



STAFF REPORT

Title: Regional Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) Report on Family and Community Support Services

Meeting Date: September 19, 2023

Executive Summary:

The Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities (ACSRC) at the University of Alberta was tasked by the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) to conduct a deep dive into the current challenges faced by rural FCSS programs across the province.

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with a summary of those challenges and to confirm that other rural and small town FCSS service providers across the province report that they are often expected to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal or reduction of provincial social services, such as mental health, addiction, child welfare, and seniors' support.

Background:

Family and community support service (FCSS) programs provide effective and vitally important "preventative" social service programming to vulnerable community members of all age throughout Alberta. In an era of ongoing centralization of social service supports in the province, FCSS programs remain a staple of rural community life, often existing as the only physical location where rural Albertans in need can receive assistance face-to-face.

The ACSRC research team conducted twenty (20) semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with rural FCSS service providers that included sixteen (16) different directors of rural and small-town FCSS programs across Alberta. After completing the interviews, the research team designed a 38-question survey to further explore the depth of the challenges identified thereafter. This survey was conducted online and emailed to the directors of 158 FCSS programs scattered across rural and small-town Alberta, receiving a total of 80 respondents.

The results of this study are discussed in detail throughout the attached report. In short, the research team found that rural FCSS offices are facing increasing pressures related to stagnant provincial funding, the centralization of provincial social service supports, and enhanced social challenges faced by vulnerable community members in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent period of rapid inflation.



The attached report highlights the following three (3) key challenges faced by rural FCSS programs in Alberta and responds with four policy recommendations:

Key Challenge 1: Insufficient Provincial Funding

Insufficient core funding is the most significant challenge rural FCSS programs deal. Provincial FCSS programs have remained stagnant at \$100 million since 2015, with a small increase of \$5 million in 2023.

Key findings:

- Over 63% of survey respondents answered that their municipalities contribute **more** than the required 20% of FCSS funding.
- Almost 84% of survey respondents noticed an increase in the need for municipal overcontribution after 2018.
- Of those respondents whose municipalities overcontribute, almost 43% estimated that the true contribution of their municipality is more than 35% of the FCSS program's budget.

Key Challenge 2: Increasing Inaccessibility of Provincial Social Services

It is increasingly more difficult for both rural residents and rural FCSS offices to access provincial government support services. This is partly the result of a long-running trend of the centralization of public services that has occurred in Alberta and elsewhere.

Nearly all FCSS directors who took part in this study highlighted the ongoing process of centralization of social services. They noted that, not only did these processes often unfold with little consultation or communication with key community stakeholders (including FCSS offices), the decline of services significantly impacted rural community members who are dependent on government services but are now being asked to travel much farther at their own expense to a government office or healthcare facility for assistance. This presents a very real barrier for many community members for whom financial insecurity or health concerns make such travel difficult, if not impossible.

This is not a new observation however, what is increasingly evident for FCSS offices across rural Alberta is that, given that they are now very often “the only place in town” that is understood to offer social supports to community members in need, FCSS offices are often shouldered with additional requests for help from residents.

Part of this trend seems to have been by design on the part of the Government of Alberta (GOA). A significant concern raised frequently by FCSS directors is the ongoing



“downloading” of additional responsibilities that were once within the purview of other provincial agencies onto FCSS offices.

Unsurprisingly, not only has the recent move towards the use of “1-800” lines and online platforms stressed rural FCSS offices, these changes have also resulted in noticeable negative impacts on rural citizens in need. Several rural FCSS directors spoke passionately about the reality of more vulnerable community members simply “falling through the cracks” and not receiving the help they require, and are entitled to, because the system has become far too inaccessible.

Even in cases where individuals are able to connect with support workers online or over the phone, many FCSS directors noted that such impersonal “virtual intakes” frequently fail to uncover the full range of services vulnerable people need. The result is “the loss of a continuum of service” wherein the social support system can “wrap around the entire client” and ensure they are both properly taken care of and receive the full multitude of supports they need.

Key Challenge 3: Changing and Increasing Social Needs in Rural Communities

Two trends highlight the changing nature and the overall increase of social service needs in their communities. Although tracing precise causes of such complex trends is difficult, both the COVID-19 pandemic and recent inflation are key drivers of changing and increasing client needs.

The current period of inflation has added more stress on many of the most vulnerable in our communities. Multiple FCSS directors spoke of “unprecedented demand” for the services of local food banks and the overarching anxiety of fast-rising prices of all key staples can cause in those populations without the means to absorb significantly higher costs. Several rural FCSS directors also noted increasing levels of homelessness in their communities, a trend that was already emerging prior to the pandemic, and has grown worse in the past few years.

Policy Recommendations by ACSRC:

In review of the data collected and Key Challenges identified above, the following recommendations were made by ACSRC:

1. Increase Core funding from the Government of Alberta:

As mentioned earlier, provincial funding for FCSS programming remained capped at \$100 million from 2015 – 2022. Many municipalities across rural Alberta have been forced to increase funding beyond their required 20% to prop up FCSS programs in their communities. The provincial government must do more to ensure the



sustainability of core funding for FCSS programming. Several FCSS directors noted that the current practice of signing three-year funding contracts with individual FCSS programs creates an unnecessary level of anxiety for directors and staff, especially when these contracts are frequently renewed at “the very last moment.”

2. *Increase the Accessibility of provincial social support services for rural Albertans:*

The GOA must do more to ensure certain provincial social services remain or are returned to rural communities.

At a minimum, the province must revisit the decision to transition so many support services and client intakes to “1-800” lines and online web portals. Not only has this decision placed incredible stress on rural FCSS offices, it has also proven to have significantly negative impacts on vulnerable people throughout rural Alberta who find it very difficult, if not impossible, to navigate this new system. Re-opening the Alberta Supports offices that were shuttered over the pandemic would be the most appropriate first step in this direction.

A serious commitment from the GOA to ensure that more in-person social service supports are made available across a wider cross section of Albertan communities. The province must ensure that there are physical offices within reasonable distances to all Alberta communities so rural Albertans can seek assistance in-person. Some additional assistance with transportation costs must also be included in such plans.

3. *Ensure that the future public policy related to social services delivery in Alberta is approached via a rural lens:*

Ensure that Future Public Policy Related to Social Service Delivery in Alberta is Approached via a Rural Lens

The practice of applying a “rural lens” to public policy decisions refers to an assessment that specifically considers how a proposed policy change will impact rural regions and peoples. To apply a “rural lens” to public policy decisions related to social service delivery in Alberta would require a careful and systematic consideration of the impact that any policy change in this area would have on rural Albertan communities and citizens.

4. *Ensure that social service policy in Alberta is designed with meaningful contributions from rural FCSS programs:*

Ensure that Social Service Policy in Alberta is Designed with Meaningful Contributions from Rural FCSS Programs.



Building upon the previous point, “applying a rural lens” to policy discussions amounts to more than a study conducted from afar by urban-based policy makers. To apply a rural lens is to meaningfully engage, consult, and listen to the true “experts” in this field: the directors and staff in rural FCSS offices who are living the realities described in this report.

The FCSS Association is grateful for the RMA taking on this endeavor. The Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta (FCSSAA) membership expects Resolutions, related to the recommendations of RMA’s report, to be suggested at the FCSSAA Annual Conference in November 2023.

Alternatives:

The Regional Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) Report on Family and Community Support Services is provided for information.

Recommended Action:

That the Corporate Priorities Committee receive the Regional Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) Report on Family and Community Support Services as information.

Budget Implications (Yes or No):

No

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