



A Report Prepared for the Rural Municipalities of Alberta by the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities at the University of Alberta

Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Faced by FCSS Programs in Rural Alberta

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* ABOUT THE ALBERTA CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities (ACSRC), located at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta in Camrose, has, since its founding in 2009, assisted rural communities in meeting diverse challenges across many areas of public policy through fostering constructive dialogue, promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and developing partnerships. The ACSRC's mission is to link the research, outreach, and educational capacity of the University of Alberta with students, researchers, rural communities, rural community organizations, and policy makers at multiple levels across the province, nationally, and internationally in order to support the improved sustainability of rural communities and populations.

Thinking respectfully and reciprocally with, not just for, rural communities is a main objective of the ACSRC. Through dialogue and collaboration, the ACSRC operates an outreach program that provides direction and stimulates innovation in the development of rural communities. This is built around various collaborations with educational institutions, municipalities, and not-for-profit organizations on research projects that seek to create resilient rural communities across Alberta.

Recently, the ACSRC has been engaged in rural-focused projects related to substantiable economic development opportunities, community mental health, the delivery of social services, enhancing inclusivity, advancing the transition to renewable energy, aiding municipal collaboration, and better understanding both rural public opinion and rural-based populism. To read more about the ACSRC and the work it does, please visit: www.acsrc.ca.

* ABOUT THE RURAL MUNICIPALITIES OF ALBERTA (RMA) & THE PROJECT

The Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) advocates on behalf of Alberta’s rural municipalities. The RMA’s members consist of 63 municipal districts and counties, five specialized municipalities, and the Special Areas Board. The RMA’s 69 members have several common traits: large land masses, small populations, and a lack of a traditional “population centre.” RMA members provide municipal governance to approximately 85% of Alberta’s land mass; Alberta is unique in Canada in that municipalities govern land throughout the entire province, from border to border.

Because Alberta’s rural municipalities provide municipal governance to large, sparsely populated, and often isolated areas, efficient and high-quality delivery of municipal services is an ongoing challenge that often requires innovative solutions and partnerships with neighbouring towns and villages. It also means that provincial services readily available in urban areas are limited or inaccessible to rural residents, especially those without access to a personal vehicle.

For several years, the RMA has heard from members that reductions in provincial social service availability in rural communities combined with stagnation in provincial funding for municipally-operated family and community support services (FCSS) has led to unprecedented pressure on FCSS agencies to act as a catch-all for a range of social needs in rural communities, including many beyond their mandates. Similar pressure has been put on rural municipalities to contribute funding to FCSS services well beyond their formal requirement under the *Family and Community Support Services Act*.

As social challenges are often overlooked and under-reported in rural Alberta, the RMA prioritized the need to “dig deeper” on this issue to determine whether these concerns were as serious as members described, and whether they were widespread across the province. The work undertaken by the ACSRC provides some powerful evidence as to the reality of this issue in rural Alberta and will allow the RMA to continue to advocate for improved delivery of provincial social services and adequate funding of FCSS programs in rural communities.

* EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family and community support service (FCSS) programs have provided vitally important “preventative” social service programming to vulnerable Albertans for several decades. FCSS programs remain a critical staple of community life in rural Alberta in particular, often existing as the “only place in town” for rural Albertans in need to seek assistance face-to-face. However, these rural-based programs are facing increasing pressures that are negatively impacting their capacity to serve those in need. This report highlights three key challenges faced by rural FCSS programs in Alberta and responds with four policy recommendations.

Key Challenges

1. Insufficient Provincial Funding

FCSS program costs have been rapidly increasing in the past five years, placing significant stress on their operations. Government of Alberta (GOA) funding (meant to equate to 80% of FCSS’s core funding) has remained largely stagnant since 2015. The majority of rural FCSS offices are increasingly reliant on municipal contributions well above their required twenty percent. However, rural municipalities do not have unlimited budgets, and are only able to make up so much of the shortfall created by the province refusing to meaningfully increase FCSS funding.

2. The Increasing Inaccessibility of Provincial Social Services in Rural Alberta

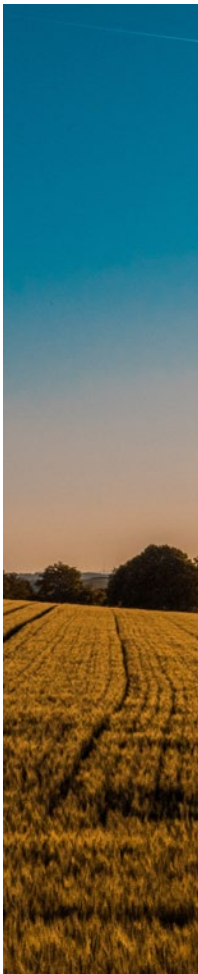
The ongoing centralization of social support services in Alberta has generated challenges for rural FCSS programs; challenges that have only multiplied with recent GOA decisions to transition to “1-800” intake lines and online web portals for several social service supports. As rural FCSS offices are often “the only shop in town,” they face a disproportionate burden compared to most of their urban counterparts, as more and more community members approach FCSS offices for help. This places additional pressure on rural FCSS offices to go beyond their mandate and provide intervention-type services, incurring the extra cost this entails with no hope of being reimbursed.

3. Changing and Increasing Social Needs in Rural Communities

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent period of inflation, FCSS programs across rural Alberta are encountering far more community members with more complex social needs than ever before. The number of people who are walking through the doors of rural FCSS offices in crisis has increased dramatically in the past few years, placing additional burdens on these offices to provide intervention-type services and incur the extra cost and effort this entails with no hope of being reimbursed.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Increase core funding from the Government of Alberta.
2. Increase the accessibility of provincial social support services for rural Albertans.
3. Ensure that future public policy related to social service delivery in Alberta is approached via a rural lens.
4. Ensure that social service policy in Alberta is designed with meaningful contributions from rural FCSS programs.



* SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Family and community support service (FCSS) programs provide effective and vitally important “preventative” social service programming to vulnerable community members of all ages 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 seek assistance face-to-face. These offices are staffed with hardworking and caring individuals who go above and beyond in serving their communities.

However, these rural-based programs 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. These challenges are pushing many rural FCSS programs to the brink, negatively affecting some of the most vulnerable members of rural communities and placing pressure on rural municipalities to shoulder an ever-increasing share of the costs of FCSS programming — a share that is now routinely in excess of the 20% mandated by provincial legislation.

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 contemporary challenges faced by rural FCSS programs across Alberta and the subsequent burdens being placed on rural municipalities.

To complete this task, the research team utilized a mixed-method study design that was reviewed and approved by the research ethics board of the University of Alberta

(Pro00124133). The research began by conducting 20 semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with individuals deemed knowledgeable about this topic. Those interviewed included 16 different directors of rural and smalltown FCSS programs across Alberta, one member of the Family and Community Support Service Association of Alberta (FCSSAA), and three separate Government of Alberta employees with significant experience working with rural FCSS programs. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted online using Zoom, and were transcribed for thematic analysis by the research team.

After completing all 20 interviews, the research team designed a 38-question survey to further explore the depth of the challenges faced by rural FCSS programs identified in the interviews. This survey was conducted online, was emailed to the directors of 158 FCSS programs scattered across rural and smalltown Alberta and received a total of 80 respondents. As Figure 1 and Figure 2, page 8 suggest, the survey respondents provided a representative sample of rural FCSS programs from across the province. Not only did the research team receive a good number of replies from each FCSS region, they also received responses from various sizes and structures of FCSS programs in Alberta.

Figure 1: What FCSS region is your program located in?

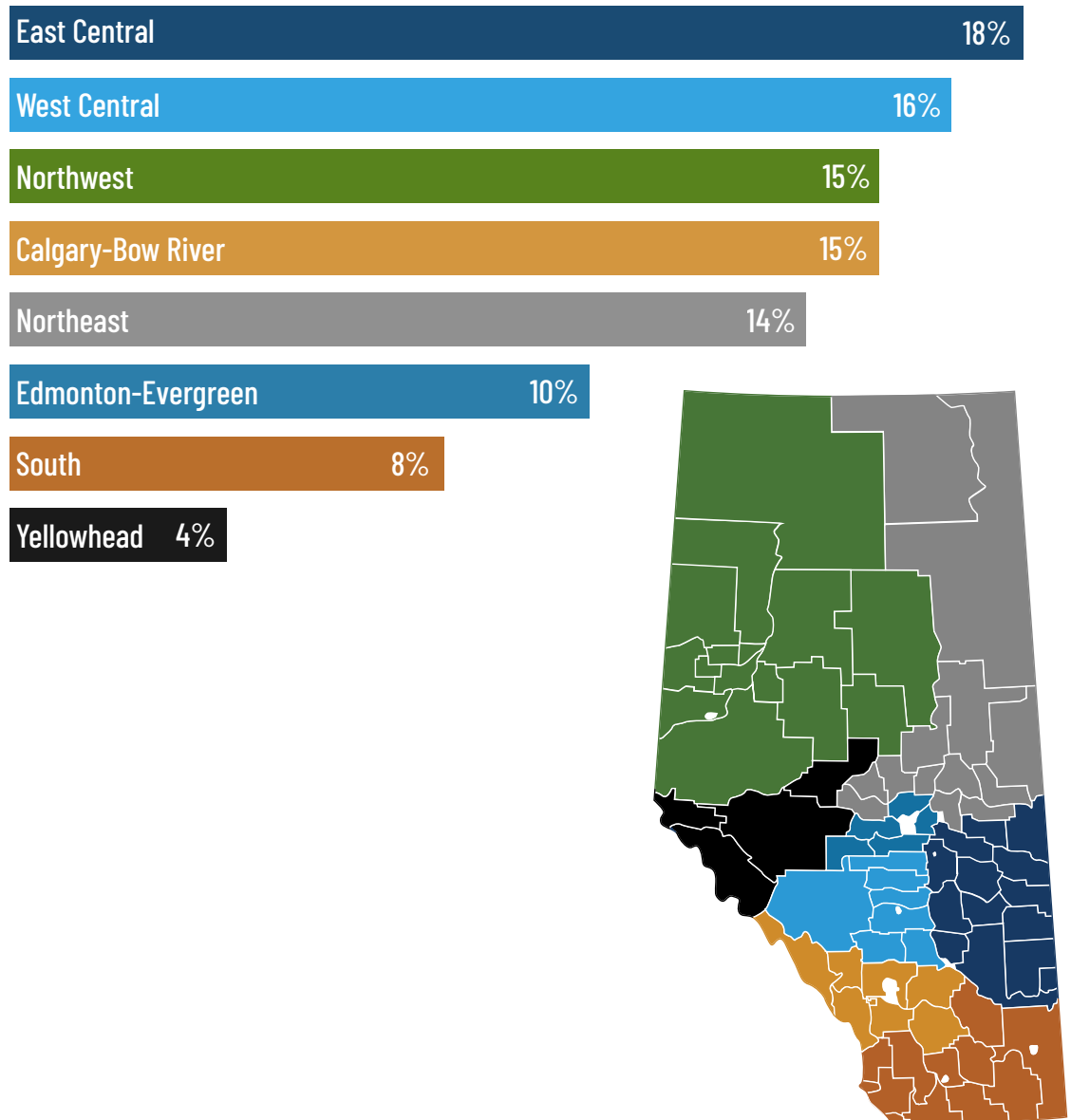
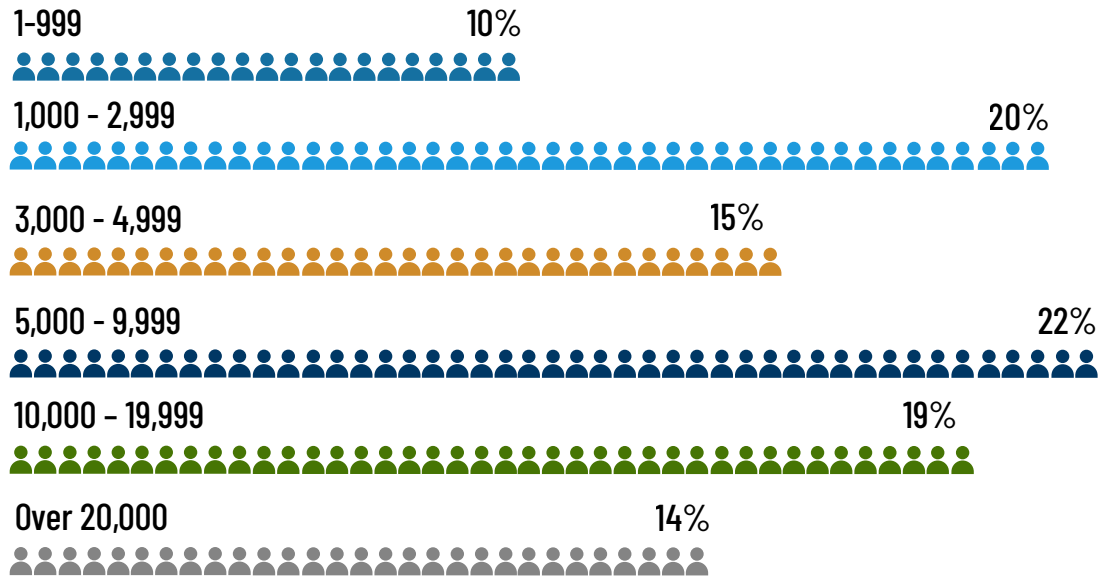


Figure 2: How large is the population your FCSS program serves?



The results of this study, discussed in detail throughout the report, were derived from an analysis of both the qualitative interview portion and the quantitative survey portion described above. In short, the research team found that rural FCSS offices are facing several important challenges that impact their capacity to address the social needs that are arising in their communities. After a brief description of the FCSS program in general (, page 9), the report delves into three specific and interlocking challenges and describe their implications for rural FCSS offices, rural Albertans in need, and rural municipalities in general (Section 3: Key Challenges, page 13). The report closes with four policy recommendations for the Government of Alberta (GOA) that would, if implemented, contribute to re-establishing the full capacities of rural FCSS offices, positively impact the lives of many of rural Alberta’s most vulnerable citizens who are currently being poorly served, and substantially relieve the additional FCSS-related fiscal load rural municipalities are being asked to shoulder in the current environment.



* SECTION 2: WHAT ARE FAMILY & COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES?

Social service delivery in Alberta is a complex file stretching across a variety of provincial ministries, agencies, and organizations. Family and community support services (FCSS) sit amid this complicated web, currently existing within the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services, but frequently collaborating with agencies from the ministries of Health, Education, Children’s Services, and Mental Health and Addiction, among others.

With a history stretching back to 1966, there are now 210 local FCSS programs across Alberta providing services to 316 municipalities and Métis Settlements, most of which can be designated as “rural” or “small town.”¹ All but a handful of FCSS programs are represented by the Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta (FCSSAA), a member-driven organization that brings FCSS directors and staff together for educational and networking opportunities, while also representing FCSS programs to various stakeholders,

1 Technically, FCSS does not make any formal distinction between rural vs. urban, although there do exist strong perceptions among FCSS directors that “rural” FCSS programs, however defined, face distinct challenges from “urban” programs. Although it is possible to select a formal measure to define rural from urban, there is little reason to do so in this context given that there exist many FCSS programming partnerships across Alberta between low population / low density rural counties or villages and higher population cities (for example, the partnership between the City of Camrose and Camrose County under the umbrella of Camrose and District Social Services) that make drawing a divide between rural and urban especially complicated when it comes to FCSS.



especially the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services.

Fundamentally, the mandate of FCSS programs is to provide preventive social services, defined as “a proactive process that strengthens the protective factors of individuals, families, and communities to promote well-being, reduce vulnerabilities, enhance quality of life, and empowers them to meet the challenges of life.” More specifically, FCSS programs are meant to enhance “protective factors to improve well-being and prevent problems before they occur or at an early stage before they require crisis supports.”²

FCSS programs are governed by the provincial *Family and Community Support Services Act*, although both their creation and the structure and programming decisions they make are strongly rooted in their local communities. When a municipality or Métis Settlement council decides to establish an FCSS program, they enter into an agreement with the Government of Alberta to jointly fund projects, services, or both. Since 1966, the funding model has been set at an 80/20 split, with the province meant to provide 80% of the core funding for FCSS programming and the municipality providing the remaining 20%.³ As of 2023, the total annual provincial funding for FCSS programs across Alberta is \$105 million. Importantly, the FCSS model also relies upon what was described to the research team as “the multiplier effect.” In essence, the funds contributed by the provincial and municipal governments are further buttressed by significant on-the-ground volunteer participation, especially from community organizations who partner with local FCSS offices on a variety of programming. This significantly extends the reach of FCSS programming. In 2021, FCSS programs across Alberta reported more than 47,850 volunteers contributing over 1,295,700 volunteer hours annually.



The Importance of Local Autonomy

Since 1981, local FCSS offices have had considerable autonomy to structure their programs and design their day-to-day programming in ways that are best suited to meet the local conditions in their respective communities. Indeed, “local responsibility for decision-making” remains a key principle of the entire FCSS program. Although the GOA is meant to provide the bulk of program funding, municipalities and Métis Settlements must “decide how to allocate the funding to best meet the needs and priorities of the community — within the FCSS

- 2 “Family and Community Support Services Accountability Framework,” Government of Alberta, December 2022.
- 3 For a more detailed history of FCSS in Alberta, as well as more information of the variety of regulations FCSS programs must follow, see: “Understanding FCSS,” published by the *Family and Community Social Services Association of Alberta*. Available at: <https://fcssaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FCSS-101-All-Modules-2021.pdf>



mandate”.⁴ This concept was repeatedly highlighted as a strength of the FCSS model in our study, a conclusion that coincides with academic literature on rural community development, which frequently stresses the importance of local autonomy as a key ingredient in program success across issues⁵. Unsurprisingly, this autonomy has also ensured a good deal of variation across FCSS programs in Alberta — there is no standard FCSS model in the province.

At the municipal level, FCSS programs can be operated directly by single municipalities, as multi-municipal programs, or in partnerships. The single municipality structure is most common. In a multi-municipal program, two or more municipalities join as a “regional” or “district” FCSS program, and each participating municipality makes its 20% contribution to the program budget. In a partnering or “grant transfer” FCSS organization, neighbouring municipalities agree to give some or all of their FCSS funds to one of the municipalities to provide services to residents of the partnering municipalities.

In addition to these three possible program structures, FCSS also offers three different models of program administration: the FCSS department (or FCSS program), the community services department, or direct municipal management. An FCSS department has a designated FCSS program director and FCSS staff who are municipal employees and report to a manager or CAO. In a community services department arrangement, FCSS is part of a larger municipal department that provides other services like recreation. Under direct municipal management, the FCSS manager or CAO administers the FCSS program and reports directly to council, which has oversight over FCSS funding decisions. This model is more common in smaller communities with small FCSS budgets. The community services department model is common both in smaller communities and in larger cities, and the FCSS department model is popular in municipalities with medium-sized budgets.⁶ There are also six FCSS non-profit societies. In these programs, FCSS staff are employees of the non-profit society, not municipal employees. Although they are independent of the municipality, non-profit FCSS programs are still mandated to provide programming that meets community needs and priorities.⁷

Day-to-day programming also varies across FCSS programs; several interview respondents spoke passionately about the importance of tailoring programming to specific community needs. The most frequently mentioned programs across all FCSS offices included parent and family support, early childhood development, and youth programs. FCSS directors also described programs to benefit seniors, including home support and organized opportunities for social interaction to combat isolation, as key components of their mandate. Annual volunteer appreciation events, providing welcoming services for newcomers to the community, and low-income tax clinics are three other examples of commonly provided services in small and rural FCSS programs. Helping connect community members in need to the provincial and federal benefit and support services they are entitled to also falls within FCSS’s mandate.

Certain types of support services fall outside of the FCSS mandate and are thus ineligible to be supported with FCSS funding. These include services that are primarily recreational or leisure-oriented in nature; services that offer direct assistance such as money, food, or

4 See: “Understanding FCSS”

5 See: Yolande E. Chan, Jeffery A. Dixon, and Christine R. Dukelow, *Revitalizing Rural Economies*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013

6 “FCSS Program Structure, Administration and Delivery,” published by the Family and Community Social Services Association of Alberta, p.2. Available at: <https://fcssaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FCSS-101-All-Modules-2021.pdf>

7 “FCSS Program Structure, Administration and Deliver,” p.2

shelter; services which could be classified as intervention or rehabilitation; and services which duplicate programs that are the responsibility of a different ministry or government agency.⁸

The Reality of FCSS Programs in Rural and Small Town Alberta

The research team heard repeatedly throughout this study that the FCSS office is often the only social service agency in rural communities. As this report will demonstrate, this is an important consideration that plays a central role in the challenges FCSS programs face across rural Alberta.

Given that they are often “the only shop in town,” rural FCSS programs are likely to spend a large portion of their funding on direct service delivery, including salaries for employees who provide direct service delivery. In general, this contrasts with larger urban FCSS programs, which tend to grant their funds to the myriad other community service organizations that exist to offer programming in urban centres rather than deliver programming themselves.

Where there are other social service agencies and community-based non-profits, rural FCSS offices often play a coordinating role. In addition to managing their own FCSS funds and outside grants, FCSS programs will often act as the banker or guarantor for community non-profits, helping them to write grants, manage funds, and fulfill reporting requirements. Several of the rural FCSS directors interviewed described this as a community development role: they want to reduce barriers for the community non-profit sector and see FCSS as having an important role in making funding accessible to local non-profit organizations.

Finally, while all the FCSS directors interviewed expressed their support for prevention as the core of FCSS services, it is also clear that provincial stipulations around funding only preventative programming frequently conflict with daily realities in rural communities. Many directors emphasized that rural FCSS programs serve as social service “catch-alls.” In the words of one director, “In rural communities, if you need help and you’re not sure where to go, you go to FCSS.” Rural FCSS offices are regularly approached by community members seeking assistance that often goes beyond prevention and FCSS staff are thus frequently placed in the largely untenable situation of “staying true to their mandate” and turning people in need away or providing some type of required intervention support, an action that not only goes beyond their mandate but also requires additional effort and resources that are not reimbursed by the GOA. Unfortunately, a variety of factors have pushed FCSS offices, especially those in rural communities, in this direction, placing significant additional stress on these programs.



8 “Understanding FCSS,” p.4



* SECTION 3: KEY CHALLENGES

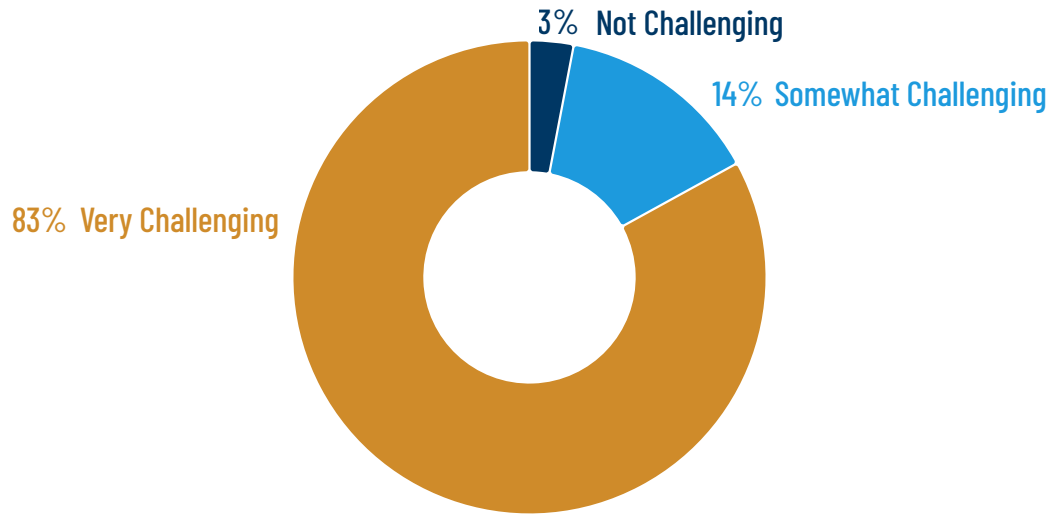
Over the course of this study the research team learned of a variety of challenges rural FCSS offices face, some specific to certain communities, others shared across the province. What follows is not a full account of all the challenges encountered, but rather a detailed consideration of three unique, complex, and often interlocking challenges that emerged as the most widespread and pressing for rural FCSS offices.

Key Challenge 1: Insufficient Provincial Funding

The most significant challenge rural FCSS programs deal with is insufficient core funding. As mentioned in the introduction, the core programming of FCSS is meant to be funded by an 80% contribution from the GOA, with the remaining 20% from the FCSS's municipality (or municipalities). 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. Given the very real challenges posed by the ongoing centralization of other social services, increasing need in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the inflationary pressures of the past few years, FCSS directors across rural Alberta were unanimous in their concerns that the failure by the GOA to meaningfully increase funding is tantamount to a funding cut. Indeed, within a series of survey questions, FCSS directors were asked to rate how challenging certain issues were to their operations. On a survey question asking about stagnation of provincial funding increase since 2015, over 83% of respondents suggested that this has been "very challenging" (see Figure 3, page 14), the highest scores among all challenges listed in the survey.



Figure 3: How challenging has the lack of a funding increase since 2015 been to your FCSS program?^{9 10}



Although FCSS programs often supplement their core provincial and municipal funding with other government service contracts or grants, most rural FCSS offices increasingly rely on municipal contributions well over their required 20%. This municipal overcontribution often occurs because municipalities step in to fund programs which have become established in the community but have had provincial funding cut or are no longer affordable given rising costs of programming not being addressed with additional provincial funds. However, municipalities do not have unlimited budgets, and can make up only so much of the social service delivery shortfall created by the stagnation of provincial FCSS funding.

The survey results corroborated and expanded this information. Over 63% of survey respondents answered that their municipalities contribute more than the required 20% of FCSS funding (Figure 4, page 15). Almost 84% of survey respondents noticed an increase in the need for municipal overcontribution after 2018 (Figure 5, page 15). 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 (Figure 6, page 16).

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- 9** For readability purposes, this data was collapsed from a survey question that employed a 10-point Likert Scale asking respondents to rate “how challenging” this was from 1 (not challenging) to 10 (extremely challenging). In this chart, scores from 1 – 3 were collapsed into “not challenging”, scores 4 – 6 were collapsed into “somewhat challenging”, and scores 7 – 10 were collapsed into “very challenging”.
- 10** This survey was completed in early 2023, before the increase in overall FCSS funding from \$100 million to \$105 million was announced by the GOA.

Figure 4: Does your municipality (or municipalities) contribute more to your core funding than the required 20%?

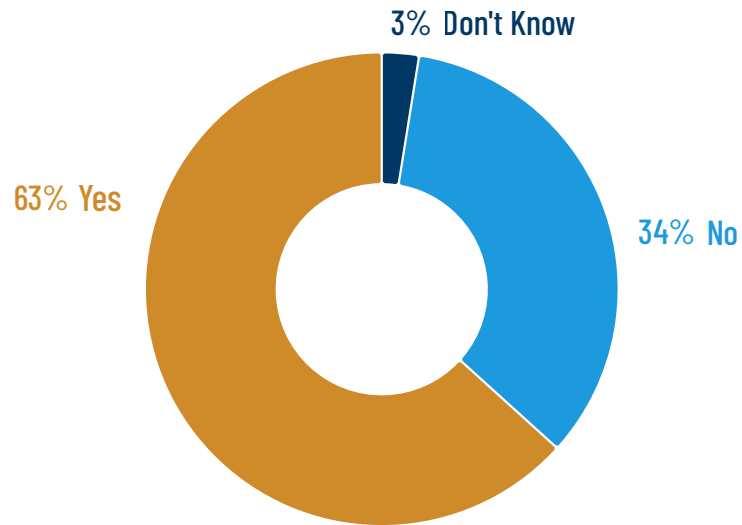


Figure 5: Has the need for this municipal over-contribution increased since 2018?

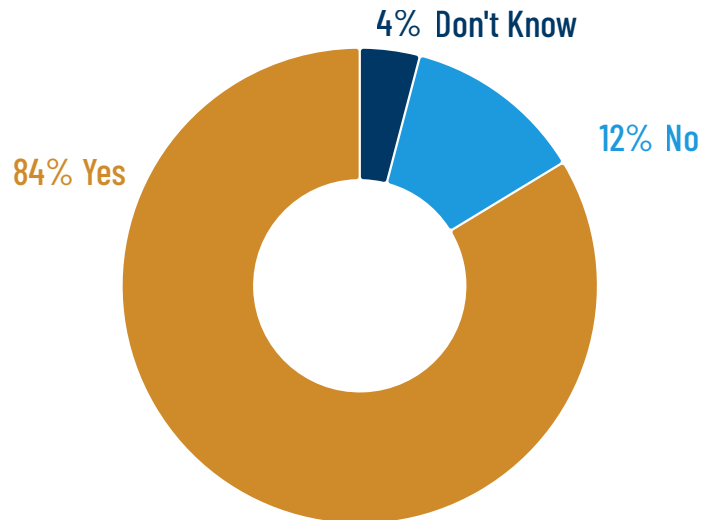
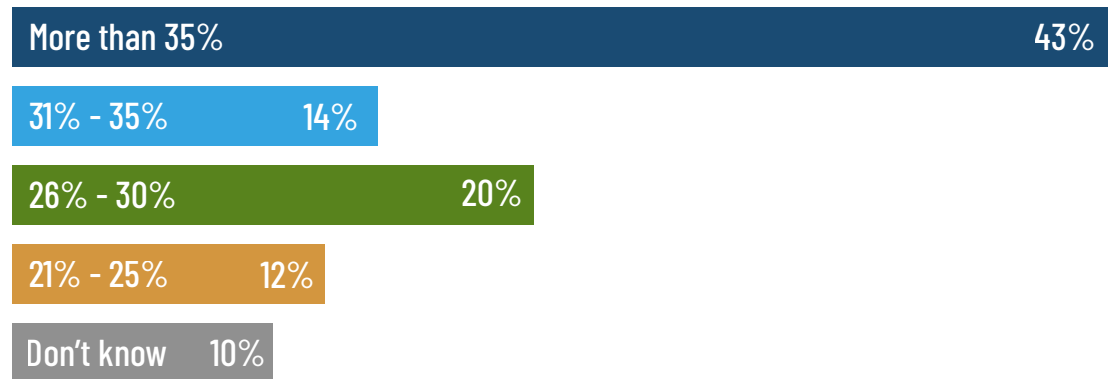


Figure 6: If your municipality is contributing beyond 20% of your core funding, can you provide an estimate as to the true percentage that your municipality is contributing?



Since “more than 35%” was the highest rate of overcontribution that survey respondents could choose, the survey did not capture the true rate of overcontribution in detail for municipalities with the highest rates of overcontribution. Indeed, within the interviews, the research team learned of one case wherein the municipality typically contributes about 50% of the FCSS program’s budget, but this year the contribution increased to 60%. Another director explained that their supporting municipalities will contribute more than the provincial amount this year.

Several FCSS programs are similarly growing more dependent upon outside grants for which FCSS directors must apply. Although outside grants (non-FCSS funding) make up a significant portion of some FCSS programs’ budgets, they make up very little or even none of other FCSS programs’ budgets. This is because accessing such funds depends on the capacity of individual FCSS programs. Directors and staff may or may not have the time or skillsets to identify, apply for, and manage external grants — a challenge that is especially acute for the smaller rural FCSS programs in Alberta.

Overall, the research team heard that insufficient funding is both a long-time concern and the result of recent events like the pandemic and some political decisions at the provincial level in 2019 – 2020 (to be discussed later). The funding challenges faced by rural FCSS programs can be broken down into four distinct components: insufficient operational funding, insufficient funding for staff, funding precarity / inattention to sustainability in funding, and, especially germane to this report, the funding challenges related to inattention to or lack of understanding of rurality on the part of the provincial government.



Insufficient Operational Funding

Overall, rural FCSS programs do not feel they have the funds to adequately meet community needs. More specifically, respondents noted that there is a lack of funding to meet the operating costs for direct delivery of ongoing programs. Adequate and reliable program funding is extremely important because community members and service users come to rely on programs to support their own and their families' wellbeing. When a longstanding program is cut because of insufficient funding, this results in a loss of trust in the community and a decrease in individual and social wellbeing. As one director noted, "If we weren't seeking additional funding and partnerships, we would be offering a lot less to our communities."

As will be discussed later in the report, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent inflationary period has resulted in several FCSS offices offering expanded or revised programming to meet emerging community needs, or simply being pulled in new directions to help those in need; this increased demand means higher staffing and material costs. Some FCSS directors interviewed seemed eager to respond to increasing and changing community needs by expanding their capacity to address a wider and more complex range of issues and taking on a larger social role in their communities. These directors noted, however, that they cannot expand their capacity without increased funding, infrastructure, training, and staffing.

It is also clear that the community-based non-profits many rural FCSS programs partner with have more financial need than the local FCSS program can meet. These groups have also been impacted by increasing community need and several rural FCSS programs are fielding increased requests for funding from these organizations, especially to fund mental health supports.

Rural FCSS directors also told us that their budgets are often too small to allow them to apply for many grants, largely because they lack the staffing capacity to do so. For similar reasons, many are unable to engage meaningfully

with evidence-based practice. Without the capacity to fund staff education, training, or research, rural FCSS programs perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding the impacts of their programming and designing more effective programs.

Ministerial-level changes to programming have also meant funding decreases for rural FCSS programs. In particular, the transition from Parent Link Centres to the Family Resource Network (FRN) model has seen FCSSs having to participate in a competitive process for a smaller pool of funding.

The Ending of Parent Link and the Introduction of Family Resources Networks

In 2019, the Ministry of Children’s Services announced, with essentially no consultation with the rural FCSS directors we spoke with, that funding for the Parent Link program was being cancelled. This popular program, frequently administered and delivered by FCSS offices in rural communities, provided free play groups, classes, education, and social opportunities for parents of children ages six and under, in addition to early learning opportunities and developmental screening for these children. In its place, the ministry launched a funding competition for organizations to participate in local Family Resource Networks (FRNs), a program with similar goals as Parent Link, although the program was now designed to offer supports for parents and children from 0 – 18, and the total amount of funding was now smaller.

In our interviews, this shift from Parent Link to FRNs was often a flashpoint for frustration for rural FCSS directors. Not only was the loss of Parent Link problematic for many parents of young children across rural communities who benefitted from the program offerings (especially those who relied on the access to the development screening available for very young children), FCSS directors lamented the increased competition between communities in search of a smaller pool of children-focused preventative funding made available under the FRN program. Other concerns shared included the difficulty inherent in delivering programs, with less overall funding, for children aged 0 – 18, the subsequent necessity to lay off staff in certain FCSS offices, and a broader sense that the new model’s reporting structures are “a chaotic mess” compared to those that existed under Parent Link.

The FRNs are recognized by many FCSS programs as a significant funding cut to child and youth support in rural communities, and many FCSS directors also noted other problems with the FRNs including organizational structure (discussed in more detail below). As a result of the transition to the FRN model, some communities have lost early childhood services completely, and that the loss of funding because of the reorganization of children’s services is hurting rural communities.

Finally, several directors highlighted that there is an overlooked rural component to FCSS

funding needs. Basing funding on population does not consider the needs of communities with high transient populations (like tourism-based economies). More generally, population does not give an accurate picture of need in rural communities because of the added costs rural communities experience because of large, sparsely populated areas, challenging geography, often poor internet and cell phone service, and transportation costs.

Overall, several of our respondents told us that their FCSS capacity is “maxed out” — current programs have full caseloads, FCSS offices are facing increasing need in their community and increasing costs overall, provincial funding did not increase between 2015 – 2022, and municipalities are being asked to shoulder more of the load.





Insufficient Funding for Staff

Insufficient staff funding presents several challenges for rural FCSS programs. Many rural FCSS programs have minimal staff (sometimes just one person) and many directors felt they could more effectively serve their communities if they had the funding to hire even one or two more staff. Limited funding also means that rural FCSS offices struggle to be competitive with salaries and benefits, which can make it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff. Several directors brought up the challenge of trying to maintain a balance between appropriate staffing levels — and adequate compensation for qualified staff — with program funding and grants to community-based organizations.

Putting more effort into seeking outside sources of funding (e.g., other provincial, federal, private, or charitable grants) is often not an adequate solution to funding shortfalls because applying for grants requires time and expertise that is already in short supply for minimally staffed rural FCSS programs. Outside grant funding can also come with stipulations about how the grant money is to be used (e.g., developing new programs) that pull FCSS staff away from delivering core and established programs. More than one director has had to turn down grant opportunities, or be very careful when applying for outside funding, because of a lack of capacity to administer grants. Many grants also do not include wages as an eligible use of funds.

The loss of Parent Link Centres and transition to the FRNs has also had an impact on staffing at some FCSS offices. Many directors admitted that losing their Parent Link Centre caused them to significantly restructure their FCSS program and resulted in a loss of hours and staff. Many FCSS programs that were successful in applying for FRN funding noted that the FRN funding is a significantly smaller amount of money than they had received with the Parent Link program.

Funding Precarity and the Lack of Sustainability in Funding

One of the significant stresses FCSS directors and staff experience is a sense of precarity over the future of FCSS. One respondent stated that “it seems to be this [feeling] ... always that FCSS is going to be gutted.” The people interviewed partially attribute this precarity and uncertainty to a sense of political instability in Alberta. The research team heard that there is a lack of clear signalling from the GOA that FCSS funding is secure. One director described waiting for FCSS’s next three-year agreement, which was overdue at the time of the interview, as a “nerve-wracking situation”.

Respondents also noted that formerly secure and reliable contracts are increasingly being put up for bid. One director said “We don’t know what’s going to happen” with a home care contract their FCSS has held for more than ten years. The team also heard that funding and support for FCSS programming or programs administered by FCSS is often piecemeal and short-term, with a lack of attention given to program sustainability in the face of unreliable funding.

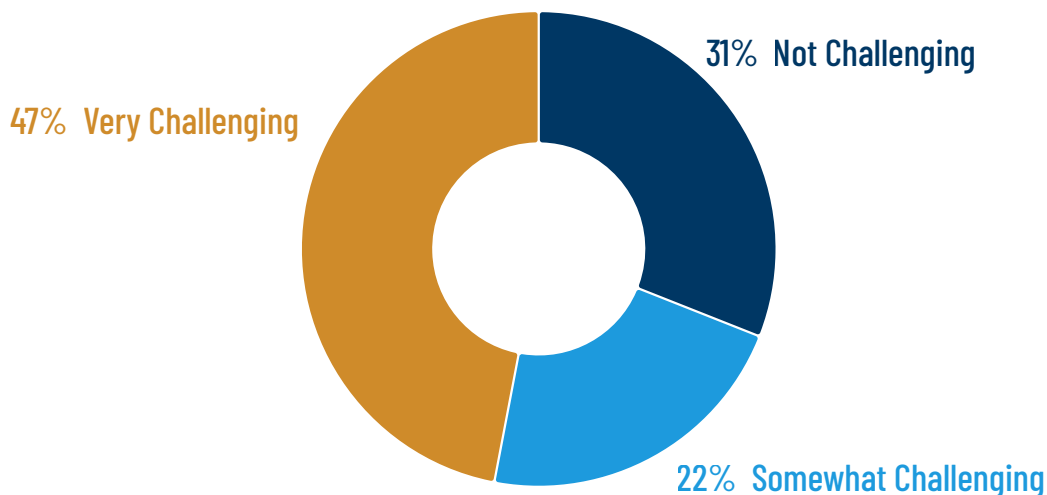
FCSS directors experience provincial funding for social services as episodic and identified the inconsistency of provincial funding and support for FCSS as a long-term problem. Several interviewees noted a pattern where the GOA will introduce a pilot program for social services

with limited-term funding (one to three years is common). In many cases, just when the program is starting to show results, the funding is inexplicitly dropped. Unexpected program restructuring and shifting government priorities contribute to challenges both in meeting government targets and in serving community members in a consistent, reliable way. From the perspective of FCSS, when funding for a program is ended, the reasons for the cut can be much better explained by a bias towards political novelty than by evidence of a need to revise policies.

The result of this sense of scarcity and instability, we were told, is increased territorialism between social service agencies. Organizations that could partner with each other instead may find themselves competing for funding. Many directors also pointed out that underfunding preventive social services ultimately results in increased social service costs. One director explained that “We put all of these dollars in ... intervention work, but if we put more money in ... prevention work ... we wouldn’t need as many dollars in intervention”.

The ending of the Parent Link program in late 2019 and early 2020 is an important example of this kind of unexpected program restructuring and funding instability. Results from the research team’s survey on this topic require some interpretation and possibly further research. In simplest terms, the survey results seem to show that the ending of the Parent Link program and its replacement with the Family Resource Network model (FRN) was either experienced as extremely challenging, or as not at all challenging. Roughly 31% of survey respondents rated the replacement of Parent Link by the FRN model as “not challenging,” while roughly 47% rated the replacement as “very challenging” (Figure 7, page 20). These two answers at opposite ends of the scale received the highest number of responses.

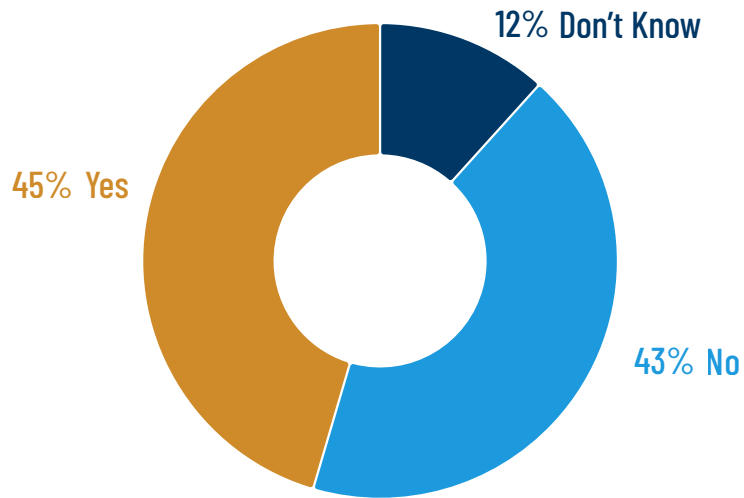
Figure 7: How challenging was the replacement of Parent Link Centres by Family Resource Networks for your FCSS program?¹¹



Similarly, respondents were evenly split on the effects of ending Parent Link. Just over 45% of respondents said that their FCSS program was negatively affected by the ending of the Parent Link program, while almost 43% of respondents indicated that the ending of Parent Link did not negatively affect their program (Figure 8, page 21).

¹¹ For readability purposes, this data was collapsed from a survey question that employed a 10-point Likert Scale asking respondents to rate “how challenging” this was from 1 (not challenging) to 10 (extremely challenging). In this chart, scores from 1 – 3 were collapsed into “not challenging”, scores 4 – 6 were collapsed into “somewhat challenging” and scores 7 – 10 were collapsed into “very challenging”.

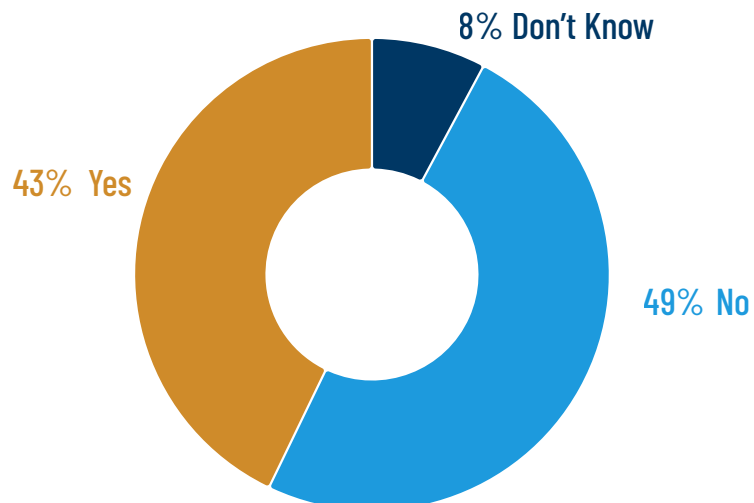
Figure 8: Was your FCSS program negatively affected by the ending of the Parent Link program?



Evidence given by interview participants was stronger and more clear-cut about the negative impacts of the ending of the Parent Link program and the transition to FRNs. Participants variously described the loss of Parent Link as “dramatic” and a “traumatic loss.” They described the transition to the FRNs as “abysmal” and “a chaotic mess” which introduced “a lack of clarity” about the role of FCSS in supporting child and youth development. Directors stated that the ending of Parent Link and transition to the FRN model was not just about funding. Many also expressed concerns related to a lack of clarity from the government about reporting expectations, goals and outcomes, and communication more generally.

Almost 59% of survey respondents answered that FRN funding was insufficient to adequately meet the needs of community members who had formerly attended Parent Link programming (Figure 9, page 21).

Figure 9: Has FRN funding allowed you to adequately meet the needs of community members who formerly attended Parent Link programming?





More than one director said that, under the FRN structure, they received about one-third of the funding they had received with Parent Link. As difficult to navigate as a two-thirds funding cut for early childhood programming must have been, the FRNs also imposed a requirement to expand the amount and type of services provided. Parent Link programs served families with children aged 0 – 6 years, while the FRNs cover ages 0 – 18. This means that FCSS programs which were successful in receiving FRN funding took on responsibility for providing services that meet the needs of families, children, and youth across a much wider range of developmental stages. Several directors expressed concern that the funding and administrative structure for the FRNs forced communities within the same region to compete for funding — something that has strained relationships between communities in certain cases.

Directors told us that in some cases their municipalities have stepped in to fund the programs that were formerly funded through Parent Link, while in other cases the loss of Parent Link and its funding had resulted in a loss of programming, jobs, and services. Directors agreed that programming for 0- to 18-year-olds was important but said that the expansion could have happened within the model already established by Parent Link. Directors agreed that the Parent Link model was much more functional, consistent, and easy to coordinate than the FRN model.

Rural-Specific Funding Challenges for FCSS Programs

Being rural significantly shapes the financial needs of FCSS programs. Many of the directors interviewed feel the GOA does not understand or appreciate the unique cost-of-living and opportunity constraints faced by rural communities. In particular, the research team heard about issues related to transportation and limited access to social services in rural communities. The team also heard from northern FCSS programs about the isolation their communities face and about how a recent economic downturn due to changes in the oil and gas industry is putting strain on residents and social programs. These and similar stories suggest that it is important to pay attention not only to ruralness as a factor in the social needs of Albertans but also to variation within rural Alberta, and to the geographic, socio-cultural, and economic reasons for this variation.

Many of the issues faced by rural FCSS programs can also be framed in terms of an urban-rural divide. FCSS directors were quick to tell us that they do not measure themselves against urban FCSS programs and that there is generally open communication and sympathy within FCSSAA and between rural and urban programs. Nevertheless, urban FCSS programs have significantly greater access to both financial and human resources. The research team heard several times that resources are more likely to go to Alberta’s urban centres, and that grants tend to be geared more towards urban organizations with administrative, data collection, and analytical capacity. The knowledge that funding is more accessible to urban FCSS programs which already have larger budgets and greater personnel capacity is experienced by rural FCSS directors as a kind of arbitrary punishment: one director told us that rural communities are “penalized for being small” when it comes to accessing social service funding.

Almost every director noted that rural FCSS programs are incredibly important because there often are no other social services available in small communities. Rural FCSS directors feel that decision-makers in urban settings do not realize how few social services there are in rural



communities, which leads to underestimating the needs of rural communities and the complexity of the situations to which rural FCSS programs must respond. The research team was told that, in rural communities, FCSS programs cannot be specialized because there often are no other social service agencies, and that rural FCSS staff must be similarly flexible, adaptable, and able to wear “many different hats.” There is a strong perception on the part of rural FCSS directors that urban FCSS programs have a narrower social focus and more internal specialization due to their

proximity to other social service agencies and greater ease of access to outside professionals such as mental health counsellors. Rural FCSS directors count their flexibility and “jack of all trades” pragmatism as a strength, in part because it means that they feel connected to and knowledgeable about the social wellbeing of their communities. However, directors are aware that the flip side of being a “jack of all trades” means that there is no one else around that one can consult or bring in to offer specialized knowledge or support for complex social issues.

Directors repeatedly raised transportation as a significant barrier for rural residents. Simply put, there is a lack of public transportation or other affordable and reliable transportation options serving rural communities. Residents often live long distances from neighbours and from municipal centres wherein so many social and health support offices are located. Lack of access to transportation is particularly acute for people living on low or fixed incomes. One of FCSS’s important preventive roles is guarding against isolation and increasing social connection. If people are unable to travel to programming, FCSS’s capacity to reach people is limited.

Transportation is also an issue for more acute social and personal needs, such as attending medical appointments or appointments with other social service agencies, either locally or in the city. FCSS programs are generally prohibited from using designated governmental funding to offer transportation service. At least one director told the research team that their FCSS provides a transportation service that they pay for with non-FCSS funding because reducing barriers to participation is a core FCSS goal. Directors also emphasized the need to provide outreach services and to meet people where they live in cases where an individual is housebound or unable to travel.

Another infrastructure issue rural FCSS directors raised concerned lack of available, appropriate, and affordable space for programming. Rural communities often have a limited stock of buildings suitable to rent or borrow for events, and building new infrastructure is for the most part prohibitively expensive for FCSS programs with limited budgets.

One final significant piece the research team heard regarding rural FCSS programs’ funding challenges is that some rural communities have experienced population growth or economic development and have increased in importance as regional hubs. While this shift may suggest an important corrective to assumptions of rural decline, the team was told that provincial FCSS funding has not kept pace with, or has not yet recognized, this growth. FCSS programs in these communities now have more clients, but in at least some cases, have had to cut programming to shift resources to “maxed-out” programs.

Key Challenge 2: The Increasing Inaccessibility of Provincial Social Services in Rural Alberta

It is increasingly 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. In general, the story has been the same across Canada for more than three decades: stagnant populations in rural areas, combined with the ever-present search for “efficiencies” among cost-conscious provincial governments has led to a “retreat of the state” from rural areas. As one rural FCSS director noted, to the extent that services still exist in small communities, they are often “a shell of what they used to be.”

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), this decline of services has 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.

“For a long time, we have been talking with Alberta Supports and Alberta Works... We have been requesting that they provide a person on a regular basis, like once a month, to come to our office ... and there is an absolute refusal. There was zero interest in them being accessible out here. Their solution was that, if there are clients that need help, they can call their office and book an appointment to meet with those clients. But it still required a person to travel that 45 plus minutes.”



This is not a new observation with respect to the delivery of rural public services. 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 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, often without additional financial support or meaningful training. One FCSS director recounted a time wherein a designated provincial support worker would routinely visit the office to help local seniors with applications required to access certain supports or benefits. That worker eventually stopped coming and instead, “Our office got a PowerPoint and my staff are expected to go out and share the information on their services and benefits to the community.”

This may seem like an insignificant anecdote, but the research team heard a version of this story repeatedly during the study. The consistent downloading of tasks is further stressing FCSS programs across rural communities by increasing their workload without access to additional provincial funding.

A related outcome of centralization of support services is, even if rural FCSS programs are not technically being asked to “take on” additional responsibilities, because they are often “the only place in town” offering any type of supports, community members requiring help will frequently show up at FCSS offices with requests for assistance. However, such requests are often beyond the FCSS’s legislated mandate of providing preventative services and thus, technically, meant to be addressed by other agencies who, in many cases, no longer have a physical presence in the community.

As Figure 10, page 25 and Figure 11, page 26 show, the overwhelming majority of rural FCSS directors are being forced to extend their mandate and completing additional work beyond what they are funded to do. Importantly, there is a strong sense that these requirements have significantly increased since 2018 (Figure 12, page 26).

Figure 10: Do you feel your FCSS program is having to take on responsibilities that are meant to be the mandate of other provincial ministries or agencies?

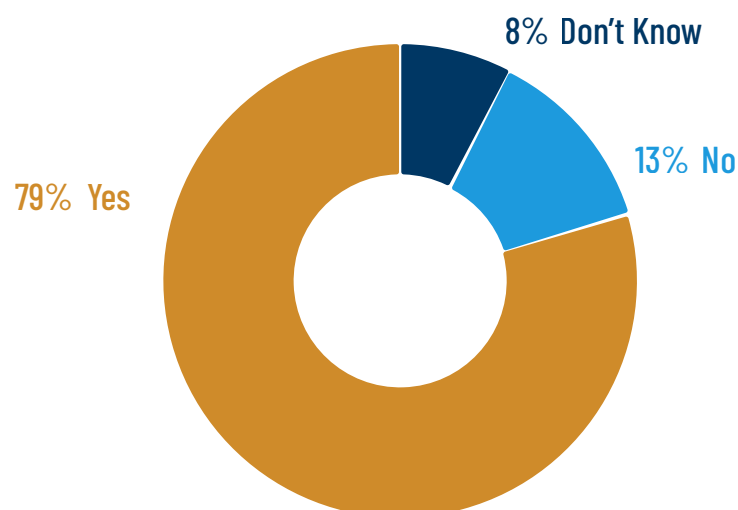


Figure 11: Does your FCSS program occasionally provide services to community members beyond those you understand to fall under the mandate of “prevention”?

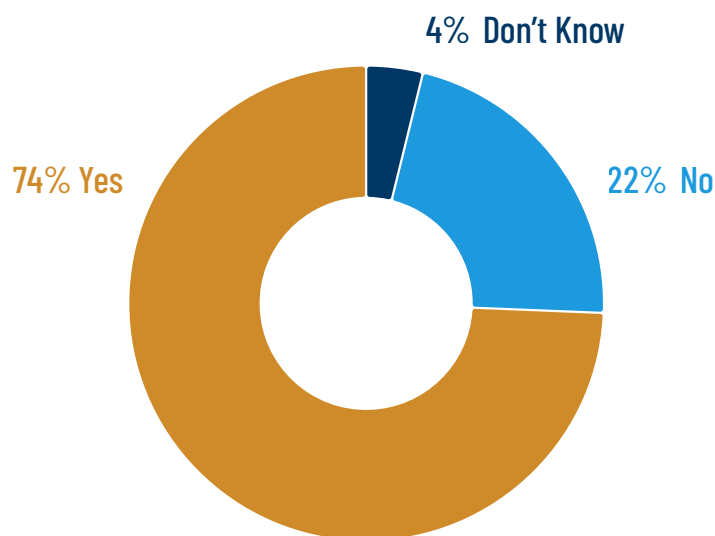
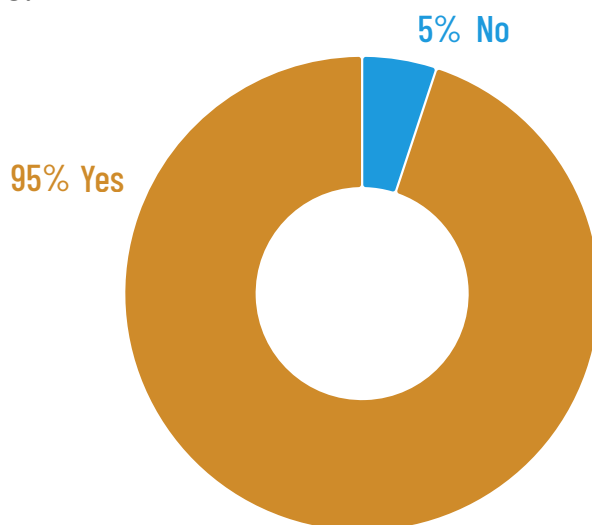


Figure 12: Has this pressure to provide services beyond “prevention” increased since 2018?



The Relational Realities of Rural Life

Pressure for FCSS offices to complete work beyond their mandate is amplified by the “relational reality” of small-town life. Compared to urban centres, there is a higher likelihood that members of a rural FCSS office have some personal connection or familiarity to the community member in need and thus feel an additional responsibility to help, even when the request is well outside FCSS’s mandate. Even if this relational component is not part of the equation in a given request for help from a community member, the fact that rural FCSS offices are more likely to provide direct services compared to urban FCSS offices (who are more likely to “grant-out” their funding to other organizations), make them more prone to being approached for this kind of help.

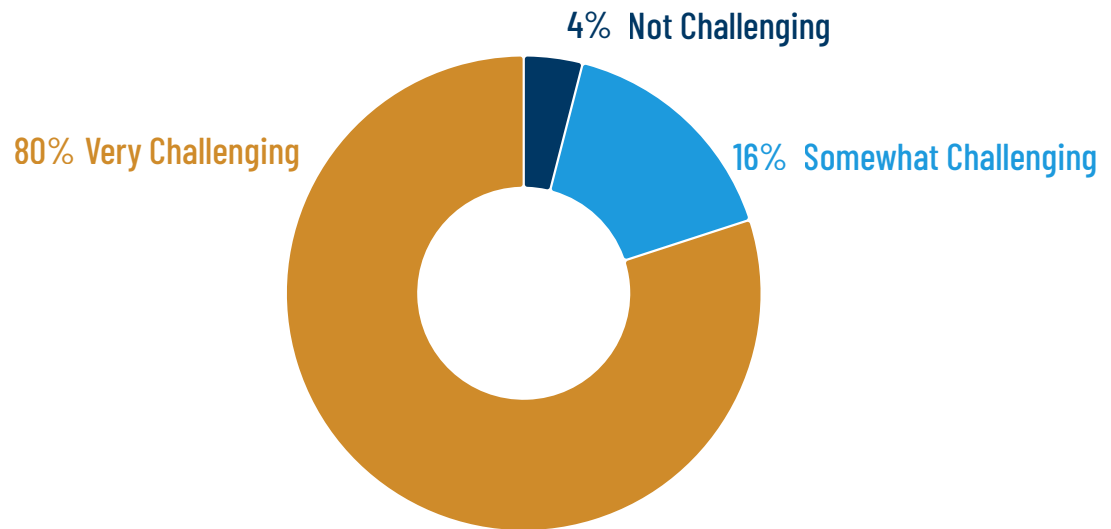
In either case, that rural FCSS offices have essentially become one of the last physical places (if not the only place) where people in need of social services can seek help, they are automatically placed in the unfair and untenable situation of having to go beyond their

mandate and provide intervention-type services (incurring the extra cost and effort this entails with no hope of being reimbursed) or turning away a community member in need, who may be someone they know personally, or at least someone they have a high likelihood of encountering again.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Shuttering of Additional In-person Support Services

This reality of rural FCSS offices as the only local site of social supports has intensified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent decision by the GOA to shutter or reduce in-person services across several social service agencies (conversely, almost all rural FCSS offices remained open throughout the pandemic). Alberta Supports was the service most frequently mentioned in this context by FCSS directors, but it certainly is not the only example of social services offices closing. In place of provincial in-person services, those in need of assistance on a range of issues, such as mental health supports, victim services, senior supports, and AISH applications are increasingly required to call a “1-800” line or seek assistance via an online web platform or email. Every FCSS director interviewed for this study highlighted the negative impact of this change on their operational capacity. FCSS directors were asked about the severity of this challenge (Figure 13, page 27) and roughly 80% of respondents rated this as “very challenging.”

Figure 13: How challenging have increased community member requests due to the centralization of provincial services like Alberta Supports, Mental Health and Addictions, and Children’s Services, been for your FCSS program?¹²

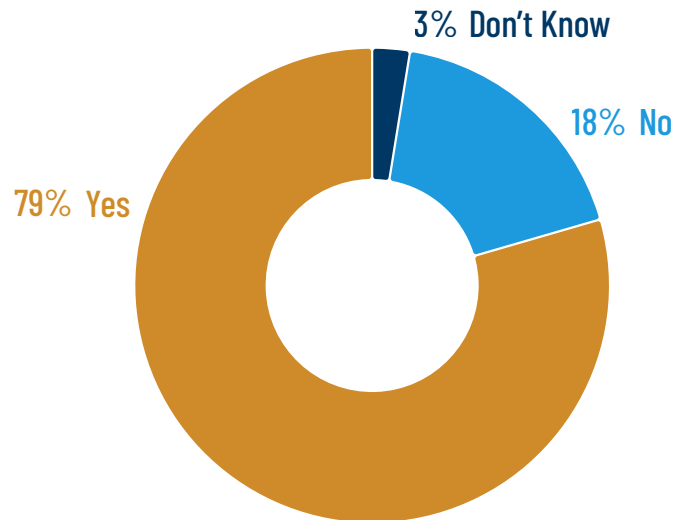


Online and telephone services have severe limitations for vulnerable people in rural communities. Several FCSS directors noted how difficult it can be for community members in need to navigate this new impersonal system. Stories of community members being left on hold for hours on end, of running out of minutes on their “pay as you go” cell phone plans while waiting for help, of attempting to navigate confusing web portals with poor internet service, and of seniors without email addresses being asked to “sign-in online” were very

¹² For readability purposes, this data was collapsed from a survey question that employed a 10-point Likert Scale asking respondents to rate “how challenging” this was from 1 (not challenging) to 10 (extremely challenging). In this chart, scores from 1 – 3 were collapsed into “not challenging”, scores 4 – 6 were collapsed into “somewhat challenging” and scores 7 – 10 were collapsed into “very challenging”.

common. For rural FCSS offices, this has led to a significant influx in community members seeking help. As noted in Figure 14, page 28, this has resulted in an increase in the amount of time FCSS staff must spend one-on-one with community members — time that is now no longer available for traditional preventative programming that is central to FCSS’s mandate.

Figure 14: Are your FCSS staff spending more time working with community members one-on-one since 2018?



This new reality is captured well in this extended quote from a long-time rural FCSS director:

“The lack of foresight when it comes to centralization of services, the 1-800 numbers, the online portals; these do not work for all people in our community, particularly those that are illiterate, that don’t have telephones, and that don’t have computer skills. And my growing concern is that we are skewing statistics to look like rural communities do not need services because they’re not able to access them.

When you look at seniors’ programs, seniors’ benefits, when you look at income support, when you look at even victim services, mental health services, continuing care, all of that has become a ‘1-800’ intake. So you take somebody who has mental health concerns, they’re on the line waiting for sometimes two, three hours, only to be cut off. And still not get to an actual appointment.

This is something that my staff experience on a daily basis with folks. Some days, we have five, six people in need come who come in here at their wit’s end, they have no money, no phone, no internet access, no ID, and we are the only ones that try to maneuver through the system with them.

And this is what’s happening in all of our rural communities. And we need a voice to say ‘no, this isn’t working.’ And my fear is that the provincial government is swinging the pendulum to a fully centralized intake system because it’s saving money, it’s efficient...

These things pull us away from what the true mandate of FCSS is. And so it does cause a lot of stress on the staff, a lot of burnout, and a lot of feelings of helplessness, almost because there’s nothing they can do.

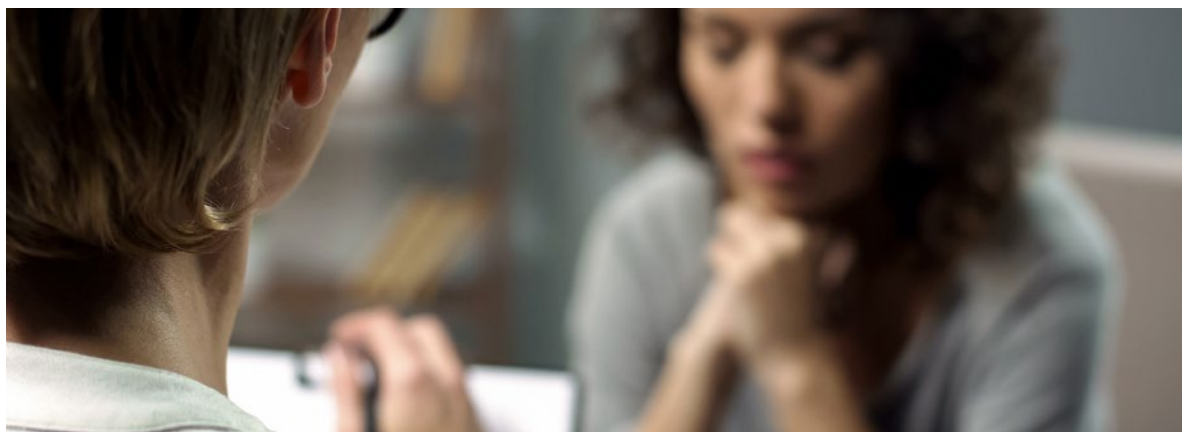
And I would say everybody in (our office) has thought about walking away. But their sense of responsibility won’t let them because they’re also the ones that look people in the eye, as opposed to the person on the other end of a ‘1-800’ call.”

Negative Impacts on Rural Clients

Unsurprisingly, not only has the recent move towards “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. Several FCSS directors recounted stories of people simply “giving up” and not pursuing the help they need. As the quote above suggests, there are legitimate fears that the true volume of “need” in rural communities is much more significant than what appears in provincial statistics because so many rural citizens either fail to navigate the new virtual reality of provincial supports or they have stopped trying. This was precisely the moral of one of the more dramatic (although not unique) stories shared with the research team:

“We had an individual that was threatening to commit suicide, or even take other people out because he was so frustrated with trying to navigate the provincial social services system. And so we did a bit of an intervention with him, and we were able to develop some supports that we could offer to him and support him, and help navigating some of those services. But I mean it, it was so bad that he was very serious about taking his own life. So, that’s just one example of where what happens when you have people that are already in challenging situations, and they just are getting the runaround from agencies and governments, and when there aren’t really clear lines about who is supposed to be doing what. I know there’s a lot of discussion in the FCSS world around the centralization of Alberta Supports. And I feel like we haven’t received as many clients requesting this type of help recently, and it’s mostly because people have given up.”

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. Further, clients no longer have a consistent contact person to follow up in this environment, leading to additional challenges accessing the required supports. Ultimately, as one rural FCSS director explained, “The actions of the provincial government [in transitioning to ‘1-800’ lines or online web portals for intakes and assistance] ... summarily dismissed people who are already disenfranchised.”



In summary, the ongoing centralization of social services in Alberta has generated significant challenges for rural FCSS programs and rural citizens — challenges that have only multiplied with the recent decision to fast-track a transition to telephone intake lines and online web portals for a variety of provincial social service supports (especially Alberta Supports) in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because rural FCSS offices are often “the only shop in town,” they face a disproportionate burden compared to most of their urban counterparts. Indeed, this issue raises a serious equity concern. Multiple provincial agencies mandated to deliver supports to all Alberta citizens have increasingly reduced their in-person supports to rural Albertans. Rural FCSS offices are subsequently faced with helping vulnerable community members navigate this new system — a considerable task for offices already facing funding and capacity pressures. This in turn intensifies pressure on rural municipalities to increase funding to local FCSS programs, which has resulted in a significant increase in municipal overcontribution to FCSS programs across rural Alberta.

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

Rural FCSS directors were essentially unanimous in highlighting the changing nature and the overall increase of social service needs in their communities — two trends that have also placed new stresses on already taxed FCSS programs in rural Alberta. Although tracing precise causes of such complex trends is difficult, the FCSS directors we spoke with were adamant that both the COVID-19 pandemic and recent inflation are key drivers of changing and increasing client needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique and difficult challenges for all Albertans. Rural FCSS directors spoke at length about a clear decline in the mental health of many of their clients, of the impacts of social isolation (especially for children and seniors), and increased anxiety related to both physical health and financial wellbeing. In addition, directors noticed new patterns of division within communities, decreased comfort levels in group settings, and declining levels of healthy behaviours in the wake of basically losing two years of FCSS group programming.

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, of noticing more and more people “not eating,” and of a more general decline in the mental health of many given the overarching anxiety 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.

Overall, rural FCSS directors are receiving more requests for assistance than previous years and are encountering more complex cases involving serious mental health issues, addictions, domestic abuse, crime, and individuals and families in serious financial distress. In short, the number of people who are walking through the doors of rural FCSS offices in crisis has increased dramatically in the past few years (See Figure 15, page 31 and Figure 16, page 31).

Figure 15: How often do your FCSS staff encounter community members who are in a state of crisis?

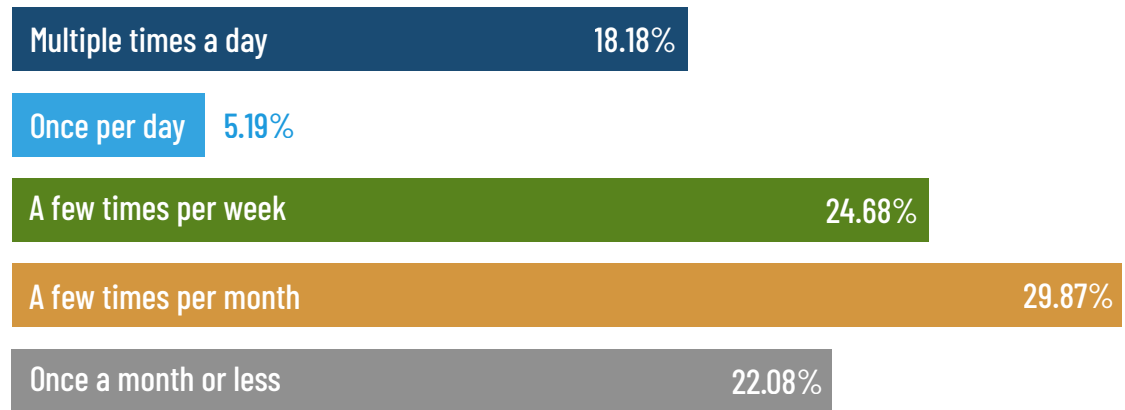
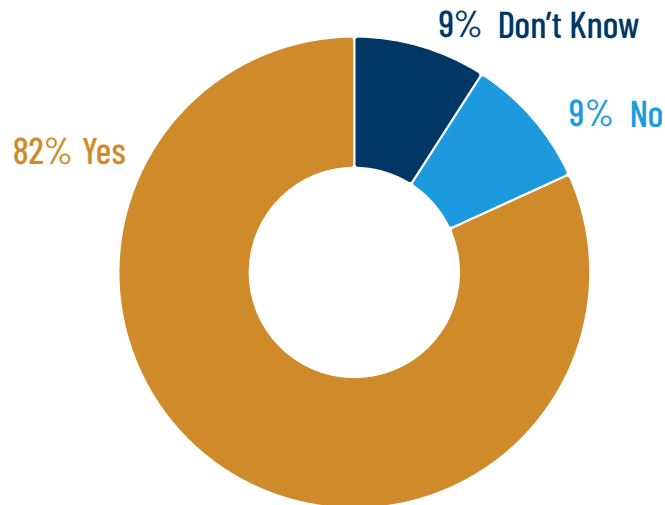
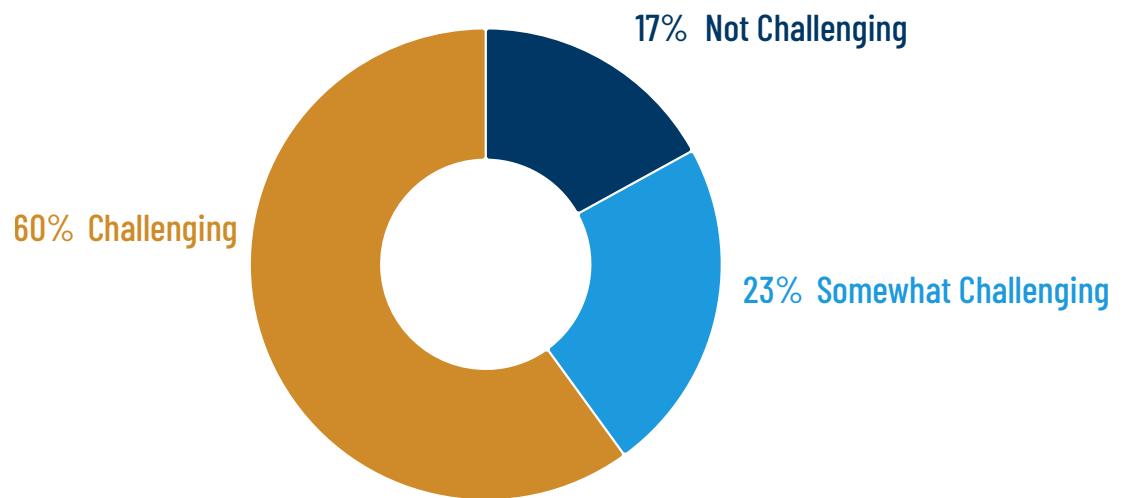


Figure 16: Have your FCSS staff experienced an increase in community members who are in a state of crisis since 2018?



These trends are especially problematic for rural FCSS offices because such cases clearly fall within the range of “intervention” rather than “prevention,” thus often pushing FCSS staff further beyond their legislated mandate. As discussed earlier, the “relational realities” of rural life make it especially difficult for rural FCSS staff to simply turn people in need of intervention away. Indeed, one clear outcome of this increased pressure that several rural FCSS directors noted was a noticeable rise in both workload and levels of personal stress among both FCSS staff and members of community organizations who partner with FCSS on local programming, often leading to what many respondents labelled as “staff burnout” (see Figure 17, page 32).

Figure 17: How challenging has the problem of staff burnout been in your FCSS office?¹³

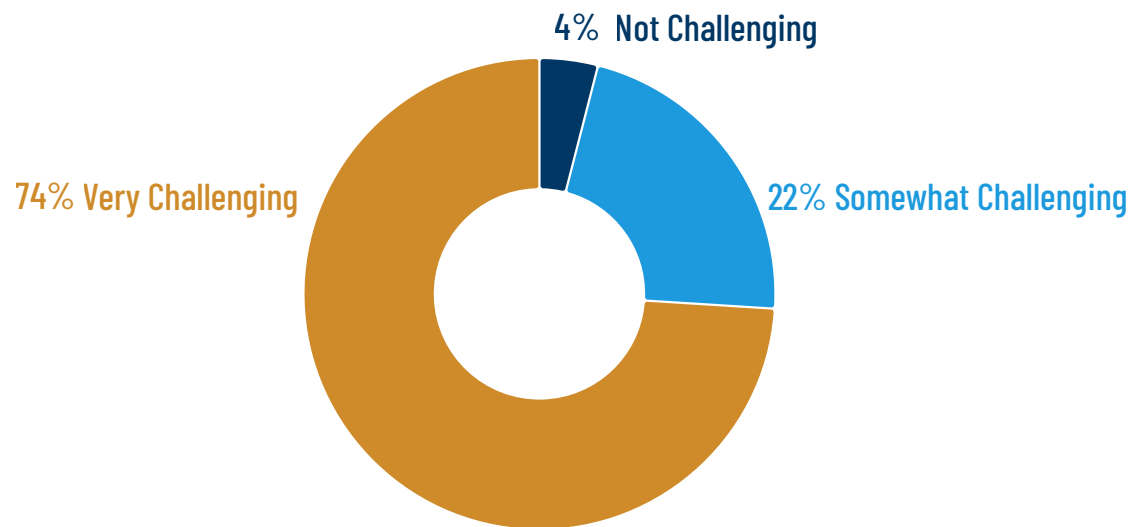


FCSS directors have faced increasing anxiety related to both the wellbeing of their staff and clientele, but also awareness that these patterns place even more fiscal pressure on their underfunded offices. In addition, many directors demonstrated a fair amount of despair in their conversations with us in response to their growing sense that provincial officials are simply unconvinced by their pleas regarding the increasingly dire situation facing both vulnerable individuals and rural FCSS offices.

Granted, the changing nature and increasing frequency of these social service needs are not localized to rural communities. It is likely that most urban social service providers across Alberta (if not North America and beyond) have noted similar patterns in the wake of the pandemic and the subsequent period of inflation. However, due to existing funding shortfalls and increasing client loads, these new challenges are pushing already taxed rural FCSS offices to the brink. FCSS directors were asked about the severity of this challenge (Figure 18, page 33) and roughly 74% of respondents deemed this to be “very challenging.”

13 For readability purposes, this data was collapsed from a survey question that employed a 10-point Likert Scale asking respondents to rate “how challenging” this was from 1 (not challenging) to 10 (extremely challenging). In this chart, scores from 1 – 3 were collapsed into “not challenging”, scores 4 – 6 were collapsed into “somewhat challenging” and scores 7 – 10 were collapsed into “very challenging”.

Figure 18: How challenging has increased demand for intervention-type services due to recent challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic or cost-of-living inflation to your FCSS program?¹⁴



Policy Recommendations

1. Increase Core Funding from the Province

The most commonly mentioned policy recommendation made by rural FCSS directors who participated in this study was simple: the provincial government must increase core funding for FCSS programs across the province. As mentioned earlier, provincial funding for FCSS programming remained capped at \$100 million from 2015 – 2022. In the meantime, several standard FCSS costs, from staff salaries to space rental to materials required for various on-the-ground programming have risen considerably. In this environment, many municipalities across rural Alberta have been forced to increase funding beyond their required 20% to prop up FCSS programs in their communities. Even with municipal overcontributions, the research team repeatedly heard about FCSS programs across rural Alberta facing significant fiscal pressure, often being forced to curtail programming, make smaller contributions to partnering community organizations, and reduce staff hours. Although the province increased overall funding to FCSS programs across the province by \$5 million in 2023, it is a near certainty that this amount will not be enough to address the key fiscal issues rural FCSS offices are facing.

A number of different ideas for ensuring more funds flow to rural FCSS offices were shared over the course of this study but, at minimum, it would be prudent for the provincial ministry to ensure annual increases in core funding are indexed to inflation. Given the emerging patterns of need discussed in the previous section, and the significant pressures the centralization of other social services puts on rural FCSS offices, there is an urgent need not only for funding to index with inflation but to increase significantly overall. Therefore, a significant increase to core funding that acknowledges the rising

¹⁴ For readability purposes, this data was collapsed from a survey question that employed a 10-point Likert Scale asking respondents to rate “how challenging” this was from 1 (not challenging) to 10 (extremely challenging). In this chart, scores from 1 – 3 were collapsed into “not challenging”, scores 4 – 6 were collapsed into “somewhat challenging” and scores 7 – 10 were collapsed into “very challenging”.



need for the types of vital services and programs FCSS offices provide to their community members is also recommended. Widespread municipal overcontribution essentially means that the provincial government is failing to uphold the funding parameters that govern FCSS operations in Alberta: 80% from the province and 20% from the municipality. A meaningful increase to core funding would help to return the provincial-municipal funding balance to what is demanded by the terms of the FCSS Regulation. In an environment wherein the provincial government is basking in significant budget surpluses and has made several large spending announcements across different jurisdictions in the past year, a serious increase to the core funding of FCSS programs in Alberta seems imminently doable.

In addition, 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, and even program inertia, for directors and staff, especially when these contracts are frequently renewed at “the very last moment.” Similar concerns were shared in relation to “pilot programs” the provincial government decides to fund. These should be funded for at least three (if not five) years, and should not be abruptly ended without significant consultation with FCSS directors. The degree of precarity faced by FCSS offices on both these fronts adds additional stress to programs that are already “maxed out”.

2. Increase the Accessibility of Provincial Social Support Services for Rural Albertans

In accordance with the second key challenge discussed above, the GOA must do more to ensure certain provincial social services remain or are returned to rural communities. No rural FCSS director we spoke with expected a full return of social services that once existed in rural Alberta decades ago. However, there are actions the GOA can take to lessen the load rural FCSS offices face in terms of the increased demand from community members given that they are often “the last shop in town” offering some social supports.

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.

More generally, 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 is required. While it is unrealistic to insist that every town and village across Alberta contain a selection of social service offices covering multiple issues, 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.

In addition, the GOA must reinvest in ensuring that social service workers who possess the capacity to truly help community members in need with various supports they are entitled to are travelling to and spending time in rural Alberta. The slow erosion of this practice has negatively impacted rural FCSS offices and vulnerable rural citizens. The principle of equitable treatment for all Albertans, urban and rural, requires revisiting this model.

3. 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.



Having outlined the challenges rural FCSS programs face, many recent decisions related to social service delivery in Alberta were not considered through a “rural lens.” Although FCSS programs across Alberta are facing increasing pressures in response to similar challenges, impacts are often felt most acutely by rural FCSS programs that bear most of the burden generated by the ongoing centralization of broader social service delivery. On a more technical note, the transition to the use of telephone and web portals by many social service agencies discounts the reality of both poor internet and spotty cellular service in rural regions. Although the past cannot be altered, future policy decisions related to provincial social services must more seriously engage with questions related to impacts on rural communities and citizens.

Throughout this study the team heard many ways in which ministries responsible for social service delivery could better anticipate the impacts of policy changes on rural Alberta. Several rural FCSS directors noted the current funding calculation that determines the provincial contribution to each FCSS program should take into account that the size and sparseness of rural communities leads to higher costs for offering different FCSS programs, and of sharing important information with community members. Similarly, although some consolidation and centralization of social services may be inevitable, rural FCSS directors insisted that, when relocating services, more must be done to understand the actual travel patterns that rural residents follow, rather than assuming that travelling to a location pre-determined by an Edmonton-based bureaucrat will be realistic for rural citizens from a specific community.

Several directors (although not all) were open to being more creative (and even somewhat radical) in terms of what rural FCSS programs can and should accomplish, given the realities they face. Rural FCSS offices are consistently “doing more with less” given the centralization of social service supports and the increasingly complex social challenges many rural Albertans are now facing. In such circumstances, more and more rural FCSS directors are asking whether they should take on an enlarged mandate capable of providing traditional “preventative” programming and additional “intervention-type” services and supports to community members in crisis given that no

local alternatives exist. Any such move in this direction would require careful planning, consultation, and enhanced resources from the GOA. Such an idea was not unanimously supported by the FCSS directors we spoke with. However, to even discuss it in a way that considers the impacts such a move would have on rural FCSS programs and community members is an example of applying a “rural lens” to an important debate about a large change in policy direction in rural Alberta. Evidence suggests that the time is now to have these conversations to ensure that social service delivery truly works for rural Albertans. The team heard too many examples that speak to the ways it currently does not.

4. 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. Most recent social service-related policy decisions have been made without this type of engagement — a process that goes some way towards understanding how Alberta has ended up in this situation. In fairness, recent work around the creation of a new FCSS Accountability Framework engaged a wide cross section of rural FCSS directors, and one of the goals of the process was to better plot ways to improve coordination with social service agencies located in other ministries. But more must be done by the GOA to intentionally engage rural FCSS offices when making broader social service delivery decisions that will inevitably impact rural communities and, of course, the rural FCSS programs that are actually in the community and will be tasked, formally or informally, with dealing with the on-the-ground consequences.





* CONCLUSION

FCSS is a crucial service in towns, villages, and rural communities across Alberta. Relying on the efforts of dedicated staff and supported by municipal decision-makers, FCSS offices in every corner of the province support strong families, connected seniors, and healthy children. In other words, FCSS is a massive part of what makes Alberta's rural communities great.

This report shows that the efforts and passion of FCSS leaders in doing whatever it takes to support everyone in their communities, even the most vulnerable, has been compromised by systematic provincial downloading of responsibility and underfunding of FCSS services. FCSS services are doing more than ever before without the requisite training, funding, and capacity support. This situation leads to unfair pressure on municipalities, unreasonable expectations on FCSS staff, and additional stress to vulnerable rural Albertans.

The RMA will continue to advocate to government for proper funding of FCSS services, and adequate local availability of social services that are the responsibility of the province to deliver. This report tells an indisputable story: FCSS offices are going above and beyond to soften the local impacts of provincial underfunding and service level reductions.