

CARE FARMS FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

The Benefits of An Outdoor Day Program

Authors

Kristen Belza, Rebekah Churchyard



Affiliations

University of Waterloo, Green Care Farms

Background

The concept of care farms originated in Europe and is widespread in countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, and Japan, yet remains new and relatively unknown in Canada.

A care farm provides agricultural activities for a therapeutic, social, or educational purpose on an operational farm. Green care is the use of animals, interaction with other participants, natural environments, and activities that are meaningful and individually adapted. A green care farm is the combination of both concepts, and the first one in Canada was founded in April of 2021. The Growing number of people living with dementia pushed for innovative solutions such as this one, located in Milton, Ontario. This specific care farm runs its adult day program on Mondays during the spring and summer from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm. Members spend their day tending to the half-acre Sensory Garden and getting to know one another.



Objective

To learn how participants make use of the Sensory Garden, and how social interaction and horticultural activities positively impact physical, mental, and emotional well-being.



Methodology

Program Structure



Participants varied in age, background, and ability, but all exhibit signs of dementia. Attendance and participation levels were adjusted according to individual needs and capacities.

The program day begins at the farm entrance, where staff and members gather to say goodbye to care partners.

Together, the group travels together to the Sensory Garden, approximately a 10-15 minute walk.

Upon arrival, participants share a snack and collaboratively plan the day's activities based on their interests and abilities.

Examples of Activities



Seasonal garden tasks such as planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting.

Farm-based activities such as animal visits, tractor rides, and nature walks

Data Collection



Observations were documented weekly through learning journal entries which recorded participants' engagement, mood, appetite, interactions, and overall wellbeing throughout the program season

Findings

The care farm program demonstrated positive outcomes for both the individuals living with dementia and their care partners. The care partners benefitted from a 5 hour block of respite, allowing for personal rest and reducing stress. Members of the program overall showed improvements in engagement and well-being. Noticeable changes included stronger appetites, better recall of fellow members and previous activities, and enthusiasm for taking part in daily tasks. Many members remained physically and socially active throughout the day and reported better sleep quality at home the following program day. The variations in terrain and the sensory interactions provided opportunities for physical and cognitive stimulation.



Conclusion

It is estimated that by 2030, almost 1 million people in Canada will be living with dementia (Alzheimer's Society, 2024). As the population grows, there is an increasing need for innovative and person-centred services such as care farms. These findings indicate that programs such as Green Care Farms may play a vital role in addressing the complex and evolving needs of dementia care in our communities. Expanding access to care farms and utilizing the concept in existing services and day programs can be a solution.

Key Sources & Acknowledgements