

The Lighthouse pilot project: Enhancing access to physiotherapy services for people experiencing poverty and homelessness



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Introduction & Background

- Homelessness negatively impacts overall health & well-being
- Approximately 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness (3,6)
- Homeless individuals experience health challenges that are 3-5 times higher than the general population (2,3,9,10)
- 0.2% of people living in Saskatoon, SK self-reported being homeless, 45% of whom self-identified as Indigenous* (7,8)
- Providing enhanced access to primary health care services is critical for this population (15, 19)
- Primary health care provides improved access to health care by providing services within the community (20)
- Physical therapists are primary health care professionals who can support health promotion interventions at individual & community levels
- Individuals experiencing **homelessness face unique barriers to accessing relevant, timely, and appropriate health care (including physical therapy) which perpetuate health disparities**

Timely access to physical therapy services in PHC settings can...

- Positively impact health outcomes
- Reduce health care costs
- Reduce the number of emergency visits
- Reduce the length of hospital stays
- Optimize independent living & quality of life

Research Purpose: to reveal client and provider perspectives on the impact of enhancing access to physical therapy services within a primary health care community-based setting.

The Lighthouse Supported Living Inc.

- Non-profit housing provider for individuals requiring emergency shelter, supportive living, and affordable housing in Saskatoon, SK
- A need for an onsite physical therapist was identified by the nurse practitioner at the 'Lighthouse'
- In response, a physical therapist provided services 1x/week at the Lighthouse during a 4-month pilot project

Research Participants & Methods

- Client participants: clients of the Lighthouse Supported Living Inc. who accessed physical therapy services
- Provider participants: 4 physical therapists and a nurse practitioner delivering care
- Both client and provider participants engaged in key informant interviews and/or an online focus group discussion



Results

Client participant demographics

- Average age of participants **47 years** (21-72 yrs)
- A total of **47 individuals** participated, **7** were interviewed
- Individuals reported diverse conditions, with 85% of conditions being musculoskeletal-related
- Approximately **54%** of individuals had **repeat visits** (>2 visits; range between 1 and 11 visits)



Qualitative Themes

1. Complex Health Challenges, Unmet Needs

Client participants identified chronic pain, reduced mobility, urinary incontinence, and dizziness as conditions that affected their activities of daily living, function, and quality of life.

Provider participants identified a range of unmet health care needs:

*I really began to realize how easily this population "slips through the cracks" and go without the care that they need.
(Provider participant)*

2. Overcoming access barriers & impact of physical therapy services

Client participants identified cost, transportation & wait times as barriers to accessing physical therapy care.

That is why this physical therapy [at The Lighthouse] is great because I'm on a low income and there is no way I can afford private physio. (Client participant)

3. Respecting & responding to context & environment

Client participants repeatedly identified that the **environment was familiar and comfortable**.

Provider participants highlighted various adaptations they had made to physical therapy treatment:

The types of treatment I tended to focus on were different than a typical private practice caseload. ... I tried to focus on education and self-management strategies and less on true biomechanical care. (Provider participant)

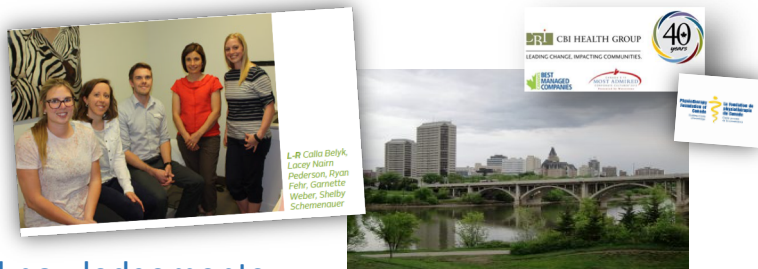
4. Moving forward to enhance access to physical therapy care

Client participants offered insights into elements that would continue to enhance access to physical therapy care at The Lighthouse, including more consistent and regular sessions.

Having a consistent team of service providers [including physical therapists] who could really build relationships with this community would be helpful.

Conclusions

- Individuals experiencing homelessness and poverty in Saskatchewan face **diverse barriers to accessing** physical therapy services
- Client participants perceived an **improvement in overall health, function and wellness** after receiving physical therapy care at The Lighthouse
- **Physical therapy services in the community** may be an effective way of enhancing access to care for diverse populations
- The transient nature of individuals living in contexts of homelessness & poverty is unpredictable and uncertain, making appointment-based approaches to care delivery a barrier to care
- As physical therapists **expand their role into primary health care settings** in low socioeconomic contexts, **enhanced professional development** should be provided



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Implications & next steps

- Physical therapists are well **equipped to optimize function, mobility and overall health** in primary health care contexts
- Our results reveal that client participants believed that physical therapy had a **positive impact on their general health and well-being**
- **There is a need for** health care services to be delivered in non-traditional ways, to better meet the opportunistic lifestyles and unmet health needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and poverty

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