



Planning a healthy community starts here

Prioritizing Health and Wellness in Houston



The District of Houston created a Health and Wellness Charter that helps the northern community cope with challenges, plan effectively, and work towards a shared vision that provides greater health for all residents. The Charter incorporates contributions from partners and organisations within the rural community and stakeholders from across the Bulkley-Nechako region.

Houston's first steps towards their Health and Wellness Charter began with a vision: to expand the lens through which they view community health, moving beyond an emphasis on acute and primary care through hospitals and health facilities and towards a more holistic definition of community health. They decided to guide this shift in thinking by creating a Health and Wellness Charter, a document that Councillor Jonathan Van Barneveld describes as "a plan that both the District of Houston and our service groups and health partners could buy in on and incorporate together to reach common goals for the community."

The District of Houston applied for and received funding through the PlanH Healthy Communities Capacity Building Fund, then set to work making their

Community Story Snapshot

CATEGORY Capacity Building

INNOVATION Health and Wellness Charter

LOCAL GOVERNMENT District of Houston

PARTNER Northern Health

COLLABORATION Multiple partners on CHES Committee

vision a reality. They received \$5,000 through the 'Seed' granting stream, designed to support small, rural and remote communities. Upon receiving the funding, their first step was to make sure that all sectors of the community were represented in the planning process. Van Barneveld explains, "We always feel that reaching out to all groups is not so much innovative but mandatory. When you're developing something like a health and wellness charter that needs to be so all-encompassing, everyone needs to be on board."

Diverse Community Contributions

To make sure that all community voices were heard, the District of Houston formed the Community Health, Education, and Social Services (CHES) Committee. The committee included a wide range of members from organizations both large and small, including Northern Health, Ministry of Children and Families, Houston Friendship Centre, Houston Link to Learning, and many more organizations, for a total of 25 community partners.

Cormac Hikisch, Health Services Administrator with Northern Health and CHES Committee member points out that the size and diversity of the CHES Committee will be a significant strength in the long term, observing that "the issues will change over time and as priorities shift, different groups will come to the forefront, while having the structure of the committee in place will galvanize collective improvement as long as we continue to seek progress."

Once the committee was formed, they began meeting regularly to brainstorm and prioritize



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the issues that were most important to the community. Their shared vision and excitement created a strong sense of purpose and commitment to their work, which committee members feel was integral to their success. Hikisch was inspired to see the positive focus of the discourse from the very first meeting: "It was incredible to see the Houston residents share all the strengths in the community and focus on how best to build on them."

Identifying Health and Wellness Priorities

Northern Health (NH) and the District of Houston have always had a close working relationship. NH was a natural choice to facilitate one part of the CHES Committee's visioning process, bringing their local experience as well as a wealth of knowledge about social determinants of health. In Hikisch's words, the NH approach to wellness centres on "maintaining community and individual health needs to start with the positive aspects of maintaining wellness, including having social structures in place to help make good decisions in life."

The District of Houston also worked with Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC) to hold a public consultation to identify what aspects of health and wellness

Houston residents wanted to focus on.

The results of the public consultation were striking: the issues identified as priorities were virtually identical to those identified by the CHES Committee. This was a strong indicator of the success of the committee in representing the community's needs, as well as a heartening confirmation of shared community vision.

With community consensus on priority issues in place, the District of Houston officially adopted their Health and Wellness Charter on April 19th, 2016. It articulates an overall vision for health and wellness in the community as well as a description of concrete goals needed to work towards that vision.

Creating a Living Document

Councillor Van Barneveld stresses that adopting the Charter did not represent the end of a project, but rather a new beginning. He advises other communities adopting similar charters to "make sure that it's able to live as living document, not just a plan that gets written and thrown on the shelf to collect dust. If you can integrate it into not just the daily business of the town but the daily business of the partner organizations, then it has the best

chance of being implemented."

Houston residents began integrating the Charter into their daily business almost immediately. When the only grocery store in town closed in June 2016, residents faced a 45 minute drive to neighbouring communities to buy food. The community needed to quickly begin planning how to maintain and improve community health in the face of this challenge.

The issue of food security was identified as a top priority for the district, and discussions began immediately to identify ways to support all community members to access healthy food. Suggestions currently on the table include community garden expansions, food box programs, and shuttle runs to grocery stores in nearby communities. The District of Houston's collaborative work on the Health and Wellness Charter has given them a strong base to work from and community members are confident they will have plans in place soon to support residents' health.

The Community Health and Wellness Charter has effectively equipped the District of Houston to be able to cope with challenges, plan effectively, and work towards a shared community vision that provides greater health for all community members. In Councillor Van Barneveld's words: "When you have all the pieces of the puzzles integrated, if everyone is talking to each other and working from the same plan, you can assist the community to become healthier and more well-balanced, deal with systemic issues or shortfalls, and get people the help they need where and when they need it."

Visit the PlanH website for more resources, funding opportunities and to expand your capacity: www.planh.ca.

PlanH, implemented by BC Healthy Communities Society, facilitates local government learning, partnership development and planning for healthier communities where we live, learn, work and play.

Working together with health authorities, UBCM and the Ministry of Health, PlanH supports Healthy Families BC, the Province's health promotion strategy. Contact us at bchc@bchealthycommunities.ca.

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Learn More

Community Capacity Building on: www.planh.ca
Capacity building describes processes and activities that help strengthen the ability of individuals, organizations and sectors in order to develop creative solutions that address community issues.

