

2014

Sudden Labour Displacement For Métis in Alberta

This report documents research findings about the Métis Training to Employment's response to the sudden labour force displacement that occurred as a result of the 2011 Slave Lake fire and the 2013 flood in Southern Alberta. The report includes best practices and recommendations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was undertaken at the request of the Rupertsland Institute, to find out more about the contexts within which sudden labour force displacement – through events like natural disasters and environmental disturbances – impacted their clients’ successful program completion. Such events can potentially impact client success in a number of ways: geographical displacement (being forced to move); employment flux (as employers scramble to rebuild in the wake of such disasters); and focus and priorities may switch to the immediate present.

After the fire in Slave Lake, AB, May 15, 2011, for example, RLI offered a construction skills program to local Métis clients which, given the number of houses destroyed in the forest fire, should have been successful. However, the program received no uptake at all. Given RLI’s past successes, this is an unusual occurrence, and threatens existing client success statistics. By exploring the effect of the Slave Lake fire on Métis and non-Métis residents, this report seeks to offer some likely reasons for why RLI’s construction skills program had no uptake.

In addition, this report provides a set of best practices for dealing with program delivery to clients experiencing natural disaster or environmental crisis. As well, it offers suggestions for the organizational to better approach the changes in essential areas of their business including developing emergency management and risk plans, communication and marketing, and ensuring that front line regional employees (regional managers, assistant managers and employment counselors) are the most suited to the job and well trained.

TOP 4 BEST PRACTICES

1. Require RLI Regional managers to include a risk management component in their regional program planning, including environmental risks and all other potential risks. Imagine and plan for how these different risks would affect organizational mandate and processes. Consider that each region has different potential risks due to different geographies, industries etc.
2. Specifically plan for risks to marketing and communication networks and have back-up plans in place. Know your marketing network clearly; map it out. Understand how disruptions to basic services can affect these networks. Plan to “get the word out” despite these changes. When to shift to word of mouth? The RLI’s RV might be utilized to bring in extra people or to encourage word of mouth.
3. Plan for risks to program delivery strategy, the sudden unavailability of facilities for program delivery (for example what would happen if one of a College rural campuses where a program was going to be offered burned down?)

4. Develop and maintain relationships between local RLI staff and key players in the local and regional Slave Lake economy, community organizations and businesses.

Natural Disaster Case Study 1: Slave Lake Fire, May 2011

A catastrophic fire event took place in the area of Slave Lake, AB, on May 14-15, 2011. The weather was hot and dry, with a strong southeast wind. 100 fires were burning across Alberta at this time, and 23 were out of control. The fires affected an area including the Town of Slave Lake, the Sawridge First Nation, the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124, and the Hamlets of Canyon Creek, Widewater, and Wagner. Of the area's approximately 7400 residents, 90% reside in the Town (Kulig et al. 2012c).

At 1:30 pm on May 14, Fire SWF-056 (the Southshore Fire) was 17 km southwest of Slave Lake. Ultimately this fire didn't threaten the Town of Slave Lake but it burned towards residential areas on the south shore of Lesser Slave Lake west of the Town, including Canyon Creek, Widewater, and Wagner (Ramsey et al. 2012). Slave Lake Regional Fire Chief Jamie Coutts spotted a smoke plume to the southwest as he left the Canadian Tire store, where he was shopping for BBQ parts. He notified the CAO's (Chief Administrative Officers) of the Town of Slave Lake (Brian Vance) and the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124 (Allan Winarski). Both men immediately activated the Emergency Operations Centre for both the Town and the Municipal District. At the Town of Slave Lake, Vance was joined by town councilors, office staff, and Mayor Tyler Warman (Ramsey et al. 2012).

SWF-065 (Fire 65) was detected at 5:50 pm on May 14, burning in mature black spruce stands, 8 km southeast of Slave Lake. The Lesser Slave Lake Regional Fire Service undertook the initial attack. Within one hour, Fire 65 spread to the northwest into the rural sub-division of Poplar Estates (a sub-division in M.D. 124, 3 km east of the Town of Slave Lake). During that night, the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Fire Service was assisted by ground resources fighting the fires (Flat Top Complex Wildfire review Committee 2012). At 10:30 pm May 14, the Town of Slave Lake declared a state of local emergency, which triggered the involvement of Alberta Emergency Management (Ramsey et al. 2012: 26).

The morning of May 15 was bright, clear and calm, with blue skies. People in Slave Lake relaxed, as some citizens had spent the night with the radio on and one ear and eye open. At this time, Fire 56 was more active than Fire 65, continuing to threaten the Southshore communities. Later in the day as wind speed increased significantly, Fire 56 became more active and spread. Evacuation orders for the Southshore communities occurred at 12:36 pm. The fire crossed Highway 2 at 8:23 pm, and entered the communities of Canyon Creek and Widewater (Flat Top Complex Wildfire review Committee 2012).

On the morning of May 15, Poplar Estates had sustained damage from SWF-065. The fire was not spreading, due to overnight fire fighting efforts and improved weather conditions. In the early afternoon, however, the wind increased to extreme speeds (over 100 km/hour) and Fire 65 rapidly developed, moving in the direction of the Town of Slave Lake. Embers flying ahead of

the fire began igniting buildings in town as the fire approached Highway 88. Fire 65 crossed the Highway at 5:25 pm. The town began to burn and people evacuate (Flat Top Complex Wildfire review Committee 2012).

Fire 65, on this day, resulted in the evacuation of the whole of the Town of Slave Lake, the Sawridge First Nation, and a number of residents from the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124. There were no fatalities except for helicopter pilot Jean-Luc Deba of Montreal on May 20, 2011, as he was participating in recovery activities later in the week. In the Municipal District communities, the fire caused destruction or damage to 56 residences and 1 commercial building. One third of the Town of Slave Lake was affected, more than 400 homes were destroyed or damaged, 3 churches, and 19 non-residential buildings including the Government Centre which housed the Municipal Library, the Town administrative offices, and most of the regional provincial offices (Flat Top Complex Wildfire review Committee 2012).

In total, 22,000 hectares were burned, considerable property damage incurred, regional commerce was disrupted, and hundreds of residents were impacted. Personal possessions were lost, and maybe more importantly, the sense of security that the threat of wildfires could be kept outside of communities was lost. Long-term impacts (depth and breadth) won't be fully appreciated until years ahead (Flat Top Complex Wildfire review Committee 2012). As of July 2012, it is estimated that the fire ultimately caused one billion dollars in damage, 45,000 person hours worked on the aftermath of this event by Red Cross volunteers, 2 million man hours needed to rebuild homes, 233 modular units installed for temporary housing, and 289 million dollars committed by the Alberta Government (Rural Wildfire Study Group, July 2012:2).

Effect on Community: Excerpts from The Sky Was on Fire

Over the next year and a half, four community members decided to put together a book of community experiences, photographs, and stories, called *The sky was on Fire: Slave Lake's story of disaster, exodus, and new beginnings* (Ramsey et al. 2012). Many of the quotes below are drawn from this book. One of the goals of this report is to explore the effect of natural disasters on people. An event like this sharply focuses people into the present moment. In order to better understand when people are again ready to focus on the future, and undertake job and skills training programs, and to begin to understand why the construction skills program had no takers, we summarize some of the key experiences revealed by community members in their own words.

First, the fire challenged the deep confidence felt by the townspeople towards town and municipal administration and fire crews to successfully protect them from wildfire threat. This confidence was, in part, based on past experience. 10 years ago Slave Lake was threatened by another wildfire, which destroyed 10 homes in the Hamlet of Chisholm in May of 2001, and came "dangerously close" (within 8 km) to Slave Lake (Ramsey et al. 2012:87; Chisholm Fire Review Committee, 2001). "I wasn't worried...still believing naively that the water bombers could save any structures the same way they had at Wagner three years earlier" (Joe McWilliams, in Ramsey et al. 2012:39). During the advance of the Chisholm fire, the Slave Lake mayor was on the radio every 15 minutes, updating the town on whether they had to evacuate or not, they ultimately did not have to (Joe McWilliams, Personal communication, March 26, 2014).

In this case, with Fire 65, there was little direction from the Town regarding evacuation, “We were still listening to the radio and the constant bulletins advising us to stay put and not to evacuate” (Denoncourt, Ramsey et al, 2011:90). In fact the official call to evacuate did not come until long after people has started moving out of the area. Many citizens, upon calling the Town office, heard repeatedly that there was no official evacuation notice. This lack of information conflicted with what people’s eyes and senses were telling them about the seriousness of the approaching danger.

Armed with misplaced confidence, denial, and dismissal of the facts: five burnt houses, high winds, and extreme dry conditions, we walked back home from Northern Lakes College. However, as soon as we left the NLC, we noticed huge columns of smoke filling the sky, but this time the smoke was coming from the west. We stood there in awe wondering about the frightening and ominous overtones. However, this clear and imminent threat still seemed far removed from our blissful daily activities even when it was palpable to the naked eyes. Like a tourist documenting the spectacle of nature, my husband Frank started taking pictures as we nonchalantly walked home (Aicha Gaboune and husband Frank Fraser in Ramsey et al. 2012:26).

We had one bag packed for the five of us. I packed baby books and several jump drives with some photos. Yet we waited for an evacuation order and nothing came. We didn’t want to over-react and head out of town if it was not necessary. It was such a strange feeling to think we better get out of here right now, yet we did not see anything that we assumed would happen if we were evacuated. I guess we thought people would be knocking on our doors or with megaphones, some type of alarm system. There was nothing (Laurie Garneau in Ramsey et al. 2012:41).

Subsequently, many people waited until the last minute, when the fire was already in town, to pack essential items, collect children and pets, and begin to evacuate. “And then it came down to this: I opened the window and yelled at him, ‘What’s going on? Are we evacuated or what?’ He yelled back, ‘I don’t know; all communication is down. Just go, just go!’” (Corinne Willier in Ramsey et al. 2012:62).

Related to the deep trust in authority to direct and take charge in crisis, was evidence of the need of some people to be directed.

I recall snaking our way through that district yelling at all the people standing on their sidewalks. They were staring in the direction from where we’d just come. We shouted to them that they had to leave now. They all responded immediately, like they’d just been waiting to be told (Corinne Willier in Ramsey et al. 2012:60-61).

Aicha Gaboune’s comment below reveals a deeper balance that we must find, between providing services and a safety net to people in need but developing a citizen’s sense of personal resilience.

I have been living in Canada for over three decades. The one thing that impressed me the most when I first arrived in Canada was and still is, how everything runs so smoothly. Of course, my perspective is formed by my first twenty years in Morocco, a developing

country with many assets but lacking most of the social services...Over the years, living in Canada, I forgot about the sense of being on my own in the face of adversity, and like most Canadians, I became more reliant on our Canadian government to assist us in the face of any disaster. Hence, my comportment during the spring forest fires in Slave Lake in 2011. If I had that sense of doom I had acquired from my upbringing in Morocco and lived with since I was a child, I would have been better prepared to cope with the magnitude and destruction of the fire that was to come (Aicha Gaboune in Ramsey et al. 2012:39).

Stories reveal the movement from understanding the fire as an abstract and potential threat to a real and immediate threat. “On one of the trips out to the holiday trailer the gusty wind was particularly hot and full of ash, and for the first time I thought, ‘This is happening and there is no guarantee that it will be okay’” (Ruth Stephenson in Ramsey et al. 2012:88). Once the threat becomes real, action occurs, where before there was contemplation and hesitation. “That was the moment it became real for me. A kind of sinking feeling, realizing – finally – that this was not like all the other forest fires. At that point, I stopped being a reporter and started worrying about Eric up in the townhouses” (Joe McWilliams in Ramsey et al. 2012:72).

Other stories reveal the general ignorance about forest fires and how they work, their ability to change suddenly, how they are alive and very, very dangerous. There was a general lack of information among residents about whether the town roads were open or closed, how to escape the town once they decided to move, the condition of the fire, the ability to judge the danger level and severity of fire and *whether it could even be fought*. As an example of how serious the fire was, Leonard LeBlanc, fire fighter, says:

We were about 200 yards away and the heat was unbelievable. Water bombers would fly over and drop their load, and the water would evaporate before it hit the fire. Unless they had chemicals, they couldn’t do anything. We had all our manpower out there and we couldn’t fight that fire (LeBlanc in Ramsey et al. 2012: 22).

As the fire moved it seeded ahead of itself with a rain of burning twigs and cinders flying on winds over 100 km an hour. Many valiant, but ultimately doomed, attempts were made by residents to soak roofs of houses and put out starter fires with the garden hose.

The density of embers flying from the bog of burning black spruce near town onto roofs, fences, gutters, wood piles and sheds was greater than anything else recorded in the history of fires in Canada. ASRD estimates that 900,000 embers per hectare or 90 embers per square metre (or 10 per square foot) fell on the areas ahead of the fire that day...Once the wind switched direction, the houses in direct line of the fire were soon covered with burning twigs, pine cones, and pine needles. In other words, they didn’t stand a chance of escaping destruction any more than the firefighters stood a chance of preventing the devastation (Ramsey et al. 2012:52).

Stories reveal that many, if not most, of the townspeople had not done any basic emergency planning or thinking ahead as to what items they would need or want to take with them. There was also little thought about what would or wouldn’t be available in a crisis, such as electricity. “Like many of her neighbors, Laura [Lokken] had been caught off guard by the sudden advance

of the fire and, without electricity, had been unable to get her car out of the garage” (Ramsey et al. 2012:84). It occurred to some people to take emergency measures the night before (May 14) but for various reasons they did not follow through with them. “I thought of fuelling our vehicles, but I didn’t. My husband thought of putting water in the holiday trailer and hooking it up, but he didn’t” (Ruth Stephanson in Ramsey et al. 2012:27).

The sudden unavailability or restrictions to the use of communication technology presented a challenge for some. The power went out and so did the radio, cell phone towers were overloaded and people had trouble getting through to others on the phone and there were delays in texting. “I tried to text the friend’s mom a few times, but the but the cell towers were so busy there was no getting through” (Ruth Stephanson in Ramsey et al. 2012:89). Traffic lights stopped working and so caused some difficulty for cars trying to leave town. Police and in some cases citizens did some traffic directing. See the YouTube video “Shocking footage of RCMP Constable Sherrie Choo evacuating Slave Lake during fire” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cocyyBlx-JY>) for a sense of the barely-controlled panic in Constables Choo’s voice, but also the orderly movement of the vehicles evacuating the town. In fact many were heartened by the assistance and concern that many townspeople showed for others, making sure neighbours were out of their homes, giving stranded people rides out of the fire zone, and the massive charitable response from other Albertans and organizations to Slave Lake in the days and weeks after the fire. This was a bright spot in an otherwise horrible situation, that in the midst of the worst fire since the early 1900’s, people looked out for and helped each other.

Social media sites such a Facebook were heavily used as a method to communicate the progress of the fire and communicate with others.

After a few more water bombers flew over, I decided to run in and check Facebook. To my surprise, there were already pictures posted; a fire [56] was burning in the hills southwest of town...Each time Al gave us an update, I would post it to my Facebook status. I knew that my friends would be concerned about the smoke coming into town and two fires burning now; it was the least I could do to ease their uncertainty (Kelly Adelman in Ramsey et al. 2012:20, 25).

And of course, the opening up of possibilities that is the disguised gift of events like this. “It feels like anything could happen. We could even die” (Sandy Gaskell in Ramsey et al. 2012: 83). In the case of Slave Lake, the activities of the “Regional Tri-Council” could fall under this category. In response to the large amount of funding for community rebuilding received from the Alberta and Federal governments, The Town of Slave Lake, the Sawridge First Nation, and the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124 have begun working closely together to decide how to spend the funds and rebuild the communities. The three groups have been meeting as often as once per month, and a new respect and trust for each other has grown (Interviewee 1, April 10, 2014).

Natural Disaster Case Study 2: Calgary Flood, June 2013

Dozens of southern Alberta communities experienced major floods in the spring of 2013, triggering an evacuation of 100,000 Albertans from their homes and killing four people. As the Bow and Elbow rivers encircled Calgary's downtown and twined through the heart of the city, they flooded many areas in central Calgary. 4000 businesses were impacted and 3000 buildings were flooded (Environment Canada 2014). Costs of the flooding are notoriously difficult to estimate, Alberta Finance Minister Doug Horner pegged it at around 6 billion dollars in September of last year, 3 months after the floods (Calgary Herald, September 24, 2013). Costs include applications for disaster relief (for uninsured losses) reconstruction, and mitigation projects.

The floods were attributed to a unique hydrometeorological situation. Snowfall the previous winter (2012-2013) was particularly heavy, resulting in an abnormally large mountain snowpack (25% higher than normal) (Environment Canada 2014). A wet spring, with already saturated ground and bloated streams and rivers, lots of rain and a brief warm up started the snowpack melting. Flooding was caused by a combination of the quick melting of the heavy snow pack, ground saturation and heavier than usual rainfall over an extended number of days. Satellite imagery showed the basin groundwater to be higher than average leaving the land with little capacity to absorb rain and snowmelt (Environment Canada 2014).

Calgary is close to the Rocky Mountains, and river conditions can change very quickly. Early Thursday morning (June 20, 2013), rapidly rising river levels and increased flow rates attracted the attention of the Calgary Emergency Management Agency (CEMA). The "rain-on-snow" combined with the steep terrain of the watersheds feeding the Bow and Elbow (a tributary to the Bow) Rivers resulted in a large amount of water entering the river systems in a very short period of time (City of Calgary 2014).

Calgary's mayor, Naheed Nenshi, comments as he addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos in January earlier this year: "I think it's important for us to remember that natural disaster is not just cataclysmic things that face the developing world and humanitarian crisis," Nenshi said. "Natural disaster can face all of us ... certainly we aren't immune, but we were ready in our response" (CBC, January 25, 2014). A program manager for a Calgary skills training organization said about the flood:

Then the manholes were pouring over as it was said that there wasn't enough drainage in Calgary to hold all that water and that's why it all started coming back out. Even when they sump pumped out our parkade in my condo building in the basement, they would take out so much water that it would all go back down in and then it would just push all back up again... It was [scary] and we walked right down to you can see where the pictures were taken. We walked right down there and it was so surreal. It's like things you only see like in movies. And it was like chaos for a few days. People were just like running down here just to look at the lake, you know what I mean, like that's Memorial Drive as well. So yes, it was quite the experience. So don't take things for granted that's for sure (Interviewee 2, April 16, 2014).

Mayor Nenshi went on to say that his focus is on rebuilding the City of Calgary *in the right way*, incorporating the lessons learned about where the weak points in the systems lie, and building better to eradicate those weak points and strengthen those areas. He did point out however, that getting people to spend the money and to put in the time required to rebuild to the highest standard is easier right now, when the flood and devastation is fresh in people's minds. As events like these generally happen rarely, and as we move in time away from the experience of the flood, he anticipates people will be less willing to spend money and time on resilience planning and rebuilding. Referring to a proposed diversion tunnel under the city and several other flood mitigation measures currently under evaluation, "I have a \$23 billion infrastructure deficit on things that will be needed every day and yet I have to go to citizens and say, 'I have to spend your money, this money, on something that might never, ever be used'" (CBC, January 25, 2014).

This report recommends prioritizing resilience planning, and risk and emergency management planning. We suggest that it is a valuable exercise even though disasters of large magnitude like the Calgary flood and the Slave Lake fire rarely happen. One significant reason resilience planning is valuable is the communication component to the planning process. Having a strong and flexible communication network and plan that is constantly scrutinized and updated, aids RLI's everyday business practice of providing Métis Training to Employment services, as well as helping to deal with any future crisis that may occur.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wildfires have affected 250 communities and 700,000 people in Canada between 1995 and 2005 (Rural Wildfire Study Group website). There is increased concern by Canadian and provincial governments and agencies about the level of preparedness of rural communities and individuals to disasters, which they define as the “impact from natural hazards, technological hazards or conflict (not including war)” (Rural Wildfire Study Group (2012)). More information is needed about how rural communities experience, respond and cope with natural disasters, as well as how to meet the complex and long-term needs of disaster survivors (Bell et al. 2010). This is a relatively new and growing research area. Natural disasters cause a sudden and immediate change to the service delivery environment where “clients, community needs, funding, staff availability, organizational linkages, and basic infrastructure for such a large geographic area changed, literally, overnight” (Smith 2012:381). There is little or no long-term tracking of ongoing needs of survivors nor developing problem solving strategies and approaches following a disaster of this magnitude (Smith 2012).

Until recently, disaster recovery services were provided by voluntary agencies such as church groups, local organizations, non-profit organizations and volunteers partnering with survivors (Smith 2012:361). These processes are increasingly being standardized as large-scale disasters continue to occur, funding becomes increasingly available and organizations emerge dedicated to providing long-term recovery services (NVOAD 2011:2). The Disaster Recovery Process is a “set of loosely related activities that occur, during and after a disastrous event” (University of Colorado Natural Hazards Centre, no date). The Disaster Recovery Process can include: warning and ongoing public information, evacuation and sheltering, search and rescue, damage assessments, debris clearance, removal and disposal, utilities and communications restoration re-establishment of major transportation linkages, temporary housing, financial management, economic impact analyses, detailed building inspections, redevelopment planning, environmental assessments, demolition, reconstruction, hazard mitigation and preparation for the next disaster (University of Colorado Natural Hazards Centre, no date).

Large-scale natural disasters can have long-lasting effects on labour markets in the affected area (Venn 2012). Venn presents three key factors affecting the labour market impact of disasters: barriers to labour supply, a skills mismatch due to structural change, and disruption to businesses (Venn 2012). Barriers to labour supply are caused mainly by the abrupt population change that occurs with evacuation. Large numbers of people leave the disaster area for unknown periods of time. Sometimes people do not move back to the affected area and the evacuation becomes permanent. If people do return to the area, pre-disaster jobs are unlikely to exist. Second, people lose access to stable housing, transport networks, and social infrastructure. Losing an established range of social services can make family and health (physical, mental and emotional) issues that arise as a result of the disaster very difficult to deal with and thus can have a notable effect on labour force participation.

Second, a mismatch often occurs between the pool of available jobs and the skillsets of people now residing in that place (Venn 2012, Bell et al. 2010). People and places grow together. People move to places because of the work available there, people get training to take advantage of employment opportunities in their area. As disasters shake everything up, business and workers are uprooted suddenly, with little control over where they land, and this match between skillsets and businesses in an area is disrupted.

Finally, disasters cause havoc for business and employment. Troubles that can occur whether people are evacuated or not include damage to physical infrastructure including roads and transportation systems, water supply and sewer systems, all of which may require rebuilding, electricity systems turned off for various periods of time, and communication systems that are suddenly unreliable. Businesses close or are forced to operate in different, non-ideal locations. Businesses are damaged physically and they lose customers in the evacuation. Employees are laid off or let go, and so businesses may have to stop working for a period (Venn 2012).

Of all of the barriers, the importance of stable housing to evacuees finding new or continuing employment cannot be underestimated. Finding housing takes a backseat to finding a job (Bell et al. 2010). Who has the best chance of finding work after a disaster? Vigdor (2007) explained that “there is essentially no impact on employment (relative to their pre-disaster situation) for evacuees who return home, but evacuees who remain away from home suffer from substantial reductions in employment, although this impact falls over time”. Groen and Polivka (2008) found that evacuees who did not ever return tended to be from areas where destruction was the greatest. Overall, housing, employment, transportation have been identified as survivor’s greatest needs (Bell et al. 2010).

Multiple people mentioned Abraham H. Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” when discussing the natural disasters in Slave Lake and Calgary and how they may have affected people. They are referring to the theory Maslow developed in his paper “*A Theory of Human Motivation*” (Maslow, 1943). The hierarchy provides a useful framework for understanding what’s happening for people during sudden crisis events. Maslow saw human needs as “arrang[ing] themselves in hierarchies of prepotency...the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need” (1943:370). In other words, once certain, more basic needs are met, other higher needs are focused on, or come to dominate the organism. “No need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives” (370). Physiological or basic needs come first (breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, and excretion), then the ‘higher’ physiological safety needs: (security of body, employment, resources, morality, the family, health, property) (Wikipedia March 26, 2014), and after these, needs for love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

William Freudenburg et al. (2009), in their book on Hurricane Katrina, entitled *Catastrophe in the Making: The Engineering of Katrina and the Disasters of Tomorrow*, re-define how we think about the nature of a *natural disaster*, suggesting that the natural disaster is not so scary to us because of the size of the flames or the waves, but because of the catastrophic effect it has on our human systems.

It is important to understand that what we so casually describe as a ‘natural’ disaster is really a collision between some cataclysmic force of nature – a wind, a tide, a quake, a conflagration – and a human habitat located in harm’s way. It is the character of the habitat being struck rather than the character of the force doing the striking that we study to get the true measure of the disaster. In the case of Katrina, the storm sliced into a complex human landscape, and the calamity that followed will be remembered not for the velocity of its winds or the size of its storm surges, but for the amount of damage it did to the landscape and to the humans who inhabited it (Freudenberg et al. 2009: 6).

The key to understanding the stress of people undergoing natural disasters, and disaster recovery, lies in part, in this observation. The loss or destruction of our human systems, which easily become invisible, established, and routine, is shocking. The Rural Wildfire Study Group is a research group based out of the University of Lethbridge, who study the human and social dimensions of the impacts of wildfires on families and children in rural communities (Rural Wildfire Study Group, no date). Their latest study focused on the Slave Lake fire.

The Study Group looks at “what local social and institutional dynamics and structures contribute to the resiliency of communities”. Resiliency is defined as “the ability of a community to deal with adversity and develop a higher level of functioning as a result. It is a process that all communities experience as they interact with their environment, particularly after events such as natural disasters” (Kulig et al July 2012a: 7).

Their study in Slave Lake was based around a household survey and in-depth interviews with families and children and a school-based survey with children. They found that the disaster was “totally unexpected” and “most residents were not prepared for the disaster and felt overwhelmed by the suddenness and severity of the fires” (Kulig et al 2012b:1). Many families experienced six main changes after, and as a result of, the fire. These are ‘re-evaluation of life goals and priorities, new routines, changes in attitudes, changes in interactions within family units, changes in interactions with the community, and reconsideration of values and perceptions (Kulig et al. 2012b:1). They also found that after the fire, changes in living arrangements, financial assets and family relationships had the biggest impact on families.

As a part of the household survey (550 respondents), Kulig et al. asked about the effects of the fire on employment and work patterns (Kulig et al 2012c: 3). 136 people (25%) said that they had lost the ability to work after the fire. Of this group, 22 people (18%) had their workplace destroyed by fire, for 18 people (15%), their work was not needed, and 31 people (25%) lost a personal capacity to work. 78 respondents had other reasons directly related to the fire such as lost time due to evacuation and damage to the workplace or work items, loss of clientele due to relocation or inability to secure business after the fire (Kulig et al. 2012 c: 3). People also are dealing with high stress, emotional turmoil and depression. They have continuing financial problems because they didn’t have home insurance and/or lost their home, people lost jobs or had to move away or subsist on limited incomes (Kulig et al. 2012c: 3).

The impacts of natural disasters can change the community as a collective whole, and understanding these changes can help in both disaster preparation and mitigation, as well as

designing and putting into place post-disaster recovery programs and policies for the affected community (Kulig et al, 2012c:7).

RESULTS

Background and Context

This section builds on the case studies at the beginning that describes the fire and people's main reactions, and is mainly drawn from the community book and public documents. This section does similar, but draws on interviews and describes experiences that are more specifically related to the experiences of Aboriginal/Métis people and to our study topic.

Slave Lake Fire

One interviewee who had volunteered with the Red Cross after the fire describes how the destruction touched everyone in the town, even those who had not lost anything. "Even though 2/3 of the town was left unburnt, everyone, including those with no fire damage to their property, were set back by the events and by the losses to businesses, infrastructure, and the loss of people's homes" (Interviewee 3, April 25, 2014). She points out that an event of this magnitude 'holds up' resources. Many businesses shut down, permanently or temporarily. This, in turn, affects business owners, employees, and clients. The fire brought some major changes to the economy, including the influx of many new restoration and rebuilding companies. One interviewee commented that the new companies were "...all construction companies. People coming in to build businesses and homes, and probably doing a lot of the clean up as well" (Interviewee 4, April 14, 2014). Interviewee 3 comments that people were "feeling displaced – some have lost their job, and they may have put 10 years into that job, and that facility is now gone, so there is no job, and they have to start from scratch again" (Interviewee 3, April 25, 2014).

It is unclear how many of RLI's client base in Slave Lake relocated, temporarily or permanently. "The fires wiped out lot of homes and lot of people...maybe they just moved on... [and] they didn't come back there for quite some time" (Interviewee 5, April 17, 2014). RLI's client base were more likely to not have insurance to cover rebuilding costs. Some went to Edmonton, and of those that stayed, entire families are still living in hotels or with other families (Interviewee 3, April 25, 2014).

As the Slave Lake office was closed after the fire, RLI reached clients through the RV, driven by Wayne Morin. "RLI sent Wayne...to wherever they were – they had a gathering place for people who are displaced, so he took the RV and parked there. And anybody who wanted or needed to use the computer or internet could access that. That's really all we could provide at the time with the resources we had" (Interviewee 4, April 14, 2014). "When the fire happened we...went there within a day or two, we went to Athabasca to the community hall arena...And the ladies from our Bonnyville office were there [and they] sat with me for...that week that we were there. Just making our presence [known]" (W. Morin). Morin reports that multiple evacuees he spoke in

Athabasca with asked him if the Métis Nation of Alberta were going to come and help them. Morin agreed that people associate RLI with the Métis Nation of Alberta. “Yes. They always do. And they still do” (W. Morin). He also said that people who did *not* know about RLI or their services learned about them in the week they were parked in Athabasca. “We had...lots of people coming here. And they don’t know what we are. And some of them don’t even associate with the Métis Nation, but you know they are quite surprised...with the things we have to offer” (Morin). Morin describes the mindsets and attitudes of the people he spoke with during that week, he said that many of them had no information about the state of their homes or what was happening, but that they were “just happy – they were happy they got out alive, that’s all” (Morin).

An employee of the Slave Lake Friendship Centre told us about a Métis friend who was experiencing so much stress (though she had not lost her house) that her doctor advised her to leave town to relieve it. This was considered by both women to be an unacceptable option, given the high level of attachment to family and place: “this is her home”. The Friendship Centre employee further thought that it was inappropriate advice to give an aboriginal person, as the family connections and connection to place are so strong. Do aboriginal people face disasters differently than non-aboriginal people? Another person from the Friendship Centre suggested that experiencing the fire and evacuation, and recovering from those events, may be more stressful for non-aboriginal people. He suggested that aboriginal people are more used to hardship, and more experienced with living through hardship. Aboriginal people, because of this, may respond more easily to sudden serious situations (Interviewee 7, April 11, 2014). Though this does not mean that disasters like the fire are ‘easier’ for aboriginal people. A similar comment was made by a program manager for a Calgary skills training organization in response to a question about whether she thought her group’s aboriginal clients were more or less vulnerable to the Calgary flood than a Calgarian not experiencing threat to employment, said that though she thinks “everybody was affected, no prejudice to lifestyle, rich or poor, gender or race, or whatever the culture”, she goes on to say that “people who live in survival mode every day, they are used to chaos and trauma and all those things, so this may have been just another day to them. Where as to the average person who does not live like that, this could have affected them more emotionally or mentally than one might expect...” (Interviewee 2, April 16, 2014). Usually the everyday adversity faced by aboriginal people in Canada is considered a negative thing, but in this fire situation several of our interviewees seemed to think that it provided them with a store of resiliency to face adverse situations.

The Friendship Centre employee told me that as part of the community rebuilding and healing efforts, the *Building a Resilient Community Wellness Conference* was organized one year after the fire (May 10-12, 2012). It very successful and well attended by 1300 people (Regional Tri-Council, August 29, 2012). An expert presenting at the conference said that research showed that the third year after the event there is another spike or bump in symptoms in stress for those who have not completely dealt with the event. It is now the third year. Friendship Centre employees, in describing the reactions of the community, said people in general, did not want to talk about what happened. This unwillingness to talk about the fire and the events after continues today, almost three years later. A Métis woman (Interviewee 8) working at the Friendship Centre, shared her story with us.

Interviewee 8 is currently in interim housing. Her house was burned, and her property is not cleaned up yet. Her property is in a rural area, and she was “the fifth house to be burned”, on Saturday, May 14, 2011. She owns this property with her family members. She is very sad to have lost things that belonged to her grandparents. Then their property flooded some weeks after the fire. She lived in a hotel room for while after. The fire and loss of their house lead to alcoholism for her two family members. It almost got her, but she successfully avoided/resisted this. She moved to Slave Lake, where the rents are generally higher, compared to the more rural communities. She is angry. Others have gotten help and have moved forward but she has not got the help she needs to move forward. She doesn’t want to think about it. She contacted the Red Cross: they said they gave her help already (the Red Cross had given her some food and clothes soon after the fire.) Later that year, in the fall, they had agreed to send a garbage bin to her property, but the volunteers that were supposed to come with it and help clean up her property, did not come. The bin sat there all winter, and the Red Cross helped with the payment of the bin bill, but did not want to help after that. She also contacted Samaritan Purse, but nothing happened. They promised a truck of furniture, but it never showed up. She had filled out the forms for Alberta Government Disaster Recovery programs and gave them to her family member, but he was drunk and didn’t take them in. She lost two family members soon after the fire. She lives now in a government-provided trailer and the rent is \$1200.00 per month. She heard recently that Habitat for Humanity is building ten houses for people in Slave Lake. She hadn’t heard about it in time to sign up for one though. Her’s dogs ran away during the fire, but later they were returned to her, with minor burns. This made her happy. She and her boyfriend have been doing some cleaning up on the property, he has a power saw, so that helps. The cleanup is going slow. She doesn’t want to think about it. She is grateful she has her dogs, her family, and her boyfriend. She experienced depression, and took some mental health help, counseling. “A few sessions and weight lifted right off me” [she makes lifting, swooping motions with her arms as if lifting and sweeping away the depression, up and off]. This is the third year that her property remains unresolved, she says this summer, we need to finish that. But she doesn’t even want to think about it. She said that she has not told anyone her story before, this is the first time (Interviewee 8, April 15, 2014).

People experienced various levels of hardship, and the hardship takes different forms. A community of people who collectively experience a natural disaster have variances in how each one is affected. Interviewee 2, Calgary program manager, describes her experience of threat to property by the Calgary flood.

Yes, I was definitely affected...the waters came right up to my building. I was evacuated for 10 days...it wrecked our underground parking and our electrical room was affected. So the waters came up about a foot in the parkade, where my car usually is parked. The water did come up to my car but I wasn’t parked in the parkade that night...Friday morning, I walked out on my balcony and the water was rising up on Memorial Drive. Memorial is right off my property, and this is when I realize how serious everyone was up to this point and I started running around,

packing my bags because I figure the worst and think the water is going to trap me inside my place and I might drown, hahaha, wasn't too funny at the time!... So I got out of there, went to a friend's place... for ten days... I was kind of traumatized, now thinking about it... And it is a brand new building. I just bought my condo suite last year, so it's all brand new, and now what happened; hope it doesn't affect the value of the building (Interviewee 2, April 16, 2014).

DISCUSSION

NW Carpenter 2012: No Slave Lake Recruits - Why?

Slave Lake Office History

At one time the Slave Lake RLI office was quite busy, with three employees and a Regional Manager. Following the amalgamation of Regions 5 and 6, however, the NW Manager position was moved to the Peace River office (Janet Gardner) and Slave Lake (Region 5 NW) became an itinerant services office with a single Employment Counselor. This was the case at the time of the fire, May 2011. At this time only one client enrolled in a program at Northern Lakes College. An RLI employee suggests that a more 'normal' number of clients would be about 30 clients in training at one time, just for one employment counselor (Interviewee 4, April 14, 2014).

Various interviewees offered their thoughts on the Slave Lake office before and after the office. One, who had worked there prior to the fire, suggested that it had slowed a lot down like when she worked out of the office: "it wasn't crazy busy but it was steady" (Interviewee 9, April 11, 2014). Following the necessary closure of the Slave Lake RLI office for a short period of time following the fire, the employee staffed the office on selected days but the office was closed a lot. "I would still continue to go in every Friday but our office was closed back and forth a lot. People got so used to it being closed so even though we tried reopening it not long ago with somebody there, it needed more time for people to realize we were actually open, not always closed. I think that has a lot to do with the impact, at least I'm pretty sure that's what it was because I had people. Like when I was there all the time I had a lot of people coming in upset. They needed the stability and when they walk down there know it's not going to be closed" (Interviewee 9, April 11, 2014).¹

The Slave Lake RLI branch office is currently closed due to water damage and a potential mold issue, and no one in Slave Lake is employed there. The office is currently under the supervision of the Manager MTE Services Region NW Michelle McCullough, based out of the Grande Prairie office. Wayne Morin, driver of the mobile RV unit, visits Slave Lake every few weeks and he acts as a contact person and links potential clients with Nancy Sloat, Employment Counsellor from the High Prairie office, who does itinerant services for the Slave lake office. Wayne stops there and makes initial contact and passes those clients on to Nancy at High Prairie, or Nancy goes with Wayne periodically. There is not a lot of traffic at the office right now, though RLI currently has 4 clients from the Slave Lake community.

¹ An employee hired on a temporary six-month contract to focus on marketing and to make initial contact with clients might have been helpful in speaking to this issue; however, his contract had ended prior to our research visit there, and so he was unavailable for comment.

Pre/Post Fire Programs: NW Carpenter 2012 and Hospitality Management

A Hospitality Management program was in the planning stages and was advertised in the Slave Lake just prior to the fire, but cancelled as soon as the fire occurred. No contract was in place and no dates for the program had yet been set. After the fire, given the drastic changes to the local economy, RLI Slave Lake staff decided to switch the focus from Hospitality Management to a Carpentry program (eventually dubbed NW Carpenter 2012). Any details relating to the process of deciding that this was a better option than the planned Hospitality Management program are unavailable to this report. The Manager at the time (Janet Gardner, Peace River office) and Employment Counsellor (Margaret Thunder, Slave Lake) no longer work for RLI, nor were we able to access any paperwork or emails around this programming change decision.

However, we do know from talking with interviewees that the thought process around this change in program focus generally followed the lines of “a third of the town has burned down. There will be rebuilding and skilled construction labour will be needed.” It was also assumed that local labour would be hired. Thus, RLI decided that a Carpentry program would be the most appropriate offering to the Métis clientele in Slave Lake. The program was advertised in Slave Lake but recruiting was unsuccessful and no applicants from Slave Lake applied to this program. The project was then moved to Grouard, the advantages being they could recruit for both Region 5 and 6, and clients had accommodations in Grouard at the Northern Lakes College. Grouard campus. The project started in January 2012 with 10 clients, and the majority (80%) completed the program but “they did not move into apprenticeship...positions; but back in regular labour or lower paying positions” (Interviewee 4, April 14, 2014). As success for RLI is in part defined by the number of people going to higher education or working, or moving into apprenticeships, this program was ultimately not as successful as it could have been.

To determine why this program had no takers to the NW Carpenter program when offered in Slave Lake despite active recruitment, and further because there was no one coming into the office at all (Interviewee 10, Personal communication February 2014) we will address 3 questions: Was the focus of the program wrong?; was the program marketed badly?; and were prospective clients ready?.

Program Focus

Each region designs their own programs, because the economy in each region is different from each other. The manager and the assistant managers look for two things with respect to the labor and job market: what skills are in demand, and are people with these skills being hired into positions? Managers then tailor their programs to local market developments. The managers and their teams also work together on networking, and developing relationships and programs with local companies and potential employers. “Managers have discretion to decide what projects they are thinking of running and then they have to back it up by doing some research, labor market information, what’s going on in the community. Is there a valid need for that training? And at the time...we thought that [there] was” (Interviewee 4, Feb 27, 2014). One interviewee’s impression of the demand for construction labour in Slave Lake is that people are slowly going back to Slave Lake, and there is a construction labour shortage (Interviewee 3, April 25, 2014).

After the Katrina Hurricane in New Orleans as well as 5 other major disasters worldwide, researchers found that in the short-term most of the increase in demand was for construction workers to rebuild damaged infrastructure (Venn 2012: 15). Hospitality and service sectors experienced some growth due to the influx of people in the area doing clean-up, NGO's offering services, government officials, and because of the diminishment in existing viable housing for these people (Venn 2012). Longer-term trends in New Orleans, however, showed reductions in job opportunities in the hospitality and service industries, due to reduced tourism and a smaller overall population (Venn 2012). In addition, women were hit particularly hard by job losses, as they are prevalent in service and hospitality industries and also "less likely to take part in construction opportunities during the rebuilding phase" (Venn 2012:14).

A senior municipal official said that after the fire, there was a demand for local labour in the construction trades: in fact construction companies were desperate for it. We did not speak to construction companies active in the Slave Lake region after the fire.

There was a suggestion that the companies may have brought in foreign workers or their own workers from other places, and that the assumption made by RLI Slave Lake program planners that local labour would be hired was erroneous. Comments made by the senior official suggest that foreign workers were not in competition to the local labour market (Interviewee 1, April 10, 2014). These workers, though increasing in Slave Lake, are generally not considered the first option for hiring, so they would not have been given priority over local workers, and Métis workers. However, many foreign workers staff local factory? outlets. The official explained that foreign workers can be an option for employers that provide stability and dependability within the organization that [employers] haven't seen in traditional hiring practices. A major advantage is that when there are problems in a workplace, foreign workers do not "job skip". Local labour has a tendency to go on to the next job rather than trying to fix the issue within their current job. This happens when there a lot of options for lower skilled workers. Job skippers can be very disruptive for businesses and can affect the security of other employees. Also, in response to the question of why Canadians from other provinces are not being hired for these jobs, the interviewee explained that people don't move from Ontario to Alberta to work at Tim Hortons. High demand by industrial workers and residents in northern Alberta for Tim Hortons and other similar service providers make foreign workers a viable option (Interviewee 1, April 10, 2014).

Drawing on the two criteria that RLI Regional Managers follow when deciding on the focus of training programs (an objective need and employer uptake), we may conclude that a construction/carpentry program was a good choice and the labour market needed skills were adequately judged by RLI employees. Despite this, the program still didn't get any takers and there was no one coming into the office at all. Why not?

Upon hearing about RLI's experience offering a Carpentry skills program instead of the pre-fire planned Hospitality Management program, one interviewee suggested that people who are interested in a services and hospitality program are unlikely to be equally interested in or suited to a construction skills program. Further, hospitality management is customer-service oriented and tends to be female-dominated, while construction is male dominated industry. As such, the interviewee speculated that perhaps RLI's program switch did not consider that the individuality

of the Métis client labour pool in Slave Lake as many women who might be interested in service work may not be interested in working construction. This observation is supported by the literature described above, where women suffered a decrease in the range of available post-disaster jobs due to long-standing gender patterns in the labour market (Venn 2012). In summary, the interviewee suggested that this approach did not take into consideration *the client as an individual* with preferences that would not necessarily change because of the fire-related changes to the available job pool. Nor did it consider that the needs and preferences of female and male clients may differ according to gender.

This program switch may reflect that RLI employees successfully considered the needs of the labour market but this was not balanced out by considerations of the needs and interests of the clients as individuals or the importance of client gender and the ways in which gender affects the distribution of people in the labour market. It might also reflect the fact that the funding siloes within which RLI operates do not sufficiently distinguish between the distinctiveness of gender-specific needs.

Program Timing

In this section we deal with timing of the program: was it wrong? To answer this question we consider first, where people's focus is in the time after the disaster, with a special focus on the need to re-establishing housing. Second we consider post-traumatic stress and how that condition affects a person's ability for undergoing training programs, or 'future thinking' in general.

For people in a crisis such as fire or flood, short-term immediate needs become priority. A natural disaster puts people squarely in the present, as they deal with the rupture of their established physical, social, and economic systems. Key problems after a disaster are dealing with human needs, while future things such as training and skills development, a secondary concern (Bell et al. 2010: 217, Maslow 1943). As described by Maslow (1943), focus on the 'higher' physiological safety needs: (security of body, employment, resources, morality, the family, health, property) come into play during and after a disaster. The key point that Maslow makes is that these needs are focused on *to the exclusion of everything else*. Other needs, such as improving one's skills for increased success in the labour market, are put on hold, or cease to exist for that person. Only when these needs are satisfied, will people release their "survival tunnel vision" to focus on the future and training programs.

A program manager for an Edmonton skills training organization said that crises like the Slave Lake fire "eradicates future thinking", as people prioritize immediate short-term needs like securing housing (Interviewee 11, April 17, 2014). Taking a skills program is for people who are able to think longer-term in part because they have a stable place to sleep. The importance of stable and adequate housing is essential for success in skills training programs, and for general physical and psychological wellbeing more generally. The importance of housing to client program success was a key lesson learned by a Calgary skills training organization. "There was a lot of that [people didn't have home insurance] plus a lot of people - it took a good year to rebuild so they're staying in tents and campers and at friend's places and out of town. It was just not a good time for any kind of any project" (Interviewee 9, April 11, 2014). A study on

Hurricane Katrina survivors showed increased rates of substance abuse, depression, anxiety disorders, and other psychiatric disorders among survivors, including those displaced for more than 2 weeks (Bell et al. 2010: 217). Loss of housing has such a significant effect on well-being, that even a relatively short time being homeless can cause significant stress. Interviewee 8's story told above, demonstrates this. She and her family members have been in interim housing for three years and they have been plagued by alcoholism and depression, as well as difficulty facing the clean-up and rebuild necessary on their property. Interestingly, we know that people who lost homes or had disruptions to their housing situation experienced significant stress but it appears that stress was significant even for people whose houses were not touched due to something referred to as 'survivor guilt', which can be a factor in overall community wellbeing as well (Rural Wildfire Study Group, July 2012).

In addition to an immediate focus on basic safety issues and housing needs to the exclusion of any consideration of the future, people are often not in the right frame of mind to take a course. "People forced to stand in line for water and ice, insurance appointments, and disaster assistance find it difficult to return to work" (University of Colorado, no date: 2-5), or in this case, consider taking a training program. Research shows that the effect of Post Traumatic Stress can be much longer than anticipated. The Rural Wildfire group recommends mental health and psychological support services to be made available for community members for a minimum of two years after the event (Kulig et al. 2012b:2). The Red Cross expects to keep its Slave Lake office open with one full-time employee for at least another two years from the time of this report, making the duration of its continuing service there five years in total (Interviewee 3, April 25, 2014).

The Calgary skills training organization had one client who was made homeless by the flood and subsequently this client stopped attending the program. The organization is not exactly sure how this came to be, but they think that

Perhaps her every day stresses could have affected her attendance, which we do only know what she tells us, but it could have been a combination of reasons, the flood, her living conditions and her personal life...Perhaps it disrupted her train of thought too, her focus may have been now she had to find a place to live...wherever she was staying she wasn't able to focus on her studies. I believe she was trying to better her life and she was until perhaps the flood threw her off focus and may caused some traumatic fears or uncertainties, needless to say, hopefully she got the help she required, both physically, mentally and emotionally (Interviewee 2, April 16, 2014).

Some other longer-term evidence of PST, one interviewee explained that a Slave Lake friend, even though she did not lose her house, is to this day made nervous and scared by the presence of red sky (Interviewee 9, April 11, 2104). Friendship Centre employees said that even three years later, people remain unwilling to talk about the fire and associated events (Interviewee 6, April 15, 2014). The literature suggests that individual recovery is slower than that of the community, which responds quickly to re-establish physical infrastructure, utilities and access (University of Colorado, no date: 2-4). "Individuals experience a short period of cohesion during which people come together to help and comfort each other, followed by a longer period of disillusionment as

personal, family, job, insurance and disaster assistance issues begin to take their toll” (University of Colorado, no date: 2-4).

In conclusion, NW Carpentry 2012 had no uptake in Slave Lake most likely because people were not ready. They were focusing on present needs such as rebuilding or re-accessing stable housing, and dealing with the emotional and psychological effects of the fire including post-traumatic stress.

Program Marketing

Communication and marketing was emphasized in multiple ways throughout this research project. These aspects were: communication as essential in an RLI day to day business of MTE program creation and delivery; communication in an emergency management context; and communication in a trying to get an office up and running after a fire context. Good communication and marketing is clearly key RLI’s business success and in filling their mandate.

We do not have any details on the marketing strategy or plan for NW Carpenter 2012 in Slave Lake or Grouard. We know that the marketing plan used in Slave Lake was ultimately unsuccessful in locating interested clients, as uptake was zero. In Grouard, however, when the program was eventually offered in January 2012, 10 attendees began the program. If we assume that the marketing plan for the Grouard client base followed similar lines as the Slave Lake plan, and was successful, then the quality of the marketing plan itself in Slave Lake may not have been the direct cause of zero uptake. We do not know when or the extent to which the program was marketed in Slave Lake, only that it was between one to six months after the fire. As the section above suggests, during this time people were focused on re-establishing housing and other basic needs, and it would take time for people shift from the present focus back to considering the future.

In place of evaluating the media and marketing plan, we speculate that the following elements affected community awareness of the program: in general, community members we interviewed were unaware of the Carpenter program and RLI as an organization; staffing changes in the Slave Lake office over the previous 5 years decreasing community contact; and the Slave Lake office likely makes insufficient use of current trends in communication methods and technologies.

Community Awareness of RLI

In general, the Slave Lake residents involved in this report were largely unaware of RLI and its activities, and if they had heard of RLI it was in association with the MNA, or assumed that RLI was MNA. The plan for offering either the Hospitality Management program (though admittedly this program had not reached the active advertising stage), or the Carpentry program in the time after the fire was unknown to key people in the community, including employees of the Friendship Centre and a senior municipal administrator. Despite recent efforts by RLI to address marketing by hiring someone temporarily on a 6-month contract to focus specifically on strengthening this area, there appears to be little overall awareness of the activities or mandate of the RLI Slave Lake office by Métis clientele and the Slave Lake community generally.

This lack of awareness by the broader community is detrimental to RLI's success in reaching Métis clients in this geographic area as these community members could be of assistance in marketing RLI's programs or finding clients. For example, the senior municipal administrator conflated RLI and MNA, based on seeing an RLI poster in the MNA window (Interviewee 1, April 10, 2014). He wasn't aware of RLI's activities or mandate, or about any program offerings, and had never met with anyone from the RLI office in a business capacity. It is notable that he was approached by companies seeking skilled labour during the rebuilding phase but he was unaware of the Métis population as potential workforce, so could not link them up (Interviewee 1, April 10, 2014)

Slave Lake Office Closure

The Slave Lake office has been closed for multiple reasons: the fire and subsequent evacuation, staff turnover, and the diminishing role of the Slave lake office in the RLI NW Region over the past 5 years, and finally water damage and potential mold issues in the office resulting in its actual closure. The office was closed during and for a short time after the evacuation. For the last year and a half, after the last fulltime Employment Counsellor left the organization, the office has received only itinerate services from High Prairie, RV visits, and temporary contract workers. People have begun to associate RLI with a closed door.

I would still continue to go in every Friday but our office was closed back and forth a lot. People got so used to it being closed so even though we tried reopening it not long ago with somebody there, it needed more time for people to realize we were actually open, not always closed. I think that has a lot to do with the impact, at least I'm pretty sure that's what it.... Like when I was there all the time I had a lot of people coming in upset. They needed the stability and when they walk down there know it's not going to be closed (Interviewee 9, April 11, 2014).

Slave Lake's role as a busy hub office in the NW region has shifted over the least few years with the restructuring of Region 5 and 6, and the subsequent reduction in employees from three to one, to currently zero (Interviewee 12, April 15, 2014). Marketing and active community linkages are difficult to maintain under these staffing circumstances, especially when the office is managed and staffed from a distant Regional office (Grande Prairie, High Prairie), a fact that was acknowledge by one interviewee.

The manager actually lived in Peace River out of Region Six. So she focused mainly on her own region. There wasn't a lot of attention given to Slave Lake, so in all honesty I think that the office there probably wasn't marketed as well as it could have been and not enough attention paid to it (Interviewee 4, April 14, 2014).

This downward trend culminated in the closing of the office due to water damage and unresolved mold issues. It is unclear what future plans for the office entail, whether it be moving to a new location or dealing with the mold issues and re-opening in the current location.

Despite the closed doors, the RLI RV was with the evacuated townspeople in Athabasca after the fire. Wayne Morin was in Athabasca with the RV, letting people use the computer and answering

questions. He mentioned speaking with people who didn't know about RLI before but who learned about its mandate and what it has to offer. Wayne's presence in Athabasca with the evacuees demonstrated a senior RLI employee's point below that when operating in disaster circumstances, face-to-face communication is the best, and sometimes only, option.

So to me when a disaster comes in, the biggest way of communicating that you're there to help is; one, in person, and two, verbally, you know. And they are not leaving it to chance that message has been reached.... Yes, because I mean it's not big town, but still there has got to be that word of mouth... (Interviewee 12, April 15, 2014).

Communication Trends

The fire and other natural disasters also brought attention to changes and trends in communication, as well as weaknesses in existing communication networks. People are accessing media differently, with a strong focus on the internet, and traditional sources of communication such as newspapers, posters, and radio are accessed less and thus are less effective (Interviewee 1, April 10, 2014). When people read newspapers they read the text and increasingly tune out the ads, they ignore posters and listen to SIRIUS satellite radio instead of local radio stations. People are information hungry and they seek consistency in their information sources. The boom in social media use must be addressed. The Town of Slave Lake has begun using social media sources, and linking these to their website, to newspaper links and other more traditional media. As a result, they have noticed a significant increase in website traffic and communication with town residents (Interviewee 1, April 10, 2014).

Communication during natural disasters and emergencies offer specific challenges. People are away from their homes, their phones (landline), cell towers are overloaded and the mail is not being delivered. The fire in Slave Lake and the floods in Calgary demonstrated that increasing reliance on new communication technologies including internet, cellular phones both calling and texting, can depend heavily on electricity which was unavailable in both disaster situations for varying periods of time, as well as on capacities of cellular towers (Ramsey et al. 2012). Common information and media resources accessed by the Slave Lake population to access information during the emergency were: internet (31%, n=171), television (28%, n=155), newspapers (27%, n=146), and radio (22%, n=122) (Kulig et al. 2012c: 3). Communication played a big role in townspeople's response to the fire and subsequent evacuation. The town experience of evacuation did not go as smoothly as it could have because of certain aspects of existing communication networks. For example, Town of Slave Lake employees realized they did not have a complete set of resident contact information and current phone numbers, as a result they couldn't call them all to inform them of the impending evacuation (Ramsey et al. 2012). People had to move out into the community, informing others by word of mouth and by knocking on doors. Some of the resulting adjustments the town made to its emergency plan included a focus on effective communication networks. The Wildfire Review Committee (Flat Top Complex 2012), in their report for the Alberta Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, highlighted the unexpected weakness to communication technology and networks that made responding to the fire and evacuating the population more difficult.

Failure of phone systems has been a common experience worldwide of attempts to communicate during disasters (Venn 2012:20). In their place, multi-pronged communication strategies have typically been used, with the internet playing a key role. Official information from authorities during these events were communicated through internet as well as standard media: posters, fliers, radio, television, and local newspapers. Government hotlines for affected people provided information about available assistance, and information about food, accommodation, and financial support (Venn 2012:20).

In conclusion, the zero uptake of NW Carpenter 2012 and the absence of office foot traffic is the likely result of a combination of factors. A steady decrease over the last few years in the amount of hours the Slave Lake office was open and a decrease in employees available to meet with clients and connect with the community; weak or non-existent links between RLI and key community organizations; and significant changes to the types of media that people access and the channels used by RLI to get information about its current programs out to the client base. We suggest that RLI regional offices make every effort to explore new methods of communication to be successful, such as social media, while maintaining, as much as possible, the power of face-to-face communication in their marketing strategies.

Rupertsland Institute: Recommended Actions

In addition to describing the fire and flood disasters and how they affected people, we were asked to comment on whether Slave Lake clients are ready for training, what indicators RLI can utilize to determine suitability, and what actions are appropriate for RLI to take. In addition, what did other labour market programs do and do other skills training programs have policies or protocol for dealing with clients who are undergoing natural disaster and displacement. Responses to these questions are followed by a set of Best Practices for dealing with clients in crisis.

When Are Slave Lake Residents Ready for Training?

We asked various interviewees about whether they thought Slave Lake residents were ready to focus on training. One Interviewee thought potential clients were finally ready, saying “I think [its far enough in the past]. You get your few people that like to hang on but most people have moved on” (Interviewee 9, April 11, 2014). Though the interviewee thought that “most people have moved on”, she also stated that “...There’s still a lot of people that are still [having] an effect from it that just can't seem to get over it” (Interviewee 9, April 11, 2014). On the other hand, another interviewee thought just the opposite, that they were not ready, and wouldn’t be for a year or two yet, at least not in large numbers or normal numbers (Interviewee 3, April 25, 2014). This interviewee believed that potential clients were not in education mode but rather, still in recovery mode. Slave Lake is still in the reconstruction phase and most of the available resources are geared towards rebuilding. At this point, there is not enough of a market in Slave Lake to actively push RLI programs there, nor is there enough demand for a full time person at the Slave Lake RLI office. In terms of training, this interviewee suggested that Slave Lake may be ready two years in the future to focus on training again (Interviewee 3, April 25, 2014).

How RLI can determine when people are ready and what variables should they consider? Since loss of housing was so obvious a deterrent for program success, RLI can access various sources of information about the state of housing in Slave Lake such as the Red Cross, and Government of Alberta Disaster Recovery Programs. As well, strengthening linkages with other community organizations and people can provide a source of information in the future about what is happening with clients and housing trends.

The lack of long-term tracking of clients and the movement of clients due to natural mobility and disaster related evacuation makes understanding the current housing situation of clients, and thus the readiness for training, a difficult endeavor. RLI must be creative in the ways they track clients from Slave Lake. For example, we can assume that clients from Slave Lake who did not return after evacuation may have accessed RLI MTE services from their new location. Front line office staff can be on the lookout for displaced clients from Slave Lake by adding one question to their general roster such as *Were you living in Slave Lake recently?* or *Have you ever lived in Slave Lake?* when initially assessing potential clients. If they get a “no” response, they move on to standard work processes, but if they get a “yes” response, they can potentially ask follow-up questions about whether the fire caused them to leave, or about their state of readiness for training. These positive “hits” can be forwarded to RLI head office for tracking and assessment and can allow front line staff to provide educational information to potential clients about how to deal with post-disaster physical and psychological issues.

Appropriate Actions

Interviewee 3, a Red Cross volunteer, is aware of the network of available community social services in her town. As clients sometimes need other social services before they are ready to access RLI’s employment services, she is able to direct them to other organizations. She suggests that RLI offices broaden their employment-specific focus by ensuring that all regional office staff are more aware of the web of social services in each town, thus being better able to direct clients to needed social services and to help them navigate this network. In discussing how best to ensure that people are aware of available services, Venn (2012) suggests integrating service delivery and communications with other service agencies, for example those that deal with disaster relief, housing, education, child care, and health. Bell et al. (2010:218) also points out that collaborating with other agencies on behalf of clients is “especially important aspects of disaster response”. Finally, for successful case managers dealing with clients in disaster situations, “knowing about community resources linking clients to them, and advocating on the client’s behalf were key” (Bell et al. 2010: 221).

Other Organizations: Disaster Risk Planning

So far we have spoken with two organizations similar in mandate to RLI , based in Calgary and Edmonton, about the following questions: *What did other labour market programs do in the face of disaster? Do other labour market training service providers have emergency management plans or risk management plans?* Other organizations that provide examples are the Town of Slave Lake where we spoke to a senior municipal official, and the Slave Lake Friendship Centre.

The Calgary skills training organization did not experience any disruption to its facilities as a result of the flooding of the Bow and Elbow rivers last June, as their building was not in the flood zone. However, they closed their office for two days to accommodate staff and students who were dealing with the immediate effects of the flood and had one student drop out of a program due to loss of stable housing and another who was forced to sleep in gymnasiums and shelters for a time after the flood, which affected his attendance at his program due to a lack of an alarm clock. This organization did not have a risk management plan of any kind prior to the flood and did not create one after. They did however, make one change to their policies in the wake of the flood experience, and the loss of that one student due to unstable housing: they mandated that clients have a stable place to live during the thirteen-week program and a back-up housing option and a signed commitment from that housing owner (Interviewee 2, April 16, 2014).

The Town of Slave Lake is required by law to have an emergency plan, and the Town did make some changes to it after the fire, updating it with lessons learned. The main area of concern was communication, and the nature of the changes to the plan were regarding the actual 'how to' of getting people out of town, or running a successful evacuation (Interviewee 1, April 10, 2014). In contrast, the Program manager for an Edmonton skills training organization did not consider risk management plans at her organizational level. She assumed that with her work, risk to any planned program posed by a natural disaster would be minimal; the program would likely be postponed, rather than cancelled (April 17, 2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we present some final thoughts from the literature and the interviewees regarding organizations acting in a post disaster environment. First and most important: “everyone can and should *be more prepared*” (Interviewee 3, April 25, 2014) because “this [Calgary flood] was a wake-up call to all people that didn’t think they had to worry about housing or losing everything they own...” (Interviewee 2, April 16, 2014). After a disaster organizations must shift their attitudes in accordance with the new reality of the post-disaster environment, considering that “the needs of clients change” and “organizations and relationships change overnight. Your entire database and understanding of community resources disappears” (Smith 2012: 372) and finally, “the old way of doing business no longer exists after a disaster. You must have a vision, think outside the box, and be imaginative” (Smith 2012: 377).

The report concludes that the decision made by the RLI Slave Lake office Regional Manager to offer a training program focusing on Carpentry skills reflects an accurate assessment of the needs of the labour market after the fire of May 15, 2011. However potential reasons for a complete lack of response by Slave Lake residents to this program may include a mismatch between the specific preferences of potential clients related to job sector and gender. The report explored the effects of major disasters and evacuations on citizens, finding that people experience considerable amounts of stress that can continue for many years into the future after the actual event. As well, people tend to focus exclusively on rebuilding homes and stabilizing basic physical and safety-related needs, and thoughts of the future, become less important. Dealing with stress and disrupted housing situations was likely a main factor in the lack of response to the program when it was offered in Slave Lake. In addition, we concluded that inadequate marketing and communication with the Métis client base and with Slave Lake organizations, municipal government, and businesses were also a factor. These weak links were caused in part by the decreasing number of employees over time and the eventual closure of the Slave Lake office.

The report suggests that the Slave Lake office and the readiness of the client base for labour market training will grow slowly over the next few years, with sufficient and consistent attention from the Rupertsland Institute. We also found that organizations with a similar mandate to RLI did not have risk management plans set in place before the Slave Lake fire and the Calgary flood, and for the most part did not implement any after these events. Despite this, we suggest that RLI implement risk plans and communication and marketing plans into all of their future program planning activities.

BEST PRACTICES

1. Require RLI Regional managers to include a risk management component in their regional program planning, including environmental risks and all other potential risks. Imagine and plan for how these different risks would affect organizational mandate and processes. Consider that each region has different potential risks due to different geographies, industries etc.
2. Create communication and marketing plans for each office, tailored to each program.
3. Use social media in communication in addition to newspapers, posters, radio, and word of mouth methods.
4. Specifically plan for risks to marketing and communication networks, have back-up plans in place. Know clearly your marketing network; map it out. Understand how disruptions to basic services can affect these networks. Plan for getting the word out despite these changes. When to shift to word of mouth? This could be another planned use for the RLI RV, to bring in extra people or to encourage word of mouth.
5. Plan for risks to program delivery strategy. For example plan for the sudden unavailability of facilities for program delivery (for example what would happen if one of a College rural campuses where a program was going to be offered burned down?)
6. Require regular training and refresher courses for regional managers in assessing labour market needs, Alberta business trends, and program planning.
7. Oversight of proposed program plans: Require a manager at head office level to look over Regional managers proposed programs. Or if this is already the case, contract outside expertise: A certified program planner to do overviews of all regional managers programs; as well as contract someone who follows business and economic trends in Alberta to review the research and decision-making of regional managers or to work with the regional managers while they are making decisions about programs to offer.
8. Increase understanding and information sharing between RLI organizational levels. Head office to keep in touch with the local level and the every day realities of client's lives. Also, local level offices to understand the realities of head office.
9. Recognizing the importance of the local level buy-in: Best practices need to be practiced and have buy-in from the local level.
10. When program planning, find a balance between approaching *clients as individuals* (with individual personalities) and *clients as a group*.
11. Develop and maintain relationships between local RLI staff and key players in the local and regional Slave Lake economy, community organizations and businesses.
12. Expect that the Slave Lake community will take years yet to fully recover, plan accordingly.

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