**Alliance for Healthier Communities**
Alliance pour des communautés en santé

# Community Governance:
# Essential to Comprehensive Primary Health Care

On the spectrum of public engagement, community governance is at the highest level. It ensures that members of the community are deeply involved and empowered, playing a key role in the planning, direction-setting, and monitoring of health care organizations to meet the needs and priorities of local communities. Meaningful community governance goes beyond simply having a board comprised of community members; the voice of the community must be centred in decision-making across the organization. Both formal and informal mechanisms must be in place for community involvement in the planning and development of programs and services. It is through effective community engagement and governance that organizations orient and tailor services to meet ongoing and changing population health needs. This engagement at the highest level of community members and people whose health is at stake ensures that those served by an organization have not only a voice but real power in strategic planning, accountability, and oversight.

Not only does community governance empower community members as leaders and decision-makers, it also protects the organization against conflicts of interest. It ensures that the voting directors are not employed by the organization and that they don't gain any immediate benefit through their participation on the board. Good community governance is also a lever for advancing health equity because it is grounded in equitable representation and empowerment of the communities served.

There is strong evidence for the positive impact of community governance (WHO, 2024; Minkman, 2023; Glimmerveen et al., 2019; Patzer 2006). Programs are more relevant; community engagement is enhanced; local needs are advocated for; and there is a stronger focus on the social determinants of health. Research has shown that organizations with community-based boards also have higher levels of patient satisfaction, better access to care for marginalized populations, and improved health outcomes relative to models with less community involvement (Patzer, 2006). A survey of community health centres (CHCs) across Canada reflected that while they all provided excellent primary care, those that were community-governed were focused on programming and services that addressed the underlying determinants of health.

> *"It feels much easier to make a difference as part of a collective community."*
> – Community Member
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> *"Community governance makes me feel good to work in a CHC because I'm not just a provider of services; I feel like our centre is a connection in our communities."*
> – Provider
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> *"Knowing that the board actually looks like the community they serve – and I know that's just a visual thing, but it's like having staff who represent the community – it builds trust."*
> – Community Member

Community engagement and governance are key pillars of the Alliance's Model of Health and Wellbeing (MHWB), a set of core principles that have been foundational to CHCs in Ontario since their inception. Although the MHWB and its commitment to community governance began in CHCs, all Alliance members have now operationalized it. Thus, not only CHCs but community family health teams, nurse practitioner—led clinics and Indigenous primary health care organizations, including a family health team and a family health organization, are now led by the communities they serve. In 2017, the Alliance conducted a review of community governance among its members. This audit confirmed that all organizations had strong community governance, and it revealed that this was highly valued by the organizations' leadership, staff patients, and communities. In interviews, an increased sense of responsibility for their communities, community mobilization, and improved service delivery were named as key benefits.

# References

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