



Roots of Hope: A uniquely Canadian approach to suicide prevention

Joshua Bauer,* MSW, on Behalf of the Mental Health Commission of Canada

ABSTRACT

Suicide is a significant public health issue in Canada, with rural areas and young people experiencing a higher incidence of suicides. To address this issue, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) developed Roots of Hope, a community-led suicide prevention model with five pillars and 13 guiding principles. The model is flexible and tailored to meet specific community needs, and an initial research demonstration project has shown promising results. The ongoing implementation of Roots of Hope has the potential to significantly impact suicide prevention efforts throughout Canada. The model aligns with the MHCC's mission of empowering communities to develop and implement their own solutions and exchange best practices. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgency of suicide prevention and the need for resources specifically designed to meet community needs. The positive outcomes of Roots of Hope offer the potential to make a meaningful impact on the lives of Canadians.

Key Words Mental health; community-based; community led; evidence-based; multi-sectoral; life promotion.

A UNIQUELY CANADIAN APPROACH TO A COMPLEX PROBLEM

Suicide is a complex and pressing public health issue in Canada, with over 4,500 deaths predicted this year alone, averaging more than 12 deaths every day. However, the impact of suicide is not uniform across Canada. Rural areas experience a higher incidence of suicides than urban areas, and it is the second leading cause of death among young people. Given the seriousness of this issue, it is essential to engage all levels of government, together with communities, in addressing suicide prevention—this means national, provincial-territorial, and local efforts.

In 2015, the International Initiative for Mental Health Leadership (IIMHL) conducted a review of existing suicide prevention models to develop an evidence-based approach for communities. This review identified five pillars of action that form the foundation of a community-led model that has the capability of preventing suicides and reducing their impact by leveraging local strengths and partnerships through a collaborative, multi-sectoral approach.

Recognizing the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention within Canada, the Mental Health Commission of Canada consulted national and international experts to develop Roots of Hope. The model's five pillars and 13 guiding principles were carefully crafted based

on the IIMHL's findings and after considering the factors necessary for effective community-led suicide prevention. Roots of Hope's flexible approach builds upon existing programs and services, encourages community collaboration, and establishes new partnerships to create interventions tailored to specific community needs. The development of the Roots of Hope model has benefited greatly from those communities championing community-based interventions and allowing others to adapt and adopt evidence-based approaches to suicide prevention.

Building Momentum: The Research Demonstration Project

The Research Demonstration Project (RDP), an initial testing phase of Roots of Hope, demonstrated the adaptability and effectiveness of the Roots of Hope model. The findings from the RDP have underscored the critical importance of continued mental health and suicide prevention efforts throughout Canada. With the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating mental health challenges, including an increase in suicidal ideation and attempts, it is more urgent than ever for communities to have access to suicide prevention and life promotion resources tailored to their specific needs.

As the RDP ends, the leadership demonstrated by the seven participating communities is inspiring. These communities have provided valuable wisdom and experience, combined

Correspondence to: Joshua Bauer. **E-mail:** jbauer@mentalhealthcommission.ca

To cite: Bauer, J. (2023). Roots of Hope: A uniquely Canadian approach to suicide prevention. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 8(2), 107–109. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.335>

© **Author(s)** 2023. Open Access. This work is distributed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license. For commercial re-use, please contact sales@sgpublishing.ca.

SG PUBLISHING Published by **SG Publishing Inc.** **CSKA** Official publication of the **Community Safety Knowledge Alliance**.

with the contributions of local researchers and the principal investigator, to provide a path forward for suicide prevention in Canada. The ongoing implementation of Roots of Hope has the potential to significantly impact suicide prevention efforts throughout Canada, and further research and evaluation are essential for continuous improvement and success.

As Roots of Hope expands into more communities and establishes new networks, it is poised to gain momentum and evolve in meaningful ways. The positive outcomes from Roots of Hope offer the potential to make a meaningful impact on the lives of Canadians. It is vital that we continue to emphasize the importance of suicide prevention and embrace Roots of Hope as a valuable tool for achieving this goal throughout our great country.

Our Findings from the Research Demonstration Project

The Roots of Hope RDP, conducted between 2018 and 2022, studied the model's implementation in seven communities, assessing the feasibility of implementing it in various contexts to reduce suicide and its impact. The RDP aimed to inform best practices for applying the model in communities and to identify promising practices that could be adapted to meet the needs of unique population groups. A third priority was to make recommendations for its further refinement.

During the RDP, six key takeaways were identified that reflect the experiences of all participating communities and highlight the essential lessons learned during the implementation of the Roots of Hope model.

- The Roots of Hope model proved to be a valuable and practical tool for developing community suicide prevention strategies, with communities using the model to identify activities to implement.
- The community of practice facilitated an exchange of ideas, information, and experiences that supported the planning, implementation, and evaluation of local programs.
- Roots of Hope promoted collaboration across different sectors, including the use of lived experience to inform the development and impact of program activities.
- Roots of Hope played a crucial role in accelerating the expansion of evidence-based suicide prevention activities in various community settings.
- The formation of community coalitions and the leadership of community coordinators were integral to ensuring a comprehensive and sustained implementation of the model.
- Lastly, Roots of Hope has the potential to engage rural populations through the development of community-based initiatives and novel activities that are tailored to their specific needs.

The Roots of Hope Model Overview

Roots of Hope communities adapt their suicide prevention initiative based on the model's five pillars and 13 guiding principles. The pillars focus on means safety, public awareness, research, specialized supports, and training and networking for community leaders.

- **Means Safety.** Identify the methods or places where a high number of suicides occur and implement measures to safely limit access to them (e.g., building barriers

on bridges or at railway crossings and protocols for medication access).

- **Public Awareness.** Create locally driven campaigns to promote mental health awareness (e.g., posters, brochures, social media) and collaboration with the media.
- **Research.** Set research priorities, surveillance, and monitoring and evaluation to increase the suicide prevention evidence base.
- **Specialized Supports.** Develop a range of possible prevention, crisis, and post-crisis services (e.g., peer support, support groups [including self-help], workplace interventions, and coordinated planning and access to services).
- **Training and Networks.** Provide training and learning opportunities for community gatekeepers (e.g., physicians, first responders, nurses, human resources staff, and teachers).

The guiding principles prioritize collaboration, measurement and evaluation, and recognition of lived experience. They aim to be culturally appropriate, strengths-based, and flexible, with a focus on recovery-oriented, evidence-informed, sustainable interventions. The guiding principles also suggest spanning the continuum of prevention, intervention, and postvention services, being community-centred, and innovative. Ultimately, the goal is to use a comprehensive approach to prevent suicide, with multiple interventions geared towards a wide range of individuals across a variety of settings.

Paving a New Way Forward for Community-Based Interventions

In terms of the possibilities for the future, Roots of Hope has the potential as a model for suicide prevention in a wide range of community contexts. Tailoring the model's approach to the specific needs and challenges of each community can help create sustainable and effective strategies for reducing the rates of suicide and promoting well-being.

As the RDP has shown, Roots of Hope's approach to suicide prevention and life promotion is not only effective but also adaptable to suit the unique contexts and structures of Canada's diverse communities. This flexibility lends Roots of Hope the potential for implementation in more communities across Canada, including in non-traditional settings such as universities, the policing sector, hospitals, and many more.

Currently, Roots of Hope has already expanded to 18 unique communities, three provinces and one territory, with ongoing discussions with additional communities, provinces, and territories interested in adopting the model. This demonstrates the demand for a customized, made-in-Canada approach to suicide prevention and life promotion and highlights the potential for Roots of Hope to expand even further.

The future outlook for Roots of Hope is promising, as there is potential for further expansion and outreach to additional communities throughout Canada. With a commitment to evidence-based strategies and a tailored approach, Roots of Hope can continue to make a positive impact on suicide prevention and life promotion in a variety of community settings.

For more information on Roots of Hope please navigate to <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/roots-hope/>.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Logan Seymour for reviewing the manuscript and for the support and expertise provided by Jayoda Tennekone in the creation of it.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Prevention & Promotion Initiatives, Mental Health Commission of Canada, Ottawa, ON, Canada.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author is an employee of the Mental Health Commission of Canada.