Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society
COVID-19 Recovery - Discussion Guide & Questionnaire

Introduction

The Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society (the Council) is part of the government's commitment to "harness the power of civil society." This commitment builds on Alberta's rich tradition of volunteerism, charitable giving, and communities coming together to solve problems. And it reflects the conviction that civil society is often best able to address social challenges.

Civil society includes a diverse and evolving array of organizations and actors. It includes formally established non-profit/voluntary organizations (including registered charities), as well as informal groups or movements pursuing shared interests or values. It may also include private-sector actors pursuing social goods.

Recovery Context

Civil society played a critical role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting vulnerable Albertans. Despite significant efforts and investments by governments and other funders, civil society organizations have sustained major impacts to earned revenues and donations, their workforce (including volunteers), and other aspects of their operations. The goal is to support a recovery that can help build an even more effective and resilient civil society, one with the capacity to help address pressing social challenges in the future.

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to gather input on what civil society needs to begin the process of recovery from the impacts of COVID-19, and to support the development of a more effective and resilient sector. This input will inform the Council's advice to government, including priorities for targeted funding from the Civil Society Fund.

Please briefly respond to the questions below, keeping each response to **approximately 200 words**. The specific input of organizations and individuals will be kept confidential.

Organization Name	**Alberta Council of Disability Services (ACDS)**
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1. What new opportunities, promising practices or learnings emerged from the COVID-19 experience (e.g. new approaches to communication or collaboration)?

Communication: After an initial period of lack of communication and direction from Community and Social Services (CSS), a communication schedule was established between CSS ADMs, ACDS and regional providers to discuss emerging issues and potential responses. ADMs heard province-wide and region-specific issues, helped troubleshoot concerns and addressed questions through weekly written Q&As.

Formal collaborative structure: A co-chaired provincial structure established pre-pandemic between government and ACDS/service providers became a natural conduit for communication and rapid problem-solving.

Data sharing: PDD Program data shared prior to the pandemic helped agencies and government have shared understanding of program pressures/opportunities, and facilitated collaborative decision-making and buy-in.

Contract flexibility: With most day/employment programs closed due to lockdown, agencies were permitted to shift funds/staff within existing budgets to areas of greater need, enabling supports to be tailored more effectively. Lower micromanagement allowed services to be accountable but also creative, unbounded by service codes.

Increased cooperation: Organizations escalated collaboration to share information and experiential learnings (e.g., dealing with outbreak), and to develop solutions to common problems (e.g., drafted agreements to share staff between agencies).

Innovative practice models: Organizations implemented alternate staffing models and used creative solutions to support individuals virtually through technology.

2. What challenges or barriers emerged for civil society during the COVID-19 response?

Communication lag: Lack of clear direction and formal communication from CSS in initial weeks created confusion regarding program closures, flexibility to redeploy resources, and managing unbudgeted COVID-related costs.

Health's lack of understanding of disability services: Public health orders relevant to disability services were not written specifically for disability services. Protocol applicability (mandated vs. strongly recommended) and practical implementation had to be interpreted by service providers. ACDS attempted to assist with interpretation; guidance from CSS or Health was not available quickly or clearly.

Lack of health-related expertise: Service providers supporting medically fragile individuals are familiar with intense health-related procedures; however, most other disability providers had to learn rapidly due to the broad reach and complexity of health orders, which increased stress at a demanding time.

Access to supplies and testing: Access to PPE, thermometers and symptom testing for staff and individuals was initially very difficult. PDD regional offices temporarily coordinated PPE orders and delivery, however timely access was an ongoing issue forcing many agencies to source their own suppliers.

Staffing: Program closures and health order restricting staff to single sites caused some loss of staff to better-paying jobs in healthcare. This could have longer term implications for recruitment and retention in the sector.

Organizational capacity: Smaller or rural organizations were least able to respond to changes and staff shortages.

3. Has COVID-19 changed the ability of civil society to address social issues in the long-term? If so, how?

Government-sector relationships: The pandemic demonstrated that government and civil society organizations can respond rapidly and effectively under intense pressure. Practices that were previously only undertaken following administratively burdensome approvals (e.g., changing services for individuals) or not at all (e.g., flexible invoicing, not restricted to service codes), became acceptable out of necessity during the pandemic. Government learned to trust service providers to act in the best interest of vulnerable individuals; service providers felt empowered to offer positive solutions rather than wait for directions or permissions. A strong, trust-based government-sector partnership creates a solid foundation to collaboratively address social issues.

Opportunity to examine system design and intersections: The pandemic revealed the importance of defining the mandate and scope for the PDD Program in relation to Health. Are individuals with high/ultra-complex needs within PDD scope/capacity? How does PDD overlap with Health? Who has overriding authority under what conditions? Who assumes liability/increased costs when systems collide/conflict/unintentionally impact the other negatively? These conversations have become more urgent, and civil society partners are motivated to engage with government to support effective system design.

Use of technology: Many technology-averse agencies were forced to become tech-savvy. Use of technology to address social issues creatively, and with potential cost-savings, will be a new norm for many organizations.

4. Looking forward, what are the key challenges to a successful recovery for civil society? What opportunities exist to address those challenges?

Staffing challenges: Low wages, demanding work, and added challenge of COVID protocols/ hazards make the disability sector even less attractive than before. Compounding longstanding recruitment and retention issues, absenteeism may increase due to illness or need to self-isolate, burnout, and access to child-care if schools do not re-open as scheduled.

➢ Opportunity for government to address wage inequity in the sector, including supporting organizations for pandemic-related costs to cover extended sick leaves.

➢ Opportunity for organizations to redesign service models, increase technological solutions for service delivery and administration, expand cross-training, job-sharing and other staffing capacity options.

Reduced revenues: Organizations relying on non-governmental revenues to supplement programs have been impacted by COVID-related cancellations of fundraising/engagement events and reduced personal/corporate donations due to the economic crisis.

> ➢ Opportunity for government to support sustainability of vital service delivery partners through adequate, flexible, long-term funding agreements.

> ➢ Opportunity for organizations to use technology to support events, cultivate new/non-traditional donor relationships, reduce costs via cross-agency collaborations (e.g., backroom administrative functions, joint case management of shared clients)

Executive capacity: Small organizations are less likely to have leadership depth and board capacity to cope with funding disruptions, adapt to change, and reposition their organizations following a chronic crisis.

> ➢ Opportunity to examine the service delivery ecosystem and support friendly mergers to enhance overall disability sector (vs. individual organization) strength and resilience.

5. What steps should be taken to ensure the needs of vulnerable Albertans are addressed as part of civil society recovery and future capacity-building efforts?

Civil society and its various sub-sectors are a core part of Alberta's communities and prosperity. It is critical to recognise that vulnerable Albertans, who are most likely to be impacted negatively in any crisis, are also the ones who most need civil society supports during these times. The recovery and capacity-building of the sector and its workforce, therefore, cannot be viewed in isolation from economic recovery plans for the province as a whole.

This means:

- including nonprofits and charities in recovery plans or supports targeted for private sector and small businesses, including: emergency subsidies for wages, rent and operational overheads, remote work supports and workforce re-training

- considering the impact on nonprofit workers and vulnerable Albertans of policies related to affordable child-care, affordable housing, public transportation, access to preventative, mental health and primary care services, and school re-opening plans

- supporting the advocacy capacity of evidence-based organizations that represent and give voice to vulnerable Albertans, and collaborating with them to jointly develop recovery plans

- supporting vulnerable Albertans to directly participate in public consultations related to recovery plans

B. Recovery – Roles and Responsibilities

6. An effective and sustainable recovery will require efforts by many parties, including creative non-financial steps or strategies. What roles should each of the following play in civil society's recovery over the next 1-3 years?

Non-profit and charitable social service organizations (including faith-based and cultural groups):

Assessing organizations with limited capacity: Boards and organizational leaders must honestly examine if their agency has the capacity to adapt, problem solve and continue to provide effective services during a crisis; if not, they should examine ways to mitigate associated risks, including exploring solutions ranging from short-term options such as inter-agency program-specific collaborations to long-term or permanent options such as partnerships and organizational mergers.

Innovation evaluation and diffusion: During the pandemic, many organizations, out of necessity, designed and implemented new ways to provide services or manage their operations. Organizations should document and evaluate if these innovative practices or approaches need to stop (not needed, too costly, only valuable/relevant during the crisis) or if they show promise and may lead to greater effectiveness or efficiency if continued in the future. Promising practices should be retained, evaluated, improved, and shared with other organizations.

Informal community groups, networks/coalitions, or Individuals:

Provincial nonprofit networks and disability sector associations and local/regional sub-sector-specific service provider councils:

Government relations (GR) and advocacy: Act as conduit to foster relationships with government, enhance GR capacity in organizations, and provide a collective voice to help develop strong policy.

Collaborations and connectivity: Support members to connect, share information and resources and provide a mechanism for collaboration.

Data strategy: Develop and implement, in collaboration with government, a comprehensive strategy to identify service demands/gaps (especially unpredicted changes due to the pandemic), existing data sources within government/networks/agencies, data needs/gaps, and ways to collect, analyse and share data for system design, program policy and service delivery planning.

COVID impacts, responses and learnings: Document stories of service adjustments and new ways of working, why they were necessary, what implications negative impacts have for system/program re-design, what can be retained/amplified from positive impacts and responses, and share learnings.

Support innovation diffusion: Identify evidence-based innovations and support diffusion via knowledge mobilization and advocacy.

Strengthen regional ecosystem: Provide an arms-length assessment of sub-sector ecosystem to identify weaknesses, strengths, collaborative/partnership/merger opportunities to strengthen capacity and resilience of sub-sectoral ecosystem (not just individual organizations).

Families and individuals receiving supports:

Individual experiences of COVID and service adjustments: Document stories of how COVID and service adjustments impacted families and individuals receiving services, gather their insights on service improvements to inform practices and program policies.

Advocacy and engagement: Provide a mechanism for families and individuals to respond to government consultations as recovery progresses.

Foundations and non-government funders:

Time-limited funding for:

- Pandemic and emergency planning and training
- Unbudgeted, emergency short-term expenses
- Capital expenditures related to remote working and technology solutions
- Workforce training in participatory and developmental program evaluation
- Leadership and board governance training
- Strategic planning and organizational capacity building
- Research, development, implementation and evaluation of service innovation pilots
- Knowledge mobilization and innovation diffusion

Private Sector/Business organizations:

- Donation of office equipment, technology hardware and software licences

- Donation to support workforce, leadership and board training

- Pro bono professional expertise (e.g., interpretation of legislative or regulatory changes, employment standards implications, risk management strategies, emergency planning, technology solutions development)

Municipal Governments:

- Understand the unique needs of vulnerable Albertans in local municipality, and develop collaborative solutions for social issues within municipal jurisdiction (e.g., free/low-cost public transportation, affordable housing to address homelessness, targeted preventative social programs and services)

- Support advocacy for policy solutions that lie in the jurisdiction of other levels of government

Government of Canada:

- Reduce regulatory burdens on charities that impact their ability to respond quickly and with agility

- Reduce administrative burdens by minimizing and delaying reporting requirements

- Fast-track funding renewal processes

- Provide sustainable, flexible and predictable funding

- Automatically include nonprofits, charities and social enterprises in federal initiatives and programs that support private sector employers and small businesses; tailor these initiatives to the sector's needs and organizational capacity (e.g., make application process simple, transfer funds rapidly since many organizations have limited financial reserves or lines of credit to access emergency bridge funding)

- Mandate communication providers to provide phone and internet services for free or at low-cost to nonprofits and charities

- Create formal structure(s) where senior government officials and sector and sub-sector representatives can meet regularly to share updates, identify issues, and develop collaborative solutions

Government of Alberta:

- Provide sustainable, flexible and predictable funding

- Work with civil society representative to address regulatory burdens that restricted organizational agility to pivot and respond. This includes but is not limited to a contracting framework that uses a transparent funding formula, is focused on outcomes rather than inputs, and has streamlined reporting processes

- Automatically include nonprofits, charities and social enterprises in provincial initiatives and programs that support private sector employers and small businesses; tailor these initiatives to the sector's needs and organizational capacity

- Build understanding in Alberta Health Services of how other human service systems and programs operate, create sensitivity about how health orders impact these other systems and programs, and create a mechanism where Health, CSS and other ministries and civil society stakeholders can work together to tailor health orders for sub-sectors

- Implement a gender-based plus analysis (GBA+) to assess how recovery measures and policies differentially impact people of different identities and abilities.

C. Government of Alberta (CSS) COVID-19 Funding Priorities

7. The Government of Alberta's new Civil Society Fund provides targeted, one-time funding (not operational or program funding) to support innovation and capacity building in civil society. To support an effective and sustainable recovery, what should the top 3 funding priorities be <u>in this first year (2020-21)</u>**?**

1. Evaluation of innovative COVID responses in program models to assess outcomes and support knowledge mobilization around effective program models

2. Leadership and organizational capacity building related to ability to adapt and respond to future crisis; the funding and capacity building initiatives can occur through sector and sub-sector umbrella associations and capacity building organizations

3. Funding to support organizational mergers in ways that minimize service disruption and provide continuity as best as possible for individuals receiving services

8. What should the top 3 funding priorities be in <u>future years</u> **(to reflect evolving challenges or opportunities)?**

- Outcome evaluation

- Pilots for promising/innovative practices

- Symposiums to share knowledge

- Collaborative partnerships and shared services to increase capacity of small organizations (e.g., human resources, evaluation or financial collaboratives)

9. What specific design considerations should the Civil Society Fund include to maximize the funding's impact and support effective implementation (e.g. eligibility requirements; evaluation criteria)?

- Fund umbrella and capacity building organizations to create broader impact across sub-sectors

- Ensure funding is tied to evidence-based practice and supports outcome evaluation

10. Do you have any final advice to support an effective and sustainable recovery and a flourishing civil society sector over the long-term?

Alberta's economic and fiscal recovery will not occur without a robust civil society and especially without strong delivery organizations to provide government-mandated services. A flourishing sector needs (i) a strong relationship with its government partner, and (ii) strong organizations to provide frontline supports.

<u>Formal sector-wide and sub-sectoral structures for collaboration</u>: Our experience has shown that having a formal, joint governance structure with equal representation from government officials and civil society leaders results in effective and timely information sharing, issues identification, and collaborative problem solving, while also being a platform through which mutual trust is created and sustained for long-term impact.

<u>Supporting organizational capacity, not just service delivery</u>: Organizations with limited internal capacity for adaptability and innovation might make it through a time-limited crisis, but are highly likely to flounder or need significant life support during a pandemic that is expected to be with us for the long haul. Funders, including government and private foundations, focus their funding on frontline services, yet they expect organizations to somehow be adaptive and innovative, with significant sophistication and leadership capacity. Civil society organizations, whether they provide direct services or support capacity building, must be funded adequately for administrative costs, workforce training, leadership capacity building, time for leaders to engage with each other to develop partnerships and collaboratives, ability to prototype and evaluate service innovations, and share promising practices.