The Caring Communities Network (CCN) is a simple idea that looks to entrench health and wellness in all aspects of campus and student life. The framework for the idea emerged after a student leader in a cultural club shared a tragic experience that troubled the members of their community. The unexpected passing of one of their community members led to a revamp of the programs that were offered in their club, and an increase in resources to support students in health and wellness related challenges. The CCN looks to increase the capacity of students to enhance and support overall student wellness. This program aims to adapt university messaging and resources in ways that are community specific, accounting for the unique cultural, religious, and social needs of the respective community.

Central to the CCN is the creation of a Wellbeing Liaison in each student community. Students have the choice to create a brand-new student position, or adapt an already existing position to act as the liaison. Wellbeing Liaisons are oriented on key health and wellness resources, including McMaster University’s Student Health & Wellbeing Strategy, and can provide refreshers on relevant health and wellness related initiatives to members of their community. They act as a central resource for their community by being a point of reference, and are able to advance initiatives for effective utilization of wellness services. Additionally, they are able to communicate with centralized McMaster services regarding trends, emerging issues, and unresolved problems related to student health and wellbeing.

The CCN looks beyond Welcome Week with a focus on ongoing support, while promoting social connections providing the training and year-round coordination of Wellbeing Liaisons. We all understand that student societies, clubs, and communities are well positioned to support the health concerns of students in their individual communities. The strength of this model lies within its ability to emphasize the localized expertise of student communities, while building on their assets. With an intersectional perspective, the Caring Communities Network showcases a range of pathways to wellness and definitions of health that are defined locally within communities.

Under this framework, already existing student clubs health initiatives would receive increased visibility, resources and support. The CCN looks beyond Welcome Week with ongoing support, while promoting social connections between Marauders. It empowers more student leaders that are willing and able to talk about health, and also encourages them to create programming that speaks to the challenges of their specific communities.

The Caring Communities Network is not a replacement for systematic review - it is clear that the stressors of university remain. The MSU is also undertaking a systematic review of health and wellness resources of the University, and is working with administration to help elivate the stressors that lead to student health issues. This is not a new program, and it does not pretend to be. This is an example of where we can leverage student communities, MSU services, and University resources and expertise to improve the quality of life of Marauders. A detailed description of the program and registration can be accessed at msumcmaster.ca/ccnetwork.