Overview
In December 2000, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo received approval for its Community Plan on Homelessness (CPH), and within six months money was flowing to the community. Since that time, operating as a community-based organization, the RMWB has made great strides in addressing this important issue—working with all three levels of government, numerous non-profit organizations, the private sector and dedicated volunteers. Recently, a Supportive Transitional Housing Team was also formed to try and ensure that no one falls through the cracks—or has to knock on seven different doors to get the help they need.

Fort McMurray has been singled out before. For example, it was designated a “Safe Community” both within Canada and by the World Health Organization. Now the community is again taking the lead—by meeting the needs of the homeless.

Inside this newsletter we will share the challenges and success stories of the various agencies who are responding to this growing concern. We hope you will be inspired to give them your support.

The Government of Canada is working in partnership with other levels of government and the community to address homelessness in this country. Consultations across Canada led to the launch of the three-year National Homeless Initiative (NHI) in 1999, to enhance the existing strategies of local communities. In response to the NHI, the RMWB created an individualized Community Plan on Homelessness, completed in December 2000.

A strong partnership was created by the community, the RMWB, the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta, who matched the federal funding. Working as a community-based organization, the RMWB accessed the federal and provincial funding and put it to good use.

On March 4, 2003, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, with Minister of Labour and Federal Coordinator on Homelessness Claudette Bradshaw, renewed the Government of Canada’s commitment to combat homelessness by investing $405 million over the next three years to help communities continue to address the needs of homeless people. The Government of Canada is currently working to determine the details of the renewed initiative in consultation with the provinces and territories to ensure a coordinated and effective approach.

The Government of Canada recognizes that no one level of government can alone effectively address the challenges of homelessness. That’s why it is also important to acknowledge the significant role of the Province of Alberta in partnering with the Municipality. Ultimately, however, solutions to homelessness begin at the community level and require the ongoing support of the citizens of the community. It’s working, but we still need your help!

Did You Know...
✔ That up to 85 individuals are using the Fellowship Baptist Church Soup Kitchen on a daily basis?
✔ That the 52 beds available at the Salvation Army shelter operate at nearly 100% capacity most days in winter?
✔ That rent in our community for a two-bedroom apartment can be as high as $1,675 a month?
✔ That in a survey of 20 landlords in Sept. of 2000, an estimated 15% of tenants were struggling month-to-month to pay rent?
✔ That the 4 second stage units and the 6 beds at Unity House provided for women and children fleeing an abusive situation are near maximum capacity year round?

A Special Update from the Community Plan on Homelessness
“It’s working— but we still need your help!”
April 2003

“We are not lazy. Some of us volunteer; many of us work on a regular basis. But finding employment is difficult. It’s hard to get a job when your clothes are dirty and you look rough.”
Alberta Human Resources and Employment (HRE) has been an invaluable link between agencies responding to the issue of homelessness. In partnership with the United Way, they helped fund the Salvation Army Men’s Emergency Shelter and MAT Programs, and contributed to six beds for the homeless at the Family Crisis Center’s Unity House. Other well known programs of HRE are Support for Independence (SFI) and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH). These are just two ways of helping dependent adults and persons needing financial, training and employment support, so that they don’t become homeless.

One of the key roles of HRE is to respond to desperate situations where basic needs are not being met and an individual has nowhere else to turn. Most of HRE’s income support programs are for eligible Albertans between the ages of 18 and 65, but they recently encountered a handicapped senior with dementia that no one was equipped to help. HRE stepped in and provided a hotel room and saw that she was taken care of. This type of emergency financial support—whether it be accommodation, medical support, transportation or assistance in relocating to be closer to immediate family—is important for those struggling with homelessness.

Until now, HRE has been a primary funder of homeless shelters in Alberta. As of April 1st, however, that role will fall under the department of Alberta Seniors, which is also responsible for low income housing across the province. The transition is expected to be both seamless and transparent. As spokesperson Diane Durnford explains, “With respect to funding the shelters, the only real difference will be who signs the cheque.”

HRE will continue to focus on employment training, career planning and support services for Albertans entering the labor market.

Under the leadership of Pastor Lindsay Taylor, the Fellowship Baptist Church is providing a much needed service for the homeless of Fort McMurray and area. Their Soup Kitchen operates Monday through Friday, September to June from 11:30 AM to 12:30 PM, providing hot meals to all those in need. Last year, with the help of corporate sponsors, the church initiated summer barbecues. These were so successful that the program will continue three days a week this July and August.

Volunteers—from 3 to 10 on any given day—are the key to the success of the Soup Kitchen. Some even arrive before the office staff to begin preparing meals. Others come in on their lunch hours to help wash dishes. One retired gentleman comes in every day to help. Regular teams—including the Fort McMurray Alliance Church on Tuesdays and the Fort McMurray Gospel Assembly on Thursdays—work with church members, members of the Catholic community and other volunteers to ensure smooth service. Throughout the year, school classes also come, learning a valuable lesson in service and compassion, and over Christmas a number of parents bring in their children to experience the true spirit of the season.

The Soup Kitchen began a little over six years ago. At the time it was open just one day a week. This soon expanded to three days a week, and with the help of the Community Plan on Homelessness, it has become Monday to Friday. As of 2003, about 85 people are served daily, with provision made for take-out as well.

On March 15th, another successful fundraising Banquet & Auction was held at the Travelodge Hotel, raising money for food and supplies. Two savvy shoppers regularly take advantage of 15% Tuesdays to make the funds stretch as far as possible.

Two years ago, renovations included new stoves, fridge, freezer and dishwasher. This year additional renovations, scheduled to begin May 1st, will mean a larger soup kitchen in the basement, with new space for offices and a library.

With sufficient funding to allow for round-the-clock staffing, an even stronger partnership with the local Community Mental Health Services department at the hospital could be established. This would mean that more beds could be made available for other clients.

The Fort McMurray Association for Community Living currently employs a full-time Coordinator for Horizon House, whose goal is to assist homeless/near homeless women who meet entrance criteria to make the transition from dependent to independent living. Clients are helped with budgeting and other life skills, and in making applications for housing and finding appropriate employment.

In addition to being a strong mental health advocate through its support and services, the agency provides a wide range of resources to the community—including CHOICES Employment Services, which offers support to individuals with limitations in finding and maintaining employment.

The staff also takes time to volunteer at the Fellowship Baptist Church Soup Kitchen. This helps them identify people who might further benefit from the work of the association. As Valerie Crowe explains, “We’re part of a team, and this is part of our overall commitment.”
Though the physical location must remain confidential, Unity House is nevertheless the most well known project of the Fort McMurray Family Crisis Society, providing a warm, caring and secure environment for battered women and their children. The facility first opened in 1984 and its 21 beds are almost always at full capacity. Six of those beds are intended for homeless women and their children.

In August of 2002 the society established second stage housing—four fully furnished apartments designed to help abused women and children make a fresh start at living independently. This is supported by programs which help build self-confidence, and skills in budgeting, nutrition and anger management. So far the Society has helped almost a dozen women and their kids move on to a better life, but there is a waiting list of many more wanting to occupy these units.

With family violence an ongoing problem, the Society is keen to focus on their Outreach and Public Education programs. Teams of two visit the schools to educate children so they don’t perpetuate the cycle of violence. The issue of bullying—which includes ostracism, harassment and excluding people, as well as dating or relationship violence and self-esteem issues—are the main reasons the Society is invited to do presentations in the schools.

Public Education Coordinator Eleanor Mauger says they will take any opportunity to speak to the issues. “Sometimes it feels like we’re bailing out the ocean with a spoon, but even if we reach just one person, it’s worth it.”

The focus of this year’s Family Violence Awareness Week (November), and a firm belief of the Society is: “Education is the long-term answer.”

Another important project is outreach to the surrounding Aboriginal communities where events such as craft circles are used to build rapport and encourage open dialogue.

Wherever there is homelessness, there too is the Salvation Army. In Fort McMurray, most of the services are located in the Community Services Centre on 50th Street near Hospital Drive. Above the Thrift Store are the 32 beds of the Men’s Emergency Shelter; which for the most part are all used nightly, 365 days a year. Here a range of men—some doing a job search, others trying to integrate themselves into the community, others needing a place to sleep while they explore other services—find comfort, respect and two square meals to get them through the day.

On the weekends in winter, the Salvation Army also operates a community soup kitchen, to complement the services of the Fellowship Baptist Church during the week.

The Salvation Army Mat Program operates from October 1st to April 30th and accommodates up to 20 men and women with behavioural issues and addictions who are not allowed in the shelter. While the challenges in managing Harm Reduction are great, the Salvation Army will not turn away people under the influence of drugs or alcohol, unless they are disruptive. And when the mats are full, they will still allow people to drop in, have a cup of coffee and warm up.

Support today achieves results tomorrow. This is the rationale behind another initiative of the Salvation Army—the START Program, which supports clients with developmental and physical disabilities. By June of this year, a special needs, wheelchair accessible home should be complete. The home will accommodate two to three individuals, plus 24-hour support staff. Program Director Iris Pasareno is pleased with the response to the Together We Can campaign and salutes “everyone involved who gave 100% to the project.”

As of this April, the WBHDC will have been in operation for two years. In that time they have successfully partnered with other community agencies (such as Unity House and Horizon House) to help meet existing and emerging housing needs for both singles and families. Their goal is to ensure that all residents of the region, both urban and rural, have affordable housing options.

On the construction side, a major success has been the creation of Edgewater Court, an apartment/townhouse complex of 175 units which opened last year in the Lower Townsite. The complex is a major step forward in helping residents make the transition to independent affordable housing.

The latest project of the WBHDC is Marshall House. Currently in the final planning stages, they hope to turn sod in four to six weeks. Marshall House is a transitional housing complex with 19 modest, self-contained units on the second floor, and 10 larger units on the third floor available to service sector employees. In addition there are four one-room units available for rural residents to use when a family member requires medical treatment in Fort McMurray. The main floor will be allocated to a commercial enterprise.

The WBHDC is also effective on the administrative side, addressing such issues as social housing waiting lists and requests for subsidized housing, and helping prepare residents for first time home ownership. They are also working to develop new affordable housing in Timberlea. Their Rural Housing Program has identified a real shortage of appropriate housing in Conklin and Janvier, and they have recently accessed funding to help meet that need as well.
The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo would like to thank the community for its support of this ongoing initiative. It's working— but we still need your help!