

Access to Physicians and Licensed Health Care Professionals Supports Rural Economic Development (2023)

Issue

Business growth in rural communities is directly impacted by access to physicians and licensed health care professionals.

Background

The ability of rural residents to access health care provided by rural physicians and licensed health care professionals (HCP) 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 and HCP care also impacts businesses' ability to attract skilled workers and grow which, in turn, impacts the vitality and sustainability of rural communities.²⁶⁴

Economic Development

Physician and HCP 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 medical care.²⁶⁵ 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 HCPs' economic contributions to a community can be as important as their medical contributions. Physicians and HCPs 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.²⁶⁶

Sustainable healthcare

²⁶⁴ Investing in rural Healthcare: An Economic Stimulus for Canada <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FINA/Brief/BR10006555/br-external/CollegeOfFamilyPhysiciansOfCanada-e.pdf>

²⁶⁵ The Economic Cost of Wait Times in Canada <https://www.cimca.ca/i/m/TheCentreForSpatialEconomics-Jun06.pdf>

²⁶⁶ Want to see the economic impact of a doctor? Visit a small town. <https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/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.²⁶⁷ 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 and HCP 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.²⁶⁸

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Recognize the economic and social impact physicians and other licensed health care professionals have on SMEs and communities when negotiating with physicians and other licensed health care professionals; and
2. Create healthcare infrastructure that adequately supports the attraction and retention of physicians and other licensed health care professionals in rural Alberta communities to ensure an adequate level in rural communities.
3. Work with the College of Physicians and Surgeons and Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS) to:
 - a. Prioritize admissions of Albertans into medical programs; and,
 - b. Restructure the residency placement process to allocate graduates of Alberta universities into Alberta's residency positions.

²⁶⁷ 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

²⁶⁸ 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