
Alberta Charities are Relying on Collaboration and Innovation to Meet the Challenges Presented by COVID-19

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The charitable sector is responding rapidly to the expanding impact of the pandemic, in terms of outreach, operations, and advocacy. In the coming weeks, The Philanthropist will provide up-to-date coverage, as well as our usual reporting and commentary on other news of relevance to foundations, charities, and non-profits. [Read more of our COVID-19 coverage.](#)

It's an Alberta story that is playing out in similar ways for charitable organizations across the country thanks to the COVID-19 crisis: needs are on the rise while donations are way down.

Indeed, The Open Door, a Camrose non-profit that serves youth, has faced a double whammy over the past month, with both cash and in-kind food donations down as much as 75%, according to its executive director, Jessica Hutton. She estimates that requests for help have increased by 40% over the same period.

"It doesn't matter who you are, you're impacted right now," says Hutton. "We're crisis workers and we've dealt with a lot of crises. But I don't think I've ever been so exhausted."

Organizations like The Open Door face another worry that is unique to Alberta – they must also pay attention to ongoing instability in the province's oil sector.

Over the past several weeks, Alberta producers have seen the benchmark price for oil sands crude drop to less than [\\$5 \(US\) per barrel](#), far below the \$50 (US) or more that the government was projecting for 2020. The latest crash, which is the result of an international supply glut and a dramatic drop in demand because of the pandemic, doesn't bode well for the economy or

charities' cash flows.

Falling oil prices affect the sector, says Dan Edwards, executive director of the Wood Buffalo Food Bank in Fort McMurray, both in terms of need and donations. Albertans are known to [donate more](#) to charity per capita than other provinces — perhaps not surprising given that wages in the province have also traditionally been higher.

Corporate donations follow a similar pattern. The Wood Buffalo Food Bank relies on industry donations for 30-40% of its revenue, Edwards says. When times are good, the money is more likely to flow. The opposite now seems to be true. “As [companies’] revenues go down, their ability to donate goes down,” he says. Indeed, according to Statistics Canada, declines in overall donations have, in recent years, [coincided](#) “with slower economic growth that year for provinces rich in natural resources.”

“The economy was already not in a great state; there were already layoffs happening that weren’t related to the pandemic,” says Edwards, noting that COVID-19 adds “a new layer” — one that requires charities to adapt quickly and innovatively.

The Edmonton YWCA, a 113-year-old charity that provides counselling and other services for vulnerable women and children, is one example of this. Katherine O’Neill, a former journalist and political candidate, started as its new CEO in mid-March, on the same day Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was introducing tough new measures to slow the spread of COVID-19.

On her first day on the job, O’Neill and her executive team took the decision to suspend the majority of YWCA programs that couldn’t be moved online. Following that, printers, paperwork, and other equipment had to be packed up so that O’Neill’s team could make the shift to working from home. “I’ve never seen such a flurry of movement before,” she recalls. “I didn’t even know where the bathrooms were before we made the decision to close the office.”

While navigating COVID-19 has been challenging, O’Neill notes that it’s not the first time the province’s non-profits have had to steer through a crisis. “YWCA has been operating in Edmonton since 1907,” she says. “We’ve been through world wars, the Spanish flu, the Great Depression. We always stepped up and innovated during those periods, and we never completely closed our doors.”

Others in the sector share O’Neill’s outlook. The Open Door has continued to operate despite the challenges, even though Hutton’s team had to temporarily suspend its intake and isolate the youth already in their care. Nine young people have remained living at The Open Door, which is down from 15 a few weeks ago. Even with the extra room, after three weeks of isolation Hutton says they are “climbing the walls.”

Her staff are also in isolation — with frontline employees only moving between home and work — and some programs have moved online. “Kids just really identify with being able to get a hold of us through FaceTime or texting or WhatsApp, or whatever it is that they’re using. So we had all of those in place.”

O’Neill’s team at YWCA Edmonton have also made counselling available through phone or videoconference.

These adaptations present new challenges. For example, during online meetings, Hutton says, The Open Door's staff have had to find innovative ways to navigate strict confidentiality rules while working from home with partners and children around. Some have created private meeting spaces in their basements, while others now take calls from the floor of a spacious closet.

The team at Wood Buffalo Food Bank also looked for solutions online after the COVID-19 crisis forced them to cancel an annual event that typically brings in \$35,000 in cash and 50,000 pounds of food. They created a virtual food drive, which has so far seen a great response from community members who, Edwards says, have been stepping up, “even if they’re down and out.”

But not every organization can move its work online.

The team at The Mustard Seed, a Red Deer charity that fights poverty and homelessness, couldn't switch to an online model for its school lunch program or shelters, says Scott Tilbury, its development manager. When schools closed, The Mustard Seed had to find ways to deliver lunches to students from families in need as well as ensure implementation of social distancing rules in its shelters.

As these charities have scrambled to adapt and stay operational, some others, like Medicine Hat-based Prairie Gleaners, have had to temporarily close their doors. Located near a cluster of industrial greenhouses, Prairie Gleaners takes excess food from vegetable suppliers that would otherwise go to waste, dries it, and packages it for distribution to people in need around the world.

It's a model that relies on volunteers — often seniors — to sort, wash, and chop. “We don't feel that our staff and volunteers need to be put in a situation where their health might be put in a compromised position,” said Jim Grossman, the group's treasurer, noting they plan to reopen as soon as they can.

Immediate needs such as food and shelter are at risk of going unmet as charities across the province struggle with the balancing act between ensuring the safety of their staff and providing for the communities they serve.

The Wood Buffalo Food Bank is experiencing the same challenge as The Open Door: requests for help have increased by about 35% since the pandemic began, says Edwards, while at the same time his team is struggling to reduce public contact.

The Food Bank's mobile pantry service is relying on some local First Nations communities, especially those that have set up checkpoints at their community borders, to assist with food distribution.

In the community of Standoff in southwestern Alberta, the local Blood Tribe food bank is now delivering hampers for the tribal administration. COVID-19 has meant they've had to rely exclusively on delivery — no pickups — for the 1500 emergency food packages, which are each worth \$150.

“It's been quite the task,” said Pam Blood, the Tribe's communications and public engagement director. But they're making it work so far, even though it means travelling to

members spread across the large reserve as well as those living off-reserve in urban areas.

For charities across the province, facing down these types of obstacles is the only way forward. “The public need right now is just paramount,” says O’Neill.

She adds that partnerships have been critical to the pandemic response. This includes sharing information and resources, amplifying each other’s messages, re-directing people in need to services provided by other charities, and finding new ways to collaborate when.

Tilbury agrees. “Many organizations have recognized that working together is to the overall benefit of the community,” he says. “Partnerships make the response stronger.”