

MODULE 6



Welcoming and Integrating Healthcare Professionals to Your Community

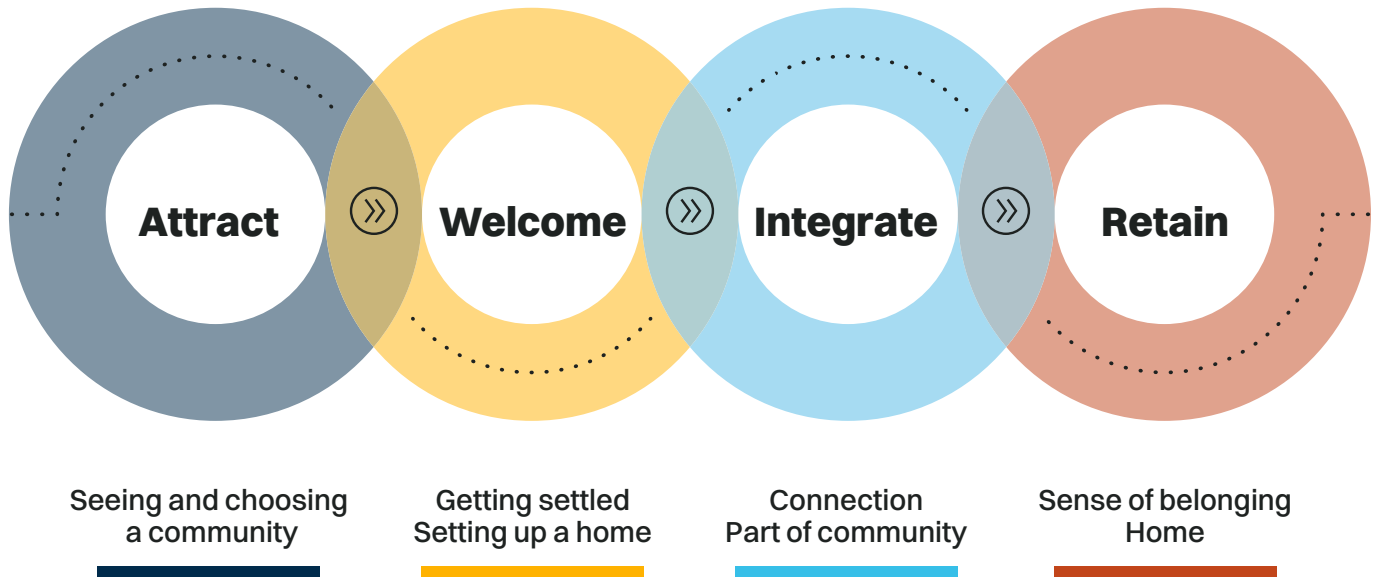
Key Highlights

- Welcoming focuses on meeting immediate needs during a healthcare professional's first few months in a community, while integration involves creating meaningful connections to foster a sense of belonging over the longer term.
- Effective welcome planning includes creating comprehensive welcome packages, setting realistic expectations about community life before arrival and assigning dedicated "navigators" as single points of contact whenever possible.
- Family integration is critical to retention success - supporting spouses/ partners and children's connection to the community through social groups, activities, and support systems greatly impacts a healthcare professional's decision to stay.
- Rural and remote communities should foster inclusivity for professionals from diverse backgrounds (including internationally educated professionals, BIPOC⁵¹ and 2SLGBTQI+ individuals) by proactively addressing potential barriers, microaggressions, and cultural differences.
- Integration is an ongoing process requiring flexible support tailored to the healthcare professional's changing needs, with "buddy systems" being effective for building connections that help professionals develop resilience and ultimately feel "at home" in the community.

⁵¹ BIPOC is an acronym that stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.

When the hard work of attracting a health professional result in their successful recruitment to the community, you can now change gears and focus on welcoming the new professional and helping them get settled in and connected to the community.

Welcoming and integrating new health professionals involves intentional, specific actions, but it's just one part of the overall focus of your work. These efforts lay the foundation for retaining those professionals in your community over the long term. It is important to note that all along this continuum is health professional choice - their needs and engagement interactions will vary professional to professional. Keep this at the forefront of the planning, as it can be forgotten!



Welcoming new health professionals and helping them become part of your community are related efforts, but there are specific differences between the two.

Welcoming is all about those first few months where the community steps up to help meet the immediate and initial needs of newcomers. The focus here is about being inclusive and supporting the new health professional to meet their immediate needs like helping them find safe and affordable housing and transportation, as well as learning their way around the community (e.g., getting a bank account or registering children for school). Some new health professionals will arrive in your community ready to go and well acquainted with the way things are done. Others may feel lost and isolated. Your Committee members need to be prepared to offer a sliding scale of support based on each health professional/family's needs to ensure they get off to a smooth start.

Integration begins once the new health professional is basically settled and organized. This step is a little more complex with the goal of creating meaningful social connections between the new health professional, their family and community members. These connections go beyond friendly or superficial interactions and involve fostering genuine relationships and a sense of closeness and belonging. Part of this bond can be achieved by being welcomed and involved in the school system, community groups, organized sports and cultural activities. As you get to know the new professional and understand where their needs lie, you may consider offering opportunities for greater involvement in the community including participation in social clubs and community events (e.g., fall fairs, rodeo, etc.).

Keep in mind that if a new health professional worships at a temple, church or mosque that is not in your community, you may want to consider reaching out to neighbouring communities or groups to see where

suitable facilities exist. This kind of information is one less worry the new health professional needs to carry, and it will likely make settling into your community a little easier. Support with things like sourcing food if they have specific dietary or cultural needs (e.g., Halal or Kosher food) can also go a long way to simplifying their initial experience of the community. The goal here is to try to reduce barriers to their successful settlement and integration.

By working closely with your health employers during the attraction stage means that you should have clear lines of communication and strong collaboration with stakeholders as you move into the welcoming and integration phases. Communication and collaboration are important!

Don't hesitate to contact and include your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant in this work. They are here to help you develop a positive and supportive welcome plan, as well as identify how best to support the ongoing integration of the health professional and their family into your community once they arrive.

Getting Your Welcome Plan Ready

A well-planned and inclusive welcome can lead to positive feelings and engagement that ensure the health professional, and their family have a soft landing in your community. This welcome also demonstrates your community's desire to make them feel more at home. Keep in mind that welcoming and integrating a new health professional and their family takes a village - be sure to lean on your unique community resources to help support the welcome and transition. We'll explore that work later in this module.

Getting Consent

Depending on who is recruiting the new healthcare professional, you may need to obtain consent before you can contact them to get the information you need to start your welcoming and integration planning.

Ideally, during the attraction phase, you developed a good relationship with your local healthcare employers and their recruitment team to ensure lines of communication remain open. You may have also had the chance during a community visit, for example, to meet the prospective health professional and obtained their permission to reach out to them directly.

Whether you were able to secure their permission or not, it's likely that your Committee will have representatives from the local healthcare employers or medical clinic. Work with these partners to coordinate the welcome and onboarding of the new health professional. Focus on this work being a collaborative effort between the health service and the community. Making a concerted effort to collaborate will allow you to avoid duplication of effort and make sure everyone is on the same page about what should happen and when. More importantly, it's important for the community to present a unified approach to avoid confusing, overwhelming or frustrating the new health professional and their family.

Planning to Plan

Consider forming a sub-Committee focused on the welcome planning and hosting the new health professional and their family. Be sure to ask for help from community stakeholders and partners who may not be part of the formal Committee. Involving additional community members, service organizations and businesses in the planning will reinforce the importance of a coordinated, warm and inclusive welcome and, for the health professional and their family, offers a genuine demonstration that the community is united and excited about their arrival, and that members of the broader community are approachable and ready to help.

An important part of your welcome planning is assigning one or two of your Committee (or community) members to act as a consistent point of contact for the new health professional and their family. Moving to a new community can be stressful enough; you want to avoid overloading them with information and dozens of different contacts. Having a single point of contact dedicated to supporting the health professional and their

family during transition provides a clear and welcoming channel for questions and concerns. It reduces the potential that they'll feel like a burden or believe they must figure everything out on their own. This contact can become a true lifeline, especially if the professional is struggling to find housing, setting up utilities or a bank account, finding a plumber, etc. The role of this contact is important not only for the health professional's first few weeks in the community, but as an ongoing resource who becomes a useful part of the retention strategy as well (see Module 7).

It's best if your key contact can reach out directly to prospective health professionals, with permission, before they arrive in the community to let them know the key contact is available to answer any questions they may have, to offer resources and to help them get settled in the community. This contact will also help inform your welcome planning by allowing you to ask questions and better understand their interests, experiences, family dynamics, needs and expectations. This initial outreach is a great way to kick-off your relationship and, if you happen to have had a chance to meet them previously (e.g., on a community tour), a logical follow-up to your initial discussions.

Moving to a new community can be stressful at the best of times. During their initial period in the community, the health professional and their family may need basic information about the community including how to find a place to stay and get that place set up to their specifications. This period is where your initial outreach is helpful to help assess their needs so you can connect them with appropriate resources. For example, if you find out they've been house-hunting and/or need temporary accommodations when they arrive, you could ask if they would like to be connected to a realtor, local hotel, or self-catering accommodation (e.g., AirBnB). Knowing whether they have a Canadian driver's license and access to a vehicle will determine if you should offer to help them at the Registry office or arrange other short term transportation options if there is capacity to do so.

Your pre-arrival conversation is also a great way to assess when they plan to arrive in town. This information is important as, if they are arriving at night or on a Sunday when grocery stores might be closed, you may want to provide a small hamper of food. In fact, you may want to consider providing a hamper regardless in case they can't get to the grocery store for a few days. You may also want to consider the weather when planning for their arrival. If it's raining, umbrellas may be helpful. If it's winter, particularly if your health professional and their family are from a warmer climate, you may want to ensure they are prepared for cold weather (see Appendix 6-1 for some information on appropriate clothing).

Coordinate with your healthcare employers or medical clinic to see if the appointed Committee member contacts should be on-call to meet the new health professional and their family when they arrive.

If you are unable to contact your new health professional ahead of time, put yourself in their shoes and consider what information and support they may need when they arrive. If there are other recently arrived health professionals in the community, you may want to get their advice and insights on the information and resource that were helpful or would have been helpful when they arrived.

Wherever possible, the best advice for preparing for the arrival of a health professional in your community is to adopt the motto, "Nothing for them, without them." In other words, while you may have a few ideas in mind about how you can be prepared to support them when they arrive, avoid acting on or verbalizing any assumptions about individual circumstances or needs before you check in with the professional to confirm what they need. To help avoid awkward misunderstandings, consider waiting to offer additional supports until it's clear that it's needed or welcomed.

The product of your planning will be a comprehensive welcome package that contains essential need-to-know information about the community, contact information for their go-to contact, banking information, places of worship, medical/dental offices, schools and other information that will be helpful to the health professional and their family during their first few weeks in the community. A great resource to use would be [RHPAP's Community Profiles](#).

Again, this is where your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant can be an excellent resource to help you design your welcome package and plan their welcome.

What Can They Expect When They Arrive?

The community's welcome requires that the new health professional and their family have realistic expectations about your community to smooth their transition into both work and social life. Take time to make sure they have some insight and understanding of what life in your community is like as well as the practical realities of moving their family there. For example, if the community does not have a diverse population, the arrival of a healthcare professional from another country may raise questions and curiosities. Depending on from where they are arriving, you may want to prepare them for answering some of the same questions repeatedly (e.g., "Where did you come from?" or even, "Bet it's colder here than where you are from?")

If your new professional is coming from outside of Alberta, or even western Canada, make sure they have as much information as possible about life here before they arrive. For instance,

- Make sure they are ready for the weather (see Appendix 6-1 for some suggestions)!
- Ask what airport they will be flying into, or from where they are planning to drive. Sometimes newcomers to Canada are shocked at just how big the country is and how long it can take to get from place to place (especially in winter). There are limited public transportation options in rural and remote Alberta - this is best to be shared before arrival.
- Someone from outside Alberta may value more information on Alberta's healthcare and school systems in addition to the requirements for Alberta-specific programs, healthcare cards and driver's licenses. (See Appendix 6-2 for more information on the process to get an Alberta driver's license.)
- Getting around town might be a bit tricky for anyone who is new to the community. Google Maps is one of several smartphone apps that can help people navigate their way around. (See Appendix 6-3 for more information).
- Health professionals who are new to Canada might appreciate some advice on where to do their grocery shopping. This advice may include where they might be able to get non-meat options and specialized foods (e.g., Halal). See Appendix 6-4 for some advice on grocery shopping that you can consider sharing.

Connecting your new health professional with someone who has already navigated a similar transition can be incredibly helpful. A peer with firsthand experience is often well positioned to answer questions and offer practical advice on the settlement process.

Don't forget that your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant can help you with some of these transition pieces. Also, see the section on Diversity and Culture below for additional information on fostering a welcoming and inclusive community.

Focusing on the Family

Experience shows that the happiness of the health professional's family can have a huge influence on your efforts to welcome and help them settle into your community.

Effective planning will consider any support required by accompanying family members. Understanding the family's needs and ensuring the appropriate support is available will help all members of the family better transition into their new environment. This targeted support will reduce the uncertainty, isolation and stress the family may experience. This support could include things like childcare (availability of, and options), pre-schools, parent social groups, play groups or information on how to get a library card. Evidence suggests that accessing public spaces and facilities is associated with improved well-being and sense of belonging for newcomers. This sense of feeling at home is important in rural and remote communities where those spaces are an essential asset to attract, welcome and integrate newcomers.⁵²

⁵²Esses, V.M., Hamilton, Leah K., Aslam, A., Barros, P.R.P. (2023). Measuring Welcoming Communities: A Toolkit for Communities and Those Who Use Them. <http://p2pcanada.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2023/03/Welcoming-Toolkit-1-Measuring-Welcoming-Communities.pdf>

Some of the family's needs may be easy to guess, but, as mentioned previously, be careful to confirm your assumptions before you act on or verbalize them. Ask open and curious questions before they arrive to confirm what they need and expect will help you prepare for their arrival. Open-ended questions invite a conversation, while closed questions usually result in a “yes” or “no” answer.

Closed Question	Open Question
Why don't you go the story circle at the Library?	Tell me about your day; what do you and the children like to do?
You don't need help with anything, do you?	Moving to a new community can be a little stressful. How can we help?
I guess you're getting all settled by now?	How are you settling into the community? What's going well and what are you still working on?

The easier the family's settling-in process is, the easier your work will be to help them fit into the community and the greater the likelihood of long-term retention success.

Diversity and Culture

The Canadian health workforce, like the country's population, is becoming more diverse. An increasing proportion of health professionals choosing to live and work in rural Alberta were born outside of Canada or are members of BIPOC or 2SLGBTQI+ communities.

Settling into a new community can be stressful for most people but can be overwhelming for health professionals who are new to Canada, from identifiable minority groups and/or accustomed to having family and cultural and social support networks nearby. While attachment to what has been left behind is normal, a lack of new connections can lead to feelings of loneliness and homesickness, which may hinder successful integration and retention efforts.

Being a Welcoming and Inclusive Community

Ensuring a diverse and representative membership of community members, partners and stakeholders (based on the *Partnership Pentagonram Plus* introduced in Module 3) plays a part in fostering a welcoming and inclusive Committee and community where people are more likely to feel safe and comfortable being themselves and expressing all aspects of their identities.⁵³ Once a rural community embraces and earns a welcoming and inclusive reputation, this reputation can reduce many of the real and perceived barriers to attracting and retaining a diversity of talented health professionals.

Fostering a positive, welcoming and diverse community can be a complicated process and may take time. Communities must be sincere about their desire to welcome and include people from diverse backgrounds without discrimination. A welcome that makes everyone feel valued involves identifying and removing potential barriers—such as language and communication challenges, cultural misunderstandings, discrimination or bias (implicit or explicit), lack of inclusive policies or infrastructure, limited access to culturally appropriate services, social isolation, housing or transportation difficulties, and resistance to change—while promoting a sense of belonging, meeting diverse needs, and offering services and supports (or referrals to these resources) that promote the integration of newcomers.⁵⁴

⁵³ Alberta Rural Development Network. (2023). Strengthening Rural Capacity to Support Newcomers Toolkit. <https://ruraldevelopment.ca/resource/strengthening-community-capacity-to-support-newcomers-toolkit>

⁵⁴ Esses, V.M., Hamilton, Leah K., Aslam, A., Barros, P.R.P. (2023). Measuring Welcoming Communities: A Toolkit for Communities and Those Who Use Them. <http://p2pcanada.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2023/03/Welcoming-Toolkit-1-Measuring-Welcoming-Communities.pdf>

There may be reasons why some communities resist inclusiveness. Researchers at Brandon University in Manitoba observed that the influx of immigrants to rural and remote communities can create an “insiders” and “outsiders” conflict.⁵⁵ The underlying cause of this conflict is rural depopulation as young people gravitate to larger centres for education and employment while, at the same time, government policy encourages newcomers to move to rural and remote communities. The potential for an insider/outsider mindset can make it more difficult to welcome and integrate new health professionals, particularly those from equity-deserving groups, such as immigrants, Indigenous peoples, racialized individuals, or members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community. In such cases, additional effort may be needed to foster a genuinely inclusive and supportive environment where all individuals feel respected, valued, and able to fully participate in community life.

Building inclusivity can require awkward and uncomfortable discussions. It's important to address biases and misunderstandings within the community as well as addressing antagonistic or discriminatory comments. Persevering in these conversations while focusing on the benefits of a diverse and sustainable healthcare workforce in the community can help you build a foundation for inclusiveness.

Committees are encouraged, as part of their welcoming and integration planning, to build in strategies to support the readiness of a rural community (and themselves) to accept and welcome all people regardless of background. If there's a risk of an insider/outsider mindset emerging, this risk needs to be thoughtfully addressed. Strategies for addressing this risk can include positive messaging through traditional and social media channels. Identifying your own personal biases and ensuring community conversations are happening to reframe misconceptions about newcomers are good places to start. Meeting with community groups and organizations on the reality of the global healthcare workforce is useful in providing context and sensitizing them to potential issues. Intentionally planning opportunities for established residents and newcomers to meet and socialize with allies present to support discussions can be a positive way to challenge pre-existing biases within the community and help integrate newcomers.⁵⁶ Committees may wish to revisit the commitments outlined in their Committee Agreement to embed inclusivity.

Despite your best efforts, there is always a small risk of a new health professional being subjected to racist remarks, shunning (e.g., patient refusing to see certain professionals) or other anti-social behaviour from a small group of community members. This treatment can be difficult for the new health professional and their family and an obvious challenge for the Committee to assist with.

If you feel this may be a risk, your welcoming plan may need to include a commitment to anti-racism with proactive consideration of communication and education strategies to help promote the benefits that the new health professional brings and sensitize the community to potential issues around discrimination. In addition to the community readiness work, you can actively encourage your Committee partners, including community members, local government, media, business members and social organizations to consider their own policies, training opportunities, as well as communications and engagement campaigns to foster a more welcoming and inclusive community. Focusing on shared interests is important: every member of the community benefits from having an engaged and integrated healthcare workforce.

Being Aware of Microaggressions

While overt racism can be relatively easy to spot and call out, microaggressions are very subtle and are often unintentional forms of discrimination expressed as verbal or behavioural comments that communicate potentially hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes that can make the recipient feel like an outsider. These brief, everyday exchanges may seem harmless on the surface but, over time, these comments focused around their identity, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, or other characteristics can be

⁵⁵ Dauphinais, J., Salmon, S., & Akimowicz, M. (2021). Feel Good? The Dialectical Integration of International Immigrants in Rural Communities: The Case of the Canadian Prairie Provinces. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 5:578076.

⁵⁶ Ramos, A.K. (2016). Welcoming Immigrants: An Opportunity to Strengthen Rural Communities. *The Journal of Extension*, 54(3), Article 19.

diminishing and excluding. There is evidence that microaggressions are quite common in healthcare.⁵⁷

Common examples include praising someone from a minority background on how they "speak English really well," asking someone where they're "really from," making comments like "there's people like you running the gas station now" or being surprised that the spouse or partner of the health professional may be a professional in their own right. Even asking to feel the texture of someone else's hair because it is not like yours can be a microaggression. While each of these instances may seem relatively minor or innocuous in isolation, research suggests that experiencing frequent microaggressions can have a cumulative negative effect on the mental health and wellbeing of the recipient. This effect can directly influence how well a person settles into your community and whether they feel they belong.

The more information and knowledge that your Committee and, by extension, the community, have about microaggressions, the more likely they can avoid the risk of often well-meaning comments and behaviour that serve to make the recipient feel excluded and diminished. Reducing these comments and behaviours can help improve your new health professional welcome to the community and ease their experience becoming part of it. In addition, making sure the wider community has this knowledge can help your welcome and integration activities go according to plan.

Committees interested in learning more about how to be sensitive to the needs of health professionals who are newcomers to Canada, Indigenous, people of colour or part of 2SLGBTQI+ communities should contact their RHPAP Rural Community Consultant. They can connect you with resources and organizations dedicated to this work, such as the Intercultural Family Support Network, or a Community's Newcomer's Association, who can provide support and advice.⁵⁸

Understanding the Stress Experienced by Internationally Educated Health Professionals

An increasing number of health professionals come to rural Alberta from abroad. Internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs) may be qualified physicians, nurses and allied professionals in their home countries; however, they must endure lengthy and, at times, challenging credential evaluation processes once they arrive in Canada. They may be required to take additional training, undergo lengthy assessments and, in the end, be unable to practise in their chosen careers or be required to take a lower-level position for which they are overqualified.

These assessment and licensure requirements are necessary to protect the public, but they can also be complicated and costly, often requiring the IEHP to be separated from their spouse/partner and family for months at a time. This separation can be extremely stressful and often means that a new IEHP may arrive in your community alone, with their family joining at some point in the future, or not at all. For example, some IEHPs who are working under return-of-service contracts may initially have no plans for their families to join them in your community. You may wish to explore this expectation with the IEHP during the planning and welcoming phases of your efforts (and once they are settled) to see how you might encourage them to have their family join them. The health professional will usually have an easier time making themselves at home in your community if their family is with them; however, at the end of the day, you must respect their decision.

⁵⁷ Azam, B., Bakhiet, A., Moussa, W., Sajid, M.A., Qureshi, M.K., Kumar, A., & Halim, U.A. (2025) The prevalence and impact of microaggressions within orthopaedics in the United States of America: A systematic review. *The Surgeon*, 23, 52-60.

⁵⁸ <https://mchb.org/intercultural-family-resource-network/>

In addition to professional licensing requirements, Committees will want to be sensitive to the stressors shared by newcomers to Alberta and Canada, including the following:

1. Adjusting to Canadian culture, and losing important social and cultural connections
2. Isolation and loneliness resulting from culture shock, language barriers and discrimination
3. Trauma and other unresolved issues from their home country that may be triggered by a loss of emotional and social support
4. Stress and burnout due to a lack of peer and professional support, lack of control and agency, and lack of time to transition to their new role
5. Finding and affording basic needs including financial stability, banking, housing and access to healthcare.^{59, 60}

Your pre-arrival outreach and ongoing connection with IEHPs once they arrive in town will help you assess the impact of some of these potential stressors, and work with them to find solutions. Be tactful in your questions and open about your community's resources. The goal in these discussions is to work together with the health professional and their family, at a pace with which they are comfortable, to help them adjust to life in Canada in general and in your rural community in particular. As one possible adjustment measure, consider ways to help the new IEHPs stay connected to their culture, by introducing them to people nearby who may share their religion, cultural or ethnocultural background, country of origin, or language.

Your RHPAP Rural Community Consultants are highly skilled in developing welcome plans for IEHPs and identifying potential the supports and resources that are available to help them make your community their new home. RHPAP has also develop a framework that can be beneficial in welcoming, integrating and retaining IEHP's specifically that can be found on our [website](#).

Navigating the Healthcare System

Many IEHPs (and Canadian-trained health professionals) may be unaware of how the healthcare system in your community and region operates. Be sure to dialogue with your healthcare employers and local medical clinic to see where your Committee could assist in their orientation. This orientation could include understanding things like the nearest referral hospital, where to call for and processes related to nursing or specialized assistance, emergency transport or interhospital transfers. It can be easy for busy employers or colleagues to overlook these details, and ignorance around this information can be very stressful for new health professionals who may start working right away.

For example, a new fee-for-services physician may have their orientation include understanding the Alberta Schedule of Medical Benefits (i.e., fee billing codes). A great resource is the Alberta Medical Association's (AMA) Fee Navigator website which includes a summary of all health billing codes, speciality codes and general information. The AMA also offers no charge virtual billing seminars, or fee-based in-person training so that physicians can understand the billing system and ensure they are earning what they are entitled to.

Funding models for Nurse Practitioners of Alberta, as well as other pertinent information, can be found on the Government of Alberta's [website](#). While this model is fairly new to the province, it is a great resource to be mindful of.

⁵⁹ Alberta Rural Development Network. (2023). Strengthening Rural Capacity to Support Newcomers Toolkit. <https://ruraldevelopment.ca/resource/strengthening-community-capacity-to-support-newcomers-toolkit>

⁶⁰ Motala, M.I. & van Wyk, J.M. (2019). Experiences of foreign medical graduates (FMGs), international medical graduates (IMGs) and overseas trained graduates (OTGs) on entering developing or middle-income countries like South Africa: a scoping review. *Human Resources for Health*, 17(7), pp. 2-16.

Advocating for Better Newcomer Supports

While you are welcoming health professionals who are new to Canada or members of BIPOC or 2SLGBTQI+ communities to your area, you may also conclude that there is value in advocating for better support services for these health professionals.

As rural and remote Alberta attracts more of the global workforce, it may become necessary to reconsider how the government chooses to help rural and remote communities welcome and integrate newcomers. Desirable supports could include intentional settlement services and targeted language and cultural supports, family and social supports with a focus on housing, transportation, activities of daily living (e.g., banking, shopping, schools, etc.) as well as anti-discrimination and racism awareness.

See Module 2 of the Toolkit for information about undertaking advocacy - and remember, your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant is an excellent resource for information.

Rolling out a Warm Welcome

The value of providing a well-organized, friendly and helpful welcome is a great way to establish your relationship with your new health professional and their family and build a solid foundation for retaining them in your community.

Taking a personal approach is recommended wherever possible. As discussed earlier, a kind and thoughtful helping hand in those first few days after arrival will be appreciated and remembered more than an email. Done well, personalized engagement will help build a more meaningful connection to the community and more quickly feel like they are part of the community and belong here. This connection and feeling of belonging is vital to retention.

Remember to align your contact with the needs of the health professional and their family. Stay in touch and see where the new professional is at. Identify what their immediate needs are, focus on helping them with those needs, and accept it if they want to manage those needs by themselves. People process change differently and the time and level of control they need to adjust varies. In addition, keep in mind that after a long journey, new arrivals may need a few days to recover and adjust. And if they've flown from overseas, jet lag can take a few days to sort out.

Although it is ideal if your Committee is aware of when newcomers arrive, it's not unusual for a new health professional and their family to simply show up in the community with little or no notice. This scenario can happen for any number of reasons and is why it's important to have a strong connection with your local healthcare employers. This connection helps ensure good communication and hopefully ensure that your employers are aware that the local Committee is available to help if there is capacity to do so. A last-minute arrival might put you a little behind when it comes to implementing your welcome planning, but you can still reach out to the new professional and their family once they're in town to see what kind of help they may need now or later.

Be sure to connect with your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant who can offer advice, support and resources to help design your welcome plan and set up your Committee and the new health professional for success.

Integrating into the Community

Once the new health professional and their family have arrived, been welcomed to the community and are getting themselves organized, the focus of the Committee can shift to helping them start making connections and getting established in the community. Helping a new health professional settle into your community is not a one-step effort. Ensuring that they are able to start becoming part of the community's fabric requires ongoing work specifically aligned with the needs of the health professional and their family.

As it is during the initial welcome, it's important to take your lead from the health professional and their family. They may need a lot of support at the beginning and less as they settle in. Or, they may choose to have very little help at the start and may ask for more help later. It's important to be flexible and keep communication lines open, so your Committee can better respond to the needs of your new health professional and their family and provide support when they need it.

Reaching out can be as simple as a phone call or checking in if you happen to run across the health professional and their family on the street or in a store. Again, try to ask curious and open-ended questions and don't assume that all is necessary going well for them. They could have some real challenges and using open-ended questions can help open a conversation. See the example below.

Instead of asking...	Try asking...
Are you settling in okay?	I imagine it's been a big change for you and your family, I wonder how things are going for you?
You don't need help or anything, do you?	If there was one thing you could really use some help sorting out, what would it be?
Are you having any problems?	I can imagine you must be busy. Is there anything that we can help you with?
Give me a call if you need anything.	May I share my phone number and email with you? If you're open to (coffee, tea lunch), I have some time next week! What might work for you?
Are your kids signed up for hockey yet?	Tell me about how your kids are settling in? What are they (interested in) getting involved in?
Are you keeping yourself busy?	I'm curious about some of the things you're involved in. Can you tell me what you've been up to?

At this stage, the health professional and their family are likely to still feel like newcomers and are slowly building connections. While the new health professional will likely have a busy daily schedule once they've started working, there's a risk that the partner/spouse and children will start to feel isolated.

Consider setting up a buddy system.⁶¹ This system is a logical extension of the work the Committee did when welcoming the new health professional and their family to the community. It provides a reliable, accessible and trustworthy person (or small Committee) that the health professional can call for support and to ask questions including practical concerns that arise (e.g., buying tires) or bigger issues like their longer-term plans in the community.

⁶¹ Be mindful that the term *buddy* is an idiom may not be universally understood or may have pejorative meanings depending on where the health professional and their family are from. You may wish to consider calling the contact a lifeline or helpline service or, more informally, just someone here to help you when you need it.

The buddy system is a genuine demonstration of your commitment to welcoming and supporting the health professional and their family so they can become connected to and part of the community. Having a friendly face from the Committee can be a relief as they get settled. Remembering their names, interests and backgrounds (from the initial welcome planning) and bringing that into your conversation can put them at ease and make them feel understood and valued. Inviting people for coffee or tea, organizing a family game night or engaging them with their interests and being intentional about offering (personalized) invitations to local events, clubs and groups are other opportunities to make them feel part of the community.

Concerted efforts over time to maintain and enhance the connections between the health professional, their family and the community helps them build resilience and combat homesickness. It is perfectly natural when you're having some trouble adjusting to a new place to wish you were back at home, or the last place you lived, where things were more familiar and made sense. Connection is critical: 80% of rural physicians responding to the RHPAP Healthcare Provider Survey in 2022 noted the importance of having a positive personal connection to the rural community in which they live and work in.

The objective of an effective and supporting welcoming and integration strategy is to help professionals and their families discover the positives of your community and develop connections and a belonging in the community. Your Committee can help create opportunities for newcomers to start feeling at home in your community. Why is this belonging important? Researchers at Queen's University in Ontario found that health professionals who feel at home in a new community are more likely to stay.⁶² The researchers caution that the process that allows people to feel at home in a new community can take time and involves commitment and reciprocity between the community and the health professional.

When you reach out to see how the health professional and their family are doing, the Committee can get an accurate read on what their needs are, or whether they need any help. A kind, helping hand can leave an enduring positive impression of the community and a reminder of the care they received and the esteem in which they are held. If they are struggling, it is an opportunity to reestablish this care; you can work with your partners and stakeholders, including your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant, to see what kinds of counselling or family supports from which they might benefit.

Over time, as the health professional and their family start to make connections and settle into the community, there may be less need for the Committee to step in. That said, the initial settlement and integration of the health professional and their family is strongly associated with their potential retention, so it never hurts to continue to shepherd your Committee's connection with the health professional and their family. The work done in the early stages of their arrival establishes the foundation for your longer-term retention work. Also keep in mind that these health professionals and their families can be a fantastic resource for future health professionals considering and/or moving to the community along with their families. They can share their experiences and even offer a bit of a lifeline to the newcomer as they get settled.

⁶²Mandal, A., & Phillips, S. (2022). To stay or not to stay: the role of sense of belonging in the retention of physicians in rural areas. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 81:2076977.

Appendix 6-1 Thinking about Winter Clothing

Winter is a big part of living in Alberta. Those that are moving to rural Alberta in the winter from a warmer climate need to make sure they are prepared for the cold before they arrive. Let them know that with the windchill the temperature in Alberta can decrease to -40°C (on the worst days - but not all days). Cold weather in Alberta can come under the guise of bright sunny blue skies as well as with snow and wind. Dressing warmly and appropriately for the conditions will allow them to experience the beauty of an Alberta winter comfortably and safely. Layering clothing allows for the flexibility of removing layers if you get too warm and adding them when you get cold.

Proper winter wear is important, especially if they are expecting to walk to and from work and to the grocery store regardless of the length of the walk. Although on some days a lighter insulated winter jacket will suffice, on other days it won't. With the right clothing, people can stay outside for long periods of time safely and enjoy the winter weather; it isn't uncommon for Canadians to walk long distances in the cold. The sun also helps with warmth during daylight hours, but just because it's sunny doesn't mean it's warm; some of the coldest days in winter can be the sunniest.

Examples of Appropriate Winter Clothing



Inner Layers

- Flannel-lined pants
- Sweaters
- Waterproof, wool socks

Outer layers

- Down jacket (the longer the better)
- Scarves or balaclava
- Beanies (also known as toques)
- Gloves or mittens
- Boots rated* to -40, over ankle, waterproof
- Snowpants

Other

- Sunglasses (the sun is bright when reflected off the snow)
- Chapstick & hand lotion (winter can be quite dry and skin will get dry more quickly)

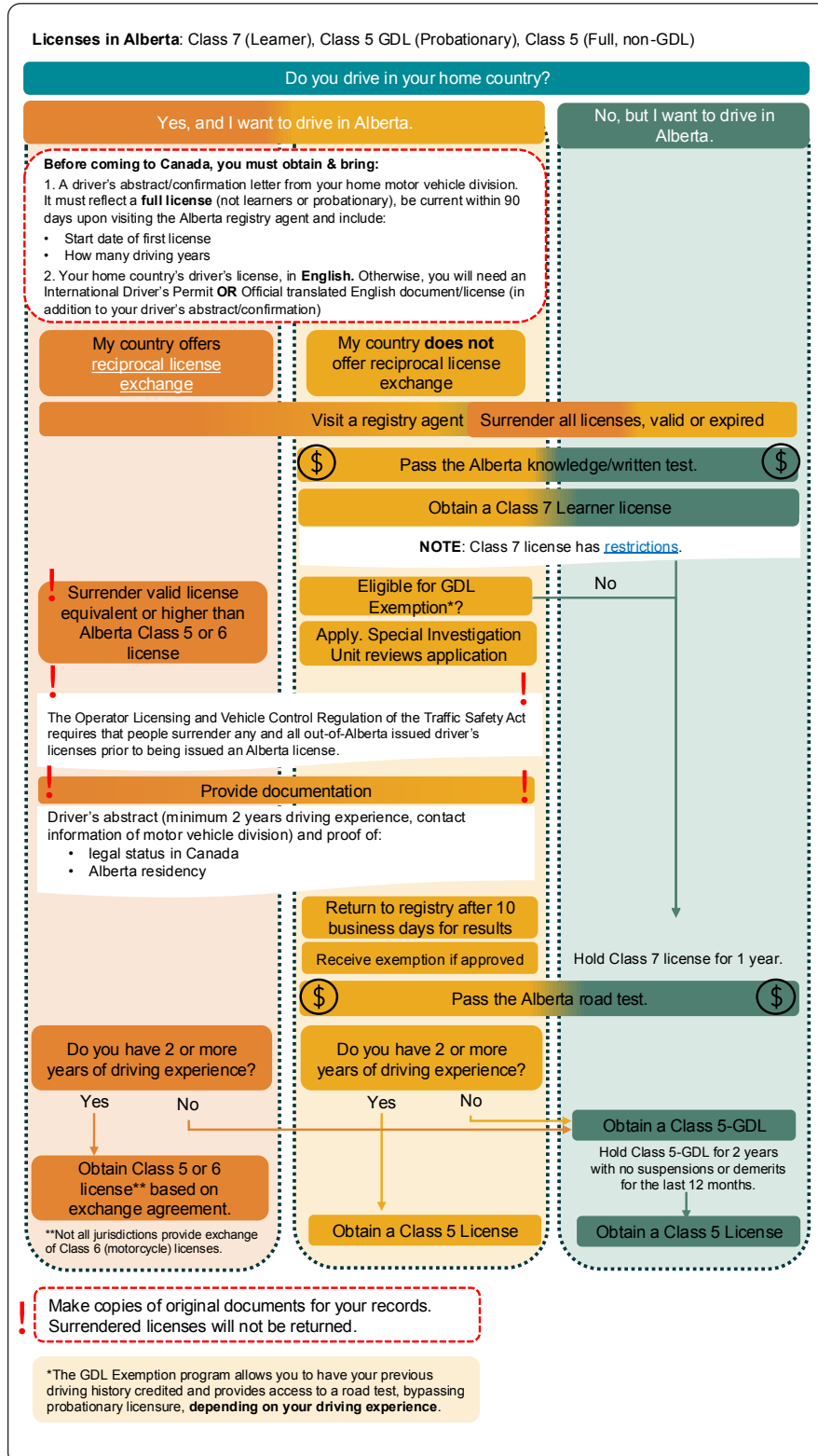
*Means they will keep you warm up to certain temperature

Resources courtesy of Alberta Health Services.

Appendix 6-2

Alberta Driver's License Process

Resources courtesy of Alberta Health Services. To learn more, visit alberta.ca/get-drivers-licence



Appendix 6-3

Navigating Rural Alberta

Resources courtesy of Alberta Health Services.

This guide will help you navigate your new surroundings so you can find essential services and amenities.

A great navigation resource is Google Maps. It can identify your location and guide you to places like grocery stores, restaurants, pharmacies, and more using your smartphone. Additionally, it covers transportation options, walking routes, and directions.

Instructions

1. **Download Google Maps:** Ensure you have Google Maps installed on your smartphone. If not, you can download it from the App Store (for iOS devices) or Google Play Store (for Android devices). You can also access Google Maps using the internet from your personal computer by navigating to <https://www.google.ca/maps>
2. **Open Google Maps:** Tap the Google Maps icon to open the app or open it on your internet browser using the website address provided above.
3. **Search for Locations:**
 - Type in the search bar at the top of the screen what you are looking for, such as “grocery stores near me,” “restaurants,” or “pharmacies.”
 - You can also use specific keywords like “Indian grocery stores” or “Chinese restaurants” to find specialty options.
4. **View Results:** Google Maps will display nearby locations on the map along with their addresses and the distance from your current location.
5. **Get Directions:** Tap on a location to view more details, including reviews and operating hours. You can also get step-by-step directions to the location by tapping the “Directions” button.
6. **Explore Specialty Stores:** Use Google Maps to discover specialty food stores that carry products from your home country. These specialty stores can offer familiar ingredients and help you connect with communities that share your cultural heritage.

Transportation Options in Rural Alberta

In rural Alberta communities, public transportation and ride-sharing services (e.g., Uber) can be limited or unavailable.

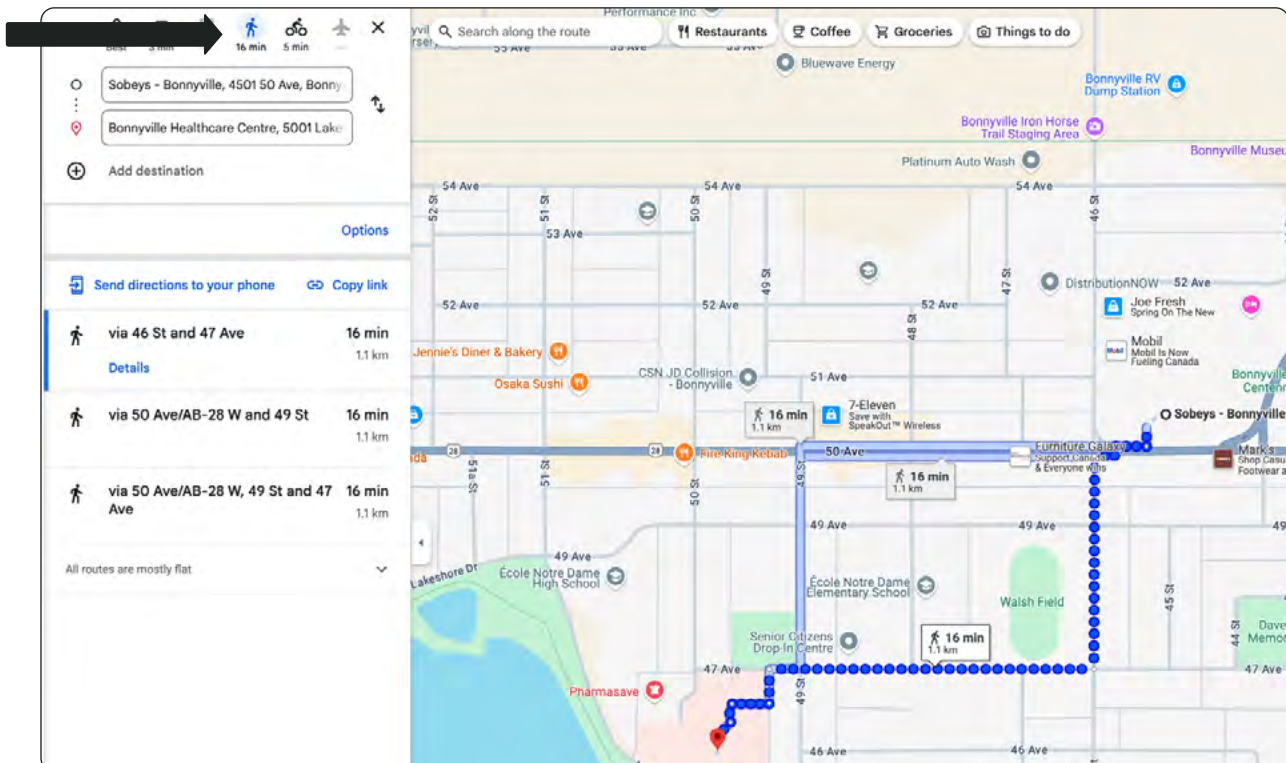
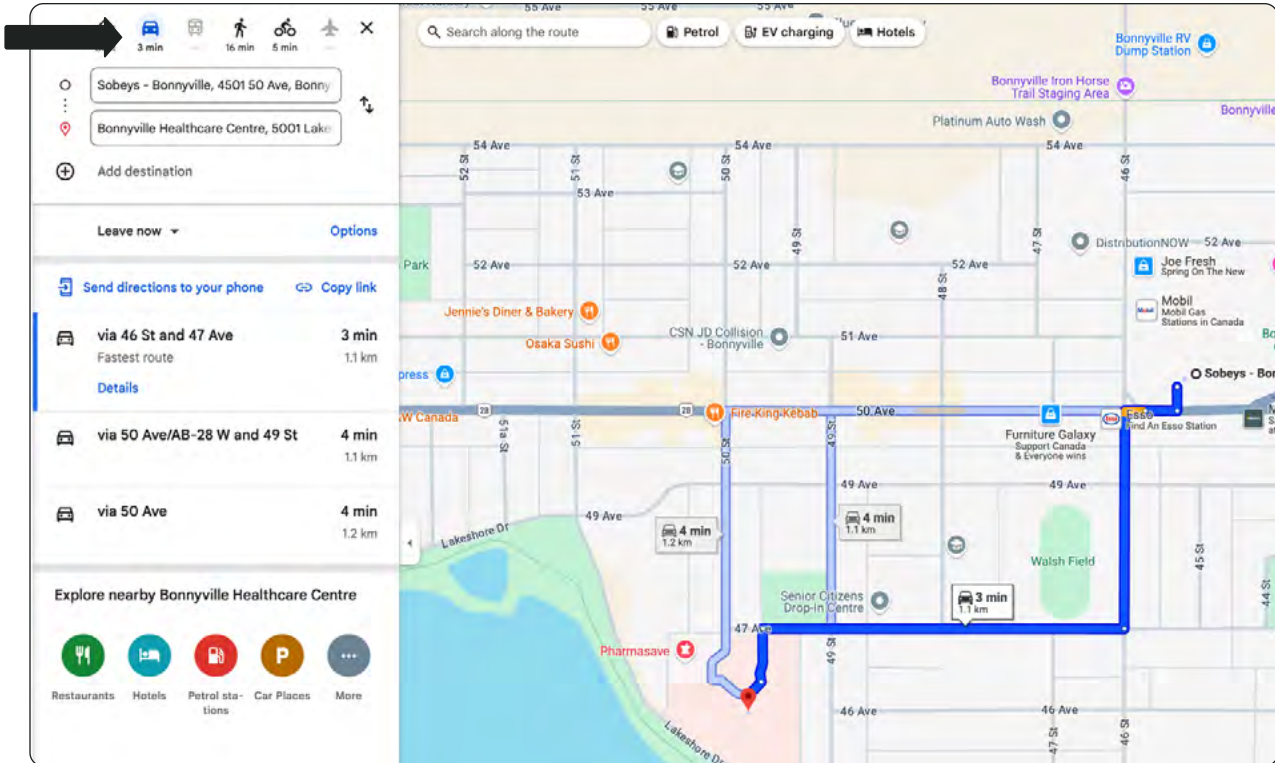
If you don't have a car, consider alternative solutions like taxis, walking, or carpooling with colleagues to get around. Additionally, community-based options such as volunteer driver programs and local shuttles can provide essential transportation if available.

You can use online tools like Google or other search engines to explore available transportation options in your area. For example, searching "taxi options in (name of your town)" can help you find local services (see next page).

We hope these resources will help you settle into your new community and enhance your overall experience.

Example

The following is an example using Google Maps to get directions to the closest grocery store from the Bonnyville Health Centre to the community's Sobeys's grocery store. Notice you can switch from driving directions to walking (shown by the red arrows).



Appendix 6-4

Grocery Shopping and Budgeting Tips for Newcomers

Resource courtesy of Alberta Health Services.

1. Make a list and stick to it

Having a realistic shopping list reduces impulse buys and allows better control over how much you spend. Plan ahead so that you only get what you need and never go shopping when you're hungry.

2. Watch out for specials

Grocery stores often advertise weekly specials and offer coupons that can save you money. Go through the flyers you receive in the mail or online flyers to find the best deals. Be aware that some of the discounts that are offered are for discontinued items, or things that are close to their best before or expiry dates. More information on best before dates can be found in the section on labels below.

3. Shop Local – and Plan Ahead

- Support your local independent grocery store, become a member of your community Co-op supermarket (and earn an annual rebate) and shop at farmers' markets, where possible.
- In Canada, stores may have different names but are often owned by the same big companies. Stores like Sobeys/IGA/Safeway, SaveOn/Buy-Low/Nesters and Superstore/No Frills are owned by big multinational corporations.
- Source locally when you can: the quality is better and often fresher and safer than imported food. In winter, fruit and vegetables are imported from places like Mexico and prices can be high. A lot of communities have seasonal farmers' markets where you can get fresh vegetables, fruit and meat that are grown more locally.
- The freezer is your friend! Frozen and canned vegetables and fruit are great options in winter.
- You can also make sauces, one-dish meals, stews and soups and freeze them for a nutritious and quick meals on busy days.

4. Price Match

The price of food in rural and remote communities can be higher than in the cities because of the additional transportation costs to get supplies to your community and other factors. If you have more than one supermarket, they may match a competitor's price on the exact item. In addition to price matching, some grocery stores will offer a 10% discount or even give you the item for free if you show them a lower price from a local competitor at checkout. Some stores may also offer a discount if you are a health professional.

5. Shop in Bulk

If you want to save a bit more on groceries, the bulk aisle can sometimes be cheaper than packaged items. Take the time to compare prices between bulk and packaged food to get the best deal. (Never assume that bulk food is cheaper; sometimes it isn't!). Most stores have a section for bulk food.

Grocery Stores in Rural Alberta

- [Co-op](#)
- [IGA](#)
- [No Frills](#)
- [Safeway](#)
- [Save-On-Foods](#)
- [Sobeys](#)
- [Superstore](#)
- [Walmart](#)

Your community may also have smaller, independent grocery stores.

6. Shop store brands

Store-branded foods are quite often made by name brand food companies but are sold in different packaging at a lower cost. Be careful, some store brands are lower quality than name brands and may contain high levels of preservatives and salt. Some examples of store brands include the following:

- Co-Op: Co-op Gold
- Walmart: Great Value
- Superstore/No Frills: PC; President's Choice; No Name
- Save-On-Foods: Western Family, Only Goodness
- Safeway: Signature Select, Lucerne, Town House
- Sobeys: Compliments, Panache

7. Read the Labels

Packaged food (e.g., soups, sauces, snack goods) may contain chemicals and high quantities of salt and sugar. Canadian food labels may be different from those you're accustomed to and provide less information. For example, portion sizes may be only a portion of the entire package requiring you to double or triple of the quantities in order to get the nutritional information for the whole package. Cheaper branded foods often contain more sugar and salt. Try to choose natural alternatives, or foods with lower levels of salt, sugar and chemicals.

Best Before dates on food can sometimes be misleading. While it's always good practice to buy food with a "Best Before" date well into the future, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency indicates that Best Before dates are not indicators of food safety. You can buy and eat foods after the Best Before date has passed. However, after this date has passed, the food may lose some of its freshness, flavour, and nutritional value. Its texture may also change.

8. Track Your Spending

Food is one of the most expensive things about living in rural Canada. Knowing how much you are spending on food can help you plan and generate creative meal planning opportunities. Your first few trips to the grocery store may be more expensive because you're stocking up on things like seasoning that can last a long time. After a while, things should settle down and you can expect a more predictable food budget. That said, groceries will remain one of your biggest monthly expenses.