

# Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions

A Study of the Sustainability of Coalitions in Alberta

October 2014



## Credits

The Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions project was undertaken in partnership with Alberta Culture and Tourism, Alberta Education, and the University of Alberta through the Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap). This report was prepared by ECMap under the supervision of a project steering committee comprised of the following individuals:

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# Executive summary

The purpose of the Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalition project is to contribute to what we know about developing and sustaining effective coalitions. This report integrates the information gathered in the literature review (*Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions: Literature Review*) with primary research undertaken with members of coalitions across Alberta.

Community coalitions have formed for a wide variety of purposes in Alberta and have involved many people and organizations. The practical experience gained in forming and sustaining coalitions can benefit new, as well as, existing coalitions. This report presents the findings of the study, whose goal was to harvest and share the wisdom of coalitions across Alberta. It covers the first three phases:

**Phase 1:** A literature review and highlights report summarizing the last ten years of research into forming and sustaining coalitions.

**Phase 2:** An online survey to develop an inventory of community coalitions in Alberta (as of November 2013) and to identify some of their key characteristics.

**Phase 3:** A series of focused conversations with coalition leaders and members in Alberta to share findings from phase 1 and 2 of the project, and gather knowledge about forming and sustaining coalitions and what coalitions need to support the well-being of their communities.

A number of overlapping themes were identified, including the importance of: a clear vision and purpose; ongoing member recruitment; quality relationships; good leadership; the availability of sufficient and sustainable resources; and addressing larger ecological/political factors. The findings of this project will be useful to individuals who are starting a coalition and to funders who wish to support a coalition model and need to have a better understanding of the factors to take into account. The findings will also be useful to researchers who would like to add to existing knowledge about coalitions.

## Alberta coalitions involved in the study

**Numbers:** Information about a broad range of local, regional and provincial issues was collected from approximately 156 coalitions. While this was not a comprehensive list of coalitions in Alberta, a variety of different types of coalitions were represented, including those that focus on early child development, injury prevention, housing, local food, addictions, literacy, and the environment.

**History:** Most coalitions involved in the focus groups had been in existence for more than three years. Participants spoke of “recycling,” “re-inventing” or “re-inspiring” their work as the focus of their coalitions shifted in response to community need. In using this kind of terminology, focus group participants echoed the life cycle concept that was put forward in the literature review as a useful approach in conceptualizing the non-linear development of coalitions.

**Membership:** The most common sectors represented on coalitions were health, education and social services. Representation from justice, business and environmental interest groups were less common. Some members were not affiliated with a particular sector and took part in coalitions as interested community members. The vast majority of members were women, reflecting what appears to be a gender imbalance in the membership of Alberta coalitions.

## What challenges do Alberta coalitions face?

Overall, the challenges faced by Alberta coalitions align with the factors identified in the literature as being critical to the success of coalitions. These include developing a clear vision, developing effective recruitment and engagement strategies, building positive relationships, and finding secure and sustainable funding. However, the importance given to these challenges differed in study participants' viewpoints and the literature. For example, while both focus groups and survey participants agreed that membership and engagement are one of their top challenges, they did not identify leadership as a primary challenge as did the literature review. Alberta coalitions noted the difficulties they have with time and logistics, a factor that was not mentioned in the literature.

The overall challenges are summarized and weighted as they were cited in the literature review and in the survey and focus session responses:

**Graphic 1: Relative importance of challenges represented in a literature review, survey and focus group sessions**



## What has contributed to the progress or success of Alberta coalitions?

Coalition members addressed a number of strategies to strengthen the sustainability of coalitions, which were identified in the literature review.

**Vision and purpose:** A number of formal and informal strategies have been implemented by coalitions to support the development of a clear and relevant vision and purpose. These strategies, echoed by the literature review, emphasize the importance of creating a clear vision over which people feel ownership.

**Membership:** Recruiting and retaining members was highlighted in the literature as being integral to coalition sustainability. Coalition members used a number of strategies to address this issue, including: engaging the community, focusing on strengths and assets, tapping into people's passions, celebrating success and taking concrete action.

**Quality relationships:** Building and maintaining quality relationships was emphasized by the literature review and focus group participants. Providing informal time for coalition members to socialize with one another, building relationships with new members through personalized, face-to-face interactions and nurturing good communication skills were all highlighted.

**Leadership:** The literature emphasizes the importance of good leadership in sustaining coalitions. Key leadership qualities include promoting others' strengths and involvement, taking a 'backseat' approach and building relationships. Focus groups echoed the importance of 'empowering approaches,' passion and commitment for the coalition's vision and a shared leadership model.

**Funding:** Some coalitions highlighted the benefits of having enough funding to hire staff. However, there was disagreement about the importance of funding in promoting sustainability. This reflects the findings of the literature review, which indicate that coalitions that were created in response to a funding opportunity will find it difficult to carry on their work when the money runs out if a strong sense of ownership and passion has not been established among the coalition membership.

Coalitions emphasized the importance of in-kind resources such as free meeting space in public libraries or schools.

**Structure and operations:** Coalitions highlighted the importance of a backbone organization to support their administrative structure. Coalitions reported building off existing structures, or using an 'anchor' agency to ensure dedicated staff time.

**Time:** A number of strategies are used by coalitions to address the fact that most members do coalition work 'off of the sides of their desks.' These include respecting people's time, using technology to cut down on travel time and employing a staff member to assist with administrative work.

**Getting the message out:** To communicate effectively with outside stakeholders, coalitions used evidence-based information, creativity and social media. They made a point of getting to

know their audience and collaborated with other coalitions to send out communication. The benefit of connecting face-to-face whenever possible was also highlighted.

## **How do Alberta coalitions evaluate their work and how do they think success should be measured?**

The challenges related to evaluating the work of coalitions and the impact on communities was evident in both the literature and the focus groups. Generally, Alberta coalitions are just beginning to implement consistent approaches to evaluating their work. However, a number of important factors were identified:

- using both qualitative and quantitative measures,
- measuring the quality of relationships within the coalition,
- incorporating “evaluative conversations” into strategic planning processes,
- the need for long-term evaluation, and
- the need for more training in evaluation.

## **What else is needed?**

Coalitions identified the following needs:

- more consistent, long-term funding and/or in-kind supports,
- training and tools on engagement, social media, self-evaluation and measuring collective impact;
- government support, both philosophical and practical (i.e. providing resources), and
- opportunities to network and share resources.

# Introduction

The purpose of this report is four-fold:

1. describe a sample of existing coalitions in Alberta, including their purposes, participants, leaders and geographic reach;
2. synthesize the information collected from coalition representatives about factors that support or hinder the development and sustainability of coalitions;
3. integrate the knowledge collected from Alberta coalitions with what is already known from the literature review about the factors that contribute to coalition development and sustainability; and
4. make recommendations to coalitions and government that are based on the findings from the literature review, survey and focus groups.

The report outlines the similarities and differences between the factors that were identified as important to coalition sustainability in the literature review and the experience of coalitions in Alberta. Factors identified by the literature review include: historical factors, membership, quality of relationships, leadership, vision and purpose, concrete measurable wins, larger ecological factors, funding and other resources, training and marketing. The literature review also provided a definition for coalitions and discussed their life cycle, effectiveness, evaluation and contribution to communities.

As noted in the executive summary, this report presents the findings of the Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions project. Phase 1 involved a literature review of more than 100 academic articles, case studies, guides and web content published about or for coalitions, mostly since 2000. Phase 2 consisted of an online survey to develop an inventory of coalitions in Alberta (as of November 2013) and to collect information about some of their key characteristics. About 300 coalitions or networks of coalitions were contacted and invited to participate in the survey. A total of 166 respondents, representing 156 coalitions, responded. Phase 3 was made up of focus group discussions with coalitions to look at the similarities and differences among coalitions in Alberta and compare these to the findings of the literature review. Forty-six coalition members participated in three focus groups in Lethbridge, Edmonton and Airdrie. Focus groups addressed the following questions:

- Who are Alberta coalitions?
- What are the key challenges faced by Alberta coalitions?
- What practices and/or resources have Alberta coalitions found useful in addressing their challenges?
- What else is needed?
- How do Alberta coalitions evaluate their work and how do they think it should be evaluated?

See Appendix A for more information about the methodology used in this report.



# Study findings

## Who are Alberta coalitions?

The definition of coalition that was developed in the literature review was used to determine the groups that were included in the project. The definition was used in introductory e-mails and the online survey, with participants being encouraged to self-select (see Appendix B) whether or not their group fit the definition:

**“Coalitions** are groups of people who come together around a particular issue, with the goal of being a catalyst for change in their community. Other characteristics of coalitions are that they value and benefit from diverse membership, egalitarian practices, a broad focus and long-term goals.”<sup>1</sup>

During two of the focus sessions, participants identified characteristics of a “healthy coalition.” The following themes emerged:

- characteristics of coalitions: everyone has a voice, growth, having clear direction, clear measurable action, shared leadership and accountability;
- characteristics of members: trust, have different perspectives, want to be there, respect diversity, passionate, accepting, committed and personal growth;
- impact of coalitions: making a difference.

It is important to note that the 156 coalitions identified through the survey represent only a portion of the total number of groups in the province that fit the above definition. Throughout the project, it became clear that compiling a complete inventory of coalitions that would be accurate for any length of time was a virtually impossible task. This challenge was echoed by one participant: “There are hundreds of them [coalitions] out there: small, local level groups are popping up all the time.” It also became apparent through focus group discussions that coalitions may change their name and/or area of interest during their lifespan. Some of the information that was collected through the inventory (such as key contacts for coalitions) changed frequently.

It is important to keep this in mind when reading the information that was collected about Alberta coalitions. The information is based on responses from 166 survey respondents (representing 156 coalitions), along with the insights of 46 focus group participants (16 participants in Lethbridge, 14 in Edmonton, and 16 in Airdrie). While the number of focus groups participants was lower than anticipated, participants represented a total of 81 coalitions, as many were active on more than one coalition, especially in smaller communities.

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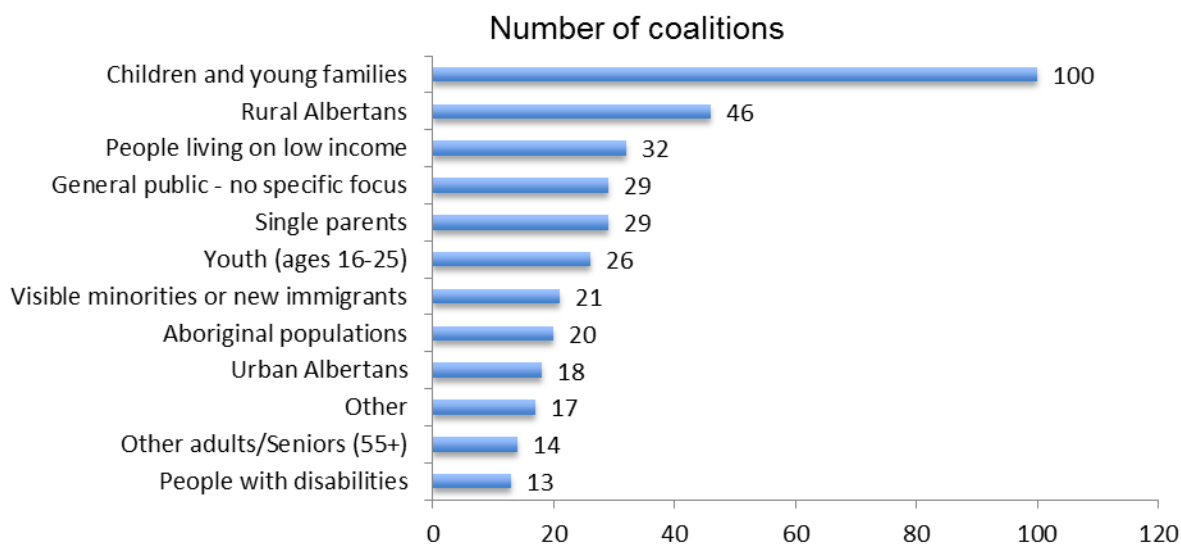
<sup>1</sup> Berger, Samantha. (2013). *Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions*. Edmonton, Alta.: Government of Alberta and Early Child Development Mapping Project, University of Alberta. p. iii. Downloaded January 26, 2015 [http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Final-Harvesting-the-wisdom-November-2013\\_final.pdf](http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Final-Harvesting-the-wisdom-November-2013_final.pdf).

## Focus of Alberta coalitions

Responses to survey questions 1, 2 and 7 (see Appendix A), along with observations made by the researcher and recorders during the focus group sessions, were used to describe trends in the vision and purpose of Alberta's coalitions. For each survey response, the name of the coalition provided in question 1 was compared with the brief statement of vision and purpose provided in question 2. These responses were grouped according to the primary social issue the coalition appeared to address, with a secondary focus recorded when applicable.

From these responses, it is clear that Alberta coalitions address a wide variety of issues. The key issues currently being addressed by coalitions in Alberta include: children or early childhood development (ECD), health, economic (including housing, local food, and business development), injury prevention, traffic safety, addiction, watersheds, youth, physical activity, cancer and chronic disease prevention, schools, literacy, violence against Aboriginal women, and new immigrant populations. Graphic 2 shows the key demographic groups addressed by Alberta coalitions.

**Graphic 2: Key demographic groups**



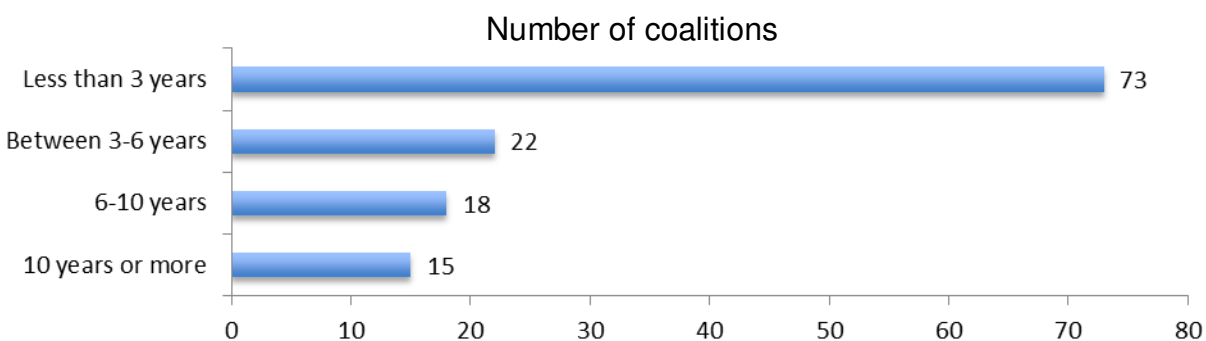
Due to the project's affiliation with the Early Child Development Mapping Project, it is not surprising that early childhood development was the most commonly reported focus of both survey respondents and focus group participants. When focus group participants were asked to list all of the coalitions they are currently involved in, however, a number of coalitions were identified that had not been included in the original inventory, with most of these being non-ECD related. At least 35 survey respondents included a focus on "broader community capacity" in addition to their primary area of interest such as health or traffic safety. Four coalitions reported "broader community capacity" as their sole focus.

## Life cycle

Results from questions 3, 8 and 9 of the survey, along with focus group discussions, were used to understand where coalitions were in their 'life cycle.' The life cycle concept was used in the literature review to emphasize the fact that coalitions do not develop in a linear fashion. In fact, there is continuous change and feedback as coalitions and their communities change. The life cycle stages were described in the literature review as follows: the emergence of a leader or champion, the creation of a core group, development of structures, creation of a mission and vision and action plans, evaluation and a wrap-up or new beginning. (See *Harvesting the wisdom of coalitions: Review highlights.*)

The focus groups and survey questions were used to establish how useful this concept was for coalition members to understand the development of their coalition. First, information about the length of time coalitions have existed was collected.

**Graphic 3: Length of time coalitions have existed**



Overall, focus group participants valued the concept of life cycle or life stage, calling it a “great idea,” “very applicable” and noting that, “most non-profit sectors talk about life cycles for everything that goes forward.” In response to the question: “How is the concept of life cycle useful for working in coalitions?” coalition members felt that it was “normalizing,” “helps to make things more tangible as what we’re doing is often very intangible” and “helps to explain to others what we’re doing.” Coalition members also seemed to find the life cycle and harvest metaphors useful in describing their coalition, using words like dormancy, stagnant, fallow and deeper roots. One group referred to its experience of losing funding as a “hailstorm.”

In addition to the life cycle concept, some groups suggested that the idea of “recycling” was helpful in thinking about their coalition, with comments such as: “We have recycled about three to four times — there comes a time when you need to refocus; what is our purpose?” Others used terms such as “reshaping” or “re-inspiring,” adding comments about how it was important not to go back through the same cycle, but to go through new things.

Overall, participants agreed that the development of their work is better depicted as a circle or spiral rather than as linear. One participant noted: “There’s no way this is linear — some phases have to happen all the time — maybe spiral would be a better image or the infinity concept. We loop around. Growth, dormancy, then growth again.”

As well as discussing the relevance of the life-cycle concept, coalitions were asked: “Which life-cycle stage best describes where your coalition is at?” Coalitions chose from a number of different ‘life-stage’ options and interestingly, responses did not necessarily relate to the number of years the coalition had existed. For example, one coalition that had existed for slightly more than two years related its life stage with its funding cycle, noting “We’re at a maturity stage now because our funding is just about finished.” Others, however, did not make this connection. For example, one respondent stated, “Even though we’re near the end of funding, we are still very much in the ‘germination’ or nurturing phase.” Another echoed this, stating, “Even though funding is ending, our group is pretty solid; we know we’re going to be there.”

Others seemed to judge their place in the life cycle based on their projects or activities. One participant clearly separated these concepts, however, stating that: “We still have some projects running, but our coalition is also sort of dormant in regards to enthusiasm and uncertainty regarding funding.”

Overall these responses clearly indicate that there is much more to judging the maturity or strength of a coalition than simply knowing the number of years they have been in existence.

## **Leadership and administrative supports**

Responses to survey questions 10 and 11 provided insight into the leadership structure and administrative support available to coalitions. More than half (51 per cent) reported that their structure or decision-making processes are “somewhat formal” with another 42 per cent reporting that their structure is “very informal.” Only nine (seven per cent) of the coalitions represented in the survey have a more formal leadership structure.

In regard to administrative supports, survey responses indicate that 100 (63 per cent) of coalitions have a paid staff member or other supports in place. One respondent described this as “a strong anchor agency that looks after the functioning of the committee,” while another referred to “strong municipal support and dedicated staffing from AHS (Alberta Health Services).” Others specifically mentioned having a paid person to “manage the daily operations and lead work with members.”

## **Funding**

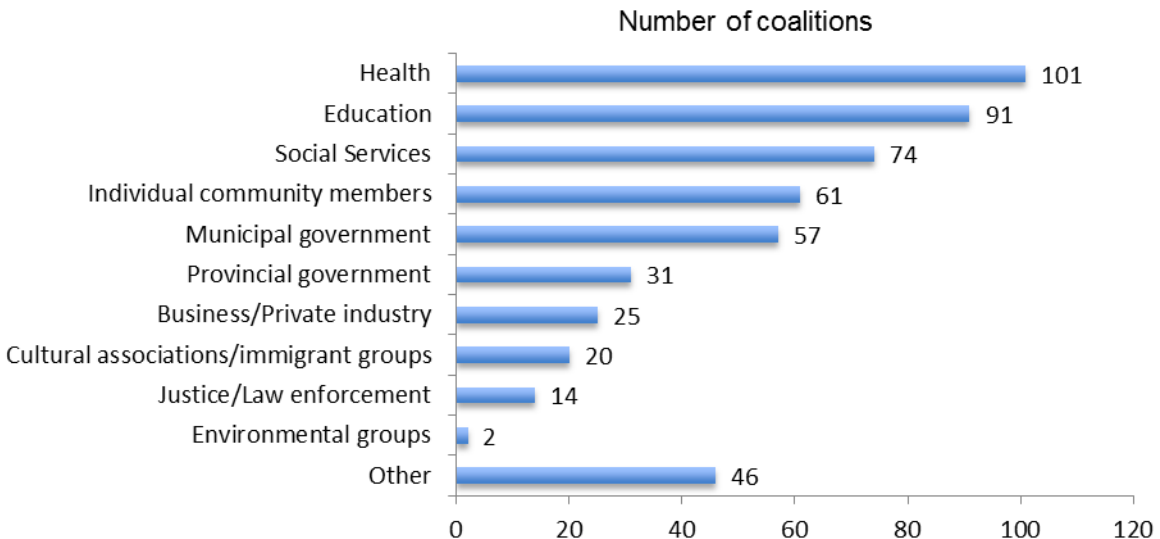
The literature review links sustainability to whether or not a coalition was started in response to a funding opportunity. Coalitions that organized themselves around a funding opportunity may lack a feeling of ‘ownership’ over the issue that they set out to address, which may impact long-term sustainability. In the case of Alberta coalitions, 66 per cent of survey respondents said their

coalition was set up as a result of a funding opportunity and 74 per cent said their coalition currently receives funding. It was not clear, however, how this actually impacted the sustainability of their coalitions.

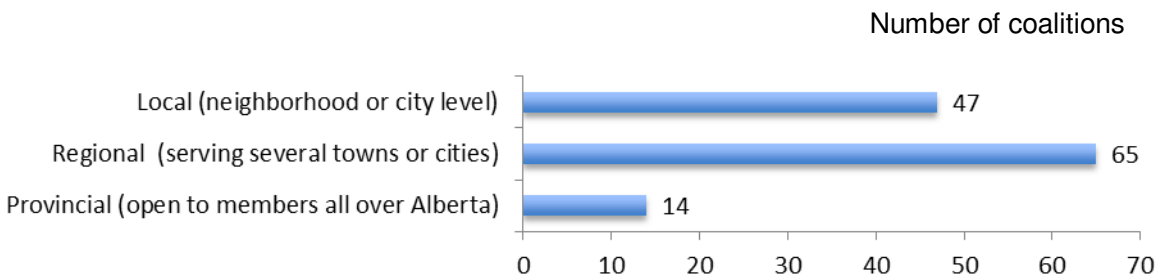
## Other demographic characteristics

Information about other demographic characteristics of coalitions (including geographic reach, membership size and sector representation) was also collected. This made it possible to link some of the information gathered through the process of creating the inventory and the more detailed information that emerged from the survey or focus group discussions.

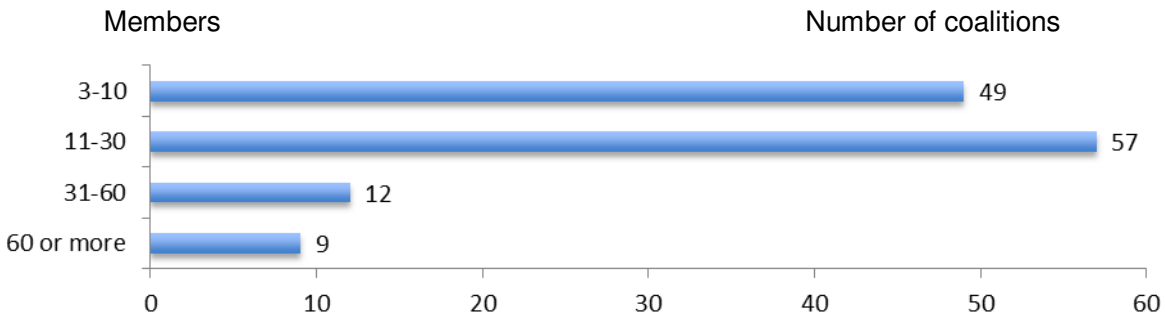
**Graphic 4: Sectors actively represented on coalitions**



**Graphic 5: Geographic reach of coalitions**



**Graphic 6: Approximate size of coalitions**



## What challenges are faced by Alberta coalitions?

As coalitions, and the communities they serve, change, the challenges coalitions experience change as well. It is more useful, therefore, to look at the challenges that coalitions face during different phases in their life cycle rather than their challenges in general. The importance of considering the life cycle in relation to challenges emerged in responses to the question: “What have been challenges or barriers for your coalition or has hindered your coalition’s progress or success?” For example, one group noted that: “It depends on where your coalition is in life cycle, scope of coalition, where the mandate came from, how you came together.” Another coalition member echoed this observation: “It depends on what stage where you are on — later on there is more conflict. Groups in general, you can see the ebbs and flows. You never see one that gets along the whole time. It seems to be the six- to seven-year mark that you get the seven-year-itch. “

That being said, survey responses identified a number of common challenges facing coalitions, including: a lack of time, the recruitment and retention of members, working with diversity, funding, sharing information and publicity, a lack of clear vision and purpose, and a lack of consistent support and/or direction from government partners. Focus group discussions echoed these themes, but the relative importance given to each factor tended to differ and several new themes were identified that had not emerged in the survey. Themes that appeared in both the survey and focus groups are presented below, followed by a discussion of relative weighting.

### Vision and purpose

According to the literature review, a common vision and purpose, which coalition and community members feel they own and can relate to, are crucial factors in coalition

sustainability. Not having a clear vision and purpose can be very detrimental in fact to the ability of coalition members to work together toward their goal.

The strong influence of having a clear vision was also evident in both survey responses and focus group discussions. Only four survey respondents listed a common and clear vision or purpose as one of their strengths. In contrast, at least 16 respondents noted that developing a clear and cohesive vision and purpose was a challenge in their work. As one respondent put it, “The board is indecisive and not clear in the final goal and outcome for a sustainable project.” Another identified “no purpose” as a primary challenge.

One focus group participant linked the development of a clear vision with the ability to attract funding, pointing out the interrelationship among the different factors that support coalition sustainability: “The allotment and designation of funding goes hand in hand with clear and attainable goals too. You can have a coalition that wanted to build a big overpass by the school to make it safer for children, but who’s going to come up with the 72 million dollars? Maybe a cross-walk person will do the same thing. Without the clear (realistic) goals, what will happen with a coalition like that? If people aren’t working within more realistic boundaries (in terms of funding) and goals, people will splinter.”

Focus group participants also identified establishing a clear vision and purpose as a major challenge during at least five small group discussions. Participants used a variety of terms to talk about this issue: establishing clarity of purpose, ensuring a collective vision, and developing a mutual, common understanding, strategy and clear and attainable goals. One group concluded: “This challenge contributes to all of the other barriers — without a clear purpose, you can’t have a coalition.”

Establishing a common vision was related to other challenges, such as lack of ownership, and varied levels of commitment and buy-in among members. This reinforced the finding in the literature review that having a clear vision and purpose is intertwined with many other factors that relate to the sustainability of coalitions. For example: “The allotment and designation of funding goes hand in hand with clear and attainable goals too. [...] Without the clear (realistic) goals, what will happen with a coalition like that?”

Some participants identified time and challenging logistics as contributing factors to their coalition’s inability to create a clear, cohesive vision: “Everyone is working off the side of their desk and timing relates to not being on the same page because people come late or not often enough and then they miss so many things and take the group backwards several steps.”

The importance of creating a sense of ownership over the vision and mission was repeated in the literature, as well as the focus groups. One group summarized this issue: “Member organization’s policy not aligning with coalition work leads to conflicts in vision and ideas about what should be done.”

## Membership

By far the strongest theme that emerged in the survey responses was the challenge that coalitions experience around recruitment and maintaining involvement: at least 50 respondents highlighted this as a challenge. The difficulties related to member recruitment and maintaining involvement were also emphasized in the literature review, along with a clear vision and strong leadership, as instrumental to the sustainability and success of coalitions.

Survey respondents identified several specific challenges related to membership, including: recruiting from certain sectors in the community such as business, municipal and non-profit leaders, involving local volunteers (who are not paid to be there as part of their

job), maintaining commitment, sharing responsibilities and work, and keeping members excited and involved. One respondent linked the challenge of engaging a wide membership base to sustainability: “It is becoming more and more difficult to find community members who wish to be actively involved at the table planning and leading the initiatives. If we did not have the commitment from the AHS (Alberta Health Services) and town staff, we probably could not do many of our initiatives. Our biggest concern right now is sustainability.”

As mentioned in the literature review, it is not only important to have a certain number of people around the table, but members should also represent the diversity in the community and be committed and passionate about the issue. The challenge of engaging diverse interests and populations was highlighted by a number of survey respondents. Eight survey respondents commented on the difficulties of having rural communities working alongside urban areas. “One community is a city of 10,000 while the other communities are small (1,000) — we have a tendency to do our big projects in the larger community, expecting members from the smaller communities to attend and that is not necessarily happening.” Others mentioned the challenge of engaging diverse populations within the same geographic area — the language barriers experienced by Low German Mennonite communities, for example. The need to reconcile the different perspectives found in diverse groups was cited as a common challenge.

Challenges around membership came up as a clear theme in focus discussions, as well. Seven out of nine groups identified it as a “most important challenge.” In addressing this theme, a variety of phrases were used, including: people power, keeping a coalition community-based, getting the right people to the table, and community mobilization. One conversation in Edmonton focused on the challenge of balancing government involvement with grassroots membership: “When government is invited to a table of grassroots (members) they take over; our real challenge is engaging Mr. and Mrs. Joe/Linda Public.”



### Gender imbalance

Out of the 46 participants who attended focus groups, six were men. One focus group participant commented on the gender imbalance: “Have you looked around the room to see who’s here [referring to the number of women in the room]? And it’s been pretty much that way with all the coalition work I’ve done through the years.” The literature review did not address this issue in any depth, but it is noteworthy and may merit further investigation.



Having diverse membership was related to varying levels of passion and commitment as well: “There are a lot of people there because they are expected to be. There are others that are there because there’s a passion. At the same time, you come up with ideas and the same people are the ones willing to actually do things. The same people do all of the work. That’s with any group.”

## **Relationships**

Interestingly, the challenge of building positive relationships was mentioned by only one survey respondent, while at least five focus groups identified this as a challenge. One group described it as their most important challenge: “The ABCs of relationships are the greatest challenge because it affects your ability to resolve the other challenges.” Another group described the challenges related to the lack of quality relationships as the “inability to work as a group” and the “need to wear a coalition hat.” Difficulties with relationships were attributed to a variety of causes, such as conflicting resources or priorities of members/organizations and a community history of working in silos. Airdrie participants attributed problems with relationships to a “limited knowledge of collective impact” while Lethbridge participants mentioned the importance of building community support for collective action.

By far the most common cause cited for challenging relationships was trying to connect with diverse communities. One early childhood development coalition member spoke about the challenges of trying to serve five diverse communities: “We all live in such diverse areas and it is difficult to bring together people for a number of reasons. People live in different areas, with different needs, people have different cultural backgrounds and may not all speak English as a first language [...]” Personality issues and differences in values were also seen as undermining the ability to create strong relationships within coalitions, including: loud personalities, hidden agendas, turf wars, social sector biases, competition over the same resources, members’ level of collaborative experience, and individuals who require formal processes versus those who strive for an unstructured environment.

Strategies for improving relationships among coalition members included helping members to see their own strengths, active listening and a balanced participation.

## **Leadership**

The relative importance of leadership as a challenge differed considerably between survey and focus group participants. While survey respondents did not identify leadership as an issue, two of the nine small group discussions within the larger focus groups identified this as one of the most important challenges in coalition building. The lack of attention paid to leadership in the survey is surprising, given the high level of importance it was given in the literature review and the focus groups.

Those that did identify leadership as a key challenge for their coalition, highlighted its importance by specifying that good leadership “sustains the purpose” of the coalition, “impacts

people's ability to build relationships" and "leads from behind." The challenge of finding the right kind of leadership was elaborated by one focus group participant: "The problem isn't having too strong of a leader or too weak of a leader; you need just the right balance. Both lack of leadership and strong leadership can be a challenge." Interestingly, participants in all three focus group locations identified the balance between strong and weak leadership as a key challenge, avoiding "too many chefs in the kitchen" while "finding people to share responsibility of the leadership."

## **Funding**

This theme was addressed in both the qualitative and quantitative responses to the survey, with at least 30 survey respondents listing 'funding' as a challenge for their coalition. This included insufficient funding, the time required to apply for funding, funding restrictions and funding time frames. Many coalitions find that applying for annual grants is time consuming and takes them away from their main focus. The report writing that goes along with receiving funding was also highlighted as being very time-consuming. One group described the drawback of spending too much time on proposal writing: "Think about the wage cost of proposal writing. You could burn through thousands of dollars of salary costs for a \$2,000 grant." The restrictions put on some types of government funding can be challenging for coalitions that often benefit from a more flexible structure. The "potential for territorial control of resources" and the "time-consuming nature of decisions around funding" were also mentioned as funding-related challenges.

Inadequate funding impacted the ability of coalitions to affect change. Five respondents noted that they were unable to pay someone to take responsibility for administrative and other time-consuming coalition activities. In addition to paying for staff, coalitions mentioned that funding is particularly helpful for covering members' child-care and transportation costs, and renting a consistent meeting space.

Lack of funding and declining funding sources were seen as a general trend in the province by one respondent who noted that: "Although we have stretched our funding over many years, we have now reached the end of all of our grant dollars and don't know how long we will be able to maintain some of our initiatives without accessing some external funding. We are also concerned about the lack of grant opportunities that are currently available. All of the grants that we have received in the past are no longer in existence."

## **Paid staff and administrative support**

Focus group participants saw having a paid staff member and administrative support for their coalition as both a strength and challenge. Some coalitions saw a paid staff member as being essential to the success of the coalition, especially in helping with everyday details and the logistics of running a coalition. Other participants noted that paid coordinators can negatively impact participation: "Members see the paid coordinator as doing everything. The paid position

should be more a facilitator, should support the leadership. If they got hit by a truck, I would like that coalition to be able to carry on.”

Participants also spoke of the impact of paid staff on coalition governance and decision-making: “The coordinator offers us consistency and you are bound to falter if you lose that consistency. We have an ongoing internal coalition struggle about whether to rehire a coordinator; we have differing opinions about our needs.”

Differing opinions about the benefits and pitfalls of having paid staff can be partially understood in light of the findings in the literature review. The literature clearly outlines the importance of having a membership with a strong sense of ownership over the coalition’s vision and mission, and a leader who nurtures and empowers coalition members. Coalitions need to cultivate a sense of ownership because if, and when, paid staff leave or are unable to support them, members are able to continue without them.

## **Time and logistics**

Time was the second most frequently cited challenge by survey respondents (at least 38). The lack of time to be involved in coalition activities because of “the many other duties and responsibilities carried by our members,” was how the challenge was generally framed. A heavy workload was cited by several respondents as the key issue underlying the lack of time. Scheduling meetings to meet everyone’s availability, the time it takes to travel to meetings, and the time and patience required to build a coalition were also cited as difficulties. Frustrations were also raised about the time it takes to make ‘progress’ while working on a coalition. One participant cited the problem as: “our meetings are definitely challenging as they are long and do not seem to finish with any concise results.” Another commented that “work can take more time than when done within one organization.”

Similar challenges with time were voiced by focus group participants. At least seven of nine groups used the term “time” when identifying their challenges, with three grouping it with logistics or operations. Focus groups and survey respondents identified similar logistics challenges, including long travel distances, scheduling meetings to suit members, and the time it takes to reach consensus and build a positive team environment. Focus group participants related the lack of time to an overall sense of being too busy in both their personal and professional lives: “Time deserves an extra category compared to other logistical barriers like ‘transportation’. Doesn’t everyone feel like they are more busy in their role than before?”

Participants also felt a great deal of time was lost because of factors that were beyond their control. For example, the need to “continually orient new members due to high turnover in communities” and the problem of “short-term government funding that does not allow for building long-term sustainable outcomes” were both highlighted.

Despite the emphasis that survey respondents and focus group participants put on time constraints, this challenge was notably lacking in the literature review.

## **Getting the message out**

Communication challenges were identified as internal, within coalitions, and external, with outside audiences. Getting people to trust one another and share their work within coalitions were reported as internal issues. As one respondent put it, “The issue is complex — it covers many silos of information and people.” Raising general public awareness and being “acknowledged at higher levels” were also difficult. Different modes of communication were used to combat this problem. One respondent described the challenge as: “Finding alternative ways to disseminate information on early child development and the coalition other than paper print materials.”

Focus groups echoed these struggles. One participant put it simply: “Getting the word out is easier said than done.” Participants recognized the importance of reaching all constituents, having consistent messaging, making better use of social media and building awareness about their area of focus. They struggled with all of these issues.

## **Larger ecological factors**

Larger ecological factors can be a challenge for coalitions, as the literature review points out. Ecological factors can range from the political climate to environmental disasters.

Several survey responses pinpointed restructuring and the lack of a coordinated government system as broader factors impacting their coalitions. One respondent mentioned “bureaucratic roadblocks and getting municipal leaders to recognize ECD as an issue” as a major challenge. Another participant suggested that a lack of understanding by some government departments regarding the mutually beneficial role of coalitions and advocacy in supporting the provincial government’s agendas and success as issues. A Calgary area respondent described the impact of the 2012 flood on the community and coalition: “Getting community buy-in led us to change our focus to prevention and continuing momentum after the floods — or changing directions due to it.”

Participants in one focus group used the word “politics” to describe what they saw as one of their biggest challenges. This included intimidating external pressures, provincial/regional unwillingness to explore policy change, the perception that an issue is solved, government and non-profit sectors working in silos, shifting demographics and the complexity of working in a large urban centre.

## **Relative importance of challenges identified**

In summary, the challenges identified through the survey and focus groups were the same as some of the factors identified in the literature. All three emphasized the importance of a clear vision and mission, for example. Focus groups and survey respondents put more emphasis on

the importance of funding and time, and less on the importance of leadership, compared to the literature review, however.

**Graphic 7: Relative importance of challenges represented in literature, survey and focus group sessions**



## What has contributed to the progress or success of Alberta coalitions?

Data from survey responses and focus group sessions were used to answer this question. Although survey respondents were not asked this question directly, their responses to the question: “Describe one or two strengths or highlights of your coalition’s work” (question 12) were relevant in understanding the factors that have contributed to their success.

Three different questions used during the focus group sessions yielded responses that provide insights into how coalitions achieved their success.

1. Part three of the morning session on identifying challenges included approximately 10 minutes for participants to discuss: “What are some ways your coalitions have addressed and overcome these challenges?” (A total of nine groups addressed this question.)

Table conversations in the afternoon also posed the following questions:

2. What has contributed to your coalition’s progress or success?
3. What are some of your coalition’s ‘best practices’ you would recommend to others?
4. What information, tools, resources, assistance or other support has your coalition used and found helpful?

In analyzing the data, it became apparent that the strengths or success factors mentioned by participants often aligned with themes identified in the literature review and in the “challenges” section of the focus group sessions. In addition, several new themes became apparent, which are elaborated on below.

## **Vision and purpose**

While only four survey responses to the question on strengths appeared to relate to the category of ‘Defining vision and purpose,’ focus group discussions yielded a number of responses that illustrate the way that various aspects of a coalition’s vision and purpose relate to its success:

Strategic planning: Strategic planning helped coalition members to clarify their vision and purpose and maintain their relevance as the coalition evolved. Vision and purpose were integrated into the coalition’s “road maps” or “milestones.” Although the vision and purpose of the coalition could be quite broad, this had to be balanced with concrete goals. (This was echoed in the literature review, which found that broad, strategic planning has to be balanced with concrete, measurable, short-term, wins). One coalition member recommended “narrowing your goal enough and targeting a few things: You can’t be everything to everybody.”

Revisiting the vision: This is important for two reasons. **First**, the vision needs to respond to changes at the community and coalition level. Coalitions have to be flexible in their vision and ability to respond to new circumstances. One participant summarized this well: “Part of best practices is evaluating what you’re doing, to know that moving forward you are being the most effective as possible. Is your process working? You need a process for that. Revisiting the goal every so often is important. You need to tweak it and make it achievable, as well as your vision and your mission.”

A few participants spoke of the importance of flexibility in defining their work, “letting the goals change and not always working towards one thing; letting it adjust accordingly.” One coalition member spoke of “revisiting/renewing the vision and mission on an ongoing basis to keep it fresh.” This could be facilitated by outside input. One participant described the effectiveness of this approach: “Having an outside source to help us do this was very successful.”

Evaluating the coalition’s goals and/or doing a needs assessment of the community could also help to determine if the coalition’s vision was still relevant and achievable. A number of coalitions found needs assessments to be helpful in “finding the needs of each community and family,” “tapping into people’s passion,” and “finding the needs that are considered critical.”

**Second**, practices that recognize changes at the coalition level have to be integrated into coalition work to support success. It is important that coalition members, new and old, have a strong sense of the coalition’s vision and purpose. This is especially relevant given the finding, both in the literature review and in this project study that members who feel ownership over the coalition’s area of focus will be more engaged and likely to participate. One focus group suggested, “You **MUST** state the vision at least once a meeting to keep it strong and to help new members understand why we are here.”

## Membership

A number of communities outlined specific strategies that they used to recruit and retain coalition membership, a challenge identified in the previous section.

Engage the community: Engaging the community in defining needs helps to recruit a more diverse coalition membership. One focus group participant stated this connection clearly: “You need awareness of your community and your audience to recruit effectively.” Thirty-three respondents described their ability to do this as a strength.

Coalitions engaged their communities through a number of different methods, including: conducting surveys, hosting social events and making a concerted effort to have parents sit on coalitions. One group reported particular success with hosting a ‘Dinner and Dialogues’ to engage in community discussion.

Appreciate diversity: Embrace diversity as a strength. The literature review emphasizes the benefits of a diverse coalition (both sectorally and demographically). Achieving this diversity and dealing with the challenges it may entail was clearly an obstacle for some coalitions (as outlined in the previous section). However, 20 respondents referred to the diversity of their coalition as a strength, including the diversity of viewpoints, backgrounds and interests, assets, knowledge and sectors.

Tap into people’s passion: This theme appeared numerous times in the survey and focus discussions. The literature review notes the importance of connecting coalition goals to people’s passions. Ownership over the issue also implies a certain amount of passion or commitment. This was clearly connected to recruitment by one group that said, “When a person can tell how this relates to who they love, then they are on board.” Another statement reinforced this learning: “You have to make it relevant to the people you are trying to connect with, tap into their emotion. Passion and emotion are what drive communities, and then communities thrive. If there’s no passion they will come to the table but they are not taking it away. They also won’t continue coming to the table — at a certain point they will stop.”

Build on strengths: One suggestion for recruiting membership was to take a strengths-based approach. One group spoke of using appreciative inquiry interviews to recruit new members.

## Relationships

The inability to create strong relationships was a big challenge for some coalitions. The opposite was true for those that were able to forge strong relationships. Relationships that were “collaborative” and engendered a “sense of community” helped to create success for coalitions, along with “teamwork” and “connections.” As the literature review notes, a positive history of working together forms a solid basis for positive relationships in coalitions. This was reflected in one respondent’s comment: “Community partners work very well together and had worked together prior to funding.”

100 cups of coffee: Taking the time to invest in personal, face-to-face conversations with people emerged as an important theme in the literature review and was reiterated during the focus

group conversations as one of the most important factors in building successful coalitions. “100 cups of coffee and taking time for individual conversations” were seen as instrumental to building a strong membership base. Typical focus group comments included the following: “Individual grassroots conversations are really powerful” and “‘100 cups of coffee’ develops relationships and keeps it personal.” Building trusting, personal relationships was seen as “especially important when new people come in — learning about the person’s turf and values and finding commonalities really takes trust, time.” One group had a lively discussion on using the “R.A.F.F” approach as a cornerstone of their work: Relationships, Action, Food, Fun.

Building strong relationships requires a big investment of time, not only at the beginning of a coalition, but also throughout its life cycle: “What is a strong core? A strong core takes time. You think a coalition that’s been there a long time will have had the time to develop a strong core, but it doesn’t always work like that. What are the ingredients of a strong core? Relationships, respect, taking the time to have a conversation about what you believe and talk about your belief system. They do it ongoing. There’s an incredible range of skills and those conversations are really valuable.”

Pay attention to process and structure: Several groups mentioned the importance of establishing ground rules or guidelines for working together. One group described this as: “Having a good consensus building process. Go around the table and ask for input. What are your thoughts? Otherwise, some people may not speak up.” Others spoke of the importance of “having a good structure: working principles, values, conflict of interest rules, how we recruit members, and that guidelines are decided on together.” A good leader navigated the tension between developing personal relationships and having more formal mechanisms or strategies in place to ensure that members felt respected and valued at the table: “What are some of the conditions that let people thrive? How do leaders adjust the climate to let things click? Establishing and maintaining an atmosphere of trust. What are the ground rules? They will ensure they are upheld. The trust of if somebody steps up and shows leadership there’s the trust that the whole coalition will be behind them.”

Build communication skills: Coalition members were mindful that having strong communication and relationship-building skills is a learned practice. One group put it this way: “Listening is a learned process; it doesn’t come naturally to everyone. You need to listen with the intent to understand, not to respond. If that’s not going on, people don’t feel validated or honoured.” Another spoke of the importance of patience and forgiveness in learning to listen: “Patience, reading who you are with can be tough. It takes time. Have patience for coalitions to click. Perseverance and forgiveness. We will all make mistakes.” An example of a strategy that may be taught is to encourage people to “be comfortable enough and honest enough to say I am in a conflict and step out.”

## **Action-oriented**

Achieving concrete, measurable wins was also reported as a coalition strength. Concrete wins help to sustain membership involvement, as the literature review points out. While some individuals appreciate long-term planning, others need to see results in order to feel that things



are moving forward and their time is being well-spent. Coalition members who described themselves as “action-oriented” or “doers” saw these qualities as a strength. At least 29 responders identified this as a strength, citing numerous examples of ‘measurable wins’ such as: bringing in high-quality speakers, hosting well-attended events, hosting a yearly conference, and creating and providing free calendars and information grab bags to their community. External recognition, such as receiving the Town Community Spirit award for Volunteer Group of the Year, was listed as one example of a concrete ‘win’ that boosted the confidence and pride of the coalition.

## **Leadership**

In contrast to the literature review, relatively few coalition members identified leadership as being key to the success of their coalition. One reason for this may be because good coalition leaders tend to lead from behind, making their contribution to the coalition less obvious. One coalition member recognized the quiet nature of a good leader: “There is typically a dominant personality or two. Your need is good leadership. Sometimes this is not apparent, but if this person or two leaves, things can fall apart. They were the glue, although that was not apparent before.”

Regardless, a number of leadership attributes were identified by eight survey respondents and two focus groups:

Passion and commitment: The characteristics that describe a good leader also define an engaged community member. The literature review also found that good leaders and members share many of the same characteristics. Passion helps leaders maintain a clear vision of where the coalition is going, as one coalition member pointed out. “Our leadership is always looking forward and is passionate about the cause: the leadership comes from the vision and the ‘why are we here’.”

Empowering approach: One coalition recognized the importance of an empowering approach clearly: “Good leadership is really allowing people to access their own gifts and talents and be contributing members. A good leader doesn’t tell people what to do, but creates an environment where people are empowered to participate.”

Shared leadership: According to the literature review, shared leadership models can be effective because they formalize the importance of nurturing leadership among different coalition members. They also emphasize the fact that the coalition’s vision and purpose belong to the larger group, not just one individual. A number of coalitions reported using a ‘shared leadership’ model, including intentional shared leadership for all decisions and actions, using co-chairs and rotating leadership.

Shared leadership highlights the non-hierarchical nature of coalitions. One respondent described the benefits and challenges of this leadership style as follows: “We may be used to structural leadership but within the coalition context it really should be all of the leaders are without authority so that there’s no top-down structure within the coalition, which could be a good thing if the synergy of the group is good and bad if people are taking their own agenda and

running with it. You have to be able to establish the respect and relationships, but you have natural leaders that come to the top, but they have to be empowering for the coalition to feel like they can contribute. You need to be able to use the right leadership style for the type of group or situation.”

## **Funding**

As previously noted, only a few survey respondents described funding as a strength, even though a total of 112 (70 per cent) indicated that they currently receive funding. Focus group discussions also yielded very few responses in terms of how coalitions have been able to address the challenge of sustainable funding.

Nevertheless, at least six survey respondents noted that grants or access to funding had been a strength or asset to their work. For example, one group reported accessing more than \$60,000 in grants, which “allowed us to install an outdoor fitness park, walking trail signs, as well as healthy walking signs above the indoor track.” While others mentioned “innovation” and “seed” funding, only one mentioned access to ongoing funding to support forward-thinking planning and project outcomes. Coalitions have worked in different ways to maximize their funding. One approach has been to set up a social enterprise, while others saved money by working collaboratively with other coalitions to share costs for things such as a booth at trade shows and fairs, for example.

The theme of funding was also identified by focus group respondents. There was disagreement about the relative importance of funding to the overall success of coalitions, however. One focus group participant stated, “We do not want any money because we think it poisons the pot.” Another noted, “You don’t need funding to start something.” One group expressed the mixed response to funding as follows: “Engagement and (financial) capacity are interdependent: both are required for sustainability. If dollars are there, people will follow but sometimes if admin and dollars are there then people may become less engaged. If there is both good (financial) capacity and passion, then people become engaged.” This statement reiterates the findings of the literature review, which showed mixed evidence about the effects of funding on coalition sustainability. The review cautioned that coalitions that start because of a funding opportunity may find it more difficult to sustain their work when the funding runs out because members may feel less ownership over and passion for the issue that the coalition was set up to address. Authors of various studies do not suggest that this is a reason to stop funding coalitions, but that particular attention needs to be paid to the importance of building ownership over a coalition’s vision and mission.

## **Structure and operations**

Need for an ‘anchor agency’ or dedicated staff: In terms of the structure and operation of a coalition, respondents to both the survey and focus discussions agreed that having a dedicated staff member in place is important to their work. While only six survey respondents referred to this as a strength or highlight of their work, 100 respondents (63 per cent) reported that they

have a paid staff member or other structural supports in place. Another group mentioned the importance of having regional support “such as an ECMap community development zone coordinator.” Regardless of whether the work was done through formal structural support or a paid staff person, having support was regarded as a strength by coalitions that had this. For example, focus group respondents emphasized the need for a paid person to “manage the daily operations and lead work with members.” Alternatively, some of this work can be done by a strong “anchor agency that looks after the functioning of the committee.” For example, one survey respondent reported a key strength as “strong municipal support and dedicated staffing from AHS (Alberta Health Services).”

Build on structure that already exists: While funding for a dedicated staff person was not always possible, focus group participants mentioned the potential in embedding coalition work within the respective organizations of coalition members: “If you have people on your coalition [that represent a particular organization], it is important that they are committed and embed pieces of the project into their organization so that it has sustainability. If they take on a certain piece, it can be supported and you don’t always have to look for the funding. Access the infrastructure that already exists. Align the mandates and make it theirs.”

Flexibility in structure: Having a structure of support was clearly a strength for coalitions that had it, but focus group participants also cautioned that coalitions had to maintain their flexibility: “Too much structure limits what could happen. It’s a fine line. You need the right level of structure. You can have structure without formalizing it. Your leadership has to establish that type of loose structure so that they’re honouring all of the needs of the people in the group. You can make the structure apparent to the people looking for the structure. It may be about reframing it for those people so that they can see it.”

When it came to operations, some participants regarded a consistent approach as a strength: “We’ve had our meetings on the same day same time for 12 years!!! AND FREE teleconference .... 28 YEARS of consistency!” Others identified the strength of having a consistent approach to orienting new members through the use of a ‘coalition orientation tool kit’ that includes member orientation and history, members contact information, early child development results, terms of reference, the values of the coalition, ROI (Return on Investment) fact sheet, and the roles and responsibilities of members. This group also mentioned the idea of sharing a work plan with new members. They did caution that “this may also scare people off.” Another group recommended a consistent approach to “cataloguing skills and skills sets (who’s good at what),” which they said could be informal or structured.

## **Getting the word out**

Marketing and/or communications was identified by only a few respondents as a strength of their coalition. Marketing was described as having capacity in raising public awareness, being visible in the community and the ability to disseminate information to target groups. Being able to do this through multiple forms of media was also seen as a strength (i.e. paper, social media, website, e-newsletter).

One of the most unique strengths of working as a coalition was articulated by one coalition member: “We can say what needs to be said publicly without the restrictions of our member organizations’ policies or rules around media contact.” The power of being part of a larger group that is not tied to any particular political or agent-specific agenda is clearly a strength of working as a coalition.

Overall ‘best practices’ identified by focus groups were as follows:

Know your audience: The ability to tailor the coalition’s message to a targeted audience was a clear strength: a school presentation is different from a chamber of commerce address. Connecting an agency or individual to the coalition’s vision shows them the benefit of supporting the group.

Use evidence-based information: Coalitions that had access to evidence-based information saw this as a strength in communicating with people outside of the coalition.

Be creative in getting message out: Being creative when presenting information is important in order to be memorable. For example, in a presentation to the United Way, one coalition used M&Ms in five jars, representing the number of children struggling in each area of development, based on local Early Development Instrument (EDI) results.

## **Use of evidence**

Approximately half of the focus group participants were from early childhood development coalitions. These coalitions have access to province-wide, population level EDI data. It is not surprising that focus group participants listed the availability of research data to inform coalition activity was listed as a strength. This theme was evident in at least five of the discussion groups on “best practice approaches.” Coalitions used the data to “pinpoint our vision and keep our focus, move their case forward, inform partnerships with other programs, and engage others with evidence and credibility.”

Thirty survey respondents also identified access to evidence or research as a strength. Knowledgeable coalition members, the capacity to conduct research through innovation grant funding and AHS staff support, and dedicated and knowledgeable teacher volunteers were also highlighted. Several respondents also mentioned the involvement of professionals in their coalition. One identified having a PhD student who kept them informed of the latest research as one of their coalition’s key strengths.

## **What else is needed?**

In response to the question: “What other tools, resources, info, or support would be helpful?” The following suggestions were raised by focus group participants:

Government (provincial) philosophical support: This seemed to be an important theme to participants, though the concept was not elaborated on to any great extent.

Funding and administrative supports: The need for longer term, consistent funding was mentioned. Coalitions also identified that having some type of paid administrative support is essential to the success of their coalition. For example, when one person mentioned “having an admin person,” everyone at the table smiled and nodded agreement. Another person then added “or two!” Another participant reported they had been doing this as a volunteer job and was “up every day at 3 am — realized it wasn’t sustainable, so now we have had an admin person doing it for past 10 years.”

Opportunities to network: Coalition members were particularly keen on having opportunities to network with other coalitions across the province. This would be beneficial in a number of ways. One participant emphasized the benefits of learning from others: “You are facilitating your group but don’t know what else someone else is doing; meeting is important to not reinvent the wheel.” Many focus group attendees reported that their favourite part of the day was the opportunity to network and learn from others.

#### Training:

- **Social media training:** Having “something/someone to help with effective use of social media” was a priority for participants. Ideally, this training could be provided through a face-to-face workshop along with a manual to take back to the coalition: “For some people a manual alone may not be effective ... we need hands-on because it’s not intuitive ... and vice versa.” Some remarked on how it’s “hard to keep up with new technology.” Others were more sceptical about using social media, commenting, “I’m not big on Facebook because of the bad parts of [it].”
- **How to tailor communication:** Participants suggested the need to enhance their skills in terms of “getting messages to various groups: business, schools, municipal government, etc.” Another group mentioned the benefit of having a generic communications plan (including template, examples of how to do communications) that could be adapted to the individual coalition. Others spoke of both the advantages and disadvantages of having a website or e-mail lists, noting “people love info and don’t want to be off list... BUT others argued info overload; not enough time.”
- **Collective impact literature and self-evaluation tools**
- **Skills/training on the engagement process itself:** One participant mentioned the need for a “step-by-step checklist of how to set-up a coalition.”
- **Database for tools and resources used by others:** For example, terms of reference or work plans

# How are Alberta coalitions evaluating their work and how do they think success should be measured?

## Current Evaluation Approaches

Responses to the question “How is your coalition measuring its success?” clearly show that coalitions in Alberta are only starting to identify consistent and effective approaches to evaluating their work. Challenges related to evaluation were commonly reported in focus group sessions. For some coalitions, identifying the most useful indicators or finding evaluation tools that are comprehensive enough to capture the richness of their work is difficult. Some comments related to this, include: “We’re still trying to figure that one out. Can’t see we have made great inroads...Started off with a plan 1-1/2 years ago to identify indicators that might relate to goal, but we’re not finding indicators that are that strong”; “We want qualitative change but only have numbers”; “Evaluation is a challenge — hate to reduce it to a logic model.”

All groups spoke of the lack of capacity they have for evaluation, with one group in particular noting a feeling of futility because of how challenging it is to track the longer-term impacts coalitions may have when funding for evaluation is only short-term at best: “It feels like fitting square pegs in round holes.” These responses were corroborated by the survey responses, in which only one coalition identified evaluation as a strength, though they did not elaborate further on the types of indicators or approaches they are using.

These difficulties are mirrored in the literature where problems with evaluating the effectiveness of coalitions is rooted in the fact that coalitions can be defined as groups that tackle broad, complex problems, making traditional outcome measures fairly useless when trying to evaluate coalitions.

That being said, the focus groups yielded a number of responses that are helpful in describing the progress coalitions have made so far in this regard:

## Training

Because of the complex task of evaluating coalitions, training or outside facilitation was identified as being particularly useful in developing an evaluation framework. One coalition had their members trained in different approaches such as the developmental assets, which helps frame an evaluation approach. Other groups brought in facilitators to help support them in creating a logic model that was fairly comprehensive.

## Use of strategic plan/visioning process

Several groups spoke about how they try to incorporate evaluation into their strategic planning process. For example, some coalitions ensure that they think about a way to define and measure success as they create their more abstract goals. Furthermore, by using their strategic

or action plan as a benchmark, it was easier for coalitions to organize feedback or evaluation results.

## Evaluation methods

A variety of evaluation methods are currently in use by Alberta coalitions. Those mentioned during the focus sessions included:

- surveys,
- anecdotal/informal feedback,
- annual evaluation conversation,
- critical review of Terms of Reference,
- pre and post evaluations following targeted community presentations, and
- interviewing coalition members regarding their level of ownership.

Participants gave the following examples of quantitative indicators currently in use:

- number of people attending events,
- number of responses to mailing lists and websites,
- number of “likes” on their Facebook page,
- number of conversations,
- how often people want more information,
- what neighbourhoods do people who attend events come from,
- number of media mentions,
- number of presentations,
- number of communities reached, and
- number of conversations with people of influence.

Some of the more common qualitative measures mentioned included:

- awareness,
- achieving goals and broader community support (i.e. other coalitions borrowing ideas),
- quality of partnerships, and
- collaborative ventures. (How are events supported by agencies and businesses that are not involved in the coalition? Are partners staying at the table? What do they contribute? (i.e. in-kind support, financial support, have their own agenda or go with the consensus?) When you follow up, what is the response? Are you invited back for further information sharing?)

One group also specified the indicators it tracks at the request of funders, such as: What organizations are participating on the coalition? How far is your reach/breadth? ECD groups also mentioned the use of Early Development Instrument (EDI) results as being a way to measure success. However, one group cautioned that it will be “hard to say our efforts were the only thing that contributed to changes in EDI results/success.” Another participant also offered this caution in relation to using quantitative measures: “Problem is with using numbers it may not look like progress, e.g., start tracking and you find more and more high-risk drinkers. Doesn’t look like progress when more are self-identifying.”

Focus group participants also suggested measures related to the strength or “health” of the coalition itself, but it was not always clear how they have actually implemented these measures. Examples from one group included:

- happiness of members (sense of contentment and belonging or the converse: unease),
- engagement (Does the community know who we are? Is there broad representation on the coalition?),
- passion itself is a measure/indicator, and
- team support/atmosphere/trust.

Other measures related to long-term impacts of coalitions, although it was not always clear if these measures are still in use. For example, one Edmonton group spoke of measuring behaviour change among youth through a baseline survey in schools for all coalitions/groups in the past. Another group spoke of attempting to track change in policies. The Policy Readiness Tool developed by the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention was seen as a helpful resource to do this (see Appendix C).

### **How should success be measured?**

In response to the question “What do you think are most important indicators of success?,” focus group participants suggested the following:

- **Quantitative and qualitative measures:** Coalition members identified a tension between using qualitative versus quantitative measures of success. Qualitative was seen as giving more rich, valuable information but funders often require quantitative, standardized measurements.
- **Impact:** Coalitions have difficulty measuring their impact, especially given the fact that they address broad issues that may not have immediate, measurable outcomes. This is especially challenging because funders often require specific types of proof-of-impact.
- **Membership:** Quality of membership can be measured by the following characteristics: longevity, variety, number of residents versus agency representatives, and members’ active contributions.
- **Relationships/sense of community:** The quality of relationships on the coalition can contribute to a coalition’s success. Suggestions around measuring the quality of relationships included: measuring the feeling people have after meetings, whether coalitions are still excited about participating and whether people are having fun.
- **Breaking down silos:** Coalitions suggested a number of ways to measure whether a collaborative process was taking place. Asking questions such as: Are people taking off their ‘hats’? Do people speak about the issue from a broader perspective? Are people pursuing their personal or organizational interest or the coalition’s?
- **Skills and capacity:** Developing the skills and capacity of coalition members is one way to measure internal success. Focus group participants suggested various ways of measuring this: member participants become more skilled at delivery, there is a greater pool of resources (human, financial and social), enhanced leadership among members, and members experience personal growth.
- **Shared measurement:** Using a shared measurement, such as the EDI, was highlighted by focus group participants as a possible way to measure success. In particular, they emphasized the need to monitor progress periodically and focus on areas of interest most important to the coalition (i.e., social and emotional well-being).



- **Other:** Other suggestions included: the production of high quality products, pride in products and the efficiency of communication.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this project demonstrate that Alberta coalitions represent a broad range of interests and issues and have a significant amount of knowledge and strength when it comes to developing and sustaining coalitions. Many of the key aspects of coalition building addressed in the literature review were reflected in the challenges that coalitions identified and the factors that have supported their success. In particular, their work around engaging coalition members, the importance of developing a clear vision and purpose that people feel ownership over, the mixed relationship with funding, and the importance placed on having quality relationships, were all factors emphasized by both coalitions and the literature. The struggles that coalitions have around developing a comprehensive way to evaluate their work are mirrored in the literature.

However, there were a few surprises. First, coalitions did not focus on the importance of leadership as strongly as the literature does. Those that did discuss the characteristics of a good leader, highlighted the same features as those highlighted in the literature. There were also a few themes that emerged through the survey responses and focus groups that were less evident in the literature. In particular, the importance of passion, a focus on strength, and the challenges related to time were not a main focus in the literature review, but came up as major themes in the survey responses and focus groups:

### Passion

The importance of passion and commitment are treated in the literature indirectly through the discussion of the central importance of both members and leaders feeling ownership over the coalition's focus. Having a connection to the topic at hand was important for membership recruitment, retention and the ability to work with diverse people for the greater good.

However, in comparison, the theme of passion came out more strongly in the survey responses and focus groups. This was especially true in responses from ECD coalitions, with phrases such as "love for children" and "members are passionate about the cause," along with "commitment" and "dedication." These findings were also supported through the focus group discussions, where passion was an essential element to being able to address coalition challenges, including developing a shared vision, membership engagement, and leadership. Some of the comments around coalition members' passion include: "Coalitions are all about passion. If you are just a body sitting at the coalition, but not there in terms of participation, there's no point." Others noted that: "Of all the things we've done, we've never had a problem getting people to take on tasks. All are passionate about what they're doing."

## Focus on successes and strengths

This was a theme that tied together many of the ‘best practice’ approaches identified across several domains. Focus group participants spoke about the importance of mobilizing individuals’ skills and strengths to address barriers and achieve outcomes. “If you don’t recognize what people can do, you start to lose them.” Data from the “key messages” activity also reinforced this theme, for example one participant advised; “Don’t be focused on who isn’t there. Focus on who IS there”; and another simply said, “celebrate successes.”

## Time

The importance of time for Alberta coalitions cannot be overstated. This theme was dominant in the survey and focus group responses as a key factor in building relationships and achieving outcomes. There were few solutions put forward to address this issue. However, it is important to note the relationship between a lack of time, short-term funding and the number of over-worked individuals.

# Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed through a synthesis of the findings of this report, findings from the literature review, and in-depth discussion with members of the steering committee. It should be noted that feedback from focus session participants contributed directly to this section, as during a final activity of the day, they were asked to identify “key messages” they have learned that they would like to share with others. Some of those messages are included here.

## For coalitions

- **Vision and purpose:** Coalitions need to focus on building a strong, cohesive, relevant vision and purpose to support the work and sustainability of their coalitions.
- **Life cycle:** Coalition members need to be aware that coalitions do not evolve in a linear fashion. Focus should be placed on consistently re-evaluating their work to ensure that it is relevant to their members and community.
- **Diversity:** Coalition members should be aware of who is in their community and strive to ensure their membership is representative of the population they are trying to serve.
- **Passion and ownership:** Coalition members should ensure their work is grounded in the passions and interests of those they hope to reach.
- **Time:** Coalition members should be careful to respect each other’s time and think about the natural ‘life cycle’ of their work. They need to celebrate successes and recognize there may be a natural ending to their work.
- **Evaluation:** Coalition members should begin work to uncover tools that can be used to evaluate their work (both internally and externally) in a meaningful way.

- **Tools:** There are many useful tools available that coalitions can use to support their work. Coalitions should continue to find ways to connect with one another and share the tools they find the most useful.

## For funders

- **Long-term funding is important:** Many of the processes that ensure a coalition is building a sustainable and strong foundation (i.e. building quality relationships, engaging in community conversation to build a vision and purpose, building leadership capacity among different members of the group) take time. Moreover, applying for grants is extremely time-consuming. Making the reporting and application process as simple as possible can help coalitions, which are often under-resourced, spend more time focussing on their area of interest, and less time completing paperwork.
- **Accepting new ways of measuring success:** Traditional outcome measures do a disservice in terms of representing the impact that coalitions are having on their communities. This is partly because coalitions do not develop linearly. Another reason is that coalitions address broad issues, which can make it difficult to evaluate their impact. New, more flexible methods of evaluation should be seen as especially valuable in relation to coalition work.
- **Flexibility:** Coalitions thrive when they are able to be flexible in the environment in which they work. Coalitions need to be able to adjust to their own needs and to the needs of the communities they serve. It is therefore important to consider the unintended, negative consequences that may come from putting too many restrictions on funding opportunities for coalitions.

# Appendix A: Methodology used in report

## Developing an inventory (Phase 2)

In order to reach a broad range of coalitions across Alberta, an inventory of coalitions was developed. Websites of Alberta-based coalitions, along with recommendations from the project steering committee, were used to compile a list of key coalition contacts. To find coalition websites, a search was conducted using a broad range of terms such as health, social services, justice and environment. These terms were then combined with words such as coalition, alliance, action group and partnership.

After coalition contacts were identified, a brief online survey (Appendix A) was used to collect more detailed information. This survey was pilot-tested with three coalition representatives and reviewed by the ECMap Community Development and Mobilization Manager (Line Perron) and the author of the literature review (Samantha Berger). This ensured that the questions reflected key themes from the literature review and included topics that were of interest to coalition members and the project funders.

The survey was published using *FluidSurveys* and an e-mail invitation was sent to the list of contacts developed during phase 2. Approximately 300 coalitions or networks of coalitions were invited to participate in the survey. The inventory of coalition contacts was updated throughout the project, based on conversations with survey respondents and additional web searches. The time frame to respond was initially August 26 to September 18, 2013. The deadline was extended to October 18, 2013 to increase response rate. A total of 166 respondents completed the survey; ten respondents were members of the same coalition, however. In total, **156** coalitions were represented in the survey.

Survey responses were analyzed using the key factors impacting coalition sustainability as identified in the literature review. These included: historical factors, vision and purpose, membership, leadership, quality of relationships, funding and other resources, larger ecological factors, training, marketing and concrete measurable wins.

## Focus discussions (Phase 3)

Three focus groups were organized based on the contact information collected through the inventory compilation. Lethbridge, Airdrie and Edmonton were chosen as locations because they would involve the least amount of travel for participants who came from southern, central and northern Alberta.

The goal was to have around 25 participants at each session. To achieve this attendance rate, approximately 90 coalition members were invited to participate (approximately 30 for each event) through an e-mail sent out during the third week of December 2013. A follow-up e-mail was sent the week of January 6, 2014 to confirm attendance. If no response was received, two follow-up phone calls were made before the contact was removed from the list of potential attendees.

The agenda and structure of the focus groups were developed by a member of the steering committee representing the Community Development Unit of Alberta Culture and Tourism, in consultation with other steering committee members. Questions for discussion were based on key themes and gaps identified in phase 1 and 2 of the project, along with additional themes and questions brought forward by the steering committee.

Four questions were discussed using a small group format of four to six participants. Facilitators and recorders were assigned to each group and provided with detailed instructions prior to each session in order to maintain consistency. In addition to small group discussions, questions were asked in a large group setting at several points during the day, with notes recorded on a flipchart. Based on feedback from facilitators and recorders, the agenda was revised slightly after the Lethbridge session and again before the Airdrie session; however, the substantive topics for discussion remained the same in order to provide consistent data that could be analyzed across the groups.

## **Data analysis and report writing (Phase 2 and 3)**

Quantitative data from questions 3-11 of the survey was analyzed using FluidSurveys. In addition, contact information from question 1 of the survey was exported into an Excel spreadsheet and the qualitative responses from questions 12-14 were exported into a Word document. Flipchart notes recorded by small group facilitators during focus groups were transcribed into a Word document and compared and synthesized with the notes taken by the recorders.

An open-ended, grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data from the qualitative survey questions and participant focus groups.<sup>2</sup> Using this approach, responses were grouped into themes, which were named using the respondents' language as much as possible. Analysis was completed by the researcher, with the exception of the affinity process, which was conducted with coalition members during the focus groups. During this activity, participants grouped and named their responses to the question: "What have been challenges or barriers for your coalition(s) or has hindered your progress or success?" Themes identified from both the survey and focus data were then compared with domains identified in the literature review in order to develop the discussion section of this report. Results were validated by sharing a draft of the final report with steering committee members who provided feedback.

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<sup>2</sup> Grounded theory is a research method in which the **theory** is developed from the data, rather than the other way around.

## Appendix B: Inventory survey tool

### Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions Inventory Survey

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#### About this survey

The goal of the survey is to create an inventory of existing community coalitions in Alberta that have both a local and a province-wide presence. “Coalitions” broadly defined mean groups of people that come together around a particular issue, with the end goal of being a catalyst for change in their community. Other characteristics of coalitions are that they value and benefit from diverse membership, egalitarian practices, a broad focus and long-term goals.

Information from the inventory will then be used to bring together leaders/members from these coalitions for the purpose of finding out what they have learned about forming and sustaining coalitions, and what they see as needed to support coalitions as contributors to the well-being of communities at each phase of coalition development. The inventory and learning event are part of a larger research project entitled Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions sponsored by Alberta Education and the Early child Mapping (ECMap) Initiative of the University of Alberta (please see: <https://www.ecmap.ca/About-ECMap/Who-We-Are/Pages/default.aspx> for more information on the ECMap initiative).

The survey should take about 5-7 minutes to complete, and your participation is entirely voluntary. Should you have questions or concerns, please feel free to call or e-mail the project coordinator, Mary Jane Yates, at: 780-429-6370, e-mail: [mjyates1@shaw.ca](mailto:mjyates1@shaw.ca).

1. Please provide the name of your coalition and key contact details:

Coalition name

Key contact name and title:

Street address

Telephone:

E-mail:

Website address (if available)

2. What is the vision or purpose of your coalition? Please describe briefly:

3. How long has your coalition existed? Please check one:

- Less than 3 years
- Between 3-6 years.
- 6-10 years
- 10 years or more

4. Which of the following best describes the geographic reach of your coalition?

- Local (neighborhood or city level)
- Regional (serving several towns or cities)
- Provincial (open to members all over Alberta)

5. Approximately how many members do you currently count as part of your coalition?

- 3--10
- 11-30
- 31-60
- 60 or more

6. Which of the following sectors are actively represented in your coalition (i.e. attend most meetings and/or regularly participate in activities)? Check all that apply:

- Health
- Education
- Social services
- Justice/law enforcement
- Cultural associations/immigrant groups
- Environmental groups

- Business/Private industry
- Provincial government
- Municipal government
- Individual community members (i.e. NOT representing any one organization or sector)
- Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

7. Which of the following demographic groups are a key focus of your work? Please check all that apply.

- Children and young families
- Youth (Ages 16-25)
- People living on low income
- Visible minorities or new immigrants
- Aboriginal populations
- Urban Albertans
- Rural Albertans
- General public --no specific focus
- single parents
- older adults/Seniors (55+)
- people with disabilities
- Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

8. Did your coalition come together as a result of a funding opportunity?

- Yes
- No

9. Does your coalition currently receive funding?

- Yes
- No



10. Which of the following best describes your leadership structure and how decisions are made?

- Very informal: everyone participates in decisions
- Somewhat formal--a small leadership or steering group has been identified
- Quite formal: we have bylaws and clear process for electing leaders and making decisions

11. Do you have paid staff or other administrative supports in place for your coalition?

- Yes
- No

12. Please describe one or two strengths or highlights of your coalition's work:

Strength 1:

Strength 2:

13. Please describe one or two key challenges you have encountered in your work:

Challenge 1:

Challenge 2:

14. Are you aware of other coalitions active in your community? If so, please provide the name and contact details below:

Thank You for Your Time! And again please feel free to contact Mary Jane at: [mjyates1@shaw.ca](mailto:mjyates1@shaw.ca) for further information.

## **Appendix C: Focus group questions**

### **Table conversation 1**

What have been challenges or barriers for your coalition or has hindered your coalition's progress? Which of these areas do you think pose the greatest challenges, barriers or hindrances to coalitions and why? What are some ways your coalitions have addressed and overcome these challenges?

### **Table conversation 2**

What has contributed to your coalition's progress or success? What are some of your coalition's 'best practices' that you would recommend to others?

### **Table conversation 3**

How is your coalition measuring its success? What have been key indicators of success for your coalitions? What do you think are the most important indicators of success for coalitions?

### **Table conversation 4**

Why do you work as a coalition? In what ways has it been better working on your cause or issue as a coalition rather than separately?

### **Key messages**

What one gem of wisdom or key piece of advice would you give about working as a coalition successfully?

### **Large group**

What information, tools, resources, assistance or other support has your coalition used and found helpful? (Opportunity to show tools or resources you brought along today). What other types of information, tools, resources, assistance or support would have been helpful at various stages of your coalition's lifecycle?

## Appendix D: Tools and resources used by Alberta coalitions

**Community Action on Drug Abuse Prevention:** a handbook on engaging communities produced by AADAC in 2004. Includes sections on forming your group; setting goals; assessing needs; deciding activities; action planning and evaluating.

<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/AddictionsSubstanceAbuse/if-com-community-action-manual.pdf>

**Various communication products on ECD**, i.e., workshop materials, newsletters, postcards, fact sheets; volunteer hours tracking sheet – from Brooks and County of Newell ECD Coalition (see: <http://www.brooksnewellecd.ca/> (hard copies were shared as well))

**Homes for All pamphlet:** created by the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness; defines housing security and overall vision/mandate of ECHH

**Community Initiatives Against Family Violence Working Principles 2013-2014.** A comprehensive document outlining CIAFV's vision, principles and framework for operating, including advocacy, information sharing, structure, communication and decision making (hard copy only)

**Growing Food Security in AB (GFSA)** created workshops, resource binders to share with other food security groups; built on the asset-based community development (ABCD) process. See: <http://www.foodsecurityalberta.org/node/18>

Resource includes:

- workshop facilitators guide, brochures, DVD to assist workshops;
- tool is on website;
- for past 12 years, the group has been connecting with 5-50 people on a weekly basis through phone conversations on ABCD; focus on what the individual or community HAS vs. NOT HAS; focus on what is healthy/ is the food the best thing you and your family can eat; everybody should have the privilege; food equity – basic right to good clean safe food; sellers workshop for sustainability, equity, locality/culture appropriate.

**Stanford Innovation Review: article on Collective Impact.** See:

[http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact)

**Worksheet for developing a planning committee using the community capitals.** *Using Community Capitals to Develop Assets for Positive change* (see: pg. 9 of:

<http://srdc.msstate.edu/fop/levelthree/trainarc/socialcapital/communitycapitalstodevelopassets-emeryfeyflora2006.pdf>

**Alberta Culture Community Development Unit:** a number of participants mentioned this with comments like: “have been foundational in our coalition work: an Alberta treasure!”

**Social media (Facebook, twitter)** powerful new tools to build and sustain coalitions; open source technologies (FREE)

**Sitting on networks with multiple coalitions** – to share resources and communicate, not competes). “Networks are so important.” Examples:

- *Edmonton Permaculture* brings together what everyone is doing to facilitate collaboration;
- *United Way summit*; looks at parenting, food, poverty

**Mining information, knowledge of organizations in certain areas** – e.g., learning from Bent Arrow, Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, Multicultural Health Brokers

**Policy Readiness Tool** – developed with support from the Alberta Policy Coalition for Cancer Prevention (APCCP; 2009-2011)<sup>1</sup>; housed in the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta (Edmonton, AB). The tool was developed in consultation with members of the APCCP’s former advisory groups and involved several stages of research. See:<http://policyreadinesstool.com/>

**ECMap** -“all agreed” is an invaluable tool resource, strategy, e.g. ECMap newsletters

**Action plan templates** (no examples provided)

**Public libraries and schools** as a resource for meeting space, etc.

**Elected officials** (this was not expanded on)

**Community Foundations of Canada** (different year different topic), see <http://www.cfc-fcc.ca/>

**Terms of reference, guidelines:** some basic foundational documents on how to function

**Strategic planning** – with support from Alberta Culture and other Government of Alberta groups (Alberta Works also mentioned)

**Communications, finances; annual reports for transparencies:** clear disclosure helps with people and \$\$\$ resources

**Access to funding source through government** that was clear, easy to access, simple to follow, not weeks to get funding

**On-line database of funding for non-profit long list** – Although this list was mentioned, it still takes a lot of time and human resources to go through this and fill out applications, etc. Comment: “... a lot of resources get you started but don’t sustain you.”

**Evaluation Report from CAPC CPNP coalition** – members review in 2011; gives an example of how this group evaluated their coalition

**Community Capacity Building Tool** from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC): see: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/canada/regions/ab-nwt-tno/downloads-eng.php> This tool was developed by the Alberta Region of PHAC and has been used by the Alberta Coalition for Cancer Prevention along with numerous other local and international groups to plan and evaluate initiatives. Nine domains of community capacity addressed: participation; leadership; community structures; role of external support (for example, a funding agency); asking why; obtaining resources; skills, knowledge, and learning; linking with others; sense of community

**Communication tool kit** (no further info on this)

**Local stakeholders** –“500 cups of coffee” and other ways to engage them

**Coalitions Connect** – a conference organized annually by the Addiction Prevention team, Health Promotion, Disease and Injury Prevention (HPDIP) of Alberta Health Services with the support of the Coalitions Connect Planning Team, which includes membership from community coalitions, AHS zone staff and other community partners (see <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/2703.asp>)

Other resources available from Coalitions Connect website include:

- Community Action on Drug Abuse Prevention Manual: This manual provides communities with some practical tools and advice on working together to address substance use, assessing needs, figuring out what to do and measuring success.
- Evaluation Framework for Municipal Drug Strategies: This guide from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities outlines basic principles and key considerations to help communities develop local drug strategies that reflect a national approach.
- Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide: This tool guides advocates and practitioners through the coalition-building process, from deciding whether or not a coalition is appropriate to selecting the best membership and conducting ongoing evaluation.
- The Tension of Turf: Making it Work for the Coalition: Turf struggles are commonly seen within coalitions, but are often misunderstood. The Tension of Turf describes common types of turf struggles and the reasons they happen, and includes recommendations for limiting the negative aspects of turf.

**Tamarack**, An institute for community engagement – <http://tamarackcommunity.ca>. Several participants mentioned using a variety of their resources, including in-person presentations, webinar training and phone conversations.

**Norlien Foundation and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative (AFWI)**. Go to <http://www.norlien.org/alberta-family-wellness-initiative>. Focus is to understand and apply scientific knowledge to factors influencing child development and to addiction and other mental-health outcomes. Online resources web casts.

**In kind resources** – Examples: meeting space; coffee/hosting, admin support, research and data support, facilitation. *One participant stated their coalition has no funding because of in*

*kind resources*

**Tapping on particular skills** – Examples, technology, writing (letters)

**Network and context maps** – Coalitions involved with ECMap and Community Initiatives Against Family Violence (CIAV) have done this.

**Behaviour change research** – how to influence, layers of influence