



Community Drug Strategy

for Strathcona County



FROM ADDICTION TO CONNECTION

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- Alberta Health Services
 - Addiction and Mental Health
 - Prevention and Health Promotion
 - Public Health
 - Home Living
- Chimo Youth Retreat Centre CSD
- Children's Services
- Elk Island Catholic Schools
- Elk Island Public Schools
- Hope in Strathcona
- MLA Annie McKittrick, Sherwood Park
- Moms Stop the Harm
- Parents Empowering Parents (PEP)
- Primary Care Network
 - Sherwood Park, Strathcona County
- RCMP
- RCMP Victim Services
- Saffron Centre (Sexual Assault Centre)
- Salvation Army
- Strathcona County
 - Communications
 - Emergency Services
 - Family and Community Services
- Strathcona County Library

Our sincere gratitude is extended to the Central Alberta Addictions Consortium for their generosity in allowing our Committee to adapt and draw on the Red Deer Alcohol and Drug Strategy Report. The excellent work by the Consortium provided our Committee a solid, evidence-based foundation for its own work.



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INTRODUCTION

Society's use of drugs is a complex issue. It is now widely accepted that traumatic experiences can powerfully impact the likelihood of substance use and mental health issues in a person's life.

Evidence shows that certain socioeconomic and demographic characteristics such as poverty, trauma or mental illness may increase the risk of harmful substance use. The issue of addiction impacts all levels of society. Many factors influence the ways in which communities understand and respond to substance use and its impacts. To develop a comprehensive response we must first understand the context of substance use and its impact on individuals, families and the community as a whole.

The purpose of this Strategy is to provide an evidence-base for a comprehensive, dynamic community conversation about our shared responses to key issues related to substance use in Strathcona County. It outlines an approach for actions needed to address the harmful effects of drug use in our community. Our approach is guided by the Strathcona County Social Framework which reflects a shift in the way we think, behave and convene as organizations, community groups and individuals to address complex social issues.

The intent is that actions taken under this Strategy will contribute to the outcomes in the Social Framework:

1 Affordability

3 Access to programs and services

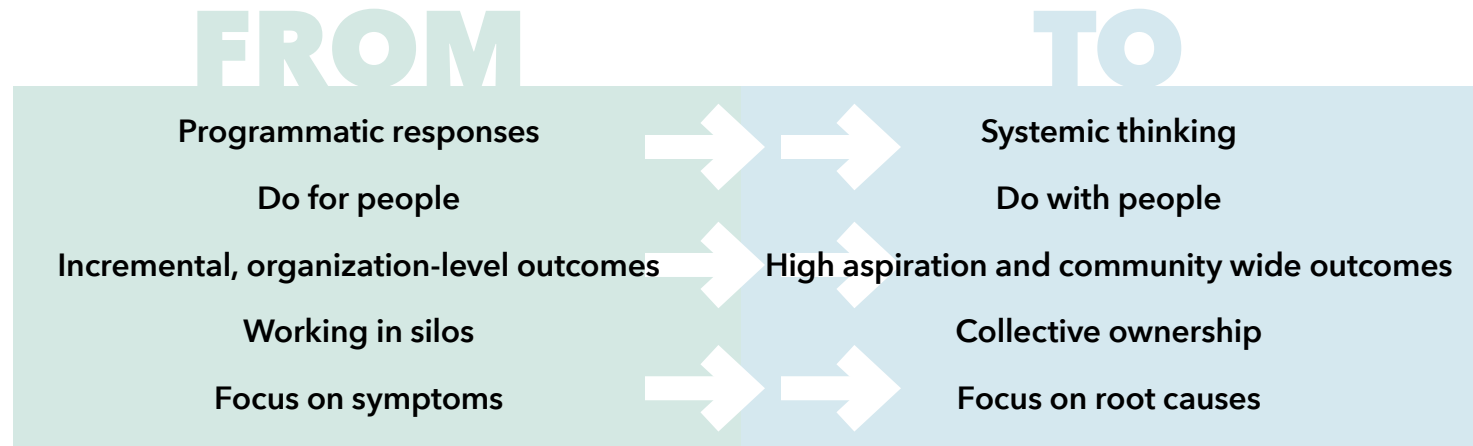
2 Safety

4 Connectedness and inclusion.

Our strategy is based on four best-practice pillars: **prevention, treatment, harm reduction and community inclusion and safety.** Through these related and interconnected pillars, we will achieve tangible solutions to meet the needs of our community and those who struggle with substance use.

PRINCIPLES AND MENTAL MODEL

The Social Framework principles will drive how we take action together shifting:

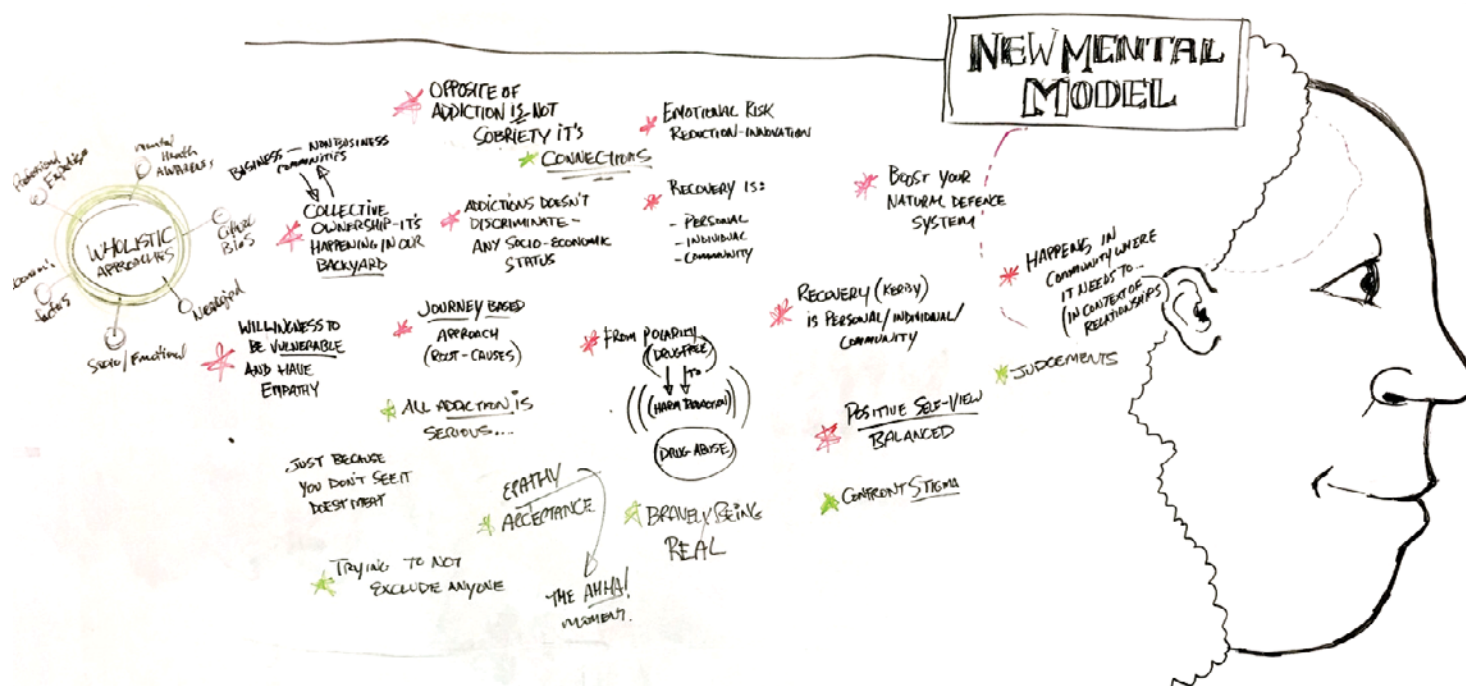


The Committee examined underlying structures and existing mental models or thinking that perpetuate substance use issues in Strathcona County. These include fear and stigma, an attitude that some people are worth more than others, and that abstinence is the only solution. Social and systemic influences including difficulty navigating systems, short-term solutions, siloed responses, and new treatments not being embraced contribute to substance use issues. Culture, criminalization of drug use and widely held worldviews such as moral assumptions, assumptions that substance use is a result of socioeconomic status or homelessness and more likely to exist in the inner city also contribute to the issue.

Substance use exists within a complex setting that features multiple systems such as health and social services, multiple jurisdictions, population characteristics and treatment approaches. Individuals, families and communities interact within these complex systems in diverse and variable ways. This complexity and repeated misalignment of policies and efforts often results in barriers for those working within systems as well as those trying to access the supports.

Our traditional ways of thinking and working are insufficient to address the challenges of substance use. There are many moving parts; it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to see the whole.

The committee was challenged to reconsider the fundamental worldviews and assumptions that have driven our theories of addiction and subsequent actions for decades. What surfaced was a shift in thinking, recognizing that while existing systems and interventions for addictions/substance use disorders are necessary, a new recipe for change is required if this community is to tackle the issue at its root. This implies a level of uncertainty, new ventures, new skills and knowledge.



Our **new mental model** is based on collective ownership of the issue. It is happening in our backyard. This model is a journey-based approach to address root causes and recognizes that recovery is at the individual, family and community levels. It is based on the understanding that addictions do not discriminate and that “the opposite of addiction is not sobriety – it is connection.”¹ Research is showing that humans require social connection for optimal brain development and children who grow up in safe, caring, developmentally rich environments have better coping and problem-solving skills and are less likely to become addicted to alcohol or drugs.

¹ Hari, Johann (2015). Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

THE SCIENCE OF ADDICTION

Like all behaviours, addiction is influenced by brain development. The environments we are exposed to as children, particularly exposure to toxic stress, even prenatally, can cause brain architecture to develop in ways that shape how vulnerable we are to addiction. While significant advancements have been made to understand the nature of addiction, a good deal of work remains to be done.

In 2010, the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative (AFWI) of the Palix Foundation partnered with Alberta Health Services and the Government of Alberta to better understand the link between early brain development and addiction. The AFWI's Sharing the Brain Story report shows the challenges of developing substance use policies:

[R]esearch, policy, and practice depend upon public awareness, perception, and support. But while scientific knowledge about early childhood development, child mental health, and addiction has advanced dramatically in recent years, very little of this knowledge has percolated into public discourse. The public still has foggy, often misguided, notions of how the brain develops; what, if anything, can be done to promote healthy development; and who is responsible for doing it. Likewise, underdeveloped notions about the nature of addiction and what causes it restrict how the public and policy makers think about what can be done to address the problem and who is responsible for doing it.²

In addition to understanding early brain development and its influence on mental health and substance use outcomes, we must support holistic approaches to truly make progress on this front. Dr. Gabor Mate illustrates this point concisely:

We need to avoid the trap of believing that addiction can be reduced to the action of brain chemicals or nerve circuits or any other neurobiological, psychological or sociological data. A multileveled exploration is necessary because it's impossible to understand addiction fully from any one perspective, no matter how accurate. Addiction is a complex condition, a complex interaction between human beings and their environment. Addiction has biological, chemical, neurological, psychological, medical, emotional, social, political, economic and spiritual underpinnings. Addiction is "all about" many things.³

² Walters (2013). Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. Sharing the Brain Story: Knowledge Mobilization Strategy - Transforming Research, Policy and Practice in Alberta. Calgary, AB, Canada. Norlien Foundation. Pg 8.

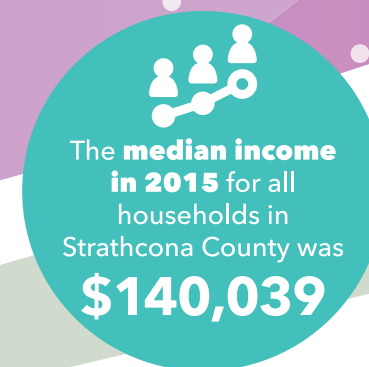
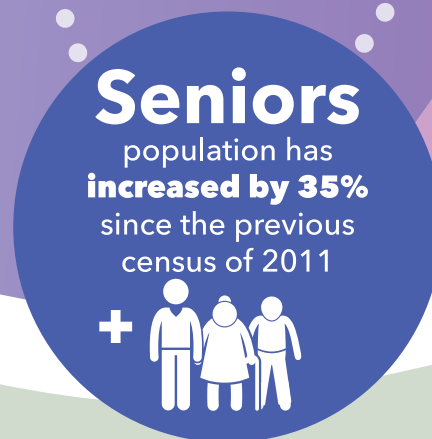
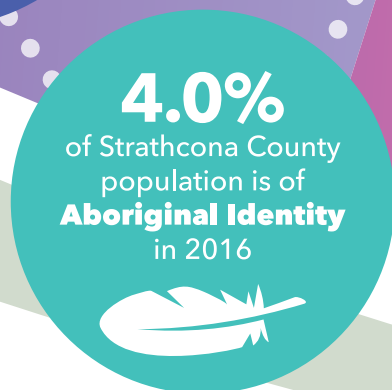
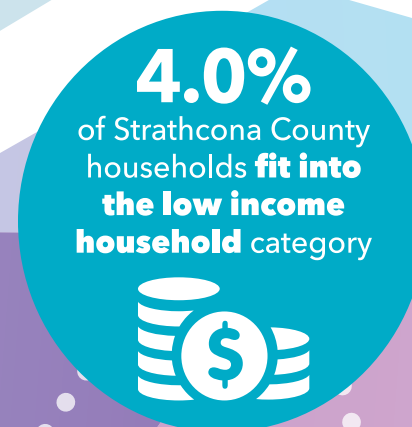
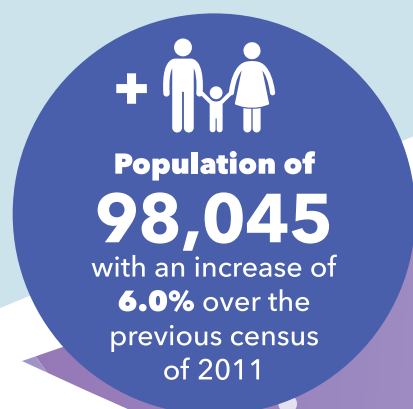
³ Mate, Gabor. In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2008), 129.



Additional science and research points to a deep human need for relationships and bonding. A systems approach supports this understanding of relationships that are interconnected to form a complex whole. Each individual will experience inclusion and connection differently. When individuals, families and communities experience fragmentation in their relationship to place, identity, basic needs and the built/virtual environment, a gap exists. These complex social interactions matter in the lives of people; where strong social connections are absent, addictions can easily fill this gap.⁴

⁴ Alexander, Bruce, K. 2014. The Rise and Fall of the Official View of Addiction: Simon Fraser University.

In Strathcona County...



ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN*

In response to growing concerns about the opioid crisis, the City of Edmonton and regional community partners met in March 2017 and from this discussion, Opioid Edmonton and Region response recommendations were developed. Municipalities were encouraged to develop their own local response.

* Data sources: Federal Census and Alberta Health, 2016



In the past 5 years,
573 emergency department visits were drug related.
80% were attributed to opioid use



3 out of 4
individuals visiting
emergency department for opioid
usage are between
the **ages of 15 to 34**



Of the **30 deaths in Strathcona County**
between 2013 and 2017
due to drug overdose
60%
were attributed to
opioid misuse



Since 2013 there has
been a **166% increase**
in the number of
emergency department
visits by Strathcona
County residents for
opioid use



6 out of 10
emergency
department visits for
opioid misuse were by
male residents

The Strathcona County Social Framework Steering Committee responded by hosting a conversation with a number of local agencies and organizations. Additionally, the Community Partners in Action Committee (CPAC), a collection of social serving organizations that focused on collaboratively identifying and addressing broad social issues, community needs and service gaps, was also invited. From this meeting the Strathcona County Opioid Response Committee came into being.

Deeper examination of this issue revealed that all addiction is serious and it does not discriminate, it can happen to anyone. The Opioid Response was seen as an opportunity to create a broader, county specific, drug strategy that would focus on risk reduction, open conversations and a social stigma response.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The broad community engagement conducted in 2016 through Community Talk to inform the Strathcona County Social Framework revealed community issues and concerns related to substance use and substance use disorders.

Feedback from youth identified the need for more mental health services and ways to deal with stress, along with more local detoxification services. Prescription abuse, drug trafficking and concerns with addiction were highlighted. Also raised was the need for locally available rehabilitation and recovery services as well as better education on drugs and the adverse effects of drugs.

Widespread education on the underlying factors surrounding substance use will be important in Strathcona County to avoid responses that have slowed progress on this issue historically – approaches that address the symptoms of mental health and addiction problems, but fail to address the root contributors to such issues. Strathcona County's Drug Strategy supports evidence-based practices and acts as a foundation that builds a comprehensive view of addictions and mental health issues in the community.

FOUR-PILLAR APPROACH

The four-pillar approach to drug use was first implemented in a number of European countries in the 1990s, followed by several Canadian communities in 1997. This best-practice approach composed of prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and community inclusion and safety pillars supports a comprehensive and multi-system approach to addressing the issue.

The four pillars do not stand on their own, rather they are closely related, inter-connected and grounded in the principles of the Social Framework. The double-helix image on the next page reflects the crucial intertwining of the pillars to support the success of our collective efforts. At the core of the double helix, actions taken will consider the diversity of the community including the factors of sex and gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and mental and physical ability.

Implementing the four-pillar approach will require a shift from traditional programmatic responses and results to a systems approach which recognizes that all social organizations and the individuals within them are connected and form a complex whole. At a systems level, when contributing organizations work together to see beyond silos, they can identify areas for greater, system-wide, collective impact. These become leverage points to drive meaningful change.

4 PILLARS



Prevention

Prevention strategies aim to prevent the problems of substance use before they start. Recognizing experimentation with substances does occur and, that if people choose to experiment, they understand how to do so as safely as possible.



Treatment

Treatment includes a broad range of community-based medical and counselling interventions, outreach support and other bio-psychosocial programs that work with individuals struggling with substance use. While treatment often brings to mind abstinence, treatment can also support developing the capacity to make healthy choices that do not demand total abstinence.



Harm Reduction

Harm reduction is an achievable, pragmatic approach to alcohol and drug issues that mitigates harm while understanding that total abstinence may not be an option for everyone. While harm reduction methods have attracted intense scrutiny over the years, they are part of a realistic solution that will help us save lives and greatly contribute to our overall success as a community.



Community Inclusion and Safety

Community inclusion and safety addresses the crime and social disorder related to drug and alcohol use. As an integral component of this strategy, human connection is at the core of community safety and is prioritized, in addition to the enforcement components of the broader criminal justice system.



Prevention

Prevention strategies aim to prevent harm related to substance use while respecting the important role played by abstinence-based and early-stage prevention approaches such as education and asset development.

Prevention approaches recognize experimentation with substances does occur, and if people choose to experiment, they understand how to do so as safely as possible. Prevention initiatives attempt to prevent harms associated with the use of legal substances, such as alcohol and prescription drugs, as well as illicit substances such as cocaine and heroin. Prevention strategies can range from prenatal and early childhood initiatives that support healthy brain development, to education programs for families, children, or individuals already experimenting with or using psychoactive substances.

Prevention Objective

Increase community understanding of substance use, reducing the level of stigma and discrimination, and strive to prevent the harms of substance use.

ACTIONS	LEAD ORGANIZATION
Implement and evaluate broad-based community education campaigns on early brain development, root causes of addiction, stigma, etc.	Family and Community Services
Support resiliency for children and families by ensuring education, arts/recreation opportunities and supports are available through an interdisciplinary approach	Elk Island Catholic and Elk Island Public School Divisions
Increase evidence-based alcohol and drug prevention programming for youth in the Strathcona County school systems and broader community	Elk Island Catholic and Elk Island Public School Divisions
Increase workplace addiction-related health and safety education and improve addiction-related supports in the workplace	All
Simplify and increase access to addiction and mental health information, including the development of a resource guide and road map	Alberta Health Services
Enhance level of dialogue between sectors and institutions to access and share local substance use data	All





Treatment

Treatment includes a broad range of community-based medical and counselling interventions, outreach support and other bio-psychosocial programs that work with individuals experiencing difficulties related to their use of psychoactive substances and to support positive behaviour change.

Many Albertans experience daily chronic pain. Improving the way opioids are prescribed can ensure patients have access to safer, more effective chronic pain treatment while reducing the number of people who misuse, abuse, or overdose from these drugs.

While treatment often brings to mind abstinence, treatment can also support developing the capacity to make healthy choices that do not demand total abstinence. In addition, feeling connected is critical for both prevention and treatment of addiction. Our cultures are our roots, our places of refuge, our heritage, where we feel we belong, and these are the cornerstones in prevention and treatment of addiction.

Treatment Objective

Enhance community treatment resources that support individuals and families toward healthy and rewarding lives.

ACTIONS	LEAD ORGANIZATION
Deliver diverse treatment options along the continuum of treatment from outreach and community-based through to post recovery, not only for those who are addicted, but for those around them	Alberta Health Services
Monitor programs and services, identify gaps and work collaboratively to address gaps	All
Support access to evidence-based, affordable residential treatment services for youth and adults	Alberta Health Services
Improve the way opioids are prescribed for more effective chronic pain management and reduction in misuse or overdose from these drugs	Alberta Health Services





Harm Reduction

Harm reduction involves an achievable, pragmatic approach to substance issues, and seeks to reduce the individual and societal harms associated with substance use.

Harm reduction seeks to mitigate harm while still allowing for the possibility that total abstinence may not be an option for everyone, and that some level of use may be a reality based on a person's readiness for change. Harm reduction ensures access to services and supports at all points along the continuum of use.

Harm reduction methods have attracted intense scrutiny over the years. The premise of not necessarily requiring a change in drug use and working to reduce the harms related to substance use is difficult for many to reconcile with the goal of safer healthier communities. Yet the philosophy of harm reduction pervades health promotion methods and benefits citizens from all walks of life. In Strathcona County, we want to work toward saving lives and reducing the harm related to substance use. We believe harm reduction is part of a realistic solution that will help us save lives and greatly contribute to our overall success as a community.

Harm Reduction Objective

Work to reduce the harms of substance use in Strathcona County.

ACTIONS	LEAD ORGANIZATION
Increase safety programming for people who inject, inhale or drink substances, and increase maintenance programs to help with withdrawal as people minimize their use	Alberta Health Services
Increase overdose prevention and awareness programming	Primary Care Network Sherwood Park, Strathcona County





Community Inclusion and Safety

Community inclusion and connection is a key factor in safe communities. People want to live in places where they know and like their neighbours - where they can do things together and help to create welcoming and safe communities in which to raise their children and grow old.

Community safety encompasses the term “enforcement” and represents the range of interventions that seek to address the crime and social disorder related to substance use. As an integral part of any drug strategy, enforcement represents all components of the broader criminal justice system, including police, the courts, parole/probation, crime prevention and community-driven initiatives intended to enhance community safety and mitigate social disorder.

Community Inclusion and Safety Objective

Work to increase community inclusion and connection, reduce substance-use related incidences, and support appropriate diversion to treatment options.

ACTIONS	LEAD ORGANIZATION
Create welcoming and inclusive communities where citizens have the opportunity for meaningful connections and every individual is respected	All
Increase the coordinated approach between police and community stakeholders in addressing substance-use related crime	RCMP
Support connected and inclusive communities to address factors contributing to addiction and create a sense of place where all individuals are respected	Family and Community Services



IMPLEMENTING THIS STRATEGY

Creating a supported, safe, and connected community will rely on the community's support of best-practice approaches and widespread understanding of this critical issue.

Organizations participating on the Committee currently provide a broad range of programs and services to address substance use in Strathcona County. These include provision of information, referrals, support and advocacy for families, crisis resources and supports, staff training and education, increased availability of Naloxone kits, training on administering Naloxone, restorative justice program, brain science education, and increased hazardous substances training for first responders.

In recognition of our shared responsibility we understand the distinctive role that partners can play to work toward the objectives in this strategy. A lead organization is identified for each action in this Strategy. Lead organizations will convene and work with partners on the Committee and others as needed to implement the actions.

Effecting change to improve the wellbeing of all community members requires an integrated, multisystem effort that engages the community and is driven, maintained and monitored by strong leadership at all levels. The Strathcona County Community Drug Strategy Committee will bring together stakeholders and convene discussions as needed to advance this strategy.

MOVING FORWARD

This strategy represents our best thinking and learning at this moment in time. Research, mainstream literature, evidence-informed practices and learnings are continually changing.

It is expected that this strategy evolve and adapt based on emerging new evidence and supportive practices. The partner organizations participating in this strategy will meet annually to share progress on initiatives, identify and plan to address gaps, and to share what is being learned through our learning-based approach and evaluation efforts.



**MLA Annie McKittrick
Sherwood Park**

— Strathcona County —
VictimServices



Moms Stop the Harm



Salvation Army





STRATHCONA
COUNTY