



Needs in Rural and Aboriginal Communities in Western Canada

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* Reference: Co-operative Innovation Project (January 2016), *Needs in Rural and Aboriginal Communities in Western Canada*. Part of Co-operative Innovation Project Final Report. Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan.



Background

From January through June 2015, the Co-operative Innovation Project held community engagement meetings across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. We invited a total of 13 Aboriginal† and 50 rural communities to attend one of 26 meetings. In all, we had conversations with over 400 individuals in these communities, including youth, senior citizens, parents, business owners, public officials, community volunteers, community development workers, co-op sector representatives, and interested citizens.

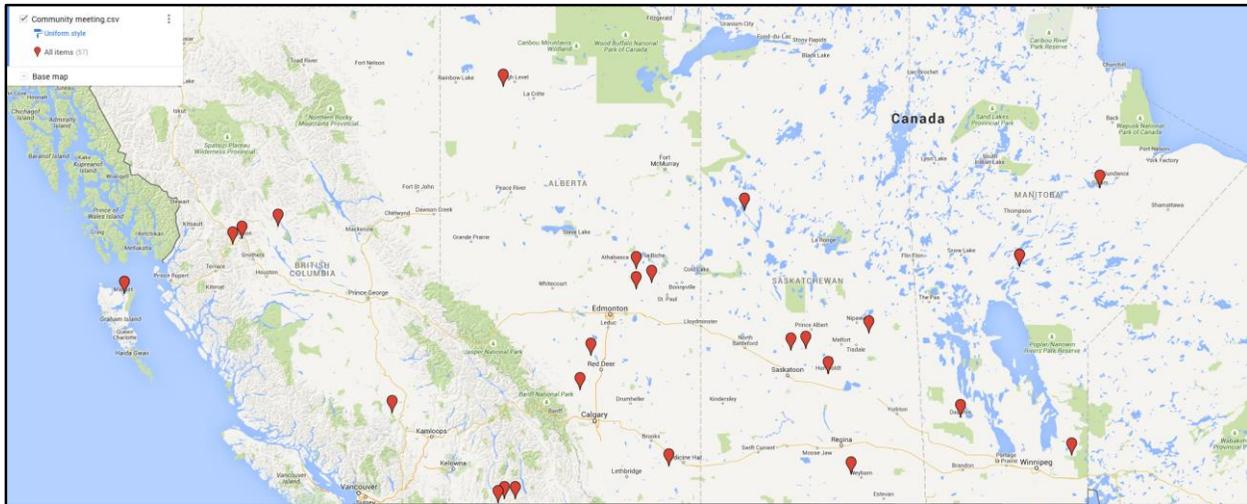


Figure 1 CIP community engagement events, western Canada 2015

Community Meeting Process

There are 1731 rural and rural Aboriginal communities in western Canada. The communities we visited were randomly selected through a vigorous process that balanced representation from the four provinces, included both rural and rural Aboriginal communities, and included broad parameters such as north and south, large and small, and different local economics and identities. For a more detailed overview of the selection process and related research methodology, please see the chapter on Research Design and Methodology.

Once a community was selected through our internal process, community administration officers and community leaders were contacted to ensure a meeting would be welcome. These initial phone calls also helped to gather key information regarding possible venues, caterers, and/or other supports. The process also allowed communities to engage with CIP and decide if they would like to participate. To build in flexibility and allow for community process, we identified and contacted more communities than we were able to visit; the result was that we had a sufficient number that could go forward into the community meeting planning stage.

† The Co-operative Innovation Project uses the term “Aboriginal” to denote Canada’s First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. This usage reflects contemporary census and other documentation which provide source citations throughout this project. We honour and respect the identities of each of Canada’s communities.



When a meeting received community leadership support and moved into the planning stage, a geographic search identified nearby communities. These communities could also be invited to the host meeting. Meetings were open to everyone in the community. They were advertised using a combination of social media, print, public posters, radio and word-of-mouth advertising. CIP logged numerous telephone calls directly to community businesses and organizations, and sometimes directly to individual residents, to offer personal invitations to the meetings. Meetings ranged from intimate conversations between 6 participants to large discussions with over 70 participants.

Each meeting started with a meal and an introduction of the CIP team and project. As per University of Saskatchewan research ethics protocol, participants were asked to sign consent forms. Each participant was then given a map of the surrounding region, and asked to draw on their map what they meant by their 'community.' Participants used these maps to frame their idea of 'community' as the evening went forward.

The first part of each meeting consisted of a facilitated discussion to identify as many community needs as possible, from deep systemic needs to gaps that, if filled, would increase social interaction and quality of life for community members. If discussion was slow, the facilitators would pose questions, such as: can you identify what is missing from your community to allow you to live a better life? Are there any programs or services missing from your community that you would like to see? Are there any programs or services that are currently being provided but that you think should be improved or changed? Facilitators listed needs as they were brought forward, and tried to capture as many needs as possible. Participants were encouraged to both build on needs that were brought forward (e.g. dig down into each need, or add related needs), and to identify distinct and new needs.

Communities recognized that, depending on who was at each meeting or at each table, the needs or gaps identified might be different. In some cases, facilitators would ask participants to think about their community from the perspective of a group that was not necessarily at the table, such as newcomers, youth, or others. After a fulsome discussion of local needs, the facilitators (2-3, depending on the size of the meeting and number of groups) would collate the notes from each of the groups, and use these notes to create a list of the top community needs.

Methodology

A note taker, acting in a similar capacity to a meeting secretary, took notes on the conversations and discussions of each focus group. The discussions were not digitally recorded. Each facilitator also wrote field notes for each community visit, which often captured conversations that would occur during coffee and snack breaks, or other connections with community members. In all, the twenty-six meetings generated 73 sets of field notes, and 74 sets of note taker notes.

All of these notes were analyzed to find themes in the conversations and across the communities. Notes were uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis platform that allows researchers to analyze rich, text-based information. Two CIP team members, working independently, would analyze each source (whether note taker notes or field notes written by community event leads). NVivo allows rich narrative data to be 'coded' according to themes that are brought forward by participants. For example, each time a participant spoke of health care (e.g. doctor or nursing shortage, lack of local hospital services, need for home care, need for specialty care services), that section of the notes was marked as a reference to health care, and coded to a specific health care need.



Some of the needs identified were unique to that locale – for example, one community needed a space in which to park yachts for the winter. Most needs fell along a spectrum, from ‘nice to have’ to ‘must have immediately.’ Often, one need was linked directly to another, such as a community with a housing shortage looking to grow its economy – but with limited living space to put new workers, which put constraints on local business development.

Where possible during analysis, similar needs were grouped together. Across the 26 communities that were visited, 52 relatively distinct areas of need were identified through an analysis of the notes and field notes. NVivo analysis also allowed CIP researchers to determine *how often* a need was discussed during community meetings. The resulting data was then translated into percentages to allow for an analysis of which needs were discussed the most often.

The following summary provides a high level overview of what participants across rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada identified as necessary to improve the quality of local life. Direct quotations, when applicable, will be used in italics; sometimes, it is most effective to hear what community residents are saying, in their own words. Each community has a unique mix of strengths, needs, and opportunities. Each will require unique solutions to meet their needs. Please note: these summaries can only represent the opinions and perceptions of the people in attendance at the meetings, and may or may not be fully representative.

Nonetheless, the information offered to the Co-operative Innovation Project during community engagement events provide a significant new source of data on what community-level residents in rural and Aboriginal western Canada identify as the most important, critical, and practical changes necessary to make life in western Canada better. The views expressed in the community meetings are a snapshot of current thoughts and trends in rural and Aboriginal western Canada, and represent a critical gauge of community-level viewpoints.



addition, some needs are interrelated and have a cascading effect. Solving one might mean solving another at the same time.

More work is required to further analyze the needs, and to build a more robust and colourful picture of rural and Aboriginal western Canada. Nonetheless, within these limitations, our analysis will help to understand both the concerns of the meeting participants, and the gaps in services in the communities that were represented at our meetings.

Table 1 Needs identified at community engagement meetings, CIP 2015. By mention and by percentage. By type of community.

	Aboriginal		Rural		W. Canada	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
1. Health Care	619	13.7%	621	7.6%	1240	9.7%
2. Housing	173	3.8%	613	7.5%	786	6.2%
3. Support Services	367	8.1%	350	4.3%	717	5.6%
4. Industry and business development	166	3.7%	541	6.6%	707	5.5%
5. Community barriers	340	7.5%	345	4.2%	685	5.4%
6. Senior's Services	263	5.8%	413	5.0%	676	5.3%
7. Transportation	237	5.2%	433	5.3%	670	5.3%
8. Accessing services	256	5.7%	288	3.5%	544	4.3%
9. Volunteerism	95	2.1%	445	5.4%	540	4.2%
10. Recreation	160	3.5%	371	4.5%	531	4.2%
11. Infrastructure	144	3.2%	373	4.5%	517	4.1%
12. Youth	103	2.3%	355	4.3%	458	3.6%
13. Shopping	86	1.9%	316	3.8%	402	3.2%
14. Entertainment and Culture	89	2.0%	243	3.0%	332	2.6%
15. Education	144	3.2%	184	2.2%	328	2.6%
16. Daycare	95	2.1%	196	2.4%	291	2.3%
17. Communication	45	1.0%	224	2.7%	269	2.1%
18. Financing	75	1.7%	175	2.1%	250	2.0%
19. Government barriers	79	1.7%	133	1.6%	212	1.7%
20. People	41	0.9%	158	1.9%	199	1.6%



21. Community Need	82	1.8%	106	1.3%	188	1.5%
22. Food	85	1.9%	92	1.1%	177	1.4%
23. Employment	49	1.1%	122	1.5%	171	1.3%
24. Addictions	128	2.8%	36	0.4%	164	1.3%
25. Economy	52	1.2%	100	1.2%	152	1.2%
26. Identifying Community and Needs	26	0.6%	112	1.4%	138	1.1%
27. Workers	26	0.6%	106	1.3%	132	1.0%
28. Policing support	46	1.0%	83	1.0%	129	1.0%
29. Jobs	24	0.5%	94	1.1%	118	0.9%
30. Restaurant	10	0.2%	95	1.2%	105	0.8%
31. Emergency Services	39	0.9%	53	0.6%	92	0.7%
32. Cost	34	0.8%	42	0.5%	76	0.6%
33. Safety	24	0.5%	48	0.6%	72	0.6%
34. Building Space	7	0.2%	59	0.7%	66	0.5%
35. Environment Green Space and Eco	48	1.1%	17	0.2%	65	0.5%
35. Averse to change	24	0.5%	31	0.4%	55	0.4%
36. Accommodations	12	0.3%	37	0.5%	49	0.4%
37. Needs assessment	22	0.5%	25	0.3%	47	0.4%
38. Leadership	16	0.4%	27	0.3%	43	0.3%
39. Postal Service	32	0.7%	10	0.1%	42	0.3%
40. Banking	21	0.5%	18	0.2%	39	0.3%
41. Family	27	0.6%	10	0.1%	37	0.3%
42. Lifestyle	30	0.7%	6	0.1%	36	0.3%
43. Natural Hazards	12	0.3%	24	0.3%	36	0.3%
44. Trades	12	0.3%	22	0.3%	34	0.3%
45. Energy	19	0.4%	10	0.1%	29	0.2%
46. Crime	14	0.3%	5	0.1%	19	0.1%
47. Downtown revitalization	2	0.0%	17	0.2%	19	0.1%



management.” Community participants cited a range of issues that they would appreciate help with: parenting, budgeting and financial awareness, counseling services, elders’ support, support for the homeless, income assistance, newcomer integration, services for families, services for children, social groups, and women’s services were among the top concerns. In communities where these services are available, demand overwhelmed availability.

Industry and Business Development

There are business opportunities in rural and Aboriginal western Canada — but sometimes it is a matter of knowing how to get started. *“Need to generate entrepreneurial mindset/skills, as opposed to being paycheque dependent.”* Communities request support and development help to grow local businesses, and to grow the business skills of their citizens.

Of related concern in rural regions was a mismatch between local businesses and community needs: a restaurant or grocery store that closes at 4:30 pm cannot service professionals and commuters returning home in the evening, which is a fact of life in most rural and Aboriginal communities. Matching business development with local expectations is a must.

There are two main kinds of businesses in rural and Aboriginal communities: retail or service opportunities that fit a local market (such as grocery stores, funeral services, laundromats, restaurants, gas stations, and so forth); or value-added production and larger-scale industrial business models, from growing to extraction to processing (oil, gas, mining, agriculture, agricultural processing such as canola oil plants, potato processing plants, and so forth). Both are present, but fluctuate depending on local markets, access to markets, financing, and other classic business factors.

Most communities spoke of the need to capture local capital, either through shopping locally or through more sophisticated local investment schemes. There is money in local communities; they are looking to find ways to keep that money in the local region, instead of spending or saving it in businesses that are not local.

The participants often spoke about sustainability of business — building businesses that could support their owners, and could be in operation for the long term. Few expect businesses to serve local needs if there was no profit or adequate pay for the owner. Nonetheless, most communities could readily identify business opportunities that could be developed, using either conventional or co-operative solutions, if there was an interested community leader, and appropriate guidance.



Seniors' Services

Seniors' services were amongst the top ten needs in rural and Aboriginal western Canada. Of particular concern were solving issues related to housing (another top ten need), including everything from smaller units to assisted living and long-term care. *"Seniors need more supports to stay in their homes — to groceries, doctor appointments, shoveling sidewalks, increased home care."* All of these supports allow seniors to remain near family and friends in a familiar cultural and social setting. Aboriginal communities in particular noted a need for care facilities embedded in Aboriginal traditions.

Communities also identified a need for services related to preserving the dignity and well-being of aging residents, including home care, access to health services, programs that target seniors, and transportation options that service seniors' needs. *"Seniors need extra help — no services or taxis here mean they either rely on the support of their family or move out."* There is a deep desire for 'aging well in place' where seniors are able to be vital, engaged community members in their home communities where they have built their lives. Yet, reduced mobility or fewer services in a rural or Aboriginal community may mean that a senior is forced to move to a nearby urban area.

Transportation

In rural and Aboriginal western Canada, distance is a fact of life. To get from here to there — whether for work, shopping, health care, recreation in another community, or simply visiting friends in the local community — rural citizens need transportation. The underlying presumption in our society is that all rural residents have both a license to drive and access to personal transportation; however, this is not true for everyone. *"Transportation is needed. People can't always drive in town and in the country."* Rural community residents face barriers to getting around, and it limits opportunities for many rural residents, including young families and seniors, low income residents and those on Aboriginal reserves. Innovations in transportation, from taxi services to public transport, are needed.

Accessing Services

Participants understand the need to travel to access services that are not offered in their community — but wish that such travel was not necessary. People note that the commitment to travel cascades across other aspects of rural life. *"People said they did not like having to travel to access basic services such as retailers, childcare, and entertainment."* Appointments in urban areas means traveling in all conditions, part or full days of work lost (sometimes several, if the community is not within a one-day commuting distance), rearranging schedules, and extra expenses.

Those without transportation rely on family members or other community volunteers to take time off work. People with health or other conditions requiring repeated visits to access services may have to move temporarily or permanently, nearer to the base where the service is offered.

In other cases, rural residents must travel just to meet basic needs: fresh food, banking, jobs or day care services, schooling or job training, and end of life requirements such as funeral services. Local funeral services that meet cultural or religious requirements, or were simply more accessible, was a clear need in Aboriginal communities, but rural communities also noted its lack.



Declining local services has a reverse spiral effect: *“when there is a lack of services available in the community, many viewed it as a detriment to industrial development.”* In other words, a community with fewer services has trouble attracting growth and development.

Volunteerism

There is an assumption that rural and Aboriginal communities enjoy a higher level of volunteer commitment than urban regions – but that assumption is incorrect. Participants in the community engagement meetings stressed that there are fewer and fewer volunteers available to work with existing services, programs, and recreation. Those that remain are rapidly burning out. *“We are a generous community. We give a lot of money to fundraising efforts, but people feel that is all they need to do, rather than volunteering their time.”*

Participants expressed worry and concern regarding volunteerism; many existing services and amenities, from halls to curling rinks to community events, rely on volunteer labour. Volunteering is a learned behaviour, and communities are worried that volunteerism is dying. If so, existing services, amenities, and activities will be further eroded. This issue is discussed more completely in the next chapter.

Recreation

Across western Canada, community and recreation facilities provide important places for residents to gather for recreation. Many of these facilities, built during a post-WWII boom cycle, are aging and require upgrades. At the same time, other rural and Aboriginal communities are growing, and require investment in such public infrastructure. *“There isn’t a place where people, families, youth can go to hang out.”*

Types of recreation facilities mentioned were meeting spaces, fitness centres, skate parks, rinks, pools, and other facilities that host sports and sport teams. Furthermore, because rural communities tend to be spread out, communities need to access a wide variety of recreational offerings across the seasons that are within driving distance from their local community. Some communities noted that these facilities are in place, but require better co-ordination, communication, and innovative use on a regional level. In some cases, a regional ‘hub’ community becomes a recreational centre for a wider region, but cost-sharing options or allocations for use have not followed suit.

At the same time, however, recreation is becoming more difficult to supply in rural and Aboriginal communities, since in many cases it is closely tied to volunteerism, which, as discussed above, is in decline. In other cases, recreational activities are not widely accessible, due to cost or cultural differences. *“There is a gap in social life. If you are outgoing and have connections there are lots of things to get involved in, but if that is not your thing, it is hard to integrate.”*



Infrastructure

Concerns exist about aging public infrastructure in rural areas. Sidewalks and roadways in communities are in various states of repair. Rural means distance; a critical concern across rural communities is the state of many roads and highways. Access into and out of communities is necessary; most goods and services are either bought outside or brought into a rural community. At some point, residents must travel, and roads become a major source of concern. *“There was some concern about the quality of the roads in the area as many are not paved. People thought that if accessing the communities was a challenge then they [the communities] would be less attractive to new people or new businesses.”*

Rural regions often suffer from inadequate water and sewer services, and these issues are often multiplied in Aboriginal communities. However, conversations around infrastructure often led to discussion paralysis: these items are large, costly, and sometimes difficult to rectify, if geography or culture present intractable problems. For example, a First Nations reserve or a rural village situated in a place with limited access to clean, fresh water (either via a nearby freshwater supply such as a lake or river, or locally drilling a well) has fewer options. Moving the community is not necessarily a solution. However, stopgap measures, such as hauling in water for cisterns, may not provide a feasible solution in the long run for the majority of community members.

Technological infrastructure is equally crucial. In today’s digital world, rural and Aboriginal communities voiced a clear need for telecommunication infrastructure, including good telephone, cell and Internet connectivity. As many participants noted, today’s business climate is embedded in communications. It was felt that if rural and Aboriginal communities were connected at a comparable level to urban regions, businesses could expand and employees would have more options, including choosing to live in and virtual commute from rural regions. *“If there was better Internet, we could expand opportunities.”*

Youth

Rural and Aboriginal residents worry about the longevity and sustainability of their communities; they feel that the key to longevity is supporting local youth. There are two distinct and somewhat divergent needs: youth engagement and youth services. Communities are desperate to find innovative ways to engage their youth in the community, to get them to come out and join in, volunteer, and be present at events. *“Youth need to have role models to learn from and if their parents aren’t engaging in the community it is not likely that the youth will. We need to consider the learned behaviors of the next generation.”*

To find ways to engage youth in the larger social circle, communities note that services for youth, particularly around recreation or programming, are critical. *“We need infrastructure development focused on youth – other than the hockey rink and the cadet building, there are no facilities or places for youth to go and hang out.”* Investing in rural and Aboriginal communities means little unless it leads to long-term strength and capacity, which requires local investments in youth.



Shopping and Local Retail

Local shopping opportunities can be disappointing for those living in rural and Aboriginal communities. Indeed, many rural areas report meagre to no access to basic retail services: fresh food, clothing, general store items, pharmaceuticals, and building supplies, for example. *“These were identified as services, yes, but services with a high social component, a place to meet and conduct the everyday connections that keep a community beating.”* It is difficult to focus on ‘shopping’ as simply a retail activity, when in essence the participants viewed the experience as embedded in the everyday life of a community.

Although some community residents have shifted to a greater use of on-line shopping, rural delivery does not match urban delivery, and people still must travel to the nearest pick-up point or post office. And large items, like a new washing machine, can’t be delivered to a rural post office. Remote communities face an even more exacerbated problem with delivery mechanisms: *“On arrival at the airport, we had a conversation with a foreman. He was waiting on a part for a machine. He wasn’t sure if the part coming in would be the right part, or if it was the right part, if it would solve the problem.”* Delays, always a problem in a rural region, are even more problematic in remote regions serviced by air or long rail or drive times.

Timeliness of delivery is also a critical issue: while urban residents are shifting to on-line shopping for fresh food or produce, such practices are not an option in rural areas. Rethinking how to provide access to a variety of goods and services from the community’s perspective would reorient avenues for regional shopping to better service rural areas.

Entertainment and Culture

Rural and Aboriginal residents note a continued need for gathering places, outdoor activities, festivals, evening activities/community events, art, cultural, and faith-based services. *“The only place for regular social gatherings or coffee meetings is at the Monday coffee social held by the seniors’ centre.”* Sometimes, social or cultural needs fall by the wayside when other, more pressing needs such as health or housing are in dire straits.

Despite the obvious costs, participants report that these services are critical for a community’s overall health and well-being. *“A lack of entertainment facilities and social groups mean that people had fewer opportunities to meet other community members. Often, people would have to travel to larger communities to avail of the community events or services offered there.”* In some cases, participants were referring to programs; in other cases, they note a decline in economic or social support for the upkeep of the venues in which these activities take place.

Social and cultural events often rely on volunteer capacity. Participants recognized this limitation, and expressed concern with volunteer leadership and support. In addition, participants noted policy barriers that have been built up over the years, relating to problems with volunteer screening, food safety and certified kitchens, and related barriers that often result in the withdrawal and cessation of once-popular community activities.

Education

Rural and Aboriginal communities have long been concerned about the importance of local education facilities and resources. Elementary and high school availability will entice families to



choose a community when relocating into an area. Often, the potential loss of a rural school will galvanize a community to fight for its sustainability. Schools and general educational opportunities keep youth engaged.

Communities with access to nearby industrial employment, or remote communities near mines or other extraction facilities, indicated a need for post-secondary, vocational and trades education. Local people, or local unemployed citizens, have fewer resources and limited capacity to travel to urban centres for training opportunities. *“People have to leave for apprenticeships. It’s hard to encourage them to come back unless they have a guarantee that they have a job.”* Access to community-based training would ensure their community members could benefit from employment opportunities in their area.

Daycare

Rural and Aboriginal communities consistently cite daycare and childcare as a pressing problem. With two-parent working families, combined with rural commutes, good facilities or programs to look after kids are critical. *“There is a lack of daycare providers as most of the service is offered by mothers that stay at home. There is no larger daycare facility and there are insufficient spaces to meet the demand.”* In many cases, rural and Aboriginal communities still scramble to find informal care arrangements, particularly if there are no formal local services or a continuous waitlist. Availability, hours of operation, and access to qualified employees were also issues.

Complex regulations surrounding daycare operations means that while communities have looked at solutions, many feel nervous to implement solutions in case they make an error. *“They feel it is almost impossible to work through the regulations as they cross all levels of government. There is either too much government or not enough money.”* Seasonal work environments, or other in-and-out work arrangements, mean that some communities do not have consistent daycare needs. In such an environment, particularly when combined with a smaller population, daycares can attempt to operate but face a sustainability disadvantage.

Communication

Communication is always a challenge; those challenges can be exacerbated in rural and Aboriginal communities. *“There seemed to be issues of communication within the community regarding people knowing what is or isn’t happening, and what is or isn’t available.”* Awareness and coordination of services, marketing of initiatives and community/agency information, and creating and sustaining partnerships were key themes raised by participants.

During the meetings, it would often happen that one individual would raise a need, only to find out from another participant that someone in their community is working on solving that need. Plans could be underway, but citizens were unaware of the work being done. Sometimes connections would be made at the meeting enabling two groups working on the same need to co-ordinate their activities. Other times, information would come out about changed regulations, incentives, or policies that would enable a need to be met more effectively but only participants from one community would have this knowledge, while participants from the neighbouring communities would not. The CIP meetings became a powerful communication tool, in and of themselves.

Many communities raised the difficulty of changing communication platforms. While social media is a powerful tool, as is the Internet and e-mail, not all citizens have access to, or use, these



communication platforms. There is also a rural and Aboriginal gap in broadband or other internet supports. Local newspapers are closing, local gathering places are closing and there are reduced opportunities and increased costs in distributing print communications. Additionally, websites, mailing lists, and communication plans require someone to manage and update them. Communications initiatives often start under a grant and when the grant has expired, the tools created are no longer updated or used.

Financing

Rural and Aboriginal communities are looking for access to finances to fund initiatives, start-ups, projects, and ongoing services. *“The meeting started with a participant stating that it is hard to discuss needs, or make a long list of things that need to be solved, when there is no money to solve it and people are facing daily struggles to survive.”* Even the simplest of new initiatives requires some start-up funding, financing, or capital.

Grant applications to access start-up funds require resources and knowledge — research, persuasive writing, budgeting and estimation — that are not always present in smaller organizations or communities, leaving them at a disadvantage. Moreover, participants noted that grants rarely align with the needs of rural communities. Aboriginal communities felt that they had some access to finances, but they needed capacity and resources to put together applications.

Participants also indicated the difficulty of accessing financing for entrepreneurial initiatives in the community. There was skepticism that banks would be willing to loan money for businesses operating in such small markets. Aboriginal participants indicated the difficulty in getting personal loans when living on reserve due to having limited personal assets to use as collateral.

Government Barriers

Community participants had much to say about government barriers at all levels. Navigating government restrictions, being aware of regulation changes, navigating complex and changing jurisdictional and boundary issues, and dealing with political power from the local to the national level were all brought forward as challenges. Regulations, especially those dealing with food safety, police and community record checks, and volunteer or coaching training were all cited as barriers in rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities.

Local power and control, particularly in Aboriginal communities, was a point raised again and again. *“It is all about who you are and who you know in this community. You have to know how to get on the good side of the council and Chief to get anything done.”*

In most cases, government barriers are outside the control of the community. Nonetheless, participants indicated that these barriers have a strong impact on addressing needs in their communities. *“It’s almost as if the governmental jurisdictions and structures have forced a divide between...communities. So many of the needs that exist are rooted in these systems and structures.”*

People

Although there has been an overall growth in the population of rural and Aboriginal communities across western Canada between 2006 and 2011, community participants nonetheless stressed a need for more people. *“PEOPLE! This community is in dire need of an influx of population, a way to*



bring in a huge number of people to swell the local community.” Participants were interested in population growth and health: in drawing new people to the community, retaining their youth, or encouraging youth to return after post-secondary training elsewhere, keeping seniors living in the community, and attracting professionals to live in rural regions. In all communities, there was a desire for a balanced, engaged and active population.

Rural communities are challenged by an aging population base, while Aboriginal communities are challenged to meet the needs of a young population dynamic. These demographics change the nature of local needs and local supports available to meet those needs. Aboriginal communities were less likely to cite a need for growth through new population increase. These communities were focused on supporting the health and stability of their current citizen base.

Participants suggested that without an adequate and healthy population they would not be able to find realistic, sustainable solutions. Some communities, due to proximity to larger hub centres, natural resources, or recreational features are able to draw greater population. Remote communities, or previously thriving communities that have lost nearby industries, feel population loss and population sustainability pressure most acutely.

Community Need

Simply put, there is a need for a community to *be* a community. Instead of itemized needs like more doctors, or better transportation options, these needs speak to the issue of creating a viable and sustainable community which is more than the sum of its parts. These needs relate to making sure that there are places to gather and grow together, to recognize community as ‘home,’ and having vibrant and accessible public spaces and connections. In other words, there are social needs relating to community.

Community revitalization or connection were conceptually about direction, about the need to harness current capacity in a more focused effort. *“In the grand scheme of things, their needs are more things that could be improved rather than a deficit.”*

Food

Rural participants tended to suggest that they had reasonable access to food; in contrast, Aboriginal communities and remote communities cited food security as a priority. Yet, even in places with no community-based grocery store, people are used to driving to access their food. Most communities with local grocery stores cited expense as an issue. *“We have a store. It has mostly everything but it’s expensive.”* For the most part, food concerns were limited to the lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and limited or disrupted access to foods in times when transportation is limited due to road conditions. Many participants identified the lack of a local butcher in their community and expressed a preference to access fresh meat.

Yet, in some communities, particularly Aboriginal and remote regions, local food, including traditional harvesting and sharing practices, cannot necessarily be scaled up into businesses. Regulations place limitations on processing, marketing, and exchange. Even in rural agricultural regions with vigorous local farmers’ markets, processing regulations are a barrier.

When people have to drive to larger hubs for other services, they often combine retail purchases and other needs (medical appointments, entertainment) in one trip. Smaller rural stores with



higher transportation costs can't always price match larger centres. A local business with higher prices can, and often are, viewed as a reason for local residents to shop at stores in larger centres that offer cheaper prices.

Employment Support

Employment-based assistance is missing in many of the communities. For some, it may be a matter of exposure. *"It is really hard for youth to consider any sort of career path or employment opportunity outside of the few sectors that exist here because this is all they are exposed to."* While individuals can access employment services in urban hubs, many of the individuals needing these services lack the ability to get to urban hubs — a problem which connects to transportation, training, and local economies. Additionally, there was a sense that employment services based out of urban areas do not provide adequate support for individuals that wish to remain in their rural or remote community.

Addictions

Participants noted that addictions support does not meet local demand. *"Addictions are a large issue in the community; high level of traumatized people. Several people spoke about their personal experiences with addictions, and the subsequent issues related to that. The current addictions worker is not able to meet the need, and there was a sense that the current programming wasn't adequate either."*

Individuals have to leave their community to go to a treatment centre, which is especially difficult for individuals from remote and Aboriginal communities. These centres have long wait times, and when individuals return home, they do not have follow-up supports within their communities. A side effect of addictions problems is that people lose their drivers licenses, which has effects back across neighbors, relatives, and the larger community. That individual can no longer accept jobs outside the community or access non-local support services without adequate transportation. Issues related to untreated addictions are well-known and are playing out in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada.

Economy

Rural and Aboriginal communities expressed a need for economic development, identifying and taking advantage of opportunities, and supporting home-based businesses. *"I'm surprised that more people aren't talking about the impacts of this on our community. We say we want to draw more professionals here but that is really hard when local businesses can't survive here right now. Have you noticed how many empty storefronts there are along Main Street?"*

Rather than more specific individual business development, participants made reference to a need for larger coordinated activity in communities and regions. Participants know that they need a stabilized and diversified economy, since most have felt the effects of having agriculture- or resource-based economies and the effects of downturns on populations and economic activity. However, they are unsure of how to move forward.

Aboriginal participants noted further constraints for development, around land ownership, rental agreements, or changes in government which can alter or rescind agreements. While many rural



and Aboriginal participants understand their local situation, they expressed frustration in leveraging their unique situations to compete in larger economies.

Workers

Having a local population that is well matched to local business needs can be a problem in rural and Aboriginal communities. *“Businesses that exist are competing with better paying, better jobs.”* Transient labour, high turnover, lack of qualifications, and simply not enough people to fill positions are critical business and community issues.

Participants identified that often professionals in their communities are transient populations, and do not connect deeply into the community; in other cases, rural areas have trouble attracting professionals to fill vacant positions. Businesses try to operate with not enough staff; with daycare challenges in rural regions, shift work and other kinds of employment are difficult. Seasonal and fly-in, fly-out employment creates transient populations that are not attached to community. Finding people to provide odd jobs/handy man services is near to impossible in rural and Aboriginal western Canada.

Policing Support

Rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada have unique relationships with police services. Most of the communities we visited rely on the RCMP as the main form of policing. For many rural communities, policing is not available directly in their community. Instead, it comes into communities from regional centres.

Some communities expressed concerns about the response times required to get RCMP officers to a community. Others cited major concerns about enforcement of both highway speeds and general highway safety from people driving through their towns. In towns that act as RCMP bases, participants feel the police are never in town, and are primarily concerned with patrols out of town.

For communities facing drug problems, citizens argue that the RCMP lacks adequate staffing levels or enough leeway to search or arrest potential drug dealers. The burden of proof puts too many barriers in place, and the RCMP appear to be hampered. In addition, Aboriginal participants had concerns about a lack of cultural understanding between First Nations traditions and RCMP officers. *“RCMP: be a part of community, respect for community, more awareness of their community.”* Yet, as a result of community-level interconnection, relationships, and family ties, ‘outside’ police, such as the RCMP, participants noted that they are often a better solution than a local police force.

A related issue is community-level policing, particularly by-law enforcement. *“No by-law enforcement! There are by-laws, but no one to enforce them, and no one wants to enforce them because the community is too small.”* Enforcing local rules can exacerbate existing community barriers or open residents to intimidation.

Jobs

Community meeting participants had much to say about the quality of jobs in rural and Aboriginal communities. *“The availability of jobs would create the foundation for community appeal.”* While related to the call for expansion and investment in economic development, and the need for workers, this need looks at it from a slightly different perspective. In part, there is a mismatch



between what is available in communities for jobs at local businesses (restaurants, grocery stores, and other retail positions, if available) and the type of jobs residents would like, or are able, to do. Related examples included seasonal job shortages, high local unemployment in First Nations communities, and a clear desire for light industrial jobs. Jobs with somewhat higher pay, steady employment, and future growth were important indicators of a thriving community that has the capacity to create and share wealth and well-being.

Restaurant

Many small communities have lost their last bar, coffee shop, or restaurant. For those food-related meeting spaces that are left, timing and quality of services is a major concern. *“Restaurants not consistently open – none are open on the weekend, and often not open weekdays either.”* Many Aboriginal communities do not have these services in their communities at all. More than any other retail service, participants felt that the lack of this service negatively affected socialization in their community. They noted that sustainability for a restaurant in a community with a small population is a problem, but still wanted to have a meal out and socialize with their neighbours.

Emergency Services

Communities across rural and Aboriginal western Canada scramble to have adequate and prepared emergency services. *“By the time someone calls volunteer firefighters and they get there, there isn’t much for them to do.”* Ambulance, first responders, fire fighters and emergency preparedness kits, along with equipment for all of these services, is a necessity. Moreover, rural and Aboriginal communities must look for people to volunteer and train into these roles – often at a cost. In most cases, paid professionals are not available.

Response times for emergency services, given the volunteer nature of most of these services, as well as the cost of maintaining equipment, were brought forward. These services suffer from budget constraints and conflicting jurisdictional boundaries (services that are available, trained, and ready in one community may not be allowed to help in a situation in a nearby community).

Cost

Rural and Aboriginal residents in western Canada, for the most part, do not have the same mean or median wage as their urban counterparts. While some costs, such as housing, may be lower in rural communities, other costs are higher. Many residents in both rural and Aboriginal communities live on fixed incomes. *“Many seniors are doing their best to keep their houses up, but with the increase in groceries those on fixed incomes have fewer resources to maintain their properties.”* A limited income means that residents have trouble coping with increases in the cost of living. Everyday needs such as fuel and food are typically (but not always) more expensive in rural and Aboriginal communities.

Inversely, from the perspective of retailers, the cost of transporting goods and people, especially for remote communities, has increased drastically, and these costs must be passed on to the consumer. Yet, there is little corresponding increase in fixed incomes.

In areas with resource-based or tourist-based economies, prices for goods and services are driven up by both camp/trades workers and tourists with greater disposable income. Local residents indicate the prices in such places have become unaffordable. Additionally, those that drive



economic development often receive a priority for materials, contractors and government services, which leaves residents, those not involved in these economies, struggling.

Safety

Feeling safe and secure in communities is necessary for a better quality of life. In some communities, people feel scared and unsafe, which limits their social capacity. Participants described safety as both a planning problem, including issues such as high speed traffic moving through communities, and social problems, including struggles with bullying, gang presence, and lack of security due to small populations not able to keep their eyes on everyone. There is a perception of an overall decrease in rural and Aboriginal community safety.

Some participants noted that rural and Aboriginal women face large safety issues in their homes and in their communities. This problem is connected to the lack of women's shelters and other supports to help women leave abusive or violent relationships.

Building Space

In some rural and Aboriginal communities, local zoning and planning, or a simple lack of physical space, means that space for new buildings is in short supply. *"There literally is not a single space available right now in the community for businesses or housing development."* Respondents noted needs relating to incubator business spaces, affordable spaces, shared spaces for storage, cooking, and meeting, new building spaces, and the repurposing of buildings that are not being used.

Environment, Green Space and Eco-friendly

Rural and Aboriginal community respondents noted a growing interest in and concern for 'green' solutions, environmental awareness, eco-friendly development, and green spaces. These are not just an urban concern. *"Need to change the mindset of the community around environmental issues – need to get people more involved in recycling, cleaning up the community, understanding the impact and importance of sustainability."*

These concerns translated into four different avenues: green solutions such as greenhouses, local food production, and green energy production; pollution, littering, and recycling; promotion possibilities for communities through eco-tourism and incorporating green space into local planning; and a concern for communities too often in the path of environmental destruction, whether natural or man-made. Participants in rural and Aboriginal communities are passionate about maintaining the natural environment. They recognize that these needs are potential growth areas, represent responsible development, and will help preserve the lifestyle they cherish.

Community Mindset — Averse to Change

Some communities have been talking about needs for a long time and nothing has been done. *"People don't take risks anymore — there is a lack of motivation and drive from people to get involved, to try new things, to come together and take initiative."* People have gotten used to the way a community is, whether that means driving to meet their needs or making other concessions. *"Something would have to greatly affect their personal lifestyle for people to take action in a situation."*



Some residents find it difficult to envision a different community, one with the potential to meet their needs, or with the power to create change. Complacency, risk aversion, and fear of failure cause frustration. *“Community will support some issues, but are tired of trying on others.”*

Yet, rural and Aboriginal communities display stubbornness. Participants indicated that decision makers and governments need to stop discounting their ability. Policy, they argued, needs to be changed. *“There is a real sense of disconnect between community and government levels; community impacted often by government actions that do not benefit them.”* In response, participants called for increased lobbying of decision makers to open doors for development, local decision making, and opportunity in their communities.

Accommodations

A range of hospitality services are needed in communities — or, what is available could be improved. *“We had a big sporting event here and teams came from other communities but there was nowhere to stay and the restaurants were never open so people left with a very negative perception of our community. We haven’t had another event like that since.”*

While related to economic development and job creation, local accommodation supports local meeting spaces, and allows for visits by family, business developers, sales and service people, and/or large-scale recreational activities. In some cases, a community could have a sportsplex or hall that can host events, but without the peripheral business support — restaurants, hotels, and so forth — the events are not as successful as they could be. Without local accommodations, there is often no way to draw newcomers, visitors and tourists, or potential incoming residents.

In the communities we visited, participants recommended increased accommodations related to tourism, from high-end resorts to RV and campground sites. Yet, there are limitations to those ideas, too — finding a way to fill space year round, rather than seasonally, is always a challenge.

Needs Assessment

Communities — some more than others — understood that in order to solve community problems and address needs, there must be direct engagement with community members. In that process, the community can consider which needs are high, which are moderate, and which are low. Identifying primary versus secondary needs, structural or marginal needs, and determining which can be solved quickly and which will take coordinated effort due to the circular or complex multiple linkages between needs, is an integral and ongoing activity for communities. *“The community recognized the circular nature of their challenges.”*

In part, the CIP project discovered that our open community meetings held tremendous value for the communities we visited in large part because of their role in contributing to this process. We asked participants to provide feedback on our meetings. Many of the responses told us how valuable community-level conversations are to upholding ties and creating new ones, building on local energy, and actively working together to consider current challenges and future directions.

Leadership

“Who will take on the leadership role?” This was a question heard again and again. Leaders exist in all communities, but many are tapped out. Others have alternative views on which direction a



community should take. *“It’s hard to get leaders...together in a room and to get everyone to get along. There are so many things we could do together...if we could put our differences aside.”*

Improving services or creating new initiatives require a lot of focused and directed energy. Most communities noted that there are people who could become leaders, but that they may need leadership training and mentorship. Leaders need to be identified and supported for communities to be vital and to find local solutions.

Postal Service

Cost and access to a reliable local postal service remains important, even in an era of digital technology — and possibly more important in rural and Aboriginal communities, where digital technology is not on pace with urban infrastructure. *“You never know how long it will take for mail to get here and it’s really expensive to send mail or packages.”* With fewer local retail outlets, communities rely on online purchasing, or having orders shipped in from larger hub areas.

Since many rural residents commute to work, hours of operation and the general proximity of the postal service is crucial. Many Aboriginal communities noted a complete lack of postal service. They are required to drive to the nearest community to access their mail. The transportation gap found in many rural and Aboriginal communities intensifies this problem.

Banking

As with postal service, access to banking services or ATM services is missing in many communities. *“There is an ATM at the gas station but it is not affiliated with any bank and therefore imposes a higher fee.”* Transportation is a contributing factor: individuals with reduced mobility have a more difficult time accessing these services. Rural bank and credit union closures or amalgamations have a cascading effect across business, loans, mortgages, and other traditional banking support. Other residents, particularly those in the older generation, still prefer cash transactions and need a place to cash their cheques. Some rural and Aboriginal people indicated a lack of connection to large, impersonal banking institutions.

Family

Participants cited a desire to increase the role of families in their communities. *“That whole parenting thing has been lost due to residential schools. For parents to just sit down and say there is nothing to do, it takes a lot of involvement and you can’t just expect it to be up to everyone else. As community leaders we often take that responsibility from those parents rather than teaching them that they need to take that responsibility.”* In Aboriginal communities there is a lot of concern expressed about the effects of residential school on parenting, family unification and health, and the connection between home and school. Additionally, there is strong concern that children in care are removed from their community and from the extended family, causing ongoing pain and loss of culture. It was expressed that there is little support for parents to improve parenting, or learn different parenting methods. Rural and remote communities often lose families, who move to larger centres to access schooling or other opportunities.



Natural Hazards

In rural and Aboriginal communities, nature and natural features can be a defining part of life and livelihoods. Mitigating and managing natural hazards is a concern, specifically the impacts of floods and other disaster events, containing and living with wildlife, and addressing mold in houses. *“These homes are not built for the local climate of our area and community. Mold is an issue.”* Some geographic features such as landslides, flood zones, or winter storms can be mitigated but not removed. In other cases, community location — on an island, on a small point of land within a larger wet region, on the edge of mountain — cannot be changed.

Lifestyle

Rural and Aboriginal communities have a unique lifestyle. Part of the community conversations involved recognizing the possibilities and limitations of that lifestyle, and finding ways to integrate community needs with local choices.

One of the major veins was a discussion about north and northern issues, and the particular challenges it can create. There was a clear understanding that living in the north carries its own burdens and opportunities that are enfolded in the lifestyle. *“Northern Saskatchewan is the richest area of Saskatchewan, but it is behind the rest of the province.”*

The second major point about lifestyle related to connection and commitment to place and community. *“I can’t imagine moving back to a city now.”* Multi-generational ties and being born and raised in a community is a critical factor in rural and Aboriginal communities. *“Most people had lived in the area for several decades. Everyone indicated an interest in staying long term. They spoke positively about their community and the area; they consider it home.”*

Trades

While clearly related to education and local training opportunities for adults, rural and Aboriginal communities need skilled trade workers. *“Need every trade out there.”* Fields such as auto repair, carpentry, welding, machine shops, electricians and general handy workers were mentioned. Communities are looking for community-based apprenticeships to train and retain tradespeople.

As older tradespeople are retiring and selling their businesses, there is nobody to come behind to offer the services. There are opportunities for succession planning and business planning around rural and Aboriginal service work. Tradespeople in nearby urban hubs do not want to drive to rural areas to provide services — they tend to be busy enough in the city.

Energy

In Canada, energy (gasoline for vehicles, and sources of household heat and electricity) are basic necessities of life. In rural and Aboriginal communities, the supply line can be long. *“People want to change how they get energy.”* There is concern about cost, accessibility and availability of various sources of energy including generators, electricity, propane, wood, and gasoline. On top of this,



participants identified a growing need to identify and implement sources of green energy both for environmental reasons and to lower costs.

Crime

Related to policing services, as well as safety and emergency services, participants spoke of reducing crimes against people, including incidents of domestic violence. Crime and its residual impacts are a major impediment to community relations, social capacity and business capacity. In rural communities, crime incidents were typically associated with outsiders to the community, while many Aboriginal communities identify crime as a problem *because* it comes from within the community. Working to combat crime involves more than external justice; it spills over into neighbor and community relationships, family and kinship networks, work colleagues and friends. *"No one wanted to be seen as working against the dealers."*

Downtown Revitalization

Empty or shabby buildings, general poor quality of downtown amenities including roads and sidewalks, and a lack of accessibility is how participants described their towns. *"Downtown needs a facelift."* Downtown revitalization would draw business, improve the aesthetics of their community, as well as create a natural hub location. Many western Canadian Aboriginal communities, particularly those on-reserve or with distinct land bases, were set up on an acreage or homestead-style system, with houses and home sites spread out. These communities are looking to develop a 'downtown' base, to concentrate services and create a community hub.

Land Base

There is a series of needs related to land base, both the quality of existing land, and creating serviced lots for development. *"Not much land base to expand for business or housing development – the lack of access to land is really at the root of so many of the needs/problems in the community. It sometimes feels like our only possibility is to start to expand up instead of out, but no one here wants skyscrapers in our community."*

In Aboriginal communities with a limited land base, collectively-owned land cannot be used as collateral to generate capital, which hinders investment development. Participants recognized the need to have access to land that will allow for economic development and growth, as well as improve quality of life.

Water

In some rural and Aboriginal communities, access to drinking water is a concern. *"I still don't like the taste even though it has improved. Now when I do something I wear rubber gloves. I wear gloves all the time now. My skin cracks otherwise."* Water storage and treatment facilities are aging, repairs and replacements are expensive, and communities patch old systems to keep going. Those who run treatment plants are now expected to have high levels of training, which can be expensive and usually only offered in urban centres.

In some rural and Aboriginal regions, drinking water and sewage disposal are a household-level concern. People pay to treat well water or truck in water from another place to a cistern or holding tank, and pay to truck out sewage. While these practices are normalized in many communities, risks



are high, and the practices are a drain on fixed incomes. Current solutions are not sustainable in the long run, but prohibitive costs prevent action.

Technology

Communities, in today's digital world, need access to computers, up-to-date technologies such as cellphone towers or telehealth services, and need to know how to use them. Many feel left behind. Technology requires constant updating and many of the participants felt that their communities lacked the resources or commitment to assist. *"There is telehealth in the community but you need to book well in advance but the doctor is always busy and it's all a matter of time — and it's not utilized very well or very much."*

Non-Profit

A few community participants raised the need for developing, funding, and supporting new and existing non-profits. *"Non-profits all struggling for dollars, zero coordination amongst them, space utilization, common secretary or keeper, even a common space where they can network and be together."* Recognizing the important role non-profits play in delivery of services, it is crucial to continue to support their work in environments of declining volunteer capacity.



Comparing Communities: Analysis

There are some fascinating similarities and differences in community needs among the four western provinces, and between rural and Aboriginal communities. The material in this section examines these similarities and differences.

Rural Communities and Aboriginal Communities

The needs discussed above were determined by aggregating data across all communities, be they rural or Aboriginal, in western Canada. This aggregation, however, masks some important differences that emerge when the data is separated out by different sub-groupings. In this section, we analyze needs as reported by Aboriginal versus rural communities.

Table 2 Top Needs in western Canada, By Community Type, CIP community engagement events 2015

%	Western Canada	Rural Communities	Aboriginal Communities
7% and greater	Health Care	Health Care	Health Care
		Housing	Support Services
			Community barriers
5% - 6.99%	Housing	Industry and business development	Seniors' Services
	Support Services		
	Industry and business development	Volunteerism	Accessing services
	Community barriers	Transportation	
	Seniors' Services	Seniors' Services	Transportation
	Transportation		
3% - 4.99%	Accessing services	Infrastructure	Housing
	Volunteerism	Recreation	Industry and business development
		Youth	
	Recreation	Support Services	Recreation
	Infrastructure	Community barriers	Education
	Youth	Retail	
	Retail	Accessing services	Infrastructure
		Entertainment and Culture	Addictions
Less than 2.99%	35 additional needs	34 additional needs	36 additional needs



Table 2 shows the similarities and difference in the needs discussed in rural communities versus Aboriginal communities, and compares these needs when aggregated across western Canada. The top needs in each grouping were identified by determining the needs that received mention at least three percent of the time during community engagement events. Across western Canada, 13 needs were identified as being in the top needs category. In rural communities, 14 needs made the top list, while in Aboriginal communities, 12 needs received the most mention.

The number one need identified in both rural and Aboriginal communities is health care. A strong driver in both types of communities is mental health services, while addictions was identified more often in Aboriginal communities. Closely related to health care, and the second top need in Aboriginal communities, was a desire for support services. While some supports exist, participants indicated that they are not adequate to meet demand.

Both rural and Aboriginal communities have a high need for housing. Surprisingly, housing was brought forward as a need more often in rural communities than in Aboriginal. Participants discussed the relationship between an aging demographic and housing, and as well as the different types of housing (e.g., rental, condo, home ownership) than are required. In Aboriginal communities, residents noted both a lack of housing stock, and a lack of repair/upkeep of existing housing.

Although community barriers were important in both rural and Aboriginal communities, they received more discussion in Aboriginal communities. Participants reported a sense that they were not represented either within local community politics or at other levels of government, and a general lack of day-to-day involvement in local decision-making.

In rural communities, transportation was discussed more often than seniors' services, support services, or accessing services, while the reverse was true in Aboriginal communities. The call for services (of all types) in Aboriginal communities reflects a desire to access culturally appropriate services within their community, and not rely on outside service providers. The focus was clearly to make life better for current residents, to see improvements to standards of living and way of life.

Industry and business development was the third most discussed need in rural communities after health care and housing. It is seen as a driver to bring new residents and money to the area, and to diversify services and opportunities for residents. In Aboriginal communities, community health, services, transportation and housing needs were discussed more often than industry and business development. This difference in the ranking of industry and business development appears to be linked to a desire in Aboriginal communities for current community members to be healthy and to have opportunities; in contrast, rural communities appeared to be more interested in bringing new people and jobs to the community.

There appears to be a difference in how rural communities and Aboriginal communities view volunteerism and the process around community involvement. Rural communities, on the whole, indicated an ability to enact change in their community, while Aboriginal community members feel constrained by local band governance and the federal government. Rural communities noted a volunteer crisis, citing a high need for a new infusion of volunteers to drive community change and provide community services. In Aboriginal communities, volunteering barely registered as a local need — the sorts of voluntary services provided by a rural community's volunteer base are often viewed as the local government's responsibility. Rural communities with an existing but stretched and aging base wondered where start-up funding would come from to fuel change. Aboriginal



communities sometimes doubted that they had the ability to make a change. Both groups wondered: *who would do the work?*

Recreation was an important area discussed in both Aboriginal and rural communities. Recreational pursuits support the health of citizens and help people engage in their communities. There is a real concern that community members do not know, understand or help one another as much as they used to in the past. A consistent call for space within which to gather together reflects a desire for greater community connections. In rural communities, recreation was also tied to youth, entertainment and culture; these discussion areas were not present in the top list from Aboriginal communities.

Rural communities expressed a higher need for local retail and shopping opportunities, while Aboriginal community members did not feel this was as strong a priority. However, since transportation and accessing services were very important in Aboriginal communities, it is possible that Aboriginal respondents subsumed their retail needs into these larger areas.

Education was amongst the top needs discussed in Aboriginal communities, but not in rural communities. This difference could be reflective of both a younger population, and a desire for culturally appropriate, high quality services in their own community. Both community types — rural and Aboriginal — discussed the problem of residents leaving the community for post-secondary education and then not returning.

Overall, there were ten needs that coded high in both rural and Aboriginal communities: health care, housing, support services, industry and business development, community barriers, seniors' services, transportation, accessing services, recreation, and infrastructure (see Table 3). Volunteerism, youth services, retail, entertainment and culture, education, and addictions were important in either rural or Aboriginal communities, but not both.

Table 3 Top Ten Needs in Western Canada, CIP community engagement meetings 2015

Top Ten Needs in Rural and Aboriginal Communities in Western Canada
Health Care
Housing
Support Services
Industry and Business Development
Community Barriers
Seniors' Services
Transportation
Accessing Services
Recreation
Infrastructure



Provincial Breakdown of Community Needs

Another way to look at the data from the community engagement meetings is to look at the needs that were expressed on a province-by-province basis. Table 4 shows the similarities and differences in the needs discussed in communities in each of the four provinces in western Canada, and compares these to the aggregate list of needs.

The top needs in each grouping were identified by determining the needs that received mention at least three percent of the time. Across western Canada, 13 needs were identified as being in the top needs category. In Manitoba, 12 needs made the top list, while in Saskatchewan, 11 needs received mention. In Alberta and British Columbia, the numbers were 13 and 14, respectively.

Table 4 Top Needs in western Canada, by province. CIP community engagement meetings 2015

%	Western Canada	Manitoba	Saskatchewan	Alberta	British Columbia
7% and greater	Health Care	Housing	Health Care	Industry and business development	Housing
		Health Care	Support Services		Health Care
		Industry and business development	Accessing services		Health Care
5% - 6.99%	Housing	Volunteerism	Transportation	Community barriers	Transportation
	Support Services			Infrastructure	
	Industry and business development	Health Care		Industry and business development	
	Community barriers	Housing			
	Seniors' Services	Recreation			
Transportation	Recreation	Volunteerism	Community barriers		
3% - 4.99%	Accessing services	Transportation	Housing	Seniors' Services	Seniors' Services
	Volunteerism	Youth	Community barriers	Retail	Recreation
	Recreation	Retail	Industry and business development	Support Services	Infrastructure
	Infrastructure	Accessing services	Volunteerism		Youth
	Youth	Support Services	Infrastructure	Education	Volunteerism
	Retail	Infrastructure	Recreation		Retail
Less than 2.99%	35 additional needs	36 additional needs	37 additional needs	35 additional needs	34 additional needs

Manitoba

In Manitoba, the discussion of needs was focused primarily at the community level — housing and health care topped the list, with housing receiving the most discussion. Service concerns received less airtime. Industry and business development to diversify communities, and to generate greater resources for their communities, was a strong component of discussion.

Volunteerism comprised a larger part of the discussion than in other provinces, as did community barriers and recreational needs. Manitoba was the only province where seniors' services did not make the list of the needs, perhaps due to the long history of having hub communities providing these services.



Saskatchewan

Health care was the most-discussed issue among the participants we met with in Saskatchewan, followed closely by the provision of, and access to, services. Saskatchewan has a history of service centralization, and both rural and Aboriginal communities are concerned that their access to services has eroded. As well, rural communities have an aging population, many of whom need increased health care.

Transportation was a critical component of most Saskatchewan conversations, where participants registered concern with current transportation policies and practices. A second set of community- and economic-based needs (housing, community barriers, industry and business development, volunteerism, infrastructure, recreation) appeared lower down. Youth and access to local retail received less attention in the discussion compared to western Canada; the aging rural population and a larger discussion around transportation may account for this difference.

Alberta

Alberta communities placed the greatest emphasis on industry and business development. While other provinces had health care either first or second in terms of the most discussed needs, this was not true in Alberta, where discussion of health care was fourth in our community engagement events.

Seniors' services and support services also received less discussion than in the other provinces, while access to services did not make Alberta's top needs. Housing also received less discussion in Alberta in comparison to western Canada. Community barriers and infrastructure concerns were discussed more in Alberta than in the other provinces, as were recreation, volunteerism, and youth issues. Education, which was not on the top needs list for western Canada, did make the list in Alberta communities.

British Columbia

As in Manitoba, housing and health care topped the list in British Columbia. Transportation was a higher need in British Columbian communities than elsewhere in western Canada, which may be related to the remote, mountain terrain and island communities that were visited. Industry and business development, and removing community barriers, were also important.

British Columbia communities listed food amongst their top needs, an outcome that might be related to the remoteness of some of the communities, and a larger emphasis on locally produced, organic foods. Similar to Saskatchewan, seniors' needs came up more than youth, although youth did make the top list.

Overall discussion

Both Manitoba and Alberta expressed concern for industry and business development, and for volunteerism and community barriers. Saskatchewan and British Columbia had more discussion regarding transportation than either Manitoba or Alberta, which could be attributed to distance, road conditions, or the centralization of services. While health care topped the overall list of needs for western Canada, the only province where it was the primary concern was Saskatchewan.



Housing was second on the overall list, and was the top priority in two provinces. Two provinces, Alberta and British Columbia, had education within their top discussed needs, but education did not maintain that ranking in the overall western Canadian picture. Participants in Alberta and British Columbia were not as worried about accessing services as the other two provinces, as that category did not make the list of their top needs.

Further investigation of the data, perhaps in combination with other data sources, is required to see if the needs in rural and Aboriginal communities differ by province, or even by region (north or south, island/remote or central).

Going forward, there is an opportunity to compare the community engagement results with those from the telephone and web-based surveys conducted by CIP. One of the most intriguing points is that our data shows not only differences between rural and Aboriginal communities, but clear distinctions between communities depending on which province they are situated within. This evidence could support a contention that there are strong provincial identities and attitudes, which may be supported by provincial policy interventions. There is potential to address differences or access innovative ideas through a pan-provincial viewpoint.