

Allied Health Roles & Skills to Support COVID-19 Response

Allied Health Roles & Skills to Support COVID-19 Response Across the Continuum

This is a brief overview of Allied Health unique skills that may be fully used to support the COVID – 19 pandemic response. It does not describe the full scope of practice for these health care providers. It is important to note that not all of these activities may fall within the competencies of every allied health clinician. Depending on the typical role of the clinician additional training, education or access to supervision or consultation prior to or while performing these activities, may be required. As regulated professionals, it is the responsibility of each clinician to determine which activities are within their current or possible competencies (i.e. seek timely training as required) as well as determining which are outside of a reasonably attainable competency (i.e. requiring significant education/training and skill development).

Allied Health clinicians share a common role in screening, clinical services, promotion/prevention and end of life/quality of life care. Please refer to the document [Role Clarity for Health Professions \(2013\)](#) on Insite.

The following Allied Health disciplines are included in this document:

- Audiologist
- Occupational Therapist
- Physiotherapist
- Psychologist
- Recreation Therapist
- Respiratory Therapist
- Social Worker
- Speech Language Pathologist
- Spiritual Health Practitioner
- Therapy Assistant

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of an Audiologist

Maintaining access to good hearing and communication at this time, particularly for those who are sick, in self-isolation, self-distancing or key workers providing essential services, is important. The ongoing need to ensure early detection and management of hearing loss cannot be understated.

Audiologist Skills	Patient Care Setting				AHS System supports
	Critical Care	Acute Care	Outpatient/ Community/ Home care	Continuing Care (LTC & SL) Congregate Living	
<p>Communication Access Support individuals with hearing loss to ensure they are able to communicate, have the hearing supports they need to enable informed choice and participate in shared decision making.</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>In-person essential audiology assessment &/or intervention services for individuals presenting with meningitis, sudden hearing loss, ototoxicity monitoring with urgent medication management needs (e.g., chemotherapy), REFER result on Early Hearing Detection and Intervention hearing screening, implantable hearing devices with no sound and unsuccessful virtual troubleshooting</p>			✓		
<p>Virtual audiology services to assist individuals with implantable hearing devices & technologies to have access to sound; and supporting children and families with new diagnosis of permanent hearing loss</p>			✓		
<p>Clinical Supervision of EHDI Hearing Screeners providing inpatient (NICU and Post-partum) screening</p>	✓	✓			

In addition to the roles noted above, the Audiologist is well suited to providing clinical services that require a high level of critical thinking, but do not require a specific clinical skill set. This would include such activities as assisting in Health Link calls, or other telephone advice and virtual practice, and /or communication around discharge if there was a plan that needed to be conveyed. If required, an Audiologist can be educated and trained to provide comfort care on in-patient units.

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of an Occupational Therapist

During COVID-19, occupational therapy intervention is focused on the need to prevent hospital admissions/readmissions and facilitate rapid discharge. Occupational therapists are needed to address patient safety through falls risk management, post-operative or traumatic splinting, positioning, pressure injury prevention and the use of bed and other surfaces to minimize skin breakdown. The absence or delay in these clinical activities may result in patient safety concerns and further medical complications.

Occupational Therapist Skills	Patient Care Setting				AHS System Supports
	Acute/ Critical Care	Inpatient/ Post-Acute	Outpatient/ Community	LTC/ Continuing Care	
Screening, assessment and triage of patient needs (e.g. mental health, psychosocial, physical, cognitive, environmental needs)	✓		✓		Support engagement in context of occupational disruption, impacting physical and mental wellness
Early physical mobilization	✓			✓	
Early cognitive stimulation / delirium prevention	✓				
Transition planning (i.e. Discharge recommendations)	✓	✓	✓		
Palliative and End of Life Care			✓	✓	
Positioning interventions/ joint protection/ pressure relief	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Skin and Wound (i.e. pressure injury prevention, edema management, etc.)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Splinting (i.e. resting hand splints, post-operative, traumatic splints)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Activities of Daily Living – Self Care (feeding, dressing, toileting, grooming, etc.)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (meal preparation, shopping, finances, work, childcare, etc.)		✓	✓	✓	
Enabling engagement in occupation – behavioural interventions, balanced occupations, compensatory strategy training, sleep hygiene, pain management, energy conservation, stress management	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Allied Health Skills to Support COVID-19 Response Across the Continuum • 4

Occupational Therapist Skills	Patient Care Setting				AHS System Supports
	Acute/ Critical Care	Inpatient/ Post-Acute	Outpatient/ Community	LTC/ Continuing Care	
Engage one's social environment based on occupational needs (i.e. goal setting, skill building, problem-solving)	✓	✓	✓	✓	Collaborative goal setting with individuals and teams, identify supports in one's social environment
Functional cognition	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Communication access	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Falls risk management	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Restraint as a last resort/ Responsive behaviours	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Feeding, eating and swallowing interventions	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Equipment/ Environmental adaptations (i.e. wheel chairs, bathroom equipment, mobility, technology, etc.)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Patient, family and caregiver education, training	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Nasopharyngeal swabs (with training)		✓	✓	✓	
Level I Comfort Care and Level II Basic Care interventions	✓	✓		✓	

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of a Physiotherapist

Physiotherapists are uniquely qualified to address physical and respiratory function. As well, physiotherapists are able to provide basic and comfort nursing care in urgent situations.

Physiotherapist Skills	Patient Care Setting				
	Critical Care	Inpatient Acute	Home Care	LTC/ Continuing Care	Ambulatory
Health History			✓	✓	✓
Physical Assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Respiratory Assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Positioning/joint protection/pressure relief	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cardiorespiratory techniques when indicated including airway clearance/ suctioning	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Oxygen Management	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mobilization/rehabilitation interventions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fall Risk Assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transfers/Positioning	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Active/pass ROM	✓	✓	✓	✓	
ADL's basic care needs and basic equipment provision	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wound/skin care /pressure relief	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Education on Non Pharma pain and symptom management	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Allied Health Skills to Support COVID-19 Response Across the Continuum • 6

Physiotherapist Skills	Patient Care Setting				
	Critical Care	Inpatient Acute	Home Care	LTC/ Continuing Care	Ambulatory
Wayfinding to a available supports in community (i.e. PT after emergency orthopedic surgery)		✓			✓
Discharge Planning		✓	✓		✓
Telephone triage of PT referrals into three categories: urgent face to face, urgent need for virtual PT visits, non-urgent need for virtual PT visits			✓		✓
Collaboration with primary care provider to reduce duplication and preserve resources			✓		✓
Self-management ,activity prescription, home exercise program		✓	✓	✓	✓
Advice for front line patient care staff who have MSK symptoms and concerns	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assessment and Provision of PT treatment (with screening/distancing) for critical staff unable to work with MSK concerns	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nasopharyngeal swabbing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of a Psychologist

Psychologists, with their expertise in psychological health, are ideally positioned to help mitigate psychological risks (to patients, families, and staff) related to the pandemic, promote positive mental health outcomes and resilience, support efficiencies in patient flow, and deliver prioritized, urgent psychological services (counselling, psychotherapy, assessment) as needed and where possible and appropriate.

Psychologist Skills	Patient Care Setting				Support for AHS Staff
	Critical Care	Inpatient	Outpatient/Community	LTC/Continuing Care	
Assessment					
Screening for adverse psychological outcomes (e.g. psychiatric disorders, cognitive dysfunction)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Standard psychology general assessment		✓	✓	✓	
Formal Capacity Assessments	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Problem specific diagnostic and functional assessments		✓	✓	✓	
Diagnosis					
Differential diagnosis of psychiatric disorders		✓	✓	✓	
Intervention					
Early Intervention (Psychological First Aid)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Stabilizing distressed patients and families	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Crisis Intervention and Safety Planning	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Assess and address emotional and/or behavioral concerns	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brief intervention to address focused mental health concerns					
Counselling (problem focused, supportive)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Psychotherapy					
Address barriers impacting function/ treatment success	✓	✓	✓	✓	
		✓	✓	✓	
Psychoeducation and resources to facilitate coping and resilience					✓

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of a Recreation Therapist

Recreation therapists provide social, emotional, physical and cognitive intervention and rehabilitation to prevent decline, need for re-hospitalization, responsive behaviors secondary to dementia and to promote resilience, coping, wellbeing and recovery.

Recreation therapy is an unregulated health profession in Alberta. Recreation therapists in Alberta are not authorized to perform restricted activities under the Health Professions Act.

Recreation Therapist Skills	Patient Care Setting			
	Critical Care	Inpatient	Ambulatory	Congregate
Comfort Care				
Lifting and Transferring				
Turning and Positioning				
Falls Prevention	✓	✓		✓
Physical Restraints				
Safe Feeding				
Care for the Dying Patient				
Basic Care				
Vital Signs	✓	✓		✓
Oxygen Delivery				
Pressure Sores				
Oxygen				
Category 3 Allied Health	✓	✓	✓	✓
Safe client handling and mobility				
Lifts, transfers, mobilization	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mobility equipment and transfer devices				
Falls screening and prevention	✓	✓	✓	✓
Communication				
Cognitive impairment, dementia, delirium	✓	✓	✓	✓
Speech, language and hearing disorders				
Screening and assessment		✓	✓	✓

Recreation Therapist Skills	Patient Care Setting			
	Critical Care	Inpatient	Ambulatory	Congregate
Rehabilitation and Recovery		✓	✓	✓
Dementia and responsive behaviours	✓	✓	✓	✓
Psychosocial support for patients and families				
• Caregiver respite	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Virtual modalities				
• Information and Education				
Discharge Planning and Wayfinding	✓	✓	✓	✓
Advance Care Planning and Goals of Care	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Supportive conversations to initiate and evaluate ACP/GCD				
Promotion and Prevention		✓	✓	✓

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of a Respiratory Therapist

Respiratory Therapists possess the expertise to assess and treat patients with cardio-respiratory disease or dysfunction. Respiratory Therapists provide life-saving interventions in urgent and emergent care of patients.

Respiratory Therapist Skills	Patient Care Setting				Support for AHS Staff
	Critical Care	Inpatient	Outpatient/ Community	LTC/ Continuing Care	
• Medication administration & management	✓	✓			
• Blood gas procurement and analysis	✓	✓	✓	✓	
• Basic and complex respiratory assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	
• Complex airway management – intubation, extubation	✓	✓			
• Tracheostomy management/ change		✓	✓		
• Respiratory equipment management	✓	✓	✓	✓	
• Discharge planning		✓			
• Patient education		✓	✓	✓	
• Oxygen administration and management	✓	✓	✓	✓	
• Consult on home equipment needs		✓	✓		
• Ventilator management – invasive & non-invasive	✓	✓	✓	✓	
• Bronchoscopy assistance	✓	✓			
• Proning	✓				

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of a Social Worker

Social workers' priorities center on the societal, emotional consequences and economic impacts that will occur. The focus for social workers does not change during a pandemic and in fact the demand for social work services may increase. However, the focus of the intervention will shift to stabilizing patients and families and meeting basic needs.

Social Worker Skills	Patient Care Setting				AHS staff & contracted providers
	Critical Care	Inpatient (all unit types)	Outpatient, Community and Home Care	Congregate Living	
Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General social work assessment • Risk assessment and safety planning (suicide, abuse, neglect) 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Decision Making & Capacity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate timely and urgent decision-making capacity and alternate decision-making processes 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Psychosocial Support for Patients & Families <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support in addressing basic needs (food, shelter, income security, transportation, social support, safety) • Support in accessing and validating identification for vulnerable persons required to self-isolate • Support to patients and families with problem solving around staying connected in light of visitor restrictions 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Counselling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grief support, bereavement counselling, end of life support, post mortem support, focused brief mental health intervention 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Psychotherapy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on managing immediate issues and stabilizing clients 			✓		
Discharge Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discharge planning for homeless who must self-isolate; Discharge planning for expedited admission to facility care where finances are not in place • Discharge outside of distance guidelines – i.e. further away than 100 km radius which includes difficult transportation to and from, separating families/couples 	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Social Worker Skills		Patient Care Setting				AHS staff & contracted providers
		Critical Care	Inpatient (all unit types)	Outpatient, Community and Home Care	Congregate Living	
System Navigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaise with other social programs and systems to address barriers and develop service protocols and processes. • Advocacy – individual and system level • Heightened resource problem solving in light of reduced social services and supports 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Case Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict resolution and problem solving • Liaising between unit and family where visits are not possible • Facilitating conversation and updates between family and care team • Conflict resolution and problem solving 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Crisis Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stabilizing distressed patients and families • Addressing impacts of abuse and neglect (child abuse, domestic violence, financial abuse) including mandatory reporting 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Health Promotion & Early Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health promotion and early intervention (psychological first aid, skills for psychological recovery and HeartMath) • Education, resources and strategies (individual and group) to facilitate coping and resilience 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of a Speech-Language Pathologist

Speech-language pathologist’s (SLPs) priorities focus on communication with patients to facilitate their participation and informed consent; reduce delirium and expedite recovery. Patients with speech, language and hearing difficulties, in isolation or coming off ventilation are at particular risk. SLPs are skilled in dysphagia management and contribute to care for patients with tracheostomy or on ventilators.

Speech Language Pathologist Skills	Patient Care Setting				AHS System Supports
	Critical Care	Acute Care	Outpatient/Community	LTC/congregate living	
Swallowing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex dysphagia (e.g., respiratory complications, decompensation & post extubation dysphagia) • Dysphagia assessment and management • Support for nutrition and hydration • Oral care & secretion management • Feeding support for people with dysphagia 	✓	✓		✓	
Communication with patients who have communication barriers regarding COVID-19 , pain, preferences, informed decision making, goals of care designation and facilitating capacity assessment. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide low tech alternative and augmentative communication equipment 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tracheostomy/Ventilation/Upper airway/Voice					
Tracheostomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management including cuff deflation, capping trials, and speaking valves • Voice, upper airway assessment & management (e.g., laryngeal endoscopy and voice prosthesis insertion and management) • Tracheostomy management, voice prosthesis; vent care; post extubation dysphagia & dysphonia • Respiratory strength and coordination 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cognitive and communication assessment & rehabilitation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce delirium • Assessment post brain hypoxia • Aphasia, apraxia, dysarthria 	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Transition planning & support for early discharge		✓	✓	✓	✓

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of a Spiritual Care Practitioner

During COVID-19, SHPs provide the following essential services: mental health screening, comprehensive assessment and trauma informed interventions to address spiritual distress (loss of meaning and connection, often expressed through emotional distress) and promote wellbeing and resiliency among patient, families and staff; counselling for grief and its spiritual dimensions; support to health care providers in screening for spiritual distress; assessment and provision of spiritual care at end of life inclusive of morgue viewings; consultation in support of essential religious care provision by community religious care providers (AHS Religious Community Visitors).

Spiritual Health Practitioner Skills	Patient Care Setting				AHS staff defusing and support for moral and spiritual distress across sectors
	Acute Care	Critical Care	Calgary Palliative Home Care	Outpatient Clinics	
Screening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct suicide risk screening inclusive of safety planning and referral. • Conduct screening for mental health conditions (such as anxiety and depression) 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Comprehensive Spiritual Assessment • Assessment of spiritual distress in support of differential diagnosis from depression • Identify how beliefs and values may impact treatment choices. 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Palliative and End of Life Care (inclusive of required rituals, religious/cultural protocols, grief counselling inclusive of its spiritual dimensions), 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Spiritual Health Practitioner Skills	Patient Care Setting				AHS staff defusing and support for moral and spiritual distress across sectors
	Acute Care	Critical Care	Calgary Palliative Home Care	Outpatient Clinics	
Interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Palliative and End of Life Care (inclusive of required rituals, religious/cultural protocols, grief counselling inclusive of its spiritual dimensions), • Provide COVID-related essential spiritual care services to patients/families with limited or no psycho-social-spiritual supports • Provide Urgent after hours on-call and call-back services for imminent death, life-threatening trauma, and bereavement including morgue viewings (RAH, RDRH, UAH) • Address spiritual and moral distress and ethical dilemma • Support other health care providers in screening for spiritual distress • Provides consultation in support of essential religious care provision by Community Religious Care Providers. • Crisis intervention, safety planning and disaster psychosocial services • Identify solutions for spiritual health • Provide counselling (supportive, problem focused, and grief counselling) • Provides psychotherapeutic interventions (psycho-spiritual approaches to psychotherapy in support of holistic healing and spiritual growth). • Ritual Provision (provides or facilitates prayers, rituals, rites, ceremonies and services). 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spiritual health education and resources to facilitate coping and spiritual resilience.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills of a Therapy Assistant

Therapy Assistants are unregulated staff that can perform rehabilitation clinical activities under assignment and supervision of Audiologists, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapist, Recreation Therapists, or Speech-Language Pathologists. Comfort Care and Basic Care are outside of the typical duties of Therapy Assistants, however during a pandemic they may perform these activities under assignment and supervision of Nurses. Therapy Assistants can also provide non-clinical supports as per direction of their manager.

Therapy Assistant Skills	Patient Care Setting			
	Critical Care	Inpatient	Outpatient/Community	LTC/Continuing Care
Rehabilitation				
• Patient Mobilization	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Therapeutic Exercises	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Equipment/Assistive Devices	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Preventative Skin Breakdown Interventions	✓	✓	✓	✓
Basic Care				
• Monitor Basic Vitals	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Oxygen Delivery	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Monitor Pressure Sores	✓	✓	✓	✓
Comfort Care				
• Lifting and Transferring	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Turning and Positioning	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Falls Prevention	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Physical Restraints	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Safe Feeding	✓	✓	✓	✓
Non-Clinical				
• Clerical Duties	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Equipment Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Stocking	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Laundry	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Cleaning	✓	✓	✓	✓

Pandemic Planning – Role and Clinical Skills – Additional Considerations for Allied Health

In addition to the roles and skills describe above that reflect the optimization on the unique scope of practice of each of the disciplines during a pandemic, Allied Health Professionals may need to be redeployed to other areas in need.

When the need arises to draw on Allied Health staff beyond their traditional roles in AHS, the table below provides an at-a glance view of areas to be considered for redeployment, that leverages professional skill sets.

It is important to note that there will be variation in the skill set of individual clinicians based on their specific area of practice within their discipline.

- A check mark (✓) signals a particular role or task that an Allied Health professional can be redeployed to
- Colour coding reflects the degree to which the skill or role is in the scope of Allied Health Professional and offers insight into their readiness to enact the skill or role, and how much additional education and training may be required.

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Majority of the skills are practiced by the discipline – little if any additional education required

Some of the skills are practiced by the discipline – some additional education or training will be required depending on typical area of practice

None of the skills are part of regular activities of the discipline – significant education or training will be required

General Roles & Skills	Audiologist	Occupational Therapist	Physiotherapist	Psychologist	Recreation Therapist	Respiratory Therapist	Social Worker	Speech-Language Pathologist	Spiritual Health Practitioner	Therapy Assistant
Clinical										
Basic Care Level II	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Comfort Care Level I	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Feeding patients		✓	✓		✓			✓		✓
Communication & Cognition										
Adapt an approach for Cognitive impairment, dementia, delirium	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Facilitate patient/provider communication for those with communication barriers (ex. Communication boards)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Discharge Planning										
Supportive Transition and Discharge Planning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Discharge planning for homeless who must self-isolate		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		
Expedited admission to facility care where finances are not in place							✓			
Supportive conversations to initiate and evaluate Advance Care Planning and Goals of Care	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Psychosocial supports for patients & families										
Timely and urgent capacity recommendations		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	
Addressing basic needs (income, food, shelter)		✓	✓		✓		✓			
Facilitating patient/family virtual connections	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Obtaining identification for vulnerable populations requiring tracking							✓			
Grief support		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Focused brief mental health interventions		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Coordination of child abuse investigations and apprehensions							✓			
Stabilizing distressed patients and families		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Psychological first aid for staff		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Psychological first aid for other first responders		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	
End of life support		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Coordination of supports post mortem				✓			✓		✓	

