

Rural Community-based Palliative Care

2017 - 2020

Making palliative care available in rural communities to improve health and reduce disparities in access and services

Overview

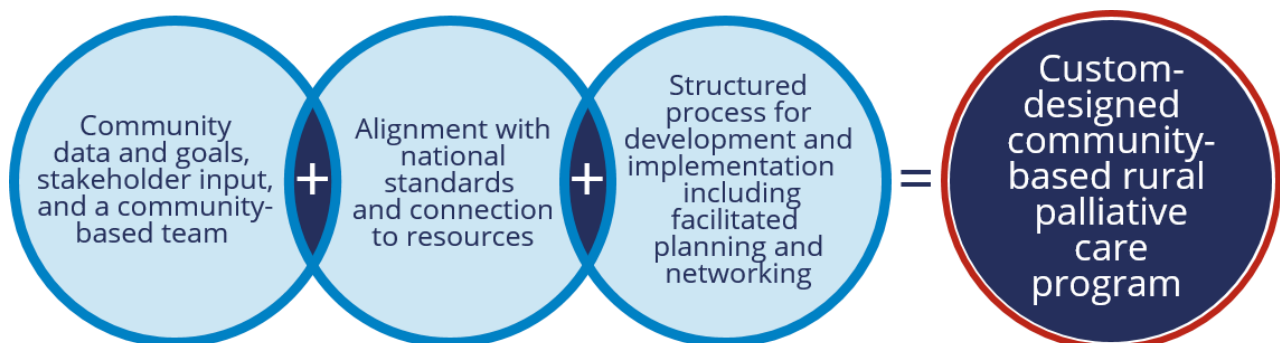
Building on more than a decade of pioneering work in supporting development of rural community-based palliative care teams and services in Minnesota, Stratis Health received private foundation funding in 2017 for a three-year project to expand this ground-breaking initiative to rural communities across three states, as well as to continue to build foundational resources and expand capacity in rural Minnesota communities.

Why focus on palliative care in rural communities?

Palliative care is supportive medical care for people with serious illnesses, offered by interdisciplinary care teams in wholistic, patient-centered ways. It focuses on providing patients with relief from the symptoms, pain, and stress of a serious illness – regardless of the diagnosis. It is appropriate at any age and at any stage in a serious illness and can be provided along with curative treatment. Rural populations can benefit significantly from palliative care, as they are disproportionately older, poorer, and more likely to have a range of chronic illnesses than their urban counterparts, all of which have been illuminated and exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet rural communities are less likely to have access to palliative care services, as most palliative care programs have been developed within larger urban hospital delivery models. *The intersection of these factors means that rural communities have significant need for palliative care but also are uniquely positioned to meet the challenges of providing palliative care through collaborative community-based efforts to help address disparities in access and services.*

The Approach

Stratis Health has designed a community-capacity based formula for program development that uses a facilitated planning process to support development and implementation of palliative care services tailored to meet each community’s unique needs by aligning and enhancing local resources.



The Components

- Build capacity for state leadership:** To help ensure sustainability in the three new states, Stratis Health partnered with State Offices of Rural Health in North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin using a train-the-trainer approach, providing guidance, tools, process, and structure for development of leadership, partnerships, and expertise at a state level.
- Alignment of partners and resources:** Participating states were asked to engage an advisory group with a broad range of state-based stakeholders, helping navigate local context and facilitated connections to education, training, and other supports needed for development of rural community-based palliative care services.
- Facilitated asset-based community planning process:** Training, structure, and tools were provided by Stratis Health to state partners to recruit and lead at least five rural community teams through an 18-24 month facilitated planning process to support local development of community-based palliative care services.
- Sustainability:** To ensure long-term viability of rural palliative care programs, Stratis Health built from existing efforts in Minnesota to develop a blueprint for new and existing programs to navigate the changing health payment landscape, as well implementation of a pilot project using Project ECHO to help build clinical skills for rural Minnesota teams.

Rural Community-based Palliative Care Partnership



The Timeline

A staggered approach to project implementation was used to foster additional knowledge transfer between the state-based cohorts. The total project spanned just over three years, Fall 2017 – Winter 2020. The project was extended for an additional six months in 2020 to help support continued efforts during the coronavirus pandemic.

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3(+)
Partner Building		Sustainability Planning
Cohort 1 WA: 6 communities		
Cohort 2 ND: 9 communities		
Cohort 3 WI: 6 communities		
MN: Key Informant Interviews/Roundtables		MN: Project ECHO Pilot
Resource Development, Training, Coordination, Support, Spread		
← Evaluation Activities →		

The Results and Findings

The outcome of this three-year effort is not only additional data and insight about the impact of making palliative care services available in rural communities to improve health and reduce disparities in access and services, but also improved and updated tools and resources reflecting the learnings from the past three years, including an important new service development framework relevant for rural communities.

Rural Community-Based Palliative Care: 2017-2020, Final Report. Stratis Health engaged the NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis to perform 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).

Project ECHO Summary Report. Overview and lessons learned from implementation of a nine-month Project ECHO focused on palliative care clinical skill development with eleven 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.

Sustainability Strategies for Community-based Palliative Care. Financing and reimbursement are primary challenges in developing and sustaining community-based palliative care services. Based on input provided through roundtable discussions with rural palliative care program leaders, Stratis Health synthesized and categorized field-tested approaches to assist rural community-based palliative care programs in identifying strategies to support and sustain services. This document describes themes identified in developing a business case and offers examples of sustainability strategies and resources used to support palliative care services in rural communities.

Rural Community-based Palliative Care: A framework and toolkit for designing high-value, right-sized programs.

Stratis Health has developed a new framework for rural community based palliative care program development reflecting foundational components, process development, and service implementation. With the new framework, Stratis Health revised and updated its library of tools and resources, now organized around the framework. The toolkit contains guidance and links to a comprehensive set of resources to support rural leaders in developing community-based palliative care services.

