

# Volunteer Navigators Connect Older Adults in Rural Communities to Resources and Supports

*Project by Wendy Duggleby, PhD, Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta*

Older adults living with advanced chronic illness in rural communities often have many symptoms and a poorer quality of life until they are able to connect with the sparsely located resources they need. The Innovation Fund, by Covenant's Network of Excellence in Seniors Health and Wellness, provided seed funding for *Navigation Partnerships: Connecting, Assessing, Resourcing and Engaging Older Persons, Families and Communities (Nav-CARE)*. This project implemented and evaluated the value of using trained volunteer navigators to improve the quality of life of older adults living at home with serious illness.

Building upon a successful collaboration with researchers using a volunteer navigator/healthcare provider partnership in rural BC, the Alberta Nav-CARE project was launched. This work was led by Wendy Duggleby, PhD, RN, from the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta and Barb Pesut, PhD, RN, from the School of Nursing at the University of British Columbia. Their team developed specialized volunteer navigator training modules and then trialed them in the rural Alberta communities of Camrose and Killam. Over the course of a year, nine volunteer navigators supported by one specially trained nurse navigator worked together to successfully connect 23 older rural adults with serious illnesses to the appropriate resources, information, and people to address their needs. This led to an increase in their independence and community connections.

"It's been a win-win situation for everybody," says Wendy Duggleby. Navigation services provide older adults with support, education and connection to resources in the community that help improve their quality of life and allow them to remain in their own homes and communities. Volunteers describe the navigation role as rewarding and find "a sense of satisfaction in knowing you have assisted someone, even it's in a small, little way." As for the seniors participating in the program, their satisfaction is obvious. "I can't get out much anymore and the volunteer visits keep me connected to the community and provide me with a link to the resources I need," says one participant. Another adds that "everybody deserves to have this kind of program in their life."

While the Network's funding ended as of March 31, 2018, the sustainability and spread of the program has been a true success story. The entire Nav-CARE program will be transitioned over to the Hospice Society of Camrose and District, allowing it to continue in Camrose and Killam. Thanks to additional funding from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, the Canadian Cancer Society Research Institute, BC Centre of Palliative Care and the Max Bell Foundation, Nav-CARE has now been implemented in 11 sites across Canada with funding available for another 15. An evidence-informed Nav-CARE toolkit is currently being developed to support organizations as they tailor and implement the program in their community.