

Reaching Home:

Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Homelessness Plan

2019 – 2024

Note:

All communities receiving funding from Designated Communities stream are required to use this template in order to complete the community plan under Reaching Home. In completing this template, communities are encouraged to develop comprehensive community plans that reflect the contributions of all funding partners, including other orders of governments, not-for-profit organizations, and the for-profit sector.

Please note that in communities that receive funding from both the Designated Communities and Indigenous Homelessness streams, cross-stream collaboration is expected to promote the adoption of a community-wide planning process and support the achievement of community-level outcomes reflecting the needs of the whole community. To support communities in completing their community plans, a Reference Guide has been developed. It is recommended that this be reviewed prior to completing your community's homelessness plan to ensure understanding of the requirements and completeness.

The Community Plan for Reaching Home must be approved by the Community Advisory Board (CAB) of the Designated Community before it is submitted to Service Canada. If your community is developing a joint plan with the Indigenous Community Entity, both Community Advisory Boards must approve the community plan.

In addition to the core requirements provided in this template, communities may also wish to include other components that provide insight into the community's housing and homelessness context or contribute to community-level homelessness challenges, such as a map of the community's current homelessness services and/or gaps in homelessness services or infrastructure (e.g. housing stock). Communities have full flexibility in drafting these sections.

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1. Community Engagement

Please identify the steps taken to engage your community stakeholders in developing this plan.

Leading up to the development of the Community Plan, the Community Entity (CE) completed a document review of relevant research projects, regional plans, reports, and statistics, which included identifying successes, challenges, and priorities based on the findings. As a starting point for engagement with community members and organizations, an overview of the findings was developed along with short questions.

Over a two-month period (August 2019 to October 2019), the CE conducted engagement sessions, tradeshow-style, resource-sharing events, rural community open houses, and information sessions to gather information related to the Community Plan and share information about the Coordinated Access System (CAS).

In the rural hamlets, open houses were held with local Indigenous organizations and community members to review community needs and gaps in relation to housing and homelessness. They were held in August and September in Janvier, Draper, Conklin, Fort Chipewyan, Saprae Creek, Anzac, and Fort McKay. Attendees and stakeholders provided insight into the housing and homelessness situations in the rural areas.

During the rural open houses, gaps and community issues were identified, such as a need for increased affordable housing and maintenance updates, better communication with housing bodies (i.e., Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corporation) and the various levels of government that fund housing programs; and more services to support community members who need to be stably housed (e.g., health and financial support services, mental/physical health programs, etc.).

In the Urban Service Area of Fort McMurray there was a variety of engagement sessions in August and September that took place at regularly-scheduled events such as the Get Involved Wood Buffalo Service Provider Trade Show and Community Plan on Homelessness (CPH) Executive Directors, CPH Team Lead, Coordinated Access System Team (CAST) and Interagency (service providers from across the region) meetings.

The Community Advisory Board (CAB), locally called the Homelessness Initiatives Strategic Committee (HISC), engaged in a gap analysis and focus group on Aug. 1, 2019. Members discussed successes, challenges, and gaps with regards to housing and homelessness across the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, incorporating their knowledge of the rural areas. CAS was also discussed at an open house learning session in August, with funded agencies and community stakeholders providing feedback.

The following points emerged during the engagements.

- The CE has good relationships with service providers, is a strong advocate for funding, and has increased and strengthened its ability to collect and use accurate data to make decisions. The community has a strong support system of programming and staff and is culturally sensitive when using a person-centered approach.
- The most significant housing gaps are funding abilities and restrictions and programs for diversion and homelessness prevention.
- Although the situation is improving, there is a need for more knowledge-sharing, advocacy through consistent messaging, and a community understanding of the impact of housing issues and homelessness.
- The stock of affordable, safe and habitable housing in the rural communities is limited and maintenance costs for existing housing can be high. Consequently, housing in those areas can be unstable and less attainable.
- The CE has a designated Social Program Advisor who provides advice about the Alberta *Residential Tenancies Act*, helping landlords, tenants and caseworkers understand the legislation and their rights and responsibilities. New landlords are offered an orientation on all tenancy-related forms and best practices to assist them in fulfilling their legal obligations and mitigate issues as they arise. Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing participants can take a RentSmart Basics course that is designed to meet the unique needs of the homeless and help them seek out and maintain sustainable housing. Mediation services are provided to address issues between landlords, tenants and caseworkers.

Moving forward, the CE intends to have regularly scheduled engagement sessions in the Urban Service Area and the rural communities. The goal is to raise awareness about available programs and supports and increase collaboration between organizations to better serve those in need and collect important information about community progress towards ending homelessness. To ensure the success of the CAS, it will be important to engage with the community and various groups, stakeholders, service providers, and individuals with lived experience.

2. Investment Plan

In the table below, please outline your planned allocation of Reaching Home funding from 2019-24 by investment area. Please note that it is acceptable that your community's funding priorities change over time. This investment plan is to demonstrate that your community has a vision moving forward for the allocation of Reaching Home funding. An example has been included in the Community Plan Reference Guide.

Reaching Home Annual Allocation

2019-2020: \$793,533*

2020-2021: \$382,399

2021-2022: \$409,954

2022-2023: \$405,454

2023-2024: \$405,454

*Please note that the 2019-2020 Reaching Home Annual Allocation includes Indigenous Homelessness Funding while the subsequent years do not include Indigenous Homelessness Funding.

	2019-20*	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Housing Services**	76%	69%	70%	71%	71%
Prevention and shelter diversion					
Support Services					
Capital Investments					
Coordination of Resources and Data Collection	CCI 9%	CCI 16%	CCI 15%	CCI 14%	CCI 14%
Administration	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Please note that the 2019-2020 Reaching Home Annual Allocation includes Indigenous Homelessness Funding while the subsequent years do not include Indigenous Homelessness Funding.

**Housing services includes a Centralized Intake (CI) Program, which prioritizes individuals and families into Housing First, Rapid Rehousing, Permanent Supportive Housing, and Outreach Programs.

3. Cost-Matching Requirement

*In the table below, please outline all funding for homelessness initiatives your community plans to receive from external partners from 2019 to 2024. Please **do not** report Community Capacity and Innovation funding in the table. An example has been included in the Community Plan Reference Guide.*

Projected External Funding Towards Homelessness Initiatives						
Funder	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2019-24
RMWB** Transit	\$40,000	\$40,000	\$40,000	\$40,000	\$40,000	\$200,000
RMWB** Recovery ¹	\$6,500					\$6,500
Provincial Funding*	\$3,451,000	\$3,451,000	\$3,451,000	\$3,451,000	\$3,451,000	\$17,255,000
TOTAL	\$3,497,500	\$3,491,000	\$3,491,000	\$3,491,000	\$3,491,000	\$17,461,500

*The Provincial Funding initiative is Outreach & Support Services Initiative (OSSI) distributed through the Housing and Homeless Supports Department.

**Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo

4. Coordinated Access

*Please discuss the steps you will take to implement a coordinated access system in your community. If your community has a coordinated access system in place, please describe how it presently functions. **Note:** Please also ensure you discuss how Indigenous Organizations have been engaged on the design of Coordinated Access, or how they will be engaged.*

The Municipality started developing a CAS and a By-Name List (BNL) in 2017, working with partners across the province and Canada to observe and follow best practices.

¹ RMWB Recovery Task Force was formed as a department of the Municipality in the months following the 2016 Horse River Wildfire. RMWB Recovery received funds from different levels of government as well as the Canadian Red Cross to lead wildfire recovery projects. The RMWB Recovery (out of the Canadian Red Cross funds) were used to provide specific training for CPH funded agencies in 2019. This funding is a one-time disbursement and will not be available in following years.

The CAST, which is made of experts in the community who work directly and primarily with individuals and families experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, was formed in June 2019. There are members from each Community Access Point (CAP) who were selected based on their knowledge, insight and ideas about how to end chronic homelessness. At this point, CAST serves as an advisory group for the initial development of the CAS. It is working with the CE to assume governance of the project and build the capacity of members to undertake this work. CAST will work with the CE to develop terms of reference and model for governance of the project.

The CAS officially started on Sept. 9, 2019, as a partnership pilot with three community service providers as CAPs. It is a multi-phased approach, first targeting service providers that work directly with the homeless or those at risk of becoming homeless and then community agencies at large. The pilot is currently moving into the second stage of the CAS development plan; the CE will be training five community service providers in the coming months, some of which offer outreach services in both the urban service area and rural communities.

Service providers under the CAS, or Access Points, receive and share information about the By-Name List via weekly in-person meetings, secured file sharing over email, and referrals made through the communities Homelessness Management Information System, called Efforts to Outcome (ETO). Moving forward, there are plans in place to increase the ability to share information via Access Point Database training and support.

During the engagement sessions in the rural hamlets, relationships were developed with various community leaders and volunteer groups to highlight what CAS could look like in their areas. As part of the community role of the CAS, the CE has identified groups in each hamlet that may be interested in being a CAPs and initial conversations have begun. Urban Indigenous organizations (such as Athabasca Tribal Council and Nistawoyou Friendship Centre) have also been identified for potential access points and for partnership development.

Challenges are expected as the CAS expands in the rural communities due to limited resources in the communities and time needed to build strong relationships. However, the CE is committed to ensuring that CAS is successfully developed across the region - including the rural communities - to support all community members in need and make greater progress towards ending chronic homelessness. Thus far, the CE has taken initial steps to discuss CA in rural communities during the open houses engagements and have received positive responses and interest. There have been initial discussions with Indigenous organizations, Indigenous and Rural representatives on HISC, and Municipal Indigenous and Rural Relations team to discuss CA and what this system could look like in rural and Indigenous communities. Over the next several months the CE, HISC, and service providers will be working with Indigenous communities to hold dialogues about CA and finding collaborative strategies to address housing and homelessness in rural communities.

The CAS is geared towards housing the most vulnerable and chronically homeless individuals and families. Those experiencing homelessness connect with a CAP, which then determines their housing needs using triage and assessment tools - i.e., the Vulnerable Index Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) and the Program Eligibility form. The CAPs send completed

assessments and required paperwork to CI, which then prioritizes individuals and families through the BNL.

Those with the highest level of need and with the most chronic experiences of homelessness are placed at the top of the list and for Housing First; those with a moderate level of need are referred to Rapid Re-Housing. Individuals who have cyclically received housing supports with limited success and require a higher level of support and care that other programs cannot provide are prioritized for Permanent Supportive Housing Program. When spots in the respective programs become available, participants are referred to each agency via supported transfer and the BNL is updated.

The CAS also serves to divert individuals and families who are not prioritized for supported housing programs to other avenues of outreach and external agencies to address their needs. As the CAPs increase, so will referral programs. As well, the CAS and BNL are valuable data collection tools. With the BNL, the community has the ability to see regularly updated data about the homeless population, which can assist evidence-based decision-making.

5. Community-Wide Outcomes

If you would like your community to measure progress on additional outcomes beyond the [federally mandated outcomes](#), please identify those outcomes. Please provide your proposed indicators, targets, and methodology for each of the additional identified outcomes.

In addition to the four core outcomes, the CE will track increased accessibility of housing and support services for homeless individuals through CAS. The indicators of success will be the number of CAPs, and individuals accessing housing support services through CAS and CI. By 2022, the CE aims to increase the number of support service referrals by 30 percent and have 80 percent of identified CAPs launched. These indicators will be tracked through: CI monthly and annual reporting, use of common assessment tool (VI-SPDAT) and database collection tools (Efforts To Outcome). The baseline for these indicators at March 31, 2019 was 0 referrals and 0 CAPs launched. This is due to the CAS pilot launching in Sept 2019.

6. Official Language Minority Communities

The Government of Canada has a responsibility under the Official Languages Act to ensure that programs and services meet the needs of [Official Language Minority Communities \(OLMCs\)](#). Please describe the steps that you will take to ensure that the services funded under the Reaching Home take the needs of the [OLMCs](#) into consideration where applicable.

There are four bilingual staff that work in the funded agencies, two individuals working in the CI role who provide services to individuals and families who are completing an intake for the Housing

First, Rapid Re-Housing, and Permanent Supportive Housing program. One CI staff member speaks French and English fluently, and one speaks Malayalam, Tamil, and Hindi. As well, there are two Housing First staff members who are bilingual in both French and English services for individuals receiving intensive case management. All documentation for intake assessments and program materials can be completed in both official languages with staff who are bilingual speaking, as French speaking program participants have the option to be assigned to program caseworkers who are French speaking.

During the assessment and triage process CI will directly refer individuals and families who require language and/or cultural services to service providers who offer those resources, whether or not they are prioritized into the housing support programs. Once participants are referred into the housing support programs, their caseworkers have tools and information to support their cultural and language needs either directly within their agency or refer any needs they are unable to meet to an external service provider.

Once the CAS is functioning at full capacity, there will be more diversity in languages being offered to support individuals in the region. The goal is to have the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) and Nistawayou Friendship Centre serve as CAPs. These organizations provide essential services to Indigenous individuals in the Municipality and have staff and/or volunteers who speak Cree and Dene and can provide services in these languages to individuals accessing housing supports. This is a key objective as CAS is rolled out.

To ensure inclusivity, there are various resources within the community to meet the needs of individuals who speak French, English and other languages.

- Unity House provides translation services for individuals who are staying in the women's homeless shelter, this service provides everyone with the opportunity to receive all necessary supports during their stay at the shelter.
- The Multicultural Association of Wood Buffalo provides cultural events in the community to be inclusive for all individuals in the region. The Multicultural Association of Wood Buffalo also provides interpretation services with 24-hour availability along with cultural interpretation for individuals seeking assistance. As well, the agency provides certified translation services in more than 45 languages.
- FRAP (Francophonie Albertaine Plurielle) offers services in French to welcome, establish, and re-establish newcomers to Alberta. Its main goal is to promote diversity, economic and cultural inclusion of Francophones.
- YMCA Immigrant Settlement Services (ISS) offers support to those new to Canada and the Municipality. The organization provides various services; supportive counseling, translation and interpretation, employment insurance benefits, and child tax benefits
- Employment Link provides French speaking Canadians and immigrant services to obtain employment. This program provides one on one help with creating resumes, cover letters, and job searches.

- ACFA (or the French Canadian Association of Alberta) promotes the cultural and well-being of Francophones in the region. It organizes cultural events, classes, and French-speaking early childhood classes (0 months to five years).
- There is also support in the community for languages such as Cree and Dene, with the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC). The ATC has developed a Cree and Dene app to download on cell phones. Their main goal in developing this app is to preserve the indigenous languages, they had worked closely with elders to develop the app and it contains more than 400 words.

Designated Community – Community Advisory Board

Note: ESDC has removed all personal and identifying information for members of the Community Advisory Board(s) from this document. To validate or change this information, please contact your Service Canada representative.

Indigenous Community – Community Advisory Board

Note: ESDC has removed all personal and identifying information for members of the Community Advisory Board(s) from this document. To validate or change this information, please contact your Service Canada representative.

Appendices

i. Context of The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Housing Situation

The Municipality covers a geographic area of 66,361 square kilometers and is one of the largest municipalities in Canada. According to the 2015 Municipal Census, the population of the Municipality is 125,032. The region includes the Urban Service Area of Fort McMurray along with nine rural communities dispersed over 500 kilometers (some of which are accessible only by and ice road in the winter or by plane).

The rural communities include: Fort Fitzgerald, Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay, Draper, Saprae Creek, Anzac, Gregoire Lake Estates, Janvier, and Conklin. The region is home to five First Nations communities and six Métis Locals (Mikisew Cree First Nation, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Fort McKay First Nation, Fort McMurray No. 468 First Nation, and Chipewyan Prairie Dene First Nation, Métis Local 125/Fort Chipewyan, Métis Local 63/Fort McKay, Métis Local 1935/Fort McMurray, Métis Local 2020/Fort McMurray, Métis Local 780/Anzac, and Métis Local 193/Conklin). Each community, First Nation, and Métis Local has its own strengths, challenges, and needs. Further, each has a unique relationship with government, other First Nations and Métis Locals, industry, and other partners.

The Municipality is home to numerous oil sands projects that operate both north and south of the Urban Service Area. For many years, employment prospects have attracted people from across Alberta, Canada, and the world. However, an economic downturn in 2015 resulted in a drop in oil prices which continues to have a major impact on the region - even moving into 2020. Housing homeless individuals is not an easy task, especially when dealing with the chronically homeless. Non-profit agencies committed to Housing First are to be commended; however, there are many factors that affect success. In allocating resources to the region, it is important to consider multiple factors that create an environment that requires higher-than-average administrative costs.

Cost of living in the region is extremely high, which impacts our operating budget - including requiring a higher allocation of funds for salaries, food, clothing, rent, etc. This heightened cost of living creates problems for many residents when they are subject to the same income thresholds as other Albertan and Canadian residents. Since the Municipality has such a high cost of living, many are above the income thresholds and would not be approved for assistance.

- At more than \$100,000, the Municipality has the highest average cost of living in the country - more than double the national average²

Region	Cost of Living
Wood Buffalo	100,535
Edmonton	50,634
Alberta	56,778
Canada	48,597

- The average cost of food for a family of four is more than \$77 higher per month than the provincial average³

Another major challenge for the Housing First initiative in the region is the lack of social housing and continuing high rents. The Municipality continues to have higher rents than other cities in Alberta. Rental rates continue to be grossly unaffordable for many residents. On average, over the last eight years, rent in the Municipality has been \$701 more than the next-highest rent in Alberta (Calgary) and \$1,057 higher than the lowest average rent in Alberta (Medicine Hat). The high rental costs continue to make it impossible to graduate Housing First participants as they are unable to cover the cost of rent - even in affordable housing units - and social housing waitlists remain long.

Availability of social housing stock in Fort McMurray is very low. It is difficult to graduate participants from Housing First into social housing. Many existing participants in Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing are in the program solely for the support with rent supplement. If they were to graduate without the ability to pay rent or support themselves, they would cycle back through the programs, likely with greater challenges each time. This current standstill of having clients unable to sustain their own rent has resulted with the waitlist rising to 85 people.

During funding deliberations with HISC in early 2019 and from ongoing input from service providers it was determined that the amount of funding available for housing is not enough to meet core needs in the region. Though proud of the progress we have made, including a 65-percent decrease in the homeless population, there are some outstanding issues and gaps that need to be addressed so we can advance towards ending homelessness.

Knowing the limitations with available funding currently received and the restrictions about spending parameters with allocations to service providers, the CE and HISC have spent a great deal of time reviewing how to best allocate funds to service the needs in the region to reduce chronic homelessness according to the Federal timeline. The allocations have been strategically mapped out to ensure the best use of all funding to meet current needs and advance our goal of ending homelessness.

This has meant pooling both designate and Indigenous funding streams along with some provincial funding to provide a strong CI allocated to an Indigenous organization in Fort McMurray that can best serve residents. The CAS program will bolster the reach of CI to ensure our rural communities can also easily access the programs. Despite these strategies, the geographical vastness of the region, continued high rental costs, limited supply of social housing, and high cost of living remain very real challenges.

While allocations are committed yearly and determined with HISC using evidence-based decision making, it is possible to assume that it would be necessary to make a drastic change in current programing without all streams of funding used as one collaborative budget. Having the ability to

³ Alberta Healthy Services monthly cost of a healthy diet in Alberta (2017).

intertwine the funding streams allows for a greater coverage of resources and needs that are made available and service more individuals and families through housing support programs.

ii. Community Engagement Session Questions

1. What do you feel the Community Entity (CE) is doing well regarding housing the homeless population?
2. What do you feel is working well in the community regarding housing the homeless population?
3. With the gaps discussed, do you feel some gaps are larger than others in the community regarding housing the homeless population?
4. With the gaps discussed, do you see anything in the community regarding housing the homeless population that was missed?
5. With the gaps discussed, what do you see as priorities to focus on regarding housing the homeless population that was missed?
6. What do you see as your role in housing the homeless population?