

Year in Review 2024/25




RHPAP
Alberta's Rural Health
Professions Action Plan



Financial contribution for RhPAP has been provided through Alberta Health.

RhPAP supports healthcare services throughout rural Alberta, which are provided on both historical and contemporary Indigenous lands. These lands include the territories that are home to Treaty 6, Treaty 7, and Treaty 8, as well as the Métis Nations of Alberta. These lands have long been home to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, serving as a foundation for their communities, cultures, and traditions of stewardship and connection. We recognize Indigenous Peoples' deep history, culture, and contributions to the rural communities we serve. RhPAP is committed to fostering respectful relationships and advancing equity in healthcare, working together to build healthier, more inclusive rural communities.

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About **RhPAP**

Who we are

For over 30 years, the Rural Health Professions Action Plan (RhPAP) has supported the efforts of rural Albertans to maintain an accessible health workforce close to home. RhPAP is committed to fostering and building relationships with rural communities, stakeholders, partners, learners and each other to encourage better access to rural healthcare.

Established in 1991 by the Government of Alberta as the Alberta Rural Physician Action Plan, and originally focused on supporting practising rural physicians, RhPAP has grown to be a broader rural community health workforce attraction and retention resource, an ally with Alberta's medical schools, as well as a trusted, collaborative partner for rural Alberta communities trying to achieve greater access to healthcare.



Vision

A stronger future where quality healthcare is accessible to rural Albertans.



Mission

To serve as a trusted voice, building solution-focused partnerships and delivering initiatives that support rural communities in their efforts to keep healthcare close to home.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

RhPAP highly values and respects diversity among the public, practitioners, employees, volunteers, learners and those who govern the organization. RhPAP is committed to providing equal opportunity to all, without regard to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, ancestry, age, place of origin, marital status, family status, sexual orientation and any other protected ground. Equal opportunity is provided in employment and volunteer positions within RhPAP, as well as within the opportunities we offer to stakeholders. RhPAP is committed to creating a space free of discrimination across all operating practices. The organization fosters a culture of equity by embracing, respecting, accepting and valuing differences.



2024–25 Strategic pillars

RhPAP's 2024–27 Strategic Plan is built around five key pillars that guide the efforts to strengthen rural healthcare in Alberta. These pillars reflect the commitment to supporting individuals throughout their healthcare career journey, empowering communities, investing in professionals, and demonstrating the impact of our work. Each pillar plays a vital role in helping keep healthcare close to home for rural Albertans.

High school to healthcare

RhPAP inspires rural high school students to explore careers in healthcare and consider practicing in their home communities. RhPAP supports this through Let's Go Rural events that offer hands-on exposure to healthcare careers, and the How Do I Get There? virtual series. Launched in 2024–25, which provides students in grades 9–12 with practical guidance on healthcare education and career planning. Together, these initiatives help build early awareness and lay the foundation for long-term rural healthcare attraction and retention.

Post-secondary to practice

RhPAP seeks to support post-secondary learners by providing tailored programs and supports that encourage exploration of rural learning opportunities and careers. By acting as a connector between learners and rural communities, and expanding financial support, RhPAP aims to facilitate the transition from education to rural practice. This approach ensures that students are well-prepared and motivated to serve in rural health settings upon graduation.

Investing in health professionals

Investing in the continuous development of rural health professionals is crucial in maintaining high quality care. RhPAP emphasizes continuing professional development, quality improvement, mentorship, and return-of-service programs. By enhancing skills and competencies, and providing support mechanisms, RhPAP ensures that rural health providers are equipped to meet the evolving needs of their communities.

Creating community capacity

Building strong relationships and networks is essential for attracting, integrating, and retaining rural health professionals. RhPAP focuses on fostering purposeful relationships with stakeholders and maintaining a diverse provincial attraction and retention network. By acting in a leadership role, RhPAP ensures communities are prepared to respond to current and future healthcare needs, thereby strengthening the overall rural health infrastructure.

Demonstrating impact

To extend the reach and effectiveness, RhPAP aims to clarify and leverage the brand, highlighting its distinctive value proposition in keeping healthcare close to home. By effectively communicating our impact and leadership in rural healthcare, RhPAP seeks to increase awareness and recognition among stakeholders, ensuring sustained support and engagement.



Tracy Sopkow,
CEO

Message from the CEO

As we reflect on the accomplishments of 2024–25, I'm proud to share how RhPAP continues to build on its mission of supporting the attraction, integration, and retention of rural healthcare professionals and strengthening rural communities across Alberta.

This past year marked a significant step forward in the implementation of RhPAP's 2025–2027 Strategic Plan. Grounded in our five strategic pillars, our work continues to align closely with the Government of Alberta's priorities to improve access to care, invest in the healthcare workforce, and support thriving communities.

We saw measurable impact in key areas—supporting learners through training and accommodation, empowering local communities with attraction, integration and retention tools and grants, celebrating rural healthcare champions, and delivering professional development to rural providers. Our collaboration with local partners, health authorities, and post-secondary institutions remains central to our approach, helping us respond to the evolving needs of Alberta's rural healthcare system.

We are grateful to the communities, volunteers, healthcare professionals, and stakeholders who make this work possible. Their passion and commitment drive innovation, resilience, and progress across rural Alberta.

As we look ahead, RhPAP remains steadfast in our support of rural health. Together, we will continue to build capacity, create opportunities, and ensure that Alberta's rural communities are not only served—but strengthened.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

With gratitude,

Tracy Sopkow
Chief Executive Officer
Rural Health Professions Action Plan (RhPAP)

Message from the Chair of the RhPAP Board of Directors

As we mark another year of progress and impact at RhPAP, I'm honoured to reflect not only on what we've achieved, but on where we're headed.

The future of rural healthcare in Alberta depends on continued innovation, collaboration, and a strong commitment to community. With the launch of RhPAP's 2025–2027 Strategic Plan, we are charting a clear course to support the healthcare workforce and the communities they serve—now and into the future.

RhPAP is well-positioned to lead in this space. Our focus on long-term attraction, integration, and retention strategies ensures that our programs and partnerships are sustainable and responsive to the evolving needs of rural Alberta. As we align with the Government of Alberta's goals to improve healthcare access and workforce stability, the board of directors remains deeply committed to supporting RhPAP's growth, adaptability, and impact.

We are excited about what lies ahead—from deepening support for communities and learners to exploring new opportunities to strengthen rural care. On behalf of the board of directors, thank you to the volunteers, healthcare professionals, and community leaders who continue to walk alongside us.

Together, we are building a strong future for rural health in Alberta.



Gavin Parker
Board Chair
Rural Health Professions Action Plan (RhPAP)



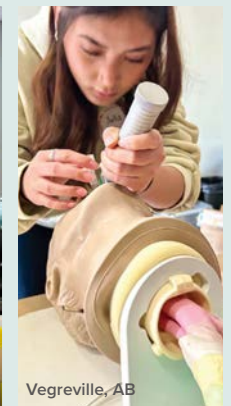
Dr. Gavin Parker,
Board Chair



Pincher Creek, AB



Barrhead, AB



Vegreville, AB

Let's Go Rural!

High School Events

Throughout the year, rural students took part in hands-on learning events that explored a wide range of healthcare careers. Held in schools, healthcare facilities, and community spaces, these experiences aim to spark interest in rural healthcare and highlight the opportunities available close to home.

Let's Go Rural! (LGR) High School Skills Events

10

LGR! High School Skills Events.

331

Rural Alberta students attended LGR! High School Skills Events.

88%

Agree – LGR! High School Event increased their desire to work in rural healthcare.

"The hands-on activities (like injections, drawing blood, and suturing) were helpful to see what I liked, so I could focus my next steps on health professions that fit my interests."

- High school student



Rimbey AB



Watch a video highlighting
RhPAP's Let's Go Rural!
High School events.



Wetaskiwin, AB

RhPAP resources help high school students turn

healthcare dreams into reality

By Lorena Franchuk

Dreaming of becoming a nurse, physiotherapist, or midwife is a great start, but turning those dreams into reality can be challenging.

RhPAP's "How Do I Get There?" webinar series and the newly launched A-Z Rural Health Careers webpage can help guide the way for high school students across the province.

Re-invigorated last fall, RhPAP's virtual series guides participants—from Grade 9 and up—on navigating the path to a career in rural healthcare. The series provides insights into various roles, including registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, healthcare aides and allied health professions.

"The participants appreciate hearing from the professionals themselves who are actually working in rural Alberta on what their experience is, why they love it, and what the struggles are," says Lynsey Robinson, RhPAP's south zone rural community consultant and virtual events lead.

The free, two-hour long webinars feature presentations from health professionals and experts, followed by a question-and-answer session. Events explore many areas of rural healthcare, such as pharmacy, dental care, and combined laboratory and x-ray technology. Robinson notes that high schools support the webinars as they offer students valuable insights into potential careers in their communities.

To further introduce high school students to the variety of careers in rural health, RhPAP recently launched the A-Z Rural Health Careers webpage.

"Now students interested in a healthcare career have a space that they can go to after the sessions that fills in the gap and answers some of those questions that they didn't get to ask," Robinson explains.

The site includes resources on a wide variety of healthcare careers — highlighting paths to roles like paramedicine, combined laboratory and x-ray technology, and respiratory therapy—fields in

demand in rural Alberta communities and beyond. It also features videos showcasing a day in the life of various health professionals.

More health professions will be added in the coming months to provide a comprehensive resource that reflects the diversity of roles in rural healthcare. "We're hoping to set up a one-stop shop," says Robinson.

How Do I Get There? Webinars

411

Rural high school students attended four virtual information sessions.

99%

Agree – sessions provided valuable information to inform what health careers are available in rural communities.

5

Career exploration sessions hosted – in collaboration with leading provincial associations and post-secondary institutions, including AHS, NAIT, and Northwestern Polytechnic.



Watch *How Do I Get There: Combined Laboratory and X-ray Technologist* webinar.

Let's Go Rural! Post-Secondary Events

Post-Secondary learners had the opportunity to explore what it means to live, work, and play in rural Alberta.

Let's Go Rural (LGR!) Post-Secondary Events

4

Events hosted.

8

Different health disciplines participated.

375

Post-secondary students participated in the LGR events.

98%

Agree – LGR! Post-secondary Events increased their desire to practise in a rural community.



Watch *Let's Go Rural! Post-Secondary Event* through the eyes of a first-year med student.

Athabasca, AB

Beaver County, AB



Flagstaff, AB



Drumheller, AB

"I had a blast. This experience confirmed my desire to practise in a rural community upon graduation. Being able to meet new residents and practising physicians was invaluable."

– Post-secondary learner

Dr. Erin Kelly **loves** **rural medicine**

Dr. Erin Kelly never expected to build a career in rural medicine, but one experience changed everything.

Growing up in Lethbridge, she developed a love for physiology, which led her to study medicine at the University of Calgary. Initially, she envisioned a career in internal medicine in an urban setting—until a physician encouraged her to do her final year of clerkship in Taber.

“I loved it,” she says. “It changed the course of my career.”

That experience led to rural residencies in Rocky Mountain House, Ponoka, and Whitecourt. She enjoyed every town she worked in, but choosing a permanent home came down to family.

Her partner, Dan, works remotely but occasionally commutes to Calgary, making Sundre the perfect place to put down roots.

Now, as part of the Moose and Squirrel Medical Clinic, Dr. Kelly is thriving in the diverse world of rural medicine.

“The people here are wonderful. Everyone teaches each other, and the variety of practice keeps things exciting.”

From family medicine to emergency care, obstetrics, and even assisting in the OR—rural medicine offers a breadth of experience few urban settings can match.

Beyond patient care, Dr. Kelly is a dedicated mentor.

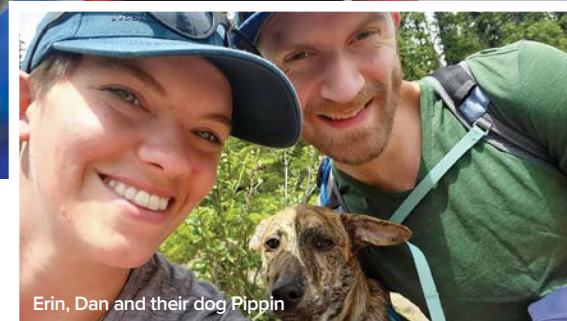
She serves as a preceptor for resident physicians and med students and participates in RhPAP’s Rural Mentorship Program.

“She’s a great mentor,” says Juliette Eshleman, a second-year med student. “A natural teacher who creates a safe learning environment.”

Looking ahead, Dr. Kelly plans to expand her skills, including advanced point-of-care ultrasound, to improve patient care.

“We’re not city people. We love the quiet, knowing our neighbors, and having access to the backcountry.”

Outside of medicine, Erin, Dan, and their dog, Pippin, love life in rural Alberta.



Erin, Dan and their dog Pippin



Watch *Why did Dr. Erin Kelly choose to practise in Sundre?*



Dr. Kelly assists second-year medical student Juliette Eshleman as she makes her first ever cast on an emergency patient at the Sundre Hospital.

Rural Mentorship Program

Preceptor participation has grown by 118 per cent over the past two years.

143

Shifts for medical learners to experience rural emergency care facilitated by 37 preceptors.

98%

Students indicated overall satisfaction with the mentorship initiative.

Room with a view a perk for rural medical learners

By Lorena Franchuk

Their primary goal may be to study medicine, but medical students also learn a lesson on rural life when they stay at a Vermilion couple's home.

At Darla Yonkman and Mike Fritz's walkout home overlooking the Vermilion River, medical learners can catch the Northern Lights dancing across the night sky, deer grazing in the adjoining forest, and hear songbirds singing.

The couple have rented out their walkout suite to medical learners for two years through RhPAP Accommodations. Having students live with them isn't new for the couple, as they previously opened their doors to international students, college students, and instructors from the community's Lakeland College.

RhPAP helps medical learners find

furnished accommodations while they do their medical training in rural Alberta and has more than 154 leased accommodations across the province in over 52 rural communities.

"I believe 100 per cent this is a great program," says Yonkman, who is also a school trustee in the community.

"Most of the students I've had have never been to a rural place, not even to stay. They were born in the city and that's where they stayed so not only do they learn the medical differences, but they also learn how it is to live here, how kind the people are, and how you eventually know everybody that's coming to see you."

Yonkman says she works hard to make the students feel at home and share the benefits of rural life

Darla Yonkman and Mike Fritz are landlords through RhPAP's Accommodation program in Vermilion. — Photo supplied by Darla Yonkman

and work. She hopes one day a previous medical student may accept a healthcare position in her community, located about two hours east of Edmonton, and call Vermilion home.

"Your experience, firsthand seeing it, is what's going to bring you back, not someone telling you about it," she explains.

A self-professed community builder, Yonkman knows it's important to make people feel welcome when they come to the town of about 5,000 people including the students from Lakeland College. She is also careful not to overstep with those who are keen to stick to their own space in the walkout basement suite that they renovated for medical students.

Rafael Sanguinetti stayed in the suite for four weeks while he completed his rural family medicine rotation with the University of Calgary. It was his first visit to Vermilion.



Watch It Takes A Village to house a medical student in rural Alberta.

"Having accommodation provided is reassuring, in a sense, that I don't have to take time to look for a place and figure out all the logistics behind it," says Sanguinetti.

"It's also nice to not have to pay out of pocket for accommodations. I just had to get groceries and set myself up that way."

He appreciated the couple's support throughout his stay, helping him with the location of the hospital and key community attractions, while also being flexible and understanding of his early morning and late-night shifts. Sanguinetti says he was so busy during his rotation in January and February that he missed seeing the Northern Lights.

But the Calgary resident was impressed with his landlords, his preceptor, healthcare staff, patients he encountered, and the lack of traffic in the rural community.

"It was cool to have kind of that appreciation by the staff and the patients. I had a fantastic time."

"It was such a great time that I had over there.... Everyone seemed really happy to see a medical student working in Vermilion.



University of Calgary medical student Rafael Sanguinetti checks out his scrubs.
— Photo supplied by Rafael Sanguinetti

Vermilion, AB

Post-secondary to practice



One of 154 leased RhPAP accommodations.

RhPAP accommodations

154

RhPAP leased accommodations.

52

Rural communities with RhPAP leased accommodations.

958

Post-secondary learners in health-related programs were housed in RhPAP leased accommodations this year.

"Having reliable and pleasant accommodations made it so much easier to picture living in a rural community long term. Being able to have my spouse accompany me for my University of Calgary Longitudinal Integrated Clerkship (UCLIC) experience really transformed our understanding of what rural life could look like. Ultimately, we have applied for rural residency programs because we had such a fantastic experience in the UCLIC program." – Post-secondary learner

Mother **returns to rural nursing career** thanks to international bursary initiative

By Lorena Franchuk

Angelica Romero's dream to become a registered nurse (RN) has become true—again.

Romero recently began her role as an RN at Stettler Hospital and Care Centre following participation in the Bursary for Internationally Educated Nurses (BIEN) Program, an initiative funded by the Government of Alberta, Ministry of Advanced Education and administered by RhPAP since 2023.

BIEN was designed to support internationally educated nurses in bridging their current education to Canadian standards with bursary assistance of up to \$30,000.

In return, BIEN participants agree to work in rural Alberta for a period of time following their graduation.

Romero immigrated to Canada 10 years ago after training as a Registered Nurse (RN) in the Philippines. When she arrived in Canada, her RN credentials were not recognized, so she began working as a healthcare aid in homecare and long-term care. Later, she pursued post-secondary education to become a licensed practical nurse (LPN).

"We don't have the same curriculum back in the Philippines," says Romero, explaining the bursary helped cover some of her expenses while attending school.

Last fall, she completed her LPN training and summer preceptorship in Stettler, two hours southeast of Edmonton. Romero now works there as an LPN in acute care.

Romero says her return to nursing took time, but she persevered. She now encourages others to follow her lead.

"Nursing is challenging, but it is very fulfilling," says the mother-of-two boys. "My advice is just to stay focused and motivated.

"Working in a rural area is very rewarding. There are a lot of opportunities to learn in a rural area, you get to do a little bit of everything. You are trained for that, and you are not just staying in one corner, one unit."

Opportunities for career growth are also available. Her role in Stettler will see her return to labour and delivery (her specialty back home in the rural Philippines) and eventually the emergency department.

"Nursing involves long hours of work, shift work, and physical demands," she says. "But basically, it offers job security, career growth, and a big opportunity to help others."

Romero credits her late father, Angelito Romero, who worked in Guam and later became a farmer in the Philippines, in guiding her towards a nursing career.

"The way he cared for family and friends, he showed me the impact that kindness and expertise can have on someone's life," says Romero. "His passion for making a difference motivated me to pursue nursing so I could do the same for others."



Top: Angelica Romero spends her free time in Kananaskis Country often camping with her partner, Ted Domingo, and sons, Andrew and Carlos Domingo.

Bottom: Angelica Romero is shown with her mother, Rose Marie Romero, and her son, Andrew Domingo, at a celebration during her second year of nurse training in the Philippines. — Photos supplied by Angelica Romero

Bursary for Internationally Educated Nurses (BIEN)

10,734

Months—equivalent to 894.5 years—of Return-of-Service* commitments have been secured, demonstrating a significant investment in rural healthcare capacity.

256

Applications were approved.

*Return of Service means the student agrees to work rural for a specified amount of time upon graduation.

Laurel Ford: One of four

2025 Rural Medical Student Award recipients

Spending time with a rural Alberta physician through RhPAP's Rural Mentorship Program became a pivotal moment for a Penhold medical student.

While a rural medical career was always in the forefront of Laurel Ford's mind, she had reservations about the scope of a family physician.

The first-year University of Calgary medical student says it took research, conversations with physicians, and spending a day shadowing a Lacombe physician through RhPAP's mentorship program for her to realize that family medicine aligned with her goals.

Ford was recently awarded a 2025 RhPAP Rural Medical Student Award. The one-time \$5,000 contribution was set up to assist with a student's tuition, accommodation, living, and/or professional development expenses.

In her application, Ford credits the importance of RhPAP's mentorship opportunity and her research in discussing the profession with other physicians.

"This experience allowed me to witness firsthand the diverse and dynamic scope of rural family practice. It was through these two formative experiences that I became confident in my decision to pursue a career in rural family medicine."

Ford says she longs to return to her rural roots after growing up in Penhold, in central Alberta. She eventually hopes to enter the Rural Family Medicine Residency in Red Deer.

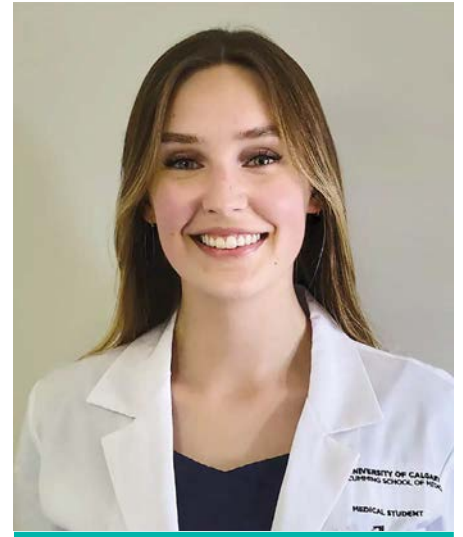
"This goal is deeply connected to my roots in the neighbouring community, Penhold, and my desire to serve rural communities like the one I was raised in," explains Ford.

"To this end, I have proactively sought opportunities to broaden my knowledge and skills in rural family medicine."

Ford currently is involved in the Calgary Student Run Clinic (which provides medical care to inner city residents), the University of Calgary's Family and Rural Medicine Interest Group, and other rural medicine initiatives.

She says she hopes to eventually work as a locum in rural Alberta before she transitions to her own rural practice. In the meantime, Ford plans to advocate for rural healthcare.

"I strive to combine my rural upbringing with initiatives that inspire my peers to understand the lifestyle within rural communities while exploring and implementing novel strategies to retain physicians in these underserved areas."



2025 RhPAP Rural Medical Student Award recipient Laurel Ford.

Rural Medical Student Awards were given to medical learners with rural roots and a strong interest in pursuing rural medicine. **Forty-one students applied for the awards in 2025.**



Meet the 2025 Rural Medical Student Award recipients.

Journal highlights **domestic violence research project**

By Lorena Franchuk

A research project supported by RhPAP to empower rural nurses in effectively screening for domestic violence within their communities will appear in the Canadian Journal of Emergency Nursing (CJEN) this summer.



The “Normalizing Assessment at Triage Through Rural Simulations” has been introduced to nurses in various southern Alberta locations over the past year including Bow Island, Cardston, Crowsnest Pass, Fort Macleod, Milk River, Pincher Creek, Raymond, and Taber.

Annamaria Mundell, a rural clinical educator and eSIM (Educate, Simulate, Innovate, Motivate) simulation consultant with Alberta Health Services southwest zone, helped spearhead the initiative.

The project, which received a \$18,194 RhPAP research grant, will be highlighted in the upcoming CJEN publication. The research was also showcased at the Global Conference on Emergency Nursing and Trauma Care in Gothenburg, Sweden in 2023.

The project resulted from a collaborative effort between Alberta Health Services’ Domestic Abuse Response Team (DART), eSIM Provincial Simulation Program, and SW Zone leadership, which provides in-person and tele-simulation training for rural communities.

“It’s one of those opportunities where it’s going to put rural Alberta on the world stage and show the amazing support and work that’s being done to enhance our rural teams,” says Mundell.

More than 180 nurses and other health professionals have been trained to discreetly and confidently handle the sensitive issue of domestic violence when patients arrive in an emergency room or check into maternity.

“Alberta has the highest rate of police reported domestic violence cases across the Canadian provinces.”

The funding from RhPAP also highlighted the critical role of research in developing such projects. Sara Dolan, eSIM research assistant and PHD student, was instrumental in mentoring the team and analyzing the data, says Mundell.

Prior to this project, triage questionnaires inquired about domestic violence, but less than 12 per cent of the rural nurses

that participated in the project ever received training on how to properly carry it out.

Through the e-SIM project, nurses were able to engage in simulated exercises in their own health-care facilities with virtual support from DART specialists located throughout the province.

Mundell emphasizes the importance of offering local training to enable nurses to practice various scenarios in a familiar environment.

“We do a really comprehensive pre-brief just to be sensitive to the fact that we know that some of our participants may have actually been exposed to domestic violence and they may have stories from their practice where there’s been some trauma,” she explains.

Nurses had an opportunity to learn about resources available, engage in discussions on the barriers involved in asking patients about domestic violence, and learn how to offer non-judgmental support.

Although initially piloted for nurses, Mundell stresses that the project can easily be adapted for other rural health professionals who work on the front lines.

“For nurses and health-care providers, if we don’t feel comfortable talking about domestic violence, we’re actually telling the people in our community that it’s uncomfortable and not right to talk about,” she said.

“We need to normalize the fact that this is an issue, we need to improve, and we’re okay to talk about it.”

RhPAP Supported Research

2

External research projects were funded.

2

Internal projects were completed.

Physician Skills Enrichment Grant funds anesthesia training for Bonnyville doctor

By Lorena Franchuk



Bonnyville area residents requiring anesthesia for surgeries and low-risk births will benefit from a local family physician who returned to his clinic with enhanced skills.

Dr. Jonathan Barnard recognized that there was a shortage of Bonnyville family physicians trained in anesthesia so he enrolled in the one-year Family Practice Anesthesia (FPA) Enhanced Skills Residency Training Program with funding through RhPAP's Physician Skills Enrichment Grant Program.

The University of Alberta's intensive 12-month residency program gives rural and remote family physicians an opportunity to learn and feel confident providing basic anesthesia skills for emergency and elective surgery in their own communities.

Dr. Barnard began practising in the northeastern Alberta community in 2015 after friends encouraged him and his wife, Theresa, a general practitioner obstetrician, to leave rural South Africa and join them.

While he enjoyed his family practice, Dr. Barnard fondly remembers his time working in the intensive care unit in South Africa.

"It's something I was interested in the beginning and then just sort of naturally became something that was an option through my work here," says Dr. Barnard.

"My wife does obstetrics, so it seemed like a nice complement for that as we only have one doctor in our town right now that does epidurals. A lot of people will be transferred to different sites if we don't have epidural coverage here," he explains.

Aside from obstetrics, Dr. Barnard says anesthesia training is beneficial for rural sites when it comes to handling airway

Bonnyville-based family physician Dr. Jonathan Barnard recently completed a one-year Family Practice Anesthesia Enhanced Skills Residency Training Program through RhPAP's Physician Skills Enrichment Grant Program.
— Photo supplied by Dr. Jonathan Barnard

management during emergencies and elective surgery as well.

"It does save the low-risk patients a trip to the city for their surgeries," he says.

Through the program, Dr. Barnard was able to step back from his 900-patient panel for the year and focus full-time on the training based in Edmonton. Physician Skills Enrichment Grant Program funding helped cover the cost of renting a second home in Edmonton, while his wife and two young children remained in Bonnyville for the year.

"The financial support is obviously very important," says Dr. Barnard, noting financial obligations continued while he was training in Edmonton.

"RhPAP allowed us to keep our foot in the door here in Bonnyville and allow my wife to do the job that she likes to do while I could be in Edmonton."

Physician Skills Enrichment Grant Program

19

Physicians received funding to pursue continuing medical education opportunities.

100%

Of physicians utilized their special skills to better serve their rural Alberta communities within six months of completing training.

RhPAP funds STARS training for Westlock health providers

Emergency departments in rural Alberta often see patients who are in shock. Treating them correctly can be the difference between life and death.



Emergency departments in rural Alberta often see patients who are in shock. Treating them correctly can be the difference between life and death.

To stay on top of their game, this past year, 16 health professionals from Westlock traveled to the STARS base in Edmonton to learn advanced skills for treating patients who are in shock.

STARS paramedic Jacques Coppens led the day-long training session.

"We call it the A-B-C 1-2-3 approach of shock," said Coppens.

"The intent of this is to give them ideas, tips, and tricks to handle in the first 5-15 minutes [of a patient arriving in an emergency] to make sure we can manage the airway, breathing and circulation of this patient."

Westlock Health Centre Emergency

Department registered nurse, Rachael Schiller organized this event for the Westlock health providers.

"The biggest thing with shock is we see it frequently," explained Schiller. "The way of treating shock is constantly changing for the first-line staff."

The day started with a 90-minute PowerPoint presentation on shock treatment. Next, health providers rotated through four skill stations: basic airway, advanced airway, intraosseous infusion (IO) insertion, and intravenous pump/vasopressor.

What was their favourite?

"I really liked the airway portion of it," said Janice Baker, LPN, Westlock Healthcare Centre Emergency Department. "I don't do it a lot so just having that refresher, yeah, it's super important."

"Oh boy, I've learned so many things," exclaimed Schiller. "Not to be afraid of doing an intraosseous infusion (IO). I think we're more afraid of not being successful but thanks to the teaching that I learned, I'm not going to be afraid to try it."

In the afternoon, the Westlock group at STARS rotated between two simulations.

"The simulation is all about what we call crew resource management," explained Coppens. "Which is basically, how do they communicate as a team, how do they work as a team, and how do they make sure everybody is on the same page."

The STARS shock training day was funded by RhPAP's Rural Education Fund.

The group from Westlock included a physician, RNs, an LPN, a paramedic and med students.

"I just want to thank RhPAP for the grant," remarked Schiller. "If it wasn't for this type of money and commitment to rural, we wouldn't have this opportunity."

"I just highly suggest anybody that could do this, do it," shared Baker. "It's worth it."

"I think it just adds more confidence to us, especially in rural sites," added Schiller. "You have to recognize shock quicker, know how to act on it and know the steps on how to deal with it."

Rural Education Fund (REF)

630

Rural health professionals received funding.

15

Health disciplines received funding to pursue team-based opportunities.



Watch *The Rural Education Fund helps Westlock health providers learn shock treatment.*

Intraosseous infusion (IO) is the process of injecting medications, fluids, or blood products directly into the marrow of a bone. It's used when it's not possible to inject into a vein.

RhPAP-funded course helps RN speed up diabetes care

By Lorena Franchuk

A registered nurse from Edson hopes to ease the load on area physicians caring for diabetes patients following her completion of a course funded through RhPAP's Rural Education and Advanced Learning (REAL) Program.

Maggie Loucks recently completed RN Prescribing training that permits her to manage diabetes patients out of the McLeod River Primary Care Network without having to clear her work with a physician beforehand.

The RN has worked in diabetes management for about eight years and currently oversees a panel of more than 350 patients within an 80 km radius of Edson.

"Now I'm able to order lab work and basically autonomously manage someone's diabetes care," said Loucks, a chronic disease management nurse.

"I can prescribe their medication to help get their A1C (blood glucose measurement) targets, order their lab work, and do all the follow up myself without having a physician being involved unless something gets a little more complicated. I am able to work to my full scope."

While some of Louck's patients see both her and a physician for diabetes care, others do not have a family doctor.

Those are the patients that Loucks expects will see the greatest change from her new certification.

Loucks expects the changes will lead to considerable savings in appointment time for diabetes patients and physicians, as well as money overall for the healthcare system.

Within her own diabetes panel, she estimates eliminating up to 300 physician appointments every three months—opening accessibility to other patients who must see a doctor.

"It alleviates the pressure on the doctors because I am not sending all these patients to a physician every three months to get a lab requisition for an A1C and then go back to the physician to follow up with the results.



Registered nurse Maggie Loucks will soon be able to order tests and prescribe medication for her diabetes patients following the completion of a course funded by RhPAP's Rural Education and Advanced Learning (REAL) program.

"I've been doing this for a long time, and I know what needs to be done."

At the time of publication, Loucks awaits licensing from her regulating body, the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, as she is believed to be the first RN from a PCN to have met the criteria.

Loucks says there are RNs with the same responsibility in other healthcare positions so she expects more PCN nurses will eventually follow suit.

"PCNs like to share our work so that we don't have to duplicate it," says Loucks. "That funding portion is amazing because it opens up opportunities," she says, noting RhPAP reimbursed her for the cost of the course and textbooks.

Rural Education and Advanced Learning (REAL)

68

Rural health professionals received funding to pursue continuing medical education opportunities.

11

Health disciplines received REAL funding.



*Watch **The CARE Course builds confidence in emergency teams in Vegreville.***

Rural nurse practitioner appreciates trauma training

By Lorena Franchuk

The nurse practitioner (NP) spends much of her time as a locum, providing temporary relief for health professionals who work in rural and remote areas of Alberta.

“Knowledge is power.”

The famous quote originally attributed to Francis Bacon has been around for centuries and still rings true for Sara Lee.

“It’s such a cliché, but really, knowledge is power and there’s never enough,” says Lee.

This is why she was eager to participate in the General Emergency Medicine Skills (GEMS) for Rural Health Professionals Course. The training is offered to rural physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants in partnership with RhPAP and the Shock Trauma Air Rescue Society (STARS) as a way to increase their comfort level and knowledge in emergency medicine.

“I found it extremely helpful for me. Nurse practitioners are highly varied in their scope and their experience,” explains Lee, who opened her own private practice in Medicine Hat last year.

“I don’t have a heavy trauma background ... so getting the trauma training was really important because it’s something that I have not had a ton of experience or history with.”

Lee is quick to point out that she is always cautious when she takes on a locum assignment and ensures she is working within her comfort level.

General Emergency Medicine Skills (GEMS) course

21

Rural health professionals received GEMS training, including physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants.

6

Rural healthcare professionals completed a subsequent STARS in-person simulation session.



Nurse practitioner Sara Lee enrolled in a General Emergency Medicine Skills (GEMS) course to help her feel more comfortable dealing with emergencies when she works as a locum throughout Alberta. — Photo supplied by Sara Lee

“I have emergency department training, I have ICU (intensive care unit) training, but I don’t have much trauma experience so I limit myself in trauma situations and revert the team to nurse procedures when those things come through the door,” she explains.

“GEMS was intended to increase my exposure and my confidence in those skills, so that maybe down the road, I can add it to my credentials and work to the full scope of an emergency department attending.”

GEMS helps rural practitioners learn at their own pace through online modules and finishes with a hands-on component provided by STARS. Lee says most NPs don’t receive official emergency department training, so she is always looking to enhance her knowledge to help when she does locum work.

Lee loves the adrenaline of the rural and remote locum work—she even helped in Jasper and Hinton during last summer’s wildfires. The mother-of-four now craves a more balanced lifestyle after spending about 50 per cent of her time away from home prior to establishing her private practice.

“I definitely hope to continue to work with the locum program,” says Lee, who grew up in Medicine Hat.

She hadn’t given rural medicine much thought until she spent time in Wabasca, a community nearly four hours north of Edmonton, where she practised for three years after completing her master’s degree in nursing.

There, Lee learned about the challenges rural communities and under-served people experience in healthcare and she wanted to do her part. Being a locum became an outlet for her to retain that rural connection.

“I hope to continue working locum ... to show what nurse practitioners are capable of, and where we can fill gaps. We’re not a complete replacement for physicians, obviously, but we like to be able to help Band-Aid where we can.”

Rural Physician Locum Services

RhPAP provides funding that allows Alberta Medical Association (AMA) Physician Locum Services® to offer short-term locum service for family physicians in rural areas.

Weekend Locum Program and the Seniors Weekend Program supports retention by reducing burnout, improving work-life balance, demonstrating system support, enhancing community stability, and making rural practice more attractive to new recruits.

873 locum requests were filled via the RhPAP-funded Weekend Locum Program and Seniors' Weekend Locum Program (administered by AMA).

Physician Locum Services®

378

Completed requests.

95%

Increase in completed requests over 10 years.

Seniors' Weekend Locum Program

495

Completed requests.

38%

Increase in completed requests over 10 years.

Focus on fostering strong relationships

Champion and deliver initiatives to attract, integrate, and retain rural health professionals by fostering strong relationships

Attraction, Integration and Retention Program

RhPAP's Rural Community Attraction, Integration and Retention Program offers rural Alberta communities resources to support the attraction, retention, and integration of healthcare providers to their area.

RhPAP works closely with rural Alberta communities to attract, integrate, and retain healthcare professionals through our AIR (Attraction, Integration, and Retention) initiatives. This includes supporting local attraction and retention committees, offering grants, workshops, customized coaching, and providing tools like the attraction, integration and retention Toolkit to help communities build welcoming environments and long-term strategies for the sustainability of Alberta's healthcare workforce.

"RhPAP is a great resource for our regional attraction and retention committee. Not just because of their financial support but also with the advice and experience that they provide us that allows us to make the best decisions for our communities."

– Athabasca/Boyle A&R Committee

Attraction, Integration and Retention

62

Attraction and retention committees supported by RhPAP.

171

Communities supported through Attraction and retention committees.

126

Healthcare professionals—47 physicians, 76 Internationally Educated Nurses (IENs), and three nurses—were successfully attracted and integrated into 37 rural Alberta communities.



Rimbey, AB



Athabasca, AB



RhPAP Calgary



RhPAP

Rural Community Attraction and Retention Grant

RhPAP offers \$1,000 grants to rural community-based groups to support their healthcare-based projects and initiatives in an effort to attract and retain their local healthcare workforce.

Rural Community Attraction and Retention Grant

15

\$1,000 community grants awarded.

19

Support local students pursuing health-related careers, fostering a homegrown pipeline of future professionals.

Biennial conference

Every second year, RhPAP hosts a Rural Community Conference that serves as an opportunity for rural communities to connect, share and learn about rural healthcare.

The 2024 RhPAP Rural Community Conference, held in Wainwright from October 8–10, 2024, brought together over 200 participants for three days of learning, networking, and collaboration.

Under the theme "Reflect. Reimagine. Refocus.," the conference addressed the evolving landscape of rural healthcare in Alberta, focusing on strategies for attracting and retaining healthcare professionals in rural areas. Keynote speaker Dr. Zayna Khayat, a health futurist with Deloitte Canada, delivered a dynamic presentation on the future of rural healthcare and the health workforce.

Other notable speakers included Kim Hyshka, who discussed meaningful civic engagement; Aileen Burke, who provided insights on political advocacy; Dr. Aaron Johnston and Dr. Mark Prins, who shared developments in medical education expansions in Lethbridge and Grande Prairie; and Dr. Gavin Parker, RhPAP board chair, who moderated a panel on rural healthcare strategies.

The conference also featured sessions hosted by RhPAP's Community Development and Engagement Team, offering attendees practical insights into attraction and retention of rural health professionals.



2024 RhPAP Rural Community Conference

216

Individuals attended.

78

Communities were represented.

93%

Participant satisfaction rate. These highly impactful gatherings have advanced knowledge exchange, accelerated adoption of best practices, and celebrated the achievements of rural healthcare providers and communities.



Watch *Highlights from the 2024 RhPAP Rural Community Conference in Wainwright, AB.*

Rhapsody Awards uplift rural communities

By Lorena Franchuk

Blairmore, AB

Appreciated. Recognized. Valued.

These were just a few of the words some Alberta health professionals described feeling after being awarded RhPAP's coveted Rhapsody Awards, a recognition program that began in 2002.

"It was a great honour to be nominated for the award, and, of course, to win the award," recalls Dr. Karen Lundgard, who has practised in Peace River for 45 years and continues to serve as associate zone medical director.

The family physician and rural generalist received the Rhapsody Physician Award in 2022. The Award recognizes the contributions of rural physicians, especially those unsung heroes, who provide Alberta rural communities with outstanding patient care and make notable contributions to medical practice and to their communities.

Dr. Lundgard says being nominated was special in itself, but winning and celebrating with friends, colleagues, and community members was the icing on the cake.

"I think it shows physicians that they are appreciated and that they are very valued in the community, and that their hard work does not go by without notice," says the doctor who is poised to retire from family practice next month.

Michele Austad describes a similar reaction at her clinic in Blairmore after they were chosen for the Rhapsody Healthcare Heroes award last year. The clinic manager says that winning the award was uplifting to the 10 physicians and the staff at the Crowsnest Medical Clinic, which serves close to 6,000 patients in southwestern Alberta.

"It's been a rough five years with COVID and all the changes in healthcare, so it was really meaningful for them to be recognized by people in the community for doing a good job," says Austad.

"The nomination was spearheaded by a patient. She did the nomination and got other people involved to say things so that makes clinic staff feel like they are doing something right. You don't hear happy stuff very often when you work in a medical clinic."

The Crowsnest Medical Clinic won the Rhapsody Healthcare Heroes Award after being nominated by a patient and other community members.

The Rhapsody Healthcare Heroes Award was established to pay tribute to healthcare providers that demonstrate superior commitment to their patients, healthcare team, and community.

Austad says it was refreshing to share the positive news with the community and thank everyone for their support.

"It was in the papers, even newspapers as far as Lethbridge and Calgary called me to write stories on us," Austad recalls.

"We put it on Facebook and said, 'We're so happy, thank you so much. It was nice to thank people as usually what we're posting is 'the phones are out, we don't have any vaccines left, or that kind of thing.'"

While the award recognized her as a physician, Dr. Lundgard is quick to point out that awards and recognition are just as important for health professionals who aren't always as visible and often work diligently behind the scenes.



Crowsnest Medical Clinic



Dr. Jacob Hoffman receives the 2024 Rhapsody Physician Award from Dr. Christine Ellis, RhPAP board member, at a special celebration event held in Olds on June 13, 2024.

Crowsnest Medical Clinic, recipients of the 2024 Rhapsody Healthcare Heroes Award.



Rhapsody Awards

2

Rhapsody Award recipients were selected.

15

Nominees celebrated representing rural communities in all zones of the province in 2025:

- Bonnyville
- Sundre
- Lac La Biche
- Ponoka
- Westlock
- Edson
- Viking
- Okotoks
- Taber
- Barrhead
- Spirit River
- Milk River
- Oyen
- Wabamun



Meet the Crowsnest Medical Clinic: 2024 RhPAP Rhapsody Healthcare Heroes Award recipient.

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, RhPAP will continue to build on the strong foundation established over the past 33 years. Guided by the 2024–2027 Strategic Plan and its five pillars of focus, RhPAP is becoming more agile, proactive, and purpose-driven in its efforts to support rural healthcare across Alberta.

As the organization prepares to launch new tools like the attraction and retention toolkit and expand programming, RhPAP's work remains grounded in community, collaboration, and innovation. The commitment of RhPAP staff, volunteers, and partners—spanning every corner of the province—is what drives their mission forward.

Together, strengthening the rural health workforce will support resilient communities and, most importantly, ensure that quality care remains close to home for all rural Albertans.



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Alexandre Grant
Public Member

RhPAP staff

RhPAP is supported by a diverse team of 25 professionals located across Alberta. Seventy-one per cent of RhPAP staff were born and raised in rural communities, while 83 per cent of RhPAP's Board of Directors live and work in rural Alberta, so the organization understands the unique challenges Alberta's rural communities face. This collective expertise ensures that RhPAP continues to fulfill its mission of improving rural healthcare access and supporting health professionals. Learn more at RhPAP.ca.

