

Access to Physicians Supports Rural Economic Development

Issue

Business growth in rural communities is directly impacted by access to physician care.

Background

The ability of rural residents to access health care provided by rural physicians is of great importance to Alberta's economic recovery and long-term prosperity in the province. With the growing concern of physicians leaving rural communities, residents of rural communities are at risk of losing much more than local medical care; reduced access to physician care also impacts businesses' ability to attract skilled workers and grow which, in turn, impacts the vitality and sustainability of rural communities.¹²³

Economic Development

Physician shortages negatively impact the business community's ability to recruit and retain employees; people want and need accessible health care for their families. Employers in underserved areas report lost productivity and increased absenteeism because employees need to invest their time—and by extension, their employers' time—accessing out-of-town health facilities and physician care.⁴⁵ The increased costs of staff recruitment and lower productivity due to inadequate access to medical care can be a significant factor in location decisions for business. This may influence companies to locate in other areas, negatively impacting Alberta and Canada's competitiveness in the world economy.

Studies show rural physicians' economic contributions to a community can be as important as their medical contributions. Physicians employ people and maintain brick-and-mortar locations, both of which use local services and contribute to local taxes. Travel required to access healthcare services and physicians outside of a local community impacts the local economy in another way—while individuals seek medical attention elsewhere, they are also spending their money outside of their community.⁶ *Sustainable healthcare*

¹ Investing in rural Healthcare: An Economic Stimulus for Canada

<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FINA/Brief/BR10006555/brexternal/CollegeOfFamilyPhysiciansOfCanada-e.pdf>

² Physicians Offices in Canada: Assessing Their Economic Footprint

https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/health-advocacy/activity/physicians_%20offices_canada_economic_footprint_2017_e.pdf

³ CMA Brief: Small Business Perspectives of Physician Medical Practices in Canada

<https://policybase.cma.ca/documents/Briefpdf/BR2016-05.pdf>

⁴ The Economic Cost of Wait Times in Canada

<https://www.cimca.ca/i/m/TheCentreForSpatialEconomics-Jun06.pdf> ⁵ CMA Position Statement:

Ensuring Equitable Access to Care: Strategies for Governments, Health System Planners, and the Medical Profession <https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/2018-11/PD14-04-e.pdf>

⁶ Want to see the economic impact of a doctor? Visit a small town. <https://www.ama-assn.org/practicemanagement/economics/want-see-economic-impact-doctor-visit-small-town>

The business case for maintaining physicians in rural communities extends to the broader healthcare system. Rural physicians typically carry a greater practice burden than their urban colleagues.¹ They have greater population-to-physician ratios, broader scopes of practice, and less support than a typical urban practice. These added costs affect the overhead costs that they incur. For this reason, rural physicians are affected more than their urban counterparts by physician shortage and government funding.

Rural physician training in rural areas: A proven model

Research, including that of the Canadian Medical Association, and experience in other provinces, such as Ontario and British Columbia, indicates that medical education in rural areas is an effective model for addressing the rural physician shortage. Programs such as those developed by the Alberta Rural Physician Action Plan are not only alleviating the overall shortage of family physicians in their provinces but are targeting both the physician needs and community needs in rural areas.²

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Recognize the economic and social impact physicians have on SMEs and communities when negotiating with physicians; and
2. Create healthcare infrastructure that adequately supports the attraction and retention of physicians in rural Alberta communities to ensure an adequate level of physicians in rural communities.

¹ Review of Family Medicine Within Rural and Remote Canada: Education, Practice, and Policy https://portal.cfpc.ca/resourcesdocs/uploadedFiles/Publications/News_Releases/News_Items/ARFM_Background_Paper_Eng_WEB_FINAL.pdf

² The Economic Impact of Canada's Faculties of Medicine and Health Science Partners https://www.longwoods.com/articles/images/Economic_Impact_Study_Report_FINAL_EN.pdf

