



Three Hills Community Team - Pandemic Response

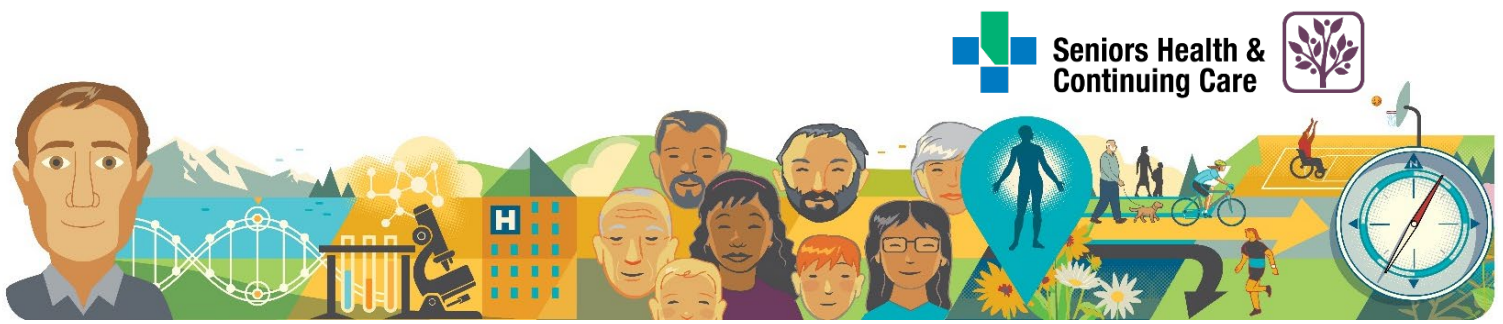
Case Study

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 protecting us impacted individual 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. Through the pandemic's progression, older adults were identified as being one of the most susceptible, and disproportionately affected groups. Persons living with dementia and their care givers were, and continue to be, among some of the most vulnerable. As people were becoming more isolated in order to protect against COVID-19, their needs were evolving. 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 uniquely impacted due to their geographic location, and pre-existing realities 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 affected by dementia.

Kneehill COVID-19 Group

Three Hills is a rural community located in central Alberta that faced its own unique challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the understanding of the virus evolved, Three Hills embraced the diversity of its community organizations and came together to identify and address the emerging needs of its residents. Prior to the pandemic, the *Kneehill Regional Family and Community Support Services (FCSS)* had an *Inter-Agency* group consisting of organizations from multiple sectors (i.e. health care, social, and community). The group originally met to address the needs of the community at large, and ways they could support residents of all ages. It was well-established prior to the pandemic, and endeavored to ensure appropriate resources were accessible in the community. More recently, there was also a *Dementia Coalition* formed to help guide and promote the creation of a dementia-friendly community within Three Hills. The main focus for the coalition was to improve the wellbeing and community supports for those affected by dementia. As social distancing guidelines evolved, the inter-agency group and Dementia Coalition shifted focus to be able to adequately support





residents, especially the most at-risk populations such as older adults and those affected by dementia. The two groups recognized the value in joining forces and formed the *Kneehill COVID-19 Group*.

Identifying Local Needs

Early in the pandemic the FCSS was forced to close its doors due to COVID-19 restrictions. Although in-person services were on hold, phone access was a key way to offer support. FCSS employees received an increased number of phone calls from community members seeking information and inquiring about available local resources. Not only were people calling about services FCSS offered, but many were reaching out with questions around mounting public health restrictions as they were not sure where else to turn. It became clear existing establishments and resources needed to adapt to support the evolving needs of those living in the community. The Kneehill Regional FCSS was able to bring concerns to the Kneehill COVID-19 group to promote discussion, and together address emerging needs. The Kneehill COVID-19 group structure fostered an opportunity for multiple sectors (i.e. Primary Care Network, FCSS, Seniors Outreach Program, Victim Services, etc.) to share issues and challenges experienced in their respective organizations, and then collaborate on how to advance identified priorities. It was important for each member to be included in the discussions as each brought a different perspective. By intentionally seeking out, and incorporating diverse views, the group was better equipped to understand gaps, recognize unmet needs, agree on priorities, and re-allocate existing resources. Due to the increased risk of isolation and negative consequences within the older adult cohorts living in Three Hills and surrounding area, the Kneehill COVID-19 team directed specific attention to this group. This included individuals living with dementia and their carers.

Bolstering Resources

The diverse membership in the coalition, and the variety of perspectives and networks benefitted multiple groups within the community of Three Hills and Kneehill County. This resulted in more residents becoming aware of the resources within their community. Concerns like social isolation, loneliness, food security, transportation and information sharing were recognized as key areas. FCSS was able to provide social and emotional support to residents via a confidential and secure line. In an effort to increase awareness and accessibility to mental health and addictions supports, resources were circulated amongst the interagency group members to share with respective clients. Activities to help provide social engagement while still following physical distancing restrictions were created. One such activity is the *Virtual Coffee Break* offered once a week where individuals connect via computer, tablet or telephone and socialize with others from the comfort, and safety, of their own homes. FCSS has tablets for loan to help promote inclusiveness and virtual engagement. For those who do not have internet access, the local municipal libraries of Three Hills, Linden and Trochu offered complementary Wi-Fi outside of their buildings. The FCSS *Neighbors helping Neighbors* program enlisted





volunteers to help support individuals isolated at home with services such as grocery shopping, running errands, and providing friendly phone calls. Local churches were able to support community members through their involvement with transportation services. Food security was identified as a priority and two organizations, *Seniors Outreach* and the *Three Hills Food Bank*, secured emergency funding to address this issue. Throughout the pandemic, the Three Hills Food Bank continued to make appointments and fill food hampers to help meet the needs of those with limited resources. The Seniors Services Outreach expanded its Meals on Wheels program to serve the growing needs of more people. In addition, grocery stores opened up with more options to offer Three Hills and surrounding area residents such as dedicated hours for vulnerable individuals.

Summary

Through the efforts of the Kneehill COVID-19 group, along with its corresponding trusted relationships with community organizations, the successes of Three Hills and the Kneehill County's response to the global pandemic is apparent. Bringing together two previously formed multi-sector groups already familiar with each other, and with Three Hills and surrounding area, meant the teams were able to quickly and efficiently adapt to identify priorities, and adjust or incorporate services to respond to the emerging local needs, especially for those most vulnerable. It is important to shed light on these efforts, and showcase how through the collaboration of multiple sectors, a better and stronger response is possible when faced with unprecedented circumstances.

September 2, 2021

