



NOVEMBER  
2021

# COVID-19 PANDEMIC YEAR 2

STORIES FROM SUMMER 2021  
IN ALBERTA'S COMMUNITY  
DISABILITY SERVICES SECTOR

Alberta Council of Disability Services





# INTRODUCTION

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In October 2020, ACDS published [\*Impact and Insights: COVID-19 and Alberta's Community Disability Services Sector\*](#), synthesizing the impact on disability service providers during the first six months of the COVID-19 public health emergency. The report identified a number of systems-level prerequisites for the post-pandemic recovery and growth of the sector based on the emerging learnings, promising practices, and chronic exacerbating factors characterizing this intense period following the onset of the pandemic.

When we prepared the report, we thought that the end of the pandemic was close. We were wrong.

By spring 2021, Albertans had experienced two more COVID-19 peaks,<sup>1</sup> and more virulent viral strains were appearing. On the one hand, we were hearing that emotional stress and physical exhaustion from non-stop crisis-management were taking their toll on service providers. On the other hand, staff and leaders in the sector appeared to have become more adept at responding to changing public health orders, supporting each other and their clients through outbreaks, and using creative ways to mitigate client isolation and associated mental health issues.

It was important to document these shifts in the sector. In June 2021, instead of sending out an impersonal survey tool, we invited member agencies to share with us stories of experiences that had impacted them in personal and direct ways during this pandemic. The effort was as much about documenting as it was about providing a caring ear and validation to our members that they were not alone in these trying times. Stories were collected until mid-September.<sup>2</sup>

This paper supplements the original *Impact and Insights* report by shifting from a systems-level perspective to a vantage point closer to frontline service delivery. The key overarching themes arising from our members' stories are presented alongside a timeline of broader, sector-specific pandemic developments to contextualize the background for these impacts. To honour the voices behind the stories, we illuminate the essence of each theme only with illustrative quotes, reserving our interpretive comments to the conclusion.

[1] Wave 2 in December 2020 and wave 3 in May 2021. These were followed by wave 4 in September 2021.

[2] We are deeply grateful to our member agencies that responded to our call for stories. Our knowledge and understanding of the issues on the frontlines is only possible with your participation.

# OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

The stories tell us that COVID-19's ongoing presence continue to result in challenges and adaptations; the latter, however, are predominant.

Challenges overwhelmingly include **mental and physical exhaustion**, arising primarily from staffing shortages (whether due to federal unemployment benefits, isolation requirements, single-site restrictions, stress leaves, or permanent turnover). The exhaustion is compounded due to **personal loss and grief**. **Mental health concerns**, manifesting as stress, anxiety, and depression, are on the rise for staff and for individuals in service as the latter struggle with **social isolation**. Agencies founded on principles of community inclusion are grappling with **philosophical conflict** as public health orders restrict service delivery to models contrary to these deep-seated values. The pandemic has also increased **accountability pressures** on agencies as they respond to heightened compliance demands.

Stories of positive adaptations are few. They focus largely on the **benefits of technology** to increase creativity and flexibility and to reduce social isolation. For staff who are able to work from home (a small minority in a field defined by in-person service delivery), the pandemic has enabled greater **work-life balance**.



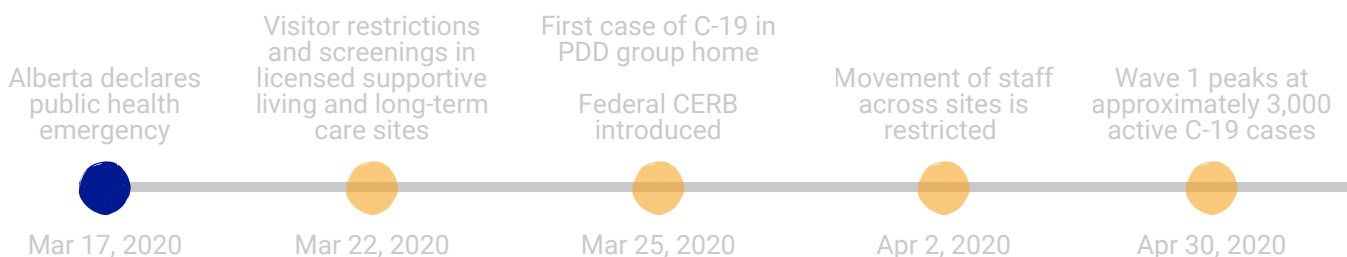
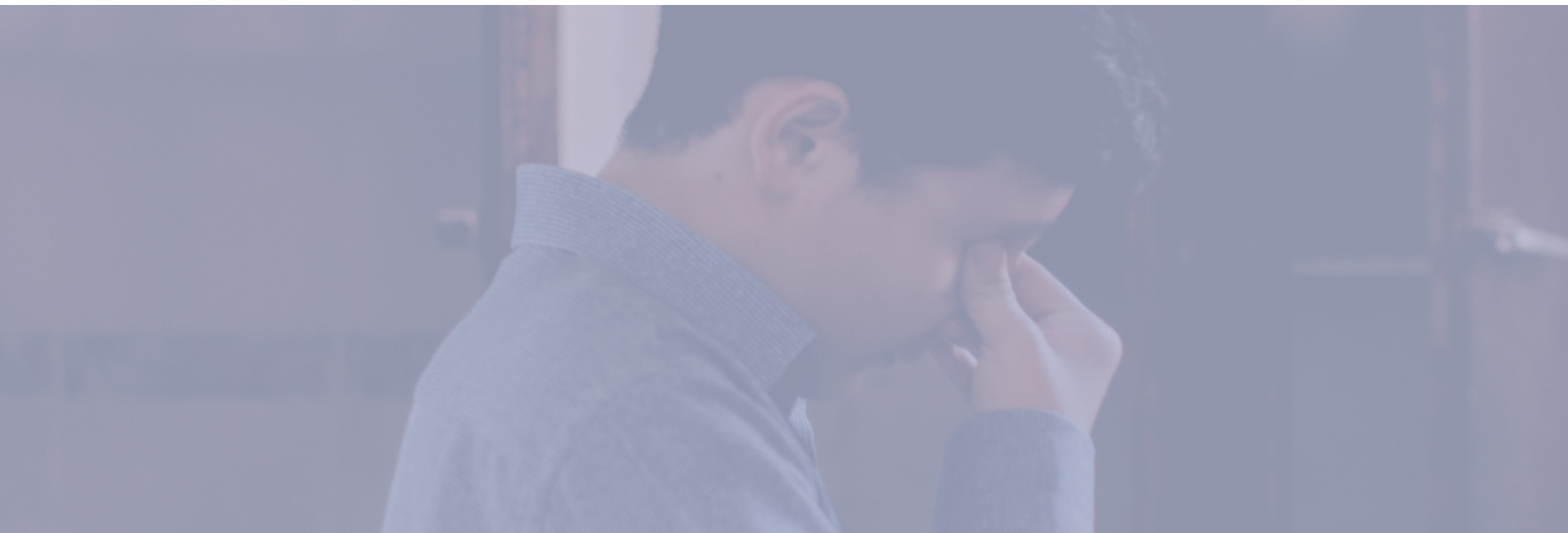


# PHYSICAL AND MENTAL EXHAUSTION

*So far, during the pandemic we have had 26 staff and 17 clients test positive for COVID-19. In addition to that 27 staff were required to self isolate for 14 days due to being deemed a close contact. When you add 14 days away for each staff member requiring self isolation that adds up to 742 days of self isolation where staff were not available to fill needed shifts. This really added to the stress already being felt by managers and frontline workers dealing with other aspects of the pandemic. Many staff put in long hours in very difficult situations in order to keep clients safe. The management team spend many hours and sleepless nights trying to figure out how they would fill shifts and keep some residential programs open due to the depletion of available staffing. There were times that if a shift wasn't filled within a few hours, a residential program closure was a real possibility.*

*On top of that, during an outbreak, information from AHS' CDC changed depending on who you talked to making managing an outbreak more difficult than it should have been. If it were not for some dedicated brave staff and creative coordinators/managers, this had the potential for a tragic outcome.*

**- Darrin Stubbs, Executive Director  
Signature Support Services Society, Grande Prairie**





# PERSONAL LOSS AND GRIEF

*An individual we have supported for over 30 years who has no family (other than our organization) passed away unexpectedly Thursday night. I provided direct support to her roommates and staff, including helping the RCMP and funeral home until midnight, and then spent Friday morning back at the house notifying staff as they came on shift and supporting them, all while following strict health order COVID protocols in a licensed home. We worked at supporting each other as we did not have any available relief staff to cover them off.*

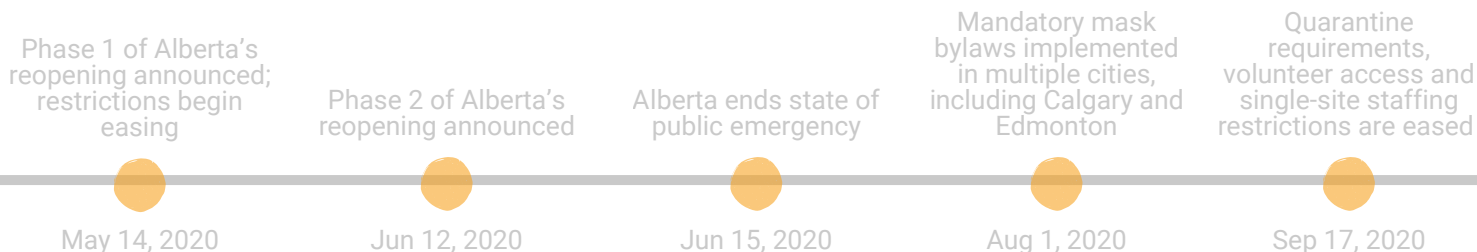
*This situation had further complications for me personally. Many years ago, I had directly supported the person who passed away. We formed a friendship that continued even after I changed roles in our organization. My grief with her passing away did not hit me until a few days later. I just sat at my desk for a few minutes after I sent an email and stared off into nothing. I realized that I had been in a work/crisis mode of supporting people and our organization in a difficult situation for 4 days. At that moment, sitting at my desk, I knew I needed to go home and take care of myself, someone who was not just the Executive Director, but a person who just lost a friend.*

**- Lorelei Martin, Executive Director  
Drumheller and Region Transition Society (DARTS), Drumheller**

# MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

*A number of our staff have gone through major mental health breakdowns. We have experienced people needing time off due to depression/anxiety. This has also brought about situations of conflict on matters that would otherwise be straight forward. A number of our individuals have also experienced significant stress and anxiety. We have seen an increase of behaviors of concern for some of our individuals. We are also experiencing a shortage of staff and increased workload for current employees.*

**- Anonymous**



# SOCIAL ISOLATION OF INDIVIDUALS IN SERVICE

*COVID-19 has rapidly affected almost every aspect of our day-to-day operations at VALID. It has disrupted services and significantly reduced community engagement for our individuals and staff. We have cancelled or postponed large-scale events and have avoided travelling and celebrations. Life as we knew it came to a complete standstill.*

**- Lana Syms, Executive Director  
VALID Association, Vegreville**

*Due to the pandemic, my client was at home with me 24/7. No day placements, no evening social activities, no parental home visits, no vacations. No break from each other. There was a good 3-4 months with everyone home together. No respite workers to hire. No training for new respite workers. But [we] got her out doing volunteer work safely around community. Being a snow angel or helping with cleaning up neighbourhood. Helping with animals. Due to increase in supervision and commitment to my client, my other career was put on hold and so was my ability to make an income. I am glad the world is opening up again and she gets to see peers and other adults and see her family.*

**- Anonymous**

*This was a difficult time for my client. Programs were closed, visits with friends were restricted, respite opportunities were impacted by restrictions and the sheer magnitude of the virus was larger than ever experienced. These impacted my client negatively in that she was sad at times, not understanding of the situation, requiring explanation and context to stories on TV. Then restrictions lifted a bit, then back to lock down. The back and forth was hard for her.*

**- Anonymous**

*My client was with me 24/7 for 18 months with little to no breaks. It was hard to watch my easy-going client that socializes and was very active, that got out on a daily basis, to having to stay home with not much to do and seeing her friends over Zoom instead of in person. She was stressed, worried about her family and not wanting to go anywhere. I had to constantly reassure her that we were doing everything we could to stay safe. Also trying to find things to keep her busy and active was hard when everything was closed. There's only so much you can do inside the home. It was hard to watch her go through this. She is still affected from all the shutdowns, she isn't that happy-go-lucky lady she once was.*

**- Anonymous**

Bill C-4 is passed, providing federal COVID-19 benefits (CRSB and CRCB)

Oct 2, 2020

Calgary and Edmonton restrict social gatherings

Oct 26, 2020

Alberta declares 2nd public health emergency

Nov 24, 2020

Alberta's 2nd wave hits its peak at almost 21,000 active C-19 cases

Dec 13, 2020

First C-19 vaccine administered in Alberta

Dec 15, 2020



## PHILOSOPHICAL CONFLICT

*The 2020 pandemic has tested us to the core. As an agency we are built on the foundation of connection to community. Opening in 1985 in response to the closing of an institution - Baker Center in Calgary – our values were/are based on the opposite of an institution or hospital. We strive for community inclusion, a home-like setting, family connection, and natural supports.*

*The pandemic cut us off at the knees. We were having to look deep to meet the health restrictions and still be true to our values. Day programs started to look institutional, as health orders became paramount. Instead of building community, participating in the community, and fostering family involvement, we ended up taking temperatures, putting on masks, wearing gowns, eating separately, not being able to leave the home, discontinuing family visits, not being able to grieve fully or host funerals, and limiting interactions. This was very difficult for us an agency and as a field.*

*The staff, individuals and families adapted quickly to the new reality and became so very creative. Of course there are lessons learned from the pandemic, and some efficiencies will come out of these past 16 months. As we cautiously decrease restrictions, and open up to being in groups, having celebrations, attending events, and truly participating in the community, we are ever so intently reminded of what is most important – the PEOPLE, the COMMUNITY, the PHYSICAL TOUCH, and our deep-rooted CONNECTION to others.*

**- Pam McGladdery, CEO  
Universal Rehabilitation Service Agency (URSA), Calgary**

Alberta begins Step 1 of a new reopening strategy based on hospitalization benchmarks

Feb 8, 2021

CWB is announced, providing \$1,200 one-time payment to frontline workers; eligibility is limited in CDS sector

Feb 10, 2021

Alberta begins Step 2 of reopening

Mar 1, 2021

Vaccination eligibility expands to adults with severe or profound learning disabilities or severe developmental delay

Mar 30, 2021

Alberta returns to Step 1 restrictions following rising C-19 cases

Apr 6, 2021



# ACCOUNTABILITY PRESSURES

*The high burden COVID-19 placed on staff have had far-reaching consequences. We have seen disruptions to our training schedules, overloaded staff resources and a high burden of accountability to the community and those we serve.*

*We experienced a COVID outbreak at one of our facilities, affecting 5 staff and 2 individuals. Fortunately, we did not experience any extreme outcomes and all those affected have had a 100% recovery. The amount of stress and concern our staff experienced during this outbreak is incomparable to that which they have had to deal with in the past. This outbreak led to an Occupational Health and Safety review as our outbreak was in a licensed home, further adding stress to both staff and management in completing this detailed process.*

*Our staff face daily high levels of stress, in part because some individuals were failing to follow public health orders and us having little recourse in preventing this from happening. Our COVID restrictions to address this exposure risk, based on AHS supports and orders stemming from our outbreak, led to 'restrictive procedures' abuse complaints being lodged against us by PDD. These allegations were proved to be unfounded, but it just added so much more to our stress levels, and unnecessarily so.*

**- Lana Syms, Executive Director  
VALID Association, Vegreville**



Frontline disability workers are eligible for vaccination

Apr 30, 2021

Alberta reaches the peak of wave 3 with 25,000+ active C-19 cases

May 9, 2021

Albertans 12+ are eligible for vaccination

May 10, 2021

Stage 1 of new reopening plan based on vaccination rates begins, restrictions ease

Jun 1, 2021

Stage 2 of reopening plan announced

Jun 10, 2021



## BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY

*Supporting our clients remotely is very different through Zoom but we are still there to listen, engage, play, create, read, exercise and learn together. Zoom support has opened up new avenues to communicate which works well with clients.*

### **- Anonymous**

*Working on Zoom with clients noticeably served as a therapy for the negative effects of staying home, gave birth to a lot of innovations and so many clients (and staff) learned how to use several features of the computer that they never knew existed.*

### **- Anonymous**

*Working remotely gave us new opportunities to support clients, such as if they go away to their cabin, holiday, or need remote support from their house for unique circumstances. Clients can still have support without having to use their holiday time in these situations. This gives us flexibility to do our jobs in different ways that was never possible before. Personally, I enjoy the remote work over coming into the office and I like a blend of the workstyles. I have been working mostly from home during the pandemic.*

### **- Anonymous**

CWB eligibility expanded to all frontline community disability workers

Jun 22, 2021

Stage 3 of reopening: the majority of all COVID-19 restrictions are lifted in Alberta

Jul 1, 2021

Restrictions set to expire in mid-August are extended to the end of September due to rising C-19 cases

Aug 13, 2021

70% of eligible Albertans are fully vaccinated

Sep 2, 2021

Due to rising C-19 cases, masking and work-from-home restrictions are implemented

Sep 4, 2021

# WORK-LIFE BALANCE

*I am able to fit more in to one day, which hugely benefits some clients because they are able to see me more frequently. However, this is emotionally draining to switch gears so often in the day.*

**- Anonymous**

*Working from home time to time was beneficial for me as I found I was a lot more productive with administrative side. The issue though was maintaining effective communication with the rest of my team as we were not in the office all the time.*

**- Anonymous**

*Working throughout the pandemic was extremely challenging at times simply because the world was under immense stress and fear, and while my friends and family were mostly off work, the pressure of my job was higher than ever before. Despite that, I'm grateful that I was able to work throughout this past year and a half, and am proud of the services and support we offered to clients. During this time, I was able to expand my skill set and gain experience that will benefit me throughout my career. I hope that things learned, like the value of working from home and having a healthy work-life balance, can be carried with us and included in the new normal of working as we move forward.*

**- Anonymous**



A vaccination incentive of \$100 is offered to unvaccinated Albertans 18+

Sep 13, 2021

Public emergency #3 and new social gathering restrictions announced as ICU rates surge

Sep 15, 2021

Restrictions Exemption Program enables businesses to avoid new restrictions if they check for proof of vaccination or a negative test result

Sep 20, 2021

Alberta's 4th wave hits its peak at 21,000 active C-19 cases

Sep 26, 2021

Full vaccination is required for the Restrictions Exemption Program

Oct 25, 2021



# CONCLUSION

These stories provide two main take-aways of the effects of this lingering pandemic:

- (i) the mental health consequences on the workforce at all levels of the organization; and
- (ii) limits on organizational capacity to continually adapt under conditions of unrelenting stress.

*"The mental health consequences of COVID-19 ... are projected to result in the greatest and most enduring health footprint."*<sup>3</sup>

A year ago, our *Impact and Insights* report identified human resource issues and the mental health consequences of COVID-19 as critical threats to sector sustainability. At that time, none of us could have guessed that the pandemic would be raging on a year later even with the majority of the population fully vaccinated.<sup>4</sup> Although greater adoption of technology has enabled creative alternatives to traditional modes of service delivery, this sector will always depend heavily on a stable, skilled, and healthy workforce.

**The mental and physical exhaustion reflected in these stories, thus, requires urgent attention not only for frontline staff, but also for supervisors and organizational leaders.**

*"Organizations with limited resources or adaptive capacity will need significant life support if the pandemic lingers."*<sup>5</sup>

As we write this report, Alberta is in the midst of the fourth wave of the pandemic. Several health measures relaxed in early July have been reinstated. A number of community disability service agencies are considering (or have implemented) their own health and safety measures, such as mandatory vaccination policies for their workforces, that would have been deemed unlikely two months ago. Organizations' abilities to continually assess and adjust to shifting conditions while under ongoing stress is limited by their administrative depth and sophistication.

**Investment in organizational capacity by government and community funders is critical to support sector recovery.**

[3] Jenkins, Emily, Anne Gadermann and Corey McAuliffe. July 31, 2020. "[New Research: Mental Health Impact of Coronavirus Pandemic Hits Marginalized Groups Hardest.](#)"

[4] At the time of writing in early November, 80% of the population over 12 years old (68% of total population) was fully vaccinated in Alberta. Government of Alberta. [COVID-19 Alberta statistics](#). Accessed November 1, 2021.

[5] Alberta Council of Disability Services. October 2020. [Impact and Insights: COVID-19 and Alberta's Community Disability Services Sector](#). Calgary, AB.

**This report would not be possible without  
submissions from the following organizations:**

Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre (DDRC)

Drumheller and Region Transition Society (DARTS)

Rehoboth Christian Ministries

Signature Support Services Society

Universal Rehabilitation Service Agency (URSA)

Vegreville Association for Living in Dignity (VALID)

All anonymous respondents

**Thank you**