

Systems Approach Workbook

Case Study

Creating Connections: Alberta's Addictions and Mental Health Action Plan

The Project

Creating Connections is a five-year strategy and action plan that aims to reduce the burden of addiction and mental health in Alberta by improving access to and coordination of services throughout the province.

Systems Approach concepts reflected in the project

Coordinated, multi-sectoral approach and No wrong door:

A plan for an integrated addictions and mental health approach, Creating Connections is intended to break down silos both within and between the two sectors. It also prioritizes greater capacity for addiction and mental health services within the primary healthcare environment to ensure clients can access the full range of specialized or community-based services regardless of which “door” they use to enter the healthcare system. Strategies such as case management, integrated care plans and cross-ministry teams are identified in the plan’s key results, high-priority initiatives and performance measures and targets.

Recognizes the full range of risks and harms:

The plan’s strategic directions span the complete continuum of services and supports for substance use, from prevention and health promotion to community-based services to addressing complex needs. Specific actions across the continuum include training for school prevention programs, enhanced addiction outreach services, and services for immigrant and refugee youth with concurrent disorders.

System accountability for effective service:

Creating Connections identifies high-priority initiatives, performance measures and targets, timelines and agencies or organizations to be involved in both primary and supporting roles during the plan’s implementation. The provision of services across tiers is noted in the key results associated with several strategic directions. The plan also highlights the importance of engaging individuals with lived experience and their families in service planning, monitoring and evaluation.

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Matching:

The plan's strategic directions note the importance of matching client needs to appropriate services. These services include those within the specialized sector (for example, for clients with complex needs), as well as those within the broader health and social services (housing and justice services, for example).

Responsiveness:

Creating Connections has a consistent focus on building capacity in and moving clients toward lower-tiered or less specialized services. These services include prevention and early intervention and the plan builds as well as community capacity to work with high-risk and at-need clients.

What has been the value of using the Systems Approach concepts or materials?

The Systems Approach Tiered Model provided the framework for the development of the Creating Connections strategy by:

- Providing a common language and approach for addictions and mental health within an integrated system;
- Providing a framework that operationalizes the system and where everyone's work fits within it;
- Illustrating the continuum of services that forms a comprehensive system; and
- Allowing us to look across the tiers to identify gaps.

The Tiered Model was adaptable and easy to work with, cutting across the silos that existed within mental health and between addictions, mental health and other sectors.

CCSA's templates and guides offer a valuable starting point for the next steps in implementing the action plan. They provide readily available and adaptable resources that will save work that would otherwise have to be done internally.

Project details

Creating Connections is an addictions and mental health strategy developed in concert with professionals and those with lived experience. Its development was driven by the restructuring of Alberta Health Services, a process that provided a good opportunity to set provincial direction and develop a different culture around addiction and mental health by reducing stigma, decreasing the number of people who abuse substances or suffer from mental illness, and providing the best quality of services when they are needed. This broad approach meant recognizing the influence of the social determinants of health and working with multiple sectors. Alberta Health, the legislative strategic arm, also worked with the project.

The Creating Connections strategy identified five broad priority areas:

1. Build healthy and resilient communities.
2. Foster the development of healthy children, youth and families.
3. Enhance community-based services, capacity, and supports.
4. Address complex needs.
5. Enhance assurance.

The strategy is intended to last for five years but is renewable if consistent needs are identified. Its priority areas were built with the Systems Approach Tiered Model in mind, looking in particular at levels of intensity as well as knowledge exchange and training needs.

The two lead partners in developing the Creating Connections strategy and action plan have been the Government of Alberta (Alberta Health as well as 17 other provincial ministries) and Alberta Health Services as the delivery partner. The development process also included several levels of working groups. A deputy minister's committee included, for example, representatives from non-governmental organizations, professional colleges, consumers, physicians and Métis associations. An assistant deputy minister's committee featured representatives from 17 provincial ministries. There were also working groups with staff from those ministries and representatives from the lived experience community and service provider organizations. An independent contractor shepherded the process to translate the information and recommendations provided by these groups into the five priority areas for the strategy and subsequent action plan.

Following the launch of the action plan, Alberta's Minister of Health announced \$25 million to support the implementation of Creating Connections.

Note that this case study is one in a series illustrating the application of the Systems Approach, and is accompanied by a brief video featuring Silvia Vajushi. The video, as well as the web-based Systems Approach Workbook, are available at www.ccsa.ca/Eng/topics/Treatment-and-Supports/Systems-Planning/Pages/default.aspx.