

RESPONSE TO THE ONGOING SOCIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

Issue:

The Town of Okotoks Response to the Ongoing Social Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic report is provided for information.

Motion Proposed by Administration:

That the Town of Okotoks Response to the Ongoing Social Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic report be received as information.

Report, Analysis and Financial Implications:



Town of Okotoks Responding to the Ongoing Social Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic Status Update August 2021

Prepared by:
Okotoks Emergency Social Services Team
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August 2021

Supporting the Social Fabric of Okotoks

Healthy people make healthy and resilient communities.

The Town of Okotoks launched and adapted its Emergency Social Service (ESS) plan in 2020 to help meet the needs of the people of Okotoks during the response and recovery phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Now, half way through 2021 the Town of Okotoks is still responding to the continued and emerging impacts of the pandemic.

On July 1, 2021 Alberta entered Stage 3 of COVID-19 restrictions. While many activities and services have been able to resume Okotoks residents continue to be impacted by the pandemic. Responding to the social needs of residents and maintaining flexibility to pivot programming has become part of the way Administration delivers services. While there are still a lot of unknowns around the longer term implications of the pandemic we do know that COVID-19 has impacted the social, emotional and financial health of individuals and businesses.

Outcomes

The outcomes that were established by the ESS team are now integrated into daily operations.

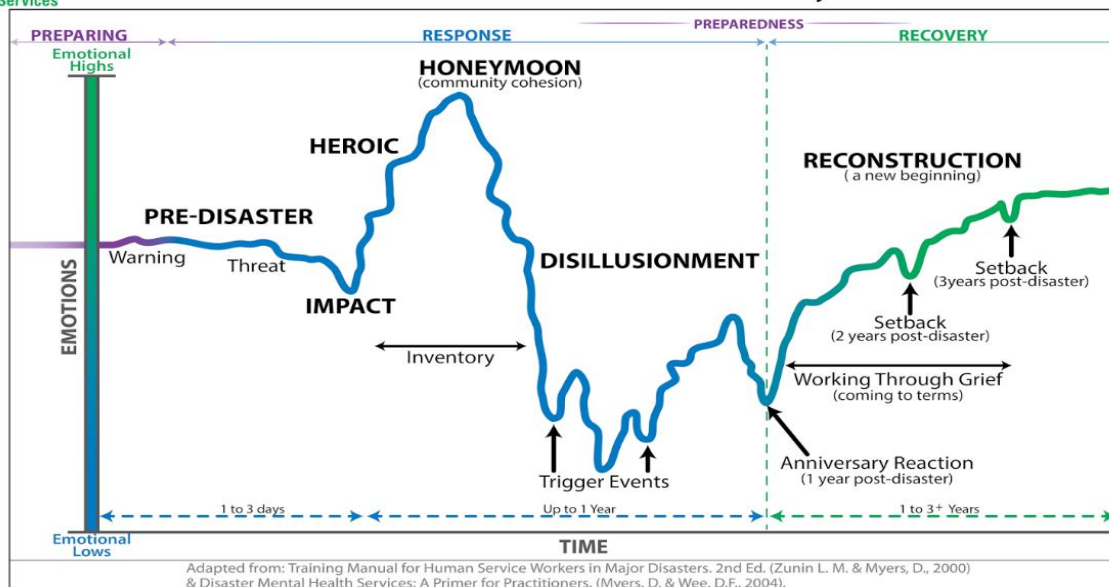
- Maintaining and building community resiliency by supporting mental and physical wellness for all community individuals
- Vulnerable residents are supported and can access available supports and resources
- Residents of Okotoks are socially connected while maintaining physical distance
- Residents have opportunities for recreational and cultural activities



How is COVID-19 Continuing to Impact our Community?

Disasters have long term effects on communities and individuals as indicated in the table below. Recovery does not follow a straight path, but rather, has a lot of up and downs. Our response to a disaster is immediate however recovery spans over multiple years. With the reduction in restrictions on July 1, 2021 the Town of Okotoks is has just entered the Honeymoon Period. As explained in the next section, although we can identify at what stage of response/recovery we are at the pandemic, impacts are not linear and we have moved back and forth along this line.

How Individuals and Communities are Affected by Disaster



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Produced by: Mental Health Promotion & Illness Prevention—Alberta Health Services, Addiction & Mental Health.
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Unlike a disaster that is comprised of single, isolated events, the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing disaster that has the potential for multiple waves. Our communities have and will continue to move from pandemic response into recovery and will then be hit by another wave resulting in a return to

responding to the pandemic. Immunization rates reduce the risk of further waves, however this is also impacted by factors such as variants so it is hard to predict at what point we can fully transition away from response and to a longer term recovery.

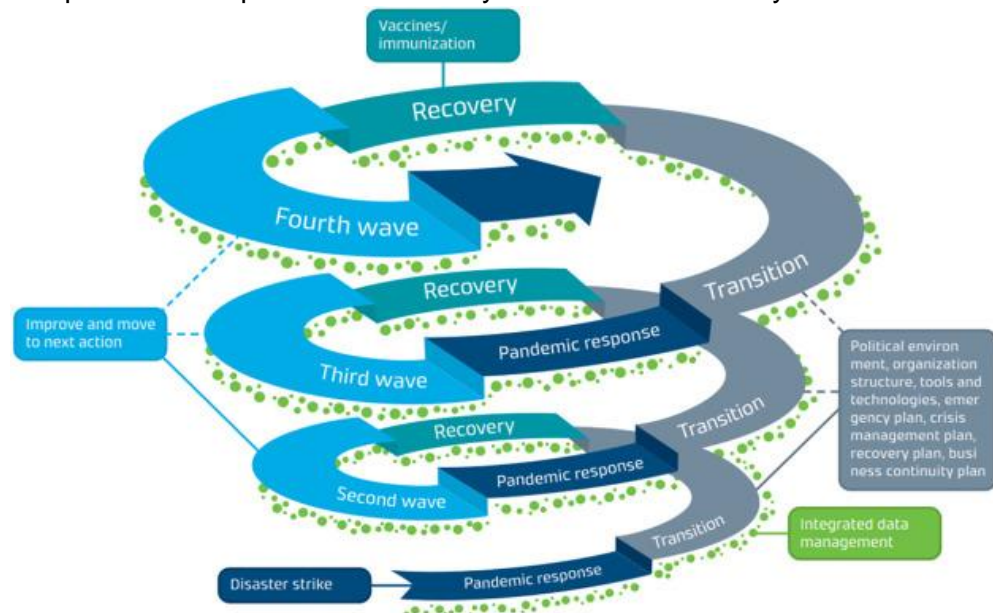


Fig. Transitioning from pandemic response to recovery in a spiral fashion: there is a high probability of the second and even the third wave of a pandemic if there is no vaccine or immunization, each new wave pushing the disaster risk reduction cycle from the recovery back to response phase.
Taken from: "Are we there yet? The transition from response to recovery for the COVID-19 pandemic", Crossref DOI Link: <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.PDISAS.2020.100102>
Published: 2020-10

Employment and Income

In 2015 the Okotoks employment rate decreased from 71.9% (2010) to 67.8%, compared to Alberta which decreased from 69% (2010) to 60.2% (2015). Okotoks employment rates declined by 4.1%, an average decline rate of 0.82% per year (Statistics Canada 2016).

Anecdotal stories prior to the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that the employment rates in our area may have seen a decrease since 2015.

Alberta's employment rates have been and will continue to be impacted by the oil and gas downturn. In addition employment rates across Canada plummeted with the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that were implemented. Short-term federal benefits such as CERB were available to support Canadians, but we know there are many Okotoks residents who are still struggling to find employment and deal with the financial impacts of a long period of unemployment.



Source: Statistics Canada - Canadian Economic Dashboard and COVID-19, current as of July 12, 2021

Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), mortgage deferrals and more. While the Federal government is continuing to offer income support programs to those unable to work, there are many people finding their supports nearing or coming to an end.

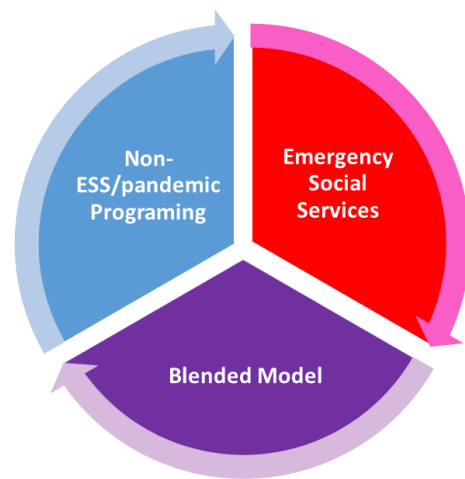
Social Impacts

We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and is continuing to have, an impact on the mental health of individuals and increasing the number of residents that are isolated and/or experiencing a much higher level than normal life stressors. Enhanced resources and prevention will be required throughout the pandemic and as we shift into recovery. Ensuring that residents have access to the supports that they need and opportunities for social connection will be an important priority in maintaining a strong social fabric for Okotoks. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to increased division within communities and has highlighted and intensified some of the gaps and challenges already facing communities. Both social and economic data show a huge amount of change in a relatively short period of time.

Emergency Social Services Response (ESS) Model

With the initial facility closures (as a result of COVID-19), when the ESS response was initiated, all programming was in response to the immediate needs of the community. As facilities have reopened and restricted in-person programming is allowed, the response has shifted to a blended model.

Ongoing provincial and federal updates have an impact on residents and how services are provided. The ESS team identified the need to be able to pivot quickly to meet the rapidly changing guidelines. The blended ESS response ensured that existing programming could be combined with new and adapted initiatives. Based on possible future waves of COVID-19, the blended model allows for complete flexibility in response and will provide the infrastructure to nimbly meet community needs as we shift into a long term period of recovery.



While the cross functional ESS team is no longer meeting on a regular basis the blended model of service delivery that was implemented is still working hard to ensure that there opportunities for residents to be engaged in affordable and accessible social and recreational activities. The longer the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the greater the need will be to reduce or mitigate the impacts of social isolation.

Objectives

Administration has worked hard to pivot to a longer term and sustainable response model that continues to structure programming under the three categories of social supports, social engagement and community coordination/facilitation. These categories continue to be relevant to community recovery and, support Administration in identifying the needs of residents, encompassing the critical social, emotional and recreational needs of residents. We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has left many socially isolated, with increased mental health concerns, and, experiencing financial strains. A key component in supporting the community in recovery will be ensuring there is a diverse range of affordable and accessible program options for family and individuals. Administration will work to offer a blend of in person and virtual options for residents with a focus on ensuring that the most utilized services from pre-pandemic are available. Fee assistance will be promoted to ensure the options are affordable for the lowest income families and individuals.

Given the isolation that has been seen throughout the community, developing connections in neighbourhoods and between residents will remain a focus with #OkotoksStrongerTogether initiatives continuing to be offered.

Social Supports

Category	Objectives	Sample of Strategies
Social Supports Direct Supports including Vulnerable Populations	Facilitation of Grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular stream of FCSS Funding United Way/Okotoks Partnership Community Investment
	Direct Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Okotoks Family Resource Centre Community Access Program Volunteer Resource Centre Connect Residents with Resources Daily Check In Program

Social Engagement

Category	Objectives	Sample of Strategies
Social Engagement Direct Supports to the Community	Healthy Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 55+ Fitness Fitness Online Programming In person programming
	Healthy Minds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online Programming In person programming
	Culture and Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online Programming In person programming Performing Arts Gift Shop Engage residents
	Environmental and Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virtual Events In person programming
	Community Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virtual Events Events plan Sharing and engaging
	Social Connections/Community Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrations Kindness Currency Community Champion Program Neighbourhood Connections

Community Coordination/Facilitation

Category	Objectives	Sample of Strategies
Community Coordination/Facilitation	Supporting Seniors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age Friendly Okotoks Initiative Elder Abuse Awareness and Prevention
	Supporting Community Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healthy Okotoks Coalition

Support of External Community Initiatives	Interagency Coordination including Regional Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update and Resource Sharing • Provide support for agencies
	Supporting and Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource sharing

Resources Required

All services are currently being accommodated within the approved 2021 Operating Budget. As we continue to operate with a blended model and respond to the continued and changing needs of the community there will be a requirement to remain nimble and responsive. 2022 activities and the blended operating model will be factored into requested 2022 Operating Budgets.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a rapidly changing situation and there is still no clear end date. The ESS team is focused on providing a blended model of ESS and non ESS activities for residents. This cross-functional team approach allows for quick pivots and rapid responses to the changing needs of the community. It is important to remember that the economic impacts and trauma from this crisis will continue to have lasting effects and long term supports will be needed. Social supports for individuals and efforts to build and maintain the social fabric of our community will be increasingly important as we enter the recovery phase of the pandemic. Ensuring that all Okotoks residents have a range of programs and options to engage in healthy activities as well as providing free or affordable opportunities to participate and engage in activities will remain a key priority. Healthy people make healthy and resilient communities.

Strategic Plan Goals

<input type="checkbox"/>	Manage Community Growth	<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide Strong Governance
<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide Quality Community Infrastructure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Healthy and Safe Community
<input type="checkbox"/>	Enhance Organizational Excellence	<input type="checkbox"/>	Foster Economic Vitality
		<input type="checkbox"/>	Promote Environmental Excellence

Governing Policies/Bylaws/Legislation or Agreements

n/a

Public Participation Strategy

n/a

Alternatives for Consideration

n/a

CAO Comments

This report highlights the complexities of the pandemic response and the need to maintain focus to ensure all Okotokians have access to the supports needed through the multiple phases of the pandemic.

Attachment(s)

n/a

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July 05, 2021