



GUIDE

Creating and
sustaining
patient and
family advisory
councils

Recruiting for Diversity

**Health Quality
Ontario**

Let's make our health system healthier



Ontario
Health Quality Ontario

WHO IS HEALTH QUALITY ONTARIO

Health Quality Ontario is the provincial advisor on the quality of health care. We are motivated by a single-minded purpose: Better health for all Ontarians.

Who We Are.

We are a scientifically rigorous group with diverse areas of expertise. We strive for complete objectivity, and look at things from a vantage point that allows us to see the forest and the trees. We work in partnership with health care providers and organizations across the system, and engage with patients themselves, to help initiate substantial and sustainable change to the province's complex health system.

What We Do.

We define the meaning of quality as it pertains to health care, and provide strategic advice so all the parts of the system can improve. We also analyze virtually all aspects of Ontario's health care. This includes looking at the overall health of Ontarians, how well different areas of the system are working together, and most importantly, patient experience. We then produce comprehensive, objective reports based on data, facts and the voice of patients, caregivers and those who work each day in the health system. As well, we make recommendations on how to improve care using the best evidence. Finally, we support large scale quality improvements by working with our partners to facilitate ways for health care providers to learn from each other and share innovative approaches.

Why It Matters.

We recognize that, as a system, we have much to be proud of, but also that it often falls short of being the best it can be. Plus certain vulnerable segments of the population are not receiving acceptable levels of attention. Our intent at Health Quality Ontario is to continuously improve the quality of health care in this province regardless of who you are or where you live. We are driven by the desire to make the system better, and by the inarguable fact that better has no limit.

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Health Quality Ontario's Patient, Family and Public Engagement Program

At Health Quality Ontario, we believe that patient, family and public engagement is central to improving health care. Our patient engagement efforts are designed to encourage, enable and empower all Ontarians to be full participants in the care they receive – and to help patients, families and health professionals join hands together to improve Ontario's health system. Through our [patient engagement](#) program, patient and family volunteers contribute their ideas and priorities to all aspects of our work on health quality. We also support patients, families and providers on how to effectively engage with each other to meaningfully improve care, through our [online hub](#) of tools and resources, and through conferences and learning events.

Introduction

This is an exciting time for patient and family advisory councils across Ontario. With councils in all long-term care homes, many hospitals, and showing promising examples in other health sectors, patients and their families are poised to make significant contributions to improving the quality of care across our system.

At Health Quality Ontario, our goal is to help advisory councils get off to a good start and keep working well, focusing on meaningful projects that have a positive impact.

Do you serve on or support a patient and family advisory council?

Then this guide on *Recruiting for Diversity* is for you. It is part of a series of guides designed to provide you with practical tips and tools to help you address some of the challenges that patient and family advisory councils may face. The other guides include:

- Creating an Effective Terms of Reference
- Choosing meaningful projects

For links to other resources available to help you create and sustain an effective patient and family advisory council, please visit Health Quality Ontario's website (www.hqontario.ca) and our [hub](#) of patient, engagement tools and resources that have been carefully gathered by Health Quality Ontario in consultation with patients and providers.

What's in a name?

Patient and family advisory councils go by various names, reflecting the variety of roles they can play within a health care organization. At any given health care organization they might be called a council, committee, forum, panel, network, roundtable or team. The Long-Term Care Act mandates that a resident's council is established in every long-term care home and that a family council is established, if requested by a family member of a resident or a person of importance to a resident. The key to these partnerships is that collaboration is meaningful for patient and family advisors and the organization. This requires leadership participation and organizational membership on the council so that goals are set, and decisions are made, that work for all involved. In these guides, we use the term "patient" to describe any type of person served by the health system and "family" to describe any individual who provides or has provided care or support to a patient or former patient.

These guides have been developed as a general resource. It is important to refer to the legislation for your sector (which can easily be accessed through your organization) to ensure you meet those requirements. As well, resources – like this guide developed by the [Ontario Association of Resident's Councils](#) – can help with understanding the resident and family council legislation in the Long-Term Care Act.



Recruiting for diversity

Diversity matters

An effective patient and family advisory council reflects the diversity of the people that your organization serves and the broader community you share. A diverse council ensures that the decisions being made reflect, and respond to, a broad range of lived experiences.

Diverse representation on your advisory council is important for a number of reasons. As a service that intimately touches people's lives, health service providers need to deliver culturally appropriate health care and be sensitive to social and cultural differences and preferences. Social and cultural background affects a person's experience of care in many ways – from the language used to communicate with a provider, to expectations about what role family may play as caregivers, to the type of diet and activities people find comforting.

As publicly funded agencies, health care organizations also have an obligation and responsibility to reduce barriers so that all Ontarians can access high quality care that is appropriate to their needs. For the people who may face the highest challenges in navigating the health system (e.g. vulnerable or marginalized populations), this means making clear efforts to involve those with these lived experiences in decisions that affect their care. When patient and family advisory councils collectively bring a variety of experiences to the table, it expands their ability to contribute ideas that apply to the diverse lives of people and families served by your organization. Members of the council can become active participants and partner with the organization in developing recruitment strategies to broaden the diversity on their council. The tone and activities of the council should also reflect an interest in bringing all perspectives to the table.

Consider many kinds of diversity

Before starting or refreshing recruitment for your council, it's helpful to identify the range of experiences you want represented, so you can reach out directly to people with those experiences. [The Health Equity Impact Assessment Tool](#) is one template that can help guide this discussion.

- Determine how to reach out to and include a range of people. It's important to actively reach out to people from different demographic groups, for example: age, sex, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, income variety, education, differing neighbourhoods, disability and/or other groups protected under the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#), and to groups who have historically faced discrimination.
- Think across the lifespan and the variety of family structures and roles: what could you learn from the perspectives of the frail elderly or of single parents? What could you learn from friends who are caregivers that might be different from family members?
- Remember that different experiences with health issues and health care are an equally important type of diversity to include on your patient and family advisory councils. You may benefit from people who have long contact with your organization, such as people with long-term illnesses or another chronic condition. But you also many benefit from the voices of people who receive short-term care, such as a day surgery, short-term recovery in a long-term care institution, or limited-time support from community care services.
- Consider also that it's often people with overwhelmingly positive or negative experiences with health care who are motivated to volunteer as potential patient and family advisors. It can be important to balance your council with a wide range of voices.

Remove barriers to participate

As you plan your outreach, it's important to think about things that might prevent people from being interested or able to join your advisory council.

Here are some questions to ask to identify possible barriers to participation:

- What time are the meetings? If you always meet during regular work hours, that can exclude youth in school and people with 9:00 to 5:00 jobs.
- Will you provide child or elder care or reimburse child or elder care expenses? These are important supports to consider providing if you want to engage with parents of young children or with people caring for aging parents.
- Will you reimburse advisors for transportation costs, such as by providing parking passes and public transit tickets?
- Is the meeting place accessible for people with disabilities? While this is unlikely to be a problem in health care organizations, it might be a concern if you meet somewhere in the community instead.
- Providing food at meetings is a great way to create a social atmosphere and thank people for participating. Consider whether the food is appropriate for any cultural or religious restrictions of the council members, as well as for any health concerns.
- Can you provide spoken or sign language interpretation for members who need that service to fully participate?

Planning ahead and addressing these questions in your recruitment material may help to attract a wider range of people.

Tips and tools for reaching out

It is also helpful to think of a range of ways to have patients and families engage with your organization. For example, are there ways to reach out to groups or individuals who are not able to attend regularly scheduled meetings? How can their voices be brought to the table and to the organization as a whole? This is an opportunity to be creative and collaborative.

Relying on patient and family advisors to come forward on their own will probably not result in a diverse council. The usual methods of recruiting volunteers, such as advertising in major newspapers, posters and handouts, tend to attract a narrow part of the patient and family population. While it's good practice to widely publicize the opportunity to join the council, be sure also to find ways of involving those who may face barriers to participation.

Active, targeted recruitment — both inside your organization's walls and out in the community — can help you build a diverse group of participants.

Be proactive. Ask local community organizations, businesses or residents associations and social service agencies to help you attract people from diverse communities. Groups that work regularly with the people you want to recruit can provide valuable insight about how to reach out effectively and how to reduce barriers to participation.

Locate organizations through www.211Ontario.ca. This site provides contact information on social services and community organizations across the province. You can search by postal code and the kind of service or community resource you are looking for.

Use or adapt the **email template** below and provided [here](#), to introduce yourself and your request.

RECRUITING FOR DIVERSITY:

Email template for outreach to community organizations

Subject: Seeking your help to recruit for a patient/family advisory council at *[your health care organization]*

Dear *[name of contact person]*,

I work with the *[name of your patient and family advisory council]* at *[your health care organization]*.

We want this advisory council to reflect the diversity of our patients, their families, and our wider community. I am writing to ask for your advice and assistance to help us reach people in the communities you work with *[or describe specific groups you want to reach]*, to invite them to consider volunteering for this council.

The advisory council plays a vital role in our organization by advising our senior leaders on ways to improve the quality of care we provide. By joining the council, people have the chance to be part of changes that can benefit everyone who uses our services. *[if possible, revise this paragraph to be more specific about how the advisory council's work connects with the work of the agency you are contacting]*

Specifically, we are seeking people who: *[list your membership criteria; consider including these or other key qualities]*

- Have received care or had a loved one receive care from our organization within the last two years.
- Can work respectfully in partnership with a variety of other people.
- Are interested in sharing insights and information about their health care experiences in ways that others can learn from.
- Take a constructive approach to discussing concerns and ideas in order to address them.

Could we set up a time to speak by phone? I would greatly appreciate your advice on the best way for us to reach people to provide them with information about joining our advisory council. For example, we can provide *[name the type of material you can prepare such as posters, articles for a newsletter or website]*.

Thank you.

[your name, title, and full contact information]



Stay visible — inside and out. Your health care organization probably produces both internal and external communications on a regular basis. Use those channels to let people know that your advisory council is always looking for new members who reflect the diversity of its patient and family community. Always include brief specifics about the role of the council, criteria for membership, and key ways you have addressed possible barriers to participation.

Here are some specific ways to stay visible and spread the word about your advisory council:

- Work with your communications department to arrange for a prominent spot on the organization’s website to “advertise” for new members.
- For internal newsletters (for staff and for patients and families) and in external newsletters (for the community), contribute stories about the council’s recent work and the impact of that work, or submit recruitment advertisements.
- Create posters for common areas throughout the building.
- Encourage any front-line staff who have contact with patients and families to be a resource for recruitment. They may be able to identify good candidates and approach them for you.
- Work with your communications department to pitch stories about the advisory council to local newspapers, TV or radio stations, or to post public service announcements with local media outlets.
- Participate in local community fairs and events to let people know about upcoming opportunities to volunteer for your council.
- Build connections with other local health organizations who have patient or family advisory councils, to share lessons learned and to identify opportunities to work together to improve care.

Use clear language and design. To reach the widest audience with your recruitment material, make sure the writing is clear and the design is inviting.

- Be conversational and direct.
- Be explicit that you are seeking a diverse membership to contribute a range of experiences, however avoid giving the impression that members may be asked to be a token representative or are filling a quota.
- Make sure your text is easy to translate. This is important if you want to reach out to different language groups.
- Use photos that reflect the diversity you want to see in your patient and family advisory council so that people can see themselves in this role.
- Tell people where they can get more in-depth information, such as what is expected of council members and how to apply for membership.
- Use the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) regulations as a guide to promote inclusion for this population

Here are more tips about clear language and design that are available online:

- “About plain language” from the Plain Language Association International http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/About_Plain_Language/aboutplainlanguage.html
- “Developing health materials” from the Health Literacy Studies program, Harvard School of Public Health <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/developing-materials/>
- “Health literacy” from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/>
- “Health literacy” (see especially “External Resources: Canadian”) from the Canadian Public Health Association <http://www.cpha.ca/en/programs/portals/h-l/resources.aspx#extern>



Case Examples

Maamwesying North Shore Community Health Services Inc. holds four meetings per year with client partners to focus on the design of a community-driven and evidence-informed holistic Primary Care Services Delivery Model.

The engagement activities are focused on three major questions:

1. What's working in our service delivery model?
2. What's not working in our service delivery model?
3. What do we need to improve on?

St Michael's Hospital and its Centre for Research on Inner City Health meet regularly with several community advisory panels (CAPs) to involve patients and to improve the overall quality of care of underserved populations. For example, there are four inner city health panels:

- aboriginal health;
- women and children at risk
- homeless populations
- mental health and addictions.

These community advisory panels have contributed to more than 60 innovations in patient care, research and education.

Worth the effort

It can be hard work to build diversity into your council, but the benefits are well worth the effort. Varied voices will add to your organization's ability to improve the quality of care for all the people it is serving and will make your council stronger and more representative. Plus having a council that sounds like and looks like your community will reflect the respect and support your organization has for the community it serves.

Share your experiences with us

Health Quality Ontario is eager to hear about your experiences with patient and family engagement, and any lessons learned. In addition, we welcome input on how these guides can be improved to help ensure the tools and resources we are providing are relevant and helpful.

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