



RESPONDING TO COVID-19

CITIES REDUCING POVERTY

May 2020

CITIES
REDUCING POVERTY

CITIES
DEEPENING COMMUNITY

Vibrant Communities

 **TAMARACK**
INSTITUTE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
1. INTRODUCTION	5
OVERVIEW	5
PURPOSE	5
CONTENT	5
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
2. OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS	6
3. HOW COMMUNITIES ARE RESPONDING	8
EXPANDING FOOD ACCESS AND DISTRIBUTION	8
FINDING HOUSING & SAFE SHELTER FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS	11
SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES	13
ENHANCING AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF TRANSPORTATION	15
EXPANDING FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT SERVICES	17
SUPPORTING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH	20
ADAPTING EDUCATION & EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES	22
4. STRUCTURES & PROCESSES	24
SERVICE DELIVERY AND INFORMATION SHARING	24
MULTI-SECTORAL PARTNERSHIPS AND RESPONSE TEAMS	26
5. LOOKING AHEAD	28
ADVOCACY	28
IMPLICATIONS FOR CRP	30

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Through the COVID-19 crisis, Vibrant Communities - Cities Reducing Poverty (VC-CRP) has responded to meet urgent community needs through a variety of mechanisms and partnerships. Our 81 members, representing 328 communities, have demonstrated creativity, commitment, and compassion as they support their communities' most vulnerable.

CRP members are providing food and housing, supporting local businesses, improving access to transportation, expanding financial empowerment services, and fostering health and education. They are streamlining service delivery, coordinating information sharing, enhancing multi-sectoral partnerships, and initiating emergency response action teams. They are also creating advocacy opportunities for fellow members to engage in key policy proposals such as Universal Basic Income.

Through 60 stories of innovation and resilience, this report provides a point-in-time snapshot of how CRP member communities are responding to COVID-19 across Canada and the USA. It was written to acknowledge the innovative efforts of CRP member communities, and to provide members with fresh ideas and insights that they can use to build resilience and strengthen their own responses.

OVERVIEW OF HOW CRP MEMBERS ARE RESPONDING

FOOD SECURITY 	HOUSING 	LOCAL BUSINESS 	TRANSPORTATION 	FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT 	HEALTH 	EDUCATION 
COORDINATING SERVICE DELIVERY & INFORMATION SHARING 		ENHANCING MULTI-SECTORAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS 		ENGAGING IN ADVOCACY 		

Examples of Program Adaptations and Innovations

- Expanding food access and distribution
- Finding housing and safe shelter for vulnerable populations
- Supporting local businesses and non-profits
- Providing free transportation
- Expanding income supports and financial empowerment programs
- Supporting physical and mental health
- Adapting education and early childhood development services

Coordinating Service Delivery and Sharing Information

- Supporting expansion and adaptation of services that provide food, shelter, transportation, education, financial empowerment and mental health supports.
- Developing websites, infographics, fact sheets, and social media posts to share information about services and supports available, including emergency benefits.
- Acting as an information conduit from the province/territory to the community and vice versa, helping agencies adhere to public health regulations and to inform the government on how to adapt policies and resources to address gaps in support.

Supporting Vulnerable Populations During Isolation

Members are offering wellness checks for seniors, providing low-income families with access to internet and technology to stay connected, expanding capacity, opening up public and private spaces for shelter and self-isolation, and connecting volunteers with isolated individuals in need of support.

Mobilizing Funds for Local Response Efforts

Local, municipal and provincial governments are diverting funds and launching fundraising campaigns to support initiatives that urgently need funding to enhance and adapt their operations. This includes fundraising campaigns for food banks, utility deferrals and rent banks.

Engaging in Advocacy Campaigns

Member communities are identifying gaps in policies and supports, and are advocating to higher levels of government for policy changes including universal basic income, paid sick days, increases to social assistance, payday lending regulations, and bans on evictions.

CONCLUSION

The ability of CRP members to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 has been evident. While the crisis has exacerbated social and economic inequalities, it has also built momentum for collaboration. CRP's multi-sectoral poverty reduction roundtables from across Canada and the USA have partnered across sectors to adapt programming and drive policy and system change in a way that ensures that nobody gets left behind.

As the CRP network's focus shifts from emergency response to social recovery, our team remains committed to creating space for members to connect and to learn from each other. We would like to acknowledge each of our members that took the time to share your stories of innovation and resilience with us.

1. INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

Vibrant Communities - Cities Reducing Poverty (VC-CRP) is a Collective Impact movement aimed at reducing poverty across Canada and the USA. Our members engage in this learning community to build capacity as they connect and learn from each other. The network enables members to align poverty reduction strategies at the local, provincial/territorial, and federal levels. As of May 2020, the 81 members representing 328 municipalities were working together through CRP towards the shared goal of ending poverty.

PURPOSE

This report aims to highlight how CRP members and their communities are responding to COVID-19. As the pandemic continues to evolve, our members are responding with creativity, commitment, and compassion. Though we cannot provide a comprehensive summary of all the incredible work being done on the ground, this report provides a point-in-time snapshot of member community responses across North America. We hope the examples presented will provide our members with fresh ideas and insights that they can use to strengthen their local efforts. The report also takes a critical look at the impact the pandemic is having on poverty reduction efforts and explores implications for our work moving forward.

CONTENT

This report is divided into five sections: **Section 2** provides an overview of the main ways that CRP members are responding to COVID-19. **Section 3** includes examples of local responses, including program adaptations and innovations around food security, housing, local businesses, transportation, income assistance and financial empowerment, health, education, and early childhood development. **Section 4** highlights the approaches members are taking to coordinate and streamline service delivery, coordinate communication and information sharing, enhance multi-sectoral partnerships and collaboration, and initiate emergency response action teams. Finally, **Section 5** looks ahead and explores opportunities for members to engage in advocacy on key policy proposals such as Universal Basic Income. This section also explores the implications of the pandemic on poverty reduction efforts across the CRP network and on Tamarack and Vibrant Communities' work as a whole.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the CRP members who took the time to share updates and information about their local response efforts. We would also like to acknowledge our funders for their continued support in making this work possible: McConnell Foundation, Maytree, and Employment and Social Development Canada.








2. OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS




CRP members are supporting their communities in myriad ways during the pandemic. Their responses include:

1. Coordinating service delivery and information sharing
 - Supporting expansion and adaptation of services that provide food, shelter, transportation, education, financial empowerment and mental health supports.
 - Developing websites, infographics, fact sheets, and social media posts to share information about services and supports available, including emergency benefits.
 - Acting as an information conduit from the province/territory to the community and vice versa, helping agencies adhere to public health regulations and to inform the government on how to adapt policies and resources to address gaps in support.
2. Supporting vulnerable populations during isolation
 - Examples includes wellness checks for seniors, providing low-income families with access to internet and technology to stay connected, expanding capacity, opening up public and private spaces for shelter and self-isolation, and connecting volunteers with isolated individuals in need of support.
3. Mobilizing funds for local response efforts
 - Local, municipal and provincial governments are diverting funds and launching fundraising campaigns to support initiatives that urgently need funding to enhance and adapt their operations. This includes fundraising campaigns for food banks, utility deferrals and rent banks.
4. Engaging in advocacy campaigns
 - Identifying gaps in policies and supports and advocating to higher levels of government for policy changes in areas such as universal basic income, paid sick days, increases to social assistance, payday lending regulations and bans on evictions.



In this report, we highlight brief examples of how a variety of communities are responding to provide food and housing, support local businesses, improve access to transportation, expand financial empowerment services, and foster health and education. The communities featured in this report are listed in the charts below:

FOOD SECURITY 	HOUSING 	LOCAL BUSINESS 	TRANSPORTATION 	FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT 	HEALTH 	EDUCATION 
Chilliwack	Mission	Nelson	Edmonton	Golden	Cornwall	Calgary
Newfoundland & Labrador	Wood Buffalo	Powell River	Amherst	Northwest Territories	Iowa	Chestermere
Sault Ste Marie	Simcoe	Sault Ste Marie	Cochrane	Calgary	New Westminster	Strathmore
Revelstoke	Toronto	Atlantic Region	Ottawa	Prince Edward County	Saskatoon	Revelstoke
Chatham-Kent	Guelph	North Perth	Innisfil	Saint John	Ottawa	Chilliwack
Trail	Vancouver	Cranbrook	Charlotte County	New Westminster	Saint John	Simcoe

COORDINATING SERVICE DELIVERY & INFORMATION SHARING 	ENHANCING MULTI-SECTORAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS 	ENGAGING IN ADVOCACY 
Grande Prairie	Mission	Calgary
Prince Edward County	Lethbridge	Hamilton
Bruce Grey	Region of Peel	Edmonton
Whitehorse	Saint John	Prince Edward County
Canmore	Ottawa	Guelph
Hawaii	Stony Plain	Niagara

3. HOW COMMUNITIES ARE RESPONDING

This section is organized into seven key areas where member communities are responding during the pandemic: food security, housing, local business, transportation, income and financial empowerment, health, education and early childhood development. Some inspiring and innovative examples are being featured here, many of which are underpinned by the principle of equity.

EXPANDING FOOD ACCESS AND DISTRIBUTION

Prior to the pandemic, [studies showed](#) that 1 in 8 Canadians were food insecure. As the economic shutdown has led to thousands of people losing their jobs, many more are experiencing hunger. Without effective responses to the hardships brought on by COVID-19, food insecurity will increase in prevalence and severity, and the health implications of being food insecure will become even more dire. The examples below highlight how CRP members are responding to ensure that the most vulnerable have their food needs met, for example by adapting emergency food programs, expanding access, and distributing more food.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Chilliwack, BC: Food hampers delivered to school sites for families

With schools closed during the pandemic, students no longer have access to school meal programs. Community partners in Chilliwack have come together to form the [Feed the Kids Initiative](#), which provides weekly food hampers for school-aged children. The initiative is a partnership with [Chilliwack Community Services' Starfish Program](#), [Chilliwack School District](#), [Salvation Army Food Bank](#), [Bowls of Hope](#), [Rotary Clubs](#), the [United Way of the Lower Mainland](#), and the [Chilliwack Chamber of Commerce](#). Food hampers are prepared by the Chilliwack Salvation Army Food Bank with the support of volunteers and community partners, these are then delivered to 23 school sites by volunteers and picked up by families.

“During this critical time, it is essential that we ensure that children in our community are fed and that their basic needs are met. In a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, we are dedicated to making sure this happens.”

- Joint statement from partners



Newfoundland and Labrador: Online database of food banks and services

Newfoundland and Labrador has one of the highest rates of food insecurity in Canada. To address this challenge during the COVID-19 crisis, [Food First NL](#) stepped up to the plate. They began connecting with food banks and food service programs across the province and built an accessible [database of programs and services](#) available across the province. People across the province can access the database and get access to local food banks and food programs. Food First NL is also partnering with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador to provide an innovative funding program which will support food programs to hire short-term employees to deliver much needed groceries to those in need.

Sault Ste. Marie, ON: Local chefs and hardware store help with emergency food operations

[Harvest Algoma](#) has received a surge in food donations. Each truck that comes is worth \$60,000 to \$120,000 in rescued food. Milk producers are sending them surplus milk. They are coordinating distribution of food with St. Vincent Place, Salvation Army and Soup Kitchen Community Centre and depots at Grocer 4 Good, The Country Way and City Meat Market for downtown residents who need help. They have outlets for free food at Walmart and a Health Foods store on opposite ends of the city - where people already go for food. They are also sending food to food banks in neighbouring communities. Home Hardware has offered a truck and driver to help get food out. Local chefs who are out of work are volunteering to get creative and pre-make food with what's donated so that food doesn't go to waste.

Revelstoke, BC: Expanding emergency food access and local food initiatives

[Community Connections'](#) food recovery and food bank are meeting increased demand for food by aligning services and resources, expanding food provision to five days per week, and opening eligibility to anyone in need. Local food initiatives are working to bring food vendors online, supporting kids who had been accessing school breakfast programs, and enacting safe protocols for farmers markets and community gardens. Local initiatives are also creating online local resources and to support residents with garden and seed-sharing opportunities.

Chatham-Kent, ON: Youth volunteers delivering groceries to seniors

[Clean Helping Hands CK](#) is a group of youth that have come together to support seniors struggling to access food and other services in the community due to the pandemic. They deliver food, for free, to seniors anywhere in Chatham-Kent. The volunteer group started when a young woman heard about an older couple who waited in their vehicle for more than hour because they were too nervous to go into the grocery store. While there is no obligation, any tips will be given to an area food bank and matched by a local company. Another local company provides gas money for volunteers. Learn more about acts of kindness in Chatham-Kent [here](#).

Trail, BC:
Community kitchen initiative adapts to deliver meals to food insecure families

The [Lower Columbia Community Kitchen](#) is a program offered by the [Greater Trail Community Skills Centre](#) that aims to alleviate food insecurity in Rossland, Trail and Fruitvale. It was developed with the belief that food has power: the power to inspire, nurture, develop new skills, promote healthier lifestyles and bring people together. The Skills Centre was about to launch the program when physical distancing measures were put into place. Program staff quickly adapted the program to create a modified 'meals on wheels' program that would ensure food security for families during the pandemic. Additional funding and wholesale discounts were provided to cover the cost of equipment, delivery packaging, ingredients and program co-ordination. Under this revamped program, low cost nutritious meals are cooked and distributed by coordinators and volunteers once a week with ingredients sourced from food banks and local stores. In each of the three communities they are supporting 18 households with a weekly check-in and food delivery. The emotional toll of poverty, food insecurity and feelings of isolation are greatly alleviated by the act of 'sharing' a meal together, even if it cannot be shared in person.

FINDING HOUSING & SAFE SHELTER FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

The importance of housing and safe shelter has been heightened and has become more challenging due to COVID-19, physical distancing and self-isolation requirements. Recognizing the need for safe housing as a priority action, many members have actively been involved with taking steps to ensure shelter is available for vulnerable populations that need to self-isolate.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Mission, BC: Outreach walkabout teams

In Mission, outreach walkabout teams are distributing several items to homeless camps: food packs, soap, hand sanitizer, disposable gloves, and information sheets (for example, on COVID-19 symptoms and emergency response phone numbers, self-isolating, and safer drug use), and are communicating the importance of hand washing. The teams are tracking the locations and numbers of people in each encampment, engaging those living in encampments to establish drop sites for food and supplies moving forward, and creating signage for encampments that communicate the current situation, key contacts, and numbers to call if they are symptomatic.



Wood Buffalo, AB: Support for vulnerable persons

The region of [Wood Buffalo](#) has been working on ways to support women transitioning from shelters and housing for women escaping domestic violence. Emergency Services has also expanded the use of the Vulnerable Persons Registry, aimed at improving the safety of residents living at home who would be at greater risk during emergencies, and are checking up on registrants on a weekly basis to identify needs during the pandemic.

Simcoe County, ON: Prioritizing people who are homeless

Simcoe County has been actively working with the shelters to address the crisis for the homeless population by getting them into hotels, providing funding support and personal protective equipment for staff, and offering supportive calls twice a week.

“You can’t stay at home if you haven’t got a home”

- Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council

Toronto, ON: Increasing capacity

Leveraging the largest shelter system in Canada, the [City of Toronto](#) has secured additional housing units and matched several families with housing since the crisis began through the city's Rapid Housing Access Initiative. This initiative prioritizes access to housing for existing shelter clients in Toronto Community Housing (TCHC). Seniors and vulnerable tenants who call TCHC home live independently; however, many rely on a network of community support and agencies for assistance in their daily lives such as visits from personal support workers, links to health teams or deliveries from Meals on Wheels.

Guelph, ON: Collective action for self-isolation

A collective of community and healthcare organizations in [Guelph](#) have launched a [Supported Isolation Centre](#) for people experiencing homelessness to self-isolate. The space includes a bed, clean clothing and meals, and is staffed 24 hours a day. This is the result of nearly every social and health-care leader banding together to put plans in place for the city's most vulnerable.

Vancouver, BC: Re-purposing space to expand shelter

With the city's homeless population at more than 2,200 people and shelters at capacity, Vancouver has converted a privately-owned hotel and two downtown community centres into facilities that will provide food, shelter, and medical support for people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable populations who need to self-isolate during the pandemic. A 60-unit hotel is [Vancouver's](#) first private space that has been leased by BC Housing and converted to support vulnerable people who need to self-isolate. Meals will be provided by the hotel's restaurant and hotel staff who had faced layoffs, who were offered jobs to stay on in the converted facility. Coal Harbour Community Centre and Roundhouse Community Centre have also been converted into housing for homeless people who need to maintain social distance and self-isolate. Non-profit organizations will oversee day-to-day management of the converted facilities, but the centres will be staffed by BC Housing and Vancouver Coastal Health.

Read more about Vancouver's efforts to provide shelter for the city's most vulnerable residents [here](#).

SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES

With the economy paralyzed during the pandemic, unemployment is growing rapidly. The economic situation continues to be volatile as businesses and governments adapt to conditions that are changing daily. Local communities are responding to support individuals who have lost their jobs and local governments are working with small businesses to develop strategies for a quick economic recovery.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Nelson, BC: Outreach Team established to help all businesses and non-profits

The [City of Nelson](#) has created a Business Outreach Program in partnership with the Nelson and Area Economic Development Partnership (NAEDP), which includes the Nelson & District Chamber of Commerce and Community Futures Central Kootenay. The aim of this program is to connect with all local businesses and non-profits to help them navigate federal, provincial and other programs to obtain the best possible assistance for their particular circumstances; understand what other support businesses require to get through this pandemic; and work with the business community to ensure the local economy will recover from the effects of the pandemic. To date, the team has connected with over 300 businesses.

Powell River, BC: Surveying local business community

Through its Business Retention and Expansion Program, the [City of Powell River](#) is seeking input from local businesses on how they have been affected by COVID-19 via a [short survey](#). The overall goal of collecting this information is to identify ways government and local agencies can assist business through these troubling times and be ready to provide supports for recovery.



Sault Ste Marie, ON: Hotline and conference calls to support local businesses

The [City of Sault Ste. Marie](#) is hosting a series of [conference calls](#) to find out the best ways to support local businesses in the wake of COVID-19. The purpose of the calls is to relay information about existing supports, understand the needs and concerns of local businesses and to explore other support opportunities. The City has received many questions about what supports exist, as well as how long a business owner can expect to receive them so the city has set up a hotline, which small business owners can call. The hotline will help the city better connect businesses with supports and receive constructive feedback on how else they can support the local business community.

Atlantic region: Connecting food manufacturers with laid-off food service workers

With the economic shut down, restaurant closures have impacted many food service workers. At the same time, food manufacturers are dealing with shortages of labour as many workers need to stay with children or sick family members. [Food Works Atlantic](#) has been connecting people in the food service industry who were laid off due to COVID-19 with vital food manufacturers that are keeping our communities fed.

North Perth: Online directories to support local businesses

The Chamber of Commerce and the municipality's Economic Development Department are funneling information to businesses about what support is available and the latest government policies by creating websites listing useful supports. The Chamber of Commerce has developed a new [webpage](#) and the municipality has created an online [directory](#) of local businesses that are open during the pandemic and Perth County is encouraging people to purchase gift cards that they can use later to help keep local businesses afloat.

Cranbrook, BC:

Joint Economic Resilience Task Force established

Local and regional governments, businesses, and non-profit organizations have joined forces to launch a new joint [Economic Resilience Task Force \(ERTF\)](#), a collaborative initiative intended to develop strategies to help the local business community during and after the pandemic. The key focus of the ERTF will be determining what supports and stimulus is needed for economic recovery. The ERTF members will work with each other to identify actions to support business – employers and employees – and residents. The task force is represented by a wide array of organizations including the [City of Cranbrook](#), the [City of Kimberley](#), the Ktunaxa Nation, the [Cranbrook and District Chamber of Commerce](#), the [Cranbrook Downtown Business Association](#), [Community Futures](#), the [Columbia Basin Trust](#) and [Cranbrook Tourism](#). The ERTF will be working with local governments exploring all options for minimizing the economic impacts while enabling conditions for an economic recovery.

“A healthy community requires a healthy business community and we are committed to do what we can to achieve this.”

- Lee Pratt, Mayor of Cranbrook

ENHANCING AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF TRANSPORTATION

The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted a number of issues to do with transportation and access for essential needs and services including social distancing on public transit, cost, rural travel, and mobility issues. Affordable and accessible transportation supports any poverty reduction effort. Even during a pandemic, transportation can facilitate access to employment, healthcare and basic needs such as quality food and medication. As one way of recognizing the increased economic strain for residents, a number of cities and regions across the country have made public transportation free.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Amherst, NS: Neighbours Helping Neighbours

Cumberland County community members set up a Neighbours Helping Neighbours [website](#) for people needing help. This covers a wide range of supports coordinated by a group of volunteers. This includes running errands, getting groceries and picking up medication. The Town of Amherst is setting up a similar initiative where people can put a logo in their window if they want a check-in (phone call, social media connection, etc.), this then gets coordinated with helpers.

Edmonton, AB: Suspending transit fares and enhancing services

The [City of Edmonton](#) is suspending transit fares, including allowing those with low-income Ride Transit Program passes to use those passes for an extended period of time, and are enhancing Saturday services. Edmonton Transit Service is also offering essential service healthcare workers one-way trips within certain hours.



Cochrane, AB: Free on-demand transit

[Cochrane's](#) On-Demand Local Transit service is providing free rides to everyone. It has been enhanced to meet the needs of the population, making buses available for regular stops and on-demand stops for which riders can schedule via phone, app or website.

“We consider our transit system an essential service so that people can continue to get to their jobs and important appointments without transportation being an undue burden”

- Cochrane Mayor Jeff Genung

Ottawa, ON: Coordinating urgent transportation needs

The [City of Ottawa](#) is working with other non-profit organizations, the Good Companions and Champlain Community Support Network to coordinate urgent transportation to medical appointments, assessment centers, food centers and grocery stores for those with financial constraints, transportation difficulties, and/or health and mobility issues.

Innisfil, ON: Transit initiatives help residents access essential services

[Innisfil](#) is using their flexible Uber transit system to give vouchers for free rides to people to access grocery stores, pharmacies and other essential services. The Town was the first in Canada to form a partnership with the rideshare company Uber to subsidize rides and has launched two initiatives in response to COVID-19: Innisfil Transit Voucher and the Essential Trips Assistance Program to help residents access the essential services they need during the pandemic.

Charlotte County, NB: Maintaining volunteer driver initiative

Vibrant Communities Charlotte County (VCCC) has been working to develop protocols for safe transportation and delivery. [Dial-A-Ride](#) is a volunteer service that has been operating for years in the rural area to support the vulnerable population. Volunteers provide rides in their own vehicles to help people get to appointments or run errands. As a volunteer service, it would have been classified as a non-essential service, creating issues of police stopping and ticketing people driving in the same car that are not from the same household. With communication between Charlotte County's Community Inclusion Network and the provincial Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC), ESIC was able to use their position to work with the RCMP to give people passes for essential travel such as going to the hospital, that police will recognize and allow.

EXPANDING FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT SERVICES

COVID-19 has shown us how financially unprepared most households are for a serious emergency, particularly one that may last a year or more. Households are now seeing their employment and earnings cut with widespread layoffs. Those with low and modest incomes are most affected by these changes and the need for income assistance and financial support has never been greater. Community service providers are struggling to adapt their service models to meet critical and growing needs by creating online free tax clinics and phone-based one-on-one benefit assistance to connect people with low incomes to vital income support programs. These services are a critical lifeline for the most vulnerable who are not able to successfully tax file or access benefits on their own due to language, literacy, digital literacy, disability, mental health and systemic barriers.

Without these services, many would not be able to access the income they need to meet basic needs or would see their existing benefits lapse if they fail to requalify by tax filing. Communities are developing newly adapted service models that integrate social distancing and make greater use of telephone and online supports.



Here are some ways communities are responding:

Golden, BC: Supporting individuals to apply for emergency benefit programs

Navigating the wealth of COVID-19 emergency supports and benefits information can be daunting for many people, especially for those without internet access. The [Golden Community Coop](#) is now providing free support to community members interested in applying for emergency benefit programs. Their Social Justice Advocate is helping people to find out what economic supports are available for individuals and businesses, whether they qualify, how they can apply, and where they can find up to date information. They have set up a community hotline where people can call, text or email questions and ask for direction or clarification.

Northwest Territories: Supporting local hunters and trappers

In response to the pandemic, the Government of Northwest Territories (GNWT) has been working to ensure funding for harvesters provided through the existing [Community Harvesters Assistance Program](#) is made available sooner. The purpose of this funding is to provide financial assistance to organizations recognized by the GNWT as representing the interests of hunters and trappers. These program funds assist in defraying a portion of capital and operating costs of harvesting activities. Funding is available for renewable resource harvesters for the purchase of small tools and related equipment required to store, process and preserve foods from community hunts or harvests.

Calgary, AB: Free tax filing services now offered by phone and video conferencing

[Sunrise Community Link Resource Centre](#) leads the taxation and benefits programming in Calgary. The program generates tangible financial supports for many Calgarians who are living in poverty. In response to the pandemic, Sunrise has adapted its program and is offering free, low-income tax filing services [remotely](#) over the phone and via video conferencing.

Prince Edward County, ON: Free tax filing services

An [expanded tax-filing program](#) offered by the Prince Edward Learning Centre (PELC) is ensuring that residents economically impacted by COVID-19 can access federal and provincial funding. They are working to reduce barriers Prince Edward County residents face in accessing COVID-19 related government support. Because residents need to have filed their taxes last year to access funding, Prince Edward Learning Centre is helping the most vulnerable members of their community during this extremely difficult time. The municipality is supporting PELC's program through the Municipal Community Grant Program. With the grant, PELC is providing free, online support to people who want file their tax returns. In addition to accessing COVID-19 related support, people who file their tax returns may qualify for additional government support programs they were not previously receiving.

Saint John, NB: Deferring water payments and suspending water disconnections

[Saint John Water](#) is providing customers in need with a Payment Deferral Program to ease the financial strain of the pandemic. The Payment Deferral Program is intended to support citizens and businesses that need it the most in our community. The Payment Deferral Program will enable residents and businesses experiencing unexpected financial hardships to defer payments toward their water and sewer account for close to two months with no late payment charges or interest charges applied. In addition to the Payment Deferral Program, Saint John Water has suspended any disconnection of water service for non-payment until further notice.

“Coronavirus and the subsequent loss of many jobs have left renters across BC in financial difficulty. It’s an incredibly stressful time and rent banks are here to support low-income renters who need help.”

- BC Rent Bank Project Lead

New Westminster, BC: Rent banks to support tenants

As the economic toll of COVID-19 continues to deepen, renters are facing an unprecedented housing crisis. Many have lost their jobs and are worried about keeping a roof over their head in the months ahead. While renters wait for federal and provincial relief programs to come into full effect, local rent banks are ramping up their efforts to support low-income households that are no longer able to pay their rent or utilities. Rent banks are an innovative strategy that prevent people from falling into homelessness when faced with an unexpected financial crisis like the one we are seeing now. Rent banks create housing stability through providing financial assistance in the form of repayable short-term loans for rent, utilities, and damage deposits. Many rent bank programs also provide financial literacy classes, mediation between tenants and landlords, and referrals to agencies that can help with food, clothing, and transportation.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the BC Rent Bank has been working with rent banks across the province to increase their capacity to serve more communities. [New Westminster's Rent Bank](#) has expanded its service area to Burnaby to provide support to families facing financial difficulties. The rent bank program has enhanced loan capacity to support more residents to access the program and developed interim loan recovery terms to allow for flexibility for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Read more about rent banks as an innovative strategy during times of crisis [here](#).

SUPPORTING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Health has been at the forefront during this crisis, with many members reporting emergency responses and a range of efforts in keeping communities healthy. These health measures are broadly encompassing, ranging from communication of reliable information such as safe handwashing and physical distancing, to mental health and social isolation supports.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Cornwall, ON: Neighbours supporting neighbours

The [Eastern Ontario Health Unit](#) created printer-friendly cards for neighbours to share with each other to facilitate the opportunity to chat or ask for assistance. As well, the Social Development Council is focused on sharing mental health resources such as webinars and videos via Facebook.



Central Iowa: Statewide coronavirus hotline

United Way [Central Iowa](#) is promoting several ways in which people can get involved and help as well as coordinating support for those who need it. This includes spreading the word in the community and on social media about 211 - a statewide coronavirus hotline that is run as a partnership with United Way Central Iowa and the state's Department of Public Health.

New Westminster, BC: Support for vulnerable seniors and persons with disabilities

Friendly support calls can be made to older adults and persons with disabilities in [New Westminster](#) for social connection, information sharing, and basic wellness checks. The City arranges for a staff person or qualified volunteer to call individuals as needed to check on safety and health, offer supports or resources, or to just socialize.

Saskatoon, SK: Hygiene kits for the homeless population

A group of volunteers is making hygiene kits for the city's homeless population through [Islamic Relief Canada](#). The kits include basic items such as soap that will help keep people healthy and prevent the virus from spreading. There are plans to make 400 of these kits.

Ottawa, ON: Emotional and practical support for seniors

The [Good Companions' Seniors Centre Without Walls](#) has expanded its services with a focus on outreach to vulnerable and isolated seniors and other populations. Emotional and practical support is provided via telephone. [Rural Ottawa Support Services](#) is working with [The Good](#)

[Companions](#) to provide similar telephone outreach and practical supports to isolated seniors through [A Friendly Voice program](#), which does wellness calls connecting seniors to local services and programs.

Saint John: Supports for youth

Saint John's [Teen Resource Centre and Pathways](#) team are using creative ways to ensure youth feel supported and connected. Live videos are available daily for youth to engage in with daily contests and challenges being organized. The subject matter is much like drop-in itself - from art, to chit chat about everyday stuff, and helping to answer big questions related to government announcements. If students have identified needs such as mental health services, they are connected with virtual counselling through Gentle Path Services or for youth struggling with housing, staff advocate to landlords. Opportunities are created to engage with students through social media, FaceTime, texting, phone calls, and a soon to be available online portal for the Choose Your Own Adventure mentorship program. There is a social (not crisis) hotline for anyone feeling isolated during the COVID-19 crisis. Staff are available to help find accurate information, resources or just talk. 'Let's chat' is a partnership of Carleton Community Centre, the Waterloo Village Neighbourhood Association and PULSE.

ADAPTING EDUCATION & EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Childhood is a formative time. Many children have been exposed to daycare, schooling and other channels of learning through family resource and learning centres, programs and activities. Children of all ages are finding themselves at home more, and away from the formal learning and activities they may be used to, it is thus important to use this opportunity for them to become engaged in different ways.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Calgary, AB: Free books to promote skills and well-being

Every day [Calgary Reads](#) is sharing a new and free resource for families with young children to help develop their physical health and well-being, emotional maturity, social skills, language and cognition skills, communication skills and general knowledge. The [Calgary Board of Education](#) has created a 'Learning at Home' [webpage](#) that offers a variety of educational ideas to support literacy, numeracy and wellness at home. The [Calgary Public Library](#) has a digital resource home that will give you free access to eBooks, audiobooks, movies and more with your free Library card.



Chestermere, AB: Compiling resources for families

The town [Chestermere](#) developed a list of online activities, videos and resources to help keep children and families entertained. Resources include those available for parents to help children cope mentally and emotionally with their experience of the pandemic. A team is also available to provide phone support for parents and caregivers of children 0-6 years.

Strathmore, AB: Creativity for kids around COVID-19 messaging

Giving children the opportunity to relay messages to each other about COVID-19 to ensure they do not feel alone, the Town of [Strathmore](#) in partnership with the Child, Youth and Family Hub has launched a Creative Kids Campaign. Each week, a themed message such as “We’re in this together” is posted on Facebook for children to get creative in communicating it in any way they want. There are weekly winners and prizes.

Revelstoke, BC: Connecting students with computers and internet access

Revelstoke's school district and Community Connections are supporting families that don't have computers at home, to access iPads for online learning, and Telus is offering free internet for those that were previously on their \$10/day low-income family program.

Chilliwack, BC: Providing books through neighbourhood distributors

[Chilliwack Learning Society](#) is providing free pre-owned books to families in need. A neighborhood distributor (who is in good health) makes it known that books are available in their area, takes "orders" from families, chooses and sanitizes a selection of books for them, and then arranges for one family at a time to pick up their books from a designated outdoor book pick up area.

Simcoe County, ON: Letters to seniors

[Simcoe County](#) has launched a Letters to Seniors pen pal program to encourage children to write postcards to seniors in Long Term Care Homes to keep people connected during social distancing. This Pen Pal program is aimed at creating new friendships with the older population. During this time, Long Term Care homes need to be kept as safe as possible and restrict general access and this has meant many seniors have not been able to maintain the same connections. The Pen Pal Program enables residents to interact with young people in a meaningful way while also encouraging residents to contribute to the future of their community. Handwritten letters are a tangible way to share old memories and create new friendships that will hopefully continue when things return to "normal". To take part, children are asked to write a letter introducing themselves to a resident. Support Services staff then review and connect the student with a match at the home.

4. STRUCTURES & PROCESSES

SERVICE DELIVERY AND INFORMATION SHARING

Many CRP members have taken the lead in providing communities with real-time, reliable information about the pandemic. They have done so by leveraging existing networks and communication channels to ensure the communication strategies are effective at reaching members of the community who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Grande Prairie, AB: Community Care Program: Food & Pharmacy

The six partner municipalities of the [Grande Prairie Regional Emergency Partnership](#) (GPREP) launched the [COVID-19 Community Care Program: Food & Pharmacy](#). The program helps ensure residents of the GPREP service area have continued access to essential items like food and medication. The program is dedicated to vulnerable residents - those at heightened risk who have no other supports available, and are in urgent need of groceries, medication and essential goods. The GPREP is also aligning with the Business Resiliency Taskforce to unify the regional economic response to COVID-19.

Prince Edward County, ON: County COVID-19 help line established

Residents of [Prince Edward County](#) can call a [county help line](#) five days a week to speak directly with County staff, who can connect them with volunteers who can deliver food and other essentials, critical community services, transportation options, and sources of accurate and reliable public health information about the COVID-19 virus.



Bruce Grey, ON: Coordinating responses

Bruce Grey's [Poverty Taskforce](#) has been coordinating with partners to respond to the crisis. They conducted a rapid assessment, developed best practices and coordinated logistics to keep the food system going. They have created and shared information on their website that includes comprehensive resource lists on services and supports in the area of food, health, housing and income.

Whitehorse, YK: Communicating broadly with network

The [Yukon Anti-poverty Coalition](#) continues to hold regular meetings with the group through new virtual meetings. A newsletter is produced and disseminated frequently that captures all local updates for information and resources, as well as news and information on policies. Their communication also welcomes suggestions from the network on how to deal with challenges. As the designated Reaching Home convener, the territory is receiving an additional \$500,000 to improve the capacity of service providers to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading amongst people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This is being done through disseminating the funds responsibly to service providers to make sure the needs of this population are met.

Canmore, AB: A community call centre

The [Canmore](#) has set up a COVID-19 Community Call Centre. Residents can call or email if they have questions regarding mental health employment insurance, meal and grocery services, housing, issues related to immigration, child and youth care information and more. Family and Community Supports and Services is also set up to take phone calls and emails related to pandemic question or concerns.

Hawaii Island: A hub for community resources

[Vibrant Hawaii](#) has developed a broad communication strategy by producing regular newsletters for Hawaii Island and is creating a dedicated section on their website for COVID-19 resources: A Hub for Community Resources and Information, as well as live updates on Facebook. They are also coordinating responses and donations with volunteers.

MULTI-SECTORAL PARTNERSHIPS AND RESPONSE TEAMS

Responding to the pandemic has required quick decisions to be made in real-time and action across sectors. As such, the creation of special teams designed to focus on acting in a coordinated and efficient manner has been crucial to meeting immediate needs.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Mission, BC: Vulnerable Persons Action Team launched

A Vulnerable Persons Action Team (VPAT) has been established for the District of [Mission](#) as an emergency response measure to act as a communication hub for core agencies providing food and urgent medical and mental health needs to vulnerable pockets of the community. The VPAT will identify resources in critical need among agencies including items, food and staff/volunteers moving forward as well as share communication and directives from BC Housing and Fraser Health. The VPAT holds weekly conference calls communicating need to the public as it arises through the District website and social media channels.



Lethbridge, AB: A Community Call to Action

The [City of Lethbridge](#) has mobilized an emergency social service committee that works closely with Alberta Health

Services and the agencies that serve vulnerable populations to ensure these groups have the needed housing, health care and other supports they require. With the help of HelpSeeker, the city has re-oriented service delivery by creating a number of working pods leveraging civil society through a community and service-provider Call to Action. This strategy has enabled immediate inventory and dissemination of essential needs including transportation, accessing virtual services, employment services, and mental health supports.

Region of Peel, ON: Community Response Table

The [Region of Peel](#) convened a Community Response Table to support the region's most vulnerable residents. Made up of upwards of 100 partners, the table includes municipal government, non-profits, and systems organizations such as schools, to collaborate and coordinate efforts, problem solve and act rapidly. Its early development and comprehensive diversity of participants has been found to be incredibly effective. Just ahead of the crisis unfolding, Peel had established a governance structure, with several working groups, for its

Poverty Reduction Strategy. Many members of these working groups are part of the larger Community Response Table, such as the Systems-Change group, the work dovetailing with the strategy. One working group in particular, the Advocacy and Awareness table, continues to meet regularly and has been actively working on issues to keep them front and center.

Saint John, NB: Continuing poverty reduction work while also engaging in emergency response

[Living SJ](#) is playing an active role in their community's Emergency Response Team along with the United Way, Social Planning Council and Food Bank. While being part of both community and provincial response efforts, they are also still working to move their poverty reduction work forward as the Social Innovation Fund carries on.

Ottawa, ON: Cross-sector emergency response team

[Ottawa Community Housing](#) is working with City partners to respond to COVID-19 as it progresses, including with the City's Office of Emergency Management, Ottawa Police Service's Incident Command Centre, Ottawa Public Health's COVID-19 Stakeholders' Group and the [United Way's Inter-Agency Working Group](#).

Stony Plain, AB: Neighbourhood Connect project

Stony Plain Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) have launched a [Neighbourhood Connect project](#) to support, inspire and further connect neighbours and neighbourhoods.

Residents interested in volunteering during this time are being encouraged to register as Neighbourhood Connectors and help ensure that their neighbours and neighbourhoods are connected and supported. The method of connecting requires innovation as all residents must use social distancing protocol. Stony Plain FCSS, in partnership with Parkland County and Spruce Grove, have also launched a new Helpseeker.org tool to help residents connect with services.

5. LOOKING AHEAD

ADVOCACY

While great strides have been made in responses, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity to highlight the gaps in the system and some imperfections in our beloved and respected social safety net, and where people are falling through the cracks. The time is ripe to advocate for better policies and systems change, and CRP members and their networks are well-positioned to do so. Examples of identified gaps to advocate on with higher levels of government include Universal Basic Income, paid sick days, increases to Social Assistance, payday lending regulations, and bans on evictions.

Here are some ways communities are responding:

Calgary, AB: Post-COVID-19 strategy, decent work and affordable housing

The City of Calgary, along with the United Way and the [Canadian Poverty Institute](#) is working on developing a strategy in preparation for the post-COVID-19 impacts. An Innovative Affordable Housing Strategy has also been proposed - the Endowment Fund - as a way to create affordable housing and end homelessness. An [assessment](#) of the employment impact of COVID-19 on Calgary's vulnerable workforce has also been conducted. The assessment found that women, youth, those who were already low-wage earners, and vulnerable populations have been hardest hit by the contracted economy, and that their households have experienced significant financial strain.

Hamilton, ON: Advocating for basic income and regulation for payday lending

The [Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction](#) has been focusing their advocacy work around income supports: social assistance rates, basic income, and payday lending. This includes advocating for additional income supports from the provincial government for income assistance recipients to purchase groceries; advocating for a basic income as an imperative, to support the many people not eligible for CERB benefits; and are raising awareness about payday lenders taking advantage of workers who are precariously employed or are now unemployed and waiting for emergency benefits to kick in. Read their op ed on payday lending during COVID-19 [here](#).



Edmonton, AB: Calling for crisis income for all

[End Poverty Edmonton](#) is gathering personal stories to provide them with the means to advocate for policy change to support renters during the pandemic. They are looking for people's experiences to help better understand how COVID-19 is affecting people who are currently (and perhaps newly) experiencing poverty - all with a view of advocating for targeted and helpful policies and programs. They are advocating for a federally provided, and provincially supported, crisis income which would ensure that all people and all businesses have what they need to make it through this crisis. Read their [call](#) for a Basic Income here.

Prince Edward County, ON: Social assistance rates

The Poverty Roundtable of Hastings Prince Edward has signed an [open letter](#) put together by [Income Security and Advocacy Centre](#) to the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services calling for measures to ensure income security for Ontario's most vulnerable populations amid the pandemic. The letter highlights two immediate ways to support low-income Ontarians: raising social assistance rates and exempting federal benefits from any clawbacks for social assistance recipients.

Guelph, ON: Flagging gaps in emergency support programs

The [Guelph and Wellington Taskforce for Poverty Elimination](#) is leading a strong advocacy effort to promote supportive policies for vulnerable populations and to flag gaps in existing and new policies. In addition to the city's strong and coordinated response for people experiencing homelessness, they are advocating for improving social assistance and decent work including critiquing the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, as well as creating a plain language guide for this emergency benefit.

Niagara, ON: Calling for a moratorium on rent and mortgage obligations

The [Niagara Poverty Reduction Network](#) (NPRN) is calling on the Province of Ontario to legislate a postponement on rent obligations of tenants who cannot afford to pay rent due to the COVID-19 crisis. They are advocating for the moratorium to endure until emergency funds, which include rent subsidies for eligible tenants, are in place from both the federal and provincial response plans. In order to ensure that landlords can pay their mortgages and expenses in the wake of the proposed moratorium, NPRN is also calling on the government to legislate postponement of the mortgage obligations of landlords impacted by the moratorium.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CRP

While we remain in uncertain times as the pandemic continues to evolve, what is for certain is that COVID-19 has affected everyone in every community in some way. As we look ahead, there are significant implications for CRP members and partners, learning opportunities and what it means for the CRP Vibrant Communities team moving forward.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CRP MEMBERS AND PARTNERS

The crisis has imposed financial strain on a much larger section of the population, and across a wide variety of socio-demographic groups. With more and more people having real financial concerns and needing to navigate the system for help, there is a growing awareness of the plight of poverty and appreciation for the work our members are doing on the ground to support vulnerable populations. Though the ability to bounce back will vary for many, this is an opportune time to leverage this new awareness, foster new relationships across sectors, and support those with lived experience.

The crisis has shown us that traditional hurdles in poverty reduction can be overcome, and importantly, that meaningful cross-sectoral collaboration can be achieved. Collective Impact is a way for poverty reduction roundtables to enhance their resilience and ability to respond in times of crisis. The pandemic has created new partnerships and built momentum for collaboration, which if sustained, can lead to meaningful progress in poverty reduction.

As community needs and priorities evolve during this crisis, many of our members have found their work and roles shifting. Some have had to put a pause on long-term poverty reduction work as they pivot to emergency response efforts. Now that members and partners are finding this emergency state to be more protracted, they are beginning to look to the medium and long term. Efforts have included more capacity building responses and advocacy work towards systems change. In light of areas discussed in this report, communities and sectors all over are considering their role. For example, how can efforts move from emergency food responses to enabling meaningful food security? Can housing no longer be examined from the lens of temporary shelter but rather be recognized as a human right for all?

Government at all levels have demonstrated political will to act. As we look forward, how can our members work to sustain this political will and momentum? This includes advocacy, new alliances, and communities driven by the ethic of not letting anyone be left behind.



IMPLICATIONS FOR CRP LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The pandemic has highlighted new learning opportunities and questions for the CRP learning network to explore. As remote learning and online community engagement become the new norm, how do we ensure that people do not get left behind? When capacity returns, how will our work look different? What does recovery look like for cities? What is the role of cities, communities and members in contributing or leading recovery efforts? What can we learn from the value of Collective Impact, locally, regionally and nationally?

Innovation is all around and incredible opportunities to learn from the network itself are emerging. What has been valuable learning from these experiences, innovations and adaptations?

Finally, how can advocacy be embedded into the work? What policies created through this should be kept? How can we create more alignment and unification across different levels of government and across sectors?

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CRP TEAM

The Cities Reducing Poverty team strongly believes in the power of the CRP network and is committed to creating space for members to organize and connect with one another to learn from each other's response efforts. We are interested in supporting a national recovery strategy, the advocacy efforts of our members, and better policy decisions that lead to those most vulnerable in society being better off. We welcome opportunities to do so and will proactively seek them out where issues and opportunities arise.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

CRP members have demonstrated action in key areas that show the ability to innovate, adapt and be proactive. The importance for cities and communities to respond to the crisis in order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic with those who are living in poverty and those who are most vulnerable has been evident.

COVID-19 has revealed the strength and resilience that exists among communities and what can happen when different sectors and all of society are working together. There is a will because we are all affected and there is an economic, social and health need to get through this. But the notion of being 'in it together' is misleading, we cannot forget how disproportionately people are being affected and how inequalities are being exacerbated due to the crisis. CRP members, cities and communities within the Vibrant Communities network, have shown that efforts must be targeted to minimize the growing disparities. Sustaining this momentum means everyone plays a role in poverty reduction and poverty reduction is possible.