

Public Sector Leadership Awards – IPAC
APS Leadership - Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Wildfire

Backgrounder

On May 1, 2016 a rapidly growing forest fire threatened the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB). Within two days, the fire entered Fort McMurray and forced over 88,000 people to evacuate.

Staff who served on the front lines of our government's emergency response say it was life-changing. They were not only changed by the unprecedented size of the disaster and the human needs that followed, but the caring response of the organizations and people who helped evacuees.

This exceptional work was not possible without Alberta Public Service leadership (APS), which provided collaborative and innovative guidance, demonstrated a bold approach to execution of policies for maximum impact, and achieved results that mattered to Albertans.

On May 4, 2016, a provincial State of Emergency was declared for the second time in the province's history. APS members moved to assist. The RMWB remained under mandatory evacuation until June 1, when a phased voluntary re-entry began.

APS members collaborated to coordinate logistics and find innovative solutions to complex issues within very short timelines. Working shoulder-to-shoulder, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for over six weeks with APS members were:

- federal organizations such as the Department of National Defence, Health Canada, and Indigenous and Northern Affairs,
- municipal government organizations including the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo and many others,
- first responders including fire, EMS and RCMP from Alberta, across Canada and around the world,
- health care and mental health professionals,
- commercial businesses large and small, including the oil and gas industry and contract suppliers,
- utility companies, and
- emergency social services and voluntary sector organizations.

Hundreds of people dropped regular duties to work under the guidance of a Ministerial Task Force and public service leadership to coordinate activities through the Provincial Operations Centre (POC) in conjunction with the municipality's Regional Emergency Operation Centre (REOC).

The Provincial Emergency Social Services (PESS) Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) was activated for the first time to mitigate the human impact of the emerging situation and provide basic essential services to wildfire evacuees.

As evacuees dispersed throughout the province, reception centres were activated to offer interim accommodation, food, shelter and essential needs. Evacuees needing longer-term accommodations were moved into alternate lodgings.

The APS established a wildfire relief program, which distributed almost \$100 million to over 96,000 evacuees through debit cards. This relief payment provided financial support until evacuees could access insurance funds and was expanded to evacuees out of province. This program required the support of all provincial and territorial governments, and the Canadian Red Cross.

APS leadership demonstrated courage by developing and implementing innovative policies that challenged public sector practices. Evacuees, and all Albertans, needed regular, reliable information updates. APS leadership also recognized that communicating with 88,000 evacuees posed a significant challenge and information needed to be coherent, current, accurate and accessible across Canada.

Two of the most impactful methods to achieve this were media availabilities and telephone town halls. These events were regularly led by Premier Notley and senior officials.

Residents received direct communications through regular media availabilities that were live-streamed via YouTube. Seventeen telephone town halls were held, four evenings a week for over a month to ensure evacuees had direct access to information from all the major partners. Success was beyond expectations. In fact, the telephone town hall vendor says that the use of town halls has established a new standard in what's possible in crisis communications.

Shortly after the evacuation of Wood Buffalo, we established a Wildfire Recovery Task Force to address the unique and changing needs of residents once they returned home. This brought together staff from across government to work with the RMWB's task force.

A voluntary re-entry plan was developed in consultation with the Provincial Operations Centre, municipal leadership and the PESS ECC. The plan ensured that residents returning to Fort McMurray were safe and had essential services.

None of the municipality's critical infrastructure was directly damaged, but did require extensive cleaning before they could be safely re-occupied. A temporary emergency room was established to provide care for front line personnel while the hospital was being brought back to full functioning by hundreds of Alberta Health Services staff and contracted cleaners.

These conditions required creative solutions to provide the community an opportunity to re-establish, re-enter and start the critical recovery process.

Eight welcome centres were set up to support returning residents. The Nistawoyou Friendship Centre for Indigenous peoples also provided a centre. The welcome centres served as a central place for evacuees to meet while accessing information on critical services.

As the POC transitioned out of response, the recovery work was handed over to the Wildfire Recovery Task Force. And its work continues.

Fort McMurray's recovery will be a huge undertaking that will take years to complete. As Fort McMurray rebuilds, the APS will continue to be there to support the community and its people.

What We Have Learned: The Important Opportunities for Replication

We've made sure there's a strong focus on the mental health of residents and first responders, which continues as a significant part of the long-term recovery plan.

We've learned that recovery planning needs to start as soon as a crisis takes place. A third-party review of the province's response to the fire will identify additional learnings. This review can help Alberta mitigate hazards by preventing or minimizing future disasters, and enable better preparedness to respond and recover when a disaster occurs.

The PESS Framework was tested, and its value affirmed through its successful response to this unprecedented emergency. APS leadership has begun to ensure learnings are incorporated into the PESS Framework.

We look forward to being able to share our learnings with other jurisdictions so that they can benefit from this experience.

Thanks to the teamwork among Alberta government staff and all of our partners, and the collective efforts to learn from the past, we have a valuable disaster response model that can be replicated in other jurisdictions in the future.