



THE ONTARIO

caregiver
ORGANIZATION

ESSENTIAL CARE
PARTNER SUPPORT
HUB

Integrating Essential Care Partners as Part of the Care Team in **Hospitals**



INTEGRATING ESSENTIAL CARE PARTNERS AS PART OF THE CARE TEAM IN HOSPITALS

Four million family caregivers across Ontario provide an estimated 75% of the care in the system. Family caregivers are essential care partners.

What would happen if care partners weren't able to provide that care? Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions painted a very grim picture of that reality. It underscored just how imperative care partners are in patient health outcomes and experiences.

There is [evidence](#) to demonstrate that including care partners enables high-quality care, and relieves pressures on the health care system, including hospital usage and demands on health care workers, as well as supporting care transitions and avoiding ALC. Equally important, care partners help make the experience better for both healthcare providers and care partners.

Without the inclusion of caregivers, there are negative consequences for patients, care partners, healthcare providers and the system, including:

- Harm to patients, particularly for vulnerable populations and those with linguistic/ethno-cultural care needs or complex conditions;
- Increased caregiver distress; and
- Greater demands on the healthcare team and the health care system as a whole.



“The implications of restricting hospital visits are incomparably more negative than positive.”¹

¹Correia, T.S.P.; Martins, M.M.F.P.S.; Barroso, F.F.; Pinho, L.G.; Fonseca, C.; Valentim, O.; Lopes, M. The Implications of Family Members' Absence from Hospital Visits during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Nurses' Perceptions. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2022, 19, 8991. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19158991>

Impacts when essential care partners are **not** included as part of the care team

| Patient and Care Partner impacts | Healthcare provider impacts | Health system impacts |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worse health outcomes and quality of care • More cognitive, mental and physical health decline • Increased risk of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - behavioral responses (e.g. delirium, anxiety) - falls - depression • Less proper use of medication • Missed opportunities for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - patient history - preventative care • Discharge instructions more likely not fully understood | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased demands on health care workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More social support - More time communicating and updating family - Learning new tech - Adhering to new and changing safety protocols • Secondary trauma • Increased distress, anxiety and depression for workers due to being unable to provide person-centred care • Added stress from working in an environment with low morale and distress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased hospital usage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Greater risk of ALC designation - Less successful transitions and risk of readmission - Missed opportunities for ALC avoidance • Higher system costs |

The evidence is clear – the quality of care, health outcomes and experiences are better for patients when care partners are actively included and involved as part of the care team.



WHAT IS AN ESSENTIAL CARE PARTNER?

Essential care partners (also called essential caregivers or designated care partners) play a critical role in providing unpaid physical, emotional and cognitive support to family members, partners and friends in many care settings.

There's a difference between essential care partners and visitors. Essential care partners are necessary to the safety, quality of care, health outcomes and well-being of patients. Visitors have an important social role but aren't actively involved in care.²

Essential Care Partners

provide physical, psychological and emotional support, as deemed important by the patient. This care can include support in decision making, care coordination and continuity of care. Essential care partners can include family members, close friends or other caregivers and are identified by the patient or substitute decision maker²



²Healthcare Excellence Canada. Policy Guidance for the Reintegration of Caregivers as Essential Care Partners. September 2021. https://www.healthcareexcellence.ca/media/4btksgcp/202110_policyguidance_en.pdf

WHAT IS AN ESSENTIAL CARE PARTNER PROGRAM?

An Essential Care Partner program is a set of policies and leading practices implemented by a health care organization to **identify**, **include** and **support** care partners to actively participate as members of the care team. An Essential Care Partner program can include components such as an identification card, training and education for staff and care partners, family presence policies, communications, support services for care partners, as well as referrals to community-based supports.

An Essential Care Partner program is a tangible way to demonstrate your hospital's commitment to recognizing the essential role of care partners. It is often part of a larger organizational culture shift towards person and family-centred care, which includes meaningful patient and family engagement to help inform hospital priorities, policies and practices.

By implementing an Essential Care Partner program, your hospital can proactively identify care partners, formalize how you include and support them, and empower them as members of your care team. With a program in place, it ensures essential care partners can be present and involved even during health system pressures and outbreaks.

Many hospitals have policies and practices in place to enable caregiver presence and participation in care, but they vary widely from one hospital to another. Based on collective learning and work with health system partners, the Ontario Caregiver Organization has developed Essential Care Partner guiding principles and [leading practices](#) to support health care organizations in achieving greater consistency regarding how essential care partners are identified, included and supported across Ontario.



ESSENTIAL CARE PARTNERS – A KEY CONTRIBUTOR TO POSITIVE HEALTH SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

Hospitals across the province are facing unprecedented staffing pressures and burnout rates, amidst unrelenting demands on health system resources. Essential Care Partner programs have been implemented throughout Ontario hospitals, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, with meaningful and measurable impacts.

At first glance, hospitals may question if this is the right time to focus resources on the implementation of programs or new practices to support essential care partner inclusion. In fact, an Essential Care Partner program is often an extension and enhancement of existing hospital practices and is a proven strategy for addressing current pressures in the health care system. An Essential Care Partner program is imperative to:

- Addressing health human resource challenges
- Successful care transitions
- ALC avoidance and solutions
- Rebuilding trust between hospitals, providers and care partners

In some cases, like at Sault Area Hospital, the program was a key factor in solving a challenging patient situation. “With one particular patient, once their essential caregiver was onboarded, ‘anxiety and anger melted away and the individual’s care started to be positively affected by support from their family caregiver,” explains Danielle Florio (Patient Care Supervisor), Sault Area Hospital.

In some cases, the Essential Care Partner program was started as a temporary way to reintroduce care partners into hospitals during the pandemic. Once the program was in place, its benefits were so clear that the program is now permanent. As Sonia Pagura, former Director of Quality, Safety, Risk, Patient Partnership and Relations at Niagara Health explains, “It is critical that this is a forever program and that we continuously identify care partners and include them as part of the care team, as their wisdom and support contribute to positive health outcomes.”

“We can’t do it without our (Essential) Care Partners. They provide incredible support to our patients and residents. We believe our Designated Care Partners have the potential to reduce the risk for falls and help improve health outcomes. We know that understanding the impact of the designated care partner program and fostering its continued improvement will be just as important as creating the program.”

Paula Doering, Senior Vice-President Clinical Programs, Chief Nursing Executive and Allied Health, Bruyère

“The impact of the program on patients, caregivers and staff has also turned some challenging situations into positive ones.”

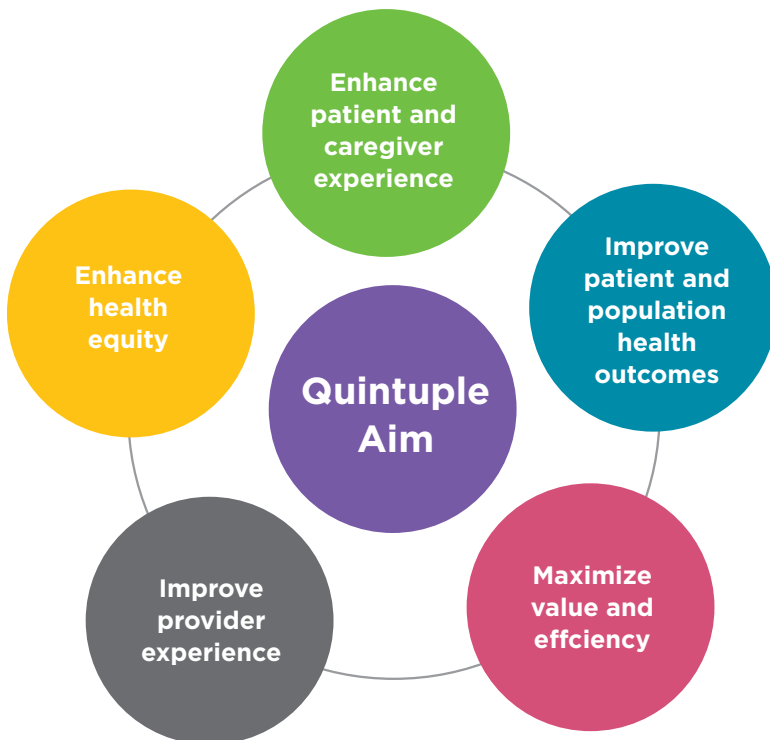
D. Florio, Patient Care Supervisor, Sault Area Hospital

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO AN ESSENTIAL CARE PARTNER PROGRAM?

Essential Care Partner programs are a proven contributor to achieving the Quintuple Aim for healthcare quality.^{3,4,5,6,7}

When there is an Essential Care Partner program in place, there are benefits for both the patients as well as the healthcare organization, including:

- Enriched and improved patient care and safety
- More equitable and culturally safe care
- More successful patient transitions
- Reduced front-line employee stress and workload for healthcare teams
- Better two-way dialogue between care partners and health care teams, which builds mutual trust



³Healthcare Excellence Canada (2020). Evidence Brief: Essential Caregivers as Partners. https://www.cfhi-fcass.ca/docs/default-source/itr/tools-and-resources/essential-together/evidence-brief-en.pdf?sfvrsn=103fe5b3_4

⁴Hahn-Goldberg S, Jeffs L, Troup A, Kubba R, Okrainec K (2018) "We are doing it together"; The integral role of caregivers in a patients' transition home from the medicine unit. PLoS ONE 13(5): e0197831. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0197831>

⁵Bélanger, Lynda, Bussièrès, Sylvain, Rainville, François, Coulombe, Martin, Desmartis, Marie. 2017/11/20. Hospital visiting policies - impacts on patients, families and staff: A review of the literature to inform decision making. Journal of Hospital Administration, DOI: 10.5430/jha.v6n6p51

⁶Kuluski K, Im J, McGeown M. "It's a waiting game" a qualitative study of the experience of carers of patients who require an alternate level of care. BMC Health Serv Res. 2017;17:1-10.

⁷Institute for Patient and Family Centred Care. Better Together Partnering with Families, Facts and Figures about Family Presence and Participation. <https://www.ipfcc.org/bestpractices/Better-Together-Facts-and-Figures.pdf>

All of these benefits add up in cost savings for the overall health care system.

Benefits to patients

Better quality of care, health outcomes and experience

- Providers get better knowledge of the patient and their unique circumstances
- Discharge is smoother
- Proper use of medication is improved

Risks are mitigated, including risk of:

- Cognitive, physical, or mental health decline
- Responsive behaviours
- Depression
- Falls

Benefits to health care providers & hospitals

Less strain on health labour force

- Care partners can provide a supportive role in care – offering patient history, emotional support, help at mealtime, etc.

Health care workers are less likely to experience moral/ethical distress because the ability to deliver person-centred care is improved when care partners are involved

Less pressure on the hospitals because fewer discharges are delayed and re-admission rates are lower when care partners are involved and informed

ALC leading practices identify care partner inclusion and support as a strategy to reduce or avoid ALC designation

Transitions to home, community and long-term care homes are more successful



READY TO IMPLEMENT? WE'RE HERE TO HELP.

The Ontario Caregiver Organization has created the [Essential Care Partner Support Hub](#) to help hospitals and other healthcare organizations implement and improve their own Essential Care Partner programs. Through the Support Hub, you can access:

- Guidance and coaching
- Leading practices based on organizations that have successfully implemented
- Resources, tools and templates
- Connection to settings and peers that have implemented
- Opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange through our Caregivers as Partners in Care Learning Collaborative

Contact the Essential Care Partner Support Hub at ecpsuppothub@ontariocaregiver.ca to get started.



Essential Care Partner Support Hub

Email: ecpsupporthub@ontariocaregiver.ca

Ontario Caregiver Helpline: 1-833-416-2273

Email: info@ontariocaregiver.ca

Phone: 416-362-CARE (2273) or 1-888-877-1626

www.ontariocaregiver.ca

