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1

From the Ground Up:

Supporting Rocky View Farmer Mental Health

Together we can change healthcare supports

Landmark Study - 2026

Thank You!

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	iii
Letters of Support	iv
Our Story So Far	1
The Challenge	1
Multi-Faceted Research	2
Problem Discovery & Definition	3
Possible Solutions	5
Next Steps	8
Final Reflections	9
Research Team	10

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Citation Information

Executive Summary

The *From the Ground Up* project emerged through a close collaboration with Rocky View County's farming community, supported by Woolliams Farms Ltd. Beginning October 2024, our team worked directly with farmers, local partners, and organizations to understand the everyday realities of farm life and the unique challenges people face when accessing mental health and wellness supports. This work explored how farmers, geography, culture, and the health-care system intersect to shape life in this diverse and widely dispersed rural area. Using a multi-faceted research approach, including ethnographic fieldwork, community engagement sessions, expert consultations, and design-thinking methods, we developed a clear picture of community needs, wants, and expectations. The process produced 66 guiding principles to help shape future products, services, and solutions. Possible design-based solutions include telehealth services, resource networks, and other healthcare-driven initiatives, while service-based solutions range from community-led events and public-identity projects to targeted caregiver support. We also identified emerging priorities such as the creation of clear care pathways, improved local health services, and more opportunities for social connection and farmer identity building.

We are grateful to the community partners and experts who shared their time, trust, and knowledge. The findings in this report are not the final word, they are a foundation for the next phase. As we move forward, we will continue to work hand-in-hand with the Rocky View County community to develop solutions rooted in local values and aspirations, building a healthier, more connected future – truly from the ground up.

John Parkins
Dean & Executive Officer, Augustana Campus
University of Alberta



The Augustana Campus is proud to contribute to the *From the Ground Up* project through AgWell, a major initiative focusing on farmer well-being led by Dr. Rebecca Purc-Stephenson at our campus. The project reflects our commitment to community-engaged research that responds directly to the needs of rural Albertans. By working with the Rocky View County community members, this project shows how farm culture, geography, and access to care can shape what meaningful support can look like in practice. The findings provide an evidence-based foundation for practical solutions that are locally grounded and collaborative, all of which reinforce Augustana's ongoing support to advancing resilient, sustainable agricultural communities.

The Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine is proud to champion the *From the Ground Up* project, recognizing that supporting the mental health of our farming families is essential to the vitality of Alberta. This initiative exemplifies our commitment to community-led research by addressing the critical gap between existing healthcare systems and the lived realities of our rural neighbours. In collaboration with Woolliams Farms Ltd and the Faculty of ALES, our Rehabilitation Robotics Lab is helping to ensure that wellness supports are not only accessible, but also deeply rooted in the unique values of Rocky View County. We remain dedicated to developing innovative, inclusive care pathways that serve all communities, regardless of geography.



Esther Kim
Professor & Dean, Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine
University of Alberta

Samanntha Wright
Deputy Reeve & Division 4 Councillor
Rocky View County

Improving access to rural health and mental wellness supports is essential to the long-term strength of Rocky View County's agricultural community and way of life. *From the Ground Up* demonstrates what is possible when farmers, ranchers, local producers, and researchers come together to talk openly about stress, wellbeing, and the realities of carrying a farming legacy forward. This work strongly aligns with the County's Agriculture Master Plan, which prioritizes resilient producers, thriving farm families, and the viability of agriculture in our County. Sincere thanks to those who have contributed their time, experiences, and expertise, and for the opportunity to learn directly from our agricultural community.



Rickey Yada
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences
University of Alberta

The *From the Ground Up* project shines a much needed light on mental health care access and wellbeing among farmers and rural families in Rocky View County. I am inspired by the partners who came together to connect, listen and propose meaningful, community-informed solutions. At the University of Alberta, we are committed to research that addresses global challenges like mental health and also acknowledges the diverse communities we serve and the need for personalized approaches. This project reflects this commitment and the power of partnerships between researchers, communities and industry to address complex issues with compassion and innovation. I commend the team for their thoughtful approach and care for the wellbeing of rural families and farmers in Alberta, who play a critical role in our society and should not be left behind. I look forward to seeing the impact of this important work continue in phase two.

Our Story So Far

From before first light until after dark on those long Alberta summer days, farming is not just a job that you clock out of, it's a way of life. But farm life can bring unique challenges that are hard to talk about, especially when it comes to mental health and wellbeing. In Rocky View County, distance, changing community structures, and a fast-evolving rural landscape have made it harder for farmers and their families to find the support they need. Many feel isolated, misunderstood, or left behind by systems built for urban life. The *From the Ground Up* project began with a simple question:

What would it take for farmers in Rocky View County to feel truly supported in their mental health and daily wellbeing?

Between 2024 and 2026, our team from the University of Alberta's Rehabilitation Robotics Lab; Wooliams Farms Ltd.; Airdrie Health Foundation; Rural Heart Foundation; Agwell Alberta; and the Faculty of Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences worked alongside farmers and their families, local organizations, and experts to listen, learn, and create solutions together. This collaborative process was made possible through Wooliams Farms Ltd.

Rocky View County is a large, diverse, and geographically complex region shaped like an inverted horseshoe nested within the boundaries of Cochrane, Calgary, Strathmore, and Mountain View County. The landscape stretches from rolling foothills in the west to flatter prairie land in the east, creating variations in weather patterns and growing seasons across the county. This spread-out geography makes everyday life, including accessing services, more challenging. Rocky View County includes farmers, acreage owners, Hutterites, town residents, and industrial producers.








The Challenge

Given its size and the variety of communities within it, Rocky View County can at times feel dispersed, with distance and diversity contributing to a sense of fragmentation. While there are a number of health and service facilities around and throughout Rocky View County, many residents report uncertainty about where, when, and how to access care, especially mental health supports.

Multi-Faceted Research

A multi-faceted research approach was taken that combines traditional research with community-led, arts-based, and design thinking methods. Following is a summary of each of the facets of the research approach, along with the core objectives that guide each facet.

 Community Awareness & Project Branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Develop farming-culture awareness- Establish project values & goals- Set specific objectives
 Barrier Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Identify contributing factors to the problem- Gain insight on core issues- Ask the right questions
 Ethnographic Field Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Connect with community & representatives- Scope-out Rocky View County Municipal District- Explore community places & spaces- Investigate core issues- Document environmental & social aspects
 Community Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Characterize key aspects of the community- Highlight distinguishing features- Identify gaps in research findings
 Friends Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Seek industry insight into the problems identified- Source comparable case studies- Gather advice & existing resources from experts
 Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Connect with the community- Communicate the goal of the project- Listen to their experiences- Engage in conversations- Understand their needs, wants, & expectations- Foster trust & collaboration
 Community Workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Focus on community-first research topics- Integrate research-first questions to develop data- Help bridge the gap between needs & care by:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• providing resources• developing skills• building/strengthening relationships
 Research Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Survey questions to help fill in gaps identified- Test survey with team members/community- Reach a wider audience- Develop a more accurate understanding of the challenges faced by the community

Problem Discovery & Definition

We engaged in identifying specific problems related to health and wellness through our research including: *From the Ground Up* team brainstorming, consulting with experts, and consulting with farmers and community in Rocky View County. Through problem discovery, we are able to consider four possible innovation categories that Rocky View County can spearhead. At this stage, these are not meant to be definitive products or services; instead, they are in-roads to future co-research and co-creation with Rocky View County.

1

Innovations solved through digital technology, physical space and place, communications and information dissemination, and sociocultural human interactions. These are sorted into the resources currently present in Rocky View County, resources that can be created, and what things Rocky View County can and cannot control, and important characteristics that could be embodied into possible solutions.

2

Innovations solved through digital technology; analogue designed solutions; community-forward solutions within the scope of Rocky View County; and systemic solutions outside the scope of Rocky View County. Many community-forward solutions are possible and some of these are dependent on systemic support.

3

Innovations linked to resource management including how information is transferred; educational and skill development including the content of the potential innovations; and the infrastructure that Rocky View County currently has to work with, what they want, and any noted gaps. There is a breadth of possible innovations that can draw from a myriad of human, informational, and structural resources in Rocky View County.

4

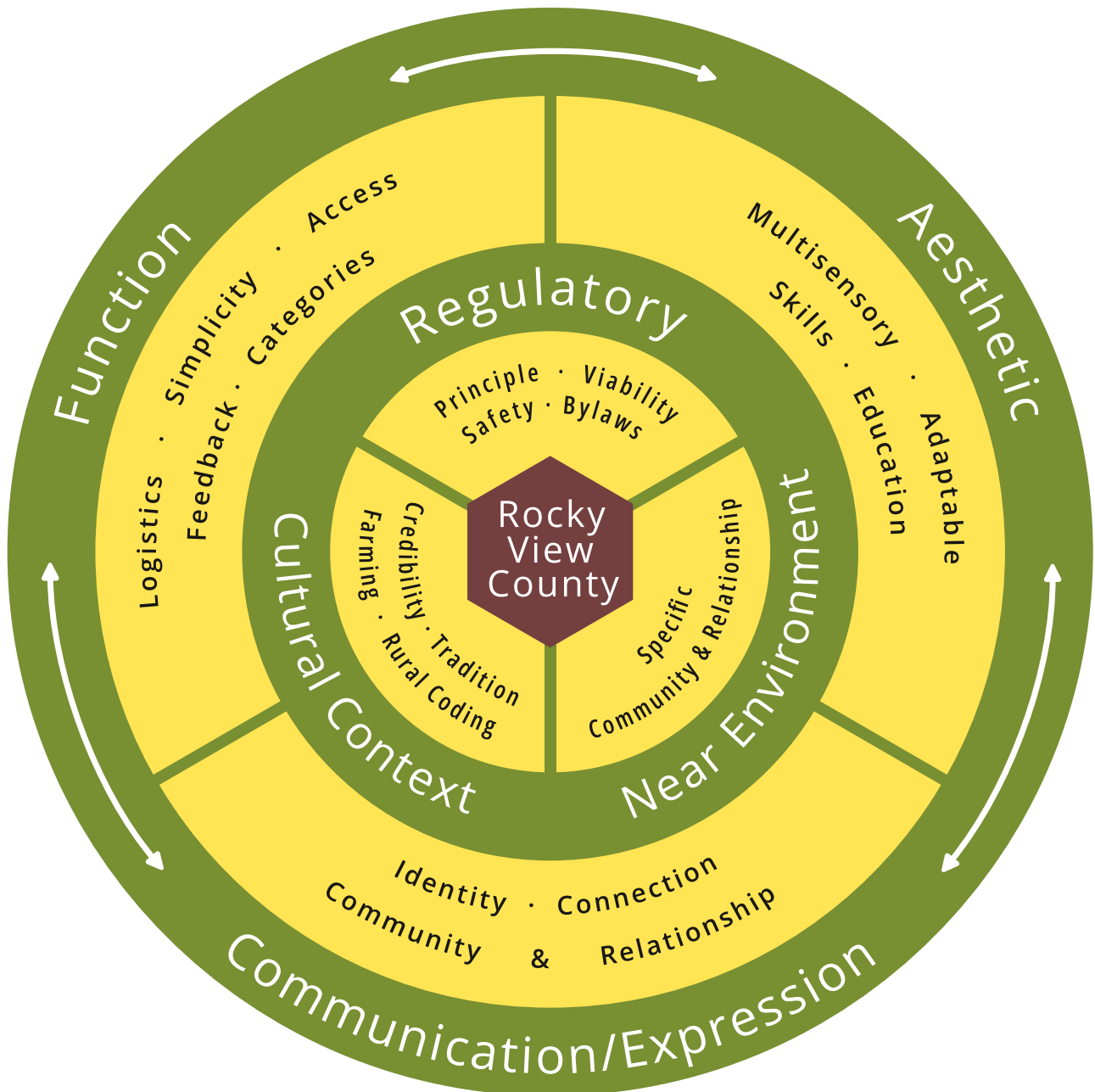
Innovations that are design-based (e.g., products, objects, physical designs) and service-based (e.g., services, education, engagements) solutions.

Five Key Community Asks



Guiding Principles for Innovating

To facilitate continued co-research and co-creation, we created 66 guiding principles tailored to Rocky View County farmers. These guiding principles provide essential information about the unique characteristics, needs, wants, and expectations of Rocky View County community to support the development of future solutions that address healthcare and mental health concerns. The needs of the community relate to survival and are essential for wellbeing; the wants of the community are those that are beneficial and desirable for health and wellbeing; and the expectations of the community are ones that should be met by the systems in place for the betterment of wellbeing and society in general. The 66 guiding principles are organized into six overarching categories: regulatory, near environment, cultural context, function, aesthetics, and communication/expression, which connect to the identified possible solutions on pages 5 and 6. The complete 66 guiding principles will be made available to all parties involved in future innovations.



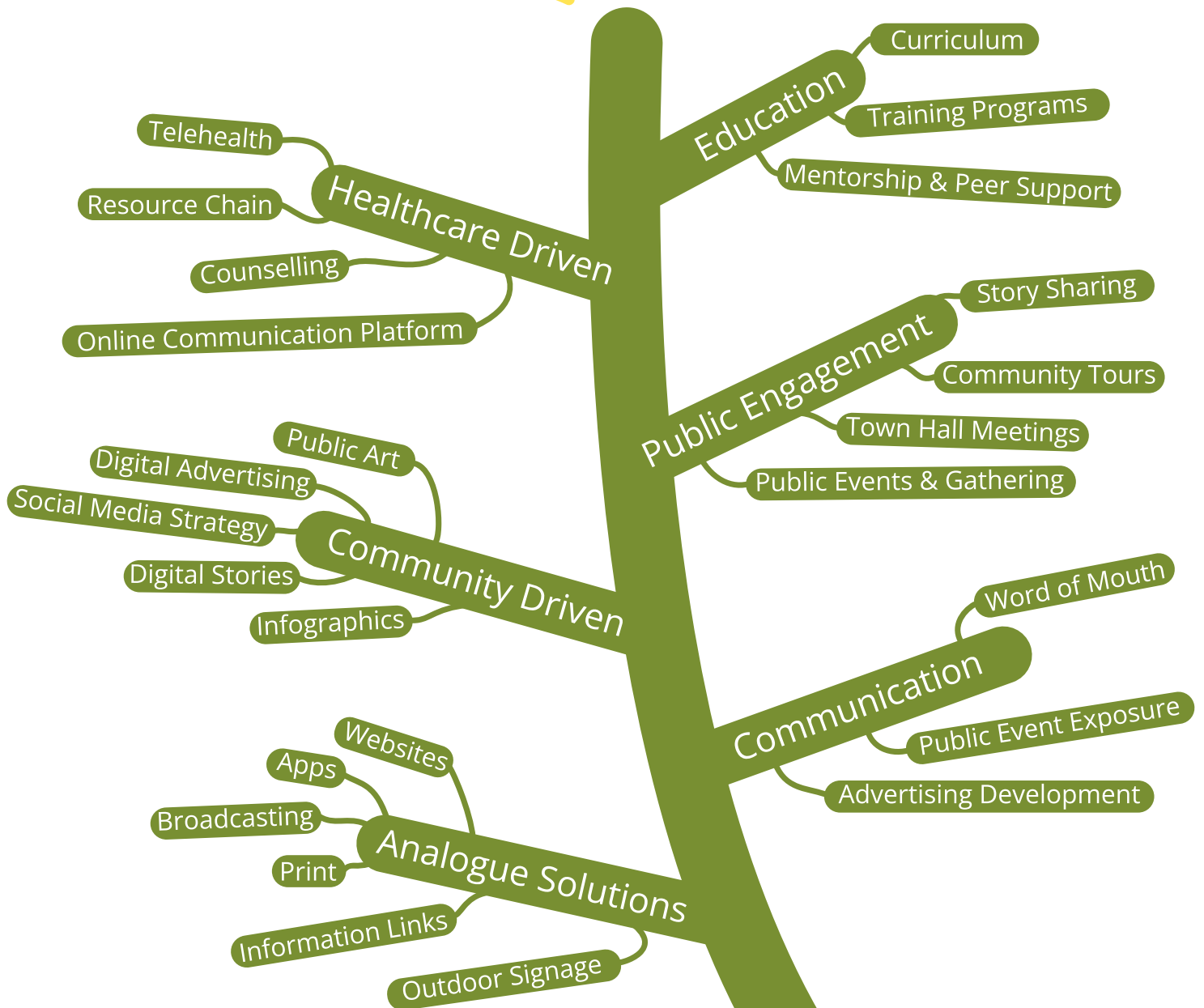
Design-based Solutions

Healthcare-Driven	Telehealth	Used for remote delivery of clinical services
	Resources-chain	Assumed to be clinical pathways or referral networks
	Online communication platform	Often for provider-patient or interprofessional communication
	Counselling	Typically clinical mental health or behavioral support
Community-Driven	Digital advertising	Used for outreach, awareness, & public health campaigns
	Social media strategy	Mainly public engagement, health promotion, or awareness-focussed
	Digital Stories	Personal narratives for education, empowerment, or awareness
	Infographics	Visual education tools, often used in outreach or awareness campaigns
	Public Art	Murals, sculptures, installations, etc.
Analogue Solutions	Information links	Can be professional (clinical) or public-facing (educational)
	Apps	Depends on purpose: clinical monitoring vs. community support
	Website	Professional portals vs. public health education
	Print	Posters, pamphlets, bulletins, etc.
	Broadcasting	Radio, television, news, etc.
	Outdoor Signage	Wayfinding, billboards, info-graphics, inflatables, etc.

Service-based Solutions

Education (formal & informal)	Training Programs	Healthcare workers & professionals, volunteers, advocates, leadership, animators
	Curriculum	On topics related to healthcare and support resources; community and culture; skill development; social connection and recognition; farming lifestyle and safety
	Mentorship & Peer Support	
	Counselling	Typically clinical mental health or behavioral support
Public Engagement & Outreach	Public Events & Gatherings	Celebrations & traditions, community events (e.g. festivals, markets, workshops, fundraisers)
	Town Hall Meetings	Public forums to foster dialogue and gather feedback
	Community Tours	Destination maps for walking, driving, and local/ surrounding events
	Story Sharing	Public engagement through storytelling & shared experiences
Communication & Promotion	Advertising Development	Creation & strategic planning of advertising content and initiatives
	Word of Mouth	Encouraging & leveraging informal communication channels to share information and promote events
	Public Event Exposure	Visibility & engagement through public events

*With gaps and problems identified,
now we need to co-create solutions together.*



Next Steps

Although we've made great strides towards unpacking complex issues around supporting farmers' mental health, there is still more work to be done. We cannot forecast all directions forward, but we already know some directions based on further and planned co-research initiatives (i.e., survey, community workshops) and the need to co-create solutions relative to the identified problems. Future initiatives with Rocky View County based on community-forward priorities may be:

Further Co-research

- ♥ Engage in community events and activities
- ♥ Engage in research related to age/demographic specific (e.g., youths, older adults), gender, intergenerational concerns
- ♥ Engage in research related to caregiving
- ♥ Engage in further identifying and understanding systemic issues with healthcare in the region
- ♥ Refine guiding principles for innovating
- ♥ Document further possible innovations and potential content specific to Rocky View County

Co-create Design & Service Solutions

- ♥ Create design criteria for each product/service/solution
- ♥ Conduct taskscape analyses for each product/service/solution
- ♥ Conduct market and precedent research for each product/service/solution
- ♥ Co-create and design products/services/solutions
- ♥ Test designs
- ♥ Refine designs
- ♥ Implement designs

Community Forward Initiatives

- ♥ Strategic planning about future co-research and co-creation
- ♥ Engage in community-building and farmer identity building through events and activities
- ♥ Engage in farmer identity building through visible cues in the physical environment
- ♥ Engage in mental health initiatives with professionals
- ♥ Liaise with allies and government officials
- ♥ Look for and advocate for funding
- ♥ Advocate for community resources

Co-researching and co-creation is community-centred work that involves commitment, layered engagement, and working cooperatively towards evidence-based solutions that are deeply meaningful. From the Ground Up is dedicated to finding solutions that are rural-centred and tailored to the farmers of Rocky View County. Together, we make a difference.

Final Reflections

From the Ground Up has engaged one project manager, five community partners, 12 experts, five highly qualified personnel, three artists, and 75+ Rocky View County community members. Along with these human resources, we used multiple University of Alberta spaces, equipment, and materials to move forward. As a team, we've invested a great deal of time in co-researching through discussion, planning, designing, spending time in and with community, carefully collecting and recording information, following important and meaningful leads, backtracking over information, creating new ways of discovering information, collaborating, presenting, writing, thinking, and reporting. So far, this project has been novel, fulfilling, and inspiring.

The results in this report mark the first step in unpacking a deeply complex issue: the mismatch between Alberta and Canada's existing health and wellness supports and the realities of farming communities. This mismatch is visible in the observations, stories, ideas, and words of the Rocky View County community members.

Our hope is that this work is just the beginning of an ongoing relationship with Rocky View County, and that this work will inspire and inform other communities who've encountered similar issues.

75+
community
members

5
community
events

800+
kilometers of
driving

11
reports +
conferences

18
experts

Project Team

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Kaylyn MacDonald, Kinesiology Practicum Student
Jackson Zhou, BSc student in Nursing

Social Sciences; Augustana Campus, University of Alberta

Dr. Rebecca Purc-Stephenson, Professor of Psychology and lead of AgWell

Experts

Peter Faid, Community Engagement Consultant
Marc Boychuk, Deputy Mayor, Town of Peace River
Ione Challborn, Ex-Executive Director, Canadian Mental Health Association
Ron Dyck, Provincial Suicidologist
Shari Hanson, Community Development Officer, Government of Alberta
Karen Langtved, Veterinary and Information Management Professional
Stefani Lisk, Project Lead for Rural Mental Health Project, CMHA
Regan Paddington, Director of Clinical Operations, Highlands Primary Care Network
Allison Soprovich, End User Lead, APERSU, School of Public Health

Community Partners

Woolliams Farms Ltd.
Larry Woolliams, Farmer and Community Member
Jenna Richter, Farmer and Community Member
Airdrie Health Foundation
Michelle Bates, Executive Director
Ryan Thompson, President, Pureform Radiology

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