



RURAL
DEVELOPMENT
NETWORK



2025

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

OVERVIEW



Thank you for participating in the 2025 Partnership & Collaboration survey. As we begin to think about Strategy 2027–2030, your input helps guide how the Rural Development Network builds relationships, supports community-led initiatives, and collaborates across sectors. These insights will shape our priorities for the next few years, ensuring our work remains grounded in local realities, responsive to emerging needs, and aligned with the shared goal of improving outcomes for rural communities across Canada. We deeply appreciate your insight and your commitment to this shared work.

Engagement Overview

Between November 13–25, 2025 we gathered input from municipal, provincial, and federal partners, as well as non-profit, community, and academic organizations, through a SurveyMonkey questionnaire. We received responses from approximately 20% of the contacts reached, with responses coming primarily from Alberta and Ontario.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report shares what we heard from community members through our Partnership & Collaboration survey (November 13–27, 2025). It summarizes the key themes, priorities, concerns, and suggestions from participants.

As RDN's new CEO, the goal was to understand how partners, funders, and collaborators experience working with us, what's working well, what could be improved, and how we can strengthen relationships.

Feedback from this survey will inform RDN's future priorities, partnerships, and initiatives, including our community engagement strategy and efforts to support strengthening rural, remote, and Indigenous communities and building stronger communities together.

Best,
Melissa Fougere



KEY THEMES & INSIGHTS

Question: What are the biggest opportunities or challenges facing rural, remote, or Indigenous communities right now?

Respondents overwhelmingly identified three key challenges:

1. Key Challenge – Lack of affordable and Safe Housing:

Participants highlighted significant housing pressures, including the absence of new developments, limited overall housing availability, and very few new rental or apartment builds. Aging and deteriorating housing infrastructure were also identified as ongoing concerns, further limiting safe and affordable housing options.

2. Key Challenge – Transportation Concerns:

Transportation was identified as a major barrier, with respondents noting limited access to transportation into major centres, a lack of reliable and consistent options, and few cost-effective alternatives. The vast geographic distances between communities further compound these challenges, making it difficult for residents to access essential services, employment, and support.

3. Key Challenge – Community Capacity Building:

Respondents identified several capacity-related challenges, including the need to strengthen skills and resources for engaging with diverse populations, supporting sustainable growth, and attracting long-term investment. Workforce shortages were noted as a significant barrier, along with limited opportunities for collaboration and the development of community-driven solutions. Additionally, participants highlighted a lack of services, programs, and activities outside of regular business hours, often described as “6 p.m. communities”, which further limits community vitality and engagement.

Additional issues were shared by community members and, although valuable, were raised less often than the primary challenges. These included the need for additional funding opportunities, barriers related to technology access, limited availability of basic needs items, population growth pressures, gaps in services, homelessness, and ongoing concerns related to violence and trauma.

Question: Where do you think RDN can make the most impact in the next 1–3 years?

Based on the responses, it is suggested that RDN focus the next few years on:

- Increasing awareness of rural issues through education and strengthened connectivity across networks and agencies;
- Strengthening its advocacy role as a consistent voice for rural communities;
- Addressing gaps in data availability to better inform decision-makers, to help them understand the needs;
- Advancing housing affordability through practical, solution-oriented approaches.

Other areas such as government relationship building, sharing funding opportunities, coordinated service delivery, newcomer supports and awareness, and capacity building were also noted.



Question: How can RDN’s work best support or align with your organization’s goals and priorities?

Providing research and data that informs planning, decision-making, and evaluation of community needs and outcomes, such as community needs assessments, trend analysis, shared data dashboards, and evaluation tools that help organizations measure impact and identify gaps in services.

Supporting advocacy efforts by amplifying shared priorities and elevating community voices at regional and system levels, for example by coordinating collective advocacy initiatives, sharing evidence-based policy briefs, supporting joint messaging, and creating opportunities for organizations and community members to engage with decision-makers.

Strengthening connectivity and networks to foster collaboration, reduce duplication, and build collective impact across organizations, including hosting networking forums, facilitating cross-sector working groups, maintaining updated directories of services, and supporting partnerships that align organizations around shared goals.

Ensuring consistent information and knowledge sharing so partners have access to timely, accurate, and relevant resources and best practices, through centralized communication platforms, regular updates or newsletters, shared learning sessions, and accessible repositories of tools, resources, and promising practices.

Other areas such as Strengthening Partnerships, Funding opportunities, Community Capacity building, Affordable Housing solutions and Development of Wrap around Services were also identified.

“
RDN strengthens our work by bringing solid data, shared advocacy, and the connections we need to move forward together.”
~Anonymous
”

Question: What's one thing RDN could do to strengthen or improve how we work with partners, funders, or communities?

The top responses included:

- The importance of strong communication & establishing more consistent & transparent channels with partners, funders, and communities, which could include networking opportunities.
- Capacity building in communities could be strengthened through hands-on supports such as training sessions, shared tools, roundtable partnership meetings, surveys and templates, and ongoing guidance tailored to local contexts – sharing information so you don't have to recreate the wheel.
- Exploring guided mentorship opportunities to help build confidence within communities and reduce the burden of navigating complex initiatives independently.

Additional comments emphasized the accessibility of sharing high-quality research information in different formats. Increased awareness of existing RDN connections and opportunities was also noted.

Question: How has RDN added value to your organization or community?

Most respondents noted the significant value of **RDN's fee-for-service work**, particularly the tangible results achieved in their communities, such as completed community plans, needs assessments, and project deliverables that directly supported rural communities and their identified priorities. This was followed by appreciation for **RDN's role as the Reaching Home Community Entity for Rural, Remote, and Indigenous Communities in Alberta**. Respondents also highlighted **RDN's supportive and collaborative approach**, noting that communities continue to be heard and respected through meaningful engagement, open communication, co-design, and collaborative decision-making.

NEXT STEPS

The feedback shared through this engagement will directly shape RDN's priorities and actions over the next few years. Your insights help us understand what matters most to communities, partners, and funders, and they guide how we strengthen our programs, advocacy, and collaborative work.

WE WILL USE THIS INPUT TO:

- Identify where RDN can have the greatest impact
- Strengthen communication and partnership practices
- Build tools, training, and supports that reflect real community needs
- Inform our advocacy, research, and capacity-building efforts
- Improve how we share information, resources, and opportunities across networks

IN THE COMING MONTHS, PARTICIPANTS CAN EXPECT:

- A visual summary of key findings
- Opportunities to stay involved through future conversations, learning sessions, and collaborative initiatives
- Continued efforts to build stronger, more transparent, and more connected relationships across Canada

Your ongoing feedback and contributions will help strengthen RDN as the rural community, social, and economic development partner of choice for homelessness, housing, and socially-safe and inclusive communities. Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences and perspectives with us. Your contributions help strengthen the way we work with funders, community partners, all levels of government, nonprofits, and organizations across rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. We appreciate your insight and your commitment to this shared work.



Building Stronger Rural Communities, Together



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