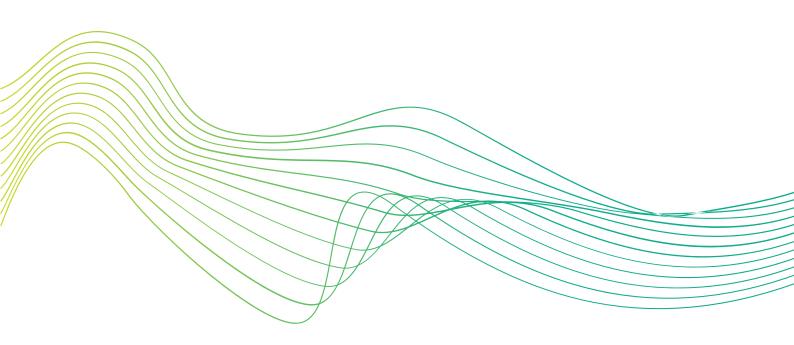May 2024

Rural Remote and Indigenous Communities' Responses to Homelessness in Alberta

What We Heard Report

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Land Acknowledgement

The Rural Development Network (RDN) would like to acknowledge that our physical office is located on amiskwaciwâskahikan, known as Beaver Hills House or Edmonton, the historical land of Treaty 6 Territory and within the Métis Nation District 9.

As a national organization, we acknowledge that RDN staff and the communities we support live, gather, and organize across Turtle Island. This project's contributors are located on Treaty 6 Territory and unceded Anishinaabe Algonquin territory.

We share this acknowledgement to reaffirm our responsibility and commitment to reconciliation. We also recognize that this land acknowledgement is just that, an acknowledgement; it is but one step in our journey.

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We thank you.

Please contact Sydney Stenekes at programs@ruraldevelopment.ca if you have any questions or concerns about this report.

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Editor: Emma Wallace

Content Warning:
Information contained in this document may be triggering or upsetting to readers. Topics include substance use, mental health conditions, intimate partner violence, death, colonialism, and discrimination.

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to understanding the causes of homelessness, the urban experience tends to dominate the conversation, mainly due to the "visibility" of unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness in urban centres. The issue of homelessness in rural and remote areas is far less understood and acknowledged because of its "hidden" nature. Further, recent data suggests that rural homelessness is prevalent at rates equivalent to or greater than urban per capita rates (Schiff et al., 2022).

In 2023, RDN conducted a provincial Housing and Service Needs Estimation with 45 communities across Alberta to better understand housing insecurity in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. Over the past year, RDN has been using data collected from the 2023 provincial estimation to advocate to the provincial and federal government, industry partners, and funders to increase their support to rural, remote, and Indigenous communities responding to housing insecurity. Now in conversations with provincial and federal representatives as well as industry and funder representatives, RDN felt it was important to reach out to community partners for additional information. Specifically, RDN was interested in learning more about communities' responses to housing insecurity, any barriers they are experiencing in responding to housing insecurity, and how organizations like RDN, the provincial and federal government, industry, and funders can support their work in responding to housing insecurity moving forward.

The purpose of collecting this information was threefold:
- To capture updated information on the prevalence of housing insecurity in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities.
- To serve as a means of checking in with community partners on how they are doing and how we can continue supporting their efforts in responding to housing insecurity.
- To collect additional data to support RDN's advocacy activities and inform conversations with all levels of government, industry partners, and funders.

METHODOLOGY

To gather information on the prevalence of housing insecurity, community responses, and barriers to responding to housing insecurity, RDN developed a survey to distribute among community partner organizations. The survey was distributed as an online SurveyMonkey link and was open for responses for two weeks in Spring 2024. RDN shared the survey with community partners at the quarterly Alberta Rural Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ARCH2) Network meeting, in RDN's monthly e-newsletter, with Reaching Home-funded projects, and through direct email invitations.

The survey distributed among community partners was adapted from a similar survey shared with community partners in 2021, though several questions were updated and/or added to best suit the purposes of this project. The survey was a multi-method survey with both quantitatively and qualitatively framed questions (see Appendix A for a full list of survey questions). The survey began with an introductory paragraph outlining the purpose of the survey and the intended use of survey results. Respondents were also informed that no identifying information would be shared in any reporting deliverables or advocacy conversations.

Also included in the introductory section of the survey was an outline of the definitions of homelessness as they are understood by RDN. These definitions were included to ensure that community partners were aware of how to define homelessness as it related to each survey question. The definitions were detailed as follows:

According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2012), homelessness describes the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing or the immediate prospect, means and ability to acquire it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, unhealthy, unsafe, and distressing.

Homelessness or houselessness can fall into four categories:

- **Unsheltered:** Living on the street or in a place not intended for human habitation (for example, living on sidewalks, in parks, alleyways, in abandoned buildings or other places unfit for human habitation, or in a vehicle or garage).
- **Emergency Sheltered**: Staying in overnight shelters as a result of homelessness or domestic/family violence.
- **Provisionally Accommodated**: Living in a place that is temporary or lacking security (for example, couch-surfing, living in an RV or trailer, living in transitional housing, or living in a situation where there is domestic/family violence, etc.)
- **At Risk:** Living in a situation that is not secure or does not meet public health and safety standards (for example, unable to afford high rent increases, one missed rent payment away from eviction, housing unit on the verge of being condemned for health, by-law, or safety violations, etc.).

Recently, there has been a push to shift our language when talking about homelessness towards terminology like houselessness or unhoused to better reflect the experiences of Indigenous community members and their understandings of home.

As a result, we are using the term housing insecurity for the remainder of the report to encompass both understandings of homelessness and houselessness.

After reading the introductory paragraph, respondents were asked to consent to sharing their information for the purposes of this project.

At the end of the two-week survey period, 27 community partners submitted responses. Once survey responses had been recorded, RDN's Homelessness Initiatives team conducted a thematic analysis of survey responses. Where relevant, supplementary data was used for cross-analysis purposes.

Limitations

Despite our best efforts to widely advertise the survey, only 27 community partner organizations completed the survey. This can likely be attributed to the short, two-week survey response period during a very busy time for many community partner organizations. As a result, there remains a portion of rural, remote, and Indigenous communities whose experiences in responding to housing insecurity were not captured in this project. Additionally, it is important to note that the purpose of this project was not to collect in-depth, comprehensive housing insecurity enumeration data but rather to inform advocacy conversations with the provincial and federal government, industry partners, and funders. Given this, the report focuses more on highlighting key themes around current responses to housing insecurity and barriers to addressing housing insecurity rather than providing specific details on the state of housing insecurity in each community.

Further, of the 27 community partners who completed a survey, only one represented a First Nation, meaning that the results outlined in this report are likely not a true representation of the experiences of all rural, remote, and Indigenous communities in Alberta.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Of the 27 surveys completed by community partner organizations, 56% (15 of 27) identified as non-profits, while 30% (8 of 27) identified as municipal government organizations/FCSS. The table below provides the full breakdown of participating community organization types.

Table #1: Breakdown of Community Organization by Type

Organization Type	# of Submissions
Not-for-profit	15
Municipal Government/FCSS	8
Shelter/Mat Program	1
Community Coalition	1
Rural Homelessness Outreach Program	1
Indigenous Non-profit	1

Considering that many rural, remote, and Indigenous communities lack services that community members experiencing housing insecurity could benefit from, it is important to understand the geographic context in which community partner organizations are coming from. To do this, community partner organizations have been categorized by their proximity to one of the seven major cities (Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and Grande Prairie).

Analysis indicates that, on average, community partner organizations were located 1.37 hours away from the nearest major city (one-way).

46% (12 of 26) of community partner organizations were closest to Edmonton, while 19% (5 of 26)[1] were located closest to Lethbridge. The table below provides a more detailed look into the geographic context of community partner organizations in relation to the seven major cities.

Table #2: Distance to the Nearest of the Seven Major Cities

Nearest Major City	# of Communities	Average Distance One Way (Hrs)
Grande Prairie	2[2]	N/A
Edmonton	12	2
Red Deer	4	1
Calgary	3	0.75
Lethbridge	5	0.85
RM of Wood Buffalo	0	N/A
Medicine Hat	0	N/A

An analysis of the geographic context suggests that 52% (14 of 27) of community partner organizations were located in Northern Alberta.

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[1] One of the participating community organizations serves a broad geographical area in central Alberta and thus was not included in the calculations to the nearest urban center.

[2] Both participating community partner organizations service large geographic areas across a County which encompasses one of the seven major cities. As a result, geographic analysis suggests both community partner locations have no travel time to get to the nearest of the seven major cities. It is important to note here that the major city these two community partner organizations are closest to has not traditionally collaborated to provide services and supports to rural clients.

What Does Housing Insecurity Look Like in Rural, Remote, and Indigenous Communities Across Alberta?

Community partner organizations were asked if/when they last participated in a Housing and Service Needs Estimation or Point-in-Time count. A total of 14 community partner organizations conducted an enumeration of housing insecurity between 2019 and 2023. Of those, 71% (10 of 14) indicated that they participated in the 2023 Alberta Provincial Housing and Service Needs Estimation, while the remaining 29% (4 of 14) community partner organizations conducted an enumeration between 2019 and 2022.

Community partner organizations were asked to detail the number of community members experiencing housing insecurity in their area and, if possible, break down where those community members fit on the spectrum of housing insecurity. The community partner organizations that had not conducted an enumeration were asked to base their numbers on supplemental data, including observational and anecdotal data. With this in mind, 7,713 individuals across participating rural, remote, and Indigenous communities in Alberta were experiencing housing insecurity, of which 5% were unsheltered.

Table #3: Approximate Number of Experiences of Housing Insecurity Along the Spectrum

Spectrum of Housing Insecurity	Approximate # of Individuals
Unsheltered	358
Emergency Sheltered	265
Provisionally Accommodated	1,303
At Risk	5,787 [3]

[3] Note that 60% of those identified as being 'At Risk' of housing insecurity come from a single community that has a very large population size.

When asked, "What does housing insecurity look like in your community (based on anecdotal, observational, and/or quantitative data)?" a couple of specific population groups were highlighted as experiencing housing insecurity, while other responses varied. 55% (12 of 22) of community partner organizations highlighted men as the most common population group to experience housing insecurity, whether they be single men, youth, or men between the ages of 40 and 60.

Additionally, 18% (4 of 22) of community partner organizations reported witnessing a variety of demographic populations experiencing housing insecurity, while others noted families, young adults, couples, single parents (women and children), Indigenous Peoples, and seniors.

Interestingly, in the 2023 Alberta Provincial Housing and Service Needs Estimation, in which 10 community partner organizations participated, the majority of housing insecure community members identified as women. Further, 93% of 2SLGBTQIA+ survey respondents and 91% of Indigenous survey respondents were identified as housing insecure. In comparison, community partner organizations in this survey noted mainly men experiencing housing insecurity, and while there were mentions of Indigenous Peoples experiencing housing insecurity, neither were highlighted as experiencing housing insecurity at the same rates as was identified in the provincial estimation. This could be attributed to a number of things. First, the Housing and Service Needs Estimation uses a service-based population estimation methodology that lends itself to community members' access to services. Research suggests that women are more likely than men to access services when needed. Additionally, men tend to experience more visible forms of housing insecurity than women, like being unsheltered or emergency sheltered. Given that 12 community partner organizations relied mainly on supplemental data, including observational and anecdotal data, to identify who is experiencing housing insecurity in their communities, it is also likely that the number of 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous community members experiencing housing insecurity was underreported in this survey.

Community partner organizations further commented on the different risk factors and living situations housing insecure community members were experiencing. A common theme amongst the listed risk factors was the lack of affordable or adequate housing due to high rental costs, lack of housing options (AirBnB is one example of reduced housing availability), and overall high cost of living.

In the 2023 Alberta Provincial Housing and Service Needs Estimation, the top three reported reasons for housing insecurity across participating rural, remote, and Indigenous communities were low wages, an inability to afford rent/mortgage payments, and increasing rent costs. Given Canada's continued housing and cost of living crises, it is unsurprising that income tops the reported reasons for housing insecurity in 2023 and 2024.

Other comments noted individuals fleeing violence, multigenerational housing leading to overcrowding, mental health and/or substance use (including lack of available supports to provide assistance with various conditions/situations), discrimination by landlords, low income, inconsistent employment, and poor housing conditions (including pests or bed bugs), all of which increase a community member's risk of housing insecurity.

64% (14 of 22) of community partner organizations indicated that those experiencing housing insecurity were couch surfing, 41% (9 of 22) highlighted that community members were living in a vehicle or RV, and 36% (8 of 22) of comments noted that community members were unsheltered.

Table #4: Breakdown of Observed Housing Insecure Living Situations

Living Situation	# of Community Partner Organizations who Observed Living Situations
Hotel/Motel[4]	27% (6 of 22)
Couch Surfing	64% (14 of 22)
Shelter/Transitional Housing	14% (3 of 22)
Staying with a stranger	9% (2 of 22)
Exchanging favours for shelter	9% (2 of 22)
Jail/Remand Center	5% (1 of 22)
Staying with family/friends	14% (3 of 22)
Inadequate shelter/poor housing conditions	14% (3 of 22)
Vehicle/RV	41% (9 of 22)
Tent/Encampments	23% (5 of 22)

Community partner organizations reported that the most common experiences of housing insecurity were community members couch surfing and/or living in their vehicles or RVs. This highlights the precarious situation that community members face. One comment from a community partner organization highlighted that those experiencing housing insecurity are often surviving day to day, searching for accommodations and safe places to sleep.

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4 Please note that some individuals and community partner organizations use hotels/motels as emergency shelters/accommodations due to lack of available shelters in the area due to issues of shelter capacity, which will be further elaborated on below.

One community partner organization observed that single-income families faced extreme difficulties with making ends meet and that some individuals who have mental health or addiction challenges also faced discrimination by landlords due to their perceived income sources. Additionally, the increase in short-term rentals, such as Airbnb's, left the community with few rental options and resulted in families living in smaller accommodations, leading to increased experiences of overcrowding.

Other community partner organizations noted the difficulty for community members with mental health and/or substance use issues to secure stable housing and access basic needs while relying on their income support benefits due to the rising costs of housing and the overall increasing cost of living.

Community Responses to Housing Insecurity

Additionally, community partner organizations were asked, "What responses has your community developed in responding to housing insecurity?" 89% (24 of 27) indicated they have been providing basic needs to support community members experiencing housing insecurity, while 67% (18 of 27) have provided mental health support to their clients. The table below outlines the breakdown of response types by community partner organizations.

Table #5: Breakdown of Responses to Housing Insecurity by Community Partner Organizations

Response Type	# of Community Partner Organizations
Emergency shelter/Mat program	14
Basic needs (food, clothing, transportation)	24
Emergency accommodation (hotels/motels)	11
Supportive housing	5
Eviction prevention programs (e.g. Emergency financial assistance, landlord/tenant mediation, family mediation)	13
Mental health supports	18
Culturally appropriate supports	7

One community partner organization explained that there were two deaths of community members experiencing housing insecurity in their community between 2021-2022. They noted that this profoundly impacted their organization and the community as a whole. Since then, they have prioritized providing consistent support to community members experiencing housing insecurity in order to prevent future deaths.

Another community partner organization highlighted their vehicle parking program. During the summer months, individuals employed locally and sleeping in their vehicles are provided permits due to limited housing availability during the tourist season.

Other community partner organizations shared that when funding was available, they supported their clients with emergency and transitional shelter options at local hotels/motels. When clients are placed in a local hotel/motel for shelter, community partner organizations collaborate with other local service providers to ensure clients have access to basic needs such as food and clothing, as well as mental health support and transportation.

As shown in Figure 1 below, community partner organizations also listed several other community responses to housing insecurity.

Figure 1: Additional Responses to Housing Insecurity

Emergency Shelter/Mat Program

- Shelter pod programs
- Day shelter programs
- Vehicle parking programs
- Transportation to shelters in other areas

Basic Needs (food, clothing, etc.)

- Community pantries & closets
- Food hampers
- Clothing and blanket distribution

Emergency Accommodation

- Emergency cold weather stays in hotels/motels

Eviction Prevention Programs

- Emergency rental funds/supplement funds
- Landlord/tenant mediation support
- Financial management support (budgetary planning, etc.)

Mental Health Supports

- Informal and formal mental health supports (not counselling, but someone to listen to clients should they need someone to speak to or casual mediation)

Culturally Appropriate Supports

- Connecting with Elders
- Smudging
- Cultural activities
- Cultural programming through Native Friendship Centres

Community Navigation Support

- Information, outreach, and referral programs
- Income assistance (e.g., Alberta Works) navigation support
- Community tax clinics
- Mailing address and distribution services

Health & Wellbeing

- Transportation to medical appointments
- Tracking medical needs (such as treatment care documentation, appointment reminders, medication compliance, etc.)
- Annual health clinic programs
- Medical advocacy support (such as advocating to lift restrictions on government ID replacements, obtaining psychological/psychiatrist assessments, etc.)
- AHS ID programs

Interestingly, in addition to the traditional prevention and intervention responses, many community partner organizations supported clients with community navigation and health and wellbeing support, further highlighting the creative, holistic, and unique ways they address housing insecurity in their communities.

Community partner organizations clearly work incredibly hard to provide a variety of supports and services to community members experiencing housing insecurity. Many organizations noted the need to adapt support and services to meet clients' ever-changing needs. Further, it is important to note that many of the community partner organizations providing supports and services to community members experiencing housing insecurity are doing so out of an identified need in the community, even when their organizational mandate is not to respond to housing insecurity.

Recognizing Alberta's harsh winters, community partner organizations were also asked about their winter responses. When specifically asked about the most effective response this past winter in addressing housing insecurity, community partner organizations noted varied responses depending on their organizational mandates, clientele, and available resources.

Many community partner organizations recognize the importance of providing emergency and transitional shelter to community members experiencing housing insecurity, especially during the cold weather months. As a result, several community partner organizations noted opening temporary Mat programs and/or emergency shelters during the winter months. When temporary Mat programs and/or emergency shelters were unavailable, community partner organizations provided emergency shelter to clients at hotels and motels. A few community partner organizations also indicated that, while not a perfect solution, they or their local government aim to provide warming stations for unsheltered community members during extreme cold weather incidents to shelter in place during daytime hours when emergency shelters are closed.

Other community partner organizations focused on providing basic needs, including emergency blankets, hot meals, clothing, and transportation, by collaborating with local service providers including outreach teams, churches, thrift stores, and any other service providers interested in supporting the program. One community partner organization indicated that they believe collaboration is the key to successfully responding to housing insecurity, stating, "This is about community, not competition."

Additionally, many community partner organizations provided clients with financial management support, eviction prevention and mediation programs, and community navigation support as part of their winter response efforts, though many also offer these programs year-round.

Barriers to Addressing Housing Insecurity

While community partner organizations have presented various unique responses to housing insecurity based on client needs as well as organizational resources and capacity, most face similar barriers, challenges, and frustrations in implementing these responses in the community.

Unsurprisingly, community partner organizations identified a lack of funding as the biggest barrier to responding to housing insecurity. Many winter responses, including warming stations, temporary Mat programs, and hotel/motel shelter programs, were identified as temporary solutions to longer-term problems and were not sustainable long term as they were cost-prohibitive to operate. Operational and capital funding to support the expansion of prevention and intervention programs and support the development of housing stock is critical. Community partner organizations also indicated that responses to housing insecurity require skilled and specialized staff, and without sustained operational funding, maintaining staff is almost impossible.

Some community partner organizations felt that rural communities are often overlooked when funding for housing insecurity is distributed, especially those communities further away from the seven major cities. Others indicated that it can be difficult to access when funding is available to rural communities because of siloed funding models. For example, it is difficult to access joint funding across two ministries (e.g. Ministry of Seniors, Community, and Social Services and Children and Family Services) to respond to intersectional housing insecurity to provide support to women and families experiencing violence and who lack safe and appropriate housing. Many community partner organizations also expressed frustrations with how administratively heavy funding applications and reporting can be.

One community partner organization discussed how mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting housing insecurity service provision is, especially as the sector struggles with post-COVID response, stating: "Since COVID everyone, …. absolutely everyone is stretched, exhausted, overwhelmed with emails, voicemails and needs

we want to fix but can't always fix as soon as we'd like to see." Further, community partner organizations expressed how incoming funding provides them with a "jolt of energy" as it means that they can continue to successfully support their clients, even if that looks like simply putting them up in a hotel for a couple of nights or filling up their vehicle with gas so that they can reach their family member's house for a place to stay.

> **"Funders are the framework of a response to housing insecurity."**

Aside from a lack of sustainable operating funding, community partner organizations highlighted a lack of services as the biggest barrier to successfully responding to housing insecurity. Without the appropriate supports and services, community partner organizations struggle to successfully respond to housing insecurity. Many noted that there is a lack of mental health and substance use supports, a lack of affordable and adequate housing (including below-market-rate units), and a lack of youth-specific supports and services. Others emphasized that when these supports and services are available in their communities, the intake process becomes a barrier for many clients trying to access them. In some cases, community partner organizations have identified language barriers to service provision but, without increased funding, have no way to provide services in clients' preferred language. It was also mentioned that many community members experiencing housing insecurity face discrimination and judgement from both service providers and community members when trying to access supports and services.

> *"The challenge has never been to disclose the frustrations of navigating through ineffective systemic protocols, the fury at landlords take advantage of the disadvantaged with no remorse, 'because they can'. The satisfaction is the most unexpected relationships that can evolve from desperate humiliation to trust. Knowing they are believed and will be helped."*

Further, community partner organizations vocalized their frustration with their communities' lack of affordable and adequate housing stock. Many also indicated that increasing rent costs was an ongoing challenge in their ability to support clients with housing.

Several community partner organizations specifically highlighted the need for advocacy on the implementation of rent caps to address this concern.

> *"Many organizational clients are one month away from possible housing insecurity."*

One community partner organization commented on their reality in facing the opioid crisis. The community has seen housing units torn down due to chemicals in the walls causing health concerns which has, in turn, reduced available housing stock in the community. Even in the middle of navigating the consequences of the opioid crisis, they believe in and are committed to using a Housing First approach to address the root causes of housing insecurity.

Several community partner organizations noted liability concerns and the short-term seasonal nature as challenges with providing temporary emergency shelter (warming stations, Mat programs, hotel/motel programs). As a result, many community partner organizations commented on the lack of emergency shelter beds in their community, emphasizing the need to increase emergency shelter capacity, whether that be by building an emergency shelter or expanding the number of beds available at their current shelter.

Furthermore, community partner organizations highlighted the challenges they face in their efforts to encourage collaborative responses to housing insecurity. Many find it difficult to bring together local actors (service providers, landlords, community organizations, local businesses, and/or municipal government) to discuss and respond to housing insecurity, indicating that many are not interested in collaborative approaches or are not interested in supporting responses to housing insecurity at all.

Other barriers or challenges community partner organizations noted in responding to housing insecurity include strict bylaws and zoning regulations for housing stock, feelings of Nimbyism (sentiments of "Not In My Backyard" from members of the public), and a lack of awareness or understanding of the complexities of housing insecurity.

Conclusion

Rural, remote, and Indigenous communities across Alberta are seeing high rates of housing insecurity resulting from a lack of affordable and adequate housing and the cost of living crisis. Many community members experiencing housing insecurity are couch surfing, staying in emergency shelters, staying in a vehicle or RV, and/or accessing hotels and motels as a form of emergency shelter.

Community partner organizations are working incredibly hard to respond to housing insecurity in their communities. Most are providing basic needs support (including food, clothing, and transportation), mental health support, and/or emergency shelter. However, their efforts to address housing insecurity in the community are often hindered by several challenges, including a lack of sustained funding, emergency shelter beds, services, and collaboration amongst local actors.

While it is clear that greater attention needs to be given to housing insecurity in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities, it is also important to recognize the great efforts community partner organizations have and continue to undertake to best support the needs of community members experiencing housing insecurity.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Questions

- Organization type

- Have you participated in a Housing & Service Needs Estimation or Point-in-Time Count?

- Based on available observational, anecdotal, or quantitative data, please detail the approximate number of community members experiencing each type of housing insecurity along the spectrum of homelessness. If you do not have any available data, please skip to the following question.

- Broadly speaking, what does housing insecurity look like in your community (this can be based on anecdotal, observational, and/or quantitative data)? For example, who are the community members most experiencing housing insecurity (e.g. men, youth, etc.) and how are most community members experiencing housing insecurity (e.g. couch surfing, staying in cars, living in inadequate housing, etc.)?

- What responses has your community developed to address housing insecurity? Select all that apply.

- What responses have been most effective this past winter in responding to housing insecurity?

- What challenges is your community facing in responding to housing insecurity (funding, collaboration, service gaps, capacity, turnover)? On top of increased funding, what additional support(s) do you need to respond to housing insecurity in your community?

- Is there anything else you would want to say to funders or think they should be aware of in your efforts to support those experiencing or at risk of experiencing housing insecurity?

Prepared by the Rural Development Network