

## Lacombe Community Team - Pandemic Response

### Case Study

#### Purpose

To highlight the efforts of local rural community teams to respond to the needs of older adults, especially those affected by dementia, in their community during the global pandemic.

#### 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. Multi-sector 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 caregivers 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 were 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 ways to respond 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.

#### Dementia Friendly Lacombe Working Group

The rural community of Lacombe and its residents were presented with unforeseeable circumstances as the COVID-19 restrictions were implemented. It was quickly recognized that some supports were no longer an option due to the public health measures. The *Dementia Friendly Lacombe Working Group* is an interagency team that was formed prior to the pandemic to focus on creating a dementia-friendly community. As the pandemic progressed, members of this working group recognized a change in focus was needed, while building and bolstering supports for the most vulnerable continued to be a primary concern.





The *Dementia Friendly Lacombe Working Group* included members representing several community organizations, and the group continues to grow by engaging local partners who serve those affected by dementia. Individuals involved include the Geriatric Assessment Nurse, Exercise Specialist, and Practice Facilitator from the Lacombe office of the Wolf Creek Primary Care Network (PCN), the Lacombe & District Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) Seniors Services Coordinator and Social Worker, a local resident, an Alzheimer Society of Alberta and the Northwest Territories volunteer, and a City Councilor. The working group is led by the PCN Geriatric Assessment Nurse who shares and coordinates efforts of those they serve.

## Identifying Needs

The *Dementia Friendly Lacombe Working Group* recognized it was imperative to reach out to those most at risk in the community. Individuals from FCSS and the PCN initiated wellness checks over the phone with older adult clients in Lacombe, including those living with dementia and their caregivers. Through these checks individuals were able to remain connected to the community, and their evolving needs could be identified so the working group could then adapt to meet those needs. For example, if concerns or changes were identified (i.e. decline in cognition, changes in functional ability, etc.), an in-person follow-up assessment by the PCN Geriatric Assessment Nurse was scheduled. Connections were also made with family members and informal support people to identify any further concerns. If warranted, referrals would then be made to appropriate resources such as virtual support groups (i.e. COMPASS for the Caregiver, Seniors' Center Without Walls), online mental health resources, home care, FCSS and the Alzheimer Society. As the pandemic progressed, individuals started requesting wellness checks more often, shifting the frequency from once every three months to once a month for many older adults who were living at home, especially those living alone, or with dementia. Feedback on the wellness checks have been positive, and clients have expressed sentiments such as "Thank you for checking in." and "It helps to know I have someone I can reach out to if I have concerns."

## Virtual Connections

Due to the evolving community needs, the *Dementia Friendly Lacombe Working Group* members began meeting four times per year rather than once every month. As a result of the telephone wellness checks and other resident encounters, the working group members were able to collaborate, share experiences, and identify concerns in areas such as social isolation, and access to, or the availability of, resources. Virtual and telephone-based programming became a means to address these issues, and provide the appropriate supports. Given the physical distancing guidelines for COVID-19 and the risks for the older population, the PCN and FCSS staff were able to restructure their work to meet the needs identified in the community.



Examples include:

- PCN supporting patients through phone and virtual appointments where clinic visits weren't feasible; support groups shifting to virtual format including *Journeying through Grief*, *Health Basics*, *Happiness Basics*, *Anxiety to Calm*, and virtual education around foot care; virtual exercise groups were also being offered through the PCN and, an online falls-prevention exercise group is underway.
- FCSS started offering the *COMPASS for the Caregiver* program virtually. Recognizing the increased reliance on technology, FCSS was able to make iPads available for older adults in the community, as well as providing support for individuals to be able to connect virtually.
- Older adults in Lacombe were connected with the provincially available virtual program *Seniors' Center Without Walls* which is run by the Edmonton Southside PCN. Through the virtual programming, individuals could connect from their own homes and interact with other older adults from across the province. There was an increase in referrals for this group as the pandemic progressed.
- Through virtual meetings, the community of Innisfail also supported Lacombe in sharing work they had done in their dementia friendly community efforts. This connection offered additional opportunities for engagement for those living in the Lacombe area.
- By partnering with established programs and services, the *Dementia Friendly Lacombe Working Group* and its organizational partners were able to address the needs within the community by linking individuals to appropriate resources.

## Community Engagement

Since the pandemic began, the regional Alzheimer Society remained a strong community partner by offering support and information for those with dementia and their caregivers in the Lacombe area. There was also an increase in the amount of referrals made to First Link®. In addition, the FCSS collaborated with local businesses to provide grocery delivery to help keep seniors safe while addressing food security concerns. Through partnership with church volunteers and other local groups, FCSS's *Meals on Wheels* program supported individuals by continuing to offer frozen meals at a lower cost.

As a means to maintain community connections and foster community engagement, the *Happy Grams* program was initiated - this program was aimed at decreasing social isolation and loneliness for older adults in Lacombe by having community members create and share positive letters, drawings, crafts, jokes and/or cards. Many local schools participated by creating colorful and heartwarming cards for Christmas, Valentine's Day, Saint Patrick's Day, and Happy Spring cards. FCSS reported that feedback from these endeavors has been positive. Some sentiments shared by the recipients include: the children's cards are proudly hung on their refrigerators; the silly jokes and anecdotes have brought belly laughs; the personal stories have been deeply and thoroughly enjoyed; and the beautiful handcrafted items brought a "spark of special to their day".





## Summary

During a time when uncertainty and disconnection was inevitable, the *Dementia Friendly Lacombe Working Group* along with various community partners were able to collaborate and adapt services to support and maintain connections with older adults living within their community. Through the collaborative efforts of multiple sectors the needs of older adults including those affected by dementia, were identified, and local resources were tailored to meet those needs. The responses showcased by the *Dementia Friendly Lacombe Working Group* and its partners demonstrates how important it is to build connections within community as it is key to connecting individuals and organizations to support those most at risk during the pandemic.

May 21, 2021

