



# The Rural Health Professions Action Plan Strategic Plan 2020-2024

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## About RhPAP

For nearly three decades, the Rural Health Professions Action Plan (RhPAP) has supported the efforts of rural Albertans to maintain an accessible health workforce close to home.

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 health care.

Under the guidance of a multi-disciplinary Board of Directors, twenty staff have the honour and privilege to serve rural Albertans, doing their utmost to support rural health professionals and communities.

RhPAP is an open and transparent public organization. To learn more about the organization, please visit: <https://rhpap.ca>

## Strategic Plan Executive Summary

Over the past three fiscal years, RhPAP refined the programs and services it offers to rural Albertan communities. At the end of fiscal year 2019/2020, we are proud that all RhPAP programs and services reached maximum participation and maintained operational/cost efficiency.

RhPAP's strength is in our ability to engage rural Albertan communities, drawing upon and working with amazing rural Albertans. We work hard to identify and understand the needs of these communities and to help them develop and implement a plan to meet their community health workforce requirements. We want to support these communities, so they have the right health-care practitioners providing the right care, on time, every time.

Based on our engagement successes and program growth, expectation of stable funding, our strategy for 2020 – 2024 means staying the course. Going from a three year to a four-year strategic plan will align our work with the traditional three-year funding grant from Alberta Health.

Our organization will continue to support rural physicians, medical residents and students, allied health and nursing, and rural community development and engagement. Part of this support involves continuing to enhance the rural voice when it comes to health needs and building awareness of these needs.

Growth areas, dependant on opportunities and new resources, will be focused on the attraction and retention of health professionals, to rural communities with the greatest need.

## The Plan

### Vision

Rural Albertan communities have the appropriate health workforce to effectively deliver the health services they need to thrive.

### Mission

Support rural Alberta communities in their efforts to keep health care close to home.

### Our Promise

We are committed to fostering and building relationships with rural communities, stakeholders, partners, learners, and each other to encourage better access to rural health.

### 2020-2024 Goals

1. Support the attraction and retention of family physicians, medical residents, and medical students to rural Alberta.
2. Grow digital and traditional media strategies to influence perceptions of health care in rural Alberta.
3. Grow the capacity of rural community attraction and retention committees to positively influence the experiences of their local health-care professionals and students.
4. Expand and formalize RhPAP's programs to other key rural health professionals.
5. Bring the rural health-care voice to government and related key stakeholders.

**Goal 1:** Support the attraction and retention of family physicians, medical residents, and medical students to rural Alberta.

First and foremost, RhPAP will continue to support the professional development of medical students, resident physicians, and practising rural family physicians as we have for decades.

To achieve Goal 1, RhPAP will do as follows:

**Support the medical education of practising rural physicians and the specialized rural physician locum program.**

- Continue to partner with recognized leaders in continuing medical education and professional development.
- RhPAP offers rural physicians' opportunities to develop or enhance their skills, including the following programs: Comprehensive Approaches to Rural Emergencies (CARE) Course, Emergency Department Echo (EDE) Point-of-Care Ultrasound Course, General Emergency Medicine Skills (GEMS) Course, and General Practitioner and Anaesthesiologist (GPA) and General Practitioner and Oncologist (GPO) training offered through the Peter K. Lindsay Enrichment Program.
- Maintain RhPAP's long-standing partnerships with the Office of Continuing Medical Education & Professional Development Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary in order to offer rural-focused continuing professional development opportunities.

**Continue to support the Alberta Medical Association Rural Physician Locum Program.**

**Provide medical residents and medical students fully-serviced rural housing at no cost to them during their placements.**

Through our partnerships with the University of Calgary and University of Alberta Medical Schools, RhPAP will continue to maintain approximately 130 rural residential properties to provide free and fully-serviced accommodations for medical residents and students to enable a seamless, positive, rural work experience, laying the groundwork for these learners to return to rural after graduation.

**Outcomes:**

- Increased attraction and retention of physicians in rural Alberta.
- Increased exposure to rural learning and rural life for medical students and resident physicians.

## Goal 2: Grow digital and traditional media strategies to influence perceptions of health care in rural Alberta.

For generations, weekly newspapers have served as the voice of rural communities. In recent years, traditional media has been beset with declining revenues and readership, prompting news organizations to consolidate operations, while shifting their focus to larger urban audiences.

In response, rural audiences are moving to online and mobile platforms to access news and information and to stay connected. The expansion of rural broadband and the growth of 4G and 5G wireless technology across the province means digital media is becoming the predominant way rural Albertans access information. Digital platforms are cost-effective, universally accessible, and easily digestible for busy rural audiences.

As an organization, RhPAP has optimized its online presence using email and a variety of social media channels—primarily Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. Through these platforms, we continue to engage our rural audiences and health-care stakeholders in positive conversations, presenting rural Alberta, and working in rural health care as the great opportunity it is. Our enthusiasm to collaborate with our partners in health care expands our reach and ensures RhPAP retains its reputation as a trusted resource and force for positivity within the rural health-care workforce realm.

Our story-telling efforts online also focus on rural health care's success stories and opportunities. RhPAP's province-wide network of staff and freelance storytellers have identified hundreds of stories that demonstrate both how innovative rural Alberta communities have met their health workforce needs and the benefits of calling rural Alberta home. We are particularly interested in reminding our audiences what wonderful places our rural communities are in which to live and raise a family, and the opportunities these communities provide for a health professional to practise to their full scope. By utilizing a mix of print, video, and visual media, our communications provide exemplars for rural Albertans to emulate in their own health professional attraction and retention efforts.

To achieve Goal 2, RhPAP will do as follows:

### **Use media and technology to maximize the sharing of positive rural health-care stories**

Continue to advance our marketing and communications plan through our dynamic website and multi-media platforms to amplify the voice of rural health care and the rural health workforce.

### **Highlight accomplishments in rural health care**

Through the Rhapsody Awards and Alberta Rural Health Week as well as articles in our online publications, highlight the stories and achievements of community members and health professionals from across rural Alberta.

**Outcome:**

- Encourage the public to have a more positive view of living and working in rural communities.
- Strengthening the ability of these communities to attract and retain health professionals.

**Goal 3: Grow the capacity of rural community attraction and retention committees to positively influence the experiences of their local health-care professionals and students.**

The Community Development and Engagement (CD&E) Team works directly with rural communities to support the health professional workforce that delivers health care to rural Alberta. Our rural-Alberta-based consultant team brings an intimate knowledge of health care to their work with 150 rural Alberta communities. This highly skilled team participates in and facilitates dozens of attraction and retention events, education and health professional appreciation events annually, contributing to the understanding of health workforce opportunities and issues in rural Alberta.

The CD&E Program adheres to a community development philosophy with a grassroots, strength-based approach that offers rural Alberta an opportunity to showcase its unique assets, contributing significantly to the attraction and retention of health professionals and their families. Within this context, CD&E rural community consultants support rural Albertans to build community specific strategies to attract and retain health providers to their communities.

CD&E program strategies and supports are based on past successes and research that reinforces what has worked and continues to work in the attraction and retention of rural Alberta's health workforce. The importance of community involvement in these efforts is well documented, including several studies that specifically focus on rural Alberta. You will find recent RhPAP research on this topic at <https://rhpap.ca/building-on-success/>.

The CD&E Program also links students with rural communities and their health professionals. The intent of the program is to facilitate experiences where rural high school students explore the health profession opportunities in their own communities, and post-secondary students experience the lifestyle and scope of practice offered in rural Alberta. RhPAP supports attraction and retention committees to seek out opportunities to showcase their communities to learners, recognizing these opportunities serve as an effective attraction strategy.

Many program resources valued by rural attraction and retention committees are related to learning opportunities that enhance rural community building and focus on results-based planning. Attraction and retention committees have participated in RhPAP-facilitated, face-to-face workshops, webinars, and provincial conferences focused on further strengthening local

attraction and retention skills, resources, and capacities. Our foray into online education, colloquially known inside RhPAP as RhPAP U, will continue, building on its successes to date.

RhPAP is committed to better serving the northern region of our province, in part by expanding unique opportunities for high school and university student learners to gain hands-on exposure to working in the health-care sector.

In specific regard to northern Indigenous communities, the foundation for RhPAP's support to Indigenous health and well-being begins there. RhPAP is interested in establishing a two-directional information sharing and education program between RhPAP and Indigenous communities. In addition, RhPAP will raise awareness of health career options for Indigenous students, encouraging interest in entering health career programs in the hopes of eventually working as health professionals in rural and/or Indigenous communities. Relevant continuing medical education and skills enrichment opportunities for Indigenous health professionals and a focus on the attraction and retention of culturally sensitive health professionals for Indigenous communities provide opportunities to enhance local health-care provision overall.

To achieve Goal 3, RhPAP will do as follows:

**Serve as a resource for rural community attraction and retention committees**

Support rural community attraction and retention committees through the provision of a range of learning opportunities and focused resources to support these committees in their efforts.

**Expand attraction and retention strategies to health professionals across disciplines**

Strengthen attraction and retention committee understanding of, and support for, a broader range of rural Alberta health professionals.

**Coordinate health career events and skills weekends**

Collaborate with rural community attraction and retention committees, post-secondary institutions and high schools to host career events and skills weekends.

**Leverage internet resources to expand and enable access to learning**

Continue the development and implementation of RhPAP's community development webinar series while assessing other innovative learning opportunities for the attraction and retention committees RhPAP supports.

**Outcome:**

Rural communities will achieve greater long-term success in their health workforce attraction and retention efforts.



#### Goal 4: Expand and formalize RhPAP's programs to other key rural health professionals.

Over the next four years, RhPAP will continue to build rural community attraction and attention supports for allied health professionals, midwives, and nurse professionals. In addition, RhPAP knows first-hand that there is increasing need to ensure rural communities have health professionals, such as occupational and physical therapists, mental health specialists and pharmacists, living and working in their communities.

RhPAP has expanded its accommodations work in order to house other health-care students beyond medical students and resident physicians in RhPAP's rural properties. The organization supports the provision of several courses to multi-disciplinary participants including the Comprehensive Approaches to Rural Emergencies (CARE), Emergency Department Echo (EDE) Point-of-care Ultrasound, and the General Emergency Medicine Skills (GEMS) Courses and the Financial Incentives for Rural Staff Training (FIRST) Program that allows multi-disciplinary teams to build their own collaborative training sessions when the funding for such training does not already exist. RhPAP will expand more of our attraction and retention programs to other health professionals.

To achieve Goal 4, RhPAP will work with Alberta Health Services and their Health Professions Strategy and Practice Team, to do as follows:

1. Align RhPAP attraction and retention committees' rural health professional support efforts with the area's most critical needs.
2. Develop an allied health specialty orientation program.
3. Develop a student learning accommodation program, aligning with RhPAP's medical resident/student housing program, for a variety of health professions.

#### **Outcome:**

- Increase the supply of needed health professionals to rural Alberta communities.

#### Goal 5: Bring the rural health-care voice to government and related key stakeholders.

For RhPAP's 2017-2020 Strategic Plan, we asked 550 rural stakeholders what their main expectations were for a renewed RhPAP. The number one response from these stakeholders was that RhPAP should help rural Alberta to be heard, to be seen in a positive light – the same way rural Albertans see their own communities. RhPAP has defines "improving the rural voice" as enhancing awareness of the experience and perspective of rural Alberta and focusing on its health-care successes and innovations.

Much of RhPAP's formal communications work is focused on enhancing the rural voice. Nevertheless, this work is not limited to the Communications Team. RhPAP's Community Development and Engagement Team is very hands-on about ensuring they understand the health workforce issues and challenges of each rural community with which they work. Through

their efforts and connections, related research, and key contacts established through RhPAP's Board of Directors and Executive Director, RhPAP helps to inform health leaders about the priorities and perspectives of rural Albertans.

To achieve Goal #5, RhPAP will do as follows:

**Create partnerships to advance rural health-care research and planning activities**

Partner with universities, rural communities, and other stakeholders to better understand health workforce issues within rural communities, focusing on improving access to health care. To learn from rural Albertans through comprehensive, accessible surveys.

**Increase awareness of and support for rural indigenous communities' health professional needs and ensuring that health professionals engaged through attraction and retention efforts are knowledgeable about the differential needs of indigenous communities**

Build partnerships between Indigenous communities, community partners, and local rural health professionals to support the attraction and retention of culturally-sensitive health-care practitioners to indigenous communities.

**Outcomes:**

- Improved collaboration and information sharing between communities, health professionals, educational institutions, key health leader decision makers and other stakeholders.
- Maintenance of the lines of communication between rural communities and key stakeholders to enable continued attraction and retention work.
- A local and stable health workforce in rural Alberta communities.

## RhPAP Board of Directors

The current RhPAP Board of Directors is based on an advisory and policy model managed by up to twelve directors: three appointed by the Alberta Medical Association, two appointed by the Health Boards of Alberta, and one appointed by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta with additional representation from the Health Quality Council of Alberta, the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta, Rural Municipalities of Alberta, and one public member. Our influential Board of Directors is composed of health and rural community leaders from across Alberta. Their expertise and knowledge of the issues affecting rural communities allows RhPAP to serve as a respected rural voice to the provincial government on issues related to rural health workforce planning.

You can meet our Board at <https://rhpap.ca/about/board-of-directors/>



## RhPAP Staff

With staff located throughout Alberta, RhPAP does as follows:

- Helps rural Albertans build strategies to attract and retain health care professionals within their communities.
- Provides accommodations to family medicine resident physicians and students from both Alberta medical schools as they study and practise medicine in rural Alberta communities.
- Enables practising rural Alberta physicians and multi-disciplinary teams to acquire continuing medical education.
- Supports the provision of locum coverage for physicians in underserved areas
- Brings your voice to the provincial government on issues related to rural health workforce and physician resource planning.

RhPAP also depends on the support of our friends and partners in health care, government, and post-secondary education to continue meeting the needs of our rural Alberta communities.

You can meet our staff at <https://rhpap.ca/about/our-staff/>

## Our Funder

RhPAP and its Board and staff are deeply grateful to the Government of Alberta's Ministry of Health for continued funding and a collaborative partnership in serving rural Alberta.

To learn more about the Ministry of Health, visit <https://www.alberta.ca/health.aspx>

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Respectfully shared,

Bernard C. Anderson, *MPA, MAdEd*  
Executive Director / Chief Executive Officer  
Rural Health Professions Action Plan