



Community Services  
Community Investment

Edmonton

**What We Heard Report**  
**- 2025 FCSS Funded Agency Visits  
and Grant Applicants**

Community Support Team  
FCSS Social Planners

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to honour the insights and voices of the non-profit sector in the preventive social services ecosystem, in particular applicants to, and partners of, the Edmonton Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) Program, illustrating the significant common challenges across this landscape in Edmonton. The findings herein will help guide the future FCSS work plan and decision-making.

FCSS is a partnership between the Government of Alberta and participating municipalities and Métis Nations across the province to provide preventive social services, where 80 percent of funding is provided by the provincial government. Local FCSS programs decide how funds will be spent to be responsive to their community, and must align with the FCSS Accountability Framework<sup>1</sup>.

This report synthesizes the analysis of 158 FCSS applications in 2026-2028 funding cycle, and 42 interviews conducted during funded agency visits. The information gathered confirms that the FCSS-funded sector is highly community-driven, adaptive, and deeply committed to individual and community wellbeing through prevention. This report<sup>2</sup> highlights an evolution within preventive social services in Edmonton, moving to increasingly collaborative work that prioritizes equity, reconciliation, and sharing of resources.

## BACKGROUND

The Edmonton FCSS Program works on a three year funding cycle, in alignment with the funding agreement between the Government of Alberta and the City of Edmonton. There were three funding streams in the 2025 funding application process: Community Programs Open Applications, Community Programs Renewal Requests, and Strong Sector Initiatives. The Community Programs funding streams are strategically allocated to support a reasonable distribution of programs across the four Program Priorities:

- Healthy Social Emotional Development
- Healthy Relationships
- Positive Mental Health; and,
- Poverty Reduction & Homelessness Prevention.

Together with the Strong Sector Initiatives, FCSS programs and services strive to build resilient individuals, thriving families and create welcoming and engaged communities.

**Table 1: FCSS Program Priorities and Funding Streams**

	Funding Streams		
	Open Applications	Renewal Requests	Strong Sector Initiatives
Program Priorities	Positive Mental Health	Healthy Social Emotional Development	Collaborative initiatives in Integrated Service Coordination and Formal Research Partnership
	Poverty Reduction & Homelessness Prevention	Healthy Relationships	

<sup>1</sup> Family and Community Support Services Accountability Framework, Government of Alberta, 2022, at <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/d261ab1f-2926-4436-aa50-a994d606520e/resource/919134b3-209c-4ea9-ab10-7a0d1b9f2c31/download/scss-family-and-community-support-services-accountability-framework.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Parts of this document were created using Google Gemini AI. The content, analysis, and final conclusions are entirely the responsibility of the authors. We are dedicated to transparent processes and ethical stewardship of the data.

The City of Edmonton's call for applications in the spring of 2025 for the 2026-2028 FCSS Community Program drew a substantial response. A total of 105 unique agencies responded to the call for applications for the 2026-2028 FCSS grant. Out of the 30 agencies that applied for more than one program, five applied for more than four programs, eight others applied for three, and 17 for two (see Figure 1 on the following page). A total of \$21.2M was granted, including \$4.5M for strong sector, \$9.9 M for renewals, and \$6.8 M for the open call.

At the same time, the FCSS team conducted their annual agency visits with agencies funded in the 2023-2025 funding cycle, to gather program updates and reported trends via structured conversations and direct observation. The meticulous work that went into these applications and agency visit conversations has yielded a rich body of data, offering a look into Edmonton's preventive social services landscape. Out of the 59 agencies that received funding for the years of 2023-2025, 42 provided input to FCSS liaisons during the annual agency visits.

Due to time constraints and different communication methods, 17 FCSS agencies whose data were either collected late in 2025 or captured through a diverse range of touchpoints are not included as data sources for this report.

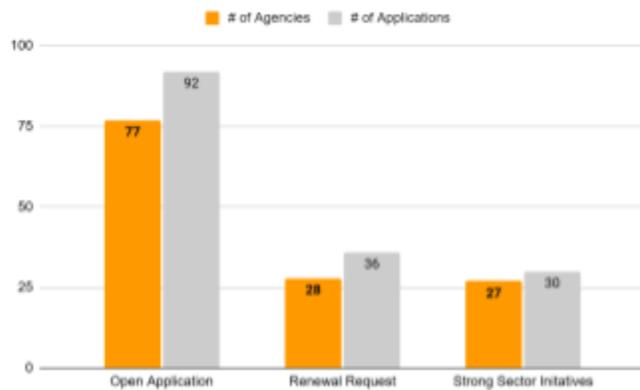


Figure 1: Data Source of FCSS Funding Applications

## SHARED CHALLENGES AND TRENDS

By examining what support our communities are seeking, what assets are already available, and where the City of Edmonton can provide or facilitate further support, this report aligns with FCSS' overarching priority to increase social inclusion and equity through preventive programs. While acknowledging the internal strengths each agency has established, increasing complexity and volume of need are observed among participants, complicating upstream prevention work. The following shared challenges emerged:

- Pervasive Mental Health Issues and Increased Complexity:** There is overwhelming demand for accessible, timely, and affordable mental health services. Agencies report a concerning rise in mental health challenges and complex behaviours among children and youth, often linked to cumulative stress, early trauma, neurodevelopmental differences, or persistent COVID-19 impacts. This has led to long waitlists and system overload. Critical gaps exist due to high private counselling costs and a lack of culturally safe and linguistically accessible programs.
- Persistent Economic Instability and Poverty:** Poverty in Edmonton (15.5% in 2022, record high since 2015)<sup>3</sup> and rising cost of living are core risk factors. About 46,155 households are experiencing Core Housing Need<sup>4</sup>, requiring urgent focus on homelessness prevention and financial stabilization programs.
- System Fragmentation and Exclusion:** The sector struggles with fragmented services, long waitlists, and complex, digitized bureaucracy that prevents those with low-literacy and marginalized populations from accessing vital support. There is a need for more culturally safe and multilingual programming, as institutional mistrust and stigma compel many to avoid seeking mainstream support.
- Disproportionate Impact on Marginalized Groups:** Indigenous peoples are vastly overrepresented in homelessness statistics (nearly 2/3 of Edmonton's unhoused population<sup>5</sup>). Newcomers, refugees, and

<sup>3</sup> City of Edmonton's Open Performance - Poverty at [Poverty | City of Edmonton Open Performance](#).

<sup>4</sup> Edmonton Affordable Housing Needs Assessment, August 2023, at [Edmonton Affordable Housing Needs](#).

<sup>5</sup> 2023-2026 Affordable Housing Strategy, City of Edmonton, 2023, at [Affordable Housing Strategy](#)

racialized women face compounding barriers, including trauma, language difficulties, and systemic discrimination.

## ESTABLISHED ASSETS AND STRENGTHS

The FCSS funding applicants and agency visit interviewees demonstrated significant strengths, resources, and assets that position the sector as a highly responsive and capable partner in upstream (preventive) social services. These strengths are largely rooted in a strategic shift toward equity, collaboration, and community-driven design, recognizing that complex social issues require deeply integrated and culturally relevant solutions.

- **Lived Experience and Equity-Led Governance:** The commitment to becoming equity-led is shown through efforts to integrate individuals with lived experience of the populations they serve into staff, board, and volunteer roles. This commitment is supported by embedding Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles into strategic planning and governance, ensuring that equity is a foundational strategy, not just a program add-on. Agencies demonstrate that lived experience is easily embedded by having effective evaluation processes that make meaningful use of participant feedback.
- **Deep Cultural Competency and Safety:** Agencies are actively moving beyond simple cultural sensitivity to offer services that are intentionally culturally safe. This is demonstrated through providing in-language support, the implementation of Indigenous-led practices, and creating identity-affirming spaces. A high degree of cultural responsiveness builds the trust necessary to effectively engage the most marginalized community members.
- **Collaborative and Integrated Service Models:** Agencies understand that they cannot solve complex problems alone. Agencies applying for the Strong Sector Initiative explicitly cite strong, formal collaborative agreements as a core program strategy, and many agencies from all funding streams reiterated the importance of their partnerships. These collaborative models focus on eliminating service silos through mechanisms like co-location, shared intake, and "warm handoffs."<sup>6</sup> Collaborative work is crucial for providing true wraparound support for clients with intersecting needs, reducing client burden and increasing the overall effectiveness of the prevention system.
- **Community-Driven and Adaptive Practice:** The sector leverages participant & community relationships, prioritizing community-based/informal evidence (e.g. client feedback, local wisdom, lived experience) to design and adjust programs. This approach ensures programs are participant-led, highly relevant and meeting needs. Furthermore, agencies demonstrate a strong commitment to data-driven program design, using their internal program outcomes and partner feedback to modify approaches, ensuring they remain responsive to emerging trends.

The combined input from applications and agency visits confirms that the social service sector is not merely reacting to needs, but is strategically building its institutional capacity around the principles of equity and partnership. These assets, including the commitment to lived experience, cultural safety, deep collaboration, and community-driven programs, are potent levers available to Edmonton FCSS for effectively advancing upstream prevention and social inclusion across Edmonton.

## OTHER KEY FINDINGS

### Demographics

To ensure resources are effectively directed within the community, the Edmonton FCSS team analyzed the populations being served and the specific challenges they faced.

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of a "warm handoff" represents a critical asset in the sector's move toward integrated service delivery, and several applications highlighted its importance in collaboration. The model is described as a strategy to eliminate service fragmentation and ensure vulnerable clients with complex needs do not fall through the cracks.

- **Age** is a significant factor highlighted by agencies, requiring services to address specific needs at different life stages. Findings point to a worrying increase in mental health challenges among pre-teens (especially those 9-13 years), while also prioritizing the needs of transitional youth (16-21 years) and the unique potential and importance of the early years. At the same time, programs must address the unique vulnerabilities of older adults and seniors, specifically ageism, social isolation, and financial insecurity.
- **Culture** is recognized by the majority of agencies as a pivotal force in people's lives, acting both as a source of strength and a critical area of need, due to systemic barriers that people may face. Agencies indicated that services often reflect a Western bias, and must transition toward cultural safety and responsiveness if they want to build trust and affirm identity. This commitment includes emphasizing the importance of incorporating Indigenous culture in services intended to support Indigenous people, as well as addressing, as much as possible, the specific linguistic and spiritual needs of all cultures.
- **Gender** is identified as an influential factor shaping how agencies design programs, often in conjunction with other intersecting identities. A critical issue highlighted across many agencies is *gender-based violence*, which is frequently compounded by factors such as race and immigration status. In response, many agencies offer gender-specific programming to provide safe and affirming spaces. Furthermore, agencies are actively focused on achieving diverse representation in their governance structures, to ensure their staff and leadership reflect the gender diversity of the communities they serve.

### Cultural Competency Lens

The data collected through the applications and agency visits outlines the path forward: moving from simply delivering programs, with convenient partnerships, to a more intentionally collaborative approach that prioritizes equity, reconciliation, and systemic anti-oppression. A deep dive using a cultural competency lens reveals an evolving understanding of intersectionality and systems transformation.

- **Intersectionality Integrated in Operations:** Agencies are moving beyond recognizing diversity, to designing for intersecting identities. Examples include: initiatives explicitly addressing the compounding barriers of linguistic and racial exclusion, agencies ensuring neurodivergent staff are actively shaping the agency's approach to inclusion, and programs curating safe spaces for groups with layered stigma, such as Black Muslim women, LGBTQ+ youth/elders, and single mothers.
- **The Power of Peer and Lived Experience Models:** Lived experience models are proven as a therapeutic and relational tool. For example, a peer support program for Trans and Gender Diverse people empowers participants to move from being service recipients to peer mentors and leaders.
- **Healing through Culture:** Indigenous programs centre Elders, ceremony, and cultural practices as the primary protective factor and means of healing intergenerational trauma, creating safe, affirming environments for all ages.

## CONCLUSION

While these agencies stand as resilient anchors in their communities, they are collectively facing intensified complexity and systemic economic stress. Despite these immense challenges, the dedicated social service agencies of Edmonton, including grant applicants and funded partners, provide evidence of success and guidance for effective, long-term preventive social services:

- **Established Cultural Protective Factors:** Many have successfully integrated Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices (e.g., Elders, smudging) and other culturally inclusive practices (e.g., multilingual forms) as a primary, measurable protective factor for mental health and well-being.
- **Embedded Lived Experience:** Many, if not all, have achieved increased diversification of boards and staff by formally prioritizing and employing individuals with lived experience, including hiring newcomers for their first Canadian jobs and having diverse representation in governance.

- **High Program Agility:** Demonstrated ability to consistently incorporate new, emerging research (e.g., digital addiction trends) and continuous participant feedback to co-develop and optimize programming and further embed lived experience into program design.
- **Integrated Collaborative Networks:** Successfully leveraged partnerships with housing providers, schools, and specialized external experts, to achieve integrated service delivery and reduce participant burdens associated with navigating multiple systems.

To help move the sector toward this model of sustained success, the City's role in the 2026-2028 funding cycle will continue to be strategic, including working alongside agencies to address, to the extent possible, system gaps revealed by FCSS agency visits and applications across all funding streams.

Though we could not give funding to all applications, all were recorded and analyzed for strategic planning for the next three years of the FCSS program. We thank all the dedicated agencies in Edmonton that put so much effort into providing such rich data. We hope this report can be useful for the preventive social services sector, and the City of Edmonton to aid in decision making and strategic planning.

## APPENDIX

- [2025 FCSS Funded Agency Visit Interviews: Content Analysis](#)
- [2026-2028 FCSS Funding Applications: Content Analysis](#)
- [Edmonton Family & Community Support Services Website](#)
- [Government of Alberta Family & Community Support Services Website](#)