



ARDN Staff

Dee Ann Benard, Executive Director

Joy Vonk, Operations Manager

Kyle Miller, Project Manager (Since March 2015)

Monica Fadul, Administrative Assistant (Volunteer since June 2015)

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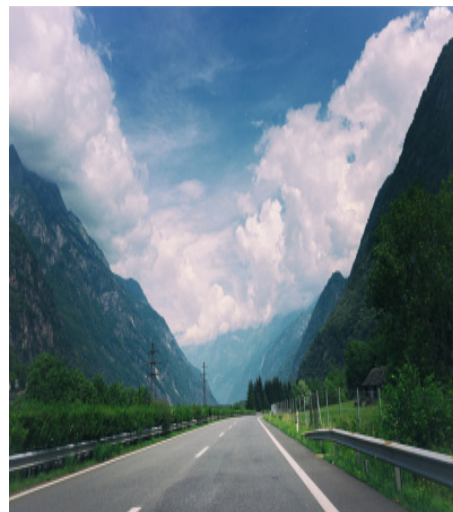
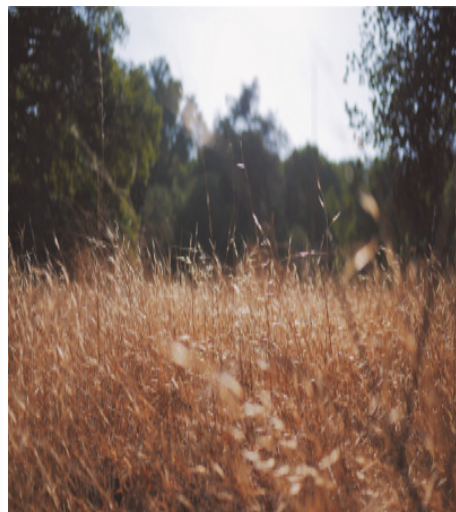
University of Lethbridge

THE ALBERTA RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK represents Alberta's 21 public post-secondary institutions.

Our Mandate is to use the combined expertise of our members to support rural development and help rural communities grow through research and learning.

Our Mission is to create a model of rural community development through collaboration. Our Vision is a strong sustainable network that is the leading source of trusted rural development projects and information.

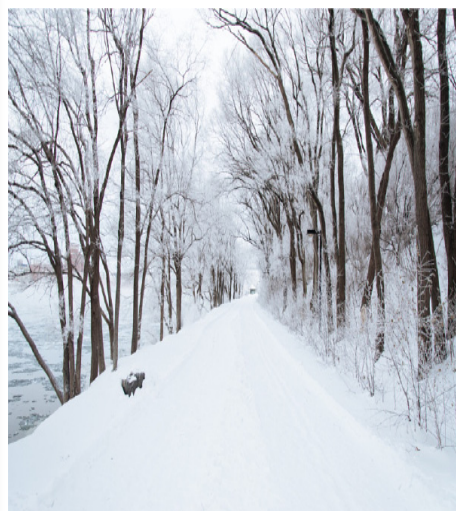
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2014 - 2015

ANNUAL REPORT

ALBERTA RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK (ARDN)



CHAIR'S MESSAGE

ARDN has become a powerhouse over the past year. Despite uncertainty, we increased productivity and the diversity of our projects, and moved from an office into a partially virtual world. Clearly, change is more than bricks and mortar. ARDN is less focused on directing strategic funding and more on coordinating strategy and responding to emerging needs.

The Homelessness initiative is a prime example of community empowered responsiveness. Rural communities and post-secondary institutions (PSI) cited this issue as a major concern, particularly for the working poor, and ARDN listened. We approached the federal government and were allocated \$2.4 million; funding allocated to 11 community-based projects. Several were showcased at Creating Rural Connections in May 2015.

Other major initiatives led by ARDN are Trades Warriors and Rural Access to Justice, but not all ARDN projects are large. We continue to respond to grassroots needs by facilitating smaller projects as diverse as a business retention and expansion pilot project in Medicine Hat, assisting in the economic survival of a small community, and helping address rural transportation. These collaborations help community-based organizations focus on work that makes a meaningful difference while ARDN coordinates the partners and paperwork. Our administrative and reporting expertise is well seasoned by the more than 200 projects completed in our charter years.

As ARDN moves forward, we strive to increase our self-sufficiency, as do the rural communities we serve. Vibrant communities need dynamic organizations to sustain their public interests. Support from ARDN and its PSI members help keep the currency and effectiveness that has historically served rural Alberta without dictating the directions stakeholders have chosen. Collaborating to solve real world problems impacting rural communities and their stakeholders is critical to a healthy Alberta.

ARDN's goals can only be accomplished with a strong team of stakeholders. I'd like to thank our charter PSI stakeholders for their vision and continued support, the rural communities we work with for their partnership and trust in ARDN, our board and committee members for their inspiring leadership, and ARDN's hard working staff led by our Executive Director Dee Ann Benard. We will miss Joy Vonk who provided office management services since ARDN began and welcome the new staff and volunteers who have recently joined us. Together we will forge ahead and keep ARDN a vibrant, responsive organization dedicated to rural development in all its many forms and constantly changing permutations.

Dr. Trent Keough

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

ARDN is a chameleon, adapting and changing with the environment in which it lives. It isn't always easy. Early 2015 brought an organizational low as the effects of uncertainty came to a head: Several of ARDN's 21 post-secondary members declined to renew their memberships. Long time Operations Manager Joy Vonk moved on to a new opportunity. Formal communications efforts, so critical to any organization, diminished dramatically because of lack of funding. We could no longer afford a physical office and went "virtual".

However, despite the gloom, there were reasons to remain optimistic. A core group of ARDN members remained steadfast in their commitment to ARDN. Some members that initially moved away came back. We received some new project funding, and were able to hire a project manager, office manager, and find a part-time volunteer to start the next fiscal year off with a bang. The AFC offered us some shared office space. Issues we have worked on for years began to gain mainstream recognition. We are now well positioned for the future. Projects and programs including rural homelessness, access to justice, community sustainability, workforce development, and transportation are all moving forward and gaining traction.

We still don't have sustainable funding for operations and that is discouraging. But my resolve gets renewed when I see the impact of our projects: a single mother finding housing so she can go back to school; a teenager going to sleep in her own bed after couch surfing or living on the streets; a First Nations man finding his voice to tell his story and become a role model for others; a young lawyer choosing to embrace a rural community instead of the big city; students gaining real world experience by helping local businesses thrive; house-bound seniors gaining back their independence when they can get to appointments and run errands without having to call on family and friends; a small community working together to create a better future for themselves and their neighbours.

ARDN's volunteer board members also energize me, when we connect by phone for our monthly meeting or they send me encouraging emails. Every time our executive members attend extra meetings or volunteer for a project, I feel uplifted; I couldn't do this job without their commitment. Vice Chair Dietmar Kennepohl has been cheerfully going the extra mile for years and Chair Trent Keough, despite being an incredibly busy college president, answers every ARDN email and phone call promptly, and regularly drives several hours to attend meetings to advocate on ARDN's behalf, much like past chairs. These things and these people feed my soul and keep me going. No matter how many bumps there are in the road, this support gives me the fuel to keep driving ARDN into the future.

Dee Ann Benard

Battle River Bus Pilot Project

Transportation is a huge barrier to life in rural Alberta for those without access to a personal vehicle. ARDN is working with the Association for Life-Wide Living of Alberta to support the Battle River Bus project, which provides weekly transportation to Camrose for rural citizens living in the surrounding areas. This successful pilot project provides a model for other regions and communities to offer similar services. In the coming year, we hope to see the expansion of the Battle River Bus project, and to ensure this model is brought to, and implemented in, other regions of Alberta.

Sustainable Housing Initiative

Further to ARDN’s work on homelessness, we have seen that many rural Alberta communities lack sustainable, affordable rental housing. Rental options are often severely limited for rural citizens who cannot afford to buy a home. In spring 2015, ARDN issued a call for expressions of interest to determine the need and desire in rural communities for developing innovative approaches to creating sustainable, affordable housing options. In response, 36 rural Alberta communities submitted applications. The needs ranged from seniors, low income, homeless, and other vulnerable groups of citizens. ARDN has since embarked on a quest to create a pilot project to prove the model of using shipping containers (seacans) to create attractive and attainable rental housing in rural Alberta.



Small Business Training Project

A previous ARDN Business Retention & Expansion project showed business support services available to rural communities are under-utilized, because business owners are too busy working ‘in’ the business to work ‘on’ it. To address the needs of rural businesses, college business students are placed with small- to medium-sized businesses to offer training, help address issues and solve problems. Under the supervision of college staff, these students can help small business owners develop and execute marketing plans to attract customers and expand their businesses, or help them learn or improve skills such as financial management, website development, or using social media.

Municipal Sustainability

In fall 2014, the Glenwood and District Economic Development Society approached ARDN for assistance, especially with marketing their community as a great place to live and work. In response, ARDN is working on a plan to use the small business training model to support Glenwood and other small rural communities and their businesses, to ensure they thrive and expand.

Rural and Regional Access to Justice

The shortage of doctors in rural Alberta is well known, but a less glamorous shortage of lawyers affects nearly every small community in Alberta. For those communities lucky enough to have a lawyer, they are often sole practitioners nearing retirement. Since one of ARDN’s goals is to help ensure the long term viability of rural Alberta, we believe it is essential to encourage and attract the next generation of legal talent to the opportunities and advantages in rural Alberta. To accomplish this, ARDN secured funding from Justice Canada for a Rural and Regional Access to Justice (RRAJ) project designed to coordinate the placement of law students and articling students in rural Alberta communities and regional centres. ARDN hired a full time Project Manager to direct and oversee the project and interact with stakeholders, students, and lawyers. A strong component of the RRAJ project is the identification and recruitment of francophone lawyers, which allowed ARDN to secure additional funding from the Alberta Francophone Secretariat.

The overarching goal of this project is to increase the availability and accessibility of legal services provided by lawyers in rural and regional communities, with emphasis on providing legal services in both official languages. ARDN is working with the Canadian Bar Association – Alberta Branch, the Law Society of Alberta, Pro Bono Law Alberta, and the Faculties of Law at the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Ottawa to raise the profile and awareness of opportunities to practice outside of Edmonton and Calgary.



Increasing the number of lawyers who choose a rural practice the cost of access to justice decreases and access to justice in both official languages increases, which is a benefit to those living in rural or regional areas. Information based on data provided by the Law Society of Alberta, smaller communities in Alberta have no lawyers practicing in the community.

Thanks in part to a significant investment of time and energy from the Faculty of Law at the University of Calgary, the ARDN has grown a large network of legal professionals, lawyers, and contacts at the Universities of Ottawa and Alberta to identify students interested in practicing law outside of Alberta’s main centres. ARDN’s relationships with Alberta’s post-secondary law schools means we are well situated to connect those looking to pursue rural opportunities with lawyers in those communities.

Between March and June 2015, ARDN connected with several students interested in pursuing a career in rural Alberta, including four common law students. Many of those students found or secured articling or summer positions. The RRAJ project is moving forward with well identified goals and objectives, and with the cooperation of our partners, we are confident that this project will eventually boost the number of lawyers in rural Alberta.

Rural Homelessness

The second year of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy’s Rural & Remote Homelessness funding, administered by ARDN, is well under way. A few key outcomes include:

- Awareness of rural homelessness is building and more communities are getting involved.
- Clients are accessing services and communities are having positive outcomes.
- Outreach workers have built relationships with landlords and have increased client stability.
- Providing access to career and employment services for clients has been positive and services are being successfully accessed by clients. Clients are enthusiastic.
- Clients are self-referring themselves to programs due to hearing about the program through the communities.
- Other agencies in the community are referring clients to the program.
- Communities are building partnerships, meeting with stakeholders and creating teams.
- Community consultations have been positive and organizations are participating in small work groups to work on research.
- Clients are learning life skills to help in the prevention of homelessness.
- Early intervention has helped clients stay in homes and stopped further escalation to clients becoming homeless.
- Outreach in schools identifies students’ needs and helps provide support to those at risk.
- Research projects are shedding light on understanding homelessness in rural communities..



Rural communities are seeing things differently. The funded projects have focussed on access to supports and services and are creating awareness, especially where projects are going into their second year. More stakeholders and communities are acknowledging that rural homelessness exists, and people and communities are coming together to create solutions. HPS funded workers feel positive about the response and dedication of stakeholders and committees about helping clients access services. Access to supports and services help clients be more self-sufficient, confident and competent. Three challenges met by the projects are: 1) Qualified project staff have been hired and are well underway to achieving their deliverables. 2) Transportation remains a key issue; however, one community has established a transportation option for their clients. 3) Developing and implementing effective programs to help at risk clients has been achieved.

The HPS funding has made a difference for rural Albertans that are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Communities have begun to come together to work to end homelessness. However, even with the successes our project communities have already achieved, there still remains an urgent need for continued support and services in these and other rural Alberta communities.

Creating Rural Connections 2015

The ARDN was pleased to host its 6th annual Creating Rural Connections (CRC) Conference in May 2015. Held in Leduc, the theme was “Rural Homelessness is Real: What can we do about it?”

CRC 2015 featured speakers, presenters, and researchers from as far away as Newfoundland, and from every corner of Alberta. Over two days, 15 presentations by 23 leaders in rural homelessness disseminated research and experiences from the front lines of service delivery. Topics varied from understanding rural homelessness to developing an affordable housing community action plan; from best practices in research and engagement to youth homelessness.

As with any conference exploring a difficult subject, there was somber reflection, but also comradery and idea sharing among all participants at CRC 2015. Information on the presentations, summaries, and videos of selected presentations can be found on the ARDN website’s Rural Project Library at www.ardn.ca.

One consistent theme identified by presenters was the issue of information and ideas being siloed in communities. The consequences of this are two fold. First, communities and support workers constantly need to reinvent the wheel, due to a lack of information sharing.



This is not done maliciously, but many communities are hesitant to admit they have a homelessness issue, and busy support workers have little or no time for consolation with peers, which adds to their isolation. Second, as a result of this isolation, there is a high burn out rate among those who work on the frontlines. These support workers are themselves in need of support, as they are critical for ensuring information flow in both directions. The best research and ideas are impossible to implement without them.

We are pleased to report that after two days at CRC 2015, both the researchers and front line staff gained new appreciation for themselves and each other. Front line staff and researchers, many of whom are working on projects funded by the Government of Canada’s Homelessness Partnering Strategy, came away from the conference with a renewed enthusiasm, and of course, some important new connections.



Creating Rural Connections