

# FORT MCMURRAY WILDFIRE A CASE STUDY

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*What will be, beams moan, sad siding weeps,  
when new is old  
and all is held in memory?"*

from the poem *Aftermath* by Joan Baker  
Vice President YMCA Community & Housing Initiatives

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# YMCA OF NORTHERN ALBERTA 2016



Serves a massive geographic area; the distance from Edmonton to Grande Prairie is 4 hours by car, and 5 hours from Edmonton to Wood Buffalo.



## 1 REVENUE

\$56 Million



## 2 LOCATIONS OF OPERATION

Provides programs and services in Edmonton, Grande Prairie and Wood Buffalo



## 3 PEOPLE

The association has over 1,500 employees and 600 volunteers.



## 4 PROGRAMS

Health, Fitness and Aquatics, Community and Housing Services and Childcare.



## 5 WOOD BUFFALO - SUMMARY

In June 2015, Wood Buffalo formally merged with YMCA of Northern Alberta.

- Serving the community since 1986
- \$10 million operating revenue
- 10 buildings throughout Fort McMurray
- 180 employees
- 9 Child Care Programs
- 6 Community Outreach & Housing Programs
- 2 Health Fitness and Aquatics Facilities
- Largest charity in the community



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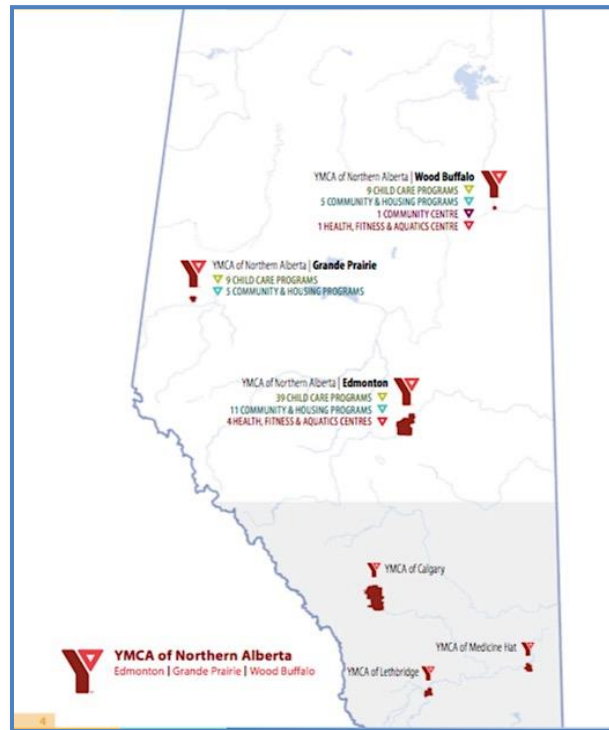
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## INTRODUCTION

Disasters expose the underlying strengths and weakness of a city and its organizations.<sup>1</sup> Through an examination of the YMCA of Northern Alberta’s recent experience of the Fort McMurray wildfire, this case study examines how the YMCA of Northern Alberta responded to the immediate crisis and emergency, and the subsequent recovery. Also explored are what helps and hinders organizational capacity to respond to a crisis, and what it takes to support people who were affected – residents, members, volunteers and staff.

This case study is not a critique of the YMCA’s response, nor is it intended to provide a set of recommendations for Y’s to undertake to aid them to be better prepared for unanticipated events, from power failure and fires to child molestation. Rather, it is a review of what the senior leadership team of the YMCA of Northern Alberta did and learned in response to the Fort McMurray wildfire, what caused them to do what they did, what insights they’ve gained about themselves and their organization, and what they would change. The reflections and observations that conclude this case study are relevant to YMCA Senior Leaders and Board Members, and extend beyond consideration of risk and emergency preparedness. To a great degree, the lessons learned concern good leadership practices and making good on the YMCA’s mandate.

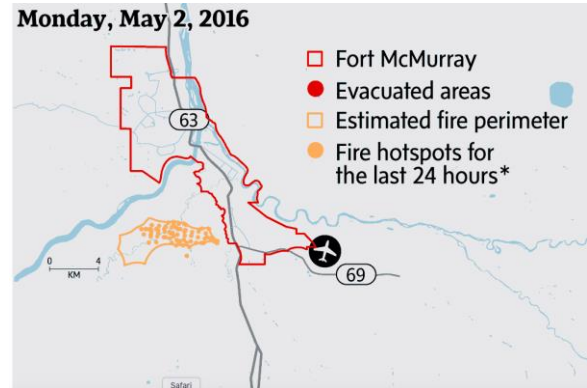


<sup>1</sup> Community Capacity Building: Learning from the 2003 Canberra Bushfires. Winkworth, G., Healy, C, Woodward, M, Camilleri, P. *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, Vol. 24 No. 2, May 2009.

# THE CRISIS

## The Fort McMurray Wildfire At A Glance

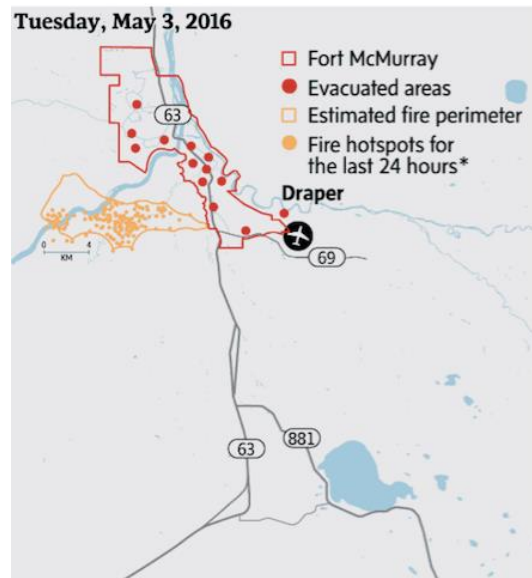
Summer in the Wood Buffalo region is a time of forest fires. With high temperature, low humidity, the type of trees in the local forest, wildfires are common. During April, Alberta contended with 329 wildfires. Fires were burning near Fort McMurray on May 1, and residents in the Beacon Hill neighborhood were ordered to evacuate. On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, these same residents were told they could return.



retrieved at <http://bit.ly/2e1DV47>

In the late afternoon of May 3, the Provincial

Government ordered the mass evacuation of the entire city of Fort McMurray. That morning, most residents would not have guessed they would be evacuating. The sky was clear at 10:00am, with very little evidence of smoke – the smoke from the previous day’s Horse Creek wildfires having been sucked to the ground by overnight low temperatures.



retrieved at <http://bit.ly/2e1DV47>

When Jim Weller, Regional Vice President of the Wood Buffalo Y, arrived at his office in Fort McMurray on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, he recalls it as a beautiful day. The winds were blowing away from town. While fires were burning not far from the city, it looked like Fort McMurray would not be threatened.

Regional Fire Chief of Wood Buffalo, Darby Allen, made no mention of the need for evacuation at his 11:00 am news conference, even though the fire was about one kilometer from the city. He did warn viewers that the situation could get worse before it got better, however, people were told they could continue on with their day.

Unknown to most residents, the size of the fire had doubled overnight. It had jumped the Athabasca River, what many regarded as a natural protective barrier. The winds had changed and the fire was moving fast towards the City of Fort McMurray.

Residents were unaware of the dangers and impending crisis.

Just after noon, the fire had gained speed and momentum with three hundred foot flames.

At 1:00 pm, Jim Weller sent Nick Parkinson, President and CEO of the Northern Alberta YMCA, the following photo taken from a second floor window at the Westwood Family YMCA. At 1:30, flames and smoke were encroaching upon neighborhoods in numerous areas where the YMCA provides programs and services. (See the appendix for a timelines of wildfire and the YMCA’s response.)



For a Global News report giving a vivid description of the crisis and evacuation, use this link:  
<http://globalnews.ca/news/2681249/fort-mcmurray-wildfire-timeline-of-events/>

## **The Tipping Point – How the Northern Alberta Y Responded to the Wildfire**

Early in the afternoon Provincial officials indicated they might order an evacuation of the city, but did not issue a mandatory evacuation order. While the Y did have a crisis and disaster management plan, there was no plan or playbook for what would happen.



Picture taken May 3<sup>rd</sup>, approximately 2:00 pm, Westwood Family YMCA



At about 2:00 pm on May 3, after receiving a second picture from Jim, Nick called him to discuss the situation and to get a status report on the impact to the 10 YMCA program and service locations. After a brief discussion, Nick coordinated an emergency conference call with the Edmonton-based YMCA senior leadership team and the Wood Buffalo YMCA management team.

After five minutes of discussion, Nick decided, with agreement from the leaders on the emergency call, to close all 10 Fort McMurray YMCA program and service locations. Members, program participants, staff and, most importantly the over 300 children and youth in Child Care would need to be evacuated. In the words used by both Nick and Jim, *... keeping our staff and all those we serve, and in particular our kids safe and away from harm, drove Nick's decision.*

*... when I got the second pictures from Jim from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Westwood facility, at 2:00 pm on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, I knew I had to act. ... We got everyone on the phone ... were we closing one building or did we need to close everything? ... From a leadership perspective ... someone at some point has to step up and make the call, otherwise you are in trouble. Nick Parkinson, President and CEO*

It should be noted that at the time the Y leadership team made their decision to close, the Boards of Education had not yet ordered schools closed and children sent home.

Between 2:00 and 4:00 pm, the team held three more emergency conference calls to monitor the progress of the shutdown. Using the shared information system, staff in Edmonton and Fort McMurray called over 300 Fort McMurray Child Care parents to come and pick up their children. By 4:00 pm all YMCA facilities were closed: 9 Child Care programs, 2 Health Fitness and Aquatics Centres and the Community and Housing Program Centre. All children were reunited with families. Y personnel, some of whom had already lost their homes to the fire, started their own evacuation.

By 4:30 pm, many city residents were starting to leave the city. The single route south, Highway 63, was already jammed.



retrieved at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016\\_Fort\\_McMurray\\_wildfire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Fort_McMurray_wildfire)

The decision to close all Y facilities and services was not without its potential risks. What if the fire turned away from the city later that day and life in Fort McMurray returned to near normal?

*This organization had the foresight to connect children with their families before the mandatory evacuation order. Had we waited, I'm not sure we would have succeeded in connecting families together given the chaos that ensued once the Province issued its mandatory evacuation order. – Jim Weller, Regional Vice President, Wood Buffalo Region.*

Would Y members and Child Care parents feel frustrated and angry with the Y for disrupting their lives? Would the Y lose membership because people felt the decision was made in haste, without waiting for Provincial officials to make the call?

Five months after the mandatory evacuation, Nick said: *The thing for me, as we were on the call the day of, is that I felt people could die. The pictures demonstrated to me that lives were at stake. ... The defining moment was the complexity of getting kids back to parents and parents having to evacuate, that's what created the strong sense that we needed to be decisive and act*

*immediately.*

Around dinnertime, the Provincial Government issued a mandatory evacuation order of the entire City of Fort McMurray. Over 90,000 people had to leave. Already, traffic on the one road out of Fort McMurray was at a near standstill.



retrieved at: <http://bit.ly/2eQL6la> Wildfire as seen from satellite imagery.

## THE INDETERMINATE MIDDLE AND RECOVERY

After the immediate crisis response, ensuring people's safety and closing the facilities, the Y transitioned into a long middle phase that lasted from May 3<sup>rd</sup> until June 3<sup>rd</sup>. During this time only first responders were allowed into the community. Even though the Y had no idea how the fire had impacted the 10 facility locations, senior leaders began to anticipate what would be required to assess, remediate, certify and reopen the facilities once access was granted.



The city re-opened on a phased-in basis starting June 1. The Y was not permitted back in until June 3, even though Y leaders thought they would get into the city with the first or second wave of essential returnees. To the Y leaders, this meant that the Provincial Government had not identified the Y Child Care as an essential service.

In different ways, each senior leadership member remarked that responding to the immediate crisis was easier than the questions and complexities that emerged after the first week.

*During business resumption, we should not expect the same things from staff that we did before. Fort McMurray is a different city, and staff are not back to business as usual, or back to normal, or working in the same facilities with the same people. – Janet Giles,*

Senior Vice President, Strategic Advancement.

For nearly thirty days after evacuation, the senior leadership team had to address continually emerging, complex issues and challenges. In the words of Laura Porret, Vice President Human Resources and Leadership Development, this time was *like trying to lead a team through an obstacle course when you are blindfolded.*

For example, the Provincial Government, which was in control of the re-opening of the city, had not thought about the demand for child care. The YMCA is the largest child care provider in the city, operating 9

centers. Once people started to return to the community and to work, many of those returning needed child care. They needed the Y to re-open its Child Care centers as soon as possible. However, getting operations up and running again was far harder and more time consuming than anticipated. From the time the Y regained access, it took a month for the facilities to be cleaned, for new equipment ordered and sent, and for the facilities to be commissioned and re-certified.

With the wildfire, questions surfaced for the senior team about what happens to a Y in the longer term after it has been affected by a disaster. What follows the initial upsurge of collective unity in addressing the immediate crisis? In what ways does the emotional upset that follows a crisis undermine the social fabric of an organization? In what ways does disruption make an organization stronger? What does it take for a Y to promote social cohesion both within the organization and within the communities it serves? How can a Y enable the development of greater collective agency and well-being in the aftermath of disaster? In recovery, does a Y grow back to where it was, or become something different and better? What expectations for getting back to business as usual are placed upon a Y recovering from a disaster by the communities the Y serves?

Throughout the crisis Nick reached out to, and was contacted by, many YMCA colleagues. They offered their support, encouragement, and assistance. Two remarks and discussions really stood out for Nick and had a profound impact on the leadership team:

1. *“In times of crisis, YMCAs step up...they don’t step back” — Medhat Mahdy, President and CEO, YMCA of Greater Toronto.*
2. *“In a year from now, what will the Mayor/Community say about the difference the YMCA made?” — Steve Butz, President and CEO of the YMCA of Greater Vancouver*

The timing of these conversations was perfect, as it challenged and changed the leadership team’s mindset, around this notion of moving from “emergency and crisis management” to “recovery and rebuilding.”

The team realized they had an opportunity to reposition, redefine and strengthen the Y in the community for generations to come. They wanted the YMCA to be a leader that was on the forefront in community rebuilding and the recovery.

### ***Unanticipated Challenges***

The following is a list of some of the unanticipated challenges the leadership team had to address.

- Ensuring timely relevant and accurate communications and messaging to all stakeholders (using a variety of platforms) — members, participants, staff, families, Y's in Canada, Board of Directors, levels of government, etc.
- Refunding the automatic payments taken on May 1 for Child Care and Membership fees.
- Stopping automatic withdrawals scheduled to be taken on May 15.
- Developing a system for proactively refunding fees and communicating about the refund without anyone having to request the refund.
- Managing ambiguity when the insurance company was not able to give a definitive answer as to whether the Y's business continuity coverage included salary and benefit continuation for 180 Fort McMurray employees, a monthly payroll of approximately \$450,000.
- Communicating in a timely manner with employees who had been evacuated and were living in temporary accommodation across the province and the country and who needed money and wanted to know if the Y was going to pay them or not; and if not what supports the Y would provide.
- Initiating a mass temporary layoff of all staff (175 staff, excluding the senior managers in Wood Buffalo). Not even the Y's lawyer knew the specifics of how to go about this.
- Ensuring that all 180 employees were covered for health and dental benefits during the evacuation and layoff; and ensuring all employees were informed about the Employee Assistance Counseling Program to support them in dealing with the emotional toll of the crisis and evacuation.
- Responding in Edmonton to the emergent service needs of the people who had been evacuated to Edmonton into university residences, in particular vulnerable newcomer families and Housing First clientele who did not have extended family or social network supports.
- Being excluded from the first wave of essential organizations permitted to re-enter Fort McMurray.
- Maintaining positive working relationships with key stakeholders, despite frustrations. This included relationships with the municipality, the province, the restoration company, the insurance company, the school boards that owned the buildings where the Y operates its services and programs, the adjuster, staff, board members, volunteers – just to name a few.
- Needing to work with the School Boards and the restoration companies to clean and open Child Care facilities. In the end, the Y had to bring in its own restoration company

to complete the thorough cleaning, which is necessary to reopen Child Care and other services.

- Deciding if and when it would be appropriate for the Y to set up its own fundraising campaign. The senior team knew they would need funding to recover, but didn't have any guidelines as to when would be the right time to do so. They understood there is a risk of people seeing the Y as opportunistic if a fund raising campaign was launched too early.

*The decision to launch Y's fund raising campaign came after talking with colleagues from around from the country – Medhat Mahdy, President and CEO, YMCA of Greater Toronto; Steve Butz, President and CEO, YMCA of Greater Vancouver; Laura Palmer Korn, interim President and CEO, YMCA Canada, George Rodger, retired senior Y leader, Wayne Perkins, retired CEO YMCA of Calgary, and numerous others. These leaders supported the Northern Alberta Y's needed to think about recovery, particularly the need for financial support to ensure the Y was able to offer leadership and be on the forefront in recovery. To date over \$375,000 has been raised to support the recovery efforts, of which \$160,000 was donated by 47 YMCA's across Canada. In addition, the Y has accessed significant support funding from the Canadian Red Cross to deliver new, and augmented services to aid in the community's and the Y's recovery and rebuilding efforts.*

### **Recovery – Taking the time to reflect, listen and learn!**

In October of 2016, the Senior Leadership Team engaged a third party to conduct a formal debrief of the events and circumstances. More importantly, the debrief included a focused reflection on the decisions made and learnings on what went well and could have been done differently. "Taking the time to reflect as a senior leadership team and as individuals was extremely insightful and emotional says Nick Parkinson, President and CEO. Allowing each person to share their perspectives and opinions in a trusted environment was very beneficial for all.

In December of 2016, two additional formal debriefs were conducted, utilizing an external facilitator: The debriefs were conducted with six members of the Wood Buffalo Senior leadership and several members of the Associations Senior Leadership Team. What stood out from the discussion is the Wood Buffalo staff didn't understand and appreciate what the Association Senior Leadership Team did experienced; and the Association Senior Leadership Team didn't understand what the Wood Buffalo Staff went through as they lived the experience both professionally and personally. Taking time to have a respectful discussion, and to listen and reflect on the challenges both teams experienced helped create a better understanding of what it takes to successfully respond to complexity, .

It is very clear that the human side of the healing and journey to full recovery will take time and further conversations and discussions. YMCA Management anticipates having further discussions in 2017 to support the healing process for all those involved.

There are a few characteristics common to all of these challenges and how the Y responded:

#### ***There were no clear best solutions***

For example, no one in any Canadian YMCA likely ever imagined what a prolonged closing of all facilities and services would mean in terms of business continuity, or what actions an

Association would need to take to mitigate risk to business health or to keep evacuated staff engaged while temporarily discharging them.

***There was high interconnectivity with other problems***

For example, considering salary continuation or cessation required taking account of what other organizations in the community were doing with their staff, consulting with funding partners, thinking through what could be offered to employees if a decision was made to initiate a mass temporary layoff.

*We don't have a roadmap for HR, once the facility recovers. Nor for assets, communications, insurance, fundraising. Nor for IT. These were themes that came up on almost every call. .... It doesn't have to be the closure of a whole city. If it is just one site, the same kinds of conversations need to occur. – John Kopeck, Vice President Fund Development.*

***There were continually emerging issues where predictability was impossible***

For example, when other organizations control the facilities where the Y operates its programs ... how does the Y plan for reopening? When the community wants the Y to reopen Child Care as soon as possible, but the restoration company is working at a pace and to the specifications of the building owners, what do you communicate to the community? How do you communicate messages of hope when you can't say for certain when you can offer services? In the words of Ruth Menegozzo, Vice President and Chief Financial Officer of YMCA Northern Alberta: *There are times when you miss things, anger people, and become frustrated.*

***There was a need to access resources and knowledge outside of Wood Buffalo***

As was previously mentioned, in June of 2015 the YMCA of Wood Buffalo formally merged with the YMCA of Northern Alberta. The merger with a larger YMCA provided the Wood Buffalo Y access to a significantly larger and more diverse set of skills and experiences to deal with the crisis.

Having staff expertise and resources in Edmonton, five hours away, provided capacity for the Wood Buffalo Y to respond in terms of Human Resources, Risk, Finance, Asset, Marketing and Communications, Fund Raising, Community and Government relations, etc. If the Wood Buffalo Y was still independent, how could they have managed the magnitude and complexity of this crisis? Would the Wood Buffalo Y have been able to reopen? What would happen if a small independent, one city Y in Canada experienced a similar crisis? How would the YMCA's in Canada respond as a Federation and how quickly would they be able to respond?

***There was traumatic stress***

Catastrophes such as the Fort McMurray wildfire don't just shutter a city and destroy its buildings. The Fort McMurray wildfire was a collective stress event with major unwanted circumstances. It was a disaster because it overwhelmed the capacity of the city and its residents to contain and control its consequences. The traumatic stress caused by this catastrophe, to those who were evacuated and those who were doing what they could to help, such as the Northern Alberta senior team, continues to disrupt people's lives. A prolonged disaster burns away the established

*Recovery is not going to be over for some time, the depth of despair and anger continue. EAP providers, some of our caregivers, are going through trauma and some are struggling with their responsibilities. – Laura Porret, Vice President Human Resources and Leadership Development.*

bonds of community, disrupts resilience and the settled way of doing and seeing things.<sup>2</sup>

## OBESERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The following lessons are drawn from conversations I had with individual senior leadership team members, and from a half-day *Meaning Making Session* I held with the entire team.

Even the best emergency response and business continuity plans are not enough, especially in unpredictable circumstances. You need a generative process where leadership is attuned to what is unfolding in the moment. Decisions and actions draw on experience, guided by explicit or implicit principles. This is an iterative process of acting, seeing the results, assessing why those results have occurred and what else needs to happen; then adjusting your focus to see what unanticipated issues are arising.

### Preparedness and Business Continuity

How prepared YMCAs are generally to respond to an emergency has not been tested, perhaps not even documented until this Wildfire experience. No Y, no matter how large, would be prepared for a disaster that led to the closing of an entire city. Nevertheless, in the extremity of these circumstances, there are lessons for all YMCAs in Canada.

While the senior leadership team was guided by emergency preparedness plans and practices that were in place, the current documents focus on an incident at a single site and do not take into account the complexities and the identification of additional risk areas such as HR, Asset, Financial, and Communications. Not surprisingly, there is nothing in these plans about prolonged disruption affecting multiple sites. There is also little guidance concerning re-opening multiple programs, services and facilities – from when to start planning and to how to get programs up and running when staff levels are not at pre-fire levels.

*Being under the umbrella of the Edmonton Y is a blessing for the Wood Buffalo Y. It would have been very different if the wildfire happened before our merger. We gained resources, expertise, and experience... – Jim Weller, Regional Vice President, Wood Buffalo Region.*

### Recommendations From Team Members Concerning Crisis Response and Recovery:

1. Keep up-to-date contact information for staff, members and those served, including personal cell numbers, personal emails, social media accounts etc.
2. Role-play and practice emergency response and recovery. Practice or *run-throughs* build the mental muscles for emergent response and in-the-moment leadership. A promising method to aid leaders both prior to and during complex and ambiguous

*During business resumption, we should not expect the same things from staff that we did before. Fort McMurray is a different city, and staff are not back to business as usual, or back to normal, or working in the same facilities with the same people ... Laura Porret, Vice President Human Resources and Leadership Development*

<sup>2</sup> Many studies have been conducted on PTSD after a disaster. Studies involving residents of Fort McMurray are at the inception stage. The National Center for PTSD at the US Department of Veteran's Affairs summarizes some long term affects of exposure to different types of emergencies. Access at: <http://bit.ly/2f6hnh8>



situations is the PreMortem<sup>3</sup>. The PreMortem is an effective and easy to use technique conducted around the proposition that a plan or project has failed. Not limited to emergency preparedness plans, the PreMortem can be used to test strategic plans as well as implementation plans for multifaceted initiatives. The team responsible for the plan or project generates plausible reasons for failure, and these reasons become the plan critique. The steps are straightforward and lightweight.

- Step 1: Prepare by getting familiar with the plan
- Step 2: Imagine the plan completely failed – is a fiasco
- Step 3: Individually, generate reasons for failure
- Step 4: Team members consolidate a list of reasons for failure
- Step 5: Revisit the plan; identify actions to prevent failure

3. Consider adding to the current crisis management plan some of the factors to consider during a prolonged disruption. This could include mass temporary layoff, restoring and reopening a building, dealing with Membership and Child Care fees during a disruption, as well as HR matters and ongoing regular communications to all the various stakeholders.
4. Put aside regular work and adjust expectations for affected Y's and Y's supporting the recovery efforts from afar. In addition, when there are Y Branches in distant locations, recognize that on-the-ground reality of what is happening in a city where an emergency or unexpected event occurs will be different from the realities of a senior team supporting the Branch from another location. The Wood Buffalo Region Y, after re-opening, did not have the staff capacity to run programs and services at pre-disaster levels. The Y had lost twenty percent of its staff (40 out of 180). Despite the Y's desire to offer Child Care at pre-fire levels, it wasn't possible given the lack of staff. As a greater number of Ys share services and/or merge, more Ys will be tested in their work with Branches that are located hours away. While the senior leadership team did postpone the scheduled external Child Protection Audit, they reported that they still needed to continue to deal with the other regular aspects of their jobs throughout the crisis and recovery. In Nick's words, *identify what can come off the plate and be parked*.
5. When does a Y know that it has recovered? Once the physical structures are re-opened and programs resumed, does this mean the Y has recovered? The senior leadership team suggested that recovery is not a matter of recovering to pre-fire participation levels. The city is different and the Y is different. The Wood Buffalo Y has fewer staff, some working in familiar locations, others working in locations where they never worked before with staff they didn't know. What will the new normal be? How long will it take to fully recover — 1, 2, 3 or more years?
6. Senior leaders needed to draw on resources from other Y's across the country. For example, not long after the evacuation, Ruth Menegozzo, CFO, YMCA of Northern Alberta, asked the YMCA of Greater Toronto for help in addressing insurance and risk issues. Monica Merrifield, Vice President of Risk Intelligence, YMCA of Greater Toronto engaged

<sup>3</sup> Gary Klein, *Performing a Project Premortem*. Harvard Business Review. September 2007. Also, Beth Veinott, et. al. *Evaluating the Effectiveness of PreMortem Technique on Plan Confidence*. Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> International ISCRAM Conference – Seattle, USA, May 2010. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2faIQx6>.

with the Northern Alberta team to assist, particularly in working with the insurance company and the insurance adjuster.

7. What does it take for the YMCA to be on the forefront of community renewal, providing leadership in crisis and/or recovery efforts? The senior leadership team imagined that if the Provincial Government had regarded the Y as an essential service, they would have been among the first organizations permitted back into Fort McMurray. Team members proposed that they needed to raise awareness across many areas of the Provincial Government about the Y and its contributions to a community.

## Leadership and Collective Intelligence<sup>4</sup>

### **Principles**

Senior leadership team members consistently reported they were guided by a set of principles:

- Stay true to Y values and purpose
- Put people first
- Continuously communicate to all stakeholders and senior team members
- Encourage diverse perspectives
- Act only on information that can be verified
- Focus on the areas where you can make a difference, not the areas where you can't

These principles were evident right from the beginning: for example, the frequent “emergency conference calls” to discuss and decide on the ever changing circumstances; a focus on the safety of children and parents as well as staff; participation of all senior leadership team members whether or not an individual saw an immediate role for themselves; and using social media and the Y website to provide updates and ways to get help.

### **Social Sensitivity and Team Norms**

In addition to being guided by these principles, there were two factors that stood out to me as I was facilitating the *Meaning Making Session* with senior team leaders.

One factor is social sensitivity, or empathy — group members being skilled at picking up on how others feel based on their tone of voice, and non-verbal cues such as facial expressions. Team members appeared to know when a person was feeling upset, or when someone was feeling left out. They were sensitive to one another's moods, and shared personal stories and emotions. They demonstrated an ability to connect well with each other, to test for understanding about what they and others said, to encourage different points of view in order to fill in gaps of thinking, and to be willing to make tough decisions. In other words, individuals felt that within the team it was safe to take personal risks, to say things that might be at odds with what others were saying.

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<sup>4</sup> Google is researching similar ideas. See New York Times Magazine article, retrieved at <http://nyti.ms/1WL0p4J>. See also Collective Intelligence and Group Performance. Woolley, Anita. W., Aggarwal I, Malone, T. W. Current Directions in Psychological Science. 2015, Vol. 24(6).

The other factor is group norms – the traditions, behavioral values and unwritten rules that guide how a group functions when they gather. Norms can be unspoken or openly acknowledged; either way their influence is often profound, typically overriding individual tendencies. One norm which stood out was how team members took roughly equal turns talking during the *Meaning Making Session*. They listened to one another actively, encouraged elaboration of points of view, raised different ideas and encouraged each other to explore different perspectives. My guess is that because of conversational turn taking, the team was able to take full advantage of team members' skills, ideas and experience.

### ***Flexibility, Humility and Inquiry***

During situations of great ambiguity, effective leaders are able to adapt to a wide variety of different contexts and situations where it is not possible to tell others either what to do or how to lead.

When senior leadership team members were asked to describe Nick Parkinson's leadership during crisis and recovery, they spoke about *humility grounded in a strong sense of purpose*. They spoke about Nick having the *flexibility to act in the absence of information*, having the capacity *to think holistically and to think about the details, constantly questioning what is known, what is assumed, what is believed to be true*. They spoke about Nick as *being inclusive*, and being willing to *step up and make the call when there was a lack of certainty*.

The senior leadership team also recognized that in the fast pace and uncertainty of what they were dealing with, that they had missed checking in with themselves, at the heart level, to hear and feel how each person was doing. The irony of this is that the team in Edmonton was deliberate about checking in with the Wood Buffalo leaders, yet did not turn to themselves in a collective effort to assess the impact the crisis was having on them. Leadership team members pointed out that the *Meaning Making Session* was the first time they had met as a team to talk about their experiences.

Recognizing that the wildfire brought them together as a team in a way that typically they've not been before, the team recommended to themselves that they have regular check-ins to explore how they are working as a team, and to raise ideas not usually discussed during the course of normal operational conversations. Leadership during ambiguous situations, and especially during an emergency, is exhausting. Everyone feels the pressure of the unknowns. Taking the time to check in and connect with one another can help elevate team members, making them more productive as a team.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Conditions to Increase Collective Agency***

Responding to a crisis, or to complex challenges, requires the independence and interdependence of players on a hockey team. Each player brings his or her experiences and skills to the arena. Players have collective strategies and plans they can draw on. When the game starts, it is about how the players collectively act and draw on the talents of their teammates. The best teams have a collective ability to act (collective agency) that exceeds the sum of the individual players.

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist and professor of ethical leadership and New York University, has spent many years researching *moral elevation* people experience when sharing expressions of positive regard.

In this case, the senior leadership team members responded individually and collectively in ways that increased their collective ability to achieve the best outcomes in highly ambiguous and trying circumstances. In their descriptions of their responses, I see six conditions, linked to research, that increased their collective agency.<sup>6</sup>

1. *A shared line of sight, or common agenda.* A shared line of sight – such as keeping children and staff safe as well as aiding community recovery – helps to shift individuals from advocating for specific strategies to encouraging everyone to contribute ideas to reach a goal that matters to everyone. A shared line of sight gives teams and networks facing complex goals in conditions of ambiguity a common focus to guide their actions and decision-making. Imagine throwing a bird as opposed to throwing a rock. At some point the bird starts to exert its own influence on its trajectory. To influence its ultimate path, you need an attractor, such as setting out food, to influence the bird's ultimate path and destination. This is what a shared line of sight does. The same notion holds true in other complex situations, such as in a merger of two independent organizations, where the behaviour of two organizations can be driven by a shared vision of greater potential – the attractor.
2. *Provide minimum rules or specifications* to enable quick response and rapid cycle learning. Systems in nature follow simple relationship rules or minimum specifications. These allow for adaptability. For example, birds in a flock follow only three rules that define flocking – maintain a minimum distance, respond to those around you, head towards the center. These minimum specifications give enough sense of direction, without over-directing. For birds, the result is that they respond much more efficiently as a group to both threats and opportunities, than they could do as individuals. With three rules, the birds collectively respond to emergent phenomenon, such as a hawk, a sudden updraft. The principles outlined above acted as the minimum specifications that enabled the senior leaders to act quickly, both individually and collectively.
3. *Collect data and consistently monitor results* so that all individuals remain accountable to learning how to best achieve their common agenda. Data collection is not about keeping an initiative or individuals on track. It is more about learning what works and what can be improved. In complex situations such as the wildfire, data may be missing, or when it is available the information may be contradictory. What is helpful in such situations is to be clear about what actions you think will be helpful and the results you think those actions will achieve. After action, you assess whether the actions assisted you to reach your goal or not; then identify what else you might do to achieve what end.

Consistently monitoring results also means being deliberate about conducting *after action reviews*<sup>7</sup>. An after action review is guided by a set of learning inspired questions that aid organizations to learn forward so that they continuously get better at achieving desired results. Like the PreMortem, the after action review is a lightweight activity that

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<sup>6</sup> See: Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation. Darling, M; Guber, H; Smith, J; Stiles, J. *The Foundation Review*, Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 8. See also: Embracing Emergence: How Collective Impact Addresses Complexity. Kania, J.; Kramer, M. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. 2013. Retrieved at <http://bit.ly/2eY19XR>. The bird example draws from personal communication with former York University professor Brenda Zimmerman.

<sup>7</sup> Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation. Darling, M; Guber, H; Smith, J; Stiles, J. *The Foundation Review*, Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 8

does not require special facilitation. The *Meaning Making Session*, was organized as an after action review. The key questions are:

- 1: What were our intended results?
- 2: What were our actual results?
- 3: What do we think cause the results?
- 4: What will we sustain or improve?
- 5: When is our next opportunity to test what we learned?

4. *Mutually reinforcing activities*. This is an embellishment of minimum specifications and shared line of sight. In complex circumstances, achieving successful outcomes relies on individuals seeing themselves as nodes within an array of equal, interconnected partners, rather than as the center of their own individual agenda. The goal is to mobilize loops of action that reinforce one another to deliver greater impact. Each individual who takes action is aware of actions other team members are or will be taking. The power of collective action does not come from compelling all participants to do the same thing. Rather, the power comes from each participant undertaking action, aligned with a common purpose.
5. *Shared rules of engagement* are the traditions and norms, explicit or implicit, by which a team operates. Shared rules of engagement can either create the space, or shut down the space, for interpersonal risk-taking, putting people first, celebrating wins, expressing empathy and compassion. See the section *Leadership and Collective Intelligence* for an elaboration of this idea.
6. *Continuous communication* serves all of the above conditions. Continuous communication builds reliability, assures activities are mutually reinforcing, and inspires action even in the face of frustrations and unfolding ambiguities. Individuals need to know their interests are equally valued, even when a specific idea is not acted on. Consistent and honest communication assists in the development of a common language, coherent messages and coordinated action. It also helps maintain and advance collaborative efforts through the sharing of knowledge, concerns, successes and failures, and the monitoring of results. The senior leadership team was aware that frequent communication to all stakeholders was critical to combatting rumors and keeping people abreast of progress. They also recognized early on the necessity of creating ways for stakeholders to communicate with the YMCA.



## THE BEGINNING, AGAIN: IMPORTANCE OF THE YMCA TO COMMUNITIES SERVED

There is no better way of closing this case study than sharing this video sent to the YMCA of Northern Alberta by a Wood Buffalo Region Y member after returning to her community and getting back to her fitness routine.

**View video:**

[https://youtu.be/LubPITe\\_ztY](https://youtu.be/LubPITe_ztY)

## APPENDIX

# AT A GLANCE FORT MCMURRAY WILDFIRE

**Fort McMurray Wildfire** is regarded as one of the most costly disasters in Canadian history. Here's a brief history of the fire. During April 329 wildfires in Alberta

## MAY 1

Horse Creek fire threatens 3 communities, residents ordered to evacuate. On May 2nd, residents permitted to return

## MAY 3

**10:00am** Sky is clear, no smoke or flames visible

**11:00am** Darby Allen, Regional Fire Chief issues a warning that things could get worse, but evacuation not ordered. By noon, fire jumps Athabasca River

**6:20pm** Province issues a mandatory evacuation order for all Fort McMurray resident. 88,000 people successfully evacuated with no one injured and one death.

**2:00pm** Smoke and fire fill the sky as fire jump. Evacuation ordered for a few communities

**3:00pm** Fire jumps Highway 63, enters city limits

**4:30pm** More areas ordered evacuated, cars backed up on road out of city.

**6:20pm** People stranded on highway overnight. Extremely difficult to get out of town

## MAY 4

Fire becomes large enough to create a firestorm.

The Province declares a *provincial state of emergency*.

## MAY 6

The wildfire continues to spread. Premier Notley announces emergency funds worth \$1,250 per adult, \$500 per dependent.

## MAY 9

The city remains under a mandatory evacuation order; the fire continues to spread. No timeline for residents to return.

## MAY 13

The Province, Municipality, and energy sector leaders start to plan for re-opening the city as the threat from the wildfire abates.

## MAY 15-23

Fire estimated at 523,000 hectares, which is a greater area that 525,000 football pitches. Damage: 1,921 structures destroyed, 17,150 structures approved for occupation with 160 or so limited to restricted use or unsafe to occupy. The Alberta government provisionally announces a phased-in re-opening starting June 1.

## JUNE 1

Fort McMurray starts phased-in re-opening. *YMCA must wait until June 3 to re-enter.*

*Alberta Municipal Affairs Minister, Danielle Larivee says: In hindsight, we all wish we could have made that decision [to evacuate] sooner...but it changed so quickly [decisions were made] at a point that made sense.*



**CRISIS RESPONSE**  
**Y NORTHERN ALBERTA**

*There is no roadmap for shutting down an entire city-wide Yoperation in response to an emergency. We were kind of flying the plane together.*

**MAY 3**

**12:00pm** Jim Weller begins sending photos of the wildfire to CEO, Nick Parkinson, in Edmonton.

**4:00pm** All Y facilities closed and approximately 200 children reunited with their parents.

Communicate with staff and members by social media and website.

Evacuated Fort McMurray HFA members and Child Care parents contact Northern Alberta Y about refunding money automatically withdrawn from their bank accounts on May 1.

State of facilities unknown; great uncertainty about how best to respond.

**MAY 6 - 8**

Y informs public it won't accept donations, and directs people to donate to Red Cross.

Monica Merrifield, VP Risk Intelligence GTA, helps Northern Alberta Y on insurance, recovery.

North Alberta's senior management team starts to discuss re-entry and reopening, including cleansing and restoration of all 9 facilities.

**MAY 13**

Northern Alberta board and management team host a luncheon in Edmonton for displaced Fort McMurray staff and families

Y decides to undertake a mass temporary layoff, keeping senior leaders in Fort McMurray on payroll, offering health benefits and EAP to laid off staff.

**MAY 2**

Annalise reviews emergency protocols with Fort McMurray Child Care staff.

**2:00pm** Nick and the Edmonton & Wood Buffalo senior team decide to close all facilities and services.

Annalise initiates evacuation protocols with Fort McMurray Child Care staff.

Emergency conference calls continue throughout crisis, call volume decided by consensus.

Staff contact information is not up to date, it takes extra time to connect with all staff.

**MAY 4**

No cost access to Edmonton HFA Centres for evacuated residents.

Y creates list of websites, phone numbers, places where displaced staff can seek help; advises staff to register with Red Cross so officials know where to deliver crisis financial support.

**MAY 9**

Northern Alberta Y request help from GTA Y for expertise on insurance, risk and other areas of emergency response. Great uncertainty about business continuance insurance.

**MAY 9**

Y starts refunding all payments made, retroactive May 1. No further payments to be taken until Fort McMurray operational.

All Ys in Alberta open to Wood Buffalo residents and families for use on no-fee basis.

Y staff from Edmonton & Wood Buffalo support evacuees in Edmonton with settlement services and housing.

**MAY 16**

Northern Alberta Board and CEO start *YFort McMurray Recover Fund*.



**CRISIS RECOVERY**  
**Y NORTHERN ALBERTA**

*As we came out of crisis, there was a question: going forward, what would our purpose be? It was not about doing the same old, same old. In times of crisis, Y's step up, they don't step back.*

**MAY 16 - 23**

The insurance company issues the Y \$100,000 payment to assist with immediate costs. Annalise reviews emergency protocols with Fort McMurray childcare staff.

**JUNE 13 - 29**

Restoration company has been at Y sites disposing damaged materials and deep cleaning facilities.

Once sites open, Y Wood Buffalo will make Y experience available to anyone regardless of ability to pay.

Uncertainty about insurance coverage continues.

**July 29:** 5 of 10 facility and program locations open, including childcare, community programs, health and wellness.

**AUGUST**

500 residents take advantage of free access to Y for August. Westwood Family YMCA scheduled to re-open Aug 4th. with free access.

Y Northern Alberta receives a community grant through Canadian Red Cross Alberta Wildfire Community Organization Partnership. Supports the in continued efforts to deliver quality programs and services to the residents of Wood Buffalo in their recovery

**SEPTEMBER**

Membership fees reinstated.

All 6 Community Outreach programs are operational.

8 of 9 childcare centres are operational.

2 HFA Centres have returned to full service.

Wellness workers will work with staff, children, youth and families served, as well as the community.

Y Youth Centre is open free of charge for balance of year.

Through Canadian Red cross support, Y is hiring 4 wellness workers to help people deal with trauma, stress and emotional toll from wildfire and its aftermath.

**OCTOBER**

10 Senior Leaders, YMCA Northern Alberta participate in a half day facilitated debrief & learning meeting.

**DECEMBER**

The core Y of Wood Buffalo Leadership Team & several members of Northern Alberta Y Senior Leadership participate in half-day facilitated debrief & learning meeting.

2nd level Y of Wood Buffalo & several members of Northern Alberta Y Senior Leadership participate in half-day facilitated debrief & learning meeting.

