“Partnering to End Homelessness”

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo

Annual Service Delivery Plan
June 2009
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INTRODUCTION

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) is a rapidly growing Municipality located in North Eastern Alberta. It was established in 1995 when the City of Fort McMurray, Improvement District 143 and Improvement District 18 were amalgamated to form one of the largest regional municipalities in North America. The Urban Service Area of Fort McMurray is the population and commercial centre of this dynamic region and has experienced significant growth over the last few years. This growth is due to the large scale investment in the development of the region’s oil sands which require the recruitment of workers from all across Alberta, Canada, and the world to meet the demands of the industry directly and of providing services to maintain this development.

The RMWB covers a 68,454 square kilometer area in northeastern Alberta. Within the municipality are the communities of Fort McMurray, Anzac, Conklin, Fort Chipewyan, Fort Fitzgerald, Fort McKay, Gregoire Lake Estates, Janvier, Mariana Lake, Saprae Creek Estates, Draper and a large rural area. The region also encompasses the reserves and traditional lands of five First Nations and seven Métis locals. (See appendix 1 map)

“Fort McMurray has grown at a rapid pace, far outstripping the rate of growth in any other community in Alberta. Moreover, the percentage rate of population growth from 2006 to 2011 is expected to continue to be much greater than that of any other community in Alberta” ¹

The 2007 Census put the population figure at over 65,000 people in the Urban Service Area alone, and the total population numbers for the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo at 89,167. This includes the approximately 18,000 workers housed in industrial camps in the region.² The Radke Report released in December 2006, forecasted that the population of the urban service area was projected to reach 95,000 by 2011. Additionally it was forecasted that the population living in work camps could reach 14,000 to 15,000 people by 2011³. The numbers from the 2007 census indicate that the camp population has already far surpassed the projected numbers from the 2006 report. These demographic trends bring enormous opportunities but also major challenges.

This Service Delivery Plan will focus on the area of homelessness, more specifically in the community of Fort McMurray of the RMWB. The year, 2009, has been a year of transition and change. With the establishment of the Secretariat for Action on Homelessness in January 2008, and the release of their document, A Plan for Alberta – Ending Homelessness in 10 Years, there has been a considerable ripple effect on the seven major centers certainly, but an impact of some degree for all communities within the province of Alberta. The

¹ Investing in our Future: Responding to the Rapid Growth of Oil Sands Development, Radke report pg.49.
² The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Census 2007., pg 1
³ Investing in our Future: Responding to the Rapid Growth of Oil Sands Development, Radke report, pg 5.
Provincial Plan determines the direction of all funding agreements and dictates the desired outcomes and measures of success through the extensive use of the proven model, Housing First.

Funding allocations from the provincial government now require a Service Delivery Plan outlining how the funds will be used in the community to alleviate homelessness. This document is in response to this request. It identifies the vision, priorities, and objectives of the RMWB’s Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing 2007-2010. It also addresses how this plan fits within the mandate and parameters of the Provincial Plan of ending homelessness in 10 years. The response of local agencies to begin to implement the philosophy of the Housing First approach is clearly evident in the proposals submitted for funding of which a brief outline is included as well. Finally, this document will speak to some of the challenges and opportunities that exist in this region, as efforts are made to move forward, and as a community, work towards ending homelessness.

BACKGROUND

Fort McMurray – Climate of Change

The RMWB is in the midst of a climate of change and transition. Since early 2000 there has been unprecedented growth in the population that is stressing not only the physical infrastructure of the community but also the resources contained therein.

The image of the community as being a ‘land of opportunity’ has presented itself as a paradox of sorts. On one hand, RMWB has benefited from the national and international recognition which highlighted its prosperity and opportunities. However, by the same token, that recognition has been detrimental in that it created an illusion of a ‘modern day gold rush’ that led to an in migration of workers seeking their share of the fortune.

In recent months however, while somewhat buffered from the recession, RMWB has not been totally exempt from the fallout of the recent global downturn in the economy. The Oil Sands sites, just north and south of the city have put many major projects on hold and a significant portion of their contractor work force received lay off notices. This brief lull has afforded the RMWB a golden opportunity to take a breath and take stock of the resources on hand.

RMWB as Community Based Organization (CBO)

The RMWB is the designated Community Based Organization (CBO) responsible for coordinating the implementation of the National Homelessness Partnership Strategy via the Community Plan in the region. The Municipality as the CBO
receives funding from both federal and provincial governments to address local priorities with respect to homelessness facilities and support services in cooperation with community stakeholders.

The RMWB Neighbourhood and Community Development Homelessness Coordinator’s role is two fold; playing a lead role in building community capacity to address homelessness and to manage contractual agreements with local programs. As stated in the Alberta Plan – a Ten Year Plan to end Homelessness “action on homelessness must be led at the community level”4. This portfolio ensures such leadership.

RMWB Housing Needs Count

With the steady increase in the population, it was suspected that the homeless population had also increased. Homeless counts had been previously conducted in 2003, 2004, 2006 as well as a Youth Housing Needs Count conducted in May 2007. A point in time survey was administered to Fort McMurray youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in junior and high school classrooms and at street locations where youth were known to congregate. Analysis of the results indicated that sixty five (65) youth aged 11-17 self identified as homeless by indicating they were living away from home without shelter, or living in unsafe or temporary housing in Fort McMurray on the day of the count.5 These findings indicated that Fort McMurray has a vulnerable youth homeless population experiencing a variety of issues that trigger or intensify their homelessness. Supports are essential to address family conflict and breakdown.6 so that today’s homeless youth are not the adult homeless population tomorrow.

In October 2008, a 4th housing needs count was conducted of the adult homeless population. Previously, the Housing needs count was organized and executed by a subcommittee of the Homelessness Initiative Steering Committee. In 2008, however, a contract was awarded to St. Aidan’s Society to conduct the count.

The 2008 Housing Needs Count was conducted throughout the downtown core of Fort McMurray and in agencies and organizations that are known to provide support or service to the homeless population. The total number of homeless individuals counted included the absolute homeless and those individuals in both transition and supported programs.

To maintain the integrity of the count as well as keeping the data comparable to other years, the implementation and methodology from previous years was shared with the organization. As in other years, the Housing Needs Count was a “point in time” survey conducted to count the number of individuals without

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4 A Plan for Alberta – Ending Homelessness in Ten Years., pg. 16
5 Fort McMurray Youth Housing Needs Report., Aug 2007, pg2
6 Fort McMurray Youth Housing Needs Report., Aug 2007, pg3
permanent housing on a single day. The complete report can be accessed and viewed by opening the following link;
http://www.woodbuffalo.ab.ca/residents/social_support_services/homelessness.asp?subnav=7

Some of the key findings of the 2008 count included:
The number of individuals who reported they were without a permanent residence to return to was 549. This constitutes a 24.5% increase from the 2006 Housing Needs Count which reported 441 homeless individuals.

The majority of individuals (65%) identified as homeless are within the 31-54 year age range with males accounting for 76% of the homeless population and females accounting for 24% of the homeless population.

The surveyors observed the homeless population to be comprised of 27% Aboriginal, 54% Caucasian and 19% ‘Other’. This represents a significant increase in the ‘Other’ category which was 11% in 2006. It was noted during the count by several volunteers that, of those that fell into the ‘other’ category, many were immigrants. In future, questions should be designed and included with the survey to capture this information.

Also of interest was the fact that of the 329 people who responded to the question if they were a resident of the RMWB, 58% or 192 individuals said they were residents. Of the 328 people who responded to the question of whether or not they had a source of income, 51% responded that they did have a source of income.

This was interesting to note because logically the individuals with an established income could potentially be ideal candidates for the Housing First model.

**Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee (HISC)**

The Homelessness Initiative Steering Committee (HISC) played a significant leadership role in the development of all three Community Plans on Homelessness and Affordable Housing. Formed in 2000 as a community based committee to oversee the Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing, it assisted in setting the strategic direction and priorities for action. The committee was instrumental in building partnerships between all levels of Government and with organizations, undertaking a role to help achieve the common vision and objectives within the current plan.

With direction from the group itself, the HISC has undergone significant restructuring to streamline its role and redefine its purpose and effectiveness. HISC was divided into two separate committees, each with its own membership and terms of reference. One committee, the executive group, later renamed Homelessness Initiatives Strategic Committee (HISC) is made up of representatives from both levels of government as well as other key stakeholders in the community, and takes on the role for stewarding the Community Plan on
Homelessness, strategic planning, funding, communication, research and best practice. As part of the strategic planning, this committee also reviews project proposals submitted for funding under the Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing to ensure that they address the identified priorities outlined in the Plan.

The second committee, Community Housing Agencies Team (CHAT) is comprised of representatives from local agencies and focuses on sharing information, education, awareness, and recognizing all aspects of homelessness including emerging issues. This model of two separate committees with separate roles and functions will help provide the necessary leadership and nurture partnerships as this region moves forward and works to reduce and alleviate homelessness.

A PLAN FOR ALBERTA – ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN TEN YEARS

THE COMMUNITY PLAN ON HOMELESSNESS AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING 2007-2010

In March of 2009, the Provincial Government released Alberta’s Plan to end homelessness in ten years. All community projects within Alberta requiring Provincial funding must now fit within the outlined parameters of this over arching Plan for the province.

This Plan for Alberta is a comprehensive, “coordinated and sustainable approach to ending homelessness”\(^7\). Its foundation is based upon the Housing First model as the direction to move forward. Its success has been proven across the country as well as in the United States and is attributed to its client centered approach that removes all conditions to housing. Housing First is a client centered approach to ending homelessness that provides access to safe and permanent housing with few requirements while offering support services to maintain housing stability. It’s most basic premise is that housing is a right of everyone and not a reward for clinical success.

To implement this aggressive plan to end homelessness, the Secretariat for Action on Homelessness has developed strategies aimed at the goal of ending homelessness. These strategies are not abstract ‘pie in the sky’ notions but rather definitive tangible actions that each community can adopt and track progress on. The key elements of this Plan are centered on five priority areas for action; better information, aggressive assistance, coordinated systems, more housing options, and effective policies.\(^8\)

\(^7\) A Plan for Alberta – Ending Homelessness in 10 years., pg 3
\(^8\) A Plan for Alberta – Ending Homelessness in 10 years., pg 18
With the implementation of the Plan for Alberta, it is expected that individual communities will develop their own Plan, if not already completed.

The RMWB is currently utilizing a multi year plan: The 2007-2010 Homelessness and Affordable Housing Plan drafted as a three year plan to address the assets and gaps as well as set out priorities for the RMWB in consultation with its HISC partners. The Plan is used to guide funding from, and to various partners and was developed in consultation with the HISC partners while opportunity was given for broader public input.

This Plan aims to implement the current vision of an inclusive community with opportunities for everyone to have a healthy, safe place to live. To guide the Plan’s implementation, three principles and seven objectives were developed.

Principles:
- Ensure the safety and security of individuals and families (food, clothing, warmth, safety from harm).
- Provide a continuum of care approach for those seeking shelter.
- Work together to achieve common objectives and achieve partnerships between sectors and/or agencies.

Objectives:
1. Prevention of Homelessness.
2. Reduction of Homelessness/ Transition to housing stability.
3. Social integration of persons who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness.
4. Improvements to service quality, service capacity and coordination.
5. Opportunities for a place to live.
6. Developing an inclusive community.
7. Planned and coordinated approach.

Through the lens of these objectives and in conjunction with the provincial 10 year plan to end homelessness, all proposals are evaluated and ranked in order of priority and are used to guide the development of actions, priorities, and implementation. While the focus of the current three year Plan is not specifically Housing First, it is not inconsistent with the Provincial Plan. In fact the two Plans complement one other. The five priority areas for action outlined in the Provincial Plan, work parallel with the guiding principles and objectives of the RMWB’s Plan.

8. Better information meaning sharing information that focuses on outcomes of the Provincial Plan is a parallel to one of the three guiding principles of the RMWB’s Plan – to work together to achieve common objectives and achieve partnerships between sectors and/or agencies.

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9 The Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing 2007-2010., pg 1

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9. **Coordinated Systems** meaning ensuring governments, agencies and communities work together in an integrated, efficient way towards shared objectives, again is a parallel to the RMWB’s Plan where the objective is improvements to service quality, service capacity and coordination. With the newly restructured HISC and CHAT committees, as well as with the Supports through Housing Team (STHT) government representatives sit at the table where issues affecting clients accessing services can be addressed head on.

10. **More housing options** meaning increasing the quantity and variety of housing options so every Albertan has a home is the basic premise and vision of the RMWB Plan. That the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo be an inclusive community with opportunities for everyone to have a healthy, safe place to live. In fact, in the past number of years, the Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corporation has made great strides and advances in increasing the overall stock of housing options for people living within the Municipality.

It is evident that even though the RMWB Plan does not specifically name the Housing First Approach as the direction in which to follow, the priorities for action are very much integrated within the principles and objectives of the current Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing. Moving forward and reviewing proposals based on the guiding principles of this Plan in concurrent with the terms and boundaries mandated in the Provincial 10 year Plan.

It is the goal of the HISC to commission the development of a new multiyear plan to be implemented in 2010, the end of the current plan. In developing a new Community Plan, emphasis will be given to devise a planned and deliberate strategy aimed at ending homelessness in ten years. This process will certainly involve consultation with local agencies as well as the general public, with the end goal to finally realize the original vision of the RMWB being an inclusive community with opportunities for everyone to have a healthy, safe place to live.

### 2008/2009 – A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

In February 2009, the homelessness coordinator travelled to Toronto to attend training for the Streets to Home program. The RMWB offered the opportunity to other local agencies to send representatives to this training and as a result Nicole Grouchy, Assistant Property Manager for Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corporation attended as well.

Following the training session, presenters from Streets to Home program, Iain Dejong and Toby Druce came to Fort McMurray for a two day conference to introduce the concept and practice of the Housing First philosophy. Approximately 65 attended the conference and engaged in dialogue with the
presenters on the feasibility of using the Housing First approach to end homelessness within the Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

Once the conference had ended, it was clear that there was an excitement among the local agencies about the potential of Housing First for this community but there was a lack of direction and general leadership as to the next steps. To address this issue, the Municipality hosted a Strategic Planning Session where the homelessness coordinator reviewed the principles of Housing First and identified the needs, gaps, assets and opportunities that currently exist in this community. 24 people attended representing a total of 16 agencies. The goal was to assist the agencies in building long term alliances with one another to accomplish a common goal of housing the homeless.

The approach taken was to encourage each agency to take on a piece of the whole and build partnerships to accomplish the goal of housing the most chronic and the most vulnerable on the streets.

On April 3rd, 10th, and 17th, the call for proposals was advertised in the Fort McMurray Today newspaper. Once the call had finished a total of nine proposals were submitted to be considered for both Federal and Provincial funding through the Municipal approval process. As part of the process, the coordinator reviewed each submission individually and received clarification from the agencies if necessary. Once complete, the proposals and recommendations were reviewed by the Manager.

Following this review, HISC had an opportunity to review the proposals and recommendations. Questions and concerns were addressed to determine if the proposal met the mandate of the priorities outlined in the Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing. Changes were noted. Government representatives also sit on this committee to be sure that the proposals presented meet their mandates and fit within the guidelines outlined in their funding agreements.

Once HISC reviewed and made recommendations, the proposals were prepared and presented to each member of the Community Services Advisory committee for review. The Community Services Advisory Committee is a Council appointed body made up of citizens and council members and is supported by administrative staff. Once again, proposals and recommendations were presented to this group at a meeting where questions and concerns were addressed and changes noted. Their recommendations were presented to the Council.

Following this, a council report was drafted with the recommendation of the Community Services Advisory Committee that was forwarded to the General Manager as well as the senior management team, including the Deputy Chief Administrative Officer for review. When reviewed, the Council report is

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presented to Mayor and Council for final approval. Once final approval is granted, contracts are issued to the agencies involved for review and signing. Upon signing, the funds are available to the agencies. The entire process is quite thorough with a number of checks and balances in place to ensure funding allocation is fair and unbiased.

PROPOSAL SUBMISSIONS 2009-2010

In this most recent call for proposals, nine proposals were received by the Municipality. Of these nine, two requested funding because they were a part of the past provincial two year pilot project. Continued funding beyond the term of the pilot project was conditional on all projects reflecting the Housing First approach.

The Community Outreach Team was housed at the Centre of Hope and provided outreach to those individuals who were temporarily housed or are living on the streets. The Transitional Outreach Team housed on the second floor of Marshall House provided outreach to those individuals moving from transitional housing to more permanent housing. Neither program met the established criteria for Housing First but both programs were recommended for further funding by the Municipality to the provincial government. As a result, each was given the opportunity to modify their existing outreach services to reflect the housing first philosophy. Under those conditions each submitted their proposal to be considered for provincial funding.

The Center of Hope – Proposal for Housing First Coordinators

The Center of Hope will hire and train four Housing First Coordinators whose work will be directly supervised by the Executive Director of the Center. These coordinators will reach out and dialogue with homeless individuals on the street and those that access the Center on a daily basis.

Resources and expertise will be focused on the most chronic homeless individuals living on the street. The Housing First Coordinators will use the vulnerability index to determine the priority of individuals given housing opportunities first. This survey of the homeless population captures their health and social status through a ranking system that takes into account risk factors and duration of homelessness. The ranking will allow those with the most severe risks to be identified and prioritized for housing and supports.

Two of the four Housing First Coordinators will work with those who access the Center of Hope as well as those on the streets that do not access any services. Coordinators will work with these individuals to assist in replacing identification, accessing income supports, completing applications for housing, and searching for a suitable residence that meets their particular needs and interests.
The remaining two Housing First Coordinators will work directly with those who have been housed to secure and maintain their housing. These workers will assist with the individualized ‘housing plan’, with goal setting, assist with transitioning from the street to the home, life skills and linking them to community resources. In the beginning, there will be frequent visits between the coordinator and the client however it is expected that these visits will decrease over time. Workers will also liaise with the landlords and apartment superintendent in order to trouble shoot arising issues and to address behaviors to prevent evictions. This follow up support will continue for one year following housing.

Where possible, the Housing First Coordinators will also connect with private landlords, management companies, and other housing options in order to secure potential dwellings for the homeless.

All individuals placed in housing will be required to meet three requirements before becoming a Housing First client. They are:

a. They must agree to a funding source (Income Support, AISH, etc.) to pay the landlord directly through third party payments.

b. They must agree to follow up services with a coordinator for one year.

c. They must complete an application for subsidized housing.

All individuals that are housed will still have access to the Center of Hope’s wellness clinic until Alberta Health cards and family doctors are established. All women will have access to the Women’s Wellness Clinic to assist with birth control, accessing doctors and OBGYN’s. Those that are pregnant will be provided with prenatal support and care.

The goal of this project is to house, and keep housed, thirty homeless individuals in the first year. To do this, housing supports will be provided for a minimum of one year. It is recognized that partnerships with other agencies in the community will be essential for this to succeed and people to maintain their housing.

Total amount requested for one year: $443,136
Total amount recommended by CBO for one year: $341,307

Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corporation – HOMEs Program

During the two year pilot project, the second floor of Marshall House housed the Transitional Outreach Team (TOP) that provided outreach to individuals moving from transitional housing to permanent housing. This program has concluded and in its place will run the HOMEs program (Housing Options a Must for Everyone). This change will begin immediately to reflect a Housing First philosophy.

The TOP program relied on outreach workers working with the clients to help them adjust to living in a home again and then moving on to more permanent housing. This constitutes the major change with the HOMEs program. There will not be an outreach component to this program. A partnership with the Center of Hope has been established.
where they will provide the follow up supports and Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation (WBH&DC) will provide units at Marshall House’s 2nd and 3rd floor. The expectation is that the Coordinators at Center of Hope will provide the individuals housed at Marshall House supports necessary to develop an individualized life plan which may include obtaining income, assist with housing applications, apartment seeking, home visits, enhance coping skills, employment skills and social skills. Clients will be accepted on a referral basis from shelters and other partnering agencies. Clients will sign agreements committing to a fixed stay (lease). Terms may vary depending on client need and housing availability.

The WBH&DC Administrator will provide leasing and guidance on all aspects of landlord/tenant areas.

The WBH&DC Support worker team will also provide assistance to the Center of Hope coordinators by helping clients with basic life skills including housekeeping skills, cooking skills, personal hygiene and janitorial services to all common areas of Marshall House 2nd and 3rd floor.

The second floor of Marshall House has sixteen dorm type units which will accommodate three people per suite at present. Each unit has a full bathroom, a microwave, a mini fridge and access to a common kitchen where individuals can prepare meals and watch television. Contracts will be signed and a rental amount will be set based on client’s income and/or the Supports for Independence (SFI) shelter allowance schedule. The rental rates will range from a minimum of $250.00 to a maximum of $500.00. With time, these rooms may evolve into single or couple rooms depending on the need and the demand.

On the third floor of Marshall House, there are eight one bedroom suites ready for occupancy. Rent will be based on the clients income by using the rent geared to income ratio of 30%. Rental incomes on this floor will range from a minimum of $340.00 to a maximum of $1450.00 as per the Alberta Social Housing Regulation. Clients will sign a contract agreeing to the terms of the HOMEs program with the property administrator. WBH&DC anticipates housing fifty individuals within the first year based on the capacity of the second and third floor of Marshall House.

WBH&DC will determine their success by measuring the following:

a. The length of successful tenancy per individual.
b. The number of permanent housing options obtained by the clients.
c. The decline in the number of shelter beds.
d. The number of supportive agencies working together as a team.
e. The client’s testimony to the improved quality of life as a result of being housed.

Statistics relative to the program will be tracked on a monthly basis and submitted to the CBO who in turn will submit the required monthly reports to the Secretariat. The measures of success for this program will be discussed with Provincial representatives to be compliant with the requirements of the Provincial Grant Funding Agreement.

Total amount requested for one year: $524,719

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Total amount recommended by CBO for one year: $511,064

The combined total of those two projects is $852,371. Total provincial funding, including the carry over from last year as well as the bridge funding of three months (April-June) is $950,000. Allocating $852,371 to these projects leaves a balance of $97,629. This amount constitutes 75% of the amount recommended for funding from the Fort McMurray HIV/Aids Society which will be applied to this project proposal that also models a Housing First philosophy.

The Fort McMurray HIV/Aids Society
Their proposal involves retaining a registered social worker to do intensive case management with those homeless individuals that are recently housed as well as hire an additional registered social worker. Both workers will stay with the clients for the entire spectrum from initial contact to the end of the one year of follow up supports.

Each worker will do intensive case management spending 80% of their time in follow up care, as well as 15% of the time on initial contact with individuals requiring housing and the remaining 5% of the time will be used for administrative duties (including data input) and evaluating the project.

Specifically, each worker in the initial contact will familiarize clients with the community, mapping out the existing services as well as the transportation routes. During this stage, the case workers will coordinate with the furniture bank, food bank and the Salvation Army and other service providers to ensure that the client has all the items needed for their home and health. This would include the Wood Buffalo HIV and Aids Society’s public health nurse to address health concerns and needle exchange program for those with substance use problems. At present, there are 35-40 individuals that use the services of the center on a regular basis. Of those, about 6 have self disclosed that they are HIV positive, 20 have Hepatitis C. The majority of these individuals are either homeless or living in overcrowded living conditions.

Once the immediate health concerns are addressed, workers will work with clients to develop an individualized work plan, outline activities, goals, activities to achieve the goals, and a method to evaluate whether the goal has been achieved. Supports will be given to the landlords to mitigate situations as they arise. This project will support those people who have been recently housed ensuring that they have all the supports in place, leading to long term housing. Work load will be approximately 10 individuals per worker.

Total amount requested for nine months: $203,500
Total amount recommended by the CBO for nine months: $130,850

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The total of all provincial funds (950,000) have been allocated to these three programs.

In addition to this, the Regional Municipality has also channeled Federal Homelessness Partnership strategy (HPS) funds into the remaining proposed projects for this fiscal year. With the exception of 10% retained by the Municipality for administration purposes, the remaining 90% will be used to fund the other proposals received that meet the needs of the homeless or those at risk of homelessness. The following is a brief list of these proposals.

**The Fort McMurray Association for Community Living** has applied for funding to hire an employment counselor to assist in the follow up work with those homeless individuals being housed. This person will work with those agencies providing follow up supports to assist with the employment related goals of the individual. They will provide all necessary employment readiness skills; will prepare workshops, and one on one career counseling sessions with clients to identify employment and/or volunteering interests.

**The Center of Hope** will be funded to provide staff to work on weekends and holidays. This will ensure the Center remains open 365 days a year.

**Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corporation (WBHDC)** acting as the banker for the Support through Housing Team (STHT) has proposed to operate a furniture bank. They have secured storage space in Fort McMurray to store donated used furniture as well as contracted with a rural moving company to pick up good used furniture when donated but also to move those items to apartments for clients recently housed. They have also identified the need for a contingency fund to address the financial barriers that many face when trying to get housed. Funds are often needed for utility arrears, rental arrears, first months rent, damage deposit shortfall, tenant insurance as well as start up funds for linens, bedding, kitchen ware, etc. With the recent changes to the provincial HEP fund, this contingency fund will be essential for many to overcome the financial barrier to secure housing.

**The Salvation Army** has requested funds to operate the low income transit pass program. The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo donates bus passes and tickets to this program and this year the Salvation Army has agreed to distribute these passes to meet the transportation needs of those that are homeless and those at risk of homelessness.

**Additional Capital Funding Requests**

Two additional proposals for capital projects were received, along with the above named program proposals. Wood’s Homes Society, the operator of the Stepping Stones Youth Home in RMWB requested funds to purchase and retrofit a van to be used for their home.
WBHDC requested funds to install two make up units at Marshall House to control carbon monoxide levels on the first floor.

These combined proposals outline the plan that is currently in place in this community to implement the Housing First approach to ending homelessness. The following visual provides a succinct glance at how these proposed programs will work together to model the Housing First approach.

**HOUSING FIRST IN FORT MCMURRAY**

From the diagram on the next page, there is overlap of agencies looking after particular components of the initial contact and follow up supports. This is not viewed as a duplication of services but rather, services that complement one another with the final goal of housing and maintaining that housing for individuals.

It is recognized that the plan as outlined and presented in the visual is a work in progress. Having nine contracts to monitor for the 2009-2010 year will be an onerous task indeed. Because this is the first year of focusing and aligning projects toward the Housing First approach, there are concerns that key agencies are not yet in a position to take on the lead role. Most still do not have full staffing and any new staff will have to be trained in this model.

In this the first year of implementing the housing first approach, it is hoped that several agencies will emerge as leaders in the community with respect to the providing the follow up care, managing the furniture bank and start up costs, and even as shelter operators. It is anticipated that this will reveal itself over the next twelve months.
Housing First in Fort McMurray
(Streets to Home Model)

**IMMEDIATE HOUSING NEEDS**
- Drop in center
- Housing Applications
- ID Assistance
- Income Assistance

**FOLLOW UP SUPPORTS**
- Employment skills
- Life skills
- Harm Reduction
- Service plans

**PHYSICAL BARRIERS**
- Available Units
- Start Up Costs (bedding, linens, dishes, etc)
- Furniture costs
- Moving costs

**FINANCIAL BARRIERS**
- Damage deposits
- Rental Arrears
- Utility arrears
- First month’s rent

**ADMINISTRATION**
- Community Based Organization Monitoring
- Provincial Reporting
- Facilitate partnerships

**People are housed and kept housed**

**Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo**

**The Salvation Army**

**Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation**

**Center of Hope**

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THE NEXT TWELVE MONTHS – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In a relatively short time frame, the large influx of workers for the oil sands sites has far exceed anyone’s imagination and has increased the population base causing stress on the infrastructure, namely the available housing units. This situation has created a bottleneck in the housing market where the supply of units has not been able to meet the demand. The Radke report also recognized this uniqueness\textsuperscript{10}. The reality is that the inventory of affordable one bedroom or bachelor apartments in this town is non-existent. As of March 31, 2009 WBHDC reported that of their current waitlist of 458 names, 218 individuals were waiting for one bedroom units\textsuperscript{11}. This poses a significant obstacle when faced with the task of housing the most chronic homeless currently living on the streets. Were it not for the efforts of the WBHDC, and the building known as Marshall House, there would be no place to begin. They are to be commended for providing the 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} floors of Marshall House as designated Housing First units. It is a starting point.

It is encouraging to know that at least one private landlord is willing to designate a block of rooms in an apartment building as housing first units. Rents have been negotiated but they are still far out of reach from the average homeless person with the average income from Alberta Works or AISH. Even with negotiations, the rental prices in the private market in Fort McMurray present a major barrier to housing anyone outside of what is offered by WBHDC.

Funding from both levels of government has been restricted to yearly funding agreements which place agencies under significant financial stress. Sustainable funding agreements are required to achieve the goals envisioned by the province and community. Guaranteed funding for a three year term will ensure issues such as staff retention, succession planning, long range planning and sustainable partnerships can be addressed.

The population of the RMWB has experienced unprecedented growth in the past number of years. While the boom in the economy has its advantages, there has been a downside as well. The homeless population also experienced a 24.5% increase in just the past two years. Each agency is presented with challenges to continue to meet the immediate needs of the homeless population. Now however, there is a fundamental shift in focus, to stop managing homelessness and end it. The agencies see the need to change from serving the homeless to working with each client to achieve self sufficiency.

\textsuperscript{10} The Radke report pg 8
\textsuperscript{11} Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corp. verbal confirmation – Cynthia Woodford

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CONCLUSION

The RMWB is well prepared to move to a “Housing First” approach to stop managing homelessness and end homelessness. This Service Plan is the fruition of the concept discussed for several years and more recent public education, training, strategic planning and intensive work with agencies. The local programs are committed to this widely accepted approach.

Designing a multi year plan for our region will begin with optimism and also being realistic regarding infrastructure challenges and the need for creative solutions. Strong partnerships will be the cornerstone of success. The focus will continue to be on constant evaluation ensuring resources, skills, and effective partnerships are in place to meet the desired outcomes.
References


