

Rural Community-based Palliative Care

Improving health and reducing disparities in access and services



A toolkit for designing high-value, customized programs

Strengthening organizational capacity, redesigning care delivery, and building community capacity are at the heart of Stratis Health's rural palliative care approach.

This toolkit is a starting point for designing high-value custom rural, community-based palliative care programs that ease challenges for individuals, families, caregivers, clinicians, and communities dealing with serious illness.



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INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, Stratis Health has pioneered processes for establishing and supporting palliative care services in smaller, rural communities. Recognizing that existing best practices are designed for larger hospitals or health systems serving urban areas, Stratis Health has addressed this gap by supporting more than 50 rural communities across the country in building capacity to offer palliative care services.

Rural communities can provide palliative care services effectively, yet models for service delivery vary widely. Community-based teams are a core component of developing palliative care capacity in rural areas by building on existing strengths and resources.

Based on years of experience in working with rural communities to develop services, this toolkit contains a framework to assist communities with program development by identifying key components to build a foundation, develop processes, and launch service implementation.

The framework supports community teams in identifying community-specific goals and assets and provides guidance and links to a variety of resources for implementation of a plan for program development that is tailored to meet community needs.

"Rural communities have significant need for palliative care and are uniquely positioned to meet the challenges through collaborative, community-based efforts to address disparities in access and services."

*- Jennifer P. Lundblad, PhD, MBA,
Stratis Health President & CEO*

Stratis Health's Impact

Stratis Health has supported more than 50 rural communities in six states in developing rural community-based palliative care services:

- Helped community teams improve levels of experience or expertise in a variety of core palliative care processes.
- Decreased unnecessary health care utilization (emergency department visits and hospital stays).
- Achieved patient-reported improvements in 7 of 9 symptoms assessed, with notable decreases in pain and depression.
- Earned high patient satisfaction ratings by ensuring support that honors stated goals.

WHY PALLIATIVE CARE IS VITAL IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Palliative care principles and practices can support seriously ill patients, their families, and caregivers across all settings of care. Rural communities have unique opportunities and challenges in providing holistic serious illness care that enhances the quality of life for patients and their families or caregivers. The following key concepts and resources can assist with gaining a common understanding of palliative care and how to begin a rural community-based program.

Palliative care is a newer field for many health care providers.

This approach to managing serious and advanced illness centers on relieving suffering and improving quality of life for patients and their families or caregivers. Palliative care teams help patients and their families or caregivers understand treatment options and facilitate effective communication among health care professionals, patients, family members, and caregivers—bringing together the support systems that patients need to determine how to plan for the best quality of life and care. Palliative care differs from hospice in that it is appropriate at any point in a serious illness and can be provided at the same time as curative treatment.

People in rural communities have less access to palliative care services, but potentially greater need.

To date, most palliative care programs have been developed primarily in large hospitals in urban settings. Delivery models for rural community-based palliative care lag, even though rural populations are disproportionately ill, disabled, poor, and older. Rural adults are also more likely than their urban counterparts to have a range of chronic conditions.

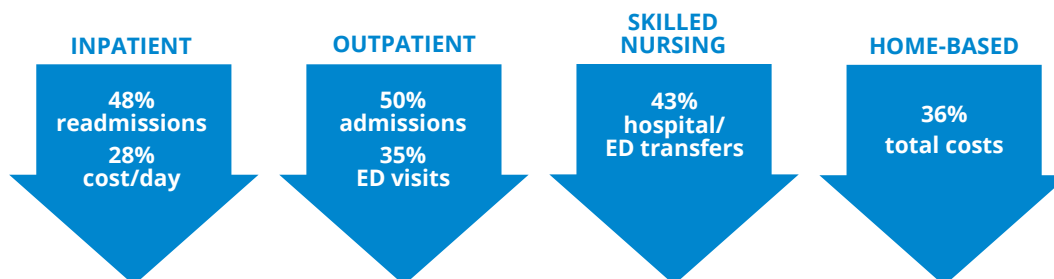
Palliative care is growing in importance in care delivery.

As our population ages, as awareness of the benefits of palliative care grows, and as pressure to improve value in health care continues, palliative care will move to a place of greater prominence in the health care delivery system.

To learn more:

- [Introduction to Building a Community Palliative Care Program](#): An overview of the basics of palliative care and creating a program. (39-minute video), [slides](#) (46-page PDF)
- [Center to Advance Palliative Care](#): About Palliative Care overview, including links to patient stories.
- www.getpalliativecare.org Provides clear, comprehensive palliative care information for people living with a serious illness.

PALLIATIVE CARE REDUCES AVOIDABLE SPENDING AND UTILIZATION IN ALL SETTINGS

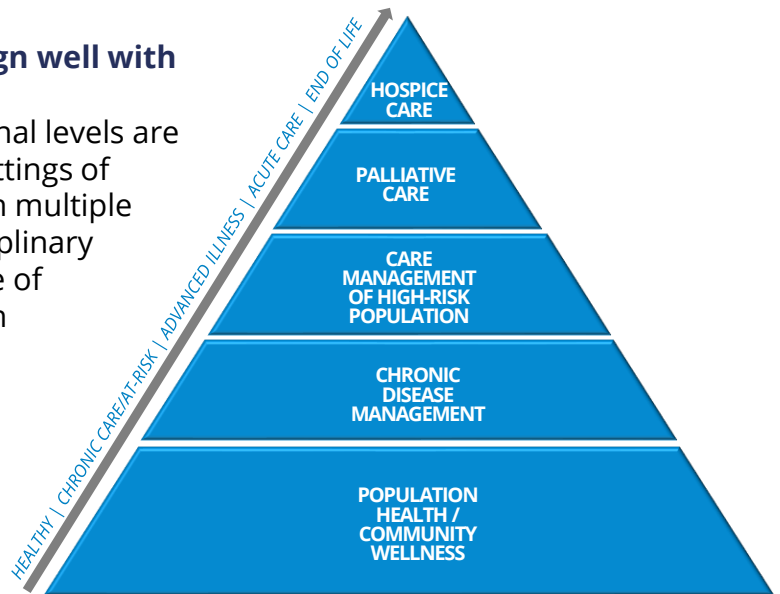


Source: Center to Advance Palliative Care, 2023

Rural Community-based Palliative Care

Palliative care programs and services align well with other efforts to redesign care delivery.

Health reform efforts at the state and national levels are calling for increased coordination across settings of care and increased focus on individuals with multiple chronic illnesses. Development of interdisciplinary palliative care services can be a cornerstone of better addressing the needs of patients with serious illness and high health care costs and can be a critical strategy to support population management under value-based care contracts.

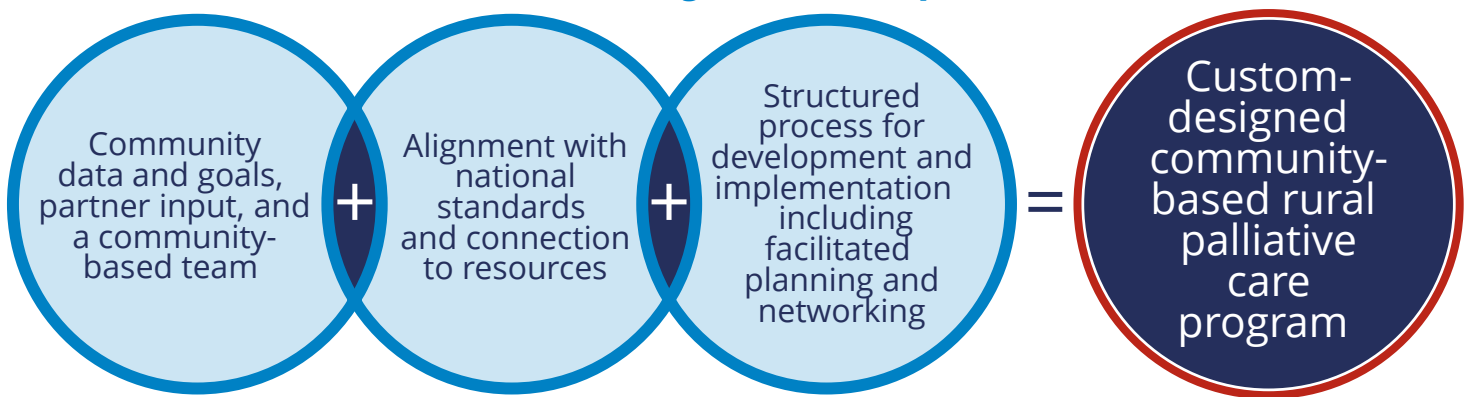


Population Management Segmentation and Services

Rural communities are uniquely positioned to meet the challenges of providing palliative care through collaborative efforts.

Stratis Health has developed a community-capacity-based formula for supporting rural communities to develop their abilities to improve quality of life for those facing serious illness.

The Stratis Health Formula for Program Development

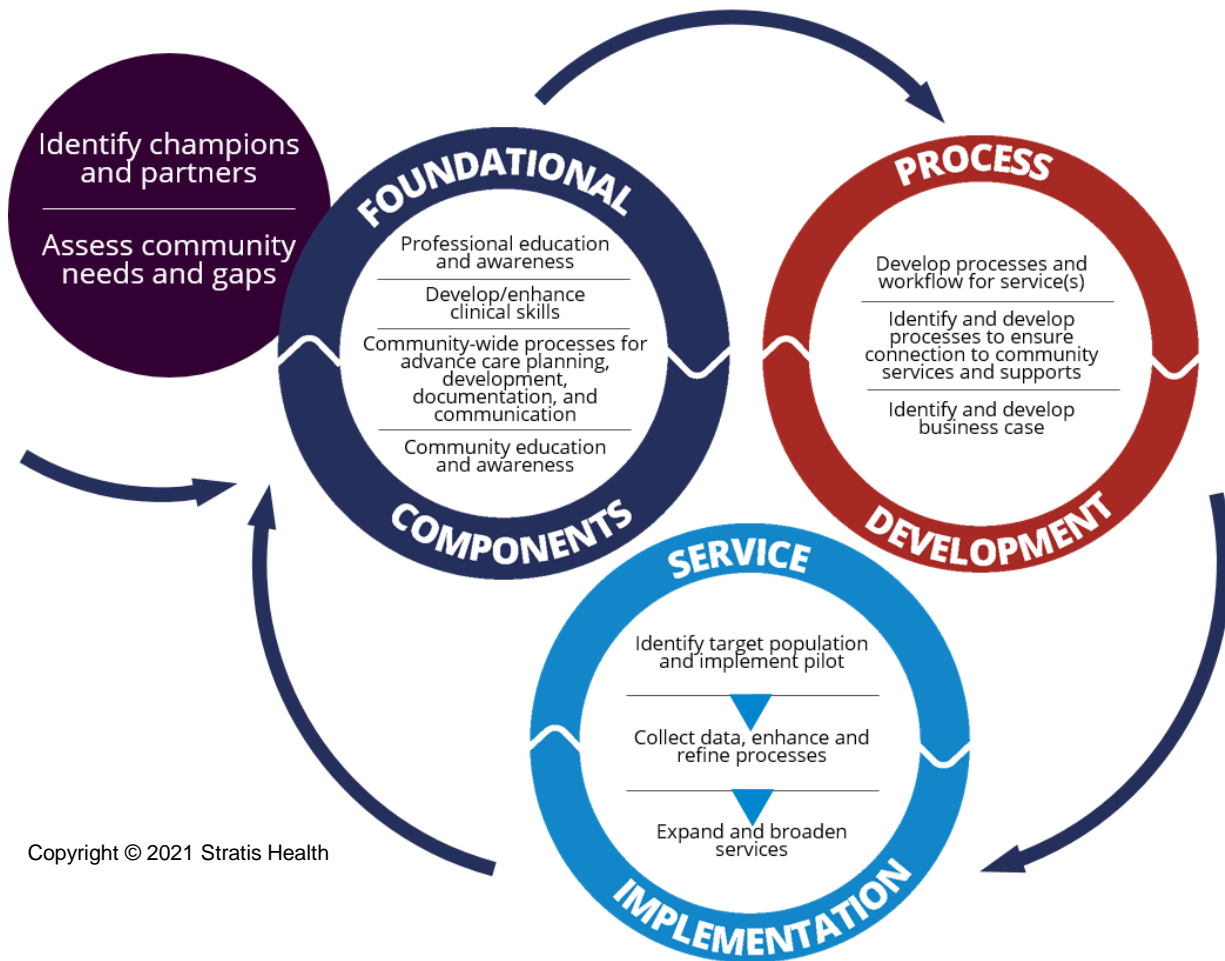


Community capacity development is strengths-based, pragmatic, and inclusive. Change primarily comes about through enhancing existing capacities rather than creating something brand new. The approach requires collaborative leadership, broad participation, and the willingness of a community to learn over time. Stratis Health has found that community capacity development is well suited to rural communities because they often have a keen awareness of their strengths and opportunities and a deep understanding of their culture, which can combine to identify and implement tailored solutions that best fit their unique situation.

The combination of this strengths-based approach, paired with a structured process for development that includes facilitated planning, alignment to national standards, and connections to resources and networking opportunities, results in the development of rural palliative care programs that are custom-designed to match a community's needs and resources.

Rural Community-based Palliative Care Service Development Framework

Stratis Health has identified a framework of key interdependent elements to guide in supporting rural community teams in development of palliative care capacity and services. This toolkit identifies resources to support implementation of each of the key framework components.



The framework begins with the identification of community champions and partners who work together to assess community needs and gaps, as well as identify resources and assets. Most community teams start with a focus on building foundational components of palliative care, such as professional education and awareness, development of clinical skills, advance care planning processes, and outreach into the community. Work on these foundational efforts is often ongoing throughout a community's journey towards service development and implementation.

Prior to implementation of services, next steps include process development related to patient identification and workflow, documentation, connection to community services, and consideration of the business case and any billing/reimbursement opportunities. Community teams are encouraged to use a quality improvement approach for implementation of palliative care services by identifying a target population and using small tests of change to develop and refine workflows with a limited number of patients, before expanding and broadening as processes are established.

Getting Started: Building a Team and Assessing Needs and Resources

Identify champions
and partners

Assess community
needs and gaps

- Identifying champions, partners, and individuals with an interest in improving serious illness care to form a community team is a key first step in a community-capacity-based approach. Community teams can then work together to identify needs, set goals, and assess resources and gaps to identify next steps in capacity and service development.
- The following resources from Stratis Health assist with developing a team and assessing community assets and gaps.

Identify champions and partners

- [**Assemble the Team**](#): This resource includes considerations for identifying a community team leader and team members. (1-page PDF)
- [**Invite the Team**](#): Template message to invite members to your community team. (2-page Word template)
- [**Initial Community Team Meeting Discussion Guide**](#): Sample agenda to support team leaders in engaging community partners. (2-page PDF)
- [**Mission, Vision, Goals Example**](#): Establishing a shared vision, mission, and goals ensures that everyone on the team understands the integrity commitment of the rural community-based palliative care program. These examples may be a helpful starting point. (1-page PDF)
- [**Community Team Development Continuum**](#): Development of palliative care services in rural communities is a journey. This resource provides a portrait of the progression of the team development components as the community works towards implementation. (Diagram in Appendix, page 11)

Assess community needs and gaps

- [**Asset and Gap Analysis**](#): Key questions to assist community teams in identifying resources, needs, and opportunities related to palliative care service development. (2-page PDF)
- [**Case Studies**](#): These case studies can be used for discussion with community teams to help identify existing resources and gaps in service availability. (2-page PDF)
- [**Action Plan Template and Examples**](#): A Template that can be used for the development of a community action plan and examples of an initial community team action plan. (1-page Word template), [**Action plan examples**](#). (3-page PDF)

Foundational Tools and Resources



Taking time to understand and establish foundational components helps ensure the successful implementation of a rural community-based palliative care program. A focus on foundational components often occurs concurrently with process development and service implementation and is an ongoing part of palliative care service implementation.

Professional education and awareness

- **[Clinical Practice Guidelines for Quality Palliative Care, 4th Edition](#)**: These guidelines expand on the eight domains of palliative care and include examples, tools, and resources. National Coalition for Hospice and Palliative Care (2018)
- **[Introduction to Palliative Care](#)**: A brief overview of palliative care for healthcare professionals (15-minute video), [slides](#) (5-page PDF), Stratis Health (2020)
- **[Professional Education and Certifications](#)**: This resource list provides a summary of the wide variety of professional education and certification opportunities available across different disciplines related to palliative care. (2-page PDF) Stratis Health (2021)
- **[Achieving Health Equity](#)**: This toolkit provides curated tools and resources to improve the quality of care provided to traditionally oppressed or excluded patients and move the needle on equity for all people living with serious illness. Center to Advance Palliative Care (2024)
- **[Ethnic-specific geriatric care in the United States](#)**: Educational modules from the Stanford School of Medicine focus on the health of 13 ethnicities in the US. Stanford School of Medicine.

Develop/enhance clinical skills

- **[Center to Advance Palliative Care \(CAPC\)](#)**: CAPC offers tools, resources, and clinical training to assist in developing, strengthening, and expanding palliative care programs. *(Please note that some tools are for members only.)* CAPC offers special membership rates for Critical Access Hospitals.
- **[Palliative Care Fast Facts and Concepts](#)**: Fast Facts provide concise, practical, peer-reviewed, evidence-based summaries on key palliative care topics important to clinicians caring for patients facing serious illness. Palliative Care Network of Wisconsin (PC Now).
- **[Edmonton Symptom Assessment System \(ESAS-r\) Training](#)**: Palliative care expert Lyn Cernovsky, DNP, GNP, FPCN, provides an overview of clinical assessment using ESAS-r. (46-minute video) [Slides](#) (20-page PDF) Stratis Health (2018)
- **[VITAL talk](#)**: Includes a variety of short videos and one-page quick guides to support effective communication with patients living with serious illness
- **[Project ECHO](#)**: Project ECHO is a nationally recognized model for reducing health disparities in underserved areas through a technology-supported hub-and-spoke approach for knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer engagement. This link allows users to filter for the active ECHO program by area of focus (select palliative care).

Foundational Tools and Resources cont.



Taking time to understand and establish foundational components helps ensure the successful implementation of a rural community-based palliative care program. A focus on foundational components often occurs concurrently with process development and service implementation and is an ongoing part of palliative care service implementation.

Community-wide processes for advance care planning, development, documentation, and communication

- **[The Conversation Project](#):** A public engagement initiative with a goal that is both simple and transformative: to help everyone talk about their wishes for care through the end of life, so those wishes can be understood and respected. Includes information, tools, and resources for community outreach and health care professionals. Institute for Healthcare Improvement
- **Advance Care Planning Resources:** A variety of tools, trainings, and resources are available to support the development of advance care plans.
 - [Five Wishes](#)
 - [Light the Legacy/Honoring Choices](#)
 - [Respecting Choices](#)
- **[National POLST](#):** A Nonprofit organization that organizes the effort to standardize the POLST process, form, and education throughout the U.S., since POLST varies from state to state.

Community education and awareness

- **[Promoting your program](#):** This resource provides tips and a sample news release template for promoting local programs. (2-page PDF) Stratis Health.
- **[Template PowerPoint presentation](#):** Sample presentation that can be adapted and tailored for community education and outreach. (17-page PPT template) Stratis Health.
- **[Serious Illness Messaging Toolkit](#):** This research-based toolkit is designed to capture public interest, bypass misconceptions, and increase the demand for serious illness care by changing how the public views advance care planning, palliative care, and hospice care. MessageLab.

Patient and caregiver education: Several resources are available for patients, caregivers, and public education about palliative care.

- **[Compassionate care at any stage of an illness](#):** This patient site provides a wealth of information on hospice, palliative care, what to expect from a palliative care team, and patient stories. American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine.
- **[End-of-life: Helping with Comfort and Care](#):** This booklet, available to order or download, helps people make sound health care decisions at the end of life. National Institute on Aging.
- **[GetPalliativeCare.org](#):** This website provides comprehensive palliative care information for people coping with serious, complex illnesses. Center to Advance Palliative Care (CAPC).
- **[What Are Palliative Care and Hospice Care?](#)** This webpage provides an overview explaining the difference between the two care options. National Institute on Aging.

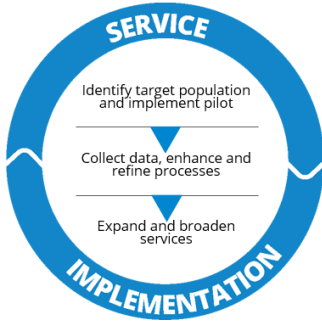
Process Development Tools and Resources



Addressing the holistic needs of the patient through a serious illness takes a skilled interdisciplinary team. Providing symptom management, continuity with support and care, and facilitating communication between providers while advocating for the patient's and family's wishes are key skills for the interdisciplinary team. These resources and tools support the development of processes, workflow, and a business case to start providing palliative care services.

- **[Variables in Program Structure](#):** Flexibility in structure and process is a key component to developing a sustainable palliative care program in rural communities. A sample of how a variety of rural programs have structured key elements can be found in the diagram in the Appendix (page 12).
- **[Center to Advance Palliative Care \(CAPC\)](#):** Toolkits for Palliative Care Programs include resources for developing programs in a variety of settings. The website has free and members-only sections. CAPC offers special membership rates for Critical Access Hospitals.
- **Sample Referral Criteria:**
 - **[Three Methods to Identify Patients Appropriate for Palliative Care](#):** This scoring tool outlines three methods for care teams to evaluate when palliative care is appropriate. (2-page PDF)
 - **[Palliative Care Referral Criteria](#):** This scoring tool includes general, neurological, and cancer criteria for evaluation of a patient's need for palliative care. (2-page PDF)
- **[Elements of Consultation](#):** A Case example highlighting key elements of a palliative care consultation. (1-page PDF). Stratis Health.
- **Edmonton Symptom Assessment Tool – Revised (ESAS-R):** Quantitative symptom assessment tool that has regularly been utilized by rural palliative care teams. [Summary article](#), [downloadable tool](#) (2-page PDF), [instruction manual](#) (39-page PDF)
- **[Assessment tools for palliative care](#):** Technical brief offers an overview of assessment tools for application in clinical care. (145-page PDF) Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2017)
- **[Spiritual assessment](#):** Physicians can support patients by practicing empathetic listening, incorporating faith traditions into treatment plans, and encouraging patients to turn to spiritual traditions and communities for support. American Family Physician (2022)
- **[Sustainability Strategies For Rural Community-based Palliative Care](#):** A summary of field-tested approaches and supporting resources to assist rural community-based palliative care programs to identify financial strategies and build a business case, including information on coding and billing, grants and philanthropy, and alignment with value-based reimbursement. (9-page PDF) Stratis Health (2025)
- **[Telehealth and Palliative Care](#):** Telehealth is one option to consider when developing workflow and processes. This toolkit covers all aspects of palliative care telehealth delivery, including selecting the technology platform, setting up a hotline, billing for services, and conducting a visit. CAPC (2024, membership required for access to some tools)

Service Implementation Tools and Resources



Stratis Health encourages using a quality improvement (QI) approach to launching service implementation. Use the information obtained from completing your community's asset and gap analysis to identify the target population for a pilot program and start testing the workflows and processes that have been developed.

Common target populations for pilot programs in the Stratis Health initiatives have been:

- Physician or staff referred with complex care needs
- Hospice eligible, but patient declined hospice services
- Infusion therapy patients or those with specific diagnosis such as congestive heart failure
- Requests for inpatient consults for goals of care conversations and symptom management

As the pilot program is refined, expand and broaden services by selecting additional patient populations or settings to provide palliative care services in your community.

- **QI Basics**: Brief training modules and tools designed to equip professionals with the knowledge and tools to start quality improvement projects at their facilities. Stratis Health
- **Evaluation measures**: Sample evaluation metrics for rural community-based palliative programs to help measure and manage results. (1-page PDF) Stratis Health
- **Data collection tools**: Excel-based data collection tool and supporting resources to support patient level data collection for program management and quality measurement. Available upon request from Stratis Health. Contact info@stratishealth.org
- **Recommendations for Palliative Care Program Standards**: Recommended capabilities and competencies for payers and policymakers to contract with palliative care programs (2-page PDF). CAPC, 2025
- **Recommended Quality Measures/Measure Areas**: Recommended measures and program considerations (2-page PDF). CAPC, 2022
- **Palliative Care Quality Collaborative (PCQC)**: Launched in 2021, hosted a unified registry for voluntary palliative care reporting. PCQC announced in early 2025 that the registry is shutting down operations. An [overview of the measures and metrics](#) collected is included here for reference.

Rural Program Examples:

- Rural Community-Based Palliative Care Project Site Visit Reports. NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health
 - [North Dakota](#) (5-page PDF)
 - [Washington](#) (5-page PDF)
- Models and Innovations. Rural Health Information Hub
 - [HopeWest \(CO\)](#)
 - [Project ENABLE \(Educate, Nurture, Advise, Before Life Ends\)](#)

APPENDIX

CONTENTS

- Stratis Health Published Work and partner sites related to rural palliative care development. (page 10)
- Rural Palliative Care: Community Team Development diagram (page 11)
- Variables in Program Structure table (page 12)

Additional information: Stratis Health Published Work

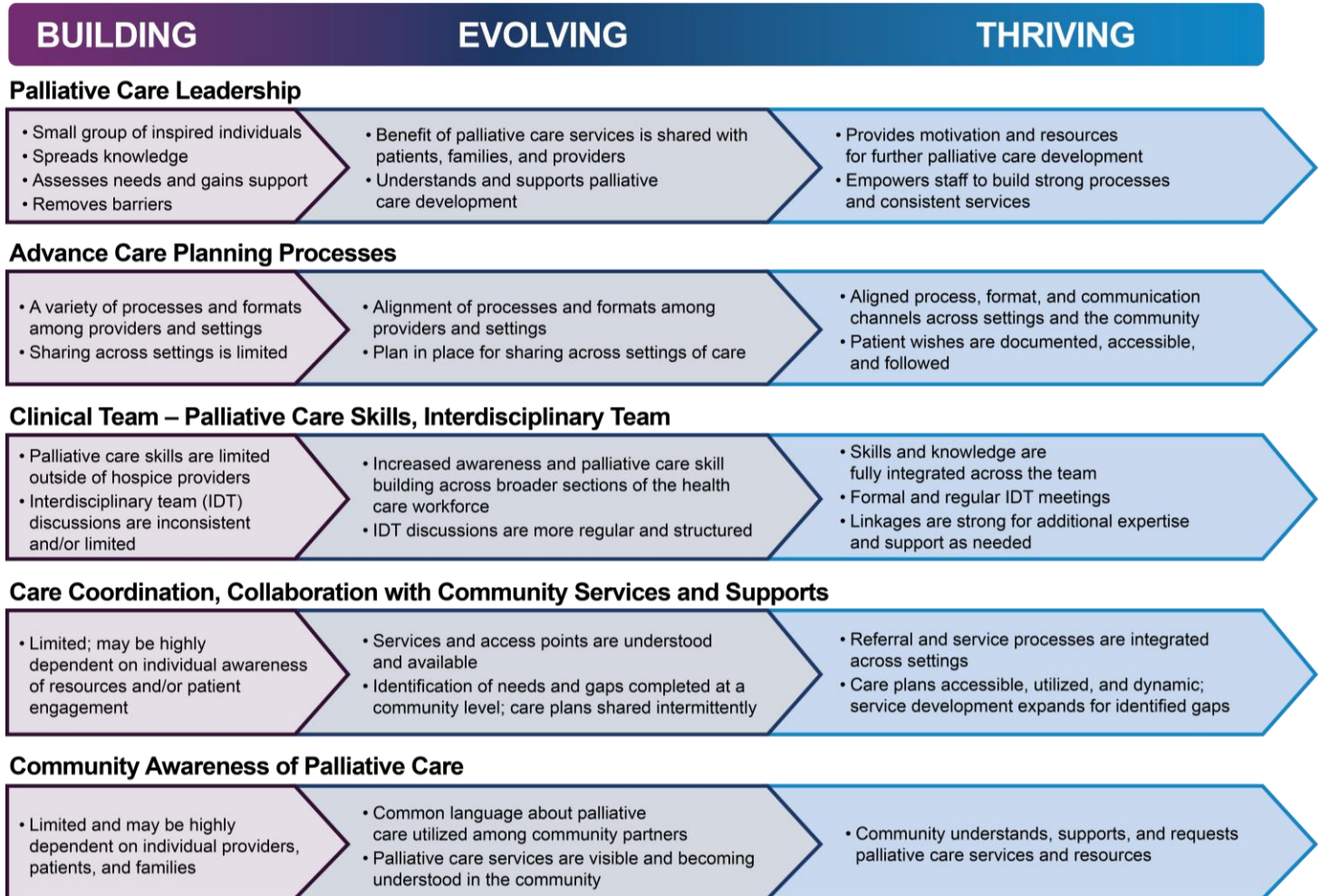
- [**Developing Successful Palliative Care Teams in Rural Communities: A Facilitated Process**](#)
Open Access Article. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, April 2022
- [**Stratis Health Project Brief - Rural Community-based Palliative Care, 2017-2020:**](#)
Highlights of a three-year project to expand and support the development of rural community-based palliative care teams and services in Minnesota, North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin. (3-page PDF) (March 2021)
 - [**Rural Community-based Palliative Care: 2017-2020, Final Report:**](#) The NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis performed an external evaluation of the program outcomes, both quantitative results (i.e., reduction in health care utilization, improved patient-reported outcomes, and increased care team knowledge and skills) and qualitative results and experiences, including case studies about the experience of rural communities in participating states. (62-page PDF) (February 2021)
 - [**Stratis Health Project ECHO Summary Report:**](#) Overview of the implementation of a nine-month Project ECHO focused on palliative care clinical skill development with 11 rural Minnesota community teams. Project ECHO is a nationally recognized model for reducing health disparities in underserved areas through a technology-supported hub-and-spoke approach for knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer engagement. (6-page PDF) (March 2021)
- [**Palliative Care Challenges and Solutions in Rural U.S. Communities:**](#) WWAMI Rural Health Research Center, Research Alert, 2024
- [**Palliative Care — More Than Just Hospice, with Karla Weng and Pat Justis:**](#) Podcast, Rural Health Information Hub, June 2022
- [**Stratis Health Rural Palliative Care Impact Report:**](#) Summarizes rural palliative care initiatives implemented from 2008 – 2014. (28-page PDF) (July 2016).
- [**Palliative Care in Rural Minnesota: Findings from Stratis Health's Minnesota Rural Palliative Care Initiative:**](#) (Page 40-43 PDF) *Minnesota Medicine*, January/February 2016
- [**Quality Measures for Community-based, Rural Palliative Care Programs in Minnesota: A Pilot Study:**](#) A standard set of quality measures was field tested and evaluated for use in rural community-based palliative care programs. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, June 2015, article abstract.
- [**Rural Palliative Care Initiative: Building Palliative Care Capacity in Rural Minnesota**](#)
Journal of Palliative Medicine, February 2013, article abstract

Partner site

[**Washington Rural Palliative Care Initiative**](#)



Rural Palliative Care: Community Team Development



Variables in Rural Palliative Care Program Structure

Methods of service delivery	Interdisciplinary team	Patient focus	Coordinating staff
Home visits	All teams included physician, social work, nursing	Hospice eligible but refused	Nurse practitioner
Clinic appointments		Infusion therapy	Registered nurse
Nursing home visits	Other disciplines vary: • Rehabilitation services • Volunteers • Nurse practitioner • Chaplain • Pharmacy • Advance practice nurse in psychiatry	Home care with complex illness	Social worker
Inpatient consultation		Inpatient consult when requested	Certified nurse specialist
Telephonic case management		Physician referred with complex illness	Advance practice nurse
Volunteer support visits/services		Nursing home residents – triggered by minimal data set (MDS) criteria	

Rural Community-based Palliative Care

About Stratis Health

- The Stratis Health team is comprised of multi-faceted experts who specialize in helping rural communities build and sustain successful palliative care programs.
- Our agile staff delivers data-driven insights, evidence-based interventions, and leading-edge improvement methodologies that inspire organizations and communities to discover and implement solutions to persistent challenges associated with treating advanced and complex illness.
- We have deep expertise in working with vulnerable and underserved populations including rural, minority, and low-income populations.
- Stratis Health is uniquely qualified to increase access to high-quality, patient-centered, coordinated care and support.

Please contact Stratis Health for more information about making palliative care available in rural communities to improve health and reduce disparities in access and services.

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