



community stories

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Alberta's Seven Cities Partnership

Introduction

In 2001, the federal government developed a structure to support its new National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) that would allow it to work directly with municipalities without the usual intermediary of provincial governments. As this approach was new to most municipalities and community organizations, there were many new administrative procedures to learn and questions to ask. Seven Alberta cities were designated as communities entities, meaning that they would receive federal funds and be tasked with delivering the NHI. These entities included Red Deer, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Calgary, Edmonton, Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray (a community within the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo).

Municipal representatives were brought together by the Government of Canada for a series of evaluation and education sessions. After meeting, members of the group realized that they were each struggling with understanding and administering the new program and decided that they might be able to support one another's efforts by getting together on a regular basis.

Membership in the Seven Cities group includes both municipal members and community-based organizations. In Red Deer, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray, members are employees from their respective municipalities. Edmonton, Calgary, and Medicine Hat representatives are from community-based organizations designated as local entities.

This story is one of a series that describes work done by members of a community of practice that was established to explore community-government collaborations on policy. Funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, the community of practice developed policy tracking procedures and produced a "Collaboration on Policy" manual. Visit www.caledoninst.org for more details of this 13-month initiative.

Pam Ralston from The City of Red Deer says: “Initially, we were overwhelmed by the task and formed as a support group. We’ve built strong, trusting relationships that honour candor. Everyone is heard and our local entity representatives are also versed in community development, so our competencies overlap and are enriched by our association.”

Shifting gears

The decision to work together grew partly from a shared belief that each community was experiencing similar housing challenges and that together, these local entities represented a large proportion of Alberta’s population. As Alberta had stepped forward relatively early to provide provincial resources to match the federal funding, the relevance of working collaboratively increased.

While the impetus for the Seven Cities partnership grew out of the need for shared learning, it soon became clear that there were a number of innovative approaches being taken elsewhere to help tackle housing and homelessness. The Seven Cities agreed to undertake some research to better articulate those emerging practices and to build a business case for additional provincial funding.

The research initiative took three years and, in August 2006, the Seven Cities group was provided the opportunity to present its findings to the province’s Standing Policy Committee on Health and Community Living. Led by Edmonton Mayor Stephen Mandel and Lethbridge Mayor Bob Tarlek, the Seven Cities gathered political and community support, and outlined opportunities for exploring new ways of meeting the needs of Alberta’s homeless population.

Later that fall, Red Deer and Calgary invited Philip Mangano, Executive Director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, to talk about the Council’s outcomes of ending homelessness through various means, including implementation of the Housing First approach (www.ich.gov/). In addition to making public presentations in Red Deer and Calgary, he spent time with members of the Seven Cities partnership exploring the significant political engagement among the US federal government, state governments and American cities. A number of Alberta members of the Legislative Assembly, including government ministers, attended the public sessions.

The results of the Standing Policy Committee presentation and public awareness sessions were worth the effort. Soon after Mr. Mangano’s visit, the province announced that it would spend \$16 million over two years for innovative outreach pilot projects focused on ending homelessness. Further, the province asked the Seven Cities partnership to establish the project’s funding allocation and program criteria. Based on a previous funding distribution model, the cities agreed to direct \$1 million for research, administration and evaluation, and \$5 million each for projects in Edmonton and Calgary. The final \$5 million would be split equally among the remaining five cities. The group selected the Edmonton Housing Trust as the central administrator of the funds.

In December 2006, Premier Designate Ed Stelmach created a housing task force to recommend strategies for dealing with the increased need for affordable housing brought about by

Alberta's unprecedented prosperity and growth. The Affordable Housing Task Force was given 45 days to propose cost-effective solutions to the problem. The consultation process included stops in each of the Seven Cities. Upon completion of the report, the province responded with \$285 million in new funding for affordable housing. While a portion of the funds was committed over a three-year period, resources were made available within a short period of time for many initiatives, including new capital development, homelessness projects, rent supplements and eviction prevention funding.

In June 2007, three member communities of the Seven Cities partnership teamed up with their respective Canadian Mental Health Association offices to present a "Housing First Conference" in Red Deer. According to a conference report, "...the data and research from many presenters supports the fact that housing is a form of health care and economic cost savings are realized – due to reduced pressures on emergency services, hospitalization, substance abuse treatment, mental health services and policing" [CMHA 2007].

While attending the conference, Seven Cities representatives learned about a number of successful programs under way in New York, Seattle, San Francisco and Ottawa. With innovative pilot project funding announced and armed with new information about Housing First projects operating across North America, Alberta was poised to tackle more effectively the issues of housing and homelessness.

As 2007 was coming to a close, both Red Deer and Calgary were finalizing their respective 10-year plans to end homelessness. Released in early 2008, these plans helped build support for the establishment of a provincial plan to end homelessness. In January 2008, Premier Stelmach announced a new Secretariat on Action to End Homelessness. The Seven Cities collaboration was invited to appoint one member from its group to represent the interests of Alberta's major centres. By the beginning of 2009, Edmonton was preparing to become the third community to finalize its plan to end homelessness, thus preparing the provincial scene for a coordinated effort – along with the provincial plan – for success in ending homelessness in Alberta.

Key success factors

Originally established to share lessons related to the administration of federal homelessness funding, the Seven Cities partnership soon recognized the power of collaboration and networking. Members have helped to develop strategies that take a broader view of housing and homelessness, and have been instrumental in building a shared understanding of the issue in the province in Alberta. Their efforts have been influential in establishing Alberta as a leader in the development of 10-year planning strategies to end homelessness.

"Getting the right people into the partnership from the beginning was a critical part of our success," says Red Deer Social Planning Manager Scott Cameron. "Each of us could speak with authority about our local situations and issues, and had the connections we needed to get questions answered effectively. We also made sure to include federal and provincial guests for part or all of our

meetings, which reassured everyone that we wanted to remain open to ideas and maintain a transparent process. We have stayed small and developed a reputation as a good avenue for communication.”

For Alberta, the physical configuration of its seven major cities ensures that representation is spread consistently across the province. Lethbridge and Medicine Hat are in the south, Grande Prairie and Wood Buffalo are in the north and Edmonton, Red Deer and Calgary are in the province’s central corridor. With only seven members, the group has been able to build close, trusting relationships. Personal accountability to the group is strong and there is a firm commitment to the collective voice. In considering changes or improvements to local programs and services, members of the Seven Cities partnership often approach one another for advice and support.

Tracy Flaherty-Willmot is the Coordinator for the Homelessness and Community Housing Department at the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society. Says Tracy: “As an advocacy group, we can speak with a collective voice. We have gained the respect of the Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry and helped to influence provincial policy in a collaborative manner. Unfortunately, we have been less successful in this regard at the federal level, but we continue to meet with federal representatives to talk about our concerns with process and program requirements.” As Alberta begins to speak with one voice on the issues of housing and homelessness, adherents hope that its approach and messages will be heard by leaders of the federal political parties.

Another factor that has made the Seven Cities partnership successful is its members’ willingness to mentor and support one another. Over the past seven years, there have been numerous changes in the roster. Whenever a new person comes into the group, representatives from the other cities extend a helping hand and continue building the partnership. The group recognizes that for its concerns to be heard, members must have a common understanding of the issues and speak as one.

Future plans

In seven years, the Seven Cities partnership has created a solid base of relationships, produced evidence for change, identified causes and solutions to the problem of homelessness, and influenced policies and practices across government departments and jurisdictions. From the humble beginnings of attending to the requirements of federal government processes, along with evaluation and monitoring meetings, the group has helped to shape the face of housing policy in Alberta and Canada.

Most recently, the group has participated in a full day of planning for the future of the Seven Cities partnership because of requests for consultation from Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs, and the Secretariat appointed to develop and oversee the implementation of the 10-Year Plan. In addition, the planning day reflected the group’s recognition for more formalized processes, leadership and communication. The outcome was a solid review of the history and reasons for collaboration by the group, commitment to continued improvement and recognition of its potential. Terms of Reference were drafted for future discussion and approval and membership criteria were confirmed, with primarily administrative changes. Members appointed a chair and vice chair, and discussed means of

securing administrative support for the business of Seven Cities. The Terms of Reference included a budget and a funding structure that would ensure equal representation and involvement from the entire group at meetings, given their various transportation and accommodation needs. Standing agenda items were developed and decision-making processes established.

The collective voice of Alberta's seven largest communities is becoming increasingly formalized. The Seven Cities partnership is positioned to support the actions of its members and governments in the drive to limit the effects of homelessness and, ultimately, end homelessness as we know it. This collaborative process will continue to evolve.

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Reference

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). (2007). Website reference, Housing 1st Conference Presentations. www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=284-713-742-2027

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