



MODULE 7

Retaining Healthcare Professionals

Key Highlights

- Retention is increasingly considered the critical focus for sustaining rural healthcare services in Alberta, with evidence showing that healthcare professionals *from rural backgrounds* who have *trained in rural and remote communities* are more likely to stay long-term.
- Effective retention requires a team approach involving the entire Committee, in addition to community members and other stakeholders to create an environment that supports healthcare professionals.
- A retention strategy includes clear goals, realistic actions, and an evaluation plan to assess success, with the understanding that it's a living document that requires regular assessment and adaptation.
- Key retention strategies include maintaining open communication with healthcare professionals, supporting professional fulfilment, offering community recognition, and supporting family balance (including spouse employment and childcare), and improving community liveability.
- Research shows that while financial incentives (like Alberta's Rural Physician Recruitment and Retention Support Program) can have some impact on retention, intrinsic factors such as community integration, workplace support, and quality of life have a more significant influence on healthcare professionals' decisions to stay in rural and remote communities.

Retention is defined as the ability to keep health professionals working in rural and remote communities over an extended period.

While attraction and integration remain important work, increasingly it is retention that is considered the critical focus for sustaining rural healthcare services in Alberta. Think of attraction and integration as an investment that pays off with improved retention. And the more time and effort you put into retaining the health professionals you have now, the less effort you will need to put into starting the whole process all over again if they leave.

Retention is also about who you are attracting. There is increasing evidence that successful retention is strongly associated with attracting health professionals who are from rural backgrounds or have trained and worked in rural and remote communities. Research suggests that health professionals who spend two years of their training in rural and remote communities are twice as likely to choose to work, live and, ultimately, stay in rural setting.^{63,64}

In this module, we will explore strategies to strengthen health professional retention, how to develop a retention strategy and some of issues that can undermine your work that may limit how long a health professional stays in your community.

Retention – The Long Game

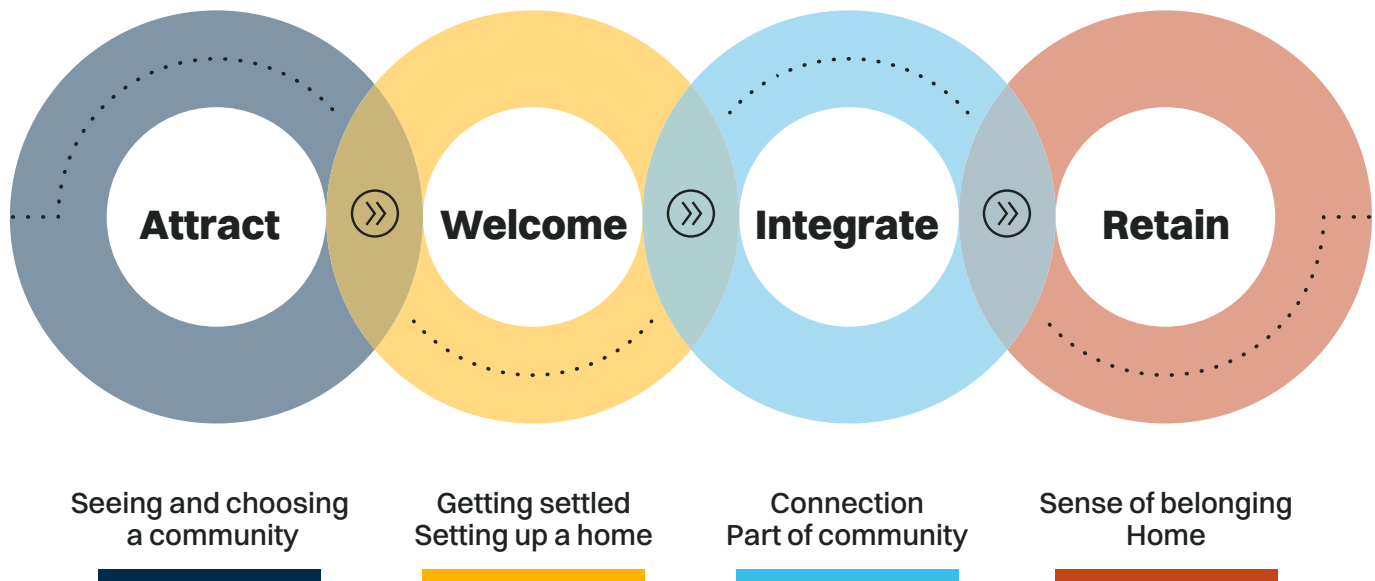
Almost everything a committee does to encourage a health professional and their family to join your community is focused ultimately on retaining them for as long as possible.

There's value in seeing retention as part of the pathway that starts with attraction and runs through welcome and integration to retention. The initial upstream work integrating the health professional and their family into the community is the investment your committee and community make to influence the family's downstream decision to stay in the community or move on after a few years.

The expectations around retention in healthcare are also changing. It's becoming increasingly rare for health professionals to spend their entire careers in one place; as such, it is unrealistic to expect someone to stay in your community for 20 or 30 years. Today, most young professionals move or change jobs every three or five years. This number is no different for health professionals. Keep this trend in mind as your committee is developing its retention strategy. More importantly, manage your committee's expectations to ensure they recognize that retention work should not be considered a failure simply because a health professional and their family decide to leave for an opportunity somewhere else.

⁶³Hines, S., Wakerman, J., Carey T.A., Russell, D., & Humphreys, J. (2020). Retention strategies and interventions for health workers in rural areas: a systematic review protocol. *JBI Evidence Synthesis*, 18(1), pp. 87-96.

⁶⁴Russell, D., Mathew, S., Fitts, M., Liddle, Z., Murakami-Gold, L., Campbell, N., Ramjan, M., Zhao, Y., Hines, S., Humphreys, J.S., & Wakerman, J. (2021). Interventions for health workforce retention in rural areas: a systematic review. *Human Resources for Health*, 19:103, pp. 1-24.



Retention – It Takes a Team

The responsibility for retention ultimately lies with the entire community. Committees, by drawing on their diverse membership of health employers, community partners and other stakeholders (e.g., media, service clubs, Chamber of Commerce, etc.), can help promote an environment that supports, respects and recognizes health professionals. This support, respect, and recognition can motivate them to remain committed to the community.

Retention requires everyone on your Committee to get engaged and support the hard work of retaining your health professionals. This engagement should include your *Partnership Pentagonam Plus*⁶⁵ Committee members: healthcare providers including physicians, community members, health employers, business and non-profit organizations, schools and, where needed, other partners and community members.

Engaging your entire Committee and your larger community about the importance of retention helps create broader recognition of the importance of this work and the shared community responsibility for it. Broader community awareness and involvement can allow you to tap into additional resources to do this work. Community partners can influence (and sometimes have control over) the factors that can strengthen retention including housing, access to shops and services, public safety, community organizations, events and amenities. Your healthcare employers have considerable influence over retention too. The Committee needs to have a good understanding of the employer's retention programs and supports to identify opportunities, maximize impact and avoid duplication of effort. For example, you may want to coordinate with employers to access RHPAP [programs](#) that offer funding to support health professionals to pursue continuing education.

You never want to become complacent and assume everything is fine with your community's healthcare workforce. The employment and community situation can change quickly and, when they do, you need to be prepared.

⁶⁵ See Module 3 for an overview of the *Partnership Pentagonam Plus* model.

Strengthening Your Health Workforce Radar

Retention is all about communication and making sure that you have a good sense of what's going on with your community's healthcare workforce.

Strengthening your workforce radar consists of ongoing, appropriate and confidential engagement with the health professionals in your community to ensure that they are staying connected and they and their families are leading balanced and fulfilling professional and personal lives. Your sincere interest in their situation can demonstrate ongoing community support for the health professional and his/her family.

Communicate with your health professionals to get a sense of their intentions and plans for the future. Your check in with them can take many forms from formal meetings or informal conversations at, for example, a hockey game.

It's critical that these conversations remain confidential. The decision by a health professional to consider leaving a community is highly personal and can have significant repercussions for them and their family if the information is revealed inappropriately. Respecting confidentiality builds trust and helps foster further communication.

Here are a few retention-related questions you can explore when meeting with your community's health professionals:

- Do you feel your professional and personal goals and objectives are being met?
- Are you feeling welcomed and included in the community?
- Can you tell me about any issues or concerns that are discouraging you from staying in the community?

Communities are often surprised to learn that the decision by a health professional to leave a community may have little or nothing to do with their work or employer and everything to do with the happiness of their spouse/partner and family. We discussed in Module 6 that moving to a new place is an uncertain and stressful experience for spouses/ partners and children. Health professionals work hard to have a connection with the community and shared common ground with the colleagues. Their family doesn't always have this type of connection. Struggling to adjust to a new environment can cause a lot of stress for the health professional's family especially if they're away from friends, extended family and support networks - all of which can contribute to their decision to leave.

Your community's health professionals, whether they are staying or leaving, are an incredible resource for your Committee's ongoing retention (as well as attraction and integration) work. Once they are settled and living in your community for a few years, invite them to provide feedback to the Committee on what you did well and what you might consider doing differently in the future. Their direct experience and feedback are valuable for evaluating your retention plans and efforts.

Developing a Retention Strategy

The purpose of your retention strategy is to demonstrate your community's ongoing appreciation for everything that health professionals do to sustain your health services and enrich the community. Implementing a multi-faceted retention strategy that incorporates the diverse needs of healthcare workers enables your Committee to significantly improve the community's ability to retain its healthcare workforce.

Your Committee's healthcare workforce retention strategy should be considered a *living document* that reflects an ongoing process of continuous assessment, adaptation, and genuine investment in local health professionals' success and satisfaction. Your strategy will be informed by your ongoing awareness of the current state of your healthcare workforce and feedback from the local health professionals with whom you engage. It's important to regularly review and update the strategy with new information and ideas.

Your planning work should be organized, sincere, and appropriately targeted toward retention opportunities and challenges. Think of your retention strategy as a cycle starting with your understanding of the current state of the workforce and setting goals and objectives based on opportunities and risks identified in the compilation of information. From there, you move to implement, evaluate, review and refocus your plan based on your learnings and the changing state of the workforce. And the cycle starts again.



Define Goals and Objectives

- An effective retention strategy is framed around a clear set of goals and objectives. What's the problem you're trying to solve, and what does success look like?
- Your conversations with health professionals and ongoing dialogue of the current state of the workforce, in partnership with your healthcare employers, will help you to identify potential opportunities and risks. The goal is to maximize your opportunities and manage your risks.

Identify Strategies and Actions

- Brainstorm at the Committee level to identify the areas where you can focus to strengthen retention of your healthcare workforce.
- Be sure to differentiate between things you have some control over and things that are the responsibility of others. Are there opportunities to advocate for changes that might support retention? For example, advocacy could involve meeting with your health employer or MLA to reverse plans to downsize your health centre's emergency department in order to retain healthcare services and professionals in the community.
- Organize your actions along a timeline, clarifying who will do the work and by when.
- Your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant can help you facilitate this planning session and offer different ways to manage and organizing your ideas and develop an action plan. They have access to tools and resources to help identify strategies that maximize your retention opportunities while reducing barriers and challenges.

Implement and Evaluate Your Strategy

- Once you've settled on your goals and strategies, you're encouraged to use a template such as a logic model⁶⁶ to help organize your action plan. A logic model is a great tool to make sure your goals and strategies align with your actions and outcomes, as well as to identify who will do the work and by when.
- Remember to consider your strategy a living document and be ready to amend your plan if the current state of your healthcare workforce changes suddenly.
- Build in some ways to evaluate your plan to see if your work is accomplishing your goals. Identify how you will assess your progress toward your goals and what measures will constitute success. Recognize that failing to meet your goals doesn't mean your strategy was flawed. You simply need to adjust, adapt and keep moving forward.
- Plan to evaluate your plan at least annually. Consider creating a sub-Committee to undertake a formal evaluation and review of your overall retention efforts.

Potential Strategies to Strengthen Retention

Your Committee's health professional retention plan is going to reflect the unique needs and context of your community. No two retention plans are the same given the differences between the communities' health services and workforces. By working with your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant, as well as connecting with other Committees across Alberta, you can learn about innovative projects and strategies to retain health professionals.

As mentioned earlier in this module, it's important to recognize that there are some aspects of retention that your Committee can control or influence, and other aspects on which it has no influence. If a health professional and their family are unhappy, there may be little you can do to influence their decision. Their desire to be closer to extended family has nothing to do with your efforts, the community or your Committee's work.

You're encouraged, of course, not to leave retention to chance or simply hope for the best. Having an effective and up-to-date retention plan means having a few different strategies and activities that encourage communication with your local healthcare workforce and focusing your efforts on the factors that can have a direct bearing on helping a health professional and their family choose to stay.

⁶⁶ This link provides an overview of logic models and their use: https://www.midlandsandlancashirecsu.nhs.uk/images/Logic_Model_Guide_AGA_2262_ARTWORK_FINAL_07.09.16_1.pdf

Here are some areas where your retention strategy could focus:

Engaging Your Community's Health Professionals

- Tune up your health workforce radar by creating intentional strategies to keep the lines of communication open with your community's health professionals to assess how they are doing and what their plans are.
 - Engagement can be formal or informal.
 - You'll want to try and get a good idea from them about their perception of how they are being accepted in the community, as well as where they work.
 - Encourage them to talk about what their days are like, and whether they feel respected and appreciated.
 - Remember to ask how their spouse/partner and children are doing.
- Ongoing communication is a good way to make sure that any commitments made when the health professional and their family first arrived are being fulfilled. There is nothing worse than a community promising something (e.g., an interest-free loan or help with childcare) and then failing to deliver. Broken promises can undermine trust and retention.

Professional Fulfilment

- In smaller rural areas where health professionals may have substantial workloads, it can be difficult for them to find the time to get additional training or attend professional development courses. For regulated professions, they must take a certain number of courses each year to remain licensed, so not having time off to study and travel can be a real stressor. In this situation,
 - The Committee may work with the local health employer to the health professional to get additional training.
 - They can advocate for additional staffing to reduce overall workload and on-call demands to help free-up the professional to stay current with their licensing requirements or upgrade their skills.
 - Access continuing education funding through RHPAP such as the [Physician Skills Enhancement Grant](#) and the Rural Education & Advanced Learning Program. Your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant can provide more information on these programs.
- A health professional may choose to leave a community because of interpersonal conflicts with their peers or others in the workplace. These kinds of conflicts can lead to isolation and depression, especially if the health professional doesn't have a good support network.
 - Interpersonal conflicts are not necessarily the responsibility of the Committee to resolve; however, flagging these issues with the local healthcare employer or your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant can be helpful.

Active Support

- Researchers at the University of Calgary found that communities that actively support their local health professionals improve the odds of retaining them in the long term.⁶⁷ While the health professionals' clinic and community hospital may have their own support mechanisms, the role of the community in providing this intentional and active support is critical to health professionals feeling welcomed and putting down roots.

⁶⁷ Cameron, P.J., Este, D.C., Worthington, C. (2010). Physician Retention in Rural Alberta: Key Community Factors. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 101(1), pp. 79-82.

- Examples of active support include working with your local health foundation to obtain new equipment or healthcare facilities, advocating for services, hosting appreciation events for health professionals and their families during Alberta Rural Health Week (end of May each year), and nominating them for awards such as [RHPAP's Rhapsody Awards](#). Everyone likes to feel that their work and their contributions are recognized and appreciated!
- The Calgary research also suggests that the onus on retention doesn't sit with the healthcare employer alone. Broad membership on the Committee can help you work closely with community members, business/industry, media, physicians and other health professionals to emphasize the importance of the community's engagement in retention strategies.

(Somewhat) Random Acts of Kindness

- Your retention plan may include sincere acts of gratitude by the community, which can have a very profound positive impact on health professionals and their families. These gestures help them to feel part of the community and that their efforts are appreciated.
- You may consider offering thank-you notes and small tokens of appreciation to recognize milestones and achievements. Having professional and personal profiles published in the local newspaper is also a means of recognizing contributions.
- It's best to plan your appreciation events early in the professional's tenure in the community and then hold the events again once the health professional announces their departure.
- Always try to be inclusive and fair when you are planning acts of appreciation or events to ensure you recognize all the health professional groups, as opposed to focusing on a particular person, family, or profession.

Supporting Family Balance

- Health professional retention is about more than their work and workplace.
- Some incoming health professionals may be coming to the community with a partner who is a professional. It can be stressful when one partner is working, and the other is unemployed or underemployed. If the spouse/partner is faced with the prospect of having to leave the community for employment, in more cases, the health professional will go with them.
 - Potential retention strategies may include working with local business, industry and non-profit organizations to match spouse and partners of health professionals with potential job opportunities or volunteer roles that helps them get connected to the community.
- Family balance is also impacted by the availability of childcare in the community. Working spouses or partners may need to share childcare with the health professional and, at times, require daycare or pre- and after-school care. A lack of these supports may lead to a decision to leave the community, especially if the lack of these supports starts to disrupt family balance.
 - Committee members should tap into their membership to look at community services and be creative about what opportunities exist to develop childcare resources. Look at a co-operative, a non-profit agency or business partner, or an extension of an existing community resource (e.g., library or seniors centre).

Focus on the Community

- Retention strategies can also include a focus on the community itself. Research suggests that the decision by a health professional and their family about whether to stay in a community can be influenced by the quality and affordability of housing, employment prospects for a partner/spouse, community safety and their general state of happiness, which can be very subjective.⁶⁸
- Retention can be strengthened by working to help your community be a welcoming and inclusive place. Module 6 considers how a lack of acceptance by the community can undermine a health professional's sense of connection and ultimately discourage them from staying.
- Committees can broaden their focus to include initiatives that improve the overall quality of life in the community, beyond the healthcare industry. Leveraging the cross-community representation on the Committee can help when, for example, advocating for improvement to housing, employment opportunities, schools and childcare.

Leaning on Your Buddy System

- The buddy system you may have established in the welcoming and integration phase of your Committee's work isn't a one-and-done effort. It can be a real support for retention, providing a trusted connection to the Committee and community at large.
- Helping the health professional and their families build lasting connections in the community supports the growth of community roots, which is critical to retention.

Don't Let Them Go without a Chat

- If a health professional chooses to leave your community, reach out to them and ask to have coffee or to meet up before they go to give you a sense of what may be behind their decision.
- The intent of this conversation is to listen and learn and not to judge their decision or persuade them otherwise.
- While this kind of outreach can be a bit stressful, it can be made easier if you've maintained good lines of communication during the health professionals' time in your community.
- The information you get from them might help identify potential retention challenges in the community. This opportunity to solicit feedback aligns with the Committee's ongoing commitment to evaluate and improve the impact of its work.
- The insights offered by this feedback may require the Committee to take a hard look at its strategies, approaches and membership. In addition, it may shine a light on the community, the degree to which it is seen as welcoming and inclusive, and how the community's expectations of and reactions to new health professionals may be influencing your efforts to retain them in the community.

⁶⁸ Wieland, L. (2018). Retention of Remote Doctors in Canada. The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352374557_THE_BOB_AND_JUNE_PRICKETT_CHURCHILL_FELLOWSHIP_Retention_of_Remote_Doctors_in_Canada

The Use of Money to Retain Health Professionals

A popular strategy for provincial governments and, increasingly, local communities is to offer health professionals extra money to continue living and working in a community.⁶⁹ For example, Alberta announced the Rural Physician Recruitment and Retention Support Program (PRRSP) in 2023, which promises to pay rural physicians \$4,500 a year to stay in rural and remote communities.⁷⁰ This payment is on top of the nearly \$130 million dollars a year Alberta spends providing financial incentives to retain rural physicians. Financial incentives may also include ongoing cash payments, salary or payment premiums, signing bonuses, escalating long-service awards and housing subsidies.

The track record of using financial incentives to encourage health professionals to stay in a rural community is, at best, mixed.^{71, 72, 73} The study revealed that just over half (56%) felt that financial incentives have a strong or very strong influence on their choice to continue living and working in a rural community. But 82% of that same group felt that a welcoming community strongly influenced their decision to stay living and working in the community.

In many instances, health professionals who are already predisposed to work and live in rural areas will choose to locate to those areas irrespective of whether there are financial incentives.⁷⁴ The additional money is appreciated, but not a deciding factor in their decision to stay in the community.

Research shows that so-called *extrinsic* or outright cash incentives, such as those provided by Alberta's Rural Remote Northern Program, can have a minor effect on rural physician retention, but broader, more *intrinsic* aspects of retention including practice resources (e.g., hospitals, collegial professional relationships), proximity to lifestyle services, workplace and community health and safety, opportunities for spousal/partner employment and schooling for children have a much larger positive effect. A similar study from Australia suggested that things like on-call workload, professional support and quality of work life are the top factors influencing retention, with financial incentives near the bottom.^{75, 76}

In conclusion, the Attraction, Integration, and Retention Toolkit developed by RHPAP is a vital resource aimed at enriching the healthcare landscape in Alberta's rural and remote communities. By emphasizing the importance of attracting skilled professionals, seamlessly integrating them into local teams, and nurturing an environment that prioritizes their well-being, this Toolkit fosters a sense of belonging and commitment among healthcare workers. As we implement the strategies outlined in this Toolkit, we not only strengthen our healthcare workforce but also ensure that our communities receive the compassionate, high-quality care they deserve. Together, we can cultivate a sustainable future for healthcare in rural areas, where every healthcare professional is valued, supported, and deeply connected to the community they serve.

⁶⁹ <https://centralalbertaonline.com/articles/town-and-county-of-stettler-approve-physician-recruitment-financial-incentive>

⁷⁰ <https://www.albertadoctors.org/practice/physician-compensation/prrsp/#:-:text=The%20rural%20Physician%20Recruitment%20and,underserved%20rural%20communities%20in%20Alberta>

⁷¹ Lafortune, C. & Gustafson, J. (2019). Interventions to improve recruitment and retention of physicians in rural Canada: A systematic review. *University of Western Ontario Medical Journal*, 88:1, pp. 16-19.

⁷² Farkas, B., Manns, B., Ogundeji, Y., Wellstead, D., Clement, F., (2020). *Recruitment and Retention of Rural Physicians - the Role of Alternate Payment Models*. Health Technology Assessment Unit, University of Calgary. https://obrieniph.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/teams/12/Rural%20and%20Remote%20Physicians_role%20of%20APM_Abridged%20stand-alone.pdf

⁷³ <https://RHPAP.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Physician-HCP-Survey-Summary-2022.pdf>

⁷⁴ [Mixed reviews for rural doctor incentive program in central Alberta - Ponoka News](#)

⁷⁵ Verma, P., Ford, J.A., Stuart, A., Howe, A., Everington, S., & Steel, N. (2016). A systematic review of strategies to recruit and retain primary care doctors. *Health Services Research*, 16:126

⁷⁶ Humphries, J.S., Jones, M.P., Jones, J.A., & Mara, P. (2002). Workforce Retention in rural Australia: determining the factors that influence length of practice. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 176 (20 May), pp. 472-476.