



CASE STUDY | Community Health and Social Services Network: A Collaborative Success Story

by Liz Weaver

In September 2020, the Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN) in Quebec celebrated 20 years of leadership, community engagement and access to health and social services to English-language communities across Quebec. The core of the CHSSN approach is engaging community-based leaders to advance the social determinants of health through a Community Mobilization Model.

OVERVIEW

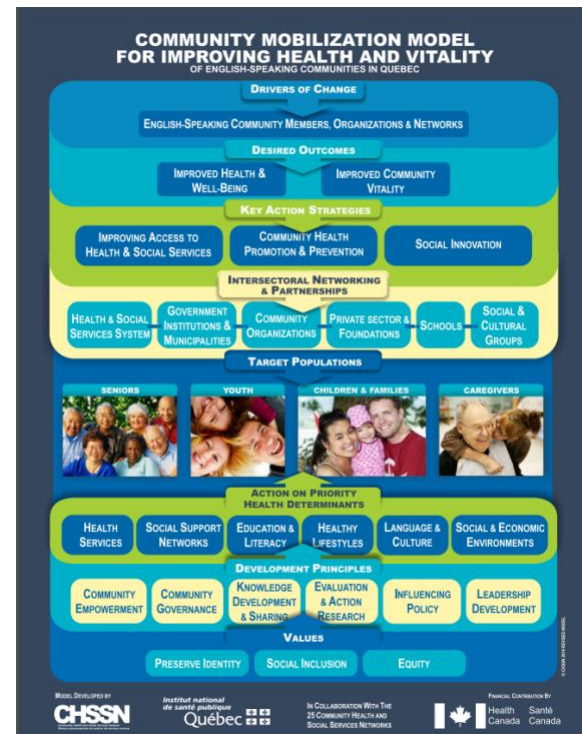
The [Community Mobilization Model](#) has two key goals: the improved health and well-being of citizens and improved community vitality. The 26 communities in the CHSSN network represent a diverse range of communities, large and small, and located in all parts of the province. CHSSNs focus on targeted populations including seniors, youth, children, families, and caregivers.

The action strategies which guide the community mobilization model include:

- Improved access to health and wellbeing
- Community health promotion and prevention
- Social innovation

The model is underpinned by the principles of community empowerment, community governance, knowledge development and sharing, evaluation and action research, influencing policy and leadership development as foundations.

Key to the [community mobilization model](#) are three values including preserve identity, social inclusion, and equity.



The model, while launched in 2018, has become deeply embedded in the design, engagement, and leadership development of all partners across the CHSSN network.

CHSSN is staffed and supported by a small team. They provide network connection, leadership development and coaching support to this diverse group.

RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Jennifer Johnson, Executive Director of CHSSN, described the early history of the network as developmental. There was no frame of reference for the network and the early design was to convene and grow the network. They did this by building capacity, sharing knowledge, and growing partnerships. Over time, as network members became more connected to one another and to CHSSN, Jennifer and her colleague Russ Kueber began to observe changes.

The members of the CHSSN shifted from solely providing services in their communities to influencing community leaders about what services were required to support citizens. This influencer role became even more prominent during the past year, as CHSSN Network members responded to the COVID pandemic. The CHSSN Fall 2020 [Community NetLink](#) newsletter contains a host of stories about how members stepped up to meet the challenge of COVID. Johnson noted in [NetLink](#) that the pandemic was a “true test of CHSSN’s adaptability”.

The network of communities responded by adapting their community connector role to remote working environments. They developed emergency programming, improved access to health and social services for members of their communities, increased access to food, and helped isolated community members connect virtually. The creativity and connection across the network enabled the leaders to pivot quickly. In the early days of the pandemic, CHSSN partners became recognized as an essential service. Many of the partners view the pandemic as an opportunity to solidify their role in the communities they serve.

Johnson and Kueber consider the response of the network to the pandemic as a time when all the skills set that had been cultivated through the network had the opportunity to come to the forefront. Over the past 20 years, CHSSN invested in deep capacity building across the network. The network members used their tools, leadership, and networks to respond quickly to the disaster and continue to serve the most vulnerable in their communities.

They also noted that the members of the CHSSN network solidified their relationships with local health partners in their community including pharmacies, community health centres, seniors support services and hospitals. The health system recognized the challenges in providing critical health services to English-language speaking Quebecers and were able to actively engage the CHSSN network partners.

The CHSSN network also provided a vital link in communities across Quebec, providing vulnerable populations with critical links to mental health services, suicide prevention services, and other crisis services. As well, other networks became more aware of the vital community lifeline of CHSSN including the Red Cross and Centraide in Quebec.

However, the pandemic also brought challenges to the forefront for CHSSN and its partners. Johnson and Kueber are worried about leadership burnout as the pandemic moves into year two. Resources

continue to challenge the local community efforts and Johnson and Kueber have been focused on diversifying the funding base to create stability across the network.

INVESTING IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Since its inception, the CHSSN staff team has invested in growing the leadership capacity across the network. More recently, CHSSN, in collaboration with Concordia University – the Centre for Human Relations & Community Studies; and with funding from Health Canada, launched a [leadership development framework](#).

The collaboration with Concordia University in the design of the NPI Leadership Development framework created a more formal approach bridging research and evidence-based practice. Concordia University researchers identified leadership competencies in each of the four pillars which help guide the design and delivery of training across the network. The model connects to the Community Mobilization Model by embedding the core values and beliefs into the NPI Leadership Credo.



The NPI Leadership Development approach was viewed by the network as positive, solutions focused, collaborative and provides the framework for the network to work collectively, and care for one-another. The CHSSN staff team models the leadership development framework in the way they work collaboratively, connect with each other, and support the network.

The four core leadership pillars include:

- Leading in the English-speaking Community
- Leading Networks
- Leading in the Larger Community
- Leading for the Future

Johnson describe the NPI Leadership Development Framework as an approach which enriches community leaders and staff so that they can develop and grow. The CHSSN team recognizes the importance of the parallel investments of building the capacity of the leaders in their network so that they can better respond to take on the complex tasks required to improve the health and wellbeing or their community and improve community vitality.

In addition to providing capacity building across the pillars of the framework, CHSSN is active in advancing a continued connection across its partners. It hosts communities of practice where network members can learn from each other and share their practice success stories and challenges. Both Johnson and Kueber note that as the network matures the conversations across the network are deeper and richer. Their role is to create space for the conversations and shared learning to occur.

TWO ORGANIZATIONS WITH A SHARED PATH

Early in its development as an organization, CHSSN was invited to a collaborative table hosted by the McConnell Foundation for systems change organizations. It was at this table that CHSSN first met Tamarack Institute leaders. Like CHSSN, Tamarack is focused on growing networks and community changemaker capacity. There was much that the two organizations had in common.

Over the past 20 years, CHSSN and Tamarack have remained connected and aligned. There has been cross-organization connections and shared learning. Johnson notes that Tamarack resources are easy to access, and relevant to their network. CHSSN has published its resources on the Tamarack website and Tamarack is often welcomed at capacity building workshops hosted by CHSSN.

CHSSN notes that the shared relationship with Tamarack increases network knowledge and capacity, informs, and validates the CHSSN approach and provides confidence to the leaders in the CHSSN network as they describe the impact of their community work.

LOOKING FORWARD POST-PANDEMIC AND THE NEXT 20 YEARS

The past 20 years have been a journey of learning and development for the Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN). Throughout its history, CHSSN has supported network leaders to develop and deliver community-based programs improving the health and wellbeing of seniors, children and families, youth, and caregivers. CHSSN has been instrumental in leveraging funding from a wide variety of sources to positively impact 26 English-language speaking communities across Quebec.

At the same time, the staff team at CHSSN, identified the importance of investing in and developing the leaders across the network. They knew that this investment would have a strategic impact. It would make the network stronger, create connections, and leverage opportunities. But more than that, leadership development would enable the network to develop a strategic and policy-focused voice.

It was the investment in capacity and leadership that helped the members of the network respond quickly, creatively, and decisively during the COVID pandemic. They were able to identify the most vulnerable populations in the communities they served and ensure that everyone had access to the health and social service supports they required.

Johnson and Kueber are excited about the potential of the CHSSN network and its leaders. There is an important cultural context for the English-language speaking community in Quebec. CHSSN and its network will continue to work in partnership with the governments of Quebec and Canada to provide an integrated approach which improves the health and wellbeing of citizens and improves the vitality of communities across the province.

FIVE LESSONS FOR GROWING AND SUSTAINING A LEARNING NETWORK

1. Recognize that network leaders need support and training
2. Build a shared framework which describes the core work but allows for local inspiration
3. Strategically partner with anchor institutions like universities to create an evidence-based and validated leadership development approach
4. Maintain strong connections across the partners and support them to respond quickly to a crisis
5. Consider that negative events, such as a global pandemic, can also be leveraged to grow and strengthen the network and its impact

LEARN MORE ABOUT CHSSN

- Community Health and Social Services Network Website: <https://chssn.org/>
- Community Mobilization Model <https://chssn.org/pdf/community-mobilization-model-En.pdf>
- Community Leadership Framework <https://chssn.org/pdf/En/NIP-Leadership-Development-Booklet-EN.pdf>
- 5 key mobilization strategies in minority community contexts - <https://chssn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/5-key-mobilization-strategies-in-minority-community-contexts.pdf>

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