

Au Coeur des Familles Agricoles – Building Better Mental Health Services for Farmers Through Understanding

When seeking mental health support, one of the key aspects of good service is that the client feels understood. Studies have shown that farmers have difficult finding this understanding, no matter where they are in Canada, when they seek support in response to the unique challenges they face.

Au Coeur des Familles Agricoles (ACFA) is an organization that trains and employs “Farmer Well-Being Workers” (FWW). These are social workers who are dedicated to serving agricultural communities. One of the core components of these workers is not only that they are familiar with agriculture, but that they reside in the same region in which they work. They collaborate with agricultural partners in the region to connect with farmers.

“This is very important to us, because every region has its own unique features,” said Nathalie Roy, President of ACFA.

“Farmers need somebody who understands them. Our workers are adaptable and understand the pressures of farm life. If a farmer has to be in the fields all day because it's nice out, and they cancel their appointment, our workers understand that, expect it and will work around it.

We know that on days when it rains we receive a lot more calls.”

The FWW program began as a pilot project in 2009, and for many years they only had one FWW working. However, since 2016 they have been able to develop their resources to the point where they now have 13 FWW who cover nine different regions. These workers cover 24,000 farms in Quebec, approximately 80% of farms in the province.

As the team develops, the FWWs are increasingly in demand, and they have met with 770 farmers in 2020, and over 1,800 farmers from 2018 to 2020.

Relationships and the understanding of farmers are at the core of ACAF's services, and farmers serve as the eyes and ears of the organization. Two-thirds of the of the farmers that meet with the FWWs are referred from other concerned farmers, family or friends.



FWWs also do tours, where workers go to agricultural events or farms to meet farmers and just chat with them.

Nathalie explained that one of the key actions needed to improve mental health services among farmers is prevention and promotion. She estimates that 90% of the organization's interventions are in response to situations that are already underway, and this does not make the work of FWWs any easier. The sooner the FWW can intervene, the quicker the situations are resolved.

“We need more resources so that we can do more preventative measures rather than seeing people when they are already in crisis. Usually the client doesn't make initial contact, their social circle does. We don't wait when that happens, we go and visit the farm and we say 'There is someone worried about you, and we want to know how you're doing and if you need help',”

For promotion, Roy says that there is still a stigma around seeking help for farmers.

“There is this fear of being judged. There's a mentality in agriculture, this image of the strong man or woman, who is always working, never stopping, and is always solid. We really need to dispel that myth. Farmers are human beings and, like everyone else, they have their ups and downs. Being strong is also about asking for help,”

ACAF identified a gap in services and the type of people that would be needed to fill it effectively. Over the years they have seen great success and their ability to service the mental health needs of their communities has increased tremendously.

Their work builds relationships, reduces stigma and isolation and works to effectively serve a community that has traditionally stayed out of the spotlight when it comes to mental health issues.

