dementia were able connect with the resources and services needed. Although the pandemic persists with public policies and restrictions, having a multisector community team with their ears and feet on the ground locally allows positive supports and services to remain in place in order to safely and effectively address the needs of vulnerable community members.

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