

“Hidden Allies” to the Healthcare System

Uncovering the realities of Informal Caregiving in NB

Last fall the Collaborative had the privilege to host three St. Thomas social work students as they completed their social action placement. Morgan Downs, Carly Furlong, and Erin Jackson launched a province-wide survey to explore and uncover the hidden socioeconomic costs of informal caregiving in order to understand how caregivers can be better supported.

On their quest for discovery, students worked diligently to reach as many informal caregivers as possible, networking with community organizations and publicizing on social media in order to spread the word on their research.

In a short, two-month period, the survey managed to reach 92 informal caregivers across 13 counties in the province. While only half of respondents fully completed the survey, students quickly learned that informal caregivers in the province know what is working for them as well as where increased supports are needed.



What do Informal Caregivers do?

Upon compiling survey results, students were quick to define informal caregivers as the “**hidden allies**” to NB healthcare system as they often take on multiple roles and responsibilities.

Results found that caregivers most often provide assistance in the areas of transportation, shopping, financial support, meal preparation, home maintenance, medication administration, and activities of daily living.

Results also indicated that 96% of respondents provide emotional support and reassurance to those they are caring for. Given these results, one cannot deny the important contribution caregivers provide, not only to the care receiver, but the larger healthcare system.

What are the costs of Informal Caregiving?

One of the main objectives of the student’s research was to explore the ways in which caregiving responsibilities interact with the other areas of the caregiver’s life.



Students uncovered that caregiving responsibilities interact with the physical, financial, emotional, and social areas of a caregiver's life. Photo Credit: Informal Caregiver Infographic

Respondents noted that they experience difficulty in meeting their own personal needs, such as time for self-care, sleep and exercise. In addition to personal needs, balancing financial, work, and personal relationship responsibilities were also highlighted.

Are Informal Caregivers being supported?

32% of informal caregivers reported that they do not take time for relief when feeling overwhelmed...**Why?**

- They do not have anyone available to help
- They feel uncomfortable asking for assistance
- They feel as though they need to take on the full responsibility

If they do receive assistance...**who** do they turn to?

- Family and friends
- Home health aids
- LTC respite beds & day programs

What's needed to better support Informal Caregivers?

Based on the research findings and suggestions made by the respondents themselves, students identified four areas in which increased supports and services could be set in place to better support informal caregivers across the province.

Education, Training, and Resources...

Respondents expressed their interest in attending educational and training workshops on adult care and self-care practices in order to increase confidence and capacity as an informal caregiver. The desire for reliable, unbiased, and accessible internet resources was also expressed.

Increased Relief, Respite, and Support Services...

A high number of respondents expressed the need for more relief and respite services to turn to in order to avoid caregiver burnout. Respondents also expressed their interest in attending caregiver support groups to share and learn from fellow caregivers.

Increased Services in Rural Areas of NB...

Respondents addressed the inconsistency in access to services across the province. A number of respondents expressed the need for equal access to services such as transportation, delivered meals, accessible medical care, and day programs in rural areas of the province.

Help Navigating Systems and Services...

Informal caregivers need assistance navigating the multiple, separated systems they may use. Respondents expressed the need for assistance in the areas of locating care services, determining LTC options, and access to support following the death of the care receiver.

Why is this important to talk about?

While the main objective of this research was to uncover how informal caregivers can be better supported, students were also interested in exploring the meaning making that comes from caring for the people we love. Students provided the opportunity for respondents to express how their informal caregiving experiences have impacted them in a positive, meaningful way. Here are some of the common themes they found among responses.

- Growing closer to the loved one
- Strengthening family relationships
- Personal growth, inner strength, patience
- Making new friends & connections
- Satisfaction in caring for those who have or would care for you

Final Thoughts...

While the research completed by social work students only captured an introductory snapshot into the lived realities of informal caregivers in New Brunswick, results were telling. This research study served as a platform to give this “hidden” population a voice to not only express the ways in which they need to be better supported, but also bring attention to the important contribution they provide in sustaining our present healthcare system!