Current and Forecasted Demands on the Strathcona County Social Framework Community Grants
Report

May, 2022

STRATHCONA COUNTY

Executive summary

Organizations providing social supports have identified increasing pressures on Strathcona County residents and families associated with changing economic circumstances and the effects of the recent pandemic. The Strathcona County Social Framework Community Grants leverage the capacity of local non-profits to deliver social supports to County residents and families. As the local non-profit social sector faces these challenges, Strathcona County Council tasked administration to review current and forecasted demands on the grants program.

Administration reviewed the history of the grants program, conducted guided conversations with current recipient organizations, reviewed the provincial and national context, and drew on findings from a Community Safety and Well-being public engagement. Results were reviewed with the Strathcona County Social Framework Community Grants Advisory Committee. The committee's input is incorporated into the findings culminating in the following situational analysis.

The analysis confirms that social sector non-profits are facing increasing service demands and increased acuity and complexity of service needs, while navigating organizational challenges associated with increasing costs of doing business and limited funding options. The analysis also identifies the potential demand on the grants program of emerging needs such as support for seniors as well as any additional needs that may emerge in the coming years.

The analysis also confirms the critical importance of operational funding. This grants program is one of the few sources of operational funding that is available to local organizations. It additionally confirms the importance of collaboration as a path forward for local organizations to find efficiencies and increase effectiveness.

Forecasts indicate that the pressures of increased service demands, acuity and complexity, as well as organizational constraints associated with inflation and economic variability will persist for the foreseeable future.

STRATHCONA COUNTY

Background

On February 1st, 2022, Strathcona County Council passed the following motion:

That administration conduct an analysis of current and forecasted demands on the Social Framework Community Grants program and report to Council by the end of Q2.

The motion followed discussions by Council during 2021 budget deliberations, as well as discussions in Council surrounding allocation of the 2022 Social Framework Community Grants.

Grants program mandate

The Social Framework Community Grants program is guided by the Social Framework Community Grants Policy (SER-005-001), approved June 19, 2018.

Prevention and Early Intervention
The policy has a mandate of prevention and early intervention in alignment with the mission of Strathcona County Family and Community Services (FCS) and partial accountability to the Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) legislation and regulation.*

The Social Framework and Community Safety and Well-being
The grants policy was revised in June of 2018 to align with the Strathcona County Social Framework and renewed County priorities including the County strategic plan. The Framework prioritizes four outcomes of: safety, affordability, access to programs and services and connection and inclusion. It also outlines behavioural shifts in how partners can better work together to address social well-being. The policy also aligns with the County's ongoing community safety and well-being work.

Municipal Responsibilities
The mandate of the policy aligns with areas of municipal responsibility – which means it does not explicitly cover, for example, childcare, education or health care which fall largely outside the municipal mandate.

Connectedness and Inclusion

Affordability

Safety

Access to programs and services

*The Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) program is an 80/20 funding partnership between Strathcona County and the Government of Alberta, prioritizing prevention and early intervention.

Grants program structure

The Social Framework policy guides the administration of four grant streams:

This report focuses on the projected needs and demands for the Core and Collaboration grants as critical funding for social supports in the County, with a current annual investment of $1,094,660.

1

Core

Supports the non-profit sector to provide prevention and early intervention supports for social needs and to contribute to the Social Framework outcomes and behavioural shifts. Core social funding is for a period of one to three years.

2

Collaboration

Mobilizes cross-sector partnerships and collective resources in the non-profit sector to address community-wide social issues. Collaboration funding is for a period of two to three years.

Change and connection grants are drawn from a separate budget line and administered through a separate process to the core and collaboration grants, with an annual investment of $65,000.

3

Connection

Grants of up to $425 are available for residents to supplement a diverse range of neighbourhood and community-focused gatherings, events or activities such as block-parties.

4

Change

Grants of up to $2,000 are available for residents, community groups, and non-profits, to undertake projects that create positive social change.

Grants program strategy

The grants funding strategy for Core and Collaboration grants hinges on three premises:

1 Within the local social ecosystem, non-profit organizations are effective at delivering specialized social supports while FCS provides generalist, customized supports to best leverage all that is available to support residents.

2 'Upstream' work of prevention and early intervention is more effective and efficient than 'downstream' intervention.
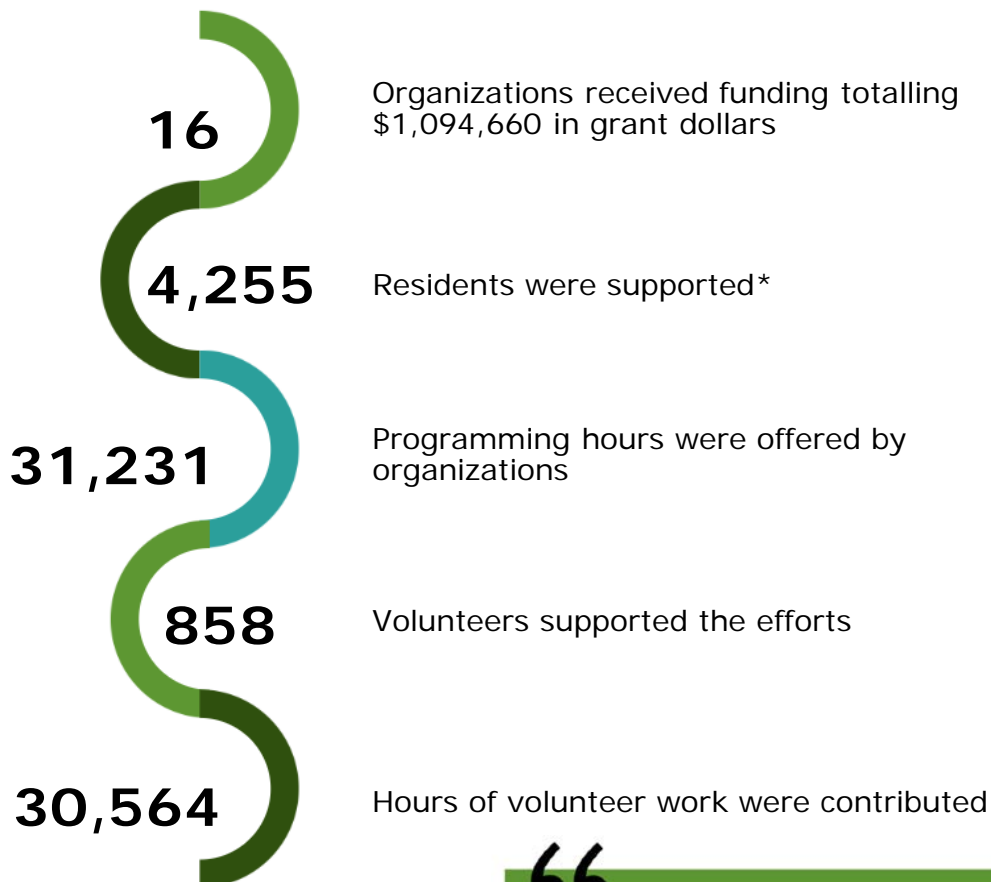
3 Multi-year core funding is critical for organizations to support ongoing operations and/or longer-term programming, and collaboration funding encourages organizations to find synergies and efficiencies to better support residents.

Grants program return on investment

Many local grant recipient organizations are the only resource available to meet a critical community need. For some residents, support from these organizations can be life-saving, such as intensive support received from the Safe Place shelter. For others, it can be life changing, such as building meaningful intergenerational relationships through Linking Generations.

In the 2020/21 grant year…

16 — Organizations received funding totalling $1,094,660 in grant dollars

4,255 — Residents were supported*

31,231 — Programming hours were offered by organizations

858 — Volunteers supported the efforts

30,564 — Hours of volunteer work were contributed

*Each organization counts participants only once, no matter how many times they participate.

> " For some, these programs are **life changing**, for others, they are **life-saving**. "

Analysis

To support Council's deliberations, administration conducted an analysis including the following components:

A review of the grant program history,

Guided conversations with ten of thirteen current grant recipient organizations,

A review of the provincial and national context, and

A review of results from a Community Safety and Well-being public engagement.

The findings have been aggregated into a situational assessment focusing on implications and forecasts for organizations, for the social ecosystem, and for a shared response to emerging challenges. This assessment was shared with the Strathcona County Social Framework Community Grants Advisory Committee and the committee's input has also been incorporated into this report.

Grants program history

Granting records were reviewed from 2011 to 2022. Investments are summarized in Figure 1.

- From 2011 to 2019, Strathcona County provided funding to Volunteer Strathcona Centre as a separate funding arrangement outside of the grants program.

- In 2018, Council increased investment in the social sector by assigning $100,000 of additional funding and $300,000 in surplus to the grants program.

- In the budget of 2019, Council made this an ongoing investment.

- In 2019, an additional one-time budget surplus of $102,908 was allocated following closure of the Strathcona County Investment Program.

- In 2020, Volunteer Strathcona Centre funding was incorporated into the grants program and Volunteer Strathcona Centre received a three-year core grant under the program for 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Since 2019, the total number of applications to the grants program have exceeded available dollars by at least $90,000 each year. This year (2022) was the first year where the Social Framework Community Grants Advisory Committee was placed in a position to recommend less than full funding to all successful applicants in order to best support as many needs as possible.

Council's increased investment in 2018 had the effect of accounting for inflation and population growth from previous years. The increased investment also addressed increasing social sector needs and an investment in multi-year and collaboration grants, as part of the revised policy.

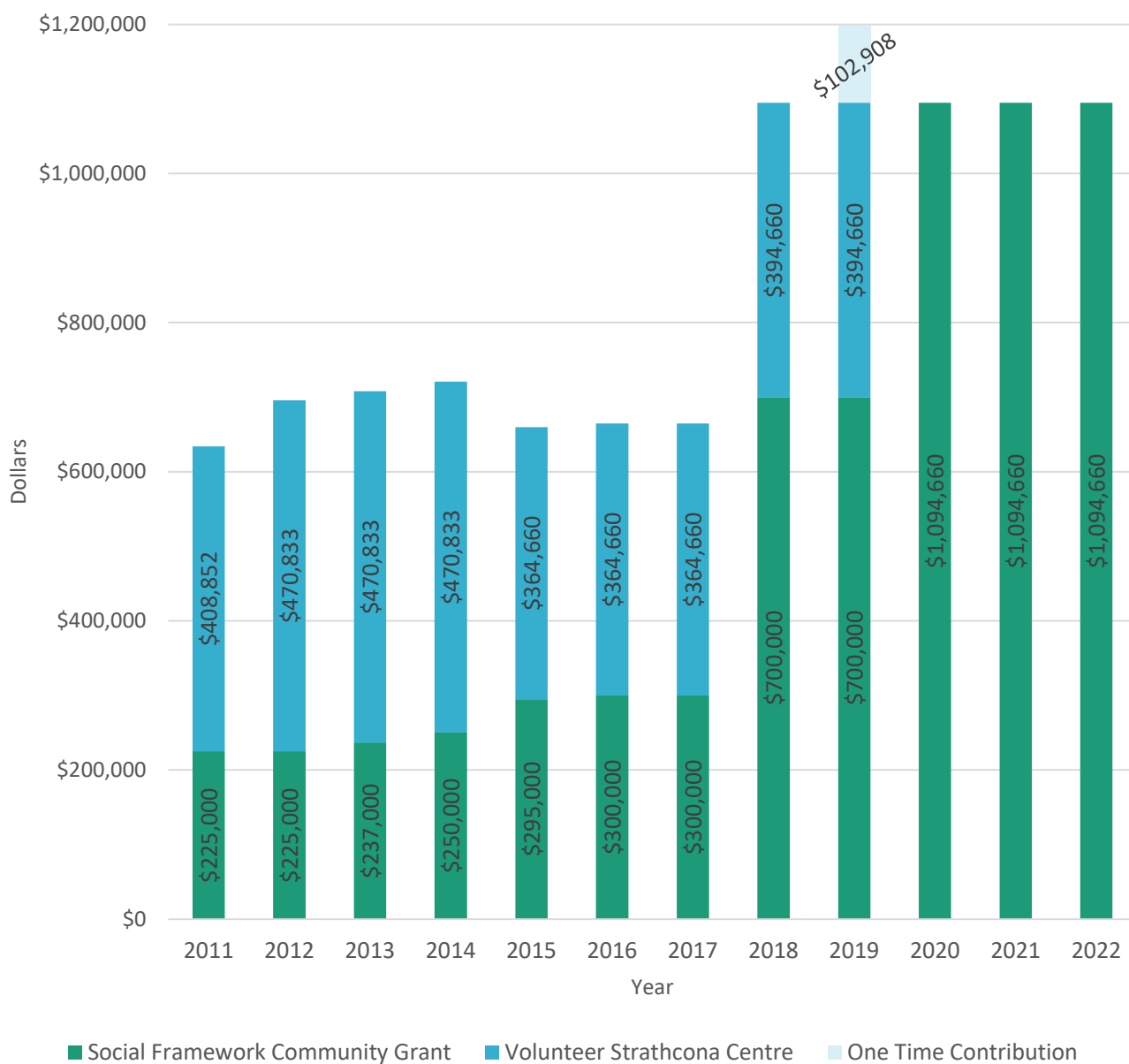STRATHCONA COUNTY

Grants program history

Figure 1 Investment per year by Strathcona County into social sector grants including both the Social Framework Community Grants and a separate grant to Volunteer Strathcona Centre. See text for additional details.

Situational assessment

Drawing from a review of the grant program history, guided conversations with current grant recipient organizations, a review of the provincial and national context, and a review of results from a Community Safety and Well-being public engagement, a situational assessment is presented to understand current and forecasted demands on the grant program following three main domains.

1 Organizations

How are the organizations doing? Are they facing changes in service levels, issues with operations such as staffing or transportation, issues with governance, strategy or funding?

2 Social system

What trends are occurring in the social system? Are needs or opportunities being met? Are these forecasted to increase or decrease? Are there unmet needs or opportunities?

3 Shared response

Are there trends in how organizations are, or could be working together? Are organizations partnering on programs or for operations?

1 Organizations

Service levels

Organizations report that service demands are increasing. In some cases, this is an indication of a successful program, such as BGC Strathcona County and Linking Generations. In other cases, it indicates a notable trend, such as Saffron reporting a sharp increase in service demands. In all cases, increased demand is placing pressure on the organizations.

Organizations also report increases in the acuity and complexity of service demands. For example, Parents Empowering Parents and Saffron both report that the time required per participant has increased significantly. This increase in the complexity and acuity of needs for our residents is consistent with trends experienced by FCS and with Community Safety and Well-being engagement results.

Operations

Organizations shared that they are noticing pressures on staff such as compassion fatigue. Some organizations also reported a higher turnover of staff or difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Other organizations had success retaining staff by offering remote working options during the pandemic.

Some organizations pointed to challenges with professional development. When staff are working at or beyond capacity to meet increasingly acute service needs, there are limited funds and time for professional development to support staff in their evolving roles.

Multiple organizations shared the challenge of increasing operating costs. Inflation in Alberta was 6.5% as of March 2022. In addition to inflation, many organizations faced costs associated with the addition of virtual service delivery modes that were adopted during the pandemic. Costs included computer equipment, technology support and training. Some of these costs persist as organizations continue to offer virtual options which work well for some of their participants.

Several organizations identified transportation costs as a specific challenge. The increased costs of transportation, and the importance of transportation in Strathcona County's unique urban/rural context place a pressure on operations for groups such as Drive Happiness, BGC Strathcona County, and Linking Generations.

1 Organizations continued

Governance

Many organizations adapted effectively to the pandemic but are now struggling due to ongoing pressures. There are indications locally, provincially and nationally that the pressures on leaders in mission-driven organizations are very high. Many leaders took on a significant burden during the pandemic (e.g. increased hours) to balance service delivery, staff well-being, operating models and strategic direction, but those efforts are now taking a toll.

Organizations shared that board support and retention were consistent through the pandemic. This may speak to a strength of the community and local organizations.

Strategy

The pandemic put pressure on organizations to adapt in many ways but there is no evidence of local organizations needing to shift their mandates. Instead, there is evidence of organizations bridging gaps in service delivery through collaboration, such as with the Canteen Youth Hub coordinated by BGC Strathcona County.

Funding

Positive trends include some pandemic-specific funding that was available to organizations, and some new provincial funding sources currently opening up. For many of these grants, organizations are in competition with other groups from across the province. Fundraising events are once again an option that was limited during the pandemic.

Nearly all organizations shared the critical importance of the grants program as a source of local, multi-year operating funding. Most other grants are specific to projects and do not cover operating costs.

Challenges include increased service pressures and costs of doing business balanced against limited funding options. Many local organizations are limited in revenue options because they cannot charge participants or cannot increase fees for participants.

2 Social system

Growing and evolving needs

Community issues that organizations identified echo challenges emerging provincially and nationally. Concerns were shared about mental health, sexual exploitation and violence, particularly of girls and young women, supports for seniors, and affordability including basic needs and housing options.

Several organizations identified volunteering as an opportunity in Strathcona County. Organizations shared that they see indications that interest in volunteering is high following the pandemic.

> " The past two-plus years have challenged the non-profit sector. Social-serving non-profits faced increased demand amidst reduced resources. Resilient non-profits were able to cope and respond to the crisis. Some built new skills and strengthened their organizations. The reality is that many more struggled to keep up with the pace of change. The fragility of the social-serving non-profit sector was among the cracks revealed by the pandemic.*

* Non-profit sector organizational resilience matters, PolicyWise (2021)

STRATHCONA COUNTY

3 Shared response

Collaboration

Organizations confirmed that collaboration will be critical to respond to the growing and changing needs of residents. Groups cautioned however that it takes time to build the relationships necessary for successful collaborations. They also shared that the pandemic made it difficult to maintain relationships and launch new collaborations.

Regional networks and context

Strathcona County benefits from being part of an active region where residents can access social supports in adjacent municipalities. Several locally active organizations are connected to larger regional and national networks. Also, several successful local organizations continue to expand their services regionally and even provincially.

Conclusion

Strathcona County social sector non-profits are facing a challenging situation, with a growing volume, acuity and complexity of service demands coupled to increasing costs of doing business and limited funding options, while managing the after-effects of successfully supporting many residents through a challenging pandemic.

More than half of the organizations that were consulted for this report anticipate asking for additional funding from the grants program in coming years. Based on the results of the situational analysis, each request will likely be legitimate relative to the costs of service provision for each organization.

In combination with any new initiatives brought to the grants program in subsequent years, requests will exceed available dollars for the foreseeable future.

Comments from Organizations

"Funding is tough. Everyone is giving us less, but the demand for the program is increasing."

-Linking Generations

"The calls from residents are more complex. Calls used to take 10 – 15 minutes. The calls have doubled in time for complex issues."

-Parents Empowering Parents

"Our summer camps were full the first week we started registration. We have 200 a week on the waitlist"

-Boys and Girls Club

"It's an undervalued sector that is at a breaking point. I'm experiencing staff shortages, and I can't recruit qualified staff to ensure a high quality of service. Turnover was 19%."

-Robin Hood Association

"The needs of our senior residents are increasing and more are falling through the cracks.'

-Volunteer Strathcona