

# ALL HANDS ON DECK

## Taking an integrated approach to health care

By Jenny Turner



**Health care and community** aren't often considered interdependent. The term "health care" often evokes images of physicians' offices, hospitals, ambulances, and waiting rooms. But in the heart of Mill Woods, blocks from the Grey Nuns Community Hospital, Covenant Health and Rohit are working to bring the two concepts together and reimagine the future of health care in Alberta.

Plans for the Covenant wellness community were announced in 2022. As a public-private partnership (P3), the joint initiative leverages private investment to support needed public health infrastructure. In total, the wellness community is projected to cost \$250 million over five phases of construction. The first phase is the community health

centre and is expected to be complete in 2025, three years after the project was first unveiled.

The project has been in the works for a while. Back in 2017, Covenant Health purchased the old Grant MacEwan Southeast Campus, intending to retrofit the building to support ambulatory care services and help relieve capacity pressures at Grey Nuns.

"The Grey Nuns was originally built to see 25,000 emergency visits per year," said Karen Macmillan, senior operating officer of acute services at Covenant Health Canada. "It currently sees 75,000 a year. The hospital's emergency room space is not big enough to accommodate all those people, to provide them privacy and excellent care in a dignified way."

Further complicating capacity concerns, the Grey Nun's outpatient care department is contiguous to the emergency room, limiting the potential expansion of the acute care space.

"We wanted to move the non-urgent ambulatory services and outpatients out of acute care because it is expensive real estate and not the best place to serve outpatients," said Macmillan. "Doing so would give us the ability to expand our emergency department and better serve patients according to their needs."

Converting a purpose-built post-secondary building to support health clinics presented problems, though. Rather than moving forward with the project based on Grey Nun's capacity concerns, Covenant Health zoomed out and looked

at the bigger picture, asking “what does the community need and is there an opportunity to do more with the space?”

“It’s been an eight-year journey so far,” said Macmillan. “Pre-COVID, we hosted engagement sessions to better understand what a true health and wellness centre could look like. We invited Mill Woods community leaders, such as Millwood Presidents Council, Edmonton Public Library, Edmonton Police

Services, SAGE Seniors Association, and schools in the area to participate and share their voices. The vision for the wellness community came from them, from a desire to meet the needs of the community and goes beyond just emergent health concerns.”

**WORKING TOGETHER**

Over the past 20 years, Millwood’s population has nearly doubled. The needs of the community are much different

now than they were when the Grey Nuns first opened in 1983. Understanding that Covenant Health could not deliver on the community’s vision alone, they partnered with Rohit in 2020 to assist with the development of the southeast site.

Rohit has experience in multiple areas of construction and development. Brendan Trayner, the project manager with Rohit overseeing the Covenant wellness community, has been with the project for more than three years. Over that time, he’s seen the benefits of working with Covenant and leaning into their different specialties to meet the needs of the community.

“We brought a lot of experience to the table,” said Trayner. “By taking a holistic approach to the project and strategically repurposing the site to allow for mixed use, we were able to ensure the property will support more than just the community health centre, but also future phases.”

Rohit was involved in the initial master planning for the site, as well as the rezoning, design, development process, costing, and consultant management of the project.

According to Allaudin Merali, vice-president of finance at Covenant Care Canada, working with Rohit has been extremely beneficial and represents a completely new approach to health-care construction in Alberta

“It is an important partnership for us,” said Merali. “You hear horror stories about P3 projects, but that hasn’t been our experience. Having Rohit on board has been a real value add because they’ve brought expertise to the development and also have helped find ways to generate revenue to help with the building’s mortgage. We are building health infrastructure with partners and without government funding. Also, we’re supporting community-based services, not just acute services. This will help take the pressure off the acute care system, which is the most-costly form of care.”

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## BUILDING THE COMMUNITY

In 2022, Bird Construction was awarded the contract to build the community health centre, worth an estimated \$95 million. The three-storey building will be approximately 200,000 square feet with a two-level underground parkade. Up to 80 per cent of the original southeast campus building materials were recycled after demolition.

In addition to non-urgent ambulatory services and outpatient care, the community health centre will also include an educational conference space, outpatient mental health services, health and wellness retailers, and food services.

The community health centre is just Phase 1 of the project's planned five phases. Phases 2 and 3 will see the construction of approximately 550 residential spaces, including multigenerational, independent and supportive living, and long-term care suites. These units will be complemented by a centre for seniors' innovation on site, with a focus on continuing care enhancements.

Jennifer Olson, senior director for the Network of Excellence in Seniors' Health and Wellness at Covenant Health Canada, says the wellness community is addressing a gap in current health-care models for aging individuals who need support and aid, but not necessarily a hospital or institution setting.

"The entire campus is being designed with innovation in mind, so it's not just how each building functions alone, but how they interact with care and the community," said Olson. "We plan to have a centre of excellence for innovation to allow families, caregivers, and technology providers to come together to look at end-user challenges that exist in our ecosystem."

For Olson, synergies and solutions within the space will extend beyond the building, providing support to the community as it's needed. Homecare

and general isolation are just a few of the complex health and wellness concerns people face as they age.

"A building can only hold so many people," said Olson. "We need to look at models of care that support outreach. We've heard time and time again, people want to age at home in their community. In addition to the actual buildings, the project will provide opportunities to test outreach models and integrate health

care into the community at large."

Plans for Phases 2 and 3 are still being finalized. Phases 4 and 5 are expected to offer additional commercial opportunities and potential expansion space to support more health-care services.

For more information on the Covenant wellness community project, including updates, timelines and leasing opportunities, visit [covenantwellnesscommunity.ca](http://covenantwellnesscommunity.ca). ♦

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