

# Newcomer Emergency Preparedness in Wood Buffalo: Reflections on the 2024 Wildfire Evacuation

*Based on insight shared by local partners, advisory groups, and community contributors, this reflection focuses on how emergency preparedness in Wood Buffalo can better meet the needs of newcomers. It outlines strengths, identifies barriers, and offers shared actions for a more coordinated and inclusive approach.*

*Wood Buffalo Local Immigration Partnership (WBLIP)*

*With contributions from the Newcomer Interagency Network (NIN), the NIN Steering Committee, and the Immigrant Advisory Table (IAT)*

Prepared by: Mackenzie Stokes, WBLIP Coordinator

[lip@ymcanab.ca](mailto:lip@ymcanab.ca)

**INTRODUCTION ..... 3**

**REFLECTIONS ..... 4**

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT ..... 7**

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER ..... 9**

***EXTERNAL LINKS*..... 10**

**APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS ..... 11**



## Introduction

On May 14th, 2024, a **mandatory evacuation** order was issued **for multiple communities in Wood Buffalo**, including four southern neighbourhoods in Fort McMurray. Approximately **6,600 residents were evacuated** (Fort McMurray Today, 2024), while the rest of Fort McMurray and some surrounding areas remained under an evacuation alert, with instructions to be prepared to leave if the fire were to advance. Although they were under "alert" and not required to leave, some residents either misunderstood this direction or chose to evacuate voluntarily. To manage traffic, some roads were closed to prioritize those under the evacuation order. The order was lifted on May 19, 2024.

This evacuation occurred eight years after the devastating 2016 Horse River wildfire. According to the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo's website, in 2016 over 80,000 residents had to evacuate for a month and destroyed 2,579 structures, making it the costliest natural disaster in Canadian history.

Although the 2024 wildfire did not cause this level of damage, it highlighted several ongoing challenges that can inform future emergency responses. Notably, shifts in newcomer demographics, language barriers, and gaps in support for individuals with diverse needs contributed to confusion and stress for many newcomers in Wood Buffalo. This reinforces the importance of enhancing strategies to ensure that all residents are equipped with information they need to respond effectively during emergencies.

## About Us

The **Newcomer Interagency Network (NIN)** is a coalition of organizations and employers in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) that work collaboratively to enhance the lives of newcomers to our community. The NIN fosters collaboration between agencies, shares expertise, and supports initiatives that enhance newcomer integration. It is **guided by a Steering Committee**.

The **Immigrant Advisory Table (IAT)** is a group of individuals born outside of Canada who play an active role in providing guidance and insight to inform initiatives. The IAT offers community-grounded perspectives to ensure local strategies reflect the realities faced by immigrants in Wood Buffalo.

The **Wood Buffalo Local Immigration Partnership (WBLIP)** focuses on strengthening newcomer participation, belonging, and inclusion through stakeholder engagement, strategic planning, and coordinated services. WBLIP is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

## Objective and Intended Audience

This document builds on the 2016 NIN report, "*Wood Buffalo Wildfire 2016: Newcomers Emergency Readiness and Response*" reflecting on progress, identifying areas for improvement, and proposing **inclusive, collaborative solutions for future emergencies**.

It is intended for emergency managers, service providers, funders, municipal leaders, and community stakeholders involved in emergency preparedness, coordination, or newcomer support in Wood Buffalo. The document serves as a starting point for **collective action** towards improved **emergency preparedness for newcomers** and the **community organizations** that support them.

## Approach

To gather feedback, the WBLIP Coordinator held discussions with members from the NIN, Steering Committee, and Immigrant Advisory Table (IAT). After reviewing key findings from the NIN's 2016 wildfire report, reflective discussions were held based on the following guiding questions:

1. What was done well for newcomers during evacuation and preparedness?
2. What could have been improved?
3. What practices, policies, and measures should be implemented for future disasters?
4. Have the strengths outlined in the 2016 report continued?
5. Were the 2016 recommendations implemented?

## Reflections

### Strengths - What Worked Well

#### *The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB)*

The RMWB played a significant role in ensuring emergency preparedness and the timely dissemination of information. The municipality provided frequent, accurate updates in **plain language**, making their website and Facebook page reliable information hubs. The **translation feature** on the RMWB's **emergency preparedness webpage** was an invaluable resource. Although automated translations are not always perfect, it enabled many residents to access key information.

The RMWB's **Vulnerable Persons Registry** ensured individuals received essential support, easing the strain on service providers, which allowed them to focus on assisting broader community needs.

#### *School systems*

Schools played an essential role in ensuring that children from newcomer families received the necessary support and information. Key contributions included:

- **School Boards- Emergency Preparedness Plans:** Both the Public and Catholic school board were noted to have thorough and well communicated plans.
  - **Hour Zero Program (Fort McMurray Public School Board):** Provides clear protocols for fire drills, evacuations, hold and secure procedures, shelter-in-place scenarios, and lockdowns, which are routinely practiced. This structured approach ensured staff and students were prepared for the evacuation.
- Staff **trained in psychological first aid** were able to provide on-site support.
- Announcements on **school board websites** kept families informed.

- **YMCA's Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS)** program and **Composite High School's English as a Second Language class**, foster relationships with newcomer families and students, ensuring the smooth delivery of critical information.
- **Keyano College** communicated updates effectively, including announcements made in class.

### *Community Organizations*

Organizations such as **Alberta Health Services (AHS)** remained operational, ensuring continued access to essential services. Organizations that remained open fostered a sense of stability within the community for those not under an evacuation order.

Groups such as **faith-based organizations and Churches** provided significant support:

- Churches served as information and resource-sharing centers. Specifically, the Markaz Islamic Centre distributed food hampers to those in need.

### *Workplace Preparedness*

Organizations that provided emergency training for staff experienced smoother evacuations. Ongoing conversations around preparedness contributed to stronger responses.

## Ongoing Challenges

### *Language and Communication Barriers*

A recurring challenge was the difficulty in communicating emergency information to those with limited English proficiency. Key concerns included:

- Inaccuracy of online translation tools.
- Emergency documents were predominantly **only available in English** and **occasionally French**, excluding many newcomers.
- Limited availability of in-person or over-the-phone interpreters during emergencies.
  - Some individuals also face **literacy challenges in their first language**. The absence of interpreters and accessible visual aids made conveying emergency instructions extremely difficult.
- Confusion over emergency terminology, such as the difference between an **Evacuation Alert** and an **Evacuation Order**. This led some newcomers to evacuate unnecessarily.

### *Service Provider Preparedness Gaps*

While many service providers were confident in their personal emergency plans, gaps remained in understanding **how to support individuals facing barriers to evacuation**. Barriers included limited access to transportation, mobility challenges, language or digital literacy needs, and responsibilities like retrieving children from school. Some service providers or helpers were unfamiliar with evacuation procedures for those relying on public transit or the location of muster points. These gaps highlight the need for broader training to help providers support residents with diverse needs and circumstances.

### *Limitations of the Vulnerable Persons Registry*

Although the Vulnerable Persons Registry is a valuable resource, the eligibility **criteria does not account for language barriers**. Newcomers faced with significant language and literacy challenges are at increased risk but are not eligible for registry support.

### *Closure of Essential Services*

Some critical services, such as food banks and child care centres, temporarily closed during the emergency, leaving many vulnerable residents without access to essential resources.

### *Changing Demographics and Evolving Needs*

An observed increase in the number of international students and government-assisted refugees has shifted the region's demographics. Many individuals within these groups face intersecting barriers to emergency preparedness. Specific concerns were raised that the **number of buses** allocated for evacuation **may no longer align with the transportation demands** of the shifting newcomer population.

### *Low Attendance at Emergency Preparedness Sessions*

Emergency preparedness sessions, while valuable, reportedly experience **low turnout**. More coordinated outreach is needed. A lack of unified promotion among service providers, the municipality, and key stakeholders contributed to significant knowledge and communication gaps.

### *Geographical and Community Knowledge.*

Limited knowledge with local geography and terminology made emergency instructions difficult for many newcomers to understand and follow.

- **Neighbourhood names** used in alerts (e.g., “Abasand,” “Gregoire”) were unfamiliar to some, leading to confusion about who was required to evacuate.
- **Terminology differences** also created barriers.
  - Locals often say “downtown,” while official **documents use “Lower Townsite”**.
- Lack of **familiarity with landmarks and directions** made instructions like “meet at the bus stop by the provincial building” unclear.
  - **Muster points** were difficult to identify and may not have been visibly marked year-round.
- Accessibility and knowledge of update locations.
  - Gaps in awareness of **where to seek updates**.
  - The Alberta Wildfire website and phone app, as well as the RMWB website and Facebook page, were inaccessible to those who do not use certain online platforms, or for the many who experience barriers such as limited digital literacy or lack access to the internet or a smartphone.

## Recommendations for Improvement

The intention of this reflection is to identify opportunities to **enhance the reach, clarity, and inclusivity** of Wood Buffalo's current emergency response plan. By strengthening communication and collaboration, and by expanding available resources, we can **improve access** to emergency preparedness information for newcomers across the community.

### 1. Comprehensive Emergency Preparedness Training for Service Providers

- Create and deliver standardized **training** on the current emergency **preparedness plan** for all **service providers** and community leaders in Wood Buffalo.
- Equip attendees with appropriate outreach **tools and materials** that can be used to inform clients and community members in a variety of formats.
- Bring key stakeholders together to:
  - Identify key emergency preparedness **topics especially relevant to newcomers**.
  - Develop clear guidance and techniques on **communicating emergency** procedures to **non-English speakers** and those unfamiliar with local systems.

### 2. Translate Emergency Preparedness Materials

- Identify key emergency preparedness **documents**, and information that should be **prioritized for translation**.
- Collaborate with newcomer-serving agencies, ethnocultural groups, and faith-based organizations to:
  - **Identify priority languages** based on barriers to accessing English or French, translator availability, and trends in literacy or technological barriers. Translations should not be based solely on how widely the language is spoken in the region.
  - **Translate** the selected documents.
  - Consider **alternative outreach strategies** to distribute material, such as cultural events, community centres, places of worship, restaurants, stores, official websites, newcomer-serving programs, and through community WhatsApp channels.
- Ensure **muster points are clearly marked** and include **visual signage** for individuals with language or literacy barriers.

### 3. Improve Access to Interpretation Services During Emergencies

- Establish a **24/7 emergency interpretation hotline** that service providers and first responders can access to assist those who do not speak English.
- Prioritize **on-call interpreters** for the most commonly spoken languages in the region.
  - Assess feasibility of a **local initiative** or the need for **provincial level advocacy**.

## 4. Strengthen Leadership, Communication, and Collaborative Efforts

- Designate community leaders from **diverse** linguistic and cultural backgrounds to serve as **Emergency Preparedness Ambassadors**.
  - These leaders should be invited and supported to participate in planning meetings, relay information to their communities, and where possible, assist during crisis.
- Encourage organizations and community groups to actively participate in **cross-sectoral efforts led by the emergency sector**.
  - This can include outreach activities, collaborative planning discussions, and co-development of culturally appropriate resources.
- Conduct **regular vulnerability assessments** or create processes for **ongoing feedback**.

## 5. Expand the Vulnerable Persons Registry Criteria

- **Modify the eligibility criteria** to include individuals with significant language barriers and/or literacy barriers.
- Provide **pre-disaster orientation to registered individuals** using translated handouts, multilingual videos, or in-person sessions with interpreters present.

## 6. Enhance Promotion and Accessibility of Emergency Preparedness Sessions

- Hold **sessions in multiple languages** and consider **offering responsive incentives** for attendance, such as transportation support, snacks, or childcare services.
- **Collaborative hosting** of events is recommended to maximize reach and share resources.
- Organizations, especially those serving newcomers, are encouraged to **promote** both community-wide and targeted **emergency preparedness activities** on a regular basis.

## 7. Develop an Accessible and Culturally Inclusive Preparedness Video

- Develop a short, locally relevant emergency preparedness video intended for newcomers, using **plain language**, **visual** storytelling, and **multilingual subtitles or voice-over**.
  - For videos in English, ensure there is an option to **slow the playback speed**.
- Leverage insights from recommendation 2 and 3 regarding **priority languages, key information** to include, and effective **outreach strategies**.
- Distribute across multiple platforms to expand reach.
  - Ensure that service providers, ethnocultural groups, and faith-based organizations have access to the video and are encouraged to share it through their own channels such as websites, at public events, social media, and directly with clients.

## Moving Forward Together

Since the 2016 wildfire, several recommendations have been implemented, leading to improved readiness and response across the region. While this progress is significant, preparedness must continue to evolve to meet the diverse and changing needs of Wood Buffalo residents.

**Service providers and community leaders** play a vital role in preparing for emergencies and supporting residents through evacuations. When organizations are **well-trained and resourced**, the region benefits collectively.

Emergency preparedness applies to **all potential hazards**, including floods, severe weather events, and industrial incidents, making **year-round, cross-sector communication** essential. Ongoing evaluations and open communication will also support early identification of gaps and the implementation of proactive solutions.

Effective preparedness requires **shared responsibility**. No single organization can address these challenges alone. Strong **emergency sector leadership** paired with the knowledge and reach of **community organizations** is key to delivering inclusive outreach and a coordinated response.

Developing a comprehensive plan for improvement, **informed by diverse voices** and community feedback, will help ensure emergency responses are inclusive and responsive to community needs. Ongoing **collaboration** with **ethnocultural leaders, newcomer-serving organizations**, and **committees** such as the Immigrant Advisory Table is essential in making emergency plans reflect the **lived realities** of all residents in Wood Buffalo.

The Wood Buffalo Local Immigration Partnership remains committed to strengthening supports for newcomers and working together to ensure residents receive accessible guidance before, during, and after emergencies. By fostering meaningful collaboration and acting on inclusive strategies, Wood Buffalo can strengthen its readiness to better support all residents during future emergencies.

*We are grateful to all who contributed to this reflection and who continue to advance inclusion and resilience across our region.*

## External Links for Information mentioned:

**Alberta Wildfire Website:**

<https://www.alberta.ca/alberta-wildfire>

**Fort McMurray Today. *Weekly update: Fort McMurray, Wood Buffalo – May 17, 2024.***

<https://www.fortmcmurraytoday.com/news/weekly-update-fort-mcmurray-wood-buffalo-may-17-2024>

**Newcomer Interagency Network/Local Immigration Partnership Website:**

<https://www.newcomers-ymm.ca/>

**Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) *Emergency Preparedness:***

<https://www.rmwb.ca/en/fire-and-emergency-services/emergency-preparedness.aspx>

**Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) *Vulnerable Persons Registry:***

<https://www.rmwb.ca/en/fire-and-emergency-services/vulnerable-persons-registry.aspx#Criteria-for-Eligibility>

**Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) - *Wildfire Recovery***

<https://www.rmwb.ca/en/fire-and-emergency-services/wildfire-recovery.aspx>

**Hour Zero:**

<https://hour-zero.co/>

**Wood Buffalo Wildfire 2016: Newcomers Emergency Readiness and Response:**

[https://www.newcomers-ymm.ca/files/ugd/d93186\\_1d8f3cabbe424517a1ca03ec3301248c.pdf](https://www.newcomers-ymm.ca/files/ugd/d93186_1d8f3cabbe424517a1ca03ec3301248c.pdf)

## Appendix: Glossary of Key Terms

**Newcomer:**

A person who recently moved to Canada or the community. In the settlement sector, a newcomer usually refers to someone who immigrated to Canada within the last five years or who still faces significant barriers to settlement. This includes immigrants, refugees, international students, and others who recently arrived.

**Interpretation:**

Changing spoken words from one language into another.

**Translation:**

Changing written words from one language into another.

**Evacuation Order:**

A message from officials that you *must leave* the area right away because it is unsafe.

**Evacuation Alert:**

*A warning that you might need to leave soon, so prepare to leave in case an evacuation is ordered.*

**Muster Point:**

A safe meeting spot where people should go during an emergency to wait for help or a bus.

**Hold and Secure:**

The building stays locked for safety, but activities inside continue as normal.

**Lockdown:**

A safety measure where everyone stays quiet and hides within rooms with locked doors.

**Shelter-in-Place:**

Stay inside your home or building because it is safer than going outside.