

**Planning Future Strategic Directions:
Addressing Service Gaps**

Northern BC Summary Report

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About this Project

The United Way of Northern British Columbia now serves a region that extends from Quesnel to the Yukon border and from the Alberta border to the Queen Charlotte Islands. The Community Development Institute at UNBC worked with the United Way of Northern British Columbia to collect and organize information to support United Way activities across this region.

The information will also assist communities and regional districts to better understand the social challenges and pressures faced by their communities and work within local partnerships to address those issues. Addressing social issues will have a direct impact on the economic stability, quality of life, and sustainability of northern communities. It will also assist the United Way of Northern British Columbia with strategic planning, fund-raising campaigns, and program investments. This research was conducted in more than 26 communities.

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Copies of all reports associated with the project are accessible through the Geoffrey R. Weller Library and the Community Development Institute website (www.unbc.ca/cdi).

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Population Issues Summary

Throughout this Northern BC Summary Report, it is important to remember that each community is unique and has many individual distinguishing features and characteristics. The purpose of this report, however, is to provide a general review or overview of issues. This general review is important because, despite local uniqueness, communities across the region are impacted by some very dominant macro-trends in areas of population change, service provision, and service needs/gaps. This general review describes these macro-trends.

The typical population age distribution found across northern BC involves approximately 11 to 23% of the local population under age 15 and approximately 16 to 34% of the local population under age 20. While these shares are declining in most communities, their continued significant share of the local population means that attention must remain on services to children, youth, teens, and young adults. In particular, changing local employment opportunities significantly impact teens and young adults. In the transition years between childhood and adulthood, these age groups often fall through the cracks in service provision – and current restructuring pressures are increasing the stresses on this population. Special attention to service delivery to those two populations should be a priority to the United Way.

A second point respecting the population age structure of northern BC's small towns concerns those aged 65 and over. In most communities, this population group comprises between 7 and 28% of the population. While not numerically large in our communities, it does suggest a need for increasing attention to the design and delivery of services that not only address specific needs but are also capable of building a platform of support for an older population and a community with a growing share of an older population. This will be a challenge given that many of our communities were specifically designed around infrastructure for 'young families'. The challenge will be to provide a full spectrum of services across the age profile of the communities. An additional complication will be services for an older population that are missing the traditional supports of family due to out migration. Therefore missing key family supports that are so important in our health and care services.

Across northern BC, there are a number of communities that function as service centres for adjacent or nearby First Nation communities. While the share of the local population reporting Aboriginal identity is relatively small in most towns, there is a much larger Aboriginal population that uses services provided in these local and regional centres. As a result, service programming, and delivery, needs to consider these implications.

In terms of family structure, northern BC communities contain mostly married or common law families. However, there has been an increase in lone parent households – mostly consisting of female-headed households. Such an increase suggests impacts from economic and social change. An important note respecting lone parent households is that a very high share of female lead lone parent households is also living on a low income. A number of communities also reported a high proportion of unattached individuals living on a low income. Fundamental change in how our resource industries are organized needs to be considered as part of service design and delivery.

A key issue with respect to education is that most of the population has only grade school or high school education. This facet will affect not only the types of services required, but also how services are designed and delivered.

A number of small communities are experiencing long-term unemployment. Issues around poverty, mental health, stress, and functional lone parent families have come to a fore as a result of past and ongoing economic changes.

The impacts of the economic downturn are raising housing affordability challenges as people with high mortgages are suddenly without employment income. There are a growing number of households spending a larger than ideal proportion of their income on rent / mortgage payments. Emergency shelter, housing support, food banks, and other similar services will likely remain important to assist households experiencing pressure from economic decline in forestry, as well as pressures and rising costs from significant activity in the oil and gas exploration industries.

Within northern BC's rural and small town communities, many groups and organizations are working successfully to provide services. Changes in population structure, combined with economic and regional changes, are increasing the demands on these groups and on the range of services being provided. It will be important to identify service gaps and to nurture the creation of a solid foundation of community supports.

In reviewing population data for individual communities it needs to be noted that underreporting, especially among First Nations people is an issue. In addition, population statistics are a snapshot, and may not cover people moving into and out of poverty.

Service Needs and Gaps

Services play an important role in attracting and retaining residents and businesses. The Community Development Institute conducted service inventories in 26 communities across northern BC in the summer of 2009. These inventories help decision-makers to understand key gaps that can guide future planning and investment strategies to assist vulnerable residents (i.e. the elderly, the disabled, and the poor), as well as the general community, experiencing pressures from economic decline or growth.

In reviewing the service gaps issues noted below, it is important to remember that there are already a great many groups and services already doing a wonderful job of assisting people. These groups are being supported by a significant variety of local and non-local mechanisms. Our project found strong support for these groups. However, we also found that many of these groups, services, and supports require additional resources to maintain, enhance, and diversify the scale and scope of programs they deliver. In addition, cross community programming needs to find ways to provide ‘help for people to get help’.

Key findings revealed that northern BC communities have reasonable access to educational facilities for youth, basic health care services, protection services, financial services, communication services, basic shopping services, counselling supports, and recreational facilities. A number of new partnering opportunities have also emerged that can enhance, retain, or link residents with essential services. The creation of the Northern Health Connections Bus, as well as complimentary non-profit groups providing transportation to link up with the Northern Health Connections Bus, is one such example.

Since the 1980s, there has been a general reduction in government services and government supported services. In northern BC, this trend continues as only a few of the services we tracked were available in a majority of the communities we examined. In particular, senior day care facilities, nursing homes, food banks, drop-in centres for youth and women, half-way houses, retraining programs, financial/business advice, and government services such as the Ministry of Community Services and Service Canada were very limited in these rural and small town places.

Additional key gaps in services and infrastructure include limited social housing infrastructure, particularly with co-op housing options, emergency shelters, and assisted/subsidized housing for low income single residents, low income families, and low income women with children. A lack of affordable housing options in a community can heighten levels of poverty and homelessness, place additional strain on other support services, and can lead to out-migration and population decline. There is also an absence of transitional housing facilities to assist those with substance abuse issues. A number of services also tend to be accessible or delivered in small communities only on a part-time basis. These include literacy programs; specialized health care services, such as speech therapy, physiotherapy, and respite care; court services; and clothing exchange programs. In many cases, the demand for these part-time services exceeds their hours of operation.

A critical implication for vulnerable residents is that if services are not available in their community, they must travel long distances to access these services. This shifts the cost of service provision to residents who have to travel. With further reductions announced for inter-community transportation services, this can have profound impacts on the supports available to struggling households. Inconvenient scheduling of bus routes between communities can increase costs for vulnerable residents who are not able to return to their community on the same day. While a number of regional initiatives are underway (i.e. Valemount-McBride, Vanderhoof-Fort St. James-Fraser Lake) to pursue partnerships to provide convenient transportation options, it is clear that general trends to service reduction and regional availability are creating challenges and costs to our households.

Summary of Issues Looking Forward

At present, there are two core issues which need to be driving motivations behind the United Way funding supports across northern BC. Given that there is only limited funding, and that the needs are quite significant, the first motivation is that United Way support should come with a mechanism to support or enhance local and regional coordination and information awareness. Coordination is critical in order to ensure that the right people are accessing the right services and to ensure that we are not duplicating services. Awareness activities are also critical so that people who need services can take advantage of those which already exist in their community. As noted earlier, there are many high quality services already available and supported by a variety of mechanisms that can already assist people. However, many of these supports require additional resources to maintain and enhance the delivery of programs.

The second motivating theme that runs through this information is the generalized need for respite support. Volunteer and service organizations can be characterized as an increasingly burdened, indeed already overburdened, segment of our rural and small town community infrastructure. It was very clear through this project that a host of respite services are critically needed for lone parents, service providers, and for the ‘unexpected’ service providers such as teachers and even store owners in communities where they bear the burden of stresses from social, economic, and other transitions.

Several significant trends in our northern communities have been identified. Each of these trends comes with implications for the design, funding, and delivery of core service supports. These include:

- Family supports
 - Supports for people accessing services for the first time, especially services that are out of town.
 - Relationships are under stress through a variety of mechanisms and general information and counselling needs to be more generally available.
 - Activities (social and recreational) need to be broadly supported for children, youth, teens, and that ‘missing’ age group from 17 to 23 years.
 - Accessibility to general and social recreational activities can help to mitigate issues around stress in the household and can build stronger families and thus stronger communities.
 - While daycare was accessible in each community, there were calls for a broader range of affordable and flexible daycare options (i.e. for shift workers, children with special needs, etc.).
 - Unexpected needs among ‘temporary’ lone parent households due to long distance labour commuting during economic uncertainty.
 - Programs connecting ‘grand parents’ to ‘grand kids’. Cross generational programming has the potential for wider benefits.

- Economic adjustments
 - Enhanced need for adult literacy, including economic literacy, programs as this group is facing fundamental change through job losses and local economic change.
 - Need to enhance a range of services and information addressing issues of poverty, food, and nutrition (i.e. advocacy support and food banks). This is especially critical since many of the people in our communities have never experienced long periods with reduced incomes and haven't developed the experience or skills necessary to adjust.
 - Key issue through all the communities is the need for enhanced mental health services. The need for these services has increased tremendously as a result of social and economic change pressures. While mental health supports are already provided in most communities, there were several calls for enhanced access to such supports during the evenings and weekends.
 - Violence and substance abuse issues can arise during both economic decline and growth periods. There were several calls to provide patients and family members with timely substance abuse supports. There is also a general absence of anti-violence or healthy relationship programs for men.
- Demographic adjustments
 - Population aging brings in a whole new category for service needs for older residents (either in their home, in the community through activities and centres, or in specialized facilities such as care homes) that have not been experienced before. With no foundation of past experience, many of these services need to be created from scratch.
 - Despite population aging and a reduced proportion of young people in our communities, our communities are still numerically dominated by families with children, and thus, we still need to provide services for babies, children, youth, teens, and those 17-23 years of age.
- Infrastructure
 - Many small communities in northern BC have limited or no social housing infrastructure and an aging housing stock. With a number of residents spending a high proportion of their income on rent or mortgage payments, it is not surprising that many participants called for more low income housing options and supports.
 - To enable seniors to remain in their community, there is a need to develop a broader range of multi-care facilities to compliment increased needs for in-home care and support services. There is also a need for supports to assist seniors in relocating to housing that is both affordable and appropriate.
 - Emergency, short-term, and long-term shelter facilities/options are needed for youth who are not able to live at home.
 - Expansion of shelters facilities/options for lone parent families, especially the growing phenomenon of male-headed lone parent families.
 - Additional investment in recreation facilities are needed to ensure that they meet multi-generational use needs, and can provide activity options at little or no cost.

- Transportation
 - Transportation within communities is very important so people can access available services supports, facilities, and activities throughout the day (for example: when the family vehicle is at a work site or out of town with a commuting worker).
 - Transportation to regional centres for higher level services can be costly, time inconvenient, and can often separate families. Winter weather across northern BC also increases concerns about the safety of travelling long distances for such services.
 - We need to make better use of available services (such as linking other users with the Northern Health Connections bus).
 - Costs issues need to be dealt with for low income households. These costs can include travel and possible accommodation cost for those forced to travel, as well as care and maintenance costs for family members who remain in the home community.
 - Care issues need to be dealt with for families so that not all children would need to travel for every out of town appointment.
- Organizational supports
 - Programming to support capacity building and support for volunteers in organizations delivering services on the ground.
 - Leadership and management training supports for these organizations to allow them to be more effective and to reduce the burden on leadership.
 - Information, awareness, and supports to facilitate leadership succession, volunteer recruitment, and sustainability of organizations.
 - Administrative supports, such as for grant writing, are not a ‘frill’ but a necessary support for increasingly over-burdened service groups.
 - Program funders must find ways to reduce the administrative and bureaucratic burdens placed on volunteer community groups through sensible paperwork and accounting materials/guidelines.
 - Support for enhanced interagency communication to make more wise use of our limited human and financial resources.