

## Community Services

*Community services such as broadband, policing, education, healthcare, recreation, and Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) support community viability and make rural municipalities attractive places to work, live, and grow. Although providing many of these services in rural areas requires innovative strategies and partnerships, rural municipalities strive to make their communities great places to live and invest.*

### What is the RMA's position on the importance of community services in rural municipalities?

- ◆ Community services are proven economic drivers. For Alberta's rural municipalities to offer a quality of life that will attract and retain residents and support business and industrial development, strong community services must be available.
- ◆ Rural municipalities do not have the economies of scale to deliver some community services and often establish innovative collaborative agreements with neighbouring municipalities or local non-profit organizations to ensure the needs of their residents and businesses are met.
- ◆ Community services often look different in rural areas than in urban areas. It is important that rural communities have the autonomy to offer services in a way that meets local needs.
- ◆ Reductions or changes to the service levels and decision-making structures for provincially delivered community services impact rural municipalities. In many cases, rural municipalities supplement eliminated or reduced provincial services in rural communities out of necessity.

### What financial considerations do rural municipalities have with respect to the provision of community services?

- ◆ Cost-sharing and other inter-municipal agreements (e.g. Intermunicipal Collaboration Frameworks [ICFs]) allow municipalities to work together to provide quality community services to their residents at a regional level. However, recent provincial decisions impacting municipal revenues may force some rural municipalities to reduce or eliminate their participation in delivery of regional community services.
- ◆ The local availability of community services is strongly linked to rural economic and community development. Funding for services that make municipalities attractive as places to live and work must be prioritized by all levels of government to promote economic investment in rural areas (e.g. rural schools, Family and Community Support Services, policing, broadband).
- ◆ The sustainability of rural municipalities relies on attracting a qualified workforce to provide community services. Having programs in place to attract and retain workers contributes to the success and viability of rural Alberta.
- ◆ Rural municipalities rely on property taxes as a major funding component of the community services they deliver. Any changes made to Alberta's assessment and taxation regime must consider potential impacts on the ability of municipalities to deliver services that will support industries and those working in rural areas.

## What collaborative relationships are essential to developing quality rural community services?

- ◆ Due to low population densities and large geographic areas, providing some services in rural communities may require innovative solutions including regional service delivery and cost-sharing arrangements with urban neighbours. These arrangements may be determined at the local level through Intermunicipal Collaboration Frameworks (ICFs) or other means.
- ◆ Many community services require collaboration among the Government of Alberta, the local municipality, and one or more non-profit organizations. It is critical that all organizations involved in the delivery of community services have a shared voice as to how the service is delivered within the community.
- ◆ Any provincially led changes to how community services are funded and delivered must occur in conjunction with municipal and non-profit stakeholders. In many cases, different delivery models are required to meet unique local needs, and adopting a single province-wide delivery model may have unintended service or financial impacts in both rural and urban communities.
- ◆ Municipalities also work with other organizations and companies to support rural community development (e.g. school boards, library boards, community groups, internet service providers).

## How does the work of the RMA support the sustainability of rural community services?

- ◆ Through advocacy efforts, the RMA works to increase awareness and support the sustainability of community services (e.g. collaboration with Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta [FCSSAA] and RMA's rural broadband speed testing project).
- ◆ The RMA has collaborated with the University of Alberta's Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities to develop two important reports regarding the sustainability of rural community services. The first is a report which highlights the gaps in current FCSS funding and other provincial funding for rural social services, and the increased role that FCSS agencies play in communities to fill service gaps. The second is a report on the declining rates of volunteerism in Alberta and the associated threat to rural communities.
- ◆ The RMA champions the rural municipal perspective on community services through regular participation in province-wide committees (e.g. ALERT Civilian Advisory Committee, Alberta Police Interim Advisory Board, Alberta Seniors and Community Housing Association).

## What current community service-related issues are impacting rural Alberta?

### Broadband and Connectivity

- ◆ Providing broadband and cell phone service to rural Alberta is key for attracting investment, maintaining local businesses, and allowing all Albertans to participate in the digital economy. Providing these services in rural and remote areas requires innovative strategies and partnerships, and rural municipalities strive to make their communities great places to live and invest.
- ◆ Information on rural broadband can be found in the RMA's "Broadband and Connectivity" position statements.

## Housing

- ◆ Rural municipalities across Alberta play an important role in contributing to the construction and maintenance of affordable housing that allows their community to grow and respond to changing demographics.
- ◆ Provincial funding changes have increased the amount that rural municipalities must invest in affordable housing. Current funding streams are inadequate to meet local realities. A provincial funding increase and review of the process funding process by the Government of Alberta are needed to improve transparency and improve services.

## Rural Crime Prevention

- ◆ As rural crime rates have increased recently in many areas of Alberta, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Government of Alberta must collaborate with rural municipalities to seek local strategies to prevent and report criminal activities.
- ◆ RMA is concerned that changes to the *Police Act* to require the formation of a centralized Provincial Police Advisory Board will not allow rural and small urban municipalities to provide meaningful input into policing priorities.
- ◆ Any formation of a supplementary independent provincial policing organization should only proceed after the establishment of clear and acceptable communication mechanisms with the RCMP and municipalities, and specific methodology as to how any new capacity will be distributed to maximize community safety.
- ◆ Community input must be at the heart of a municipality's relationship with local police.
- ◆ The Government of Alberta's police funding model requires all rural and urban municipalities with a population of under 5,000 to contribute a portion of frontline policing costs. As a result, rural municipalities will be responsible for covering more than 80% of the total costs incurred by municipalities affected by the model.
- ◆ While policing is critical to addressing rural crime, adequate investments in Crown prosecutors, as well as Family and Community Support Services and victim services is important to supporting safe rural communities.
- ◆ The creation of any provincial police services should only occur if it can be demonstrated that it will result in a higher level of service for rural areas. This must be achieved with no additional costs to municipalities.
- ◆ More information on rural crime prevention can be found in the RMA's "Policing and Rural Crime" position statements.

## Victim Services

- ◆ Victim services are a critical component of community safety and supporting vulnerable populations. The recent shift to a provincially-administered regional victims services model poses a risk of reducing access to timely and quality victim services in some rural communities.
- ◆ RMA is opposed to the regionalization of victim services. The victim services model should be delivered in a manner that meets the needs of individual communities. Given the importance of supporting people in a time of grief and vulnerability, a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate for victim services.
- ◆ Alberta's previous victim services model was unique in Canada. It was locally delivered, locally governed, and allowed for services to be offered in a way that reflects the needs of individual communities. The Government of Alberta's decision to collapse the local model in favour of a centrally controlled, regionally

delivered model has created uncertainty in rural communities and sacrificed the quality of a service relied on by Albertans during extremely difficult times.

- ◆ RMA continues to monitor the roll-out of the regional victim services model and will strive to hold the Government of Alberta to account for any reductions in service levels or access.

## Seniors

- ◆ Aging in place and living independently are important strategies for providing seniors with an opportunity to age with dignity. Funding for home care, assisted living, and accessible transportation for seniors are all key components to supporting rural Alberta's aging population.
- ◆ Additional funding is needed to support seniors' lodges to improve the ability of rural residents to live in supported facilities within their home communities.
- ◆ The safety and quality of seniors' lodges are a concern throughout Alberta. Consistent funding for upgrading seniors' lodges to meet current building and fire safety codes will benefit rural municipalities by allowing community members to safely remain in their communities.
- ◆ Housing management bodies (HMBs) provide affordable and seniors housing with financial assistance from municipalities. The process that allows HMBs to requisition funds from municipalities should be reviewed by the Government of Alberta to ensure transparency.
- ◆ RMA has released a new report on hospice and end-of-life care in rural Alberta. The report calls on the Government of Alberta to implement a sustainable hospice funding model to improve end-of-life care for rural Albertans.

## Education

- ◆ Constructive partnerships between municipalities and school boards are essential to selecting and servicing proper school sites and recruiting qualified teachers.
- ◆ Rural schools are integral to rural community viability, but many are closing due to low enrollment. This results in increased travel times for students, negates municipal investments into supporting infrastructure, and compromises the retention of rural residents.
- ◆ Teaching children in both urban and rural schools about farming, ranching, and other elements exclusive to rural living is vital for building understanding between agricultural producers and non-farming Albertans. The Alberta Education curriculum should be amended to reflect this.
- ◆ To attract and retain early childhood educators in rural communities, the Government of Alberta should reinstate the Benefit Contribution Grant for early childhood educators.

## Libraries

- ◆ Rural libraries often serve as community hubs, particularly for new Albertans. As such, a consistent and long-term approach to library funding that recognizes a continuously growing population is needed in order to sustain rural libraries as hubs of information, distance learning, and community-building.
- ◆ The current *Library Act* requires updating, as current requirements related to the hiring of professional librarians are placing significant financial strain on rural library systems.

## Rural Volunteerism

- ◆ RMA partnered with the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities to create a report examining the causes and impacts of the decline of rural volunteerism in Alberta and the associated threat to rural

communities. The report focuses on volunteerism trends, including driving factors and community impacts. Recommendations for this report to address declining rates of volunteerism include calls to action for different stakeholders, including rural volunteer organizations, rural municipalities, and the Government of Alberta.

- ◆ The charitable gaming model in Alberta is inequitable for rural charitable organizations. The model requires rural organizations to travel further, wait longer, and earn lower revenues than organizations located in Edmonton or Calgary.
- ◆ RMA has launched “Losing Bet,” a campaign to advocate for an equitable charitable gaming model. This campaign equips RMA members with the tools necessary to ask the Government of Alberta to conduct a fulsome review of the charitable gaming model with corresponding action. “Losing Bet” concludes with the release of a full charitable gaming report.
- ◆ A review of the charitable gaming model in Alberta must be conducted to ensure equitable access to casino funds.

### Family and Community Support Services (FCSS)

- ◆ Social needs vary across the province. FCSS providers need greater autonomy to properly respond to community demand for such services.
- ◆ The core programming of FCSS is meant to be funded by an 80% contribution from the Government of Alberta, with the remaining 20% from the FCSS’s municipality. However, the overall contribution to the entire provincial FCSS program has remained stagnant at \$100 million since 2015, with a small increase of \$5 million in 2023. Due to the rising cost of FCSS programming, municipalities must contribute more to FCSS programming than required in order to keep the services operational.
- ◆ Funding for other social services and simplified access to Government of Alberta services is required to ensure FCSS organizations can provide their core mandate, which is preventative services. In a growing number of rural areas, FCSS has been asked to fill in for other organizations who have lost funding. The RMA has developed a report with Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities entitled *Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Faced by FCSS Programs in Rural Alberta*, which explores the need for increased funding due to increased demand of services.
- ◆ Provincial funding and support for FCSS programming is often piecemeal and short-term, with a lack of attention given to program sustainability in the face of unreliable funding. In a survey conducted for the *Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Faced by FCSS Programs in Rural Alberta* report, it is noted that many municipalities estimate their funding contributions to FCSS programming to be over 35% instead of the 20% that they are expected to contribute.

### The Municipal Role in Indigenous Reconciliation

- ◆ The RMA recognizes the importance of the role that municipalities play in fostering reconciliation with Indigenous peoples across the province.
- ◆ The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* report calls on municipal governments to educate public servants about the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal-Crown relations.
- ◆ The RMA understands the importance of the Calls to Action and is in a position to support member municipalities in providing guidance of where to access resources and training opportunities to respond to the Calls to Action.

**Kallie Wischoff**

*Policy Advisor*

825.319.2245

[kallie@RMAAlberta.com](mailto:kallie@RMAAlberta.com)