



2022

Resilient Rurals

RURAL ASSIST PROGRAM

*For Vulnerable Populations
in Your Community*



ABOUT THE GUIDE

The *Rural Assist* mission is to ensure that vulnerable groups are not left behind when an emergency or severe weather event strikes their community. The program serves to identify vulnerabilities across households and creates a community-level system to empower people with information and tailored support.

A pilot program is underway in Bruderheim with plans for a full launch across all three Resilient Rural partner communities—Bruderheim, Gibbons and Lamont—in 2022. *Rural Assist's* program model is also available to any community looking to better serve their vulnerable populations as climate change intensifies across Canada and the globe.

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1 Program Summary

With western Canada warming at three times the global rate, and projections suggesting an increase in severe weather events for the Industrial Heartland region, it is essential that an adaptive approach is taken to prepare. The *Rural Assist* program aims to address the challenges specific to small, rural communities and to provide residents with the means to prepare for the changes to come. Rural communities face inherent climate vulnerabilities, due to their limited resources, small populations and exposure to severe weather occurrences.

This program is being piloted by the Town of Bruderheim to begin to address the needs of vulnerable populations. Resilient Rurals aims to ensure that vulnerable populations within our rural communities have the capacity to respond to unpredictable weather events and extreme conditions. These groups include: seniors, racial minorities, recent immigrants, low income earners, outdoor workers, and people with certain health conditions, substandard living conditions or a risk of homelessness.

A preliminary survey and analysis of 2016 and 2021 census data will identify the general vulnerabilities within Bruderheim. *Rural Assist* will provide residents with the opportunity to receive tailored information during climate-related events. The program will be delivered through Bruderheim's Alert System (an Everbridge platform), which allows residents to register to receive information through phone, email or text messages. Residents will have the option to

respond to messages if they require assistance.

Rural Assist will also offer an opt-in service, through which vulnerable members of the community can identify themselves and provide information about their specific concerns, vulnerabilities and services they may require during extreme weather events. Additionally, information about climate risks and methods to stay safe during extreme weather events will be communicated to the general public and to program users through a variety of platforms. Educational campaigns will increase awareness about climate hazards and public action responses.

By communicating with key stakeholders and program users in the community throughout the initial stages of program creation, suggestions and specific user needs will be considered to improve the program's effectiveness. Following the start-up of the program, users will have the opportunity to provide feedback and critiques so that any bugs or program failures can be addressed.

Overall, *Rural Assist* aims to improve the climate resiliency of Bruderheim, Gibbons and Lamont. This will be accomplished by providing support for our most vulnerable residents and assisting those in need through emergencies and severe weather events.

Program description

As Alberta communities experience more challenging weather, such as windstorms, freezing rain, flooding, wildfires, heatwaves and poor air quality, there is greater potential for the most vulnerable community members to experience significant impacts to their health, safety and wellbeing. The Rural Assist program works to ensure vulnerable people are not left behind when an emergency or severe weather event strikes their community. The program activities do this by proactively identifying household vulnerabilities to create a community-level information system that empowers each community member with notifications and tailored support.

Vulnerable populations

Evidence shows a wide range of people can be highly vulnerable to climate impacts. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes six key categories of vulnerability, including socioeconomic status, age, gender, race and ethnicity, English language proficiency, and medical issues and disability.¹ For our programs purposes, this list has been expanded to reflect the more specific vulnerabilities our three communities face.

Rural Assist is designed to support groups understood to be at a greater risk because of their health, age, lifestyle, livelihood and other factors.

VULNERABLE GROUPS

- Seniors (65+)
- Racial minority or Indigenous people
- Newcomer to Canada and the community (immigrated in the last 5 years)
- Has reduced mobility due to a disability or other factors
- Living alone or running a lone-parent household
- Living with a condition that requires caregiver assistance and/or frequent medical care
- Low-income (annual earnings are less than \$27,000₂ for a 4 person household)
- Housing conditions are substandard (e.g., crowding, unsafe housing)
- Living with a health condition that increases risk to poor air quality (e.g., asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), etc.)
- Living with a health condition that increases heat sensitivity (cardiovascular disease, kidney problems, high blood pressure etc.)
- Treating a condition with medication that increases heat sensitivity (e.g., diuretics, suphonamide, indinavir, etc.)
- Managing a health condition with equipment that requires electricity and/or running water
- Living with anxiety, depression or other mental health issues
- Working at a job that requires working outdoors in a range of weather conditions



Needs Assessment

It was only discovered after community water supply was shut off for Bruderheim during a water main break incident that a resident required steady and reliable water to run their home medical equipment. The incident left a vulnerable community member in a stressful position—unsure of when the water would return and who to speak to, and in need of reliable equipment. This incident sparked discussion among the Resilient Rurals working group about the value of a program designed to catalogue these types of concerns across communities so an issue like this wouldn't happen again. Since these initial discussions, others in the community and working group have said they know of more families and people who would suffer similar complications if there was another outage or shut off due to either climatic or other events.

Later discussions with frontline staff at Gibbons Family Resource Centre (GFRC) helped determine that the development of a program with a climate change focus would be worthwhile to pursue. Based on their work with vulnerable locals, staff explained they saw gaps in climate change-specific services and did not have information to offer visiting clients directly related to climate change vulnerability.

Resilient Rurals also liaised with staff from the Rural Development Network (RDN) with expertise in rural homelessness and rural immigration. The discussions confirmed the importance of investigating the prevalence of people in the three communities living in insecure and provisional housing (i.e., paying more than 30% of their income on rent; couch-surfing, living in overcrowded conditions and/or non-weather resistant buildings), as these categories of homelessness are often invisible but can be pervasive among rural communities. The discussions also revealed what services and information rural newcomers most often need, and the local agencies responsible for providing this support. A challenge commonly seen by RDN is limited capacity to provide these resources and support, so Rural Assist is designed with this in mind to provide resources to these groups without further stretching capacity.

Program Objectives



Rural Assist has 6 major goals, each relating to aspects of our broader regional climate adaptation plan.

Objective 1

Identify vulnerabilities within the town of Bruderheim, and eventually, in all of our three partner communities.

Objective 2

Decrease barriers to support for vulnerable community members in conditions exacerbated by climate change (heat waves, windstorms, freezing rain, floods, wildfires, periods of poor air quality).

Objective 3

Provide relevant information about vulnerability and safety in extreme weather via user-friendly formats.

Objective 4

Establish critical connections between households/people with vulnerabilities and Resilient Rurals team members, municipal staff, and local emergency management teams.

Objective 5

Increase personal wellness, health, and safety of vulnerable people leading to increased resiliency for the community as a whole.

Objective 6

Provide a program template to other rural communities, including Resilient Rurals partners, Gibbons and Lamont.

2 Pilot Program Activities

Community vulnerability survey

Resilient Rurals will administer a two-part survey among residents in Bruderheim. The intention of the survey is to learn more about the vulnerabilities that exist among households. Part 1 of the survey is designed to gather information regarding vulnerabilities, and anyone is welcome to respond to it. Part 2 of the survey is optional and serves as a form to gather subscribers and to encourage registration in the Bruderheim Alert System. See *Appendix A for a copy of the survey.*

The survey will be formatted through SurveyMonkey and distributed in digital and hard copy forms via the Resilient Rurals website, the Bruderheim Town Office, and the Bruderheim newsletter. Municipal employees may also conduct the survey over the phone or in coordination with community groups, as needed.

The Resilient Rurals team will analyze and compile responses to Part 1 of the survey into a report and input information provided in Part 2 into a secure database. If necessary, Resilient Rurals staff may follow up with program subscribers.

Alert system

Through the community survey and other communications, Rural Assist program participants will be encouraged to register for Bruderheim's Alert System, and a unique Rural Assist audience category will be created within the system.

The Alert System will be utilized to communicate climate-related information with residents that have registered, through phone, email or text messages. Residents will have the option to respond to messages if they require assistance.

Private Registry: Collection and storage of participant information

Rural Assist is a subscription service for members of the community and will utilize a private registry to collect the information of those with vulnerabilities. The CDC recognizes registries as a "voluntary database of individuals who meet the eligibility requirements for receiving additional emergency requirements based on specific needs."³ Our registry will include participants who identify in our list of vulnerabilities. However, all residents will have the choice to sign up to receive general emergency alerts and can access our information resources. Interested participants are asked to identify themselves to Resilient Rurals and provide information about their specific concerns and vulnerability, or services they may require during extreme weather events. General contact information is first collected by an online form on the program's Landing Page, or through a hard copy they can bring to the Bruderheim Town Office or participating frontline service providers.

By subscribing to *Rural Assist*, residents give their consent to the Town of Bruderheim to keep their information on file in their emergency alert systems and allow relevant staff to access it. The Bruderheim

Alert System restricts access to staff and the ability to flag and group lists based on specific criteria.

Education outreach

The Resilient Rurals Resource Hub, created in 2021, will be continually updated with links to external sources, as well as internally-created information about climate change risks and vulnerabilities. This one-stop-shop is publicly available, but pieces will be shared to program participants in either hard copy or digital format, along with additional media unique to the Rural Assist program. Print material will be available at key locations within Bruderheim.

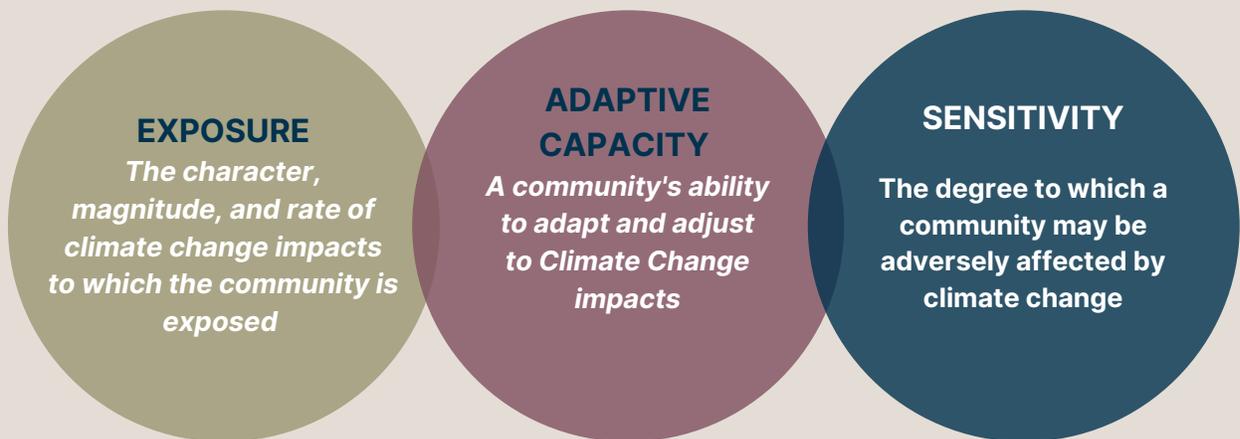
Program marketing

For effective use of the program, ongoing marketing efforts will raise awareness for vulnerable populations, as well as the program's value for the community. Messages will explain the importance of the program for vulnerable populations and the necessity of preparing for climate change impacts.

Vulnerability in rural communities

A strength of rural communities is their high levels of social capital, specifically their ability to foster social networks, relationships and trust among residents.⁴ But despite a potentially higher level of social capital in Lamont, Gibbons and Bruderheim, there are still community members who may be vulnerable—people who live alone, immigrants and newcomers, and those living with isolating or stigmatizing health or socio-economic conditions. These groups may not be able to enjoy the benefits of the 'look out for your neighbour' small-town environment.

The Rural Assist program will provide climate change specific information to people as it relates to their vulnerability in order to ensure resiliency of everyone in the community.



THE THREE FUNCTIONS OF VULNERABILITY

Key Messages

The most vulnerable community members typically suffer the most in extreme weather—it is important to ensure they are provided necessary support.

Rural Assist prepares and empowers members of our community who may be especially vulnerable in severe weather due to health conditions, living conditions and other circumstances.

As climate change worsens, the prioritization of risk assessment and emergency management will become increasingly important, and analysis of vulnerable populations is a first crucial step in this direction.

An important element of emergency response involves the preparation of vulnerable community members, a key goal for the Rural Assist Program.

Value Proposition

Improve your individual and household's safety in poor weather conditions (heat waves, windstorms, freezing rain, floods, wildfires, periods of poor air quality).

Access information about vulnerability and safety in extreme weather

Gain the ability to request assistance during climate-related events by providing a response to Bruderheim Alert System messages

Examples of Concern

"I have medications that need to be stored in a temperature-controlled environment. I wouldn't know what to do in a power outage."

"I have a caregiver who drives into town every Tuesday and Thursday, but they can't come when there's a blizzard."

"My asthma has gotten more troubling during these smoky summers, and I live by myself."

3

Program Evidence Base

Assistance programs across other jurisdictions

Identification of vulnerable groups is a key step in developing a sound emergency plan and preparing for extreme weather events.⁵ *Rural Assist's* survey will determine the overall vulnerability in Bruderheim and provide information on where vulnerable residents are located, and who is most vulnerable. Additionally, a private, opt-in registry is an effective way to store information about a resident's needs during emergency events and increase efficiency in assisting those requiring additional assistance.⁶

Local governments across Canada are innovating to adapt to a wide spectrum of climate change symptoms. Of these innovations are programs like *Rural Assist* that establish lines of communication between vulnerable residents and people involved in municipal and emergency response. The programs can be utilized as part of other, larger response plans that require community outreach like Heat Alert Response Systems (HARS), extreme cold sheltering plans and evacuation orders. For example, the Government of Canada's HARS Guidebook recommends communities utilize pre-registered lists to check in on vulnerable populations and deliver updates on responses like heat centres.⁷

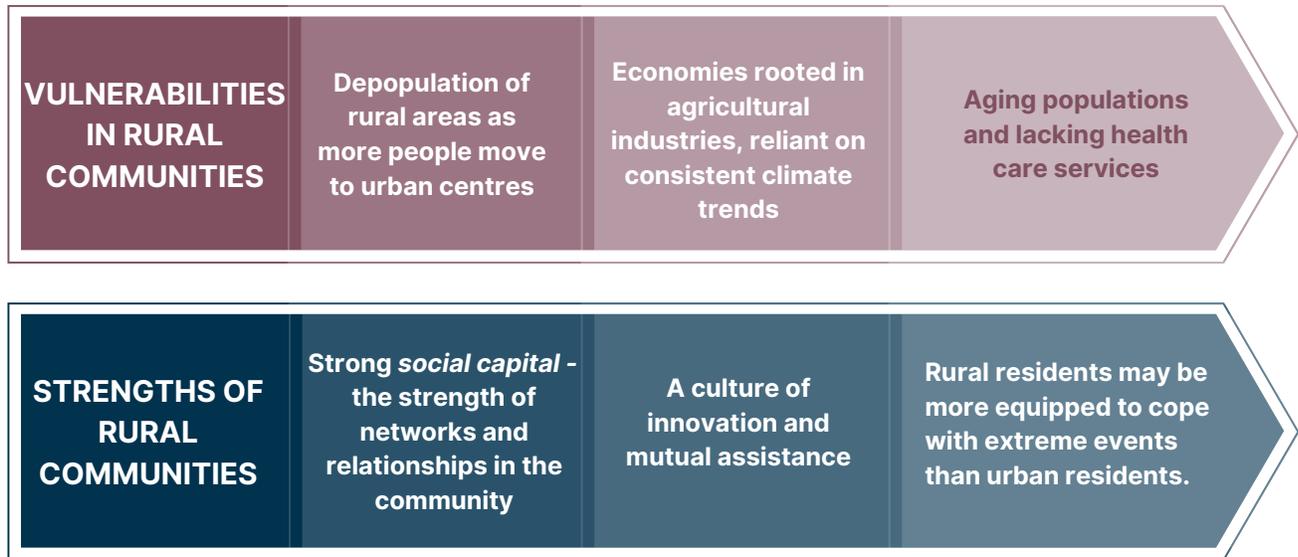
In addition to programs offered by communities, agencies across Alberta

have developed services similar to *Rural Assist*. The Canadian Red Cross' *Friendly Calls Alberta* program provides call support and community referral assistance to Albertans aged 55 and older who have been referred to the program by their physician. The Government of Alberta's My Alberta Emergency Registration System allows users to register online for updates on potential emergencies or emergencies that will affect their household. The Alberta Emergency Alert app also allows users to receive notifications on severe weather warnings such as wildfires, air quality warnings, hazardous material leaks, and floods.

In addition to *Rural Assist's* registry and community alert systems, the program will also link residents to and encourage registration for these other emergency update services.

Vulnerability in Bruderheim, Gibbons and Lamont

Despite possessing some inherently resilient traits such as cultures of mutual assistance and high social capital, rural communities are also highly vulnerable to climate change. Geographic isolation, aging populations, weather-dependent agricultural economies, decreasing viability of family farms, and depopulation continue to destabilize rural communities and make them more vulnerable to climate pressures. Therefore, it's critical to uplift the most vulnerable community members to improve community baseline resiliency.



2016 CENSUS EVALUATION

Resilient Rurals partner communities—Bruderheim, Gibbons and Lamont—are relatively small, with Gibbons having the largest population at 3,159. Analysis of Canada’s 2016 census data provides an indication of the general vulnerability of each community.

Aging populations

An aging population may indicate climate vulnerability, as seniors are at higher risk and require increased medical attention. Rural communities may have a higher proportion of elderly people, in comparison to urban centres, as well as a reduced capacity to assist them with the necessary resources and facilities. Additionally, the low population density of rural communities means seniors may need to commute long distances to receive medical care or visit loved ones. Out of all three communities, Lamont has

the oldest median age (46.2).⁸ Gibbons’ and Bruderheim’s median age was lower than the 2016 Canadian average (41.2), indicating that an ageing population may not be a significant vulnerability for these towns.^{9 10}

Housing vulnerabilities

Safe, clean and affordable housing that protects residents from harsh weather is important in reducing rural vulnerability. Across the three towns, 55 residents reported living in housing deemed unsuitable by the National Occupancy Standard (NOS).¹¹ This indicates the dwellings do not have enough bedrooms for the number of people in the household.¹² Low housing suitability is an indicator of homelessness risk. Additionally, 220 people throughout the three communities stated their dwelling was in need of major repairs, marking them more vulnerable if a severe weather event were to occur.¹³

	2016	2021
BRUDERHEIM POPULATION	1323	1329
LAMONT POPULATION	1774	1744
GIBBONS POPULATION	3159	3218

Immigrant population

In a study completed on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadians, immigrants reported higher levels of anxiety, mental health issues, and unemployment rates than other Canadians.¹⁴ This demonstrates that Canada’s immigrants are generally more vulnerable than other Canadians during times of uncertainty and economic downturn, which are factors that may become more prevalent during the climate crisis. Additionally, another study found immigrant populations are more likely to be impacted during extreme weather events, especially extreme heat events.¹⁵ This was attributed to a variety of factors. The first being potential language barriers limiting exposure and/or comprehension of news broadcasts, public directives for evacuation alerts, and facts about workplace safety.

Secondly, new immigrants may not have yet developed a strong network of people to assist them during crisis events. Lastly, on average, recent immigrants and refugees have lower socioeconomic status than other Canadians, which can impact where they live, their access to green space, and how they respond to emergency situations.

Census data shows the recent immigrant populations in Bruderheim, Gibbons and Lamont are fairly small; Gibbons shows zero immigrants arriving between 2011 and 2016, while Bruderheim and Lamont welcomed 25 and 15 recent immigrants respectively, all from the Philippines.¹⁶

Income and employment

With fewer resources to help them recover like comprehensive home insurance, money for repairs, and flexible employment options, low income rural residents have lower resilience to natural disasters. These factors also put this group at high risk of homelessness. The CDC lists socioeconomic status as a key factor of social vulnerability, as it may also represent employment issues, housing, and education levels.¹⁷ The low income rate of Bruderheim, Gibbons and Lamont respectively was 6.9%, 7.4%, and 10.3%.¹⁸ Across all three communities, there were a total of 460 low income residents. As employment levels can indicate income levels and general resilience, it is important to look at this data as well.

The employment rate of Bruderheim (65.6%) and Gibbons (67.8%) was on par and slightly higher than the overall employment rate of Alberta (65.4%) in 2016.^{19 20} However, Lamont's employment rate was significantly lower than the other two towns, at 49.8%.²¹

Single person and lone-parent households

People who live alone or parent alone are especially vulnerable during extreme weather events, such as floods, heatwaves, and power outages. In addition, social isolation may lead to mental health crises. There were 505 single person households and 270 lone-parent households across our three communities.²²

Across Bruderheim, Gibbons and Lamont:



55

Residents reported living in housing deemed unsuitable by the National Occupancy Standard (NOS).



460

Low income residents



Recent immigrants welcomed:

25

Bruderheim

15

Lamont

0

Gibbons



505

Single person households

4 Intended Program Outcomes and Targets

Program Intention

The intention of *Rural Assist* is to improve overall resilience for Gibbons, Bruderheim and Lamont and to ensure that no resident is left behind as the impacts of climate change become more prevalent.

As climate change increases the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, Rural Assist aims to provide residents with a peace of mind, and a clear system to get help when they need it. Additionally, this program will ensure that recovery from emergency events is smoother as residents are more prepared and empowered to help one another through difficult circumstances.

The vision for Rural Assist is to have a support system for residents and for them to feel there are people looking out for them. Ultimately, we aim for each vulnerable resident to feel prepared for the weather changes and extreme events that may come with climate change.

Program Evaluation & Quality Control

Throughout the development and dissemination of the program, potential users and other key stakeholders may be involved and given the opportunity to provide feedback. After piloting the first survey, respondents will be encouraged to provide specific examples of the services they require, and thus, improve the efficacy of the program overall.

The quality of the program will be monitored internally to ensure appropriate support is being provided. Overall, communication between team members and program users will be encouraged, and any feedback will be properly analyzed and integrated into implementation.

Program Challenges

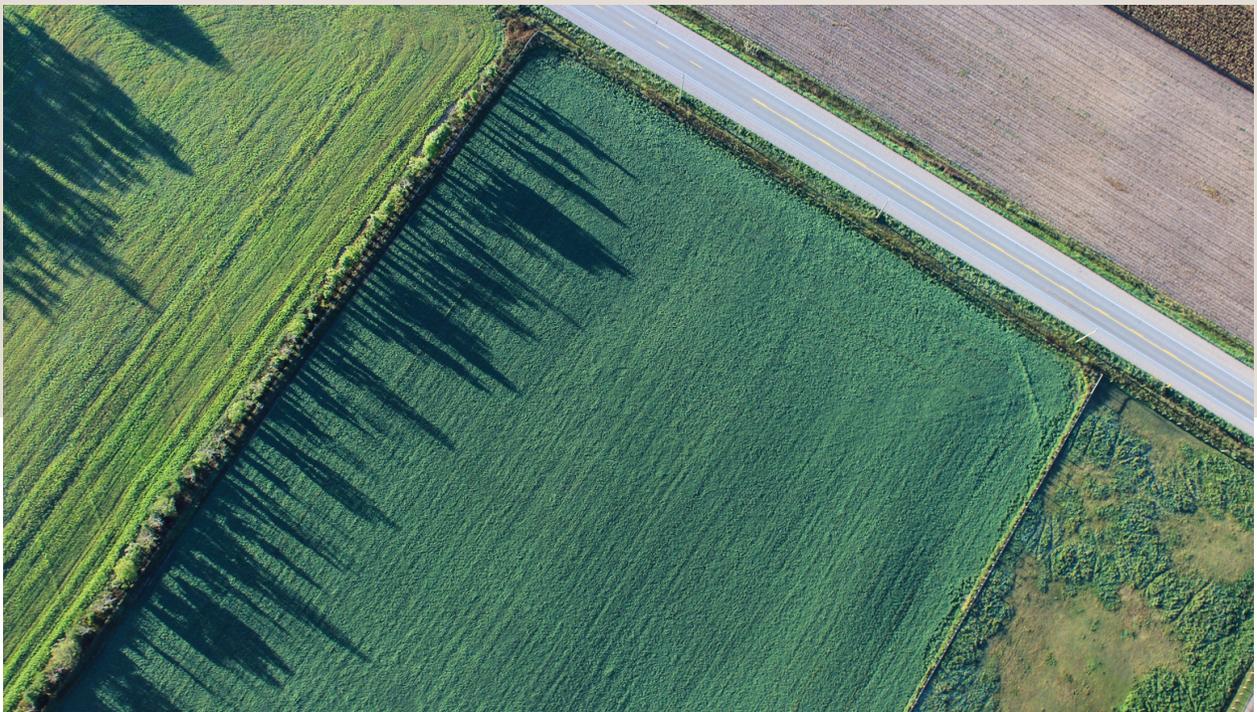
Throughout the implementation of *Rural Assist*, a variety of challenges are expected, and by understanding the obstacles commonly encountered in similar programs, we aim to reduce their effects as much as possible.

Registry recruitment is often low in the initial stages of dissemination for programs similar to *Rural Assist*. People may be weary of providing personal information to new organizations.^{2,3} This issue can be mitigated by partnering with the Town of Bruderheim for program promotion. Personal information will be stored in a database under supervision of the Town of Bruderheim, reducing concern about privacy and mistrust in new organizations.

Vulnerable groups may not initially view themselves as 'at-risk' and this may

reduce initial program recruitment. Through messaging on the different types of climate vulnerabilities, *Rural Assist* aims to reduce this factor.

Recruitment may also be impeded if sign-up links and surveys are only shared through one platform, and in online spaces. It can be anticipated that a variety of our intended users may not be active on social media platforms or keep up with Town announcements. Therefore, the survey and the program will be promoted with sign-up links in newsletters and with the Town's utility bill. Additionally, through partnerships with local organizations, we aim to use the help of social service workers and Town staff to point residents to paper copies of surveys and sign-up forms.



**Edit: Survey
Attachment**

End Notes

- 1.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Planning for an Emergency: Strategies for Identifying and Engaging At-Risk Groups. A guidance document for Emergency Managers. First edition. Atlanta (GA). CDC (2015). p.1.
- 2.** Statistics Canada, Table 11-10-0241-01 Low-income cut-offs (LICOs) before and after tax by community size and family size, in current dollars. (2021).
- 3.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Planning for an Emergency. (2015). p.6.
- 4.** Natural Resources Canada, Regional Perspectives Report, Chapter 4: Prairie Provinces (2021), p. 45.
- 5.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Planning for an Emergency. (2015). p.4.
- 6.** Ibid
- 7.** Health Canada. Heat Alert and Response Systems to Protect Health: Best Practices Guidebook. (2012). p. 42.
- 8.** Statistics Canada. 2017. Age Characteristics, for Lamont, T [Census subdivision], Alberta, 100% Data (table). "Age characteristics highlight tables, 2016 Census." Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.
- 9.** Statistics Canada. 2017. Age Characteristics, for Bruderheim, Gibbons [Census subdivision], Alberta, 100% Data (table). "Age characteristics highlight tables, 2016 Census." Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.
- 10.** Statistics Canada. 2017. Canada [Country] and Canada [Country] (table). Census Profile. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.
- 11.** Statistics Canada. 2017. Household characteristics, for Bruderheim, Gibbons, Lamont [Census subdivision], Alberta, 100% Data (table). "Private households by housing suitability, 2016 Census." Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.
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- 13.** Ibid
- 14.** Evra, Rose, and Eric Mongrain. "Mental Health Status of Canadian Immigrants During the COVID-19 Pandemic." Statistics Canada. Last modified July 14, 2020. Accessed December 9, 2021.
- 15.** Varickanickal, J, & Newbold, K. B. "Extreme heat events and health vulnerabilities among immigrant and newcomer populations." Environmental Health Review 64, no. 2 (June/July 2021).
- 16.** Statistics Canada. 2017. Immigration and Citizenship, for Bruderheim, Gibbons, Lamont [Census subdivision], Alberta, 100% Data (table). "Immigration and Citizenship highlight table, 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.
- 17.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Planning for an Emergency. (2015). p.2.
- 18.** Statistics Canada. 2017. Income of individuals, for Bruderheim, Gibbons, Lamont [Census subdivision], Alberta, 100% Data (table). "Low income in 2015, 2016 Census." Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.

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19. Statistics Canada. 2017. Labour Force Status, for Bruderheim, Gibbons, Lamont [Census subdivision], Alberta, 100% Data (table). "Labour Force Status, 2016 Census." Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.

20. Statistics Canada. 2017. Alberta [Province] and Canada [Country] (table). Census Profile. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.

21. Ibid

22. Statistics Canada. 2017. Family characteristics, for Bruderheim, T [Census subdivision], Alberta, 100% Data (table). "Family characteristics, 2016 Census." Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017.

23. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Planning for an Emergency. (2015). p.6.

About Resilient Rurals

Resilient Rurals is a partnership between the towns of Bruderheim, Gibbons and Lamont for a regional climate adaptation and resilience project in Alberta's Industrial Heartland. It is a new approach—created by small towns, for small towns.

In 2015, the Town of Bruderheim was selected for participation in a one-day Climate Resilience Express workshop with All One Sky Foundation. The Town was provided with a Climate Resilient Action Plan that outlined a number of actions to promote resilience in a changing climate.

The plan was a unique opportunity—a launching point from which to build a regional collaborative framework with neighbouring municipalities of similar size (under 3,500) in Alberta's Industrial Heartland. The towns of Gibbons and Lamont agreed to partner with Bruderheim to form Resilient Rurals.

With Bruderheim as the project lead, the group has worked to identify shared priority risks and opportunities for collaboration among partners, and creates climate education, communication and planning resources for rural communities.

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