

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Heart Heroes Camp: Where you're among friends

We can say it all started here, with a grant from the [Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion \(ELiHP\) grant program!](#)

Since its beginnings as a successful recipient of an [ELiHP grant in 2016–17](#), Heart Heroes Camp has grown into a sustainable, resourcefully funded (grants, major fundraising and corporate sponsorship), no-charge(!), wildly successful and popular three-day summer camp for children and youth diagnosed with complex forms of congenital heart disease.

Reflecting on the success of his first Heart Heroes Camp project application to the ELiHP grant program, project lead Devin Chetan says, “This grant (ELiHP) was our first major funding, that came at a time when I wasn’t sure this project would succeed. It gave us the confidence that we would be able to raise the funds needed to run Heart Heroes Camp successfully, and very importantly, free of charge to families. That was a major boost in confidence,” he adds. “And one of the pivotal moments in getting this camp off the ground and running.”

Also key to the success of ELiHP projects are the project mentors; for his 2018–19 Heart Heroes Camp project, Devin is grateful for the mentorship of Dr. Rehana Chatur, a general pediatrician at the Stollery Children’s Hospital. “As she takes care of many patients in our target population, Rehana was able to help by identifying patients for us and inviting them to camp,” explains Devin. “She was involved in almost every step of the planning process, particularly with planning the medical supplies, equipment and processes for camp.” Even fundraising benefitted from Rehana’s involvement, as she worked with the project team to plan events and coordinate fundraising efforts.



Health and wellness and the social and developmental opportunities provided by a safe, fun camp experience can't be underestimated.

ELiHP grant round two

It's evident that the ELiHP grant application review committee believes program funds are well placed with Heart Heroes Camp as they awarded Dr. Chetan's project a second ELiHP grant in 2018–2019. The value to a child's or a youth's health and wellness and the social and developmental opportunities provided by a safe, fun camp experience, can't be underestimated.

“Children born with congenital heart disease are often excluded from many recreational programs because they require higher levels of medical care,” Devin explains. “Most community programs do not have the facilities or the expertise to care for this patient population. With Heart Heroes Camp, we have the opportunity to advocate for these kids to experience summer camp like any non-medical child would.”

Heart Heroes Camp is a medically supervised summer camp “that provides a normalizing experience wherein children born with congenital heart disease get to meet others who have had similar experiences, socialize with their peers in a safe setting, and experience a developmental opportunity similar to children who do not have the same medical needs,” Devin explains.



Heart Heroes Camp boasts a year-over-year camper return rate of more than 80%.

They keep coming back!

Held for its first three years at Camp Yowochas (Wabamun Lake), Heart Heroes Camp boasts a year-over-year camper return rate of more than 80%. It's an exciting, yet comfortable environment for the kids, where they can relax and be themselves with their fellow campers: children and youth who share the same unique, sometimes frightening and often difficult and painful experiences with congenital heart disease; kids who have had multiple surgeries and bear the scars; kids who depend on medications and know what it's like to build life around medical appointments and trips to the hospital; and kids who know the ins and outs of their illness and its limitations like the back of their hand.

"We have seen how much confidence and independence these children and youth have developed," notes Devin. "We know that many of them have become great friends outside of the camp setting and are able to regularly get together and be a source of support for each other."

"We've noticed this, but what's so great is that their parents have too," he continues. "Parents' comments reflect how they have seen positive growth in their children since coming to camp and how important the experience has been for them," says Devin. "For us, it's great to know that we have the chance to make such a profound impact and to see these amazing kids grow and flourish, year after year."



Kids are not the only ones to benefit!

A plus for everyone

But don't think the kids are the only ones to benefit! Heart Heroes Camp gives back to everyone involved with it. In addition to four physicians responsible for the medical supervision of the camp, a team of volunteers – eight residents, 15 pediatric nurses, one pharmacist and another health care professional – participate in the camp, are group leaders, administer medication and help with overall camp planning and organizing.

They appreciate the opportunity the camp gives them “to interact with patients in a completely different way outside the hospital setting,” Devin explains. “It helps us better understand and advocate for the kids and their families in the hospital and in the community. It's given many of us a completely different perspective in thinking about our patients,” he adds. Through the camp experience, they feel “a sense of community amongst themselves and with the campers (and sometimes their families) when they are looking after them in hospital following their camp experiences.”

Increasing inclusivity with a new, accessible campsite

“We have always sought to make the camp more inclusive,” says Devin. “We were able to do that while in the planning stages for HH Camp 2020, when we found a new site with an accessible facility.” About the new, accessible site, Devin says, “This will be a major step forward for us and our campers. We'll be eliminating a significant barrier to camp participation with this accessible facility, welcoming children with physical disabilities.”

Onward with Heart Heroes Camp 2022!

Like so many wonderful events that were scheduled for 2020 and 2021, only to fall at the feet of the COVID-19 pandemic, Heart Heroes Camp was cancelled in both years. And what was a difficult and sad decision in 2020, was an even more difficult and reluctantly made decision in 2021.

With the health and well-being of campers and volunteers top of mind, the [Little Heart Heroes](#) team set their sites on Heart Heroes Camp 2022, to be held at its new, accessible site:

“While we certainly miss our wonderful campers, we are hoping for a brighter outlook with new memories to be made in 2022. We have been working with our new camp site and have new dates for July 8 to 10, 2022. Please hold these in your calendars when making plans for next summer! We hope to see many of your Little Heart Heroes.” Little Heart Heroes Facebook, May 2, 2021



"With Heart Heroes Camp, we have the opportunity to advocate for these kids to experience summer camp like any non-medical child would." - project lead Devin Chetan (second from the left)

About the grant program

The Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion (ELiHP) grant program provides funding to help medical students and resident physicians conceive and implement health promotion projects in support of the development of their [CanMEDS/FM](#) core competencies, particularly health advocacy.

Sponsored by the Alberta Medical Association and [MD Financial Management](#), ELiHP projects facilitate the growth of physician leadership and advocacy skills in a mentored environment, while enhancing the well-being of the general Alberta population through education, advocacy and innovative care.