



Alberta Health Services

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Innisfail team hailed as Healthcare Heroes

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The Community Partners in Action team — Ellen Helgason, left, Wendy Evans and Jennifer Wood — were recognized with the Rural Health Professions Action Plan 2021 Rhapsody Healthcare Heroes Award for their outstanding community work in Innisfail for education and people living with dementia. *Photo supplied.*

Trio garners Rural Health Professions Action Plan award for dementia care

INNISFAIL — Three women here are being recognized as healthcare heroes for their outstanding work in educating the community about dementia.

Ellen Helgason, a recreation therapist with Alberta Health Services (AHS), Jennifer Wood, the dementia-friendly community coordinator with the Wolf Creek Primary Care Network (WCPCN), and Wendy Evans, a geriatric assessment nurse also with the WCPCN, have received the Rural Health Professions Action Plan (RhPAP) 2021 Rhapsody Healthcare Heroes Award for their Dementia Friendly Community Initiative.

“A dementia-friendly community helps people living with dementia to age in their community as well as invests in the wellness of their care partners,” says Evans. “Creating awareness and providing information help reduce stigma and helps those with dementia feel included.”

The initiative offers a variety of programs for people living with dementia, including preparing first responders to better support them. It also encourages health professionals and the broader community, through education sessions, on how to recognize, interact with, and provide support.

The award brings high recognition for members of the Community Partners in Action (CPIA) team, which includes AHS and the WCPCN, as well as Innisfail Family and Community Support Services and the Town of Innisfail.

The CPIA team received a \$50,000 grant from the Centre for Aging and Brain Health Innovation — a Canadian collaboration of healthcare, science, industry, not-for-profit and government partners — whose aim is to help improve quality of life for the world’s aging population. With these funds, they hired a dementia-friendly community coordinator to help people living with dementia, and their care partners, to participate in their community with respect and dignity.

“With more support of the coordinator, we created programs, services, and education for community organizations and businesses to increase awareness on supporting people living with dementia and their care partners to engage in their community and to remain active,” says Evans.

Other programs that they developed included a fall-prevention program and care-partner support groups. More are expected after the pandemic.

The CPIA team also secured \$25,000 from the federal New Horizon Grant for Seniors Program to support Innisfail’s seniors’ community and encourage social participation and inclusion. They purchased nine Smart TVs and iPads for seniors living in apartments and condominiums so that they could join the Let’s Connect initiative, at no charge, to keep up with family and friends and participate in more online activities and opportunities such as health talks, concerts, exercises, brain gym and more.

“Our team’s success comes from working collaboratively to create and share resources instead of working in silos. We will also seek out other community businesses, agencies and organizations to partner to support community initiatives,” says Helgason.

RhPAP founded the Rhapsody Awards in 2002 to recognize individuals, teams, and communities that are making significant civic and healthcare contributions within rural Alberta.

The CPIA team received their award in Innisfail (as RhPAP recognizes recipients with an event in their home community). Part of the celebration included a presentation, a donation of \$2,500 by RhPAP that will go towards the Let’s Connect program and their video that profiles the CPIA’s contributions to the health and well-being of their community.

Wood adds: “The Community Partners in Action team is grateful for the recognition and for being able to continue to sustain and create future programs for people living with dementia and their care partners.”