

# MODULE 5

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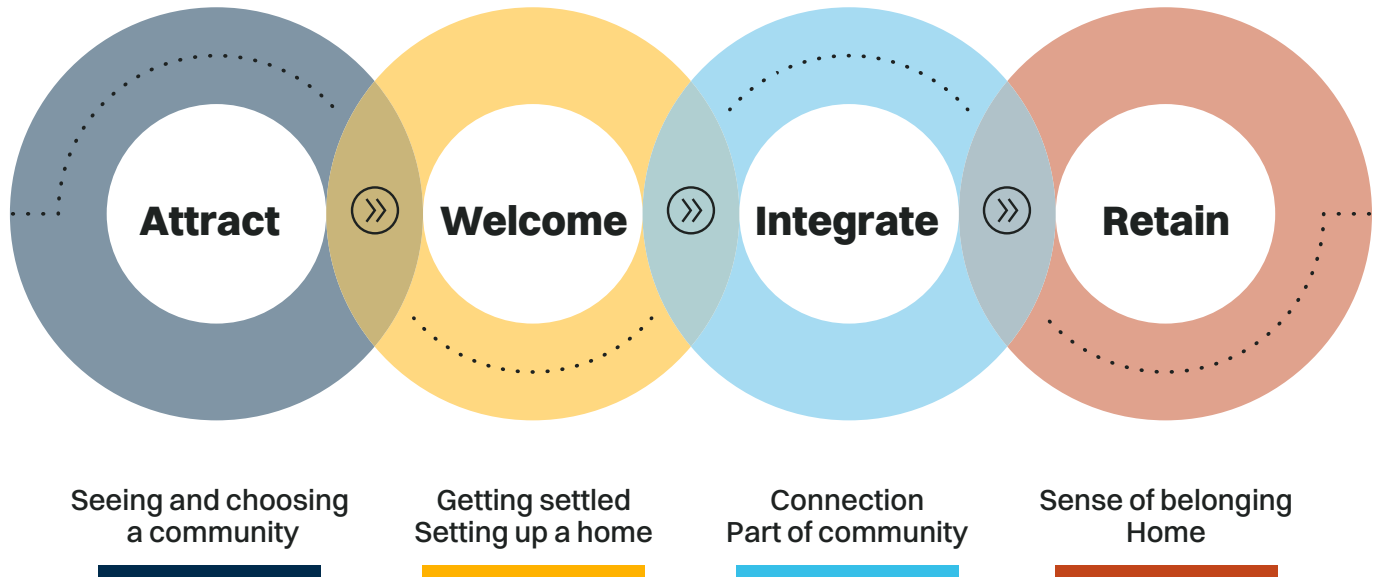


# Attracting Healthcare Professionals

## Key Highlights

- Attraction differs from recruitment: attraction involves marketing your community to healthcare professionals, while recruitment is the employer's hiring process.
- Financial incentives have limited effectiveness in attracting rural healthcare professionals. More influential factors include a welcoming community, comprehensive scope of practice, a supportive healthcare team, and proximity to family/friends.
- Community profiles, visits, and personalized tours are powerful attraction tools. These should highlight local amenities, lifestyle options, and create opportunities for prospective professionals to meet current healthcare providers and community members.
- The most effective long-term attraction strategy is providing rural training opportunities for healthcare students, as evidence shows people who train in rural areas are more likely to practice there later. Committees should encourage local providers to host students and support "grow your own" programs.
- Internationally educated healthcare professionals (IEHPs) represent an important recruitment pool but require specialized attraction and integration strategies that address cultural needs, spousal employment opportunities, and community preparation to ensure successful transitions.

Once you know the healthcare professionals needed in your community and the context in which they would be working, it is time to develop strategies and programs to attract them to your community.



Attracting healthcare professionals to your community is both an art and a science.

The *art* of attraction includes designing a marketing package that highlights everything your community (and region) has to offer. This package provides the prospective healthcare professional with an opportunity to imagine what it might be like for them and their family to live and work in your community. This marketing, complemented by a warm, personalized welcome when they come for a visit, can emphasize the community's positive aspects. However, it is important to be truthful and not oversell the community, which is another key part of successful attraction efforts (more on that in Module 6). Your attraction strategy is about building trust and relationships with potential health professionals and their families with the hope that you can help ensure the right fit for them in the community and the community will be the right fit for them.

The *science* of attraction focuses on the work you will be doing in the background to identify what characteristics and assets set your community (and region) apart from your neighbours. This work includes understanding the evolving state of the rural healthcare workforce, the intersection of community amenities, housing, local economic conditions, employment prospects, and incentives as well as the overall safety and liveability of your community. All these factors combine to influence the decisions of prospective healthcare professionals and their families about choosing your community over another.

In this module, we will explore both the art and science of healthcare professional attraction, including developing the focus and strategies for your attraction campaigns, creating a community profile, highlighting the considerations around attracting internationally educated healthcare professionals, reviewing the mixed results of financial incentives and considering the increasing importance of healthcare professional education as an attraction strategy

## Attraction and Recruitment – Two Sides of the Same Coin

Before you get too far down the road in your planning, it's important to understand the difference between *attraction* and *recruitment*. They are closely linked concepts and can be easily confused. This confusion has the potential to cause misunderstandings and conflict with the stakeholders with whom you are working, so it is important to be clear in all your discussions about the difference between the two and who is responsible for each, as well as how you can support one another.

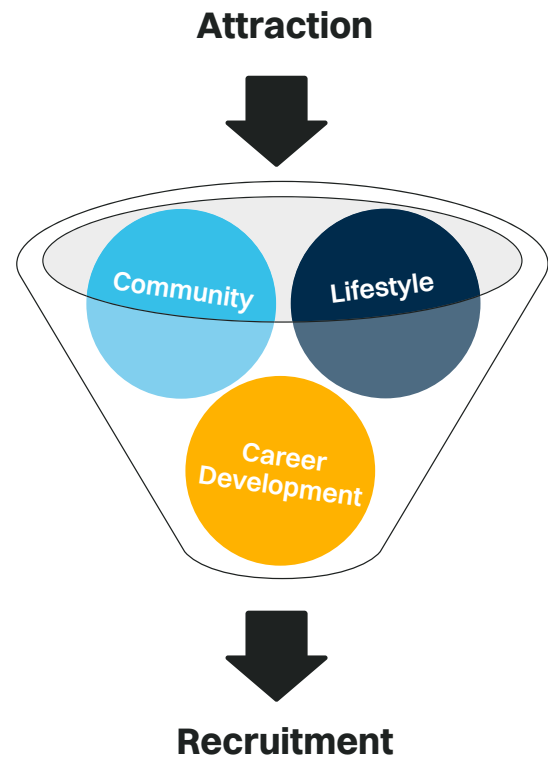
Attraction is the intentional marketing of your community to promote the positive aspects of working and living there. Attraction is focused on influencing choices and building interest in the rural community experience among healthcare students and professionals to encourage them to consider working and living in rural areas.

Attraction is about telling your community's story, emphasizing its features and amenities, including the lifestyle it offers with special attention paid to recreational and family activities. Your attraction efforts should provide an accurate picture of what life is like in your community. This picture should include the opportunities and professional challenges for the healthcare professionals working there (e.g., career advancement, full scope medicine) and how they and their family can have an enhanced quality of life in the community. The focus here is emphasizing pull factors: aspects of your community that are likely to interest and draw healthcare professionals and their families towards your community. Your effort should help health professionals, and their families, picture themselves living there.

Recruitment, on the other hand, is the administrative and human resources function that health employers (e.g., Alberta Health Services, local pharmacy, medical clinic, etc.) use to select and appoint healthcare professionals to fill a role. Recruitment, therefore, is usually the step that *follows* attraction, when potential healthcare professionals are already interested in the community and pursue the opportunities that are available there by formally applying for a role. Recruitment is usually the responsibility of the healthcare employer. Recruitment tends to have more of a focus on push factors such as financial incentives and signing bonuses.

While the community's Committee usually has no formal role in the health employer's administrative recruitment function, sometimes health employers may invite community (or Committee) members to be part of interview panels for prospective healthcare professionals to give a candidate the opportunity to ask community-specific questions that employers may not be aware of. They may also be asked to be part of a community tour and site visit – this is highly recommended.

Having a clear understanding of the different but related functions of attraction and recruitment will help ensure clarity about your Committee's responsibilities and avoid possible conflict with the healthcare employers over who is responsible for recruitment and workforce decisions. To reiterate, attraction involves all the actions to bring your community to the attention of prospective healthcare professionals and sets the stage for the healthcare employers to initiate a successful recruitment process.<sup>37</sup>



<sup>37</sup>Social Care Wales. (2024). *Attraction and recruitment: An evidence summary*. <https://insightcollective.socialcare.wales/assets/documents/Attraction-and-recruitment.pdf>

## Developing an Attraction Strategy

**Attracting prospective healthcare professionals involves creating a marketing plan for your community and region. The goal of this work is to showcase what makes your community a great place to live, work and play in a fair and balanced way. An effective and impactful attraction package enables prospective healthcare professionals to get to know what your community and region offers and to imagine what it would be like to work there and make your community their home.**

The diverse cross-section of the community that sits on your Committee will be instrumental in developing your attraction strategy. Tap into their expertise! Community healthcare leaders, representatives from your local government and business community employers will be able to help identify the key attraction features of your community. Your local government representatives can speak to the current state and plans for community amenities including recreational facilities, parks, new housing developments, and economic development activities.

Consider creating a small working group to help develop the first draft of your attraction strategy. This working group can be an efficient option that enables you to bring in additional voices and stakeholders who may not necessarily be members of the Committee to share their perspectives.

Your attraction strategy should be seen as an ongoing project that needs to be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Aspects of your community can and will change, and you're encouraged to review and update the strategy annually to capture new information and areas of focus.

### Identify Your Assets

The first step of developing your community's attraction strategy is making a list of the community's assets, using some of the elements of Assets-Based Community Development discussed in Module 4. Using an appreciative lens enables you to focus the list on what is working well in the community and focus your strategy on your strengths. Opportunities will arise from these strengths but will also include things the community may need to improve. It's important to be honest about aspects of the community that need improvement and, where possible, the plans for this improvement. For example, if your swimming pool is closed for long-term maintenance, when will it reopen? Or, if you have a housing shortage, when is the new subdivision going to be finished?

It might be tempting to focus only on the positive aspects of your community (and downplay the parts that need some improvement), but only highlighting the positive aspects can lead to you potentially overselling your community. People will quickly see through the sales pitch, so it's important to be honest and forthright in your attraction work. Being truthful will help build trust and enable the healthcare professional and their family to make an informed decision about whether your community is going to meet their needs, both professionally and personally. It can also help better ensure that the health professional is a good fit for the community. In addition, establishing trust and transparency during the attraction phase makes it easier to build positive relationships with the healthcare professional and their family, which can help foster longer-term retention.

### Organizing Your Strategy

You can use a planning template such as a logic model to help organize your strategy. A logic model is a table that starts with listing your attraction goals. Then, for each goal, you can identify all the different strategies and actions you want to take to achieve it, the kinds of things you will produce (e.g., website, TikTok video, etc.), the outcomes you hope the work will achieve and, importantly, who will do the work and by when.

Again, tap into the knowledge of your local healthcare employers sitting on your Committee. They can help inform the strategy and help you ensure it aligns with recruitment and workforce strategies of the employers with whom you are partnering at the community and regional level.

## Knowing What's Important to Healthcare Professionals

The art of attraction requires you to recognize and potentially affect the different factors that influence a healthcare professional's decision to choose your community as a place to live and work. These factors include the work experience (e.g., scope of practice, on-call, etc.), the Committee with which they will be working, access to continuing professional development opportunities (e.g., skills upgrading), how welcoming the community is, the recreational opportunities that are available, and proximity to family and friends.

The recent RHPAP Healthcare Provider Survey revealed the factors that most strongly influence a rural healthcare professional's decision to live and work in a rural community included the following:

- Welcoming community (84%)
- Comprehensive scope of practice (83%)
- Supportive healthcare Committee (53%)
- Proximity to family and friends (43%)

## It's Not about the Money

For many rural and remote communities, the go-to attraction strategy is to offer financial incentives including outright grants and signing bonuses to healthcare professionals. In Alberta, millions of dollars are spent every year to encourage healthcare professionals to choose rural practice.

A survey of rural healthcare professionals conducted by RHPAP in 2022 suggested that financial incentives have limited influence on the attraction and some impact on retention of healthcare professionals to rural and remote communities. The RHPAP survey found that 67% of healthcare professionals said that financial incentives had little or no influence on their decision to live and work in a rural community. This finding is supported by other research which suggests that the success of financial incentives is mixed, and they work best when blended with factors like a positive and healthy workplace, plentiful, safe and affordable housing, help with community navigation, spousal/partner employment, child support, and good schools.<sup>38</sup>

Evidence around the influence of financial incentives on retention was mixed. The survey found a slight majority (56%) of rural physicians were strongly influenced to continue practising in a rural when they were provided with financial incentives. For the remaining 44% of physicians, factors such as interesting work and a welcoming community were considered more important influences on retention.

## Marketing and Promoting Your Community

We've established that the primary focus of healthcare professional attraction is the focused marketing and promotion of your community. Aligned with the goals in your Attraction Strategy, community promotion is an ongoing process that includes everything from word of mouth and informal conversations to more formalized marketing materials like printed brochures and online websites, webinars and social media channels (e.g., YouTube, Instagram).

When designing your community promotional materials, put yourself in the shoes of a prospective healthcare professional. Better yet, ask some of your existing healthcare professionals (especially the newer ones) to share their perspectives. If you were moving to a new community, what information would you like to have and what would you like to see or learn about? Consider the community assets you identified in your Attraction Strategy work including some of your community's hidden gems in addition to its practical local services. Sometimes, after you've lived in a place for a while, it can be easy to take things for granted, but these details could be just what a prospective healthcare professional and their family needs to know to consider making your community home.

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<sup>38</sup> 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.

Consider multiple communications channels to extend your reach to more prospective healthcare professionals. Communications channels can include partnering with your local municipality, Chamber of Commerce, Family and Community Support Services and non-profits (e.g., Adult Learning Centre) to share marketing materials and other resources with prospective healthcare professionals. In addition to these channels, it is important to recognize that several studies have found that younger healthcare professionals are more comfortable with digital technologies and, as a result, are more likely to use digital and online resources as their first source of information about prospective communities. These digital and online channels include social media and websites, as well as Committee branding such as a logo, etc. Nevertheless, those younger professionals may still use print materials when they're looking for further information about a community. Set aside a realistic budget for your digital media. A professional website, for example, can create a positive first impression of the community; in contrast, a website put together on a shoestring using a free site if it's not done well can provide a more mixed first impression. If you plan to use social media such as Facebook and Instagram, keep in mind that these sites require people to sign in and non-users may be blocked from accessing your page.

Real-life testimonials and personal stories are a great way to promote the reasons why people choose to live, work and play in your community. As part of your Attraction Strategy, you can consider producing short videos speaking to people about why they chose your community and what it offers in terms of work experiences and lifestyle. This more personalized approach may provide useful information for someone who is considering joining your community.

Attracting health professionals to a community goes beyond simply highlighting the positions that are available. The lifestyle that can be enjoyed by healthcare professionals and their families in your community can play a key role in their decision to choose your community rather than someone else's. Research into both attraction and retention shows that the happiness of spouses/partners and family members can play an important role in a healthcare providers decision to move to a community.

## Community Profile

It's said that you don't get a second chance to make a first impression. RHPAP's Rural Community Consultants, in partnership with RHPAP's Marketing and Communication Team, can help you create a well-designed community profile (in print and online) that can be a great way to introduce your community to prospective healthcare professionals and their families. To note, only communities that have an active Attraction, Integration and Retention Committee are currently eligible for an RHPAP led Community Profile.

A profile is an initial snapshot of the community with links to access more details on Town and County websites. The profile also includes information about the community such as amenities (e.g., schools, parks and recreation) and your defining characteristics (e.g., hidden gems), as well as resources to give people a sense of what it's like to live there. As in all your communications, be truthful about what your community has to offer right now and, if it's certain, what's planned in the near future (e.g., a new subdivision being built).

Once again, building your community profile is a great time to tap into the talents, knowledge and connections of your Committee members and community partners, especially your local government or Chamber of Commerce to see if they have any existing community profiles. Using existing resources can save a lot of time, effort, and money.

### **A strong community profile addresses the following questions:**

- What is unique about your community?
- Are there planned developments in the community including housing, healthcare facilities and businesses?
- What kinds of things are a potential attractor to a new healthcare professional and their family (e.g., recreational activities, clubs, faith organizations, sports, local landmarks, etc.).

Endeavour to offer striking and memorable images, and key facts that are accessible even with a quick glance. An effective profile is available in both printed and electronic formats so it can be emailed or posted on a website or social media account.

Once completed, the community profile should be shared widely. Make sure your Committee members have print and electronic copies handy. Take the profile along to meetings, conferences and other gatherings where there might be prospective healthcare professionals. You can post the profile on your Committee and partner websites, share it on social media, encourage your partners and stakeholders to add it to their websites, and touch base with your local health employers for them to utilize it during their recruitment process.

The goal is to get as much good information about your community as possible into the hands (and hearts) of prospective health professionals. The more they know about your community, the better their experience will be if they choose to relocate there. The fewer unexpected surprises, the smoother their settling-in experience will be. Keep in mind that a smooth transition to your community is the ideal to which you should be aiming as it creates a solid foundation for your retention work with that health professional (see Module 7)..

### **A Word About Social Media**

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If you choose to use Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, X, Blue Sky or any other social media platform that allows people to make comments, make sure you assign a Committee member to check that page and/or account regularly. Social media sites can sometimes attract negative or nuisance comments. Negative postings about your community can be an immediate turnoff for a prospective healthcare professional. You can also consider turning off the comment function all together.

It's also a good idea in your public communications to make sure community members-at-large understand that what they put online can provide an unintended first impression of the community. That impression has the potential to influence the choice of health professionals considering working in your community – either positively or negatively. It is important to have a frank discussion amongst your Committee on the expectations of Committee members and their social media presence – some Committees have found it beneficial to establish a communication policy in this regard.

## **Community Visits**

One of the best ways to showcase your community is to encourage prospective healthcare professionals and their families to come for a visit. This visit can be prompted by an ad hoc invitation at a meeting or a conference, or something organized as part of a recruitment campaign with your local healthcare employers.

Community visits can be powerful tool to show someone first-hand what your town and region has to offer and to assess their needs and expectations about the type of place they want to work and live.

Generally, the health employer in your community will be setting up a community visit for prospective healthcare professionals – it is imperative for the Committee to have a strong relationship with them to assist in this community visit wherever possible. The first step is finding out a bit more about the healthcare professional and their family so you can tailor your part of the tour accordingly. Consider using a questionnaire such as this to gather some pertinent information – to note, many of the health employers in your regional will have information on hand – touch base with them to ensure duplication of this work is avoided!

## SAMPLE: Pre-Arrival Questionnaire

Personal Information			
First Name:		Last Name:	
Preferred Name/Nickname:		Date of Birth (optional):	
Email:		Phone Number:	
Occupation/Profession:		University Attended:	
Graduation Year:		Moving From (Location):	
Family Information			
Marital Status:	<input type="checkbox"/> Single <input type="checkbox"/> Married <input type="checkbox"/> Common-law <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	Spouse/Partner Name:	
		Spouse/Partner Occupation/Profession:	
Do you have children?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Is your spouse/partner planning to work?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided
Children Details			
Name	Age	Grade Level	School Needs/ Considerations
Extended Family			
Do you have family nearby or in Canada?		If yes, where?	
Family Activities & Interests			
Sports Interests:		Music Interests:	
Art Interests:		Other Special Interests/Hobbies:	
Religious Affiliation or Church Interest:		Dietary Requirements/Restrictions:	
Special Food Preferences:		Child-care Preferences:	

Social Preferences	
Would you consider yourself: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Introvert</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Extrovert</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhere in between</li> </ul>	Do you and your family enjoy socializing? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Often</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Rarely</li> </ul>
Do you enjoy attending social events? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally</li> </ul>	Would you like to be paired with a local "buddy" who can assist with your transition? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No</li> </ul>
Moving & Housing Needs	
Housing - looking to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Buy</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Rent</li> </ul>	Preferred housing type: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> House</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Duplex</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Apartment</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</li> </ul>
Furniture: <input type="checkbox"/> Bringing your own <input type="checkbox"/> Need to purchase <input type="checkbox"/> Combination of both	
Immediate Assistance Needs	
Please check any areas where you would like information and/or assistance:	
<input type="checkbox"/> Banking <input type="checkbox"/> Taxes <input type="checkbox"/> Accounting <input type="checkbox"/> Financial Advisor <input type="checkbox"/> Car Rental <input type="checkbox"/> Car Dealership <input type="checkbox"/> Religious Institutions	
International Health Professionals	
Immigration Status upon arrival in Canada:	Do you need immigration assistance? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No</li> </ul>

You may need to get the consent of healthcare employers to reach out to the prospective health professional and their family. Keep in mind that the most effective community visits are designed and planned in a way that matches the interests and needs of the prospective health professional and their family. Regularly liaising with your health employer’s recruiter (keeping in mind they may be in another town) will enable you to know when prospective candidates are coming to the community and plan accordingly. A lot of this work will already be in motion on the recruiters’ side – it’s in everyone’s best interest to work together!

Your planning should include designating a Committee representative who can act as a host to welcome the health professional and their family and, if needed, act as a tour guide or chauffeur alongside the recruiter – if applicable. The Committee should be thoughtful about who should play this role. It could be another health professional who has recently moved to town. You may also consider someone with common interests, with a deep understanding of the local amenities and contacts. A small gift basket with community information and vouchers can also send a positive message about how newcomers are accepted into the community.

## Don't Forget Locums and Students

When it comes to showcasing your community, you can extend the same welcome to locum physicians<sup>39</sup>, agency nurse<sup>40</sup>, and other health professionals or healthcare students staying temporarily in your community. Often these temporary professionals are overlooked and spend their off-hours in a hotel room or rented apartment.

Welcoming the locums and other part-time or temporary health professionals who visit your community, and making them feel recognized and valued, is a great tactic to encourage them to continue providing services and, perhaps, to consider joining the community on a full-time basis should a position become available.

Many locum physicians are relatively early in their careers and may be actively exploring different communities to see where they might want to live and practise permanently. It's the same with agency nurses. While many enjoy the travel and variety, they often are exploring communities where they may choose to live full time.

A warm and inclusive welcome to the community can make these health professionals' experience memorable, which may payoff in the future when they make the decide about where to settle down.

## Look for the Best Fit

Attracting health professionals to your community can be complicated and require a lot of patience. Enticing a prospective health professional with incentives like money or free housing may seem like a good strategy, but it can be a short-term strategy, as health professionals who come for incentives like these may not stay. It's important to recognize that the better the initial fit between your community and the perspective health professional and their family, the better chance you'll have to not just attract them but retain them in the long run.

Attracting for the right fit means that the best candidate might not be the first professional who visits your community. Be patient, open-minded and answer questions truthfully and positively. Attraction needs to be mutual!

Look for opportunities to learn more about what the prospective health professional is looking for in a job and a place to call home. You may have the chance to connect with the health professional before their community visit. If not, your local healthcare employer's recruitment Committee might be a good liaison to connect you with the health professional or to ask them some questions on your behalf.

Some answers that are often handy to know:

- What are their long-term plans? Will this position in the community be a short-term stop on their career track, or are they are interested in staying a bit longer?
- What would they like to see and who would they like to meet when they visit the community?
- Are they interested in looking at community amenities and schools?
- Would they like to learn about the local real estate market?
- What are some of their interests and hobbies?
- Would they like to learn more about partner/spousal employment opportunities? (If the answer to this question is yes, it is important to find out more about what the partner/spouse does and what their interests are).
- Do they have spiritual, cultural, sports or recreational interests?

<sup>39</sup>A locum is a physician who acts a relief when your community physician goes on a leave or is brought in on a temporary basis to fill a vacancy. A locum may be in your community for a few days or weeks, or may be part of a rotation (e.g., comes for a week every month).

<sup>40</sup>Health employers will sometimes contract with private placement firms that provide temporary nurses to ensure staffing levels can be maintained. Agency nurses may stay a few days, or a few weeks.

At the conclusion of the visit, it's valuable to find out what they thought of the community. What did they like and where are some things that may be missing? If a concern they raise is one that the community is actively addressing (e.g., shortage of newer housing), sharing information on how the issues is being dealt with may be enough for the prospective professional to consider your community.

It's okay to accept that some health professionals may not be the right fit. Rural life is not for everyone. The reasons for a health professional deciding not to choose your community can be many and is not necessarily a reflection on your community or your work as a Committee. Every rural community is unique! It's important not to despair and instead use this experience as a learning opportunity for the next prospect.

While the health professional and their family may not see themselves living in your community, there may be another community in your region that fits the bill. There are clear benefits to having Committees in a region working together to provide cross-referrals and options to prospective health professionals. It can be challenging to reframe attraction from competition to cooperation, but with a regional approach, everyone can win in the long term. Moreover, health professionals will appreciate a welcoming and collaborative approach. A positive, helpful experience can result in them referring their friends and colleagues to your community.

## Targeting Rural Healthcare Learners

Considerable evidence shows that people from rural backgrounds, who receive most of their healthcare training in rural areas, will generally choose to live and work in rural and remote communities. Researchers and business organizations in Alberta, across Canada and globally consistently demonstrate that the best way to attract healthcare professionals to your community is to provide opportunities for them to do some or all their training there.<sup>41,42,43,44</sup> This local training gives them a chance to get to know the community, develop relationships and get a feel for what it might be like to live there permanently.<sup>45</sup>

Committees can play a significant role in helping to find ways for more healthcare learners to receive some or all their training in your rural community. This work includes working closely with the local physician community to see who is teaching now and to encourage them to either take on or expand placements for medical students and residents as preceptors. It can be helpful to find out what local physicians need to enable them to teach today's medical students and residents and encourage them to consider rural practice; once you know what they need you can identify if you can support those needs. Teachers have significant influence on students, and the students training in your community today can become tomorrow's rural healthcare professional.

Committees are well placed to encourage their local health employer to open more opportunities to train student nurses and allied health professionals. You can discuss this training with your healthcare employer partners at a Committee meeting or reach out to them to discuss the topic. Always remember – your community's health employer is doing the best they can, and their capacity can be limited.

Focus on the shared goal of sustaining the community's healthcare workforce. The key message here is that the more people who can experience what it's like to live and work in a rural community and experience the rural lifestyle, the better the odds that one of them will return to your community when they are looking for that all-important first job or they want to settle down.

<sup>41</sup> Roshan, A., Gowans, M., & Scott, I. (2025). Predictors of sustained rural practice. *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine*, 30:7-16.

<sup>42</sup> Dolea, C., Stormont, L. & Braichet, J-M. (2010). Evaluated strategies to increase attraction and retention of health workers in remote and rural areas. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 88, pp. 379-386.

<sup>43</sup> World Health Organization. (2010). *Global Policy Recommendations: Increasing access to health workers in remote and rural areas through improved retention*. [https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/44369/9789241564014\\_eng.pdf](https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/44369/9789241564014_eng.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Roshan, A., Gowans, M., Scott, I. (2025). Predictors of sustained rural practice. *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine*, 30:7-16.

<sup>45</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to this rule: students from rural Alberta can be attracted to working and living in urban communities and there are some people who've grown up in urban settings who get a chance to experience rural healthcare and decide to make it their career choice.

Studies show that some healthcare learners may be reluctant to do some of their training in rural and remote communities because of the perceived isolation from their friends and family, limited recreational opportunities, and housing challenges. Your Committee's Attraction Strategy could include working closely with the community medical practices, the hospital and business community, in partnership with post-secondary training programs, to address some of these misconceptions. To support positive personal and professional experiences for healthcare learners when they are in the community, you could consider arranging an outing such as a hike, community event or a trip to a lake/river for the healthcare learners on a weekend when they are available. Committee members are encouraged to meet with these healthcare learners to welcome them, showcase what your community has to offer, host appreciation events, source social and recreational resources, etc. These interactions and supports require a modest investment that can pay off down the road

## Creating a Pathway to Grow Your Own

**Rather than solely focusing on attracting health professionals from outside your community and region, you may want to focus some of your efforts closer to home by encouraging local high school students and community members to explore healthcare careers available in your area as a proven way to 'grow your own' workforce. These careers can include patient care roles (e.g., physician, nurse, physiotherapist, etc.) or support positions (e.g., unit clerk, managers, housekeepers, and maintenance). There are dozens of different jobs in healthcare, and they are all important for securing and sustaining health services in your community.**

Talk to your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant who can share more about RHPAP's [How Do I Get There?](#) learning series. This learning series consists of webinars targeted to rural high school students and others considering a healthcare career in rural Alberta. The webinars feature representatives from the different healthcare training programs, current students and practising healthcare professionals in those programs. The intent of these sessions is to help educate rural residents on what it takes to enter these professions and provide tips to make that progression easier. You can also explore RHPAP's [A-Z Careers in Healthcare](#) page on our website for a comprehensive overview of healthcare career paths and training requirements.

Attraction, Integration & Retention Committees may also consider advocating for more formalized education *pathways* that prepare local students and other community members to pursue healthcare careers.<sup>47</sup> This advocacy could include encouraging the local school district to offer more choices in sciences at the local secondary school or providing guidance and course options to local students who have expressed an interest in a healthcare career.

Local Committees may choose to work with their local health employers, organizations such as CAREERS<sup>48</sup> or directly with their physicians and other healthcare providers (e.g., community pharmacy) to offer shadowing and mentoring opportunities for young people and community members interested in healthcare careers. This work can also include engaging with the local Municipalities and the business community to offer scholarships and bursaries, as well as housing and childcare subsidies to support residents in their pursuit of healthcare careers. The more touchpoints you maintain with students during their healthcare training, the more likely they are to return.

Once again, the importance of having a good cross-section of community members and healthcare partners on your Committee enables you to better identify and create these opportunities and to reach out to the local physicians and other health providers to involve them in these strategies.

<sup>47</sup>Russell, 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.

<sup>48</sup><https://www.careersnextgen.ca>

You can always start small: for example, if there are one or two local high school students interested in shadowing, reach out to your local health employer, organizations like CAREERS, or directly to your local physicians or pharmacists to gauge their interest in being involved in mentoring a student to support your community's pathway to rural practice. Having a student for an hour or two each week and can be life changing for the student! Reinforce the importance of this opportunity to generate interest in healthcare careers and the evidence that suggests that local students are more likely to come back to town after their training. It is also imperative to collaborate with the Guidance Counsellors at your communities' schools to move this work ahead.

There may be concerns raised about confidentiality – and this is where your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant may be able to help. Touch base with them to see if there are any supports that can be offered after discussing with the health employer on who's responsibility it is to obtain consent. In addition, you can consider supporting your community's students to shadow a healthcare professional in a neighbouring town, so students are less likely to run across confidential information about people they directly know.

Developing pathways for people to pursue healthcare careers also includes providing opportunities for and encouraging existing healthcare professionals to improve their qualifications and advance in their careers. These opportunities help support health professional job satisfaction as it relates to retention. For example, you could identify ways to support practical nurses in your community to pursue their registered nurse qualifications. Working closely with your healthcare employers, you can explore solutions to potential training barriers like the need for time away from work to study or help with tuition and transportation. Financial support could be provided as a third-party grant or through an employer's return-of-service agreement (where the employee agrees to return to the community to provide health services for a certain period once their training is completed in return for financial support for their education).

Setting up a more formalized pathway to help local students and community members move into healthcare careers will take time and coordination. Be mindful about who is on your Committee if you are looking at planning and implementing these pathways. Familiarize yourself with the *Partnership Pentagonam Plus* (see Module 2) and ensure that your Committee has representatives from your K-12 school district, local college or nearby training institution.

Research demonstrates that investing time and effort to develop clear pathways to encourage local students and residents to explore healthcare careers, and building capacity in the community to train medical students, residents, nursing students and other learners, may be an effective attraction strategy compared to offering financial incentives.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to building career pathways for your local students and community members, you may want to consider taking part in events that enables you to host healthcare learners for a two- or three-days where they can get a feel for what working and living in your community might be like. RHPAP's [Let's Go Rural!](#) Post Secondary Events embody this. It has been shown that healthcare students who experience rural practice while they are still training are more inclined to consider practising rurally once they graduate.

Make sure you involve your RHPAP Rural Community Consultant in the planning for these events as they can offer valuable resources and support to help you navigate education systems, facilitate conversations with partners and other stakeholders and provide more information on [Let's Go Rural!](#)

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<sup>49</sup> 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.

## Internationally Educated Health Professionals

Increasingly, healthcare professionals who are trained outside of Canada are choosing to live and work in rural and remote communities. As one example, over a third of family physicians in Alberta were born and trained outside of Canada.

The federal and provincial governments have been actively encouraging internationally educated healthcare professionals (IEHPs), including physicians, nurses, healthcare aides, and medical laboratory technicians, among others, to consider moving to Canada.

Moving half-way around the world from countries like Nigeria or the Philippines to a rural community in Alberta takes a lot of courage and, understandably, can create a lot of anxiety for a health professional and their family. Not only must they adjust to a new country, different languages and customs and, often, a much different climate, but they are also working to learn about and integrate into a new healthcare system with different role expectations.

As discussed in Module 1, all IEHPs are required to meet the Alberta and Canadian licensing standards including qualification examinations, additional training where needed and, once provisionally licensed, performance supervision for a period of time by other fully licensed health professionals in addition to both national and provincial licensing bodies. Only once they meet all these requirements will they be licensed to practise independently. What this means is that you and your community can be assured that IEHPs are qualified and experienced professionals regardless of where they were born or trained.

Attracting IEHPs to your community takes creativity and sensitivity as you need to prepare not only the new health professional for your community (and country), but the community as well. This preparation will be discussed in detail in Module 6 as you prepare to welcome and help integrate new IEHPs, and in Module 7 as you focus on retaining the IEHPs that are currently practising in your community.

Bear in mind that IEHPs and their families may have different needs than domestically trained health professionals. If an IEHP and their family are planning a community visit, try to open lines of communication with them well in advance so you can talk to them about their expectations and understanding of life in rural Alberta, and explore what they will need to live and thrive in your community. These needs could include things like housing, transportation, and specific cultural requirements such as food and places of worship. The more information you have upfront, the better you will be able to tailor the attraction strategy to ensure that their questions are answered and concerns addressed in a transparent and honest way. If the IEHP and their family aren't planning a visit, your healthcare employers or local medical clinic may be able to connect you with the prospective IEHP and their family. If not, you may need to wait until they arrive in the community (see Module 6).

Recent studies suggest that partners of IEHPs may have considerable influence on whether their partner will choose to work in your community. Partner and family concerns can include the location of the community, access to cultural and social amenities, spousal employment opportunities and fear of social isolation. As an example of how this final item can be addressed, researchers at the University of Calgary suggest that communities can help mitigate the sense of social and cultural isolation with greater cultural awareness on the part of all parties, which helps create supportive, accepting environments especially for IEHPs and their partners and families.<sup>50</sup>

These researchers also highlight the importance of IEHP spousal employment and recommend that attraction campaigns involve business and industry to generate employment opportunities for spouses, ideally in parallel to the IEHP attraction efforts.

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<sup>50</sup> Myroniuk, I., Adamiak, P., Bajaa, S., & Myhre, D.H. (2016). Recruitment and retention of physicians in rural Alberta: the spousal perspective. *Rural Health*, 16:3620 (Online).