



## Westlock Dementia Working Group Community Team Pandemic Response Case Study

### Background

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the enforcement of physical distancing was a first line of defense. Although the physical safety of all persons was of utmost priority, the public health measures protecting us impacted individual mental health, and the psychosocial aspects of our lives. Due to broad and continuing impacts of the pandemic and the nature of arising needs, community-level response was, and continued to be required in order to act quickly and efficiently. During the height of the pandemic and in the recovery stages, multi-sector community teams were key in local response efforts. Through the pandemic's progression, older adults were identified as being one of the most susceptible and disproportionately affected groups. Persons living with dementia and their care givers were and continue to be among some of the most vulnerable. The needs of those living in the community evolved over the course of the pandemic, and even with public health restrictions lifted many of these needs continue, and new ones have come to light. It is still imperative for individuals to find a way to 'come together' to ensure no one is alone or struggling. COVID-19 had an impact in all communities, but rural communities were uniquely impacted due to their geographic location, and the pre-existing realities of limited resources. During the pandemic, communities were in many ways, left to create and adopt their own innovative ways to respond to local needs. As individuals and communities continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic it is important to highlight how leveraging and adapting existing community infrastructures and resources, multi-sector community teams have been able to find creative ways to meet needs of those living in their respective communities affected by dementia.

### Westlock Dementia Working Group

Like many local organizations and programs, the *Westlock Dementia Working Group* (working group) experienced changes over the course of the pandemic. Early on, the structure and membership shifted as some group members were deployed to support pandemic efforts. As well, other members' participation fluctuated because of response efforts required within their own programs and organizations.





Despite this, the working group continues to have long-standing members from Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), Hope Resource Centre, Westlock Voices of Seniors, Alberta Health Services, community members and those with lived experience. In early 2022, the group welcomed involvement of the Community Youth Coordinator from FCSS. She has been able to leverage her involvement with community youth to the working group's activities to expand intergenerational activity.

This group continues to be committed to making a difference for those living with dementia in their community.

### Addressing Local Needs

Early on in their development, the group developed an objective to provide education around seniors' needs and dementia – both helped to mitigate stigma associated with dementia and promote healthy aging in their local community. They took the opportunity during various Seniors' Week events in June 2019 to collect input from seniors and those with lived experience, and from these consultations vulnerability, isolation, loneliness, and caregiving responsibilities were identified as concerns.

To address these local needs, the group focused on how to provide regular, accessible activities designed to offer opportunities for socialization, volunteering, entertainment, and education. A monthly *Dinner Club* was chosen as a way to meet the needs, and extensive planning was initiated.

Leading up to the launch of the Dinner Club, the group promoted awareness of dementia in several ways:

- Post card invites
- Local library showed a movie, "What They Had," and displayed dementia and Alzheimer related books and movies
- Human-interest story in local newspaper
- Aspen Primary Care Network wrote three articles for the local newspaper about dementia
- Local church provided facility to show "Caregivers Club" from CBC

The Dinner Club program generated excitement locally, and because of their promotion a very successful first Dinner Club was held in February 2019. Over 80 people attended, and subsequent sessions were lining up to be well attended until pandemic restrictions brought the Dinner Club to an abrupt halt.





FCSS also had a number of *Parking-Lot Parties* – gatherings where community members could come for a grab-and-go meal and stay for conversation if they chose to. These events were held at various times of day which led them to connect with a variety of community members. In the grab-and-go meals, there was education materials and resources, so even if someone chose to not stay, there was still increased awareness of resources and support.

### Adjusting to Continue to Meet Local Needs

Those living in the community of Westlock continued to have evolving needs over the course of the pandemic. Some such as loneliness, and isolation were exacerbated. The working group was determined to make a difference for persons with dementia and carers in the Westlock area, and a decision was made to pull efforts to advance this work into FCSS under a *Building Compassionate Communities* project. The goal is to make Westlock a dementia-friendly, and compassionate community through engagement, education/awareness events, and meaningful interactions.

Through *Building Compassionate Communities*, several creative activities have been initiated to support the community as it continues to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of a focus on creating intergenerational opportunities, youth and young adults participated in creating 250 *Sensory Kits*. The FCSS Teen Summer Program and the Westlock Alliance Church Vacation Bible School helped with assembly and during it dementia-related education was provided by the working group, and the Alzheimer Society of Alberta and Northwest Territories. These Sensory Kits provide multiple options for cognitive stimulation for people with dementia and are available at the FCSS office. One of the highlights of the Sensory Kits are twiddlemuffs. These are a knitted or crocheted tool with assorted items attached (for example, buttons) that people with dementia can fiddle and twiddle with. They have been found to not only provide stimulation but also help to alleviate stress and anxiety. The Twiddle Muffs are very popular with those using them, and with the creators! One community member stated, “...the twiddlemuff. I was skeptical about this. My wife loves it. She uses it when she wants to concentrate, and it’s helpful on car rides and decreases “plucking” behavior (skin and clothing). We can see that it was made with love and we are grateful.”

Creating twiddlemuffs provided an excellent volunteer opportunity through the physical restrictions of the pandemic and brought generations together. One of their 70-year-old volunteers created twiddlemuffs with her 90-year-old mother! Westlock’s twiddlemuffs have also been recognized and featured by Alberta Health Services. The story is available here: [Knitting ‘Twiddle Muffs’ can be tough, but it’s a labour of love | Alberta Health Services](#)







An iPad lending library has also been created with the intent of offering information and resources intended to support both the person with dementia and their carers. The group was able to enlist support from a student from the University of Alberta Faculty of Medicine who conducted research into what content should be included in the iPad, and they were then pre-loaded with tools, games, and information. The Westlock Library and the *Adult Literacy and Learning Centre* led development of resources to support iPad use. After the lending library launch, the working group received feedback that the iPad content was too focused on dementia explicitly, so they revised the language to be more about brain and age health. 20 iPads are available for borrowing from the FCSS office.

The working group also supported one of their team and three volunteers to receive training in *LIVING the Dementia Journey* (LDJ) – an approach to increasing awareness and understanding of dementia, and how to support those impacted by it. Two LDJ workshops have been offered in the community at no cost in various formats to both carers, and the general public. One hope is to re-link this education with the original idea of the Dinner Club, now that some pandemic-related restrictions have been lifted. These workshops were delivered in a “lunch and learn” format, with the intent to achieve some of the goals of the Dinner Club (socialization, loneliness, caregiver responsibilities). Twenty community members participated in the initial LDJ workshops, and many commented that the main benefit of participation was the creation of new connections or strengthening of existing connections to other people in their community. One participant noted, “*it was wonderful to connect with others in the community who are facing similar situations.*”

Another exciting opportunity being pursued is collaboration with the Pembina Hill School Division and the Norquest College Healthcare Aide program to facilitate the LDJ *Young Adult Training* - yet another opportunity for intergenerational learning and support.

## Summary

During a time when uncertainty and disconnection was inevitable, the *Westlock Dementia Working Group* has navigated significant challenges through the COVID-19 pandemic. From shifting group membership, to pivoting their entire approach, meeting the needs of those in their community impacted by dementia have always been their north star. The Working Group, along with various sectors and community partners were able to collaborate and adapt services to support and maintain connections with older adults living within their community. Through the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, the response by the working group and its partners demonstrates the importance of building relationships across community partners to be successful in supporting local underserved populations.

