

Burdening the overburdened: Understanding the rural and small town voluntary sector in health care reform.

The restructuring of Canada's health care system has included a shifting of burdens from the formal to informal sectors. In rural and small town places, this shift is often taken up by the local voluntary sector, a sector already under stress from covering responsibilities downloaded through other service closures. Through social capital and social cohesion, voluntary sector organizations make considerable contributions to local capacity by meeting local needs, creating local assets, knowledge, and expertise, practicing the skills of working cooperatively, and deploying that cooperation through group actions.

Such services provide an important foundation for local places in terms of community development, economic transition and revitalization, and for dealing with questions like immigration or youth out-migration, the provision of local health and wellness services, and dealing with an aging population. Despite their importance, services in rural and small town Canada are undergoing change. Since 1998,

the New Rural Economy Project of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation has been tracking service changes in 22 sites across Canada. The results thus far suggest that service reductions are occurring across rural and small town Canada regardless of local context - and that public sector services are now closing or being reduced faster than private sector services.

The example of Tumbler Ridge shows how the voluntary and service sectors work together.

Tumbler Ridge was affected by mine closures in 2000 and 2004. The first response of the provincial government was that the town should close, however, the local

voluntary sector provided the foundation for a local response which in less than a week from the first mine closure announcement had a revitalization strategy. Convincing the provincial government to provide certainty for basic health, social, and education services proved to be the key building blocks for community revitalization. Today, Tumbler Ridge is a robust community of over 3,000 people with a range of economic activities that build upon tourism, forestry, oil and gas, local retirement amenities, and, surprising, renewed interest in coal mine development.

Stresses on the voluntary sector come from a range of sources, including population



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losses that may lead to losses in critical local capacity. The closure of a school or a government office not only means the loss of those workers and their families, but it also means a loss of expertise and professional training which the voluntary sector groups draw upon. Rural and small town places, by their very definition, also have a smaller population base from which to draw volunteers.

The rural and small town voluntary sector is also stressed by its limited capacity to deal with changes in either funding or program demands. Where funding programs do exist, they too often emphasize “new” events over continued community capacity building and are poorly linked to the way rural and small town places function. For example, approval process timelines often do not link with the start dates

for community program. They also fail to institutionalize capacity building for the voluntary sector organizations that



are now taking up these service needs. For example, interim or phase out funding is rarely a part of project design and generic funding to allow group capacity building is rarely available.

The off-loading of service needs on rural and small town voluntary providers also continues to fail to recognize that the limited human capital available in these places cannot absorb additional tasks. Burnout and exhaustion will only increase the level of stress on

remaining volunteer providers. Government funding programs to support these organizations continues to demand that more time be spent answering government accountability needs than on actual local service delivery.

The voluntary sector plays an important role in providing services to rural and small town places.

While government has expressed support for the voluntary sector, policy-makers need to understand what is needed to make programs offered by the voluntary sector effective and successful.

Greg Halseth,
Laura Ryser,
Neil Hanlon,
and Lana Sullivan



The New Rural Economy Project, Phase 2
Tel: (514) 848-2424 ext. 2323
Fax: (514) 848-2322
E-mail: reimer@vax2.concordia.ca
Website: nre.concordia.ca

