

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supporting Individuals and Communities in a Changing Landscape: A Social Resilience Audit in Partnership with Hanna Learning Centre

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From 2019-2020 a social resilience audit was undertaken to better understand community priorities, resources and responses to a changing environment due to the planned closure of the local coal mine in the Town of Hanna and Special Areas. The transition from coal has attracted a great deal of interest on the economic impacts, particularly compensation to coal-powered plants and affected workers, and this study was undertaken to focus on the social dimensions and resilience at the community level.

“A resilient community aims to build relationships and to connect people and ideas to come together. Resilience is about building a stronger community to gain confidence and to foster hope. A resilient community has leadership that reflects a hopefulness and positive outlook in looking for new opportunities in light of the coal transition.”
(Study participant)

In order to assist residents to thrive through this transition, Hanna Learning Centre (HLC) partnered with local community organizations along with two researchers to gather community-specific information to better understand the community’s resilience.

This research study adopted a multi-method approach, including document analysis, literature review, program inventory, online survey with community residents, and interviews and a focus group with service providers, practitioners, and human service professionals. This project worked in collaboration with an Advisory Committee from the Hanna Learning Center to identify community priorities and resources, and what health, social, education and community services and programs contribute to fostering resilience at the community level.

In total, there were 194 participants that participated in the study, with 181 online survey respondents and 13 key stakeholder participants in the interviews and focus group session. Overall, participants described a resilient community as a community that is adaptable to change, both positive and negative, and has the resources to manage the change. All of the participants agreed on the importance and need to maintain a full spectrum of services that included health, education, and social services during this transition, and beyond.

Through the online survey, several participants expressed concerns in achieving this due to:

- Funding cuts impacting current health and social services, including the hospital and medical clinic.
- Lack of affordable and accessible services, specifically for those who rely and depend on government services.
- Funding cuts to Victim Services (this program targets those who need financial assistance and restitution for victims of crime, and grants and training for victim services providers).
- Lack of resources for people trying to access mental health services.
- Lack of affordable transportation, especially in accessing critical health services.
- Scarce resources available for parents and families.

- Older people and those living on a limited income face challenges in accessing services.

Overall, many residents reported significant gaps in meeting their basic needs. For example, when asked to check all supports available to the community from a pre-determined list, respondents were generally less likely to believe that services and supports were available for transportation (only 10% believe it is available), chronic health issues (39%), and unemployment and/or underemployment (39%).

Through the stakeholder interviews and focus group, additional themes emerged from the service providers, practitioners, and human service professionals. They highlighted the following:

- There was a concern that the community might lose services if there was an out-migration of the population.
- Some individuals and/or groups were perceived to be unable to get services that are generally available to others in the community. There continues to be perceived barriers and stigma associated with accessing some services. For example, confidentiality and anonymity were raised as an issue in a rural community.
- Services and supports for individuals at risk of homelessness or facing addictions and homelessness were raised as a concern.
- Several participants are worried about how the community will retain young people and young families due to the changing population demographic and job losses.
- The economic downturn contributed to more affordable housing in the community which in turn has changed the community dynamic.
- Services need to 'think multi-generations' which is likely the result of an aging population and the recent influx of retirees in the community.
- It was also suggested that an inpatient treatment facility or detox centre be explored.

Many participants identified several assets in the community. They are:

- Health care services which were deemed as very important for the community given their rural and remote location. Many key stakeholder participants discussed that the Town has a very good hospital, and opportunities for expansion should be explored. Additionally, it was suggested that with the backlog of patients in Alberta Health Services, there might be an opportunity to meet medical demands (e.g., surgeries) to deal with surgical waitlists in the region and/or province.
- Recreational and community wellness facilities were perceived as community assets as they contribute to the health and wellness of individuals and the community.
- The Business Hub and promoting the Cactus Corridor to attract businesses to the area, was perceived as a valuable resource by many participants. Greater emphasis on shopping local and supporting local businesses had gained new importance as community members realized they needed local businesses and relied on them during the pandemic.

The economic downturn in Alberta, coupled with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, were viewed as contributing factors that affected the community's coal transition. Participants agreed that young families need better job security, and the workforce needs more stability.

It was generally perceived that it was important to keep a positive message and work on improving the Town of Hanna and Special Areas during this transition and adaptation period. Strategies to facilitate adaptation to current challenges included organizing Town Halls in order to engage community members, particularly new community members to exchange ideas. The emphasis was to "keep people here" in the community. There was agreement that the new motto "live the lifestyle" was true for the community. It

was suggested that the Town mentality needed to broaden ideas of what Hanna could be in order to attract new businesses.

Overall, there were four recommendations suggested to enhance community resilience:

1. Strengthen the social safety net for residents so nobody falls through the cracks.
2. Work towards economic diversification to support the community to transition from coal.
3. Improve employment, services, and education opportunities to make Hanna attractive for professionals and families so people make this area their home.
4. Build and enhance local relationships by investing in informal and formal leadership throughout the area to help reduce isolation and build hopefulness for the future.

In sum, the aim of the study was to identify community priorities, resources and assets along with opportunities to strengthen community resilience while Hanna and Special Areas transition away from coal. We encourage Hanna Learning Centre to partner with all orders of government (Town, provincial and federal government), local businesses, community organizations, institutions/systems, and residents to utilize this report to inform a community planning process to leverage the local strengths and capacities, as there are many. As the community moves forward with this important process, it will be critical to focus efforts on building relationships that foster residents' sense of hope along with their ability to cope with change. The results demonstrate that the transition plan is a long-term process that requires regular assessment of the social and economic aspects particularly given the unprecedented circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Because Alberta is shifting away from coal power, it is imperative to consider the impacts on these structural changes on local communities like the Town of Hanna and Special Areas. With Hanna's strengths, assets and the political and public will, a just transition is possible.