making it work

Framework for Remote Rural Workforce Stability

A Brief Overview

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The Framework consists of nine key strategic elements, grouped into three main tasks (plan, recruit, retain) with five conditions for success.

The Underpinnings of the Making it Work Framework

Taking the Long View is Essential

Rural remote service providers and the regional authorities that support them must develop a long-range plan that ensures workforce sustainability. There is overwhelming evidence that supports a significant return on investment when educating and training rural and remote residents to become the professionals needed for service delivery in these regions. This investment may be the most important long-term strategy in workforce sustainability.

Current Urgent Needs Often Supersede Efforts to Invest in the Long View

While taking the long view is essential to build the local pool of qualified employees, we must also, invest in attracting and retaining people from elsewhere, and creating an environment where they will stay.

Three Levels of Priorities that Strike a Balance Between These Efforts

Level 1: Inter-sectoral investment in training and career promotion.

In many rural regions, the goal is to recruit people from the local community or region, ensuring cultural relevance of services provided, and a stronger likelihood that the professionals will stay in these communities.

Level 2: Create a desirable workplace.

Until there is a strong pool of local candidates, emphasis should be on recruiting and retaining people who will make your location their home.

Level 3: Create and incentivize a pool of transient workers to make a longer-term commitment to your region.

There will always be a need for locum physicians, supply teachers, and other temporary workers to fill vacations, maternity leaves, and other temporary vacancies. It is possible to build a pool of repeat candidates who contribute to the continuity and quality of service in your region.

The *Making it Work: Framework for Rural Remote Workforce Stability* describes the necessary elements of a strategy to ensure the recruitment and retention of the right professionals to provide needed services in rural and remote locations. The ultimate purpose is to support the health and quality of life of rural and remote residents, through improved access to essential services.

Elements of the Framework

Plan

These elements are activities that may be undertaken at a local, regional or national level to ensure the population's needs are periodically assessed, that the right service model is in place, and that you are seeking the right recruits.

Assess Population Service Needs

A socially accountable organization designs its services to meet the needs of the population it serves. This implies having systems in place to regularly assess the population needs or monitor changes on an on-going basis.

Across rural and remote areas, essential services (health services, education, emergency services and more) have been established over time, in an attempt to ensure the population has access to a level of service that meets a regional or national government's basic commitments to its citizens. Often these programs have been modelled on existing services provided in less remote areas, and once established, are sustained until there is an issue causing them to adjust the service levels. Similarly, service models from less remote areas that are implemented in rural areas often have built-in assumptions and dependencies that do not apply in rural and remote regions and are ultimately not sustainable. Many jurisdictions lack robust on-going systems that monitor key indicators for adequacy of service, or of higher-level population-based outcomes such as population health indicators, demographic changes or educational attainment.

Foundational to the success of any essential service, is that leadership can confirm that investments in service are targeted at measurable population-based needs. The ability to monitor and assess essential service outcomes is paramount. When discussing the difference between rural and remote health, Wakerman states an effective assessment of the population and its service needs is essential to the development of an appropriate workforce, model of service delivery and relevant policy infrastructure to support the best outcomes in each community.

Workforce stability is threatened if population needs are not routinely monitored. When service needs change and can no longer be met by professionals in the current service model, burnout and job dissatisfaction for even the most committed professionals and can threaten the stability of communities.

Align the Service Model with Population Needs

How can we be sure that our service model best meets the needs of our population, provides the most cost-effective solutions, and leverages advances in technology? When solving problems becomes the priority, we neglect to take the high-level view of the service models and how they might be improved.

The service model must best meet the needs of the population, and metrics are required to monitor the effectiveness of the service model. In addition to understanding the population's service needs, a strong body of evidence suggests that, especially in rural and remote environments, the most successful health-service models are explicitly tailored to the local environment.

Develop Profile of Target Recruits

In rural and remote environments, management and their human resource teams may be obliged to hire whomever is readily available and ultimately be disappointed with the outcome. Delivery of safe and effective healthcare in remote and rural areas requires a specific additional skill set including ongoing skills maintenance and continuing education. In addition to ensuring there are appropriately tailored education and training opportunities that are accessible to remote and rural practitioners, there is a need to ensure recruits are learning-focused and have the ability to develop the remote and rural skill set that is required. This Framework challenges this perception and encourages organizations to seriously consider the characteristics of the person you would like to hire. Management may find that the promotion and advertising materials used may be targeting the wrong person.

Recruit

These elements are generally led at the local and/or agency level to ensure that the right recruits have the information and support they need to make the life decision to relocate to your community and that when they arrive, they and their families are welcomed and integrated in the community.

Emphasize Information Sharing

Making a move to a rural or remote community, relocating and building a life there is a major consideration. Prospective employers want to reach recruits with more than just a job advertisement; it must be easy for target recruits to access any information that would influence them in making this major life decision. Professionals may have families including a spouse who needs to find work, and children requiring education and activities. Potential questions may refer to:

- The work they would be doing
- The scope of practice, the patient/student/client population
- The work environment
- The number of co-workers they would have, # of beds in hospitals, or students in their classes)
- The amount of driving or flying required to access the communities served by the role
- The impacts of weather or other factors on the work environment
- The employment benefits package
- Opportunities for advancement and professional development
- Available housing
- Recreational activities for themselves and their families
- Schooling for their children
- Potential work opportunities for their spouse

Making it easier for recruits to access information about a community through online posts and directed personnel answering emails and calls for information, may help families choose one rural location over another. Personal and positive contact with recruiters, current employees and with community contacts is an important part of the recruitment process that should not be overlooked.

Community Engagement

This is a central element to the Making it Work Framework. Engagement of communities in defining their recruitment and retention strategy is essential to the development of partnerships that will make the entire suite of interventions work. Having communities involved in defining the approach that will be used in their community ensures that solutions are feasible in their specific environment, and that community members are more likely to sustain them.

Involving communities in the planning and development of their own health care or other essential services encourages customized processes; using local knowledge and incorporating local concerns. A scoping review of the literature suggests that community engagement can support recruitment and retention of rural and remote professionals with good planning, having attractive communities, welcoming new people and developing organized sustainable relationships. Coming together around this shared challenge will help to improve community outcomes.

Supporting Spouses/Families

Community organizations and partners have an important role to play, even after a recruit has signed the employment contract. Ensuring that new the employee and their family is made to feel welcome in the community, and supported to become integrated in community recreation and other activities, is a key factor in ensuring a positive start and long stay in the community. This can mean involving community partners in meeting with the new recruits and their families, giving tours of the town, health services, and schools to ensure they are able to register in recreational and other programs.

Another important support that is often thought to be too complex to address is spousal employment. Lack of work opportunities for spouses is known to be a key barrier in the recruitment of professionals to rural locations. It is often one of the most challenging factors to mitigate. Dedicating resources to assisting spouses to learn about work opportunities is a good start to addressing this barrier. Partnering with other employers to secure employment for spouses is more challenging, however, likely to have a significant impact on recruitment.

Retain

This section describes the support needed to create a positive work environment and to train current and future professionals appropriately for remote and rural health careers and that career options in these settings are viewed as positive.

Supporting Team Cohesion

It is often said that employees don't leave a job, they leave a work environment that they don't like. In rural remote communities, professionals often work in isolation, without access to specialist support that they may have enjoyed in previous urban roles or in their training. In a service environment, often with high demands, and sometimes, limited resources, professionals can feel stretched thin, unsupported, and frustrated at their inability to make systems changes. In such high stress environments, tension can rise, causing strain on working relationships. These kinds of frustrations and burnout are typically reported in exit interviews when professionals leave rural or remote roles.

Njemanze (2016) reports that "workplace culture" is more important than salary in 80% of surveyed millennials (people born between the early 1980s and 1990s).

Rural and remote health leaders who report that they have overcome challenges in recruitment and retention of professionals typically report that they consider supporting team cohesion to be a major part of their role. They involve their team of professionals in decisions on who to recruit to the team, they create opportunities for their team to socialize and learn together, and offer them some control over their work environments (shift scheduling, strategic planning, creation of leadership roles among professionals, such as regional professional development lead).

Relevant Professional Development

Professionals working to deliver safe and effective healthcare within remote and rural communities require an additional set of skills. Because of this, they require ongoing access to education, training and skills maintenance opportunities that are relevant to the context that they practise in. Affordable, accessible and high-quality professional development opportunities are needed to sustain and improve service delivery and are a known factor in retaining professional staff. It is important to highlight the range of remote and rural relevant training, education and research opportunities that will be open to prospective candidates at an early stage of recruitment. In many countries, professionals will be required to travel from remote areas to urban centres and undertake training that often lacks relevance to their rural practise and context within which they provide care. The issues that rural professionals struggle with most and that they would like to gain skills or experience in are often not addressed in training that is available in urban centres.

Supporting your professional teams to access professional development that is relevant to their rural and remote work environment can be a significant factor in enhancing the quality of services in your community and in retention of employees. A mixture of well designed "at distance "or "technology enhanced" education programmes together with some "face-to-face" education and training should be offered.

Training Future Professionals

Developing an academic/training mandate for an organization, and potentially seeking funds to allow professional teams to dedicate time to training the professionals of the future will lead to a strong return on investment. There is a clear and substantial body of evidence which confirms that offering health professional training in rural and remote environments leads to increased retention of those professionals. Furthermore, training and rural and remote environments ensures that professionals have the unique skills that are needed for rural practice.

Remote/rural communities can strive to become centres of rural training excellence and become the hub of a strong regional rural training program for all remote and rural staff or they may wish simply to take the necessary steps to receive professional students on rural placements a few times per year. Any effort on this spectrum can have a number of positive impacts on recruitment and retention efforts including:

- Reducing feelings of professional isolation of current professional staff
- Professional staff feeling valued
- Professional staff being motivated to remain at the leading edge of knowledge in their fields, advancing the quality of available services
- The opportunity to show trainees the beauty and lifestyle they would enjoy if they moved to your area
- The opportunity to build relationships with and recruit trainees when they have completed their professional training

In addition, supporting local residents to train for allied health-professional roles (nursing assistant, physician assistant) can add value to service provision and may create a pipeline of future trainees for needed professional roles.

Five Conditions for Success

The *Making it Work: Framework for Remote Rural Workforce Stability* provides a set of key areas of activity that, when implemented as a holistic, integrated set of interventions, can provide optimum conditions to establish a stable and appropriately skilled workforce in rural and remote communities. The following five conditions are essential to the successful implementation of the framework.

1. Recognition of unique rural and remote issues

A recurring discussion among the *Recruit & Retain* collective is that policy and program decisions made in urban settings for rural and remote communities are not practical to implement, as they do not take into account unique aspects of life and work in rural and remote locations. Remote communities are also generally distinct from one another and interventions often need to be tailored to specific communities if they are to have an impact.

2. Inclusion of rural and remote engagement and perspectives

To truly recognize and integrate unique rural and remote realities, it is essential to engage residents and service providers from rural and remote environments. Community engagement is an important element of the framework and should be a part of regional and national planning for rural and northern workforce initiatives. "Not about us, without us."

3. Adequate investment

Dedicated human resources are needed; these come with a level of investment that is minor compared to the high costs (financial and otherwise) of workforce transience. Further investment in rural and remote training opportunities, professional development and other forms of education are needed. Without dedicated resources, rural and remote human resources professionals will remain focused on resolving immediate vacancies and unable to advance a strategy for a more stable workforce. In addition, adequate physical facilities and resources are required. Several of the elements of this framework have physical space and other resource implications. For example, offering training placements in your region as a potential recruitment tool may require dedicated space. Similarly, many professionals require access to library and other digital resources. Organizations may determine that investing in internet capacity is important to support recruits to participate in professional communities and prevent professional isolation.

4. An annual cycle of activities

Recruitment activities are driven by urgent need, when vacancies arise. This sometimes results in deferral of upstream activities such as health career promotion among youth, the development of training partnerships, retention activities etc. When identifying a set of activities in the region, groups must create an annual cycle of key activities that will be undertaken and confirm who will be responsible for them. Building these activities into job descriptions and performance standards ensures that initiatives are future-focused and receive attention.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

On-going monitoring of impact is essential to long-term workforce stability. Key metrics of the impacts of all elements of the framework must be developed and monitored, so that the interventions can be modified over time to best meet the needs of the environment.

Conclusion

Developed over seven years by an international collaboration of northern and rural residents who are academics, professionals, and administrators, the *Making it Work: Framework for Remote Rural Workforce Stability* describes a spectrum of strategic elements that are essential to advancing consistent access to high-quality essential services in rural and remote environments.

Local, regional and national authorities that are committed to ensuring investments in rural and remote communities are making a difference, are encouraged to review this Framework's conditions for success, and to examine their own practices in each of the Framework elements.

For a full list of references, please refer to the full *Making it Work: Framework for Remote Rural Workforce Stability* document.