



# **Reaching Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness:**

## Fort McMurray Case Study

August 2023

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# Fort McMurray, Alberta: Veteran Functional Zero Case Study


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On April 30, 2023, Fort McMurray became the third community in Canada to end veteran homelessness.

**Here's how they did it.**



# The Achievement

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- January 2018:** Joined the 20,000 Homes Campaign.
  - March 2019:** Built for Zero Canada Launched.
  - January 2020:** One of the first eight members of the Veteran Community Cohort.
  - July 2020:** Confirmed a Basic Quality By-Name List for Chronic Homelessness, a Quality Veteran By-Name List, and the Reaching Home level of Coordinated Access.
  - May 2021:** Confirmed Basic level of Coordinated Access.
  - April 2023:** Achieved Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness.
  - Next Focus:**
    - *Maintain momentum and action improvements to reach Absolute Zero Veteran Homelessness.*



**In April 2023, Fort McMurray became the third community in Canada to achieve Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness as part of Built for Zero Canada, a national movement of over 40 communities working to end chronic and Veteran homelessness.**

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## But what does that mean?

Modern mass homelessness was created by policy when the federal government stopped building housing in the 1980s and 1990s. The term "homelessness" encompasses a range of housing and shelter circumstances, including unsheltered homelessness; people staying in emergency shelters or other emergency accommodation; people living in provisional circumstances, like 'couch surfing'; and those who are at a high risk of homelessness.

Built for Zero Canada communities are proving that homelessness is solvable. Specifically, through these concrete actions, they are proving there is a solution to homelessness: a coordinated system focused on ending homelessness, data to measure the inflow and outflow of folks moving into and out of housing, cross-community support from local organizations, and strategic, data-driven investments to reduce homelessness long-term

and flexible financial resources to clear immediate barriers to housing.

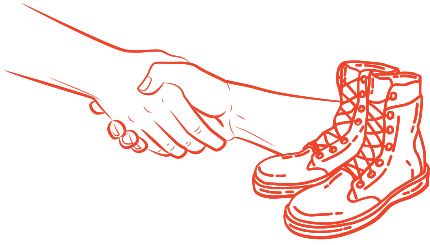
When this case study refers to ending, or solving Veteran homelessness, this means the community has reached Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness.

Homelessness is not a static issue. People move in and out of homelessness every day. Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness is a dynamic milestone, that means the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness is less than or equal to the number of Veterans a community has proven it can house in a month. The number of Veterans experiencing homelessness must be at or below a community's six-month average housing rate for Veterans (or three or less actively homeless Veterans, whichever is greater) for at least three consecutive months.

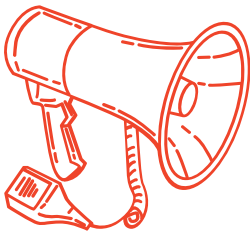
There is a rigorous verification process, led by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) to



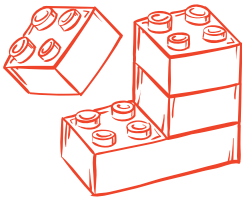
## Why focus on solving Veteran Homelessness?



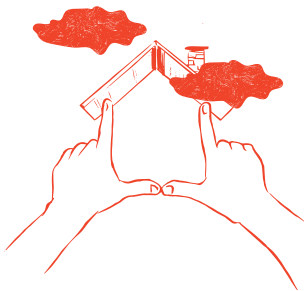
Duty to those who served for us



To build public support



Building blocks for ending all homelessness



To Prove it is possible



confirm Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness.

It requires the local community to demonstrate they have quality data and a system designed to ensure Veteran homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring. It also includes the completion of an internal case study, with the support of municipal and political leaders, the homeless-serving system, and Veteran organizations — before the designation is approved.

## How did they do it?

Fort McMurray's journey to end chronic homelessness took a multipronged approach. It began in 2008, when Fort McMurray received federal and provincial funding to create a 10-year plan to mitigate homelessness, and continued throughout the next decade when the city joined BFZ-C.

This case study will break down the actions — and results — the city took to address homelessness in Fort McMurray located in northeastern Alberta.

## *Establishing a Coordinated System*

In 2018, Fort McMurray joined the 20,000 Home Campaign, a national movement spearheaded by the CAEH to end chronic homelessness in 20 communities across Canada and started to develop their own Coordinated Access System.

A Coordinated Access system is crucial for any community looking to prevent and end homelessness.

Wood Buffalo, the regional municipality that includes Fort McMurray, introduced their Coordinated Access System in 2019 — a team that includes 14 local organizations, consisting of 22 to 24 members, who collaboratively opted into the system. Fort McMurray also joined Built for Zero Canada in 2019, and one year later, had their Coordinated Access System confirmed by BFZ-C.

Amanda Parsons, Social Program Advisor for the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, said the community would not have achieved Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness without the Homeless Serving System, Coordinated Access Team and the Royal Canadian Legion Branch 165.

Specifically, she said, the Coordinated Access System is a collaborative initiative. The people who comprise the system are kind-hearted individuals who are eager to improve the quality of life in their community.



"They are truly passionate people because they do the work to ensure that people get housed," she said. "There is no additional funding for any of them to collaborate — they do it as being a part of our community."

As part of developing a Coordinated Access System, Fort McMurray established a Coordinated Access System Team (CAST), who are experts within the community, to work directly with folks experiencing homelessness or who may be at a high risk of experiencing homelessness. The CAST team meet monthly to help address emerging issues and play a pivotal role in developing and reviewing policies and procedures regarding homelessness in the city.

## ***Developing a By-Name List***

Although Fort McMurray had 36 folks move-into housing in 2018 after joining the 20,000 Home Campaign, the city still needed to create a system that tracked homelessness in the region. Developing a Quality By-Name List is a crucial tool that lets communities understand the problem that they are trying to solve, and how it may be evolving on a day-to-day basis.

Parsons added that the Fort McMurray team established a real-time data system — through their By-Name List — that alerts the team to anyone who may be falling through the cracks.

"Anytime anyone is entered into the system, our

Community Plan on Homelessness Team can access that information instantly," she said. "Before we were getting that data on a weekly basis, but there were gaps in that. A week, even days, is a long time for an individual on the street."

In other words, a By-Name List is like a living, breathing roadmap that provides real-time data about people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, helping find appropriate housing faster.

## ***How the By-Name List works with a Coordinated System***

Fort McMurray started to track Veteran inflow/outflow and active homelessness in February 2020. They then confirmed a Chronic and Veteran By-Name List in July and set their community baseline of actively homeless Veterans that summer.

Setting a baseline is the first step a community can take towards reaching the "three months or more" threshold required to functionally end Veteran homelessness in a city.

In December 2020, six months after establishing their By-Name Lists, Fort McMurray had three or fewer Veterans experiencing homelessness for three straight months — as there were less than three Veterans who were unhoused in October, November, and December of that winter. For the next two and a half years, Fort McMurray sustained that threshold.



Gavon Russell is a Social Program Advisor with the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

"In our community, everyone shares the desire for the same outcome: for individuals to be treated fairly and have the same opportunities," said Russell. "It's a tight-knit small community isolated from larger accessible resources; our agencies have adapted, through collaborative efforts, to overcome these barriers."

Everyone who was identified on Fort McMurray's By-Name List was presented with a Veteran questionnaire. When an individual identified as a Veteran, the Centralized Intake Team began confirming their Veteran status with the Royal Canadian Legion and Veterans Affairs Canada. Next, the team worked with the Veteran to find housing that best suited their needs.

In total, they had eight Veterans move into housing between May 2020 and April 2023. Their highest monthly number of actively homeless Veterans was three — in March and April 2021 — and had zero actively homeless Veterans from November 2021 until March 2023, when one Veteran was identified and housed in April.

The ability to quickly find housing for a Veteran is a perfect illustration of Fort McMurray's strong coordinated approach to addressing homelessness.







# Summary of Fort McMurray's Strengths

## Community Commitment

Fort McMurray built a strong commitment within the community to focus on eradicating homelessness in the region. The team recognized the work of the Royal Canadian Legion (RCL) and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) had been doing for years, and building off their lead, invited those organizations to come together in addressing Veteran homelessness.

Specifically, Parsons said that their Centralized Intake team built a relationship with their local Legion, the RCL McMurray Branch 165, to create a streamlined process that found housing for an individual as fast as possible. As part of the coordinated process, the Legion helped Fort McMurray confirm Veteran status and provided financial assistance through two initiatives: the Poppy Fund and the Leave the Street Behind Program. The Poppy Fund supports Veterans nation-wide through support programs, while the Leave the Street Program assists Veterans who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness.

VAC also provided Fort McMurray with financial support and a helping hand in case management. Without the two organizations, she said, reaching Functional Zero would not have been possible.

"Veteran organizations understand military culture and how to best work with Veterans, and navigate Veteran services, benefits and supports," Parsons said. "Homelessness services understand unique individual needs, systems and structural barriers to getting people housed and keeping them housed through intensive case management."

## Partnerships and collaboration

With the RCL and VAC on their side, the Fort McMurray team were able to give Veterans experiencing homelessness choice on how they would like to receive service.

The Coordinated Access System Team identified how they could guide Veterans through programs, such as the local housing system and Veteran identification process, that may be overwhelming to do by oneself.

Cheryl Cooper, a Supervisor with the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, added the community's biggest strength was having everyone come together to address homelessness. Now that Fort McMurray has had success, she expects members of the community to sustain those achievements.

"The success is something that will drive the community because they've worked at this for so long," Cooper said. "Finally, there's a success piece to this that can be shared."



## Dedicated Team

Constant communication was key to ensuring Fort McMurray's progress would not stall. The region needed concrete actions from people in the community to address issues relating to homelessness.

As part of their efforts to synchronize their homelessness plans with the Legion Branch 165, the city invited a "point person" — dedicated to reaching Veteran Functional Zero — from the Legion, to update them on the region's evolving needs for Veterans.

"As a key stakeholder in this initiative, The Royal Canadian Legion Fort McMurray Branch 165 is committed to supporting the ongoing collective effort of sustaining Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness in Fort McMurray" said Patrick Duggan, Past President of the Branch 165.

The Centralized Intake Team's relationship with the Legion, through the point person, and VAC were crucial to maximize quality of care for Veterans experiencing homelessness in the region.

## Continuous Improvement

Due to partnerships with the Legion and VAC, reductions in wait times for Veterans looking to get their status verified, and simultaneously, move off the By-Name-List and into housing has improved.

Fort McMurray is dedicated to continuous improvement within their system by analyzing data to find gaps, offering training to all partnerships involved, and collaborating with community supports where solutions to gaps can be found.

Moving forward, Fort McMurray is looking to strengthen their partnerships with Veteran organizations, prioritize Veterans who are experiencing homelessness for housing, and continuously improve housing pathways to sustain Functional Zero — be it through prevention or diversion efforts in the future.

## Coordinating Effective Housing and Support Options

Though a community may have all their partners working together, that is just one piece of the puzzle. Fort McMurray had a strong By-Name-List in place, which provided real-time data on Veteran homelessness, and allowed them to keep tabs on the evolving situations.

Fort McMurray then developed strategies through case conferencing to offer different options and levels of support for each Veteran's individual needs. Every single person is different and may require alternative support.

Specifically, to meet individual needs, wrap-around housing support programs provide personalized



and comprehensive support to individuals and/or their families. Wrap around support ensures that a Veteran experiencing homelessness will find stable footing — no matter their background or financial situation.

## What's Next?

Ultimately, the tools are in place for Fort McMurray to sustain Functional Zero and work to absolute zero on Veteran homelessness and apply the lessons learnt with Veterans to continue reducing and ending homelessness overall.

Although the number of Veterans who have been identified in Fort McMurray is relatively small (nine in roughly three years), the work still takes the same number of partnerships, coordination, trust, and grit to build a system set up to support veterans.

For Fort McMurray, even one veteran experiencing homelessness was one too many, and so the same amount of sweat and passion went into this work to best serve those who served in uniform.

"We want to celebrate the efforts that we have made, but we also see that the work is not done," Parsons said. "Sustaining Functional Zero is our focus... We celebrate it, we're excited, it's great. Now let's keep it." The goal of always trying to improve underscores the idea that homelessness is not a "said and done" problem.

Through partnerships and leaning into their strengths, Fort McMurray is being active and responsive to solve issues that may arise in the years to come. At the end of the day, that flexibility will go a long way in adapting to current needs and, eventually, making overall homelessness a rare occurrence in the region.



# Acknowledgements

## Local Team

Community Homelessness Lead:  
Homelessness Initiatives Strategic Committee (HISC)

Community Veteran Lead: Amanda Parsons

Data Lead: Gavon Russell

## Built for Zero Canada Team

Improvement Advisor: Melinda Bain & Amanda DiFalco

Director of Built for Zero Canada: Marie Morrison

## Funding Partners



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## System Partners



REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY  
OF WOOD BUFFALO



United Way  
Fort McMurray



MCMURRAY  
METIS



Alberta Health  
Services



WAYPOINTS



YMCA of  
Northern Alberta

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*a program of the*



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