

The Rural & Remote Caregiver

By Jennifer Briand, Caregiver Support Coordinator Western Region

Rural and Remote: depending on your perspective these two words can evoke images of beautiful land and seascapes. These two words can also be used to describe many smaller communities across the province. The coastal communities, small towns, and country sides of western Nova Scotia portray a rugged beauty that is simply inspiring to all who encounter them. My travels across this area over the last year have reminded me why I continue to live here and call it home. Our communities are steeped in traditions and caregiving is one of those time honoured traditions. Providing support for family and friends is far from a new concept in rural areas, and it has a longer tradition than other structured forms of care.

Today the definition of caregiving is evolving, and the importance of unpaid caregivers is becoming more evident in our rural communities. However, the demographics of our communities are changing; many young people have migrated to larger urban centres or have moved out of the province to find educational and employment opportunities. This is a problem, particularly with the elderly as they often rely on family members, neighbours, and friends to fill any gaps in services. Living in areas of geographic isolation which are often underserved in terms of access to paid care providers can further increase the stresses for both those requiring help and support, and for those providing them.

Trends reflect the fact that the Canadian population is aging, and in 2010 Nova Scotia had, at 16%, the highest percentage of citizens over 65 in Canada. Similarly the average age of Canadians living in rural areas is increasingly higher than those in urban areas. The need to support caregivers has become an important rural healthcare issue.

As part of that long tradition of giving care, many people often see themselves as just someone providing support to those that need it. However, seeing yourself as a caregiver acknowledges the important work you do. It also recognizes that you need to look after your own health. To help rural caregivers, Caregivers NS has recently expanded throughout the province. As the Caregiver Support Coordinator for the Western Region, my role is both to increase the knowledge of our programs and services and to provide support services for caregivers in my region. I have met many caregivers across the western region and am always humbled by their efforts and their caregiving journeys. Support for these caregivers is imperative to keeping them healthy and thriving in a rural community.

While spending time on the shore at my parent's home, I noticed that the wharf has been damaged from recent storms. I realized that this would be a project for my family next summer. It's an ongoing project that is part of 'weathering the storms' in rural Nova Scotia. Similarly, by putting much needed supports in place, Caregivers Nova Scotia is helping those living in rural and remote areas to continue to thrive. We can all be prepared to weather the impending 'grey storm' that will be crashing towards our communities over the next 10 to 20 years.

