Community Strategies for the Retention of Health Professionals

This toolkit offers suggestions on how communities can become involved in retaining the health professionals they successfully recruit to their local health care system.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the retention of health professionals, especially physicians, has been a long term concern. Through the next decade, the physician shortages experienced in the North American labor market are expected to widen to other health professions. In fact, filling vacancies in the nursing and pharmacy professions has already become a recruitment challenge.

This toolkit is written as a guide for recruiters in health care and for community partners who want to introduce a retention strategy to retain the health professionals they successfully recruit. Recruiters closely involved in the hiring process recognize that a retention strategy is most comprehensive when it includes the retention needs of all potential candidates, including those attracted from the local, national and international marketplace.

The Toolkit includes:
1. **Our Recruitment Experience** in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada.
2. How targeted **Community Development Impacts Retention** of health professionals.
3. **Community Retention Approaches:**
   - Welcoming Communities
   - Community Retention Committee
   - Mentorship Program
   - Focus Groups
   - Partnerships
4. Steps to Developing a **Community Retention Strategy**
Our Recruitment Experience

Newfoundland and Labrador

Our statistics indicate that less than five years ago, 61% of our fully licensed family physicians and 49% of our fully-licensed specialists practicing in the province were Memorial University medical school graduates. When you factor in the physicians who completed medical school elsewhere and then graduated from our post-graduate program at MUN, our local training program provided 75% of the province’s fully licensed physicians. The recruitment value of our Medical School and Residency program is obvious. Clearly it is very important that this is reflected in our retention strategies, and a very similar argument can be made for the other health professions. Local graduates have proven to have the lowest outmigration rate over time, and as a province, we have benefited because of the strength of their personal connection to the province.

In recent years up to 40% of our physician workforce in Newfoundland and Labrador has been supported by International Medical Graduates who were attracted from outside the province, or from the national and international markets. It is clear that our retention strategy must also include settlement and welcoming services for these newcomers and the many other health professionals who we will need to attract in the future.
Community Retention Approaches

1) Welcoming Community

There are five different approaches that a community may take to introduce a retention strategy:

1) Establish the community as a Welcoming Community through a network of local volunteers

A helpful toolkit on how to become a Welcoming Community has already been developed as part of a Canadian initiative focused on settlement and integration. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the movement is being championed by the Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism who can provide communities with local facilitators trained to introduce the “Tool Box of Ideas for Smaller Centres”. The three day process helps a group of community stakeholders develop a work plan designed to improve retention of immigrants, many of whom are health care professionals. The facilitators, trained in community development strategies, partner with recruiters from our health care system as co-facilitators and provide communities with a valuable combined resource to explore new approaches to settlement and retention. Recruiters and immigration staff share the same vision and are actively networking with rural communities to help develop welcoming plans. The partnership is proving to be a natural fit.

Community development initiatives that are designed to improve a community’s ability to welcome and integrate new citizens are a win-win for everyone. New opportunities stimulate the introduction of new services that, in turn, benefit the quality of life of everyone by adding to the social and economic vibrancy of the community. Inviting local facilitators to a community to introduce the Welcoming Communities Toolkit begins a process for improved welcoming and retention. The health care recruitment team in Newfoundland and Labrador believe that there is considerable value in this approach for all new people attempting to settle in our communities, particularly new health professionals and their families.

Newfoundland and Labrador communities interested in improving the retention of health professionals in their health care system can contact the Welcoming Communities Project, Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism or the Provincial Physician Recruitment Office at grow@practicenl.ca.
2) Establish a Community Retention Committee to specifically build the communities capacity to welcome new health professionals.

Establishing a Community Retention Committee (CRC) is a strategy used by health care authorities across Canada to build community partnerships to work on improving health professional retention. CRC’s can strengthen our provincial health care system by helping communities to attract adequate staffing to provide consistent services.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, some communities have established retention committees because of the need to respond to current recruitment challenges. Leadership to get things started can come from a number of stakeholders, including town councils, regional economic development boards and community volunteers. The work involves bringing people together to create ways to welcome and retain health professionals to work in the health care system in a specific community. The level of community interest in health professional retention will differ from community to community, and will be influenced by a community’s previous experiences with staff shortages. Each Regional Health Authority has recruitment staff ready to champion the introduction of Retention Committees with the support of other community stakeholders.

STEP I: Identifying Community Champions
Leadership is important when developing community retention committees. Champions are those who take hold of ideas, bring people together and get things moving. In Newfoundland and Labrador our regional and provincial recruitment staff are ready to champion this initiative and advocate for others to become involved as community stakeholders.

STEP II: Developing a Terms of Reference for the committee
When the volunteer members are recruited to participate, the committee will need a terms of reference to help organize the work. Some questions to help the recruiters facilitating the group discussion include:

- What do we want to include in our mandate?
- Are we targeting all professional groups, or will our work be confined to a physicians and nurses only?
- How will we include visiting students and residents?
- How often should the committee meet and where will meetings be held?
- Will we consider a plan to attract services to the community (welcome wagon, day care)
- advocate for services (volunteer agency for community greeters, play buddies, host families, welcoming coordinator)
- find ways to encourage high school students to consider careers in the health sector
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**SAMPLE terms of reference.**

1. **MISSION**
   The Community Retention Committee (CRC) is a partnership of community representatives with a mission to retain new health care professionals and their families in a community.

2. **MEMBERSHIP AND MEETINGS**
   Members of the CRC are working participants who share actively in strategic planning, the work of subcommittees and program implementation.

   2.1 Membership of the committee is comprised of individuals and organizations that have a significant interest in the recruitment and retention of health professionals.

   2.2 Each member is accountable to the CRC for meeting the responsibilities assigned to the position held on the committee.

   2.3 Date, time and location set for monthly meetings are organized on an annual schedule.

   2.4 A simple majority of the members represents a quorum. A majority vote determines the decision.

3. **COMMITTEE COMPOSITION**
   The CRC is comprised of a maximum of ten members who represent obvious stakeholders, such as:

   - The community/municipality (x 3)
   - Health care recruiter or HR representatives
   - The medical and/or nursing professional community
   - Internationally educated health professionals
   - Other invited representatives (school, recreation, religious group, real estate, etc)
   - The settlement agency

4. **TERMS OF OFFICE**
   Members are asked to commit to a two-year term.

5. **DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**
   - To plan and facilitate welcoming initiatives for new health professionals entering practice in the community
   - To generate creative ideas to support retention
   - To monitor the success of the committees work

6. **RECOMMENDED POSITIONS**
   - Chair
   - Secretary/Treasurer
   - Fund Raiser
   - Incentives advocate
   - Site visit coordinator
   - Initiative Leaders
     - Welcoming and greeting coordinator
     - Community tour guide
     - Social events planner
     - Play buddy network
     - Host family network
     - MUN and Med Quest coordinator
STEP III: Decide on the committee structure

Once the Terms of Reference are established, the role of each committee member is more easily identified. The composition of each committee differs based on the mandate accepted. An approved list of duties for each position that reflects the committee mandate is a helpful tool. Tapping community resources will be important and, depending on the community, may warrant a position for community advocacy. For example, networking with real estate, school administrators, church groups, child care services and recreation programs may be very important.

Similarly, community groups can be a valuable support for community members as they often partner in community initiatives. Some examples might include:

- The Lions Club might offer to host a regular social event for newcomers
- The Knights of Columbus might help sell tickets to fundraise for a committee initiative
- The Ladies Auxiliary might help make welcome baskets and visit families new to the area
- The Seniors Club might offer to host a welcoming social
- The Multicultural Organization might outreach to international newcomers
- The Church Groups might organize play groups for children new to the area
- The Recreation Facilities might offer introductory passes to new families
- The local school might introduce a buddy program for new students

The work of a Community Retention Committee helps to build a network of support for individuals and introduce new initiatives to the community that also contribute the general well-being of the entire community.
3) Establish a Community Mentoring Program within a volunteer agency to support new health professionals and their families

Establishing a Community Mentorship Program is another alternative that communities can consider when attempting to improve retention of health professionals and others. A Community Mentoring Program focused on welcoming and supporting individual health professionals new to the community is an example of a socially rich welcoming initiative. Such a program could fit nicely as a sub-committee of a Community Retention Committee or stand-alone project of a hospital or community volunteer organization. Communities interested in offering a one-to-one mentorship type of support are paying attention to improving their ability to support new families of all origins to successfully settle and integrate.

Step I: Identify a community sponsor/leader

The community leadership identified to implement a volunteer driven project will be unique to each community, but generally there are two essential things to address: (1) the community’s ability to attract, manage and maintain a volunteer network, and (2) the community’s ability to train volunteers in their new role as community mentors. Due to the administration complexities and liabilities of promoting any “volunteer” agency, it is best if the leadership for such a program evolves from a reputable volunteer program already in place and respected in the community. When a community without an established volunteer program is interested in establishing a Community Volunteer Mentoring Program, there is more work to do initially, but the long term contribution to the community is even greater.

Step II: Training for recruiters and community volunteers

Recruiters will immediately recognize that communities need some help to provide mentorship training for new volunteers. An on-line course is offered to recruiters interested in learning more about professional mentorship. The course prepares recruiters to take a leadership role in developing a community mentorship program. Recruiters are invited to simply register for the on line Professional Mentoring Course at the www.practicebasedpreceptor.ca website. This training educates recruiters about the concepts of mentoring and adult education and prepares recruiters as trainers ready to provide similar training for community volunteers. To support recruiters in their role as trainers, a training package has been prepared for their delivery to community volunteers.
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The training package includes a series of power point slides and a facilitator’s guide that provides a series of class activities. Topics covered include:

- An introduction to the mentoring process
- The four phases of the mentoring experience
- The principles of adult learning which underlie the mentoring process
- Answers to questions about the mentoring process

Step III: Identifying potential community mentors

Community mentors can be identified or nominated easily once the personal qualities are communicated. Good community mentors are individuals who are:

- Passionate about their community and lifestyle
- Natural teachers who are approachable and enjoy sharing information
- Established in the community; fully settled and integrated into the NL rural culture and have that long term perspective to pass on
- Able to connect with people; they are engaging, warm and naturally friendly
- Knowledgeable about the retention issue, and interested in settlement as a solution

Step IV: Communicating the benefits of mentoring to potential volunteers

Mentors across Canada have shared that they benefit personally from the mentoring experience. They have expressed these benefits as opportunities to:

- Give back to the community
- Increase social networks by meeting new people entering the community
- Gain reputable references for valued volunteer work
- Assist the community to strengthen resources needed by newcomers
- Share what the community has to offer and the things that are important to know
- Train as a mentor and practice the skills while supporting others
4) **Organize Focus Groups** to engage current health professionals in discussion about what communities need to do to improve attraction and retention

Conducting a Needs Assessment helps determine what needs to be done. Recruiters in regions where a high percentage of the physician workforce are International Medical Graduates have a unique opportunity to work with a group of informed health professionals who have already experienced the challenges of relocating to Newfoundland and Labrador. Organizing focus groups to discuss their experience is a valuable way of identifying needs. The following is a focus group guide for communities who want to use this method to involve health professionals and their partners in identifying recommendations that would improve retention in the province.

The focus group approach was recently tested as a tool for identifying IMG retention needs. The purpose of the discussion was to gather input from an informed audience about how to improve the welcoming and integration experiences of physicians and their families in the rural regions of the province.

The following is a guideline for organizing such a focus group:

In order to introduce the topic areas, participants were provided with a discussion document about recruitment and retention challenges prior to the sessions. The document explored four key components:

1. The initial welcome they received to the community – the power of the first impression
2. Their functional integration as individuals and a family at the community level
3. Their impression of their social integration and the experience of building a personal social network in a NL community (feedback after 4 years)
4. Their recommendations for initiatives that would help newcomers integrate in the future

It was understood prior to the session that community integration would be discussed rather than employer issues such as compensation, working conditions, call schedule or training opportunities. The sessions began with a discussion about confidentiality and confirmation that recommendations made would not be attributed to an issue raised by a specific individual. Through this process, the group identified the topics that recruiters need to address during an IMG/IEHP Focus Group about community integration and retention. Also included are some samples of the type of feedback recruiters facilitating such sessions are likely to receive and what they should be prepared to discuss, such as:

**THE INITIAL WELCOMING:**
Participants felt that the initial welcoming organized for newly hired health professionals should clearly say: “You are important to us”! The group emphasized the power of the first impression made by both the employers and
the community. In fact, they felt that the initial welcoming sets the tone for the first few months in the new workplace. Specifically the airport greeter is felt to be particularly important. Extending similar support for visiting physicians, locums, medical students, residents, CSAT trainees and elective students is a recommendation that was highly ranked in importance.

**TEMPORARY HOUSING SUPPORT:**
Housing is an important issue for an individual or family when relocating. Moving to a new location, and often a new country, creates a degree of uncertainty. Addressing any concerns about safety is advised, especially when over night shifts are required in the first month. Proximity of the family accommodation to the health facility is appreciated for an initial sense of security.

**FOOD:**
Finding ways to accommodate special grocery needs is something that local storekeepers are often willing to provide. Introductions and networking in the first weeks can be very valuable in rural locations.

**BANKING/FINANCIAL:**
The lack of a financial history in Canada can make finances difficult in the early months of relocating. Scotia Bank has a program for physicians designed to support their financial needs through this period - Scotia Bank Personal Banking Package – Start Right Program for Newcomers. Physicians who are referred by recruiters are entitled to financing as low as Prime on floating term loans. This allows a physician to purchase/lease a vehicle upon arrival. The program offers up to $75,000 in unsecured credit through VISA, Line of Credit and/or Overdraft Protection. There is also a Mortgage Program for Temporary Residents who have a written reference from the current employer.

**THE EDUCATION SYSTEM:**
Families new to the area appreciate a package of information, advice and introductions to school resource people. The quality of education at the primary, secondary and high school level can impact the retention of families. It is important to provide adequate information to health professionals needing to place children in local schools. For a guide to the NL school system visit [http://www.anc-nf.cc/files/SchoolsGuideBook_09.pdf](http://www.anc-nf.cc/files/SchoolsGuideBook_09.pdf)

**LANGUAGE TRAINING:**
The opportunity for the spouse who is not employed to have access to English as a Second Language classes or tutoring is essential to successful integration. Access to such services is a building block for establishing a social support network. The Association for New Canadians at (709) 579-1780 can provide e-counseling services to rural locations and can resource local tutors who are trained and able to help. Visit the website for more helpful information at [http://www.anc-nf.cc/](http://www.anc-nf.cc/)

**SPOUSAL EMPLOYMENT:**
Access to employment for spouses who already have a professional qualification can be difficult in rural locations. It is more complex when the person has been educated as a health professional outside of Canada as they will need to meet the provincial licensing requirements in order to work in their field. Opportunities for career counseling within the Canadian system, technology for distance education and valued volunteer work are important for retention. For this reason, the health care sector has partnered with the Association for New Canadians to provide such services. Visit the website for more information at [http://www.axiscareers.net/](http://www.axiscareers.net/) or email axis@nfld.net

**RECREATION:**
Newcomers and their children need access to recreation and the valuable social networking that it brings. An introduction to local services and an invitation to join local teams, activities and events is important and needs to be incorporated into the welcoming plan.
5) Establish **Partnerships** that the community can depend on to help newcomers integrate

**The Provincial Recruitment Office**

The Newfoundland and Labrador Health Boards Association, Provincial Physician Recruitment Office is responsible for supporting regional recruitment staff by planning and implementing recruitment and retention initiatives. There are several projects specifically designed to help staff recruiters influence health professional retention in their specific region. The PracticeNL website provides an opportunity for communities to profile their location as a special place to live and work. The office can also help proactive communities to link with health professional schools at Memorial University. Arrangements can be made for community representatives to organize visits with senior students in order to promote a particular practice location prior to their graduation year. Visit [www.practicenl.ca](http://www.practicenl.ca) or email grow@practicenl.ca.

**Association for New Canadians (ANC)**

The ANC is an established partner in health professional retention. In cooperation with recruiters, the association has established itself as a valuable support in settlement and integration services for staff newly hired in the health care sector. The services, specifically developed to support settlement, include:

- Locating resources such as child care, employment, church contacts, libraries and volunteer work through an e-counseling network.
- Establishing networks with people from a particular homeland
- Counseling to support issues related to integration of a family into the NL culture/environment
- Linking interested families to a Canadian host family
- Helping with required documents: MCP, SIN, etc.
- Providing Canadian employment experience through an internship option
- Answering day to day questions from newcomers

The outreach services are complemented through an e-counseling service and a network of English as a Second Language tutors across the province. The staff are equipped to help employers/groups learn more about diversity as they prepare to have a more welcoming approach to newcomers. Visit [http://www.anc-nf.cc/](http://www.anc-nf.cc/) for settlement information and [http://www.axiscareers.net/](http://www.axiscareers.net/) for newcomer employment services.
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The Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism

The Provincial Nominee Program of the Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism provides a significant service to international health professionals wishing to establish themselves as citizens of Canada. Based on specific criteria, the program can support an application for immigration on behalf of the province. Many new physicians and other health professionals who have relocated to the province have benefited from the support of the PNP program. The retention value of providing provincial support for health professionals engaged in making immigration plans is obvious. Visit www.nlgnp.ca or email pnp@gov.nl.ca.

The MEDQUEST, Student Affairs, Medical School, MUN

The MedQuest Program is an important partner for communities that invest in long term planning. The Canadian evidence strongly suggests that health professionals who were originally from Newfoundland and Labrador are more inclined to stay longer than others who are recruited. It stands to reason that educating more local students is an important recruitment and retention strategy. Pro-active communities find ways to make sure that their high school students are informed about the career choices in health care. The MedQuest Program has been designed with this in mind. Communities must ensure that their local high school counselors are advising students about health careers and refering them to the MedQuest Program. The program offers an exciting, career-oriented summer opportunity for students in grades 10-12. The students attending have the opportunity to live for a full week in residence at the St. John’s campus of Memorial University and enjoy lectures, demonstrations, experiments, research projects, job shadowing, and tours of campus and hospitals. Visit www.med.mun.ca/StudentAffairs/MEd-Quest.aspx.

Regional Economic Development Boards

The Regional Economic Development Boards work to foster economic and social development and growth for communities in their region, and are therefore a natural partner for Welcoming Communities initiatives. To find your local board contacts, visit the NL Regional Economic Development Association and click on the map for your area. Visit http://www.nlreda.ca/content.php?cid=48&nav=111.
Steps to Developing a Community Retention Strategy

What Recruiters can do to get started

• Work with community stakeholder to help develop retention strategies.
• Develop an understanding of the recruitment experience of your area.
• Resource and critique any materials that have already been developed for recruitment/retention for your area.
• Develop an understanding of how community development can be used to impact retention.
• Learn more about community retention approaches that have worked across Canada:
  • The Welcoming Community approach to settlement and integration
  • The Retention Committee approach to planning a local initiatives
  • The Community Mentorship Program approach to establishing social support
  • The Focus Group approach to planning to learning from the experience of others
  • The Partnership Development approach to ensure use of all helpful resources