

AGKNOW

ALBERTA FARM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK



FOR FARMERS SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



ANNUAL ²⁰²⁴ REPORT

AN ALBERTA APPROACH
TO FARM MENTAL HEALTH

LEARN MORE AT [AGKNOW.CA](https://agknow.ca)



2024 ANNUAL REPORT

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AN ALBERTA APPROACH
TO FARM MENTAL HEALTH



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative.



AgKnow acknowledges that the land we call Alberta, and where Albertan farms reside, is the traditional and ancestral territory of many peoples, presently subject to Treaties 6, 7, and 8. Namely: the Blackfoot Confederacy – Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika – the Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Nakota Sioux, Stoney Nakoda, and the Tsuu T'ina Nation and the Métis People of Alberta. This includes the Métis Settlements and the Six Regions of the Métis Nation of Alberta within the historical Northwest Métis Homeland. We acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit who have lived in and cared for these lands for generations before us.

We are grateful for the traditional Knowledge Keepers and Elders who are still with us today and those who have gone before us. We would not be here without them. We make this acknowledgement as an act of reconciliation and gratitude to those whose territory we reside, farm and live on. While recognizing the historical impacts of settlement on these lands, we wish to express our common goal to care for our water and natural resources for all future generations to share in.

MISSION

To address the unique challenges faced by farmers, Agknow collaborates with stakeholders to identify needs and approaches that ensure accessible and effective mental health support for Alberta farmers, their families, employees and communities.



VISION

At Agknow we are driven by a passion for the well-being of farmers and a commitment to cultivating resilient farming communities where mental health is prioritized, contributing to the overall prosperity of Alberta's agriculture sector for long-term impact.



A YEAR IN REVIEW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2023 was a year of growth for AgKnow, particularly in laying the groundwork to address crucial aspects of farm mental health in Alberta going forward.

Stakeholder engagements early in the year were instrumental in shaping the direction of our efforts, which were backed by the unwavering support and collaborative spirit of volunteers and staff. With their help, we developed a Suicide Awareness and Prevention Training course and trained nine facilitators. Many of those involved in this project have a personal connection to the impact of suicide in rural areas, and they went above and beyond to provide and, notably, donate time and resources.

Our involvement in inter-agency meetings and tradeshow has helped to increase awareness of AgKnow and provided direction to inform our development. Partnerships with Counselling Alberta and EaseCare represent significant strides toward identifying accessible counselling options for rural Albertans, and we continue to engage with them to increase their capacity to provide farm-informed counselling.

The re-launch of free counselling sessions for farm families in September was a notable achievement, and we are pleased to also extend the programs to support veterinarians and registered veterinary technicians. Free





IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE CULTURE OF AGRICULTURE

sessions can be booked by visiting the farm-informed AgKnow Therapist Network (ATN) on our website. The expansion of the ATN to cover the province remains a top priority. We continue to develop training and provide learning opportunities for mental health and health care professionals and service providers working in rural Alberta.

Securing funding through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, supported by the provincial and federal governments, allowed us to grow our team. This ensures our capacity to develop evidence-based resources tailored to rural farming communities. It also fuels ongoing research initiatives, like the depopulation study initiated in 2023 and the stress and coping assessment, which identified five priority areas for Alberta farmers. Anticipating further research results in 2024, our goal is to optimize mental health and health care services for the benefit of the farming community.

Early in 2024, the establishment of an Industry Advisory Group presented an exciting opportunity for interested parties to connect and contribute. The commitment, perseverance, and teamwork of our supporters continue to make a difference in the lives of farmers and their families.

Linda Hunt

Linda Hunt, Program Director

AGKNOW
ALBERTA FARM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

AN **ARECA**
INITIATIVE
AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH
EXTENSION COUNCIL OF ALBERTA

ALBERTA FARM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

WHO IS AGKNOW?

The AgKnow Alberta Farm Mental Health Network was established in 2022 with over \$500,000 in grant funding from the Canadian Agricultural Partnership as the result of a province-wide assessment of the mental health support services available and accessible to farmers and farming communities throughout most of rural Alberta. The team also examined the stressors farmers typically face and how they can affect their well-being and impact their business and personal relationships.

AgKnow is farmer-led. It focuses on building tangible tools and services tailored to the needs of producers and their families based on resources and tips from real farmers. The Network partners with professionals across the province to get farmers support when they need it most.

AgKnow is an initiative of the Agricultural Research and Extension Council of Alberta (ARECA), a not-for-profit organization working with producers to enhance and improve their operations sustainability through access to cutting edge information, field research, and new technology.

AGKNOW STAFF



LINDA HUNT
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Virtual Assistant

AgKnow was established in direct response to the expressed need for mental health support within Alberta's agriculture community. At AgKnow, we provide effective support and evidence-based, practical resources for all Alberta farmers and aim to:

REDUCE
BARRIERS TO SERVICE

DE-STIGMATIZE
MENTAL HEALTH

COLLABORATE AND STRENGTHEN
PARTNERSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT BODIES, MENTAL HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS, AND AGRICULTURAL STAKEHOLDERS

STAY RELEVANT AND CURRENT
WITH THE ISSUES IMPACTING THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY IN ALBERTA

INCREASE RESILIENCY
IN FARMING COMMUNITIES



WHAT WE VALUE

- ☀ **FOCUSING ON THE FARMER**
- ☀ **THE IMPACT OF OUR WORK**
- ☀ **EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS**
- ☀ **COLLABORATION**
- ☀ **RESILIENCY**
- ☀ **CHOICE**

FOR FARMERS SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



AN OVERVIEW OF

FARMING IN ALBERTA

Alberta is an agricultural powerhouse with the second-largest total farm area (behind Saskatchewan) in the country, making up 32% of Canada's total. Alberta reported a total farm area of 49.2 million acres in 2021.

In 2021, farms classified as oilseed and grain accounted for the largest total farm area in the province, with 46.4%. This was followed by farms classified as beef and feedlots (39.6%) and other crop farms (7.9%). Alberta has more than a quarter of Canada's field crop area.

In 2021, farms in Alberta reported 25.6 million acres of hay and field crops. The province accounted for 27.6% of Canada's field crop and hay area. The three biggest crop contributors in Alberta were canola, spring wheat, and barley. Alberta was the top grower of barley in Canada and grew the second-highest number of acres of canola and spring wheat.

With 57,605 farm operators working on 41,505 farms in 2021, Albertan farmers made up only 1.3% of the population. The average age of farm operators in Alberta is 56.5 years old.

**FARMS IN ALBERTA
CAN BE DIVIDED INTO**

46.4%
OILSEED & GRAIN

36.9%
BEEF & FEEDLOTS

7.9%
OTHER CROPS

POPULATION OF ALBERTA
4,262,635

FARM OPERATORS
57,605
IN ALBERTA

AVERAGE AGE
OF FARM OPERATORS
56.5

ONE
OUT OF EVERY 100
ALBERTANS IS A FARMER



FARMS IN ALBERTA

41,505

TOTAL FARM AREA

49.2 MILLION

ACRES OF CROPLAND & PASTURE

COMPRISING

32%

OF CANADA'S TOTAL FARMLAND

NET FARM INCOME IN 2021

\$5.96 BILLION

AGRI-FOOD INDUSTRIES CONTRIBUTED

\$11.2 BILLION

TO ALBERTA'S GDP IN 2022



Alberta has the second-highest rate of succession planning in Canada with 14% of farms in Alberta reporting a succession plan in 2021. By comparison, 12% of farms in Canada reported a succession plan. In 2021, farms in Alberta accounted for more than a quarter (25.4%) of Canada's share of farms that reported a succession plan.¹

**IT IS ESTIMATED THAT 75% OF
CANADIAN FARMS WILL NEED TO
CHANGE HANDS IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS.**

¹ Source: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/96-325-x/2021001/article/00009-eng.htm>

A CASE STUDY IN FARM MENTAL HEALTH RESPONSE

THE ONTARIO APPROACH

In Ontario, farm families and employees now have access to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) delivered by Telus Health. A farm-specific phone line connects callers to farm-informed clinicians if available, with the option to direct callers for crisis support. Currently 25-30% of farm callers require crisis intervention, far exceeding the normal expected rate of 2-3%. Despite functioning since 2022 without a comprehensive communications strategy, recent funding to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Ontario has led to a steady increase in service use. Notably, farmers are not always able to connect with a farm-informed clinician, and the province pays Telus on a per-farmer basis regardless of the number of users. The CMHA coordinator actively engages with Telus clinicians about the current stressors faced by the industry.

Education and knowledge transfer is the most effective way to overcome stigma. CMHA Ontario has established a network comprising about 40 health promotion facilitators, although realistically 10 are currently active. Their primary task is to administer "In the Know," a four-hour mental health literacy course developed by the Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing (CCAW) at the University of Guelph. The government currently funds CMHA Ontario to oversee the coordination of "In the Know" training delivery, which has seen significant uptake from farm boards and delegates. Over the past year, they have trained around 60 individuals, with more than half of the sessions being conducted virtually, and have set a target of reaching 100 participants in the upcoming year. Three full-time staff are dedicated to promotion, active engagement with agriculture industry businesses and associations, and the responsibility of scheduling and contracting regional CMHA health promotion facilitators to deliver the training locally.

Finally, CMHA Ontario has adapted a successful suicide prevention program from Quebec known as the Sentinel program. Ontario's Guardian Network trains volunteers who are frequently in contact with farmers with strategies and tools to identify when someone is struggling with their mental health and connect them with appropriate services. There are 220 Guardians spread throughout the province.

Currently, CCAW is developing and testing a farm culture course for health care and mental health professionals and is piloting it in Ontario.





FARMS IN ONTARIO

48,346

TOTAL FARM AREA

11.8 MILLION

ACRES

COMPRISING

7.7%

OF CANADA'S TOTAL FARMLAND

NET FARM INCOME IN 2021

\$2.28 BILLION

FARM OPERATORS

67,390

IN ONTARIO



ONE

OUT OF EVERY 212
ONTARIANS IS A FARMER



POPULATION OF ONTARIO

14,223,942

THE LANDSCAPE OF

FARM MENTAL HEALTH IN ALBERTA

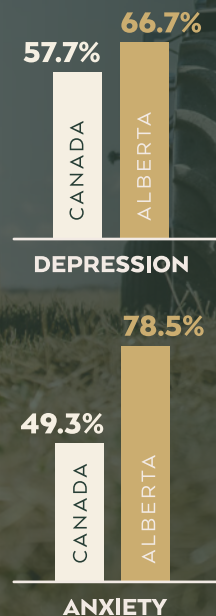
Research shows that farmers commonly struggle with depression and anxiety, and are at a high risk of suicide. According to a national study of 1,132 farmers in 2015-16, Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton and colleagues at the University of Guelph found that 35% of Canadian farmers experienced depression, 57% experienced anxiety, and 45% reported high stress. All these values were higher than those reported by the general population.

In 2023, Dr. Rebecca Purc-Stephenson of the University of Alberta led a survey on the rate of stress, mental outcomes, and coping strategies among Alberta farmers. The goal of this research was to gain baseline knowledge of the state of mental health in Alberta farmers and to have data that can be compared to the findings of national farmer mental health research.

Preliminary results from the study show that Alberta farmers are aligned with the rest of the country in terms of mental health challenges. The final results of this study are to be published this spring, and there may be deviation in those results due to further analysis.

- **Depression among farmers** The survey found that 66.7% of Alberta farmers experienced mild to severe symptoms of depression, compared to 57.7% of farmers in national data collected in 2021.
- **Anxiety among farmers** While national data in 2021 found that 49.3% of farmers experienced symptoms of anxiety, 78.5% of Alberta farmers reported experiencing mild to severe symptoms of anxiety, a significantly higher percentage.
- **Burnout among farmers** Burnout, the result of too much stress, is characterized by exhaustion (feeling overextended, depleted emotionally, physically tired), cynicism (disengaged, negative, withdrawn from the job, resentful), and feeling unproductive (low self-evaluation, seeing yourself as ineffective). Alberta farmers reported higher rates of burnout compared to both the national data on farmers and general population norms.
- **Resilience among farmers** While Alberta farmers reported higher rates of resilience compared to the national data on farmers, this was still lower than the general population norms across Canada.

ALBERTA FARMERS REPORTED HIGHER RATES OF BURNOUT



The top five stressors as identified in this study (most to least stressful) are:

0.1 UNEXPECTED WORK DISRUPTIONS

Dealing with bad weather, equipment breakdowns, time pressure, lack of manpower

0.2 FARM AND FINANCIAL PLANNING

Getting loans, planning for retirement/transition

0.3 REGULATIONS AND PUBLIC PRESSURE

Environmental regulations, policy changes, public perception of farming

0.4 OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

Operating machinery, handling chemicals

0.5 ISOLATION

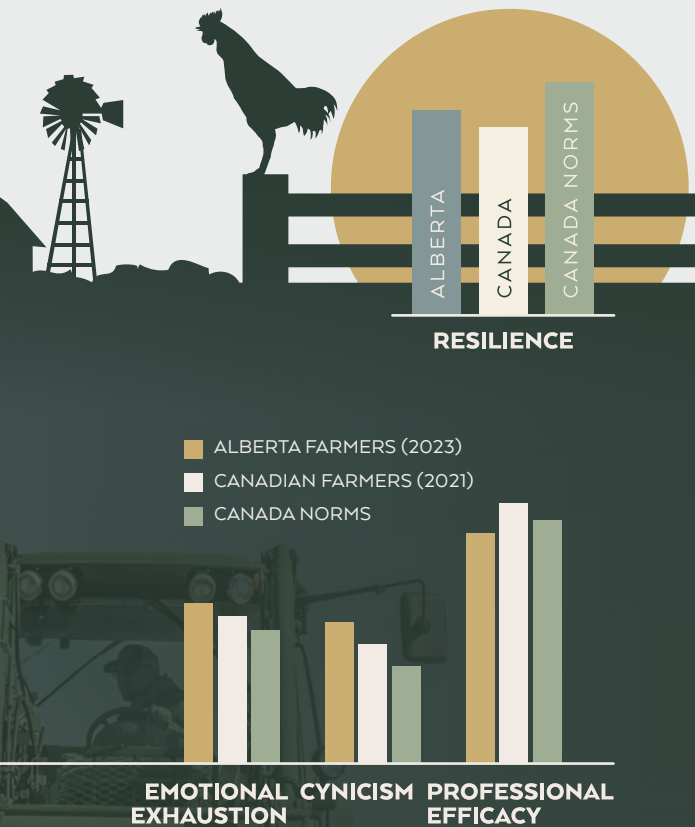
Lack of close neighbours, distance to shopping centres

It is worth highlighting that the three highest stress categories are all outside of the farmer's control, whereas the last two stressors have always been inherent to farming and rural life (albeit not as burdensome as they are presently).

The study also identified common coping strategies among farmers. These are mostly distraction and escapism strategies that help them to manage their emotions and gives them a cognitive break from the stress. They rarely engage in therapy. The top barriers to seeking help are stigma/pride, time, lack of access to service, and lack of awareness.

The preferred methods of receiving support reported are as follows, from highest to lowest:

1. Professional, in person
2. Another farmer/peer
3. Internet resources with tips/advice
4. Professional, telephone or online; a family member (tied)
5. Self-directed help/app
6. Religious leader/pastor



66.7%
EXPERIENCED MILD TO SEVERE SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

78.5%
EXPERIENCED MILD TO SEVERE SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY



A CASE FOR FARM TRANSITION

It is well established that farm transition is an ongoing concern and, despite multiple efforts to increase adoption and engagement from farmers, significant barriers remain. Finding the right professional is confusing and difficult, there is no provincial coordination of farm transition resources and services in Alberta, and there is a need for professional development supports to ensure a new generation of farm transition specialists is entering the workforce.

THE ALBERTA APPROACH TO FARM MENTAL HEALTH

METRICS OF SUCCESS

GOAL • REDUCE BARRIERS TO SERVICE

In 2021, the Canadian Psychological Association reported that in rural communities, the ratio of psychologists to population was one psychologist for every 28,500 people, whereas in urban communities, the ratio was one psychologist for every 3,848 people.²

Farmers often encounter significant barriers to accessing mental health services. Some of the primary obstacles farmers face are the distance from mental health services, the relative scarcity of resources, lengthy wait times, unpredictable working hours that hinder keeping appointments, and practitioners who do not understand agriculture. Additionally, the financial burden associated with therapy services presents a significant barrier, as farmers prioritize investing in their operations over personal well-being.

To address these challenges, the AgKnow initiative has identified and promoted farm-informed counsellors and therapists through the development of the AgKnow Therapist Network (ATN) and has piloted a free session program. The AgKnow Professional Network is made up of agriculturally informed and connected practitioners across Alberta. Information on each member of our network is available on our website, and each member bio includes detailed information regarding service areas, areas of specialty, and connection to agriculture. Therapists can be contacted directly through their individual inquiry forms on our website.

Our current free sessions pilot program covers up to two free counselling sessions for farmers, their families, farm employees, veterinarians, and registered veterinary technicians, which will be bumped up to four free sessions in 2024. The purpose of the pilot is to reduce barriers to farmers trying therapy supports and try to establish a baseline for the amount of counselling services needed to meet the demands of the industry. Adoption in Alberta, like the other provinces, has been slowly increasing over time, but as of yet a baseline for how much the services are needed has not been established. Activities that address stigma and increase awareness are still needed, as well as a consistent funding model to make the service reliable.

² House of Commons, AGRI, Evidence, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 22 November 2018, 0950 (Karen R. Cohen, Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Psychological Association).

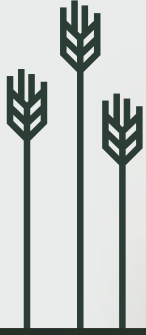


KEY HIGHLIGHT

Since AgKnow's launch, 17 agriculturally-informed therapists and counsellors have provided free 34 mental health sessions to 18 farmers.

“A LOT OF TIMES THE ONLY ONES WHO UNDERSTAND US ARE OTHER PRODUCERS.”

Sean Stanford, Southern Alberta farmer³



WHY FARM-INFORMED THERAPY MATTERS

Between November 2021 and April 2022, AgKnow conducted a needs assessment of farm mental health in Alberta. One of our findings was that health care providers and mental health professionals do not understand farm culture, which results in a breakdown in patient-provider communication and delays in farmers seeking care.

In many rural settings, general practitioners are the first point of contact, but they may not be equipped to assess or address mental health issues. Farmers report they often delay seeking care because they feel providers do not understand farm culture and farm stressors well, which is supported by research (e.g., Hagen et al., 2020). Farmers are more likely to connect with health care providers when they reach crisis/breakdown.

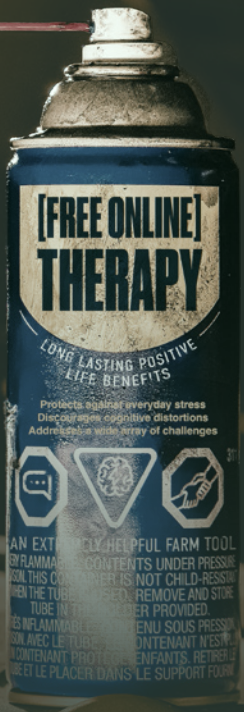
Cultural competence refers to an understanding of cultural knowledge and “encourages clinicians to consider clients’ cultural background in every stage of treatment, including intake, assessment,

conceptualization, and the delivery of intervention strategies,” as described by clinical psychologist Monnica T. Williams in *Psychology Today*.

“Cultural competence makes health care services more accessible and effective for people of different cultural backgrounds. It reduces the risk of misdiagnosis, improves compliance with therapy, and decreases health care disparities,” Williams states.

While cultural competence is often used in addressing systemic racism in health care, it can also be applied to the care of individuals in communities that often feel separate from or misunderstood by the public, such as rural and agricultural communities. If a therapist or counsellor understands the community, culture, and environment in which an individual lives and works, there is a greater opportunity for connection and support.

³ House of Commons, AGRI, Evidence, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 2 October 2018, 1010 (Sean Stanford).



THE ALBERTA APPROACH TO FARM MENTAL HEALTH

REACHING THE COMMUNITY

GOAL • DE-STIGMATIZE MENTAL HEALTH

Many farmers opt to leave their mental health symptoms unaddressed. A study revealed that nearly 40% of farmers indicated they would be unlikely to seek help for their mental health. Consequently, some farmers may ignore their symptoms while others try to 'tough it out' and hope things will improve on their own. However, without intervention, mental health symptoms are unlikely to improve on their own. Instead, they often exacerbate over time, potentially leading to the development of more severe mental illnesses.

The stigma surrounding mental illness perpetuates the misconception that mental health struggles are rare or shameful. Yet, recent research in Canada suggests that nearly 50% of Canadians will experience a mental health issue by the age of 40. Farmers living with mental health issues often internalize negative assumptions about themselves, leading to self-isolation and decreased self-esteem. Furthermore, farmers are concerned that they will be publicly judged for their lack of competency as farmers and,

in turn, receiving treatment will potentially jeopardize their ability to secure bank loans and other business opportunities integral to farm operations.

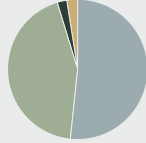
In 2023, AgKnow made a concerted effort to combat both mental health stigma within the agricultural community and to address the lack of agricultural competency within mental health industry professionals. AgKnow created a series of farm mental health presentations that were adapted to specific audiences and delivered in community. Our approach is to be ready and willing to build awareness of mental health supports, services and approaches in the context of current concerns of the industry. For 2023, resiliency in the face of drought, flooding and wildfires was the most requested topic. We adapted our series of presentations to fit the various audiences and delivered as many as we could. Audiences remarked that the farmer's voice was the most effective in delivering sensitive topics. They asserted that stigma is most effectively tackled when conveyed by farmers themselves using their past lived experiences within the community.

We also attended trade shows, wellness fairs, and conferences to reach farmers and the businesses and community members they connect with. Messages delivered in these community events were amplified through social media marketing campaigns and mainstream agriculture media outlets. Feedback from stakeholders and the network found that they like how products are customized for the local context and the focus on addressing current concerns and situations.

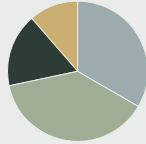


KEY HIGHLIGHT

In 2023, AgKnow held more than 30 workshops and webinars and reached more than 1,600 farmers and therapists.



14 VIRTUAL EVENTS REACHING **493 PEOPLE**



17 IN-PERSON EVENTS REACHING **1192 PEOPLE**

- MENTAL HEALTH/HEALTH CARE
- FARMERS/AG INDUSTRY
- COMBINED
- GOVERNMENT

MEDIA COVERAGE **6 INTERVIEWS**



↑ 29% INCREASE*

WEBSITE ↗

9,200
UNIQUE VISITORS

13,200
VISITS

↑ CONSISTENT GROWTH

NEWSLETTER

789
SIGN-UPS

13
SENT

↑ 210% INCREASE**

FACEBOOK

23.3K
IMPRESSIONS

807
ENGAGEMENTS

↑ 33.8K% INCREASE**

INSTAGRAM

1.1M
IMPRESSIONS

338
ENGAGEMENTS

↑ INCREASING**

X (TWITTER)

4852
IMPRESSIONS

40
NEW FOLLOWERS

↑ 704% INCREASE**

LINKED-IN

7.5K
IMPRESSIONS

555
ENGAGEMENTS



HOW ARE YOU, REALLY?

WATCH THE AGKNOW VIDEO

*From February 2023 – 2024 **From August 2023 – February 2024

THE ALBERTA APPROACH TO FARM MENTAL HEALTH

STRONGER TOGETHER

GOAL • COLLABORATE AND STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT BODIES, MENTAL HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS, AND AGRICULTURAL STAKEHOLDERS

In *Mental Health: A Priority for our Farmers, Report of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food*, Andria Jones-Bitton highlighted the absence of a national strategy for farmers, emphasizing that duplicative efforts were undermining the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at addressing farm mental health. In this same report, Bob Guest, Chairman of the Canadian Farmers with Disabilities Registry, reported that the sooner an intervention, the greater the chance that the persons concerned will go back to farming.⁴

In 2023, as part of AgKnow's commitment to building mental health capacity among farmers and agricultural communities, we focused on identifying existing resources within the mental health landscape in Alberta that could be mobilized to help farmers in times of crisis. To augment the AgKnow network of counsellors made up of private practitioners who have limited ability to take on clients, we have partnered with Counselling Alberta (refer to page 21) and EaseCare, a virtual mental health clinic covered by Alberta Health Services, to enhance therapy accessibility for rural Albertans. These services provide province-wide counselling to all Albertans, and AgKnow is pleased to endorse them on our platforms, particularly for farmers in rural areas.


In Southern Alberta, we identified FCSS.ca Farm Family Counselling as a key partnership in our network. They provide multiple free sessions to residents in Lethbridge County, Warner County, and MD of Taber, including many of the towns and villages. Their team comprises experienced counsellors who serve 16 predominantly agriculture-driven rural communities. Several counsellors have roots in farming communities themselves and possess expertise in assisting low German Mennonite, Spanish-speaking, and new Canadian individuals and families.

We have been actively working to increase the capacity and competency of a network of rural farm-informed therapists that are ready and able to provide emergency *(Continued on page 22)*



KEY HIGHLIGHT

In 2023, AgKnow developed partnerships with Counselling Alberta, EaseCare, and Farm Family Counselling (FCSS.ca) to build mental health capacity in rural Alberta.



“ONE IN FIVE OF US WILL HAVE A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM IN ANY GIVEN YEAR AND, BY THE TIME WE TURN 40, HALF OF US WILL HAVE EXPERIENCED A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM.”

Counselling, Alberta



COUNSELLING ALBERTA

Counselling Alberta is a non-profit that provides province-wide online and in-person counselling programs in response to the growing need for mental health services across Alberta. With the support of the Government of Alberta, they provide farmers with quick access to highly effective counselling without financial barriers.

Services are online in rural and remote areas and can be accessed in person in select cities including Edmonton, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie, Red Deer, Fort McMurray, and Medicine Hat.

Counselling Alberta is the provincial outreach of the Calgary Counselling Centre, and since 2020 they have delivered more than 100,000 hours of counselling to individuals, couples, families, children, and youth with client results being equal to or more effective than in-person counselling. Online counselling addresses common barriers such as scheduling, mobility, and stigma.

Through this partnership we work to increase awareness of services available right now to rural communities and increase the understanding of the current concerns in the farming community specifically. Counselling Alberta will be tracking the number of farmers who access their services, directing farmers to therapists who are farm informed, and staying engaged with AgKnow on current concerns impacting the agriculture industry.



(Continued from page 20) recovery support after traumatic events like floods, fires, devastating drought, and livestock disease outbreaks. Several organizations have expressed interest in collaborating, with diverse approaches ranging from possible inclusion in a community-based support list for farm crisis recovery, co-developing farm-informed training material for mental health professionals, sharing ideas to catalyze broad systemic changes, to providing financing support for current and future initiatives. We anticipate announcing new partnerships in 2024.

Continued investment in programs that prioritize the mental health and well-being of those working in our agricultural sector is crucial. In late 2023, the Government of Alberta announced more than \$380,000 in additional funding provided through

the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (Sustainable CAP) to support evidence-based mental health programs, tools, and learning resources to help farm families and farming communities thrive.

We are also grateful to our current partners who have provided financial support to AgKnow: **Alberta Canola, Alberta Cattle Feeders, Gulls Give Foundation, and G3 Canada Limited.** Funds generated from corporate partnerships and individual memberships are essential for providing the matching needed for our grants and subsidizing the ongoing maintenance costs for the website and staff not covered by grant funding. These organizations are ensuring that Alberta's farming communities have the necessary resources and tools available when they need them the most.



KEY HIGHLIGHT

Our oldest corporate partners Alberta Canola, and Alberta Cattle Feeders' Association were joined by new partners Gulls Give Foundation and G3 Canada.



“AGKNOW IS AN INCREDIBLE ORGANIZATION THAT PROVIDES FARMERS WITH OPPORTUNITIES, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORT, AND FCSS IS PROUD TO COLLABORATE WITH THEM TO PROVIDE SUPPLEMENTARY SERVICES AND SUPPORTS TO RURAL RESIDENTS IN OUR SERVICE AREA.



AgKnow has provided our staff with training, insight, and an opportunity to learn more about farmer mental health. We are so grateful for this partnership, and we are excited to see it continue to flourish and grow over time. AgKnow is a vital partner, and we appreciate their commitment to the wellbeing of our rural communities.”

Kaitlynn Weaver, MA, Outreach
Services Supervisor, Family and
Community Support Services

THE CIRCLE OF CARE SUMMIT

In November 2023, we participated in the inaugural Circle of Care Summit alongside 23 other organizations dedicated to mental health in agriculture. We extend our gratitude to the Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing (CCAW) and Do More Agriculture for the invitation to this significant event. The Summit fostered meaningful discussions and shared aspirations for the wellbeing of our agricultural community.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

We gained valuable insights into the collective impact of various organizations, highlighting the strength in our collaborative efforts.

Exploring the challenges we face allowed us to recognize them as opportunities for improved support.

The Summit provided a platform to explore collaborative opportunities, emphasizing the power of unity in creating a robust circle of care.

The Summit was more than just a meeting; it was a testament to what we can achieve when we unite for a common cause. The conversations had, the connections made, and the strategies discussed have set the stage for a brighter future in agricultural mental health.

THE ALBERTA APPROACH TO FARM MENTAL HEALTH

FOCUSED ON THE FARMER

GOAL • STAY RELEVANT AND CURRENT WITH THE ISSUES IMPACTING THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY IN ALBERTA

No two years of farming are ever the same. In the 2023 farm input price review published by the Government of Alberta, Azam Nikzad, market analyst and coordinating researcher, explains “the farm input market has faced many challenges in recent years, from logistical hurdles and labour market disruptions to interruptions in the production of base inputs for manufacturing, congested delivery channels, rising wages, global supply concerns and escalating transportation costs. This unprecedented confluence of challenges had tangible impacts on the escalation of farm input prices.”

The nationwide Farm Inputs Price Index confirms this trend, indicating that Canadian farmers encountered a significant increase in production costs, nearly one-fifth higher when comparing the second quarter of 2022 to the corresponding period in the previous year. Alberta's farmers ranked third nationally, experiencing a 19.2% rise in costs. Issues such as inflation, climate change, and drought readiness further compound the challenges for farmers on an annual basis, changing from year to year.

HIGHLIGHTING THE KEY TOPICS

One of AgKnow's most valuable assets is our strong connection to the farming community as they encounter stressors throughout the season. By amplifying the voices of farmers, we offer valuable insights and perspectives to mental

health and healthcare professionals, enriching their understanding and effectiveness in serving rural populations. For instance, the depopulation of livestock due to diseases such as Chronic Wasting Disease in cervids, Avian Influenza in poultry, or African Swine Fever in pork can have distressing psychological impacts. This situation has the potential to become a crisis event for Alberta producers, veterinarians, public health officials, and other decision-makers involved in depopulation efforts.

In early November, we collaborated with the Alberta Poultry Industry Emergency Management team to organize a webinar featuring Dr. Elizabeth Strand, the founder of the Foundation of Veterinary Social Work at the University of Tennessee. During the webinar, Dr. Strand presented the Animal Depopulation Resiliency Check-In Tool (ADRCT), a five-question public health protocol for stakeholders who are preparing for, participating in, and recovering from animal depopulation. Despite depopulation not being previously acknowledged as a concern within the mental health community, the increased focus on this topic has elevated its significance with counsellors. Of note, a small number of counsellors on the AgKnow professional network have first-hand experience with depopulation, an asset in helping stakeholders through the process.

AGKNOW INDUSTRY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

AgKnow has established an Industry Advisory Committee (IAC) to provide guidance and advice for the development of farm-specific mental health resources and services through Alberta's Farm Mental Health Network initiative. Composed of representatives from collaborating partners, stakeholder groups, and members at large with a preference for members with direct farm experience, the IAC serves to provide strategic direction and crucial feedback on the AgKnow initiative and bring to the table their collective wisdom and connections.

Three topics have come to the surface during the needs assessment and through our ongoing engagement with the agriculture industry stakeholders and partners:

- Increased capacity to support livestock farmers and veterinarians during a depopulation event
- Increased use of mental health and agriculture professionals to assist with farm transitions
- Increased suicide prevention and awareness and adoption or creation of programs to support people impacted by suicide in rural areas.

These three topics continue to be the focus of the activities of AgKnow and provide the structure for ongoing work.



ROSS BEZOVIE

Director, Alberta Chicken Producers



ROBERT CHRENEK

Representative, Agricultural Service Board Provincial Committee



CARLEY FRERICHS

Alberta Egg Producers



ALAN HALL

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Manager, Agriculture and Irrigation (AGI) Animal Health Surveillance Unit



DR. MARK REDMOND

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Executive Director, AgSafe

THE ALBERTA APPROACH TO FARM MENTAL HEALTH

SUPPORT FOR FARM FAMILIES

PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS

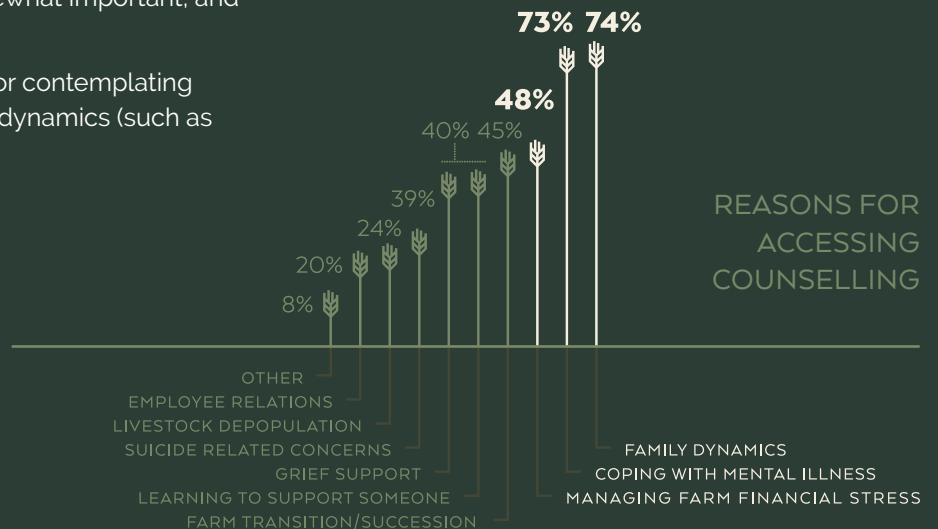
During late 2023 and early 2024, AgKnow conducted an informal survey with the goal of gathering insights to shape the development of mental health initiatives tailored to the needs of the Alberta agricultural community. By February 20, 2024, we had received 168 responses from farmers and various stakeholders of the agriculture community.

Primarily consisting of current or retired farmers (91%), participants were asked about the importance of having access to farm-informed counsellors. These counsellors could either be farmers themselves, grew up on a farm, have trained in agriculture, or have experience counselling farm clients. Results showed 67% found it important, 26% somewhat important, and 7% not important.

The primary reasons for seeking or contemplating counselling services were family dynamics (such as

relationships with spouses, children, and extended family members) and coping with mental illness (like depression, anxiety, or dementia). These were followed by challenges related to managing financial stress on the farm, navigating farm transition/succession, and seeking grief support, respectively.

Respondents who hadn't sought counselling were asked to provide their top three reasons for refraining. The primary hurdle reported was cost, followed by not having enough time during the day and concerns about counsellors lacking an understanding



168

RESPONDANTS

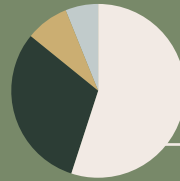
91%

CURRENT OR RETIRED FARMERS

60%

HAD RECEIVED COUNSELLING OR HAD A FAMILY MEMBER WHO DID

WHAT MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMMING BEST MEETS THE NEEDS OF ALBERTA FARMERS?



55% ALBERTA BASED FARM-INFORMED COUNSELLING

- ALBERTA-BASED FARM INFORMED COUNSELLING (55%)
- COST SHARE INSURANCE PROGRAM FOR MENTAL HEALTH (26%)
- TAXPAYER-SUPPORTED SLIDING SCALE ONLINE COUNSELLING (8%)
- NATIONAL TELUS HEALTH COUNSELLING PROGRAM (8%)

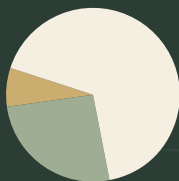
of agriculture. Other barriers noted included privacy concerns, not knowing enough about counselling, and lack of access to counselling services in their area.

Respondents ranked an Alberta-based, farm-informed counselling program as their top option to meet the needs of Alberta farmers (55%). This was followed by a cost-share insurance program for mental health, taxpayer-supported sliding scale online counselling, and the national Telus Health counselling program. Notably, 88% believed that an Alberta-based, farm-informed counseling program better served the needs

of Alberta farmers compared to the national Telus Health Counselling Program. Additionally, 81% considered the Alberta-based, farm-informed counselling program more suitable for Alberta farmers than taxpayer-supported sliding scale online counselling.

The survey requested farmers to evaluate a number of programs supported by the Sustainable Canadian Agriculture Partnership (SCAP). Farmer wellness/mental health came in fourth place, following Crop Insurance (AFSC), Agristability/Agri-Recovery, and Farm Safety, which comprised the top three rankings.

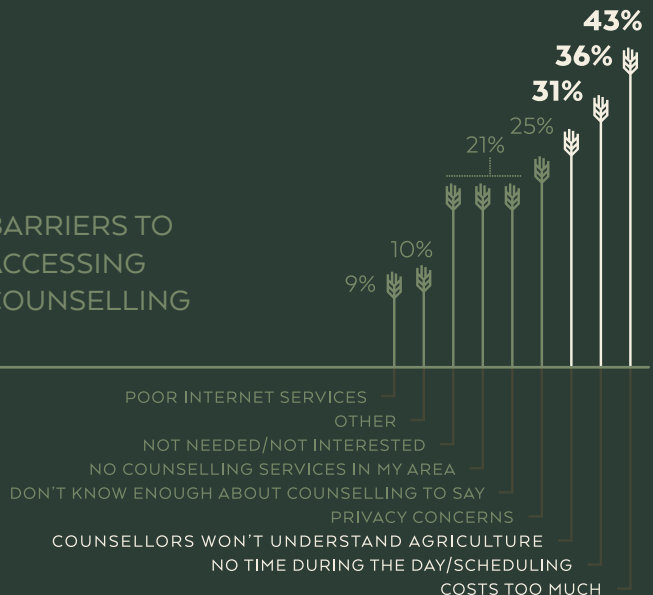
HOW IMPORTANT WAS HAVING A FARM-INFORMED COUNSELLOR?



67% IMPORTANT

- IMPORTANT (67%)
- SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT (26%)
- NOT IMPORTANT (7%)

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING COUNSELLING



THE ALBERTA APPROACH TO FARM MENTAL HEALTH

INCREASING RESILIENCY

GOAL - INCREASE RESILIENCY IN THE FARMING COMMUNITY

Farming and ranching rank among the most stressful occupations, with unique factors potentially leading to poor mental health outcomes, including suicide. Certain factors can increase suicide risk on Canadian farms, including financial uncertainty, barriers to mental health services, isolation, a blurred distinction between work and home life, and easy access to firearms. When multiple risk factors outweigh factors that build resiliency, there is an increased likelihood of suicidal ideation (Sharam et al., 2021). In Canada, farmers experience twice the rate of suicidal ideation compared to the general population. One in four farmers surveyed reported their life was not worth living, wished they were dead, or had thought of taking their own life during the past 12 months (Jones-Bitton et al., 2020). Suicide affects male farmers disproportionately.

In response to concerns from our needs assessment, we've developed training tailored to enhance resilience and mental health support within the agriculture industry. Partnering with Abridge Consulting, we've adapted proven suicide prevention and awareness training for the agriculture industry with the launch of two new courses. Unlike most mental health or suicide prevention training, *"Introduction to Suicide Prevention for Agriculture"* is a concise 90-minute session,

tailored for delivery either in person or virtually, and developed for peer-to-peer dissemination within agricultural community groups. This course is designed to complement longer events. This course is delivered by trained facilitators and can seamlessly complement longer events.

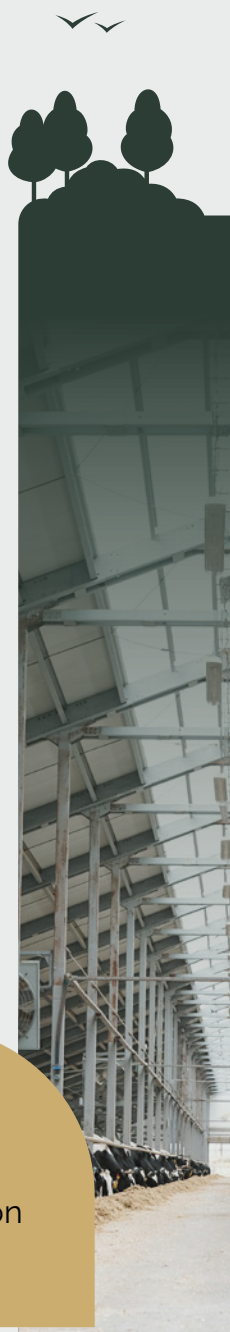
Additionally, we developed *Building a Safer' Ag Community*, a comprehensive program spanning three hours of course material delivered over a week, ideal for corporate settings. This course incorporates highly effective resources from LivingWorks and the Centre for Suicide Prevention. Virtual sessions can be easily arranged through our website or by reaching out to any of our dedicated staff at AgKnow.

Both of these courses foster open discussions and empower community members to engage



KEY HIGHLIGHT

In 2023, AgKnow trained nine facilitators to deliver suicide prevention courses in rural communities.



“OUR GOVERNMENT IS GRATEFUL FOR PARTNERS THAT ARE SUPPORTING MENTAL WELLNESS THROUGH INITIATIVES LIKE AGKNOW. AS ONE OF ALBERTA’S MOST PROMINENT INDUSTRIES, WE ARE COMMITTED TO PROVIDING FARMERS, RANCHERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES THE SUPPORT THEY NEED.”

Dan Williams, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions



in potentially lifesaving conversations by equipping them with the skills to ask tough questions and connect individuals in crisis with available support networks. AgKnow is ready to deliver virtual sessions now, and we are applying for funding support to make in-person sessions affordable in the next year.

It should be noted that one of the obstacles we encounter is the impact of suicide on many rural communities. While there's a widespread acknowledgment of the value of prevention training, there's a reluctance to schedule and promote such events. It seems that personal invitations or mandatory attendance policies may be necessary to kickstart participation.

Alongside our suicide prevention training efforts, AgKnow has collaborated with AgSafe Alberta for the past two years to promote the "In the Know" farm mental health literacy training developed in Ontario. While this training has seen widespread adoption in Ontario, Alberta has faced significant barriers to its implementation. One major obstacle has been the cost associated with in-person train-the-trainer sessions. Additionally, the four-hour duration of the training has proven to be a deterrent for farmers themselves, despite its appeal to professionals and farmer supporters.

We continue to work to investigate stressors impacting farmers such as farm transition and depopulation so we can bring awareness of these issues to the medical community.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF FARM MENTAL HEALTH IN ALBERTA

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

DE-STIGMATIZE MENTAL HEALTH

CHALLENGE

Recent Canadian research, including preliminary findings from Alberta, highlights that farmers identify stigma as their primary obstacle to seeking mental health support. Overcoming mental health stigma and fostering trust to address sensitive topics requires sustained investment and the development of personal relationships, often facilitated through in-person community events.

At present, the industry is focused on raising awareness and promoting mental health but is challenged when it comes to achieving widespread adoption. Hurdles include assessing the impact of mental health promotion on farm productivity and knowing the topics and approaches that will engage the desired audience. Additionally, the relatively new introduction of farm-specific mental health supports and services in Alberta makes estimating the demand and required funding a challenge. This uncertainty is compounded by the unpredictable nature of future needs, which are contingent on environmental factors. In times of crisis, such as droughts or wildfires, the shift from awareness to adoption can occur rapidly. As a result, maintaining agility and adequate resources is imperative to effectively adapt to the current situation.

OPPORTUNITY

The increased awareness and compassion around mental health struggles in the broader Alberta society is helping to address stigma in the agriculture industry. While there is still a reluctance to talk openly about sensitive topics like suicide, participants at our in-community events are receptive and engaged. As mental health becomes more normalized within the agricultural discourse, there is a high likelihood that we will continue to receive a growing number of requests for supports and services. Legislative and regulatory emphasis on psychological health and safety, coupled with farmers sharing their stories, helps to incorporate mental health into daily farm life. Staying connected to mental health and health care service providers to encourage growth to meet the increased demand will be key.



“IT’S ESSENTIAL FOR AGKNOW TO CONTINUE BRINGING AWARENESS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND HELP FARM FAMILIES GET THE SUPPORTS THEY NEED TO MANAGE LIFE’S STRESSORS.”

RJ Sigurdson, Alberta Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation



REDUCE BARRIERS TO SERVICE

CHALLENGE

Cost, location, and therapist availability persist as obstacles to providing adequate support to farm clients. Rural municipalities and wellness initiatives have identified that rural counselling options are needed, so there has been a lot of engagement and promotion of our free session program. However, the four free sessions currently offered may still not meet the required duration for effective therapy. Most farms in Alberta are family farms that do not have the extended health plan, so cost remains a barrier particularly for Hutterites,

Feedback from our network indicates that ideally therapists need to be located far enough away to provide anonymity, but close enough to allow for in-person sessions. Most report that they prefer an in-person session to develop trust and then prefer the convenience of virtual sessions. However, therapists in rural areas with farm specialization are rare, so there is a high risk of long wait times or multiple booking attempts. Further recruitment is necessary, but the number of therapists required to meet industry needs remains unclear.

Therapists in rural areas face challenges in finding supportive therapeutic programs and agriculture services for their clients, hindering wrap-around care.

OPPORTUNITY

The free session program provides an opportunity to engage with rural mental health service providers, municipalities, ag business professionals and farmers to come up with innovative solutions to overcome these barriers. Additionally, having a network of therapists engaged with the agriculture industry provides the opportunity for in-community support after a farm-related accident or natural disaster like the current wildfires in the Peace. Recruitment activities, coupled with the free session program, highlight the need and encourage therapists to live rural and specialize in farm issues. Access to therapeutic programs and business support can be improved by hosting a directory of services that can be searched by geographic location.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF FARM MENTAL HEALTH IN ALBERTA

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

ADVOCATE FOR RURAL RESOURCES FOR FARMERS

CHALLENGE

At present, there is insufficient investment to provide blanket mental health support and services across rural communities in Alberta, and local short-term grassroots lead initiatives are funded throughout the province. This allows innovative communities to respond to local concerns; however, the unintended consequence is broader provincial strategies struggle for engagement, resources and traction. It becomes difficult for response lines to know how to direct people to services in their area. How can we create a system that has a backbone of basic mental health support that can then refer people to customized local supports?

An additional challenge is there isn't one professional association representing farmers that can advocate for industry-specific mental health supports and services. Alberta farmers are diverse and spread over a large area with diverse priorities so a large investment in communication and engagement activities is required to reach them all. The existing farmer-led associations typically have mandates focusing on agronomic practices and do not consider mental health supports and services as part of their mandates. As a result, it is difficult to encourage the investments needed that will deliver long-term positive change for farmers, their families, employees and the industry and communities where they exist.

OPPORTUNITY

Crisis situations such as droughts, wildfires, or depopulation offer opportunities to start conversations about mental health and support services. Recent situations are prompting agricultural associations to consider integrating mental health and wellbeing supports into their strategies. Municipalities and other industry partners are hearing from their ratepayers and clients and are looking for ways to respond. In addition, ongoing health care reform provides another opportunity to integrate rural mental health into the broader health care system. The momentum to develop and implement e-mental health strategies provides an opportunity to broaden the reach of services typically only available in urban centres. Leadership is needed to bring partners together and develop a strategy that will connect rural communities and services to the opportunities that are coming online.



“Our farmers and their families face unique demands and challenges as they work to feed Canada and the world.

IT’S VITALLY IMPORTANT THAT WE CONTINUE TO INVEST IN PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF FOLKS WORKING IN OUR AGRICULTURAL SECTOR.”

Lawrence MacAulay, Federal Minister of Agriculture and Agri-food



ENGAGE FARM-INFORMED SUPPORTS

CHALLENGE

Agriculture is a unique industry that is served best by professionals who have lived agriculture experience. It is also an industry that is increasing in age and declining in numbers. Keeping a good supply of farm informed professionals with lived experience is a challenge. The blurred lines between work and life on the typical farm mean that nearly every business decision has direct implications on family relationships. Having farm informed professionals that understand and respect this balance is essential to outcomes that result in viable multigenerational farms that contribute to thriving rural communities.

Research has shown that having a written business plan is a good strategy for improving wellbeing of farm operators. Agriculture business professionals are often challenged to have the kind of conversations needed to navigate family relationships and to create business plans. Therapists are challenged to know how to support clients that are struggling with business planning. How can we connect the two types of professionals for better referrals and support?

OPPORTUNITY

Both the farm-informed therapists and the ag business professionals that are engaged with AgKnow are interested in exploring the concerns challenging farmers and the industry at a deeper level with the intention of being better positioned to offer farm specific approaches. Creating opportunities for both types of professionals to explore and share insight on mutual topics of interest we feel will lead to greater ability to provide appropriate referrals and increase overall wellbeing. Key learnings and stories from these activities could potentially be captured and made available as learning resources for new professionals looking to specialize in agriculture.

Based on our research and interactions within our network, it's evident that farmers tend to seek support from someone who understands the pressures of farming. Enhancing collaboration between the agriculture industry and healthcare professionals can improve support for farmers and veterinarians. Sustained communication with farmers regarding their ongoing challenges is essential for perpetuating discourse around their mental health requirements.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF FARM MENTAL HEALTH IN ALBERTA

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

INCREASE RESILIENCY IN FARMING COMMUNITIES

CHALLENGE

There has been low adoption of mental health-related training by the agriculture industry, particularly farmers, who tend to not participate in long training sessions due to time constraints. Participants interested in taking the farm-adapted training tend to be those supporting or wanting to support farmers, and they are interested in learning how the training is adapted for the farmer audience.

The delivery model that seems to work in western Canada is shorter one-hour to 90-minute courses delivered at industry events traditionally attended by farmers. There are several farm mental health courses being developed, but so far, none are delivered in this format.

The geographic area for delivering training in Alberta is extensive and so far, there doesn't exist a network of health promotion professionals to deliver local training sessions, so the cost of delivery is a barrier. A significant number of farmers have off-farm employment, so it is likely they have had some training already.

OPPORTUNITY

Feedback through our network indicates that the industry and farmers are warming up to the idea of increasing mental health capacity through training. Developers of the training seem willing to work with us to adapt current offerings to fit the Alberta context, and there is good interest by mental health professionals and farmers with lived experience to deliver training in-community. There also seems to be interest by corporations and businesses to invest in activities that promote community resiliency. We are optimistic the financial barriers can be overcome for event delivery and we have the community engagement needed to get uptake.



WITH GRATITUDE

To the volunteers who did the audio recordings
for our suicide prevention courses:

Doreen Blumhagen (Organizer)

Josh Blumhagen (Editor)

Joanne McMahon (Voice of Jodi) – Galahad, AB

Don Sisson (Voice of Steve) – Castor, AB

Edward Reis (Voice of Dustin), Castor, AB

Richard and Beth Elhard (Voices of Jeff & Wilma) – Castor, AB

Jaymi Rausch (Voice of Nancy) – Halkirk, AB

Shannon Blumhagen (Voice of Cody) – Halkirk, AB



To the actor in our “How are you, Really?” video – Peter Kuelken



To past staff who have graced us with their contributions
and passion – Dani Groenveld and Crystal Fullerton



We are especially grateful for the outpouring of
community support behind AgKnow. The time and
resources donated by volunteers have been essential
to helping reach the farming community.





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ALBERTA FARM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

Alberta Farm Mental Health Network www.agknow.ca

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