

Use of implementation science methods to design Wellness Hub, a responsive program to address Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes' challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed longstanding challenges in long-term care homes (LTCHs) and retirement homes (RHs). In response, we developed the Wellness Hub Program to provide real-time support during the pandemic. Through interviews with LTCH and RH leaders across Ontario and the use of established scientific methods, we identified key obstacles related to infection prevention and control (IPAC), COVID-19 vaccine access and uptake, and staff well-being. We then outlined strategies to drive change at both the individual and organizational levels. The Wellness Hub Program was ultimately shaped by a multidisciplinary project team to deliver tailored support to homes while minimizing unnecessary resource use.

Implications

This study shows that using strong implementation science and fast analysis methods can help us quickly spot urgent pandemic problems and find the right solutions in real time.

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What is the current situation?

- Long-term care homes (LTCH) and retirement homes (RH) have faced ongoing challenges for many years, and many of these became more serious during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In response, we developed the [Wellness Hub Program](#) to provide real-time support to LTCHs and RHs during the pandemic and in the period that followed.

What did we do?

- We interviewed 91 leaders from LTCHs and RHs across Ontario to learn about the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We analyzed the interview data and grouped it into themes about challenges with infection prevention and control (IPAC), access to COVID-19 vaccines, and staff well-being.
- We then used well-known scientific frameworks to understand why it can be hard for homes to use evidence-based practices and to identify the strategies that would help most.
- A broad project team and steering committee reviewed these findings and used them to help design the Wellness Hub Program.

What were the results?

- We identified 10 challenges related to putting IPAC practices in place, 6 barriers to getting COVID-19 vaccines, and 3 challenges affecting staff well-being.
- To address these issues, we identified 14 strategies to support individual behaviour change and 4 strategies to support change at the organizational or system level.
- The Wellness Hub Program included 15 components to help homes manage COVID-19 challenges, such as town halls, coaching, wellness days, educational resources, weekly newsletters, an e-learning course, change initiatives, an IPAC self-assessment tool, seed funding, vaccine incentives, off-site testing, monthly community-of-practice meetings, and support from opinion leaders.
- The program was delivered in 72 Ontario homes over two years and will be evaluated to understand how well it met homes' needs.

What does this mean for future pandemic planning?

- The development of the Wellness Hub Program shows how useful it is to use implementation science in real time, so strategies can be adjusted as homes' needs and pandemic conditions change.
- It also shows that implementation science becomes stronger when it is applied in real-world settings and developed with partners at all levels of LTCH and RH.