



Alliance for Healthier Communities
Advancing Health Equity in Ontario

Social Prescribing Link Workers Work!

Embed link workers in *every* interprofessional primary health care team.

What is Social Prescribing?

Social prescribing connects clients to non-clinical programs or services that holistically support their health and wellbeing. It is an intentional, structured, and evidence-based way of connecting people to a range of local, non-clinical, community-based programs, services and activities that address the social determinants of health and support their overall wellbeing

Social prescribing can look different for each community depending on who is part of it and the resources and supports available. Generally, it begins with a health provider identifying a client with non-medical needs better addressed outside of traditional medical intervention (e.g., medical prescriptions). The provider then refers that client to a staff member of an interprofessional primary care team, referred to as a link worker, who reaches out to the client, and together, they identify the client's interests, needs, and gifts. Following this identification process, the link worker connects the client to a community program or resource they are interested in joining. The link worker would follow up with the client to see how they are doing and if they need further support.

What is a Link Worker?

Social prescribing link workers play a key role in delivering social prescribing by spending time with clients to hear their needs and understand their interests. Most importantly, they shift the focus from 'what's the matter with me?' to 'what matters to me?'. They take a holistic, community-focused, and evidence-based approach to people's health and wellbeing to connect them to appropriate community groups, services and supports.

Strong Evidence Supporting Link Workers

Social prescribing link workers do this by developing trusting relationships and providing personalized support. As a result, their work:

- Strengthens community resilience¹

¹ [Social prescribing: A narrative review of how community engagement can improve wellbeing in later life](#)

- Reduces health inequalities by addressing the wider determinants of health²
- Increases people's active involvement with their local communities³
- Provides highly personalized and patient-centred collaborative support and service that reflects individual goal-setting priorities⁴
- Focuses on gradual and holistic change dealing with social issues beyond health⁵
- **Increases primary care capacity and decreases repeat client visits, as well as emergency department visits⁶**

Link workers support existing community groups to be accessible and sustainable and help partners establish new programming, working collaboratively with all local partners.

Sometimes, different names are used to describe the link worker's role. These include health promoters, community connectors/development workers, wellbeing or health advisors, and many other roles that are frequently involved in case management and system navigation.

The critical role of a robust and supportive relationship with an easily accessible link worker in promoting sustained behaviour change highlights the importance of link worker continuity."⁷

In the Alliance's Rx: Community Social Prescribing Pilot study, 42% of providers reported that they observed a decrease in the number of repeat visits among their clients who participated in a social prescribing program⁸. According to a recent survey, 59% of family doctors stated they think that social prescribing can help reduce workload⁹.

² [Links Project Report: developing the connections between general practices and their communities. Glasgow \(Scotland\):](#)

³ Royal College of General Practitioners, (2018). Spotlight on the 10 high impact actions. London: Royal College of General Practitioners,

⁴ [Maximising the impact of social prescribing on population health in the era of COVID-19](#)

⁵ [Service-users' perspectives of link worker social prescribing: a qualitative follow-up study](#)

⁶ [Reducing emergency hospital admissions: a population health complex intervention of an enhanced model of primary care and compassionate communities](#)

⁷ [Service-users' perspectives of link worker social prescribing: a qualitative follow-up study - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

⁸ [Social prescribing in Ontario, final report. Toronto \(ON\): Alliance for Healthier Communities; 2020.](#)

⁹ Royal College of General Practitioners, (2018). Spotlight on the 10 high impact actions. London: Royal College of General Practitioners,

Survey results from Community Health Centres participating in our Social Prescribing for Better Mental Health project showed that:

- 96% of health providers strongly agreed or agreed that collaborating with social prescribing staff is helpful for supporting their clients.
- 96% of clients felt that a link worker heard their needs and interests very well or somewhat well when they were first connected to community programs.

Quotes

Below are quotes from a provider and a link worker from our members to demonstrate the impacts of link workers on providers, interprofessional primary care teams, and the clients themselves.

“Having a designated social prescriber opens up more time for the providers that we do have. Having someone who can meet non-medical needs frees up time [for clinical staff to] have more time with their patients or take on another patient.” - **Primary Health Provider**

“Many providers appreciate that we take the time to connect with the client, beyond just one phone call or appointment....figuring out if the first thing didn't work, maybe trying something new, or [asking] why didn't it work for you? So, I've heard a lot from the providers [that they are] appreciative that we have the time and the space to make that so that they don't have to try to fit that into their 20-minute appointment. Not only that, but [for the client who is] trying to remember every single thing that they've suggested or connected. Having us to be able to follow through on that and keep track of that has been really helpful for them. And even things like providers not knowing about a resource. And so having them be like, 'Oh, I didn't even know this was an option that you suggested to my patient.' So now they know about it.” – **Link Worker**



Call to Action

The evidence is clear: Social prescribing improves client and provider experience as well as health outcomes, and social prescribing programs work best when a link worker is engaged. Link workers can ensure that each client is matched with programs and services that align with their unique gifts and goals. They provide a clear pathway connecting clinical and social care, which makes them key to an integrated, efficient, and person-centred health system.

We call on healthcare organizations, system planners, and funders to prioritize having a link worker in every interprofessional primary healthcare team.

Want to Learn More? Check Out our Videos and Further Evidence

Social Prescribing in Ontario Video Series



- Cultivating Connections: Social Prescribing in Ontario (short reel, 2 min 38 s.) <https://youtu.be/95BWEKTOmJo?si=MpMNutnKRbFY6gb5>
- Cultivating Connections: Social Prescribing in Ontario: TAIBU Community Health Centre (4 min 54 s). <https://youtu.be/3zSiQd1DEks?si=SUBTcliJo4SJDVZ5>
- Cultivating Connections: Social Prescribing in Ontario: Seaway Valley Community Health Centre (4 min 26 s). <https://youtu.be/h1zB-LdPzAk?si=nU4HCigl17OeE3Po>
- Cultivating Connections: Social Prescribing in Ontario: Lakeshore Community Nurse Practitioner—Led Clinic (4 min 20 s). <https://youtu.be/8jRjWGHoujw?si=1t8kD0Hn95fEdmQh>
- Cultivating Connections : Social Prescribing in Ontario: Centre de santé communautaire Hamilton/Niagara (4 min 2 s) <https://youtu.be/qFRbMyiqC8U?si=Slxbr930BlJ4aNrJ>
- Cultivating Connections: Social Prescribing in Ontario: Regent Park Community Health Centre (3 min 53 s). <https://youtu.be/mkLgV0ejSw8?si=GtjvzZg2fMBGOVmf>

Published Evidence from Around the World

- Linceviciute, S., Ambrosio, L., Baldwin, D. S., & Portillo, M. C. (2023). Role of Social Prescribing Link Workers in Supporting Adults with Physical and Mental Health Long-Term Conditions: Integrative Review. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 2023, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/7191247>
- Lynch, M., & Jones, C. R. (2022). Social prescribing for frequent attenders in primary care: An economic analysis. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.902199>
- Moffatt, S., Steer, M., Lawson, S., Penn, L., & O'Brien, N. (2017). Link Worker social prescribing to improve health and well-being for people with long-term conditions: qualitative study of service user perceptions. *BMJ Open*, 7(7): e015203. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2016-015203>
- Wildman, J., & Wildman, J. M. (2023). Impact of a link worker social prescribing intervention on non-elective admitted patient care costs: A quasi-experimental study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 317, 115598. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115598>

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