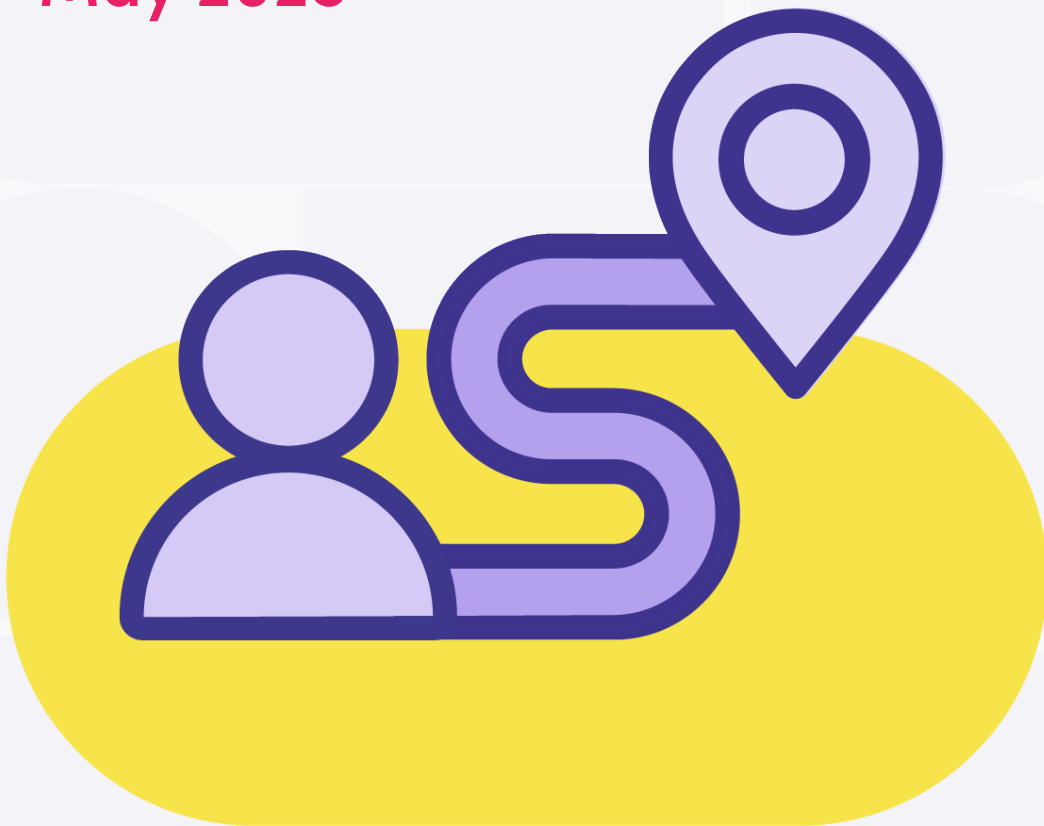


Policy pathways for expanding access to care and easing pressure on emergency departments

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About Healthcare Excellence Canada

Healthcare Excellence Canada (HEC) works with partners to spread innovation, build capability and catalyze policy change so that everyone in Canada has safe and high-quality healthcare. Through collaboration with patients, caregivers and people working in healthcare, we turn proven innovations into lasting improvements in all dimensions of healthcare excellence.

HEC focuses on improving care of older adults, bringing care closer to home and supporting the retention of the health workforce – with quality and safety embedded across all our efforts. We are committed to fostering inclusive, culturally safe and equitable care through engagement with different groups, including patients and caregivers, First Nations, Métis and Inuit, healthcare workers and more.

Launched in 2021, HEC brings together the Canadian Patient Safety Institute and Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement. We are an independent, not-for-profit charity funded primarily by Health Canada.

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Moving the dial on emergency department visits

Everyone in Canada should have access to timely healthcare, including care closer to home and in the community. But many people still turn to emergency departments for health concerns that could have been managed elsewhere if safe, high-quality care had been available. In fact, 38 percent of adults in Canada report going to the emergency department for issues that could have been addressed in another care setting.^a At the same time, in many communities, people face the opposite problem: they do not have easy access to an emergency department at all. In others, the emergency department is the only available option for care, even when it may not be the most appropriate setting.

In 2023-2024, there were over 15 million emergency department visits recorded across Canada.^b These visits come with higher costs and risks and reflect the difficulty many people face in accessing primary care. With 17 percent of adults in Canada lacking a regular primary care provider and many others struggling to obtain timely care, pressure on emergency departments continues to grow.^c Addressing these challenges is essential to improving patient care, reducing strain on emergency services and building a more efficient healthcare system.

Healthcare Excellence Canada (HEC) like many others, is working to support teams in [expanding access to care and easing pressure on emergency departments](#). Through a review of the evidence and promising practices, four common policy pathways have emerged. These pathways help address key drivers of emergency department visits that could otherwise be managed in primary or community care to ensure people can get access to care where, when, and from whom they need it.

The policy pathways and examples of promising practices include:

^a The Commonwealth Fund. [Mirror, Mirror 2024: A Portrait of the Failing U.S. Health System – Comparing Performance in 10 Nations](#). Accessed February 20, 2025.

^b Canadian Institute for Health Information. [NACRS emergency department visits and lengths of stay](#). Accessed February 20, 2025.

^c Canadian Institute for Health Information. [Access to primary care: Many Canadians face challenges](#). Accessed February 20, 2025.



Supporting community-based health and disease prevention

Examples include offering services such as diabetes education, preventative screening clinics, and more to keep people proactively engaged with their health close to home and in the community. For example, [Nursing Home Without Walls](#) is aiming to enhance the experience of aging by supporting older adults and their caregivers to age in their homes.



Expanding access to primary care

Shifting models of how primary care is funded, designed and delivered to focus on team-based primary care, optimizing scheduling practices and increasing the number of healthcare providers. For example, [Improving Equity in Access to Palliative Care](#) is an initiative focused on improving access to palliative approaches to care with and for people experiencing homelessness or vulnerable housing. Additionally, HEC's [Strengthening Primary Care](#) program focused on improving access to team-based primary care in northern, rural and remote communities.



Enhancing appropriate care through service integration

Integrating primary care in other service delivery models, such as creating a single-entry point for primary, urgent, or emergency care through triage protocols and balancing virtual and in-person care. For example, [Connected Medicine](#) supported the spread of proven remote consult models of care to provide eligible patients with access to specialist advice from primary care providers they know and trust, closer to home through remote consultations.



Enabling role substitution, health workforce improvements and changing advanced practice roles

Expanding the roles and responsibilities of allied healthcare primary care providers—such as paramedics and pharmacists — to play a larger role in primary care, while also reducing administrative burdens so they can focus more on patient care. For example, the Health Workforce Innovation Challenge supported healthcare teams across Canada to strengthen their workforces, improving turnover rates, work-life balance and patient care.

Bringing it all together

HEC's pan-Canadian movement to expand care to improve access and ease pressure on emergency departments and support care closer to home and in community has four distinct offerings for you to participate:

Right Care Challenge

Supports health and community care organizations to launch or enhance initiatives that ensure patients receive the right care, at the right time, in the right place—all while helping reduce avoidable emergency department visits. Learn more about the [Right Care Challenge](#).

Enhancing Integrated Care

Supports primary and community care organizations to strengthen integrated team-based care models, including virtual care, making access easier and reducing pressure on emergency departments. Learn more about [Enhancing Integrated Care](#).

Paramedic and Social Prescribing

Helps paramedic teams use social prescribing to connect clients with local community services, improving overall health and wellbeing, ensuring that people are provided with the right care and support, in the right place. Learn more about [Paramedics and Social Prescribing](#).

Primary Care Access Improvement

Helps team-based primary care organizations adjust resources, so patients receive timely care, regardless of urgency or demand. Learn more about [Primary Care Access Improvement](#).

Care Forward

Join a growing pan-Canadian movement where innovative strategies and shared knowledge are transforming care for over a million people across Canada.

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