

# Community Collaboration to Improve Health Care Access of Northern Residents

## The Challenge

Challenges in accessing health services are related to local services, itinerant services, and services for which residents must leave their communities. Such health services include primary health care, diagnostics, obstetrical and surgical services, dialysis, home care, emergency services, mental health services, preventative services and health promotion/education. Related issues of transportation compound the difficulties.

## The Research Approach

Participatory action research employed at the community level blends scientific inquiry with learning and political action. The research plan included community meetings, focus groups and interviews with northern residents and health providers about their experiences related to accessing health services. As jurisdictional issues often plague northern health service delivery, the participation of Manitoba Health, Saskatchewan Health and Health Canada is important.

## The Goal

Information was gathered and organized in a manner that is useful for future program planning, service delivery and health policy development. The forum created facilitates dialogue among stakeholders, not only to identify the issues but also to generate creative and useful solutions to the problems. The ability to use this process will remain in communities.

## The Plan

Inclusion of community knowledge, personal experiences and other non-scientific ways of knowing empowers northern community members in identifying issues and generating solutions. Raising awareness and knowledge sharing among participants regarding the issues and potential solutions and problem-solving strategies is key.

## Partners

Partners in **Manitoba** include: Bayline Regional Round Table members - Cormorant; Thicket Portage; Pickwitonei; Wabowden; Illford and War Lake; Burntwood Regional Health Authority; and NOR-MAN Regional Health Authority.

Partners in **Saskatchewan** include: Athabasca Health Authority; Fond du Lac Denesuline Nation; Black Lake Denesuline Nation; Uranium City; Camsell Portage; Stony Rapids; Mamawetan-Churchill Regional Health Authority; Pinehouse Lake; La Ronge.

## Manitoba Research Findings

Research findings from Manitoba include broad system wide concerns, which are viewed as issues that underpin the entire provincial health care system. Emphasis is on understanding the unique needs of isolated communities in the north. The ability to provide necessary services in small remote communities is difficult, as is building trusting relationships when staff turnover is high. Emergency response, dental care and home care often were flagged as needing improvement. Difficulties with long waiting periods, a lack of physicians, and a lack of coordination of services were identified. Travel to Winnipeg for specialized services is complicated and distance compounds the need for better coordination of services and appointments. Navigation of the system was an issue.

## Saskatchewan Research Findings

Research findings from Saskatchewan highlight concerns related to transportation policy, funding models and local availability of services and health care professionals. The value of local and regional services and staff was recognized and appreciated. Participants spoke of hardships experienced when traveling great distances at personal expense to obtain service; hardships compounded by a lack of awareness by service providers and support staff in the south. Communication between patients and service providers needs improvement; ways to address language and information barriers are needed.

## Project Outcomes

A number of creative tools and venues are being utilized. Reports, articles and case studies are being developed for publication and as teaching tools in professional programs to educate health professionals. To foster cross-border dialogue a Manitoba-Saskatchewan workshop was hosted by the Rural Development Institute, Brandon University and the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit, University of Regina, April 2008 to bring community residents, health service providers, policy makers and researchers together. Health providers and residents plan to continue ongoing dialogue across northern Saskatchewan and northern Manitoba.

## Contact

Alison Moss, MRD, Rural Development Institute, Brandon University  
(204) 571-8553 [mossa@brandonu.ca](mailto:mossa@brandonu.ca)

Fran Racher, RN PhD, School of Health Studies, Brandon University  
(204) 727-7414 [racher@brandonu.ca](mailto:racher@brandonu.ca)

Laine Mosset, MRD, Rural Development Institute, Brandon University  
[mossett@brandonu.ca](mailto:mossett@brandonu.ca)

