



MODULE 2

Getting Organized

Key Highlights

- Starting and sustaining a Committee can be proactive (focused on future health workforce needs), reactive (focusing on today's health workforce needs) or a mixture of both.
- The intent of a Committee is to foster greater collaboration in communities, build relationships and strengthen capacity to collectively address challenging healthcare workforce issues.
- Collaboration requires you to think differently about how you work with others by focusing the collective efforts around a shared problem and working together to find solutions.
- The experience of community members and organizations working together to collaboratively solve problems creates greater community capacity and empowerment that can be a template for other challenges.
- Successfully advocating for your community means understanding advocacy is both an art and a science.

Growing Role of Community-based Action

Rural and remote communities across Alberta play an increasingly important role in attracting, integrating and retaining their local healthcare workforce. The role of communities has been evolving and is now seen as integral to efforts by health employers (e.g., Acute Care Alberta, Primary Care Alberta, etc.) to showcase rural and remote communities in their recruitment efforts.

By their nature, these community-based efforts are cooperative and often driven by both proactive and reactive efforts to respond to local needs.

Proactive efforts focus on being prepared for the future, such as:

- Reviewing existing documents (e.g., [RHPAP community profiles](#)) to inform the development of sustainable and effective plans to support and retain the healthcare professionals already in the community. This is done by understanding their needs, hosting appreciation events, and working collaboratively with the local healthcare employer to learn more about the healthcare workforce.
- Planning for potential vacancies in the health workforce. For example, if a physician is working on a short-term return-of-service contract, the community can work with the local clinic and healthcare employer to start thinking about retaining that healthcare professional and/or planning to attract a new one.
- Community development to bring together all the partners who have a stake in a robust local healthcare system to create collaborative goals and collectively strive toward them.

Reactive efforts are generally driven by a real or potential healthcare workforce crisis, such as:

- The immediate loss of a community physician, surgical nurse or medical laboratory technician, which can cause temporary or even permanent disruption of local health services.
- Cuts to services and programs that result in the loss of healthcare professionals or increase the challenges to attracting someone to the community.
- Community-level challenges such as the loss of a major employer or natural disasters (e.g., wildfires) which result in people leaving the community (or reluctantly considering it).

Whether focused on proactive or reactive efforts (or a mixture of both), development of an inclusive, community-based Committee is an important first step to support the sustainability of the local health workforce and services.

In this module, we will explore the value of working together to support your healthcare workforce, community advocacy, some keys to working collaboratively and defining the differences between healthcare *attraction* and *recruitment*.

Working Collaboratively

It has been said that “many hands make light work,” and the importance of collaboration is evident when developing and implementing effective strategies to attract, integrate and retain rural healthcare professionals. A coordinated and collaborative community-based approach is the proven way to go.

Cooperative movements and collaborative action have a long history in Alberta. From building barns to banding together in the 1870s and the Great Depression to getting better prices for their grain and other products, farmers know the value of working together.¹⁰ This legacy of cooperation underpins the work of the Committees as they coordinate with partners and other stakeholders to attract, integrate and retain healthcare professionals.

Collaboration is really about relationship building. It's the opportunity to invite people and organizations that perhaps haven't worked together in the past to create a shared understanding of the community's needs, define who needs to be at the table, and create a vision, collaborative strategies and action plans. The goal here is to focus on the bigger picture: attracting, integrating and retaining healthcare professionals in your community to make sure health services are there when you need them.

Health sector employers value the opportunity to partner with the community in their efforts to recruit healthcare professionals. This desire to partner includes your publicly funded employers (e.g., Alberta Health Services, Covenant Health), private employers (e.g., physician clinic, pharmacy, dentists and local physiotherapists clinic) and not-for-profit employers (e.g., mental health associations, family service organizations, etc). Successful Committees work hard to ensure their membership is inclusive of everyone with an interest in having robust and sustainable healthcare services.

Collaboration is key. Community development expert David Chrislip notes that the purpose of collaboration “is to create a shared vision and joint strategies that go beyond the purview of any particular party.”¹¹ This purpose includes more than simply working together and involves building relationships as an intentional act of ensuring the appropriate people are ready to work collectively to co-design strategies to address a problem or challenge guided by clear principles of engagement.

Liz Weaver with the Tamarack Institute insists that complex problems, like rural healthcare attraction, integration and retention, require collaborative solutions. Weaver asserts that “complex problems are particularly well-suited to collaborative solutions because collaboration engages diverse perspectives to explore and deepen collective understanding about the shared issue.”¹² She argues that collaboration enables conversation and, from conversation, a greater sense of shared learning and openness to different ways of doing things can develop.

As you start to form your Committee, consider who could be included in the planning. Including members from the local medical community, health employers, representatives from your local and First Nations governments, cultural groups, business and industry, educational institutions and community non-profit organizations is a great first step. Committee membership will be explored in more detail in Module 3 of this Toolkit.

¹⁰ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/co-operative-movement>

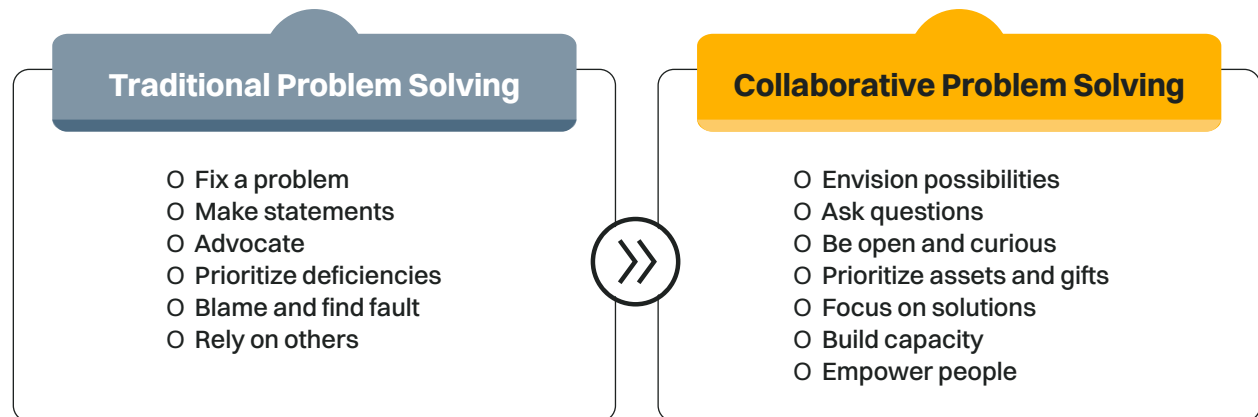
¹¹ Chrislip, D.D. (2002). *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook*. Wiley, p. 42.

¹² Weaver, L. (2017). *Collaboration: A Spectrum of Approaches*. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca>.

Thinking Collaboratively

Effective collaboration requires a different way of thinking about how to work together to solve problems.

In more traditional collective problem solving, the organization is at the centre, and the partners and stakeholders help solve the problem. The collaborative model, on the other hand, places the issue or problem at the centre, with each of the partners contributing equitably toward the solution. The collaborative approach levels the playing field and actively moves away from positional power, influence and, potentially, blame. For example, if a health employer is having a hard time filling a vacancy, focus on resolving the challenge, instead of focusing on the employer's actions.



Adapted from Tamarack Institute, *Collaboration: What is the Problem You are Trying to Solve* (2022).
<https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/>

This kind of collaborative problem solving can be a change from what you're used to. However, with a little effort to reframe the focus on the problem instead of the partner or stakeholder, collaboration and trust as well as more effective and lasting solutions will be in your reach.

Strengthening Your Community Capacity

While there's nothing wrong with organizing an informal interest group to support health professional attraction, integration and retention, there are benefits that arise from a more formally organized Attraction, Integration and Retention Committee.

A more formalized Attraction, Integration and Retention Committee can send a message that the community is serious about healthcare professional attraction, integration and retention. Setting up a formalized Committee also brings with it additional supports from RHPAP and eligibility for funding. And, with access to other Attraction, Integration and Retention Committees around Alberta (*commonly referred to as the Attraction, Integration and Retention Network throughout this Toolkit*), plus regular conferences and training events, Committee members can gain skills in collaboration, decision making, strategic planning, program evaluation and a deeper understanding of the healthcare system and workforce.

Throughout the Toolkit, we will reference "Committee" to mean either an informal community-interest Committee or more formalized Attraction, Integration and Retention Committees affiliated with RHPAP. Either way, RHPAP's Rural Community Consultants are here to support you in navigating the attraction, integration and retention of healthcare professionals.