



Food Banks, Disaster Response and Recovery:  
What Did We Learn from the 2016 Horse River Fire?

This report is the final product of an evaluative project contracted by the Wood Buffalo Food Bank Association (WBFBA) with Judith C. Kulig. Thanks to the participants, the Executive Director and Staff of the WBFBA and to HaiYan (LingLing) Fan who was the Research Associate on the project.

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### **Main Messages**

Networking and connecting with organizations within the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB), other relevant agencies and provincial government departments is an ongoing process undertaken by the Wood Buffalo Food Bank Association (WBFBA). Despite the best efforts to inform and educate the public about their work, not all stakeholders who were interviewed were aware of the diverse programs that the WBFBA offers. Several of the local stakeholders that were interviewed saw the WBFBA services as essential to their community. However other local and some external stakeholders had no or little one-on-one experience with the food bank and recognized that they were responsible for finding out more about this valuable resource. The WBFBA could:

- Pursue other avenues to educate stakeholders and lead focus group discussions about the food bank as an essential part of the social fabric of their community.

Due to the lack of knowledge about food banks, there was a lack of understanding about the potential role WBFBA can have in disaster response and recovery. To address this, WBFBA could:

- Work with Food Banks Alberta in developing mechanisms and messages for external stakeholders about the role of food banks in disasters.
- Develop emergency plans that specifically address different phases of disaster response and recovery including how to address donation management and working with the networks the WBFBA has to access supplies and transportation.

Volunteers from the industrial sector assisted the WBFBA in preparing for re-entry after the Horse River Fire. WBFBA could also:

- Offer information and training for other potential volunteers before disasters occur making the re-entry process easier.
- Consider the development of formal memorandums of understanding or cooperative agreements that allow for access to food resources within the WBFBA.

Evacuees are under considerable stress; reducing that stress through a seamless and shared database would be beneficial to this group as they access resources from food banks in other locations across the province. The WBFBA could:

- Initiate a discussion about developing a secure database that includes common elements used by all food banks in the province.

## **Executive Summary**

This report discusses the findings generated from an evaluation project requested by the Wood Buffalo Food Bank Association (WBFBA) regarding their experiences as a social profit organization responding to the 2016 Horse River Fire (the Fire). Perspectives from a variety of stakeholders representing social profit organizations, government organizations, the business sector and Indigenous agencies and WBFBA clients were elicited. Discussion focused on the meaning of essential services, the understanding of the role of social profit organizations during and after disasters and the implications for food banks. Reflecting on the meaning and role of food banks in disasters will help the WBFBA and RMWB become better prepared for any future disaster events while assisting the community to become self-sufficient, sustainable and economically resilient.

## **Approach**

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) is the second largest municipality in Canada, which consists of a 66,361 square kilometer geographic area including the urban centre, Fort McMurray, and nine rural communities. The population in this municipality was 73,320 in 2016 with an average age of 33.0 years. It is a natural resource community largely dependent upon oil and experienced an economic downturn in 2014 with the drop in oil prices.

Natural disasters are sudden, calamitous events that cause disruption in a community's function and may have economic and environmental impacts because of the event (IFRC, 2015). A disaster is the result of hazards impacting vulnerable people. In Canada, the most common types of disasters are floods, storms and wildfires (Index for Risk Management, 2015). Wildfires disproportionately impact individuals who live in rural or remote areas due to the nature of the geography and landscape (i.e., forest or grassland). The Horse River Fire was initially spotted on May 1; it moved rapidly into the communities causing the evacuation of over 88,000 people on

May 3. There were 2,579 structures lost; rebuilding the communities is a long-term process requiring collaboration and commitment from government, social profit organizations, industry and corporations. The Fire worsened the economic situation within a community that was already struggling.

### **Data Collection**

This evaluation project focused on conducting interviews with stakeholders and clients of the WBFBA and a scan of current literature, reports and websites on the role of food banks in general and specifically regarding disaster response and recovery. The interviews with the stakeholders were conducted by the author and a master's prepared research associate. An open-ended interview guide was developed by the author, reviewed by the Executive Director (ED) of the WBFBA and revised accordingly (Appendix A). A total of 22 stakeholder interviews were conducted with 9 men and 13 women. The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes; they were recorded and confidentially transcribed then reviewed to identify perspectives held by the stakeholders. After the initial attempt to invite clients through email to be interviewed, WBFBA staff used a randomized process to contact clients and conducted a telephone survey with 11 clients—3 men and 8 women. The interviews lasted on average 12 minutes; they were recorded, confidentially transcribed and reviewed to identify the clients' perspectives.

### **Results**

The stakeholders emphasized that the 2016 Fire was an unprecedented event. Coordination, networking, collaboration and learning to work with new partners combined with the first-time implementation of the PESS were all factors that impacted the response and recovery to the Fire.

The stakeholders emphasized the use of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to identify the needs of the returnees—shelter, food and water were priorities as were security (i.e., having available first responders) and health care facilities and personnel. For some stakeholders, it was without question that social profit organizations have a significant role to play in addressing the challenges that occur when facing a disaster or the impacts of such events. The clients strongly supported an active role of the WBFBA in responding to the Fire; food banks are accustomed to working with people in crisis and in soliciting for donations both important components of disaster recovery. The work of the ED of the WBFBA on the Social Recovery Task Force was also noted as an important contribution.

For other stakeholders, food banks were described as a resource for vulnerable individuals who should not have been encouraged to return to Fort McMurray during the staged return phases because their ability to be self-sustaining was hampered by the lack of a fully functioning community. In contrast, other stakeholders saw this as divisive and demonstrated a lack of understanding about the important role that food banks play in communities. These same stakeholders also related that there has been an increase in food insecurity among other groups in the community due to the Fire.

### **Conclusions**

The experiences of stakeholders and clients in the 2016 Horse River Fire provides a case example to understand the role of the Wood Buffalo Food Bank Association as a social profit organization in disaster response and recovery. Further discussion of the main messages generated through this report will help ensure that the WBFBA is considered an essential service at the appropriate phase of the disaster.

**Food Banks and Disaster Response and Recovery:  
What did we Learn from the 2016 Horse River Fire?**

**Context**

The role of social profit organizations has not been well examined in relation to disaster response and recovery. This report focuses on the Wood Buffalo Food Bank Association (WBFBA) and their experiences in relation to the 2016 Horse River Wildfire. More specifically, perspectives from a variety of stakeholders from social profit organizations, government organizations, the business sector and Indigenous agencies and WBFBA clients were elicited about the meaning of essential services and the understanding of the role of social profit organizations during and after disasters. Such a topic is timely given the number of natural disasters that are occurring within Canada and around the world. Reflecting on the meaning and role of food banks in disasters will help the WBFBA and RMWB become better prepared for any future disaster events while assisting the community to become self-sufficient, sustainable and economically resilient.

**Approach**

**The Social Context of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo**

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) is the second largest municipality in Canada, which consists of a 66,361 square kilometer geographic area including the urban centre, Fort McMurray, and nine rural communities: Anzac, Conklin, Draper, Fort Chipewyan, Fort Fitzgerald, Fort McKay, Gregoire Lake Estates, Janvier and Sapræ Creek Estates. According to Statistics Canada (2017), the population in this specialized municipality increased from 66,896 in 2011 to 73,320 in 2016. The population structure of Wood Buffalo is also young with an average age of 33.0 years. According to Statistics Canada (2017) 77.1% of the local population are between 15-64 years old, and more than 20% of the population are between 0-14

years old. There are more than 8,000 self-identified Aboriginal people living within the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and more than 63% of them live in the Fort McMurray area (Statistics Canada, 2017).

In 2011, more than 14% of the oil and gas extraction industry workers in Canada, which was about 13,050 people, worked in Fort McMurray. In 2016, there were 13,335 people working in the mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction sector. However, the overall unemployment rate in the Wood Buffalo-Cold Lake region had increased from 3.1% in 2013 to 8.0% in July 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2015). At the same time, the part-time employment rate reached 8.2% in 2015 as opposed to the 7.4% in 2013 according to the Conference Board of Canada (2016). A reasonable assumption is that the unemployment rates among the Aboriginal population would be even greater in this region since the general trend of employment rates are lower among the Aboriginal population as compared to the non-Aboriginal population across Canada (Gionet, 2009).

Natural resource communities are often subject to the up and down cycle of prosperity and decline subject to market prices and demands on products. In 2014, the value of oil dropped leading to an ongoing economic decline for the RMWB. In an area where the cost of accommodation, food and other items is already higher than their southern neighbors, a sharp decline in revenues accentuates the disparity and places individuals who would normally be economically secure in an economically vulnerable position. The subsequent high unemployment rates caused a variety of economic pressures or poverty issues for people living within the Wood Buffalo-Cold Lake region even before the 2016 wildfire.

### **Describing Natural Disasters**



## FOOD BANKS AND DISASTERS

Natural disasters are sudden, calamitous events that cause disruption in a community's function and may have economic and environmental impacts as a result of the event (IFRC, 2015). A disaster is the result of hazards impacting vulnerable people. Disasters include a full range such as wildfires, floods and earthquakes. In Canada, the most common types of disasters are floods, storms and wildfires (Index for Risk Management, 2015). Wildfires disproportionately impact individuals who live in rural or remote areas due to the nature of the geography and landscape (i.e., forest or grassland) where fires often originate. However, over the last decade, there has been an increase in fires that impact individuals and communities because of the substantial increase in the number of people who live in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) and the changes in our climate and weather patterns.

Regardless of the type of disaster, significant changes often occur within people's lives and within their community after the event. From 2011 – 2016 there were three significant disasters that have greatly impacted the residents of Alberta and the province as a whole. These disasters include the Slave Lake Wildfires (2011) the southern Alberta floods (2013) and the Horse River Fire (2016). Each of these events was devastating but the 2016 Horse River Wildfire (thereafter referred to as the Fire) in the RMWB was unprecedented regarding the number of evacuees and the extensiveness of the damage. The Fire was spotted on May 1; extreme fire behavior with high winds resulted in its entrance into Fort McMurray on May 3. Over 88,000 people within the RMWB including the city of Fort McMurray were evacuated. Firefighting and other resources from across the province, the country and from the international arena were all needed to control the fire.

A final tally indicates that the Fire consumed over 589,000 hectares; 2579 structures were lost including 1579 homes and condominiums. The financial and economic cost of the fire is

estimated to be \$8.9 billion making it the costliest disaster in Canadian history (KPMG, 2017a). Insured losses were double the 2013 southern Alberta floods (Statistics Canada, 2016). The Fire added to the community’s economic challenges given the downslide in the oil and gas industry making it even more difficult to move forward and demonstrate economic resilience. In fact, 80.4% of the population reported losing 8.5 million work hours over a two-month period due to the wildfire (Statistics Canada, November 25, 2016). There are estimates that oil production was reduced by 47 million barrels resulting in lost revenues of \$1.4 billion (The Conference Board of Canada, November 15, 2016). In addition, the natural resource industry lost the highest number of work hours (2.7 million) during the two-month period of the evacuation and wait for re-entry. More men than women, particularly those from 25 to 39 years of age, lost work hours during this time period (Statistics Canada, Nov 2016).

Rebuilding the RMWB is a long-term process involving physical rebuilding and social recovery and the need for cooperation and collaboration of local and provincial governments with a host of agencies representing social profit organizations and corporations. Figure 1 illustrates the phases communities undergo when a disaster is experienced; the project discussed in this report focused on the Reconstruction Phase (FEMA/SAMHSA, 2012).



By Fall, 2017 1184 building permits were issued, and 1300 basements were poured. The population of the community has decreased with approximately 10,000 not returning—for some residents they are waiting for their house to be rebuilt while others have decided to relocate elsewhere.

### **Provincial Response to Disasters**

The Alberta Emergency Plan outlines four pillars or phases that require coordinated action: 1) prevention and mitigation; 2) preparedness; 3) response; and, 4) recovery. The Province of Alberta responds to disasters through a collaboration between government ministries, the local governments that are specifically impacted and a variety of corporate and social profit organizations.

Critical infrastructure is an important part of disaster response and recovery and refers to structures that are vital to a city or town or municipality and ensure normal operation; examples include airports, water treatment plants, telephone towers and lines, and natural gas pipelines. The Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) refers to four categories of essential services: 1) critical services which must be resumed within 24 hours or will definitely result in injury, loss of life, infrastructure destruction; 2) vital services which must be resumed within 72 hours or will likely result in injury, loss of life, or infrastructure destruction; 3) necessary services must be resumed within 2 weeks or could result in considerable loss or further destruction of infrastructure; and, 4) desired services could be delayed for two weeks or longer but are required for operations to return to normal functioning. The different perspectives of terms such as essential services and critical infrastructure have their roots in the contrasts between definitions based in business continuity planning (i.e., identifying risks, threats and vulnerabilities that could impact the continuing operation of a business or other similar entity

(DRI Canada, no date) compared to consequence management (i.e., dealing with the effects of the event (AEMA, 2016).

The Provincial Operations Centre (POC) is a communication and response centre mandated to respond to an incident(s) that impacts Alberta residents (AEMA, no date). POC is situated within the Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) and works with the local Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) and the Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) to address the event that is impacting the community.

Based upon evaluations of responses to previous disasters (i.e., Slave Lake Wildfires [2011] (KPMG, 2012) and the southern Alberta floods [2013]), a provincial framework for responding to disasters was developed and implemented in 2016. This framework—the Provincial Emergency Social Services—(PESS) includes an organizational structure and process to ensure a coordinated approach to whatever type of disaster is being addressed (AEMA, 2016). PESS has a direct line of communication with POC and can ask for assistance as needed. The main goal of PESS is to ensure that those affected have their essential needs met in a timely fashion; it focuses on the human impact and how to address needs that arise. Partnerships form the basis of PESS which includes other provincial departments and agencies, the Federal departments of Health Canada and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, the NGO Council and local authorities. PESS (AEMA, 2016) was first implemented in response to a disaster during the Horse River Wildfire.

Within PESS, essential services are defined as basic needs (food, shelter, used clothing) as the main priority. Working with other partners will help to identify not only needs but solutions to address those needs in creative and locally acceptable ways. Networking is essential; when there are no ongoing disasters those responsible for PESS are working with other groups to

revise emergency plans, create collaborative relationships and connect with new potential partners.

During the 2016 Fire, the REOC and POC were both activated on May 1 (KPMG, 2017b). The Ministry of Human Services activated PESS on May 3 when the mass evacuations also took place. The Province established the Wildfire Recovery Task Force on May 6, 2017 which was chaired by the Premier and co-chaired by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and included members from Ministries such as Health, Indigenous Relations, Municipal Affairs, Transportation, and Infrastructure. The role of this Task Force was to focus on the safety and security of returning residents and supporting the local community in its recovery efforts while determining an appropriate re-entry plan. The Regional Wildfire Recovery Task Force was established June 21, 2016.

The Re-entry process for RMWB was a collaborative plan between POC and the RMWB to ensure a phased, voluntary re-entry process for those individuals whose houses were habitable (Government of Alberta, 2016). A formal announcement was made about the re-entry on May 18; a re-entry booklet was available on-line for residents on May 24. The re-entry was staged by neighborhood for the days June 1 — June 4. The re-entry booklet emphasized that the community had been severely impacted by the Fire and that not all services would be available and that the community was not fully functional except for critical infrastructure (e.g., power, gas, water). Individuals with health conditions (e.g., asthma, being 36 weeks or more pregnant, in need of mental health counseling, undergoing cancer treatment) were therefore advised not to return until more services were available. Residents were also advised to come prepared by having a two-week supply of groceries, water and their medical prescriptions with them. A boil water advisory was in effect due to the contamination of the water treatment plant. For those who

had lost their homes, there was limited accommodation available because of the number of individuals responding to the aftermath required housing. Current policy and programming meant that the WBFBA was not invited to be involved in the development of the Re-entry plan or booklet that was widely distributed.

### **Food Banks Roles in Post-Disaster Recovery**

In Canada, food banks help individuals and families deal with food insecurity. Food Banks Canada (FBC) is a national charitable organization which serves as an umbrella group for over 500 food banks spread throughout 10 provincial food bank associations. There are currently no territorial food bank associations but individual food banks in the territories do belong to FBC. This national organization focuses on three aspects: 1) acquiring food and other relevant products to share within their network; 2) delivering programs and services that enhances the opportunity for people in need to access food and become self-sufficient; and, 3) influencing government policy and programs through advocacy and research. At the provincial level, it is not a requirement to belong to the provincial food bank association but there are benefits including learning from one another when developing and implementing new programs, addressing policy and research issues as a group and coordination of activities when events such as disasters occur. In Alberta, the provincial food bank association—Food Banks Alberta (FBA)—focuses on “strengthening the impact of the Food Banks Alberta network by sharing best practices, innovations, and resources between members, stakeholders and community partners” (Food Banks Alberta, 2017). The cost to join the provincial association is based on the number of people served through the local food bank. The cost varies from \$50 (up to 200 people) to \$1000 (over 10,000 people).

Founded in 1983, the WBFBA provides food and support to residents of the RMWB including the city of Fort McMurray, and the surrounding rural and Indigenous communities. The WBFBA is a member in good standing within the FBA and has been actively involved in its mandate. The current ED is the Past Chair of FBA, is currently a Director on the FBA Board of Directors and is a member of the FBA-FBBC Disaster Management Task Force.

The WBFBA collects, manages and distributes food to individuals and families who are dealing with food insecurity including those who experienced higher unemployment after the recent economic downturn. In 2015, the food bank distributed 19,964 pounds of food, feeding 2,344 people—a 45% increase over 2014 (Charity Intelligence Canada, 2016).

In other parts of the world, food banks and food bank associations are more intimately involved in disaster planning and recovery. In Australia, FoodBank—the national food bank association—is directly involved with responding to disasters. During such events—including bushfires, cyclones and floods, FoodBank advocates food industry partners for donations that are then delivered to the food banks involved with those who are in need post-disaster (FoodBank, April 9, 2015).

The California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) has a detailed Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) which focuses on the role of the CAFB to address any type of disaster and its ability to maintain its three essential services (delivery of produce statewide through its Farm to Family program; communication with internal and external partners; advocacy on behalf of food banks) following the event. This association also has a detailed operations plan to maintain the Farm to Family program as well as the general operation of the food bank operations. In addition, the CAFB has free downloadable templates for use by food banks as they prepare their own disaster plan specific to their social and geographic context (California Association of Food Banks,

October, 2014). Feeding America, the national body of food banks in the United States, has committed to working with other disaster-relief organizations to ensure that donated food and grocery items are available for those experiencing the greatest need following a disaster (Feeding America, no date).

### **Data Collection**

This evaluation project focused on conducting interviews with stakeholders and clients of the WBFBA and a scan of current literature, reports and websites on the role of food banks in general and specifically regarding their roles in disaster response and recovery.

The interviews with the stakeholders were conducted by the author and a master's prepared research associate. An open-ended interview guide was developed by the author, reviewed by the ED of the WBFBA and revised accordingly (Appendix A). The interviews were conducted from October, 2017 – January, 2018. A list of potential contacts had been provided by the ED and other contacts were generated through conversations and discussions with the participants. This ensured a full range of stakeholders were included from within various sectors and provinces. A total of 22 stakeholder interviews were conducted; there were 9 men and 13 women who were in Alberta and British Columbia. The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes and were recorded, confidentially transcribed and then reviewed to identify perspectives held by the stakeholders. The group represented food banks, relevant industry partners, local and provincial government personnel and other social profit organizations who were familiar with, or responded specifically, to the Fire. The interviews were recorded and confidentially transcribed. Thereafter they were reviewed for a comprehensive understanding of the stakeholder and client perspectives.



For the client data, the first attempt of data collection included a group email sent from the WBFBA to all clients with emails who had accessed the food bank after the fire and requesting that they contact the author to arrange for an interview. Unfortunately, this elicited no responses from this sample group. After a discussion with the ED, it was decided that staff from the WBFBA would contact clients by telephone and request their participation in a telephone survey. Training was provided to three interviewers in two different sessions. Discussion was held about the following points: 1) the interview guide; 2) the interview process including discussing that the interviews were confidential and were being recorded thereafter for confidential transcription; verbal consent was required and the purpose of the project would need to be explained; 3) the process of contacting the clients and randomizing the client list was explained whereby every fifth person would be contacted to a maximum of three times; and 4) the process of data management including uploading the recorded interview. The staff were also advised that the interviews would be reviewed, and feedback provided as necessary. The staff conducted the interviews during their normal working hours and in total interviewed 11 clients, 8 women and 3 men. The interviews lasted on average 12 minutes; the transcripts were read to identify the clients' perspectives.

### **Results**

#### *Identifying Priorities During the Horse River Fire*

There were many comments made about the sheer size of the 2016 Fire. Several stakeholders mentioned that normally a fire would impact a neighborhood or part of a small town but to have a fire threaten a city the size of Fort McMurray and the communities and industry sector in the surrounding area was unprecedented. It was compounded by the reality that there is only one road in and out of the community. There was little first-hand experience of addressing such a massive disaster event in Canada. The complexity of considering multiple sectors,

infrastructure and human needs simultaneously after the disaster had not been accomplished anywhere else in the province or country.<sup>1</sup> Coordination, networking, collaboration and learning to work with new partners combined with the first-time implementation of the PESS were all factors that impacted the response and recovery to the Fire. Without the assistance of numerous Ministries working together with organizations such as The Red Cross and many other social profit organizations, the Insurance Bureau of Canada, and the Federal government, the NGO Council, the progress in recovery that has been made thus far would not be realized. One stakeholder aptly stated: “There’s multiple levels and multiple groups that were doing re-entry planning and you can only do planning around what you know.”

The definition of essential services when faced with a disaster was discussed in the interviews. The majority of those who were interviewed were not able to formally define this phrase; the exceptions were those individuals who worked within the Government of Alberta in an emergency services capacity. There were however examples of essential services that were given by some of the stakeholders; having a functioning police department, fire department and health services through for example, hospitals were mentioned. Others were access to food and water.

During the interviews, the stakeholders were also engaged in a discussion that included identifying priorities for those displaced and when they returned to their community after a disaster has occurred. There was minor variation in responses between these two phases in terms

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<sup>1</sup> There are other fires that have destroyed partial or entire communities in our history as a country, but those incidents occurred in times where the population was much smaller and there was more limited pre-existing infrastructure that had to be rebuilt. A case in point is the fires that destroyed Fernie, British Columbia in 1904 and 1908. It is also not uncommon to have destructive spring fires in northern Alberta with 2011 Slave Lake Wildfires being one example and others being the Mitsue (2001) and Chisholm (1998) Fires (<https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/Wildfire-MNP-Report.pdf> accessed Jan 24, 2018).

of what people needed. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was commonly mentioned as a guide for what was considered essential in responding to disasters. Safety of the citizens was often mentioned first—a priority was to ensure the citizens were safe during the evacuation and upon return to their community. This meant the presence of police services and other first responders such as firemen and paramedics. Feeling safe was particularly important because there was always the possibility of the fire re-igniting or changing direction. Safety was also important to help ensure that one's home, belongings and family were safe from the potential of vandalism or theft.

Having shelter was high on the list of priorities—similar to safety, appropriate shelter was required during the evacuation and after returning. Other priorities included physiological needs specifically access to clean water and food. When the clients were asked about what the immediate needs of displaced people in times of disaster, food was mentioned more frequently as the top priority. Communication was considered the highest priority by some stakeholders because without accurate communication, rumors and misinformation lead to confusion and a lack of clarity about what is happening. Power and natural gas were also noted as essential—otherwise it would not be possible to live in your home (if it was habitable) and deal with issues such as securing a new refrigerator.

Access to health care namely a fully functioning hospital and inter-related health services such as physicians and other health personnel were also identified as priorities post-disaster. The necessity of clean air was also mentioned as a priority to maintain good health.

### *The WBFBA & the Horse River Fire*

The stakeholders that work within social profit organizations believe that sustaining and maintaining everyday activities within families and communities will not occur unless the social

realm is also addressed. Food banks are one of the social profit organizations in the RMWB that provides services to a range of clients. In the interviews, the stakeholders were asked to compare the differences between food banks to grocery stores. Stakeholders who were not as familiar with food banks viewed them as places where vulnerable individuals received food hampers. More specifically, those who were vulnerable were identified as homeless or semi-homeless, underemployed or unemployed or engaged in lifestyle behaviors that impacted their ability to secure food. Some stakeholders thought that food banks “prepared food” rather than “providing food” for their clientele. In contrast, stakeholders who had worked within the food bank system or was a partner with the food bank in addressing community needs, saw a much larger role for the food bank. They noted specific programs that the WBFBA offered such as classes and programs that focus on basic shelf cooking, slow cooker cooking and financial literacy to assist individuals to become self-sufficient. They also said that in general food banks provided not only a social safety net for individuals who were in need but were also a contact for additional services. For example, food banks sometimes employ social service personnel who help clients access other services beyond the food bank for health care or social issues.

Several stakeholders commented that there was a lack of understanding that within the RMWB, there was an invisible population who struggled with food security. One other stakeholder stated that there is a perception that social profit organizations are only accessed by 1% of the population when up to 25% of the population is being served by these organizations. This same individual perceives that social profits are considered by some as “nice to have” and not a necessity for a community to properly function. In summary, to emphasize these points, this same stakeholder said: “Don’t underestimate the value of the [social] sector. And never underestimate the vulnerabilities of your community because you don’t know who’s accessing

our services....There's a real disconnect between the level of poverty and the level of need and the impacts of the economic downturn prior to the fire. And our community was a little bit in denial that we were having some of these really big social issues and that the sector was just trucking along and managing it to the best of our ability." Other stakeholders encouraged "looking at the bigger picture" to more fully understand people's circumstances and that even disasters alter people's access to resources and there is a responsibility to ensure that they can be housed, clothed and fed.

The client interviews support the need for food banks in society—this group of respondents view food banks as necessary to assist individuals who do not have the resources to manage to provide sufficient food for themselves and their families. The clients emphasized that they are well treated by the food bank staff—they are not only provided food hampers but are assisted in dealing with other issues in their lives.

Throughout the interviews with local stakeholders, there was an emphasis that the community had really experienced two disasters—the economic disaster which started in 2014 and the wildfire disaster in 2016. After the Fire, residents were even more at risk for food security due in part to the economic challenges of rebuilding or repairing damaged homes. Inter-related factors include individuals not having insurance, having inadequate insurance or having difficulties receiving reimbursement from their insurance companies or designated government emergency agencies. Others had lost their jobs due to the Fire or were unemployed while evacuated putting them at additional economic risk. Subsequently, the potential client base for the WBFBA had changed and their role in the community to reach out and assist this new client base became even more important after the Fire. One of the clients said that after a disaster, "we're all homeless" underlining the significance of how disasters change lives.

Regardless of the group represented, the stakeholders held specific views about the role of social profit organizations in addressing disaster response and recovery. For some, it was without question that social profit organizations have a significant role to play in addressing the challenges that occur when facing a disaster or the impacts of such an event.

During the Fire, the WBFBA staff were all evacuated. Food banks south of Fort McMurray began to experience an influx of requests for food hampers from evacuees. Hence, food banks in communities such as Lac La Biche, Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer all saw a significant increase in people coming forward requesting food hampers. Conversations were ongoing between the Executive Directors of the WBFBA and FBA as well as with individual food banks to appropriately deal with this situation. Discussions focused on supplies that were needed and how to address donations that were being made by corporations for the evacuees. For example, transportation of donations needed to be arranged and storage for the significant amount of donations was also needed in cities and respective food banks in southern locations.

In preparing for re-entry, only grocery stores were considered an option within the re-entry plan for accessing food. The WBFBA was not allowed re-entry until May 27 giving them only a few days before the staged return of residents began. Fortunately, local industry partners volunteered and assisted the food bank in the required clean-up so that it could re-open on June 11, 2016 (Wood Buffalo Food Bank Association [WBFBA], 2016). The Red Cross Community Partnership program provided financial assistance for the monetary needs incurred due to the disaster to ensure that the WBFBA continued to be operational during and after the Fire.

One perspective held by some of the stakeholders was that the local food bank did not have the capacity to feed all returning residents of the community. This cannot be denied but not all residents returned at once nor has the population of the RMWB reached its pre-disaster numbers.

In addition, the WBFBA may not have had food for all returning residents but they had worked on their own and with FBA to secure food donations that addressed the food needs of those who did return while also restoring their food supply for their regular clientele. One stakeholder said that if the WBFBA was negotiating with a corporation such as a grocery store chain for donations, the local recovery team could do the same thing reducing the need for the WBFBA to act as a “go-between.” However, this claim does not recognize the number and strength of the networks the WBFBA has with grocery store chains and transportation companies making it more efficient for the food bank to negotiate food donations. One stakeholder said: “There’s also a big support system backing them up—people know about giving to food banks. Food banks have great relationships with either stores or suppliers, or whole sellers. They got great deals on food, and there’s really no expectation of compensation.” One other suggestion was to determine how food providers in the community including the WBFBA can work together and prevent food wastage while ensuring food supplies are available during emergency events.

Some of the stakeholders that were included in this project noted that referrals were made to the WBFBA when returning residents went to the Reception Centres. In preparation for re-opening on June 11, the WBFBA decided to provide food hampers to anyone who requested them; eligibility criteria were not applied in the months after the Fire. Not all residents were aware that food hampers were available, but stories did circulate in the community that “free food” was available at the food bank. One stakeholder commented that they recognized the action of the WBFBA was to ensure that everyone had access to a basic need—food—but in removing barriers, other issues including taking advantage of the generosity were created.

There was a total of 7,894 weekly hampers provided to 5,396 families; the hampers were provided until the end of August, 2016. It was so busy that the WBFBA had to cap providing

hampers to 150 per day to allow enough time to restock in preparation for the next day (WBFBA, 2016). Since the Fire, WBFBA has documented a general increase in the access to their hampers. For instance, the number of people who accessed the food hamper program are as follows: August 2015--923 people; August 2016--4707 and in August 2017--1615 (WBFBA, 2016).

Not all the clients who were interviewed had accessed the food bank before the Fire. The more regular clients who were interviewed had been accessing the food bank for up to 9 years. Those who accessed it after the fire had the need for the assistance in securing food. This was in contrast to the perception held by some of the stakeholders who believed that individuals who had lost their home, belongings and vehicles in the Fire were covered by insurance (assuming they had coverage) and additional funds were provided by the Provincial government as well as the Red Cross. They had concluded that additional financial or assistance for food access through the WBFBA was not required by these individuals. The clients told us that even with the assistance from government and agencies, the additional help from the WBFBA allowed them to spread their financial resources around to ensure that they could manage under their changed circumstances. If they had not lost their home, some had experienced changes in their work hours. The evacuation meant that businesses were closed and, in some cases, did not reopen even after re-entry had occurred. For other clients, their workplaces did not return to pre-Fire routines and hence there was more limited work hours. Individuals in any of these circumstances benefitted from the assistance provided by the WBFBA. The clients concluded that the local food bank would benefit from being designated as an essential service.

Another perspective held by some of the stakeholders was that individuals who were vulnerable should not return to Fort McMurray because their ability to be self-sustaining was



hampered by the lack of a fully functioning community. This perspective is based on a limited definition of vulnerability and pre-disaster criteria. One stakeholder said that they wanted to reduce the potential dependence after the disaster and therefore individuals who needed to access the food bank should not be encouraged to return. The idea of discouraging the return of some residents was believed to be divisive and not helpful in the community's recovery. It also illustrated a lack of understanding that individuals were returning who would now meet the criteria to access the food bank because their financial circumstances had changed due to the Fire. One example is the seniors who were disproportionately affected by the fire; some social profit organizations in Fort McMurray are now seeing more individuals and couples from this age group who require assistance. Furthermore, the WBFBA served another purpose in the immediate post-disaster phase of the community. It had a role in addressing the emotional needs of residents. Picking up food hampers was not just about receiving food but an opportunity to connect and re-connect with other individuals who had gone through the same experience but had a different story. It was also a place where information could be shared about the availability of social services, which businesses had re-opened and what was being done to move the community forward in the recovery phase. One of the stakeholders said that food banks are accustomed to dealing with people in crisis which in this individual's mind confirmed that food banks had a role in responding to disasters.

### *Food Banks & the Stages of Disaster Response*

So what is the role of food banks during and after disasters? There was support from some of the stakeholders that the *different* stages of disaster recovery require responses from *different* agencies at *different* times.

For stakeholders who perceived essential services as primarily first responders assisting the public to deal with a disaster, there was no support that agencies such as food banks should be considered in this group. There was a sense that it would be better if the disaster would unfold under the government's direction and have the public's safety be secured by the right personnel, i.e., police services. Other comments in the interviews supported this--that the first responders were most needed to ensure a safe exodus occurred from the community. In this phase of the disaster, the food bank did not have a specific or mandatory role.

Stakeholders did comment that accessing the food bank supplies for preparation of food for the first responders who remained in the community would have been beneficial during the fire attack phase. This is a valid point because the food bank is a source of a variety of food items that would have been useful in preparing meals<sup>2</sup> reducing the need for donations and securing food from other agencies or corporations. In addition, given that the food bank supplies had to be all individually inspected with some discarded (baby food) and others properly washed (tinned products), using their food supply would have potentially reduced the time needed to prepare the food bank for re-opening. In anticipation of the food needs of those who remained in the RMWB to fight the fire, the ED of WBFBA had purposefully left the building with the security alarm disengaged and had advised individuals through social media, emails and telephone calls to help themselves to the food items in the food bank. Despite these efforts the WBFBA was not accessed for food resources during this phase of the disaster.

Once re-entry was being planned and implemented, there was acknowledgement that there was a role for social profit organizations such as food banks as noted in the following quote: "they [the food bank] should be understood and recognized for their capacity to do certain

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<sup>2</sup> The Salvation Army Community Response Unit was in the community providing meals to those who were involved in the emergency response.

things.” Another stakeholder said: “I think what we have to do is we have to look at what we’re setting up as the criteria to determine what essential services are. And what kind of role that would be....I don’t have the answer in regards to food banks but I think we need to look at what the criteria is and maybe there is phase one, two and three, and somewhere in there the food bank falls within one of those.”

One example of a specific role of the food bank would be the solicitation of donations for evacuees. As already noted, there is already a process in place for the food banks to request donations. In times of disaster they could message about the types of donations needed based on diverse needs for returning residents depending upon disaster recovery phases. For example, those just returning need basic items such as shampoo, toothbrushes and clothing appropriate for the season. As time goes on, needs change reflected in the specific items that are required such as supplies to return to school. Messaging about giving donations to specific groups such as food banks is very important because of the well intended but often poorly organized individual drives for donations. These individual drives can result in donations of inappropriate items that need to be transported and dealt with by individuals in the disaster-impacted community taking away time and energy from priorities. In contrast, food banks already have a process in place, including volunteers, who can deal with donations in a much more efficient manner.

The frustrations and concerns about not being allowed to re-entry early were experienced by other service providers. One example is the YWCA which operated several child care centres; their delay in re-opening was compounded by the need for each child care facility to be cleaned, inspected and restocked before they were re-opened. Some of the facilities were within schools further delaying the process. There were many frustrations with the lack of child care options. One stakeholder said: “once your children are safe [in child care centres] you can return and

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focus on the good work that you need to do whatever that industry is. And of course I would go with hospitals, the grocery stores, and the social profit agencies such as the YMCA, such as the food bank, or those support services that could be in place to help the general folks transition back to that new normal.” If residents are expected to return to their former employment, particularly those who were involved in community recovery, a full range of resources need to be available to ensure that this can happen. Individuals who have experienced a taxing experience such as the Fire do not need to also be attempting to additionally address issues of child care and food access.

From the interviews that were conducted, even though not all stakeholders understood or agreed that the food bank has a role in disasters, there was a greater interest in finding out how they operate and what they can do to assist in disaster recovery. There was a suggestion that relationships needed to be built locally through asset mapping exercises so that there was a clear understanding of the resources that were available in the community. The interviews also revealed that there were stakeholders who saw the food banks as vital to the recovery phase of the community. The local stakeholders who were most familiar with the WBFBA agreed that it should be designated as an essential service and receive the support it needs to be prepared for and respond to disaster events. Comments were made that not allowing the food bank to re-enter early actually set back the availability of supports for the returning residents. Another suggestion was that the WBFBA could transition from having a lead role to that of a supporting role to fit in with recovery plans. This means that the food bank would be considered one solution of several for addressing food issues in the community post-disaster.

The relatively small size of the RMWB means that collegial relationships can and have been developed between social profit organizations, industry, regional government and

corporations. Stakeholders who represented local industry and government attended and supported fundraisers for the WBFBA and could be accessed for professional connections that would benefit the food bank. Even though these networks and connections were in place, there was a perception that based on the general denial of the need for social profit organizations, the food bank would have to “earn their place at the table” to be allowed to engage in meaningful conversations with local emergency services committees about the food bank’s role in disaster response and recovery. For other stakeholders the contributions of the ED of the WBFBA in the Social Recovery Taskforce demonstrated that they had the skill, knowledge and commitment needed to contribute to the recovery of the community and had already earned the right to be at discussions about developing local emergency planning.

In such an extensive event such as the Horse River Fire, multiple sectors including corporations, government agencies and social profit organizations need to work together to address food security for all residents. In the case of the WBFBA, its role would vary during specific time periods—immediately upon return, food hampers could be provided to all residents who request them. Regular activities would be resumed within a specified time period with the knowledge that the context of the community will have changed altering the client base. If the WBFBA is designated as an essential service, the recommendation was that it should have pre-positioned food stocks if food stocks in the community (i.e., grocery stores) were gone. The clients who were interviewed emphasized that the WBFBA should be designated as an essential service and notified about any pending disasters. They were less aware of how this process could be undertaken to ensure it happens. One client recommended that emergency food boxes be prepared and stored in the warehouse next to other food supplies so that they could be readily accessed if a disaster occurred.

There was support voiced in the interviews that it is important to be better prepared for the next possible disaster. This could include preparing volunteers from community partners such as industry and corporations so that they would be aware about how to clean and prepare a food bank for re-entry. Pre-disaster preparation would also mean that discussions with the municipal government and regional emergency services would also be necessary to determine the role and specific activities that the WBFBA would play during and after a disaster. This would also be an appropriate time to reinforce what the food bank does in the community and how it works with its clients to help them become self-sufficient. Several stakeholders emphasized that the success of social profit organizations is based in the relationships that they have with the wide range of organizations and businesses in the community. Leveraging these relationships to inform other organizations about their roles and activities would be a worthwhile investment.

The WBFBA, under the direction of its ED, was commended by the stakeholders for starting the discussion about the role of social profit organizations in general, and the role of food banks in disaster response and recovery. One debate that would need to occur is focusing on whether the WBFBA is an organization that focuses on response or recovery when disasters occur. It was also noted throughout the interviews that the services provided by the WBFBA adds to the overall health and well-being of the RMWB and that the ED is appropriately addressing an expanded role for the WBFBA in disaster response and recovery. There was support for the WBFBA to develop its own emergency plan which would clarify roles and activities for this organization if another event occurred. This plan would be able to clarify the different strategies that the food bank can employ in different stages of the disaster.

### **Conclusions**

There is a growing awareness of the importance of social profit organizations in disaster response and recovery. Understanding the processes through which agencies including social profits work together in both pre- and post-disaster phases can guide policies and programs that can be implemented by communities, and provincial ministries and departments to assist in preparation for future disaster events. The experiences of internal and external stakeholders in responding to the 2016 Horse River Fire pointed to the need for enhancing their self-awareness of the role of social profits in general, and food banks specifically, when considering disaster response and recovery. There were varying perspectives of what food banks can do but there was a commitment to collaboratively discover what that would be. The clients who had first hand experience with the wildfire had no doubt that the WBFBA was an essential service in responding to disasters. The WBFBA under the leadership of the ED has the connections and networks to move forward in the next phase of preparing an emergency plan for any future events.

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Appendix A

**Interview Guide: Lessons Learned WBFBA**

**What is your connection with the WBFBA?**

*As WBFBA staff/volunteer:* what is your role/what are your duties? What are examples of all the activities the WBFBA spearheads in the community? Who are your partners in the community? What committees/initiatives is the WBFBA involved with on a routine basis?

*As a stakeholder/not-for-profit:* What are some examples of how you work with the WBFBA? What do you see as the important elements of what they do for your community?

*As a client:* How long have you been a client at the WBFBA?; How often did you access the WBFBA before the fire?

**Let's talk about the 2016 wildfire**

*Food Bank Staff:*

After the evacuation was lifted when did you return to the community? Did you bring two weeks of food back with you to the community?

During a crisis, what do you see as immediate needs for displaced people? for evacuated homeless people?

During the course of a crisis, in what sequence should essential needs for people come flowing back into the affected area? Where does food fit into this sequence?

What is the difference between how a food bank operates and how a grocery store operates?

Did the FB receive an early-entry permit like the grocery stores (e.g. Shoppers Drug Mart in downtown)? When did the FB get the entry permit? In your opinion, why were the grocery stores allowed to come back earlier than the FB?

What was your role and duties at the WBFBA when you returned? How many days did it take to prepare the Food Bank to be open to the public? Once it was accessed, how many clients did you serve per day?

Was there sufficient staff to do the work? What other kinds of staff would have been helpful?

What other resources would have been beneficial?

What other types of activities did the WBFBA become involved with post-wildfire?

In your opinion, what are “essential services” for a disaster situation? Is the WBFBA an essential service? What would be the benefits if it was designated as an essential service?

In your opinion, should the WBFBA be designated as an essential service? Why or why not? What would you recommend be the “next steps” in having the WBFBA designated as an essential service?

*Stakeholder:*

After the evacuation was lifted when did you return to the community? Did you bring two weeks of food back with you to the community?

During a crisis, what do you see as immediate needs for displaced people? for evacuated homeless people?

During the course of a crisis, in what sequence should essential needs for people come flowing back into the affected area? Where does food fit into this sequence?

What is the difference between how a food bank operates and how a grocery store operates?

In what ways did you access or work with the WBFBA during and after the wildfire?

What resources or personnel (if any) did your agency provide to the WBFBA during this time?

In your opinion, what are considered to be “essential services” for a disaster situation in your community? Are not for profits such as Salvation Army essential services?

Is the WBFBA an essential service? What would be the benefits if it was designated as an essential service?

In your opinion, should the WBFBA be designated as an essential service? Why or why not? What would you recommend be the “next steps” in having the WBFBA designated as an essential service?

**Lessons Learned:**

From your perspective:

What would you tell other communities and provinces about how a food bank can prepare for a disaster? Can be involved in community recovery?

What are the lessons learned about the role of food banks in a disaster situation for the WBFBA?

For the Provincial Association for Food Banks?

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For the local government? For the provincial government? For other social profit agencies (Salvation Army for instance)?

**Anything else to add?**

**Anyone else we should speak with?**

**Interview Guide: Lessons Learned WBFBA: Client Population**

**Let's talk first about food banks in general:**

What is the difference between how a food bank operates and how a grocery store operates?

During a crisis, what do you see as immediate needs for displaced people? for evacuated homeless people?

During the course of a crisis, in what sequence should essential needs for people come flowing back into the affected area? Where does food fit into this sequence?

**Let's talk about the 2016 wildfire**

*Client:*

How long have you been a client at the WBFBA?; How often did you access the WBFBA before the fire?

After the evacuation was lifted when did you return to the community? Did you bring two weeks of food back with you to the community?

In relation to your return date to the community, when did you first access the WBFBA? How often did you access it in the following two weeks? What about a month after your return—how often did you access the WBFBA? By Christmas of 2016, how often did you access it? And now, often do you access it?

Did you access other services the food bank provided during this time period?

In your opinion, what are considered to be “essential services” for a disaster situation in your community? Generally speaking, should FB be an essential part of emergency and disaster relief program? Is the WBFBA an essential service? Does WBFBA provide essential services? What would be the benefits if it was designated as an essential service?

In your opinion, should the WBFBA be designated as an essential service? Why or why not? What would you recommend be the “next steps” in having the WBFBA designated as an essential service?

**Lessons Learned:**

From your perspective:

What would you tell other communities and provinces about how a food bank can prepare for a disaster? Can be involved in community recovery?

What are the lessons learned about the role of food banks in a disaster situation?

**Anything else to add?**