

Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

## Building New Relationships and Connections in Emergency Management: The Role of Social Work Practitioners and Human Service Professionals in Disaster Recovery

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### Abstract

Spurred by the climate crisis, disasters are growing in frequency and severity around the world. In Western Canada, the impacts of the 2013 floods, 2016 wildfires, and the Covid-19 pandemic have devastated communities. Social workers, and human service professionals who assist in meeting the needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities in overcoming challenges, such as education assistants, outreach workers, and child and family support workers, are increasingly involved in the mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery phases of disasters. However, their role is not always visible or understood by emergency management professionals. Social work is a practice-based profession that responds to the needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities, and addresses barriers and injustices in organizations and society. This article shares the findings of the study “In the aftermath of the 2016 Alberta wildfires: The role of social work practitioners and human service professionals in long-term disaster recovery.” The study adopted a mixed-method research approach that recruited 140 participants to share their experiences in semi-structured interviews, an online survey, and focus groups. A thematic analysis of the data found that social workers and human service practitioners play many critical roles in disaster recovery. This includes advocacy, assessment, counselling, crisis intervention, trauma informed care, peer support, community development, providing services and programs, research, supporting first responders. Social workers can also provide valuable input into other disaster phases. For example, social workers are embedded in communities and have relationships with residents that can inform emergency plans. They provide emergency professionals insight into the needs of residents and bring collaboration skills that enhance preparedness and mitigation programs. The study findings call for greater recognition of the role of social workers and human service professionals in disasters by emergency management professionals. Implications and recommendations for social work and emergency management professionals are offered to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration.

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## Introduction

Natural-hazard disasters are exacerbated by climate change, and Canada is warming at twice the global rate (Warren & Lullham, 2021). Since 1900, Canada has experienced 844 natural-hazard disasters such as floods, severe storms, extreme cold, drought, wildfires, earthquakes, landslides and epidemics (Agrawal et al., 2021). The cost of natural-hazard disaster from extreme weather average about \$2 billion annually and have increased by almost half a billion dollars from a decade ago (Warren & Lulham, 2021) and displaced thousands of people (Public Safety Canada [PSC], 2019). The 2016 Alberta wildfire is recognized as among the worst disasters in Canadian history (Brown et al., 2019). Social workers, and human service professionals, who assist to meet the needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities in overcoming challenges and performing at their optimum level, and who are part of the social service workforce<sup>1</sup>, are increasingly involved in the mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery phases of disasters. However, their role is not always visible or understood by emergency management professionals. This article shares the findings of a study on the roles of social work practitioners and human service professionals in long-term disaster recovery.

### ***Shifts in Emergency and Disaster Management: Whole-of-Society Approach***

Disaster resilience is one of the foundations of the Government of Canada's plan, including providing assistance to the most vulnerable (Government of Canada, 2020) and is also a focus of the United Nation's (2015) Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 in which Canada is a signatory, and states:

it is urgent and critical to anticipate, plan for and reduce disaster risk in order to more effectively protect persons, communities, and countries, their livelihoods, health, cultural heritage, socioeconomic assets and ecosystems, and thus strengthen their resilience (p. 10).

In contrast to the previous Hyogo Framework, the Sendai Framework promotes reducing disaster risks (rather than managing the impact of disasters), thus shifting from reaction to prevention (Mizutori, 2020). The Sendai Framework also emphasizes promoting local solutions, and fostering inclusion, as well as shifting from a top-down centralized approach (government) to a "people-centered" and whole-of-society approach. The implication is that risk reduction becomes everyone's business, spreading the responsibility across a range of public, private, and hybrid stakeholders.

Similarly, enhancing community-based or whole-of-society approaches and interprofessional collaborations are also the focus of Strategic Priority Areas 1 and 4 (respectively) in the *Emergency Management Strategy for Canada* (PSC, 2019). More specifically, Strategic Priority Area 1 is to "enhance whole-of-society collaboration and governance to strengthen resilience" (PSC, 2019, p. 10). All members of society and levels of

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<sup>1</sup> The social service workforce refers to government and nongovernmental professionals and paraprofessionals who work with children, youth, adults, older persons, families and communities to ensure healthy development and well-being (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2021).

**Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022**

government have an important role to play in emergency management and “include diverse voices at the operational-level and in decision-making processes” (PSC, 2019, p. 10). Such an inclusive approach has two main benefits for both non-emergency management members and emergency management partners (PSC, 2019). First, the improvement of the quality of emergency management and disaster risk reduction (including resilience climate change adaptation) efforts by integrating diverse views, experiences, and capacities. In the context of Indigenous engagement, this includes culturally sensitive and strength-based approaches and co-developing solutions. The second benefit is an enhanced understanding of the broad range of stakeholders and increased engagement. Strategic Priority Area 4 is “enhance disaster response capacity and coordination and foster the development of new capabilities” (PSC, 2019, p. 20). Priority 4 outlines the need for improving emergency management partner training through exercises to test and validate emergency management plans to ensure they are effective throughout all the disaster phases and encourage participation from emergency management partners, and communicating across different sectors<sup>2</sup> (PSC, 2019).

Priority Areas 2, 3, and 5 are also important and complement Priority Areas 1 and 4. Priority Area 2 is to “improve understanding of disaster risks in all sectors of society” (PSC, 2019, p. 13). Priority Area 3 is to “increase focus on whole-of-society disaster prevention and mitigation activities” (PSC, 2019, p. 17). And Priority 5 is “strengthen recovery efforts by building back better to minimize the impacts of future disasters”, with an overall goal of reducing vulnerability to hazards (PSC, 2019, p. 23). In sum, achieving the goals of the *Emergency Management Strategy for Canada* and the Sendai Framework requires inclusion of all affected stakeholders and interdisciplinary and interprofessional collaborations across the disaster phases.

***Inclusion of Vulnerable Populations in Social Work and Disasters***

Social work practitioners’ expertise in working with at-risk populations positions them to play an essential role in supporting society’s most vulnerable in times of disaster. A new global definition of social work passed in July 2014 provides the following:

Social Work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social

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<sup>2</sup>Emergencies require immediate action and are at a smaller scale than disasters which cause significant damage or loss of life. Emergency management focuses on the preparedness and response strategies and is typically managed by emergency managers, first responders, and protection services. Disaster management has a broader scope, focused on all phases (preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation). A broader range of stakeholders at different organizational and societal levels are involved in disaster management (IPCC, 2012).

## Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014)

The social work profession adopts an advocacy-based and action-oriented framework for practice, which can facilitate addressing social justice-related issues in ways that align with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) objectives. Social work practitioners work to ensure the inclusive and accessible participation of communities in the design and implementation of policies, plans, and standards (Miller, 2012), including those related to disasters. People's individual and collective political, socio-economic and cultural rights, and their right to a safe, clean and healthy environment is at the core of social work and social development education, practice, research and policy debates and actions (IASSW, ICSW, IFSW, 2019).

Social workers play a critical role in supporting people's preparedness for disasters and in navigating the post-disaster experience, particularly with people who face increased social disadvantage (Harms & Alston, 2018). In disaster contexts, some people are more vulnerable than others even within the same household (Alston et al., 2019). Fordham notes "vulnerability is embedded in complex social relations and processes and is situated squarely at the human-environmental intersection requiring social solutions if successful risk reduction is to occur (Fordham et al., 2013, p. 12). Intersectionality considers the factors (such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability) that shape vulnerability and resilience in different contexts at different times, for example elderly women (Alston et al., 2019; PSC, 2019; Wisner et al., 2003). Considering the intersectional vulnerabilities of people, it is critically important to take a people-centered approach throughout the disaster phases. Social work practice aims "to address the vulnerability of people and place, to understand the nuances of community in order to assess those on the margins, to foster inclusiveness and to ensure that resources are distributed fairly and equitably" (Alston, Hazeleger, & Hargreaves, 2019, p. 231).

The Sendai Framework's people-centered approach is similar to that used by the social work profession (Wahlstrom, 2017). According to Alston et al. (2019), social workers around the world are engaged in strategies to build resilience such as assisting communities to undertake disaster risk reduction projects, organizing group work, undertaking community development, empowering local people, and advocating for changes in policies, services and supports. After the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China, social workers developed intervention programs in schools and trained social work students as volunteers to run the activities to build resilience (Sim & Dominelli, 2017). Social workers provided individualized interventions by conducting home visits and working closely with inter-disciplinary professionals for assessments. Social workers are known to use their skills of case management to help recovery in post-disaster (Rowlands, 2013). Following the psychosocial practice intervention in post-disaster recovery in China, social workers promoted the Sichuan model that adopts a whole-of-community approach using the principles of "local participation; culturally relevant ways of being, knowing and

## Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

coping; self-help including mutual help; employing interdisciplinary approaches among stakeholders; and behaving ethically in a post-disaster context” (Sim & Dominelli, 2017, p. 608).

The field of post disaster social work practice has emerged as part of a broader paradigm shift in national discourses of emergency management in relation to community resilience and the importance of community-led recoveries and codesigned programmatic responses rather than top-down approaches (Harms & Alston, 2018). For example, in Australia, the Victorian Government’s Resilient Recovery Strategy is engaged in a highly consultative process to address these critical elements, which recognizes the need for interdisciplinary involvement and one where social work has a major contribution to make, not only at the front line of supporting people to restore their lives, but also in policy and research efforts (Harms & Alston, 2018).

### *Making a Case for Interprofessional Collaborations*

Social work practitioners have a long history of providing humanitarian support during disasters (Dominelli, 2015). Historically, social work has emphasized emergency relief and services in wartime, disaster, and crisis situations requiring a volunteer cadre particularly in health and mental health services (Zakour, 1996). Recent research found that social work practitioners in Alberta are increasingly involved in all phases of disaster management, including disaster preparedness and long-term recovery (Drolet et al., 2021). The involvement of social workers in disaster contexts is increasing in the following areas: advocacy, assessment, advice on policy and practice, community redevelopment, outreach, social services, service coordination, psychosocial support, and trauma counseling (Drolet et al., 2021). A more comprehensive list of the roles of social work practitioners in disaster contexts is described in detail in the Findings and Discussion section below. As disasters continue to increase, so will the demand for social work practitioners. Despite social workers’ engagement in disaster and emergency management, their contributions are largely invisible and not recognized (Drolet et al., 2021; Hay & Pascoe, 2018).

Disaster management is complex and requires a comprehensive approach and interprofessional collaborations to be effective. Emergency management evolved from the civil defense programs of the 1950s (Canton, 2020). Emergency management personnel often have a background in military, police, and firefighting and the preparatory training tends to focus on first response or the tactical response level. Emergency Social Services is an emergency program that is run by emergency management to support individuals’ basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and pet care when they have been impacted by a disaster within 72 hours of the event. It is important to recognize that emergency social services (often volunteers) and social work practitioners (registered professionals) occupy different roles in different spaces. The emergency management tactical response method is the Incident Command System (ICS) (see Figure 3.5 in Canton, 2020) which is “a standardized on-site management system designed to enable effective, efficient incident management by integrating a combination of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures, and communications operating within a common organizational structure” (Microtek Corporation, 2021, para. 1). This hierarchical structure of command facilitates clear communication during the intense crisis period but does not allow enough time to tailor attention



## Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

to the needs of specific individuals or social groups. Social work practitioners focus on the individual, family, group and community in ways that are participatory, collaborative, and build agency. Research shows that disaster recovery can take a long time (Brown et al., 2019; Drolet, 2019). Social work and emergency management practitioners can work together as allies to leverage each other's strengths in the journey to rebuild and strengthen resilience.

### Method

To understand the perspectives of participants in the aftermath of the 2016 Alberta wildfires the study adopted a constructivist framework recognizing that lived experiences are socially constructed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The research methods included individual interviews, an online survey, and focus group discussions. In total, there were 140 participants in the study, which included 40 individual interview participants, six focus groups with 11 participants, and 89 survey respondents. Interviews and focus group discussions focused on the role of social work practitioners and human service professionals in long-term disaster recovery since the 2016 Alberta wildfires. Participants were recruited from a variety of human service organizations, community organizations, non-profit organizations, and government bodies that participated in recovery efforts. The criteria for participation included having direct experience in the provision of social services in the context of the 2016 Alberta wildfires. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided their informed consent to participate prior to the session. Interviews and focus groups were approximately 45 – 60 minutes in length. Interviews and focus groups were conducted using a Zoom platform or telephone to adhere to COVID-19 protocols. Each session was audio-recorded with permission from each participant and notes were taken. Each participant received a \$20 e-gift card as an incentive. The recordings and notes were transcribed and coded for thematic analysis to identify similar responses and address research questions and objectives. The purpose of the survey was to learn about social workers' roles and responsibilities in the context of disaster. Questions asked if social workers were prepared for a disaster, how they responded to a disaster, and what role they played. Recruitment of participants was promoted in diverse networks such as post-secondary institutions with social work education programs and the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) online newsletter. Survey respondents were asked to identify if they were a social worker or a social work student. The last section of the survey focused on the impacts of the 2016 Alberta wildfires. The interviews were conducted between June and September 2020, and the focus groups and survey were implemented in April and May 2021. The University of Calgary's Human Research Ethics Board approved the study prior to data collection taking place.

### Findings and Discussion

A thematic analysis of the data found that social workers and human service practitioners play many critical roles in disaster recovery. This includes advocacy, assessment, education, community development, counselling, crisis intervention, knowledge mobilization, trauma-informed care, peer support, policy evaluation and recommendations, providing and creating services and programs, providing long-term recovery support, research, and supporting first responders. Table 1 demonstrates the roles of social workers and human service professionals

throughout the four phases of disaster management: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

**Table 1**

*Social Worker and Human Service Professional Roles in Disaster*

<b>Role of Social Workers &amp; Human Service Professionals in Disaster</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>	<b>Preparedness</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Recovery</b>
Advocacy	X	X	X	X
Assessment	X	X	X	X
Education		X		
Community Development	X	X	X	X
Counselling			X	X
Crisis Intervention			X	X
Knowledge mobilization	X	X	X	X
Trauma-informed Care			X	X
Peer Support			X	X
Policy Evaluation and Recommendations	X	X		X
Providing and Creating Services and Programs	X	X	X	X
Providing long-term Recovery Support				X
Research	X	X	X	X
Supporting First Responders			X	

Table 1 shows that in all phases of disaster social workers are performing the role of advocate, conducting assessments (e.g., individuals, families, and groups), engaging in community development, knowledge mobilization, and providing and creating services and programs.

***Role of Advocate***

Research participants discussed how each of these roles may differ depending on the phase of disaster. For example, participants described advocating to employers for business continuity plans in preparation for a disaster and advocating on behalf of a family to an insurance company during the recovery phase. Social workers also advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations after a disaster. Interview participants gave examples of advocating for children's programs with dance and movement to help regulate them and advocating for specialized services for seniors who are more vulnerable to elder abuse, fraud, and mistreatment in the aftermath of a disaster. Some study participants discussed advocating for evacuee needs during

## Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

the response and for their workplaces to support their own needs as they were displaced from the community.

### *Assessments*

In all phases of disaster social workers engaged in various types of assessments. Social workers and human service professionals work with individuals and families to identify their needs and help connect them to the appropriate services in the community. Social workers also have the necessary knowledge of community organizations and their roles in order to provide referrals to the appropriate services.

### *Community Development*

Throughout the disaster phases, participants described engaging in community development activities such as creating and maintaining programs designed to build resilience and to bring distressed neighbors and children together to foster mutual support. Social workers described doing this at their workplaces as well through informal debriefing sessions at the end of long recovery-focused workdays.

### *Knowledge Mobilization*

Social workers mobilized their knowledge of trauma, crisis intervention and other mental wellbeing strategies to inform first responders and emergency management professionals about non-physical needs of community members in a disaster context. They also mobilized their knowledge of community social services to coordinate collaboration and partnership between organizations during recovery to ensure that those impacted by the disaster continued to have access to the services they needed before the disaster and recovery social services.

### *Services and Programs*

In the mitigation and preparation phases, social workers advocate for equitable options to mitigate disasters in communities, they provide education and training to help individuals and families prepare for disasters and emergencies. Social workers develop curricula, facilitate training (e.g., psychological first aid), and build capacity in the profession. Social workers often had to research and advocate for relevant federal, provincial and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) disaster recovery programs that would support their clients as they were displaced from the community.

During the response and recovery phases, the findings showed that social workers and human service professionals provide counseling, crisis intervention and trauma-informed care. They also provide long-term recovery support to community members who experience mental health challenges, stress, financial and other impacts for years post-disaster. Social workers were able to use these skills to support both community civilians and first responders. Social workers, who are embedded within the community, make these long-term impacts visible, understand their connection to one or multiple disaster events that have impacted a community and are able to respond to the unique and changing needs of individuals in the years following disasters.

## Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

Peer-support was mentioned as a key activity in the response and recovery phases. Networks for peer-support were identified by social workers who participated in disaster recovery efforts as something they would like to see more to help prevent burn-out and maintain mental wellness through the recovery period. Some social workers engaged in peer-support through debriefs at the end of each workday or check-in phone calls with friends and colleagues. The social workers who engaged in these activities stated them as critical to their wellbeing during disaster recovery.

As Table 1 indicates, these roles are not strictly divided between disaster phases, rather, many roles overlap with and strengthen each other. This study demonstrated that the roles of social workers in disasters are critical. Social workers recognize the inherent dignity of humanity, value relationships, and build trust, which is important during times of disaster and emergencies. Throughout all the disaster phases, social workers emphasize the psychosocial and mental health needs of community members, the importance of accessible, wrap-around services and supporting safety and wellbeing of those who are marginalized as well as long-term planning, support and care after a disaster. Social workers and human service professionals bring extensive knowledge of the needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities of communities that can be harnessed to better mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. These elements and the roles of social workers in disasters make the work of social workers and human service professionals in disasters a necessary component to emergency management and emergency social services. Despite social workers and human service professionals performing these activities for some time, they have not always been recognized in emergency management contexts. More opportunities for training and interdisciplinary collaboration, especially in the planning and response phases, are needed.

Recommendations for emergency management professionals:

- Acknowledging the important role and contributions of social workers and human service professionals for the work they do in all disaster phases
- Facilitating interprofessional collaboration with social workers and human service professionals
- Including social work practitioners and human service professionals in disaster planning
- Building relationships and facilitating community connections
- Co-hosting trainings and professional development opportunities
- Supporting mental health and wellbeing in all phases of disaster
- Recognizing and implementing a whole-of-society approach

### Conclusions and Implications

This study aimed to better understand the role of social work practitioners and human service professionals in long-term disaster recovery. The findings show that social workers and human service practitioners are increasingly playing many critical and important roles not just in

## Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

recovery, but in all phases of disaster management. Social workers and human service professionals offer additional resources in the short- and long-term as compared to emergency social services volunteers. Social work and emergency management professionals share a growing interest in meeting the needs of vulnerable populations who are disproportionately impacted by disasters (Enarson et al., 2007).

The findings call for greater interdisciplinary collaboration and partnership to enhance individual, family, group, and community recovery post-disaster. The findings from this research echo the call for a whole-of-society approach and interprofessional collaborations promoted by the Sendai Framework and the *Emergency Management Strategy of Canada*. The implications for doing so open many potential opportunities. Emergency managers already emphasize building back better by strengthening existing and building new physical infrastructure. At the same time, social workers are already working with communities to improve overall well-being and resiliency of individuals and communities through plans, programs, and policies. More interprofessional collaborations between emergency managers and social workers would strengthen the building back better principle which is Priority 5 (PSC, 2019). Additionally, social workers and emergency managers could work together to support communities in developing their own risk and vulnerability profiles to enhance resilience to address Priority 2 (PSC, 2019). Next, through interprofessional collaborations, community emergency plans can be developed using a whole-of-society approach (Priorities 1-3). Social workers can invite and involve diverse populations in the planning process with emergency managers. This could include community-based workshops for developing emergency plans. Another example would be for emergency management offices to also hire social workers alongside emergency managers (Priority 2).

Future research is needed to identify and imagine how social work practitioners and emergency managers could further strengthen interprofessional collaborations for a whole-of-society approach throughout all the disaster phases. This is necessary to meet the many challenges associated with disasters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

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Volume 2 Edition 2 | October 2022/octobre 2022

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