

AUMA RESOLUTION: INTEGRATE EMERGENCY SOCIAL SERVICES AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AT PROVINCIAL LEVEL

WHEREAS the Minister of Municipal Affairs is designated as the Minister responsible for the Emergency Management Act as per the *Emergency Management Act*, Revised Statutes of Alberta 2000, Chapter E-6.8, Section 1(h);

WHEREAS a Director of Emergency Management is appointed by the local authority to prepare and coordinate emergency plans, act as the director of emergency operations on behalf of the emergency management agency, and coordinate all emergency services and other resources used in an emergency [Section 11.2(2)], including emergency social services plans and resources;

WHEREAS the provision of Emergency Social Services, defined within the Provincial Emergency Social Services Framework as “the supports that meet the basic essential needs of individuals, households, and communities affected by emergencies”, is an integral part of any emergency response because it involves the care of the people affected and cannot be carved out and handled separately from the overall response;

WHEREAS the Emergency Social Services is housed in the Ministry of Community Support Services, where the structure of support to local authorities that is currently available through the Alberta Emergency Management Agency is being recreated, duplicating efforts and creating confusion for local authorities in how best to communicate with the province on planning, training, and responding to emergencies in a holistic sense;

WHEREAS the Alberta Emergency Response Plan defines the Provincial Operations Centre as the entity responsible for the coordination of provincial supports to the local authority during an emergency to ensure a common understanding and prioritization of all requests for assistance, as well as to provide a single coordination point for local authorities to access all provincial ministries;

WHEREAS during the 2011 Slave Lake Wildfire, the 2013 Southern Alberta Floods, and the 2016 Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Wildfire, the disconnection of emergency social services into a separate provincial ministry (in the case of the 2016 wildfire this was formalized into a separate coordination centre, known as the Provincial Emergency Social Services Emergency Coordination Centre) created communication challenges, confusion around roles and responsibilities, duplication of effort, and disjointed policies and supports provided to evacuees;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association urge the Province of Alberta to consolidate Emergency Social Services and Emergency Management into a single, all-hazards, public safety oriented government ministry to eliminate duplication and enhance coordination of provincial support to local authorities.

Resolution Background:

Alberta has had a number of large-scale disasters recently, which present an opportunity for learning and improvement. Through the Slave Lake Wildfire, Southern Alberta Floods, and the Wood Buffalo Wildfire, one common recommendation is for better integration of emergency social services and emergency management. Many municipalities have adopted this approach and are incorporating emergency social services into municipal plans, training, exercises, and responses. Provincially, however,

these two inter-connected pieces are currently managed through two separate ministries, which has led to communication and coordination challenges.

The Incident Command System (ICS) is “a standardized on-site management system designed to enable effective, efficient incident management by integrating a combination of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures, and communications operating within a common organizational structure” (*Alberta Emergency Plan*, 2015, pg. 10). The Government of Alberta adopted the ICS and mandated that all provincial organizations and ministries shall use ICS as their incident management systems (*Alberta Emergency Plan*, 2015, pg. 10). One of the foundational principles of ICS is designed to address this inherent challenge of a multi-agency response. “Unity of command” means each individual has a single designated supervisor to avoid the challenges of having to prioritize directives and work assignments from multiple sources, which can have immediate and far-reaching consequences during the time-sensitive nature of an emergency.

The separation of emergency social service and emergency management into two different provincial ministries undermines this foundational principle by introducing a dual reporting structure and creating an unnatural division in what should be a coordinated response. Unlike other provincial ministries with clear jurisdictional authority over specific elements of a response (such as Environment, Forestry, or Health), the mandate for emergency social services at the local level falls under the Director of Emergency Management (*Emergency Management Act*, Revised Statutes of Alberta 2000, Section 11.2).

Emergency Social Services cannot be effectively separated from the response without a significant, detrimental impact on the people affected by the disaster. Creating this separation results in loss of coordination, communication breakdowns, and conflicting messages to evacuees who need certainty in order to make decisions about their homes and businesses. For example, during the High River flood in 2013, decisions were made about relocating evacuees from Reception Centres to transitional housing at the University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge in isolation, without coordination or support from the Emergency Operations Centre. This created significant confusion and fear among evacuees when buses showed up without notice to take them to their new lodgings.

Each of the past three large-scale disasters in Alberta has resulted in the recommendation of closer integration of emergency social services into the overall response. In the *Lesser Slave Lake Regional Urban Interface Wildfire – Lessons Learned Final Report* (KPMG, 2012), one of the primary recommendations was to “fully implement the Incident Command System so that emergency response roles and mandates are firmly established within a single, clear chain of command”, especially regarding “Disaster Social Services, Consequence Management Officers, the NGO Council, First Nations, the Red Cross, and the Fire Commissioner” (pg. 165). This highlights the need for a fully-integrated response with a clear chain of command, making no distinction between traditional response resources (e.g. Fire Commissioner) and emergency social services (Disaster Social Services, the NGO Council, and the Red Cross). *The Review and Analysis of the Government of Alberta’s Response to and Recovery from 2013 Floods* (MNP, 2015) report stressed the urgent need for a provincial emergency social services framework that created a unified approach to delivering ESS services, acknowledging that “the lack of a unified approach to these elements is linked to the overarching ESS challenge at the provincial level” (pg. 43). *The May 2016 Wood Buffalo Wildfire Post-Incident Assessment Report* (KPMG, 2017) recommends the integration of provincial emergency social services into Provincial Operations Centre to streamline communication, coordination, and support to local authorities (pg. 96).

It is acknowledged that *The Review and Analysis of the Government of Alberta’s Response to and Recovery from 2013 Floods* (MNP, 2015) explicitly suggests the Ministry of Human Services is best positioned to lead the ESS framework and program (pg. 84). Part of the justification for this rationale is that “social service expertise” resides in Human Services at the provincial level. However, in

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emergencies, the direct delivery of social services is done by the local authority, supported by non-governmental organizations and provincial ministries, and not the other way around. Likewise, recovery “is a local authority’s responsibility” (*May 2016 Wood Buffalo Wildfire Post-Incident Assessment Report*, KPMG, 2017, pg. 109), where provincial financial and programming support is needed for success, but must be community-led to be most effective. It is essential to prioritize the human impact of disasters and ensure this does not become lost in the overall response, but this issue can be better addressed through more integrated training for local authorities on their responsibilities under the Emergency Management Act, which includes emergency social services. Local authorities would be best served by a well-coordinated, integrated provincial approach to emergency management and emergency social services.

Alberta has seen a number of large-scale disasters in recent years that have highlighted the need for closer integration of emergency social services and emergency management. Where previous approaches to emergency social services may have worked in localized emergencies, it is clear the frequency and impact of large-scale disasters is increasing as a result of climate change. Municipalities in Alberta are working towards closer integration and coordination between emergency social services and emergency management under the authority of the Director of Emergency Management. This progressive approach should be reflected at the provincial level to align training, planning, and responding to emergencies in a clear, unified manner.