



Covenant Health
Network of Excellence in
Seniors' Health and Wellness



Establishing Effective Resident and Family Councils

A project to increase family and resident engagement in Alberta continuing care centres

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Network of Excellence in Seniors' Health and Wellness

seniorsnetworkcovenant.ca



Executive Summary

Effective councils strive toward building strong partnerships between residents, family members and site staff and administration to improve the quality of life and care in our continuing care system. Effective Resident and Family Councils are a useful mechanism to: increase resident and family engagement; support effective communication; collaboratively problem solve for issue resolution; contribute to quality improvement initiatives.

In Alberta an estimated 70% of privately and publicly funded continuing care sites have at least one council involving residents, families or both. However, just because a council exists does not mean it is functioning well. Many councils struggle with resident and family engagement, having ineffective councils or council structures, difficulties in recruitment and keeping members, and a lack of support for their council. These challenges occur regardless of size, location or resident population. At this point in time there is no process for councils at different sites to connect to share successes, challenges, and develop solutions.

In 2015 Covenant's Network of Excellence in Seniors' Health and Wellness (the Network) reviewed literature for best practices for Resident and Family Councils and sent a survey to all Alberta continuing care sites. An Advisory and Planning Committee reviewed the information and provided input on the creation of a comprehensive [Resident and Family Council Toolkit: Creating Effective Councils in Continuing Care](#), pilot project, and resulting recommendations for implementation.

Nine sites were selected to participate in a nine-month pilot project to test the [toolkit](#) and other resources to support effective Resident and Family Councils. Twenty-eight individuals, including nine residents, six family members, four site administrators and nine site staff, were given copies of the [toolkit](#), participated in pilot activities including completing pre- and post-pilot surveys, focused post-pilot interviews and networking meetings.

The pilot project helped participating sites:

- improve meeting attendance
- make changes to their council structure, and
- improve council function

“This project was extremely useful. It has been a wonderful educational experience. Participating in this project has given us a valuable guide on how to set up a proper functioning council.”

-Pilot Participant

We learned many things from the project, but key among them were that networking meetings were helpful to all pilot sites. They had never had the opportunity to connect with other councils and share their learnings and experiences with one another and found this a very valuable way to get new ideas to try at their own council, and to deal with issues they were having. Pilot participants asked for a way to bring councils together to learn from one another as a highly desired, practical and tangible way to seed effective councils.

We also learned that the [toolkit](#) was valued by all pilot sites; 100% said it should be readily available across Alberta. Many tools in the toolkit were used by pilot participants and suggestions for improvement – which included editing for plain language, adding more information for less structured councils and creating a few more templates – were all incorporated into the final version.

Background

Why are Resident and Family Councils important?

Highly functioning Resident and Family Councils work collaboratively to improve the lives and care of residents in the care centre. They allow for open, honest two-way communication and give residents and family members an opportunity to help shape policy and procedure, problem solve and have input into quality improvement initiatives.

“Care that honours seniors is built on respect and compassion. Seniors and their loved ones become actively engaged in every aspect of care through direct participation and two-way communication. Seniors and their loved ones are informed of how care is provided and quality of life is promoted within the pragmatic realities of the limited resources available.”
-Shape Seniors' Care Campaign¹ Respondent

In Alberta, roughly 70% of continuing care sites have a Residents' Council, Family Council, Resident and Family Council or a combination of councils. These councils experience challenges, many of which are the same regardless of size, location or resident population.

Within sites, residents, family and staff are keen to work together to improve care and quality of life for residents. They are highly committed to this work, which is often a key purpose to forming a council. However, there is no established way for members of these councils to connect with other councils to share their challenges *and* successes and learn from each other.

What did we learn about Resident and Family Councils?

In 2015 Covenant's Network of Excellence in Seniors' Health and Wellness (the Network) looked at components of effective Resident and Family Councils. We reviewed literature for best practices and sent a survey to all Alberta continuing care sites. We brought this information to an Advisory and Planning Committee of researchers, rural and urban Continuing Care Administrators, Patient Relations staff, Alberta Health Services (AHS), and family members and residents, who provided input on the creation of a comprehensive [toolkit](#), pilot project, and recommendations for implementation.

Between September 2016 and April 2017 the Network ran a pilot project to test the [toolkit](#) and other resources to support effective Resident and Family Councils. Nine sites were selected to participate.



9 Pilot Sites

4

Urban Sites



5

Rural Sites



5

Large Sites
(100 or more beds)



4

Small Sites
(under 100 beds)



¹Covenant's Shape Seniors Care Campaign sought input from Albertans on what Seniors' care should look like. Go to <http://seniorsnetworkcovenant.ca/network-initiatives/help-shape-seniors-care-campaign-2015/> for a report on the findings.



All participating sites completed a pre-pilot and post-pilot survey, attended meetings and answered focused post-pilot interview questions. It became clear very quickly that all the sites, whether they were small or large, urban or rural, had very similar challenges when it came to their councils.



The Network organized networking meetings that provided education sessions, time to discuss the [toolkit](#) and round table discussions. Education sessions included information on:

- Family Involvement: Engaging Families and Family Council Success Stories
- Setting the Stage for Effective Resident and Family Council Leadership
- Resident and Family Engagement
- Frameworks and Criteria for Priority Setting; Priority Setting Exercise
- Exploring the Purpose and Significance of Resident Councils

“The networking meetings let us know that we aren’t alone in our struggles, particularly family engagement. I really appreciated the guest speakers; I always got pointers from the speakers on their topics.”

-Pilot Participant

We learned many things during the pilot project, but some things that really stood out are:

- The networking meetings were highly appreciated by all participating sites. This was the first time they had been able to connect with other councils and share their learnings and experiences with one another. They all found this a very valuable way to get new ideas to try at their own council, and to deal with issues they were having.
 - Supporting a way to bring councils together to learn from one another is a highly desired, practical and tangible way to seed effective councils.
- Family and resident engagement was a common challenge experienced by most sites. Pilot sites told us they would like to see more family and residents at their council meetings. All were looking for tips on how to improve involvement and engagement of family members and residents.
- All pilot sites thought that the [toolkit](#) should be shared widely across Alberta, though the [toolkit](#) itself was used in varying degrees by pilot sites depending on site-specific needs and progress.



What did we learn?

How were the councils at the pilot sites functioning before the pilot started?

Council operation

Forty-seven percent of respondents to a pre-pilot survey said that their councils were functioning well; 33% identified they had minor to moderate issues to solve. A smaller percentage had large issues to deal with (13%). Most pilot sites ($\geq 70\%$) had councils that had been operating for more than two years. Most pilot sites ($\geq 70\%$) held council meetings monthly.

Council purpose and considerations

Pilot participants told us that effective councils helped to increase engagement of residents and families and acted as an avenue for communicating information and obtaining input. Councils are also used as an avenue to resolve issues and concerns that impact many residents and family.

Pilot participants voiced that the most important things to consider for a council are choosing a structure that works best for the site, taking the resident population, site size and working structures into consideration. It is also important to find the right people to be involved such as keen staff, family members and residents who can commit the time required and provide input. It is also essential to recognize that each council is unique to the site. Structures will vary between sites and adapt as necessary as the demographics of the site and maturity of the council changes over time.

Pilot participants said they were looking for support to help them increase resident and family engagement and create sustainable, more effective councils.

What impact did the pilot project have?

Attendance at council meetings improved

Focused attention on improving resident and family councils resulted in increased involvement of the site administrators; 56% of the post-pilot survey respondents said the site administrator attended at least 80% of their council meetings during the pilot – this was a 25% increase in involvement from the beginning of the project.

Many sites reported an increase in overall attendance in their meetings; half of the respondents reported an increase in resident and family member attendance while a quarter saw an increase in both site staff as well as site administrator attendance.

Sites explored various council structures

One of the areas explored during the pilot was related to council structure, and to discussion of the benefits of both informal and more formal structures, dependant on the wishes and desires of council participants. At the end of the pilot, a number of sites had begun to adopt a more informal structure of shared responsibility for the council work, as compared to previous formal structures requiring council executive positions.



The pilot project helped improve council function

The majority of sites (65%) saw improvement to their council during the pilot. The remaining 35% of sites said they planned to make changes to their council in the future informed by their participation in the pilot project and project's findings.

Networking Meetings were helpful to all pilot sites

Most participants found the networking meetings useful or very useful as a means to discuss and explore common issues and challenges. All of the people who completed the post-pilot survey (100%) felt networking with other sites around effective RFCs was very valuable and wanted to see this continue in the future. Participants recommended that size and location of sites be factored into groupings for networking meetings.

Participants noted that provision of dedicated resources to connect and support sites with their councils would be highly valuable. For example, a navigator or champion who could organize meetings and facilitate interactions between councils could enhance effective RFCs.

The Resident and Family Council Toolkit was valued by all pilot sites

Many tools in the toolkit were used by pilot participants including those for evaluating councils, defining roles, purpose, function and expectations and templates for assessing resident and family member interest in involvement. The majority of people indicated that the [toolkit](#) was useful or very useful; 100% said the toolkit should be available for all Alberta continuing care sites.

Recommendations for Implementation

The Network, with input from the Advisory Committee and pilot participants, identified key recommendations to help establish effective Resident and Family Councils in all continuing care sites and facilitate resident and family engagement:

- Recognize residents and families as partners in continuing care.
- Demonstrate the site's commitment to councils by ensuring senior site administration is involved as a key partner with a resident and/or family member on the council.
- Broadly disseminate the comprehensive on-line toolkit developed for the pilot project to all Alberta Continuing Care sites.
- Develop regional, zonal and/or provincial networking opportunities that involve and engage family in continuing care centres that could include:
- Establish a provincial Resident and Family Council information and support service office for all Alberta continuing care sites to access that would: develop and disseminate resource materials and workshops in areas of identified need; facilitate support to continuing care RFC meetings upon request; develop a resource library for access to materials and tools; and provide training sessions to Alberta continuing care sites on identified areas of issue and access to phone and Skype support upon request.



Final Thoughts

Fully functioning councils are a great benefit, not only to the continuing care centre, but to the residents and families at the site. They improve communication, quality of life, quality of care and collaboration and have large, positive impacts on both resident and family satisfaction.

Many sites are aware of the benefits of councils but do not have the knowledge or resources to figure out how to increase the effectiveness of their current councils or to get a new one started. Our comprehensive [toolkit](#) was developed to help residents, family members and site operators get councils started and functioning effectively, but it is not always enough on its own.

The Network is supporting the development and convening of a Covenant network of Resident and Family Councils to support the sharing of ideas, successes, issues and solutions between councils at Covenant family sites. However, it would be ideal if other resources were available provincially, such as networking meetings, to help sites connect and find solutions for problems that they are having as well as share their successes.