

# A Snapshot of Recovery Colleges in Alberta



## After a successful three-year pilot,

**the Government of Alberta launched the Recovery College model in 2021 to support mental health across the province.** The Canadian Mental Health Association Alberta Division (CMHA-AB) supported the implementation of a province wide scaling-out of Recovery College in Alberta. They contracted us at PolicyWise for Children & Families to lead the 2021-2024 evaluation. Our goal was to understand what was working and the impact of Recovery Colleges on participants, communities, and the mental health system. We also identified opportunities to strengthen the Recovery College program. To conduct the evaluation, we synthesized data from participant interviews and surveys, regional and provincial program lead interviews, and administrative records.

**Here we share what we learned.**

## What is a Recovery College?

Recovery Colleges use a peer-based, participatory, strengths-oriented approach to provide recovery and life skills development, learning opportunities, and community and social connection. Anyone can participate in the Recovery Colleges. They offer a variety of different courses that are specifically designed for people who experience mental health or wellness needs, and their families, friends, workplaces, and communities. Recovery Colleges offer early, free, and convenient access to mental health promoting supports.



# What were the Impacts of Recovery Colleges on Participants?

**Gained knowledge and practiced new skills.** These included communication, boundaries, mindfulness exercises, and anxiety and stress management, among others. Participants learned from their peers as well as from course materials. Nearly all agreed that the courses were relevant to their lives. Most participants used or would use what they learned every day.

**Built healthy connections.** These include connections with people inside and outside of the Recovery College. Participants also reported an increase in their sense of belonging.

**Normalized mental health.** Participants attributed this to the open and supportive environment of the Recovery College. Sharing lived experience and being vulnerable with facilitators and other participants gave participants perspective and made them feel like they are not alone. Participants felt less shame and stigma.

**Felt empowered.** Participants reported increased self-confidence and hope for the future. They felt empowered through learning to identify their values and set boundaries accordingly.

**Improved well-being.** Participants had increased life satisfaction, more positive and resilient mindsets, coping skills, and ability to see the bigger picture.



# What were the Impacts of Recovery Colleges on Communities?

**Enhanced referral pathways** from clinic mental health services, community outreach, or word of mouth.

**Built and strengthened relationships and connections** between organizations and the community.

**Brought community members together** from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

# What were the Impacts of Recovery Colleges on the System?

We noted several system-level impacts of the Recovery Colleges, including:

- **Strengthened recovery pathways**, which involved community partnerships, connections, and referrals to support recovery.
- **Bridged gaps in mental health support** by providing low-barrier services and increasing awareness of available supports, making it easier for participants to access the care they needed.
- **Prevented crises**. Participants learned skills that helped them address problems before they became crises. This early access to mental health supports can decrease the need for more intensive services.

## WHAT ARE THE GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECOVERY COLLEGES IN ALBERTA?

Participants shared some opportunities to grow and strengthen Recovery Colleges across Alberta, including:

- Increase course availability.
- Offer longer and more in-depth courses.
- Increase time for discussions and connecting with other course participants.
- Provide more resources outside of class.
- Deliver courses using a variety of modes.

The year-one evaluation results were clear: **Recovery Colleges had a positive impact** on the course participants, communities, and broader mental health care system across Alberta!

