



Alberta Health Services

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A [CMOH order](#) remains in effect that requires continuous masking at all AHS and Covenant facilities provincewide.

Let's Connect brings seniors together

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Let's Connect provides a variety of virtual social and health program opportunities for people in Innisfail and other rural communities across the province. *Photo supplied.*

Innisfail team making friends across Alberta with exercise programs, digital learning, crafts and music

Story by Vanessa Gomez

INNISFAIL — For almost two years now, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended people's lives, leaving them to navigate a new normal. For seniors living alone, social isolation soon became a concern.

"With the COVID-19 pandemic came the opportunity to really think outside the box to support people in the community," says Ellen Helgason, a Community Recreation therapist with Alberta Health Services (AHS).

Let's Connect, formerly known as *Innisfail Connects*, was created in May 2020 to address the isolation faced by individuals living with dementia, but its appeal quickly grew to encompass seniors living in rural communities.

With the help of Community Partners in Action — an initiative that supports individuals with dementia in their own community — *Let's Connect* provides a variety of social and health program opportunities for people in Innisfail and other rural communities across all of Alberta.

Free of charge, these programs allow older adults to connect via online or telephone, eliminating as many barriers as possible, to ensure everyone can reach out and enjoy quality time with others.

"Sometimes, individuals can't always connect to programs in their own rural communities," says Helgason. "The program is a nice way for individuals to connect with others, while still feeling safe in the comfort of their homes."

Popular offerings include exercise programs such as *Healthy Moves* and *Movers & Groovers*; digital drop-in sessions that teach individuals how to navigate the program and set up their cell phones, tablets or computers; and programs that stimulate the mind and educate on a variety of health topics. Social opportunities include craft sessions, bingo and live music (known as *Music to my Ears*).

Linda Darby lives 25 km outside of Innisfail and came across *Let's Connect* in a newspaper ad. She was attracted by the opportunity to learn new skills and make connections.

"I've had lots of positive experiences with the program and I've been able to develop good relationships with program instructors," says Darby, who's in her 70s.

She's has been participating in programs such as *Tech Talks* and *Healthy Moves* to keep her creative and active. She's also using her newly acquired *Tech Talks* skills to begin a family history blog, and has already found family connections around the globe.

A session on talking to loved ones with dementia also proved helpful for Darby when her brother was diagnosed with dementia. Whenever she phones him for a chat, she tries to incorporate everything she's learned.

"The most important thing is to let people connect," she says. "We need people — and we need connections — and the program provides lots of opportunities to make them."

By working with community partners, *Let's Connect* hopes to have a sustainable future beyond COVID-19.

The Community Partners in Action team recently received a Horizon Grant worth \$25,000. So far the funds have smart TVs and computer tablets to be placed in community seniors' apartments, condos, local churches and community centres, thus allowing more people to attend Lets Connect and other online programs.

"We want to expand to other communities and hit a larger population," adds Helgason.

"We want to continue to build rapport with partners in the community and keep community members involved by listening to what they need. We hope with the variety of programming, people experience something new or different while making those meaningful connections."

January is Alzheimer's Awareness Month in Canada. [Learn what that means and how you can get involved.](#)