Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako
Community Group Toolkit
March 1, 2025

Contents

Introduction

As emergency events become more common in the region, communities are taking more responsibility and wanting to be better prepared. Community resilience is a partnership between individuals, community groups, businesses and local governments. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide a roadmap for people interested in starting a community group to support emergency preparedness in your neighborhood or community. It is designed to help groups ask the right questions and make informed decisions about how they want to operate, what roles they will fill, and how they will engage with their community, local governments and other organizations.

Whether your group is considering a more formal non-profit arrangement, or simply coordinating a local initiative, this toolkit will guide you through key considerations, including geographical boundaries, roles and responsibilities, communication strategies, and operational logistics. Effective community engagement creates opportunities for members of the public to provide input into decisions that directly impact the future of their community, and for community champions to build meaningful, trusted relationships with local government leaders.

This document is not a step-by-step operational manual for emergency response, nor does it replace professional advice or government protocols. It is intended to guide community efforts and support initial planning. Your local government is responsible for coordinating emergency management in the province, but community groups can help save lives, protect property and reduce the effects of disasters through mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery activities.

The toolkit will be available on the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako website, and anyone seeking further assistance or wishing to meet with Protective Services staff regarding this topic can email to: protective.services@rdbn.bc.ca.

Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (RDBN)

The RDBN is committed to supporting community groups in their efforts to improve emergency preparedness and response in their community. While the RDBN will endeavor to provide resources and guidance, we believe that leadership and priorities should come from the community itself. The RDBN is not responsible for facilitating or managing community groups, nor does it take responsibility for any actions taken as a result of the guidance in this document.

Nothing in this document should be considered legal advice, and no part of it permits or encourages the violation of any local, provincial, or federal law or regulations.

Questions To Consider

When starting a community group there are some basic questions that must be answered to help ensure your group has a solid foundation. Spending time answering these questions, including defining roles and responsibilities, will help make sure everyone is on the same page.

Should a non-profit group be started?

The first question to consider is: will you be formalizing your group? That is to say, will you be taking steps to make your group a formal non-profit organization? Formalizing a community group as a non-profit brings several advantages:

- It opens doors to funding opportunities through grants and donations that are only available to registered non-profits.
- The society can take out insurance and adds certain legal protection for group members.
- Enhances the group's credibility and accountability - making partnerships with other organizations or governments more feasible.
- Provides a clear structure, with established roles and responsibilities that can help streamline decision-making.

There are, however, downsides to consider. Formalizing adds an administrative burden, with paperwork, accounting, and legal compliance to manage. It also introduces costs, such as registration fees and ongoing operational expenses. The group's flexibility may decrease due to the more rigid structure, and accountability increases as non-profits must meet specific reporting and regulatory requirements. These factors can add complexity to the group's operations.

After weighing the pros and cons, if you decide you would like to formalize your group, please see *Section 5* for a detailed description on how to begin the process.

What is the primary role of your group?

Another important question to consider is what the role of your group will be. To answer this question, it is essential to reflect on what it was that made you want to start the group. Was there an event or a concern that prompted action, such as a natural disaster, lack of local resources, or a gap in emergency preparation or response? Understanding this reason will help decide what your group wants to focus on. Once you've identified the main issues you want to address in your community, consider what is realistic and feasible given your local context. What skills, knowledge, and resources already exist in your community? What is the capacity of your community to commit to certain roles? It is important to balance ambition with practicality, ensuring that your group can take on meaningful work without overextending itself.

What are the roles and structures within your group?

When thinking about the structure of your group, it's important to establish clear leadership and roles that ensure smooth operations and accountability. Will your group have a formal leadership structure, such as a board of directors? A board can provide oversight, decision-making, and direction for the group's activities. It is important to keep in mind that the board typically includes roles like chairperson, treasurer, and secretary, so consider if your group has the capacity to fill those roles.

Another key consideration is whether the group will have paid positions or rely entirely on volunteers. Paid positions can provide consistency and expertise, especially for tasks that require a significant time commitment or specialized skill. However, they also come with financial responsibility, such as fundraising or securing grants to cover salaries (discussed later). On the other hand, an all-volunteer structure may foster a greater sense of community ownership, though it can sometimes lead to challenges with availability, turnover, and long-term commitment.

Creating a Purpose

Creating a purpose is a key step in shaping the identity of your group. A purpose outlines the mission and core values, serving as a guiding document that helps direct all decisions and actions. To start, your group should have discussions around the core reason for its formation—what issue or need in the community are you addressing? From this, you can define the group's overall mission, which should be clear, concise, and focused on the specific outcomes you hope to achieve.

Consider the following questions:

- What is the group's main purpose or goal?
- What are the key activities or actions the group will take to fulfill this purpose?
- Who is the target audience or population the group aims to support?
- What is the geographical area the group will support?
- How will the group measure success or impact?

Creating a purpose in a simple, easy-to-understand way will make it more accessible and usable for both current members and external audiences. For a non-profit society, this is also called your Constitution.

Starting a Non-Profit

In B.C., not-for-profit organizations are called societies, which are independent entities that must follow the *Societies Act*. Societies cannot earn profits for their members; all funds must support the organization's cause. They can register as charitable organizations, apply for grants, and use funds for salaries and administrative costs. The following steps are paraphrased from the BC Government Website. Find the full page here.

When starting a non-profit society, there are five recommended steps.

1. First, start by clearly defining the type of cause, activity or support the society will promote. A purpose cannot include operating a business for profit or gain. The purpose becomes part of the society's constitution. It needs to comply with the Societies Act.

2. Next, create simple bylaws. The purpose of non-profit bylaws is to establish internal rules and procedures that govern operations and decision-making processes. Bylaws outline the structure, roles, and responsibilities of members and directors, while also detailing how meetings are conducted, how decisions are made, and how conflicts are resolved. They ensure the organization complies with legal requirements, provides transparency, and operates in a structured, democratic manner, ultimately supporting the non-profit's mission and ensuring accountability.
   In BC, there are 2 options for the creation of bylaws:
   - Option 1: Adopt model bylaws without any changes: there are model bylaws that provide a framework of basic procedural rules for new societies. Download a copy of the model bylaws here: DOC.

     Before adopting these bylaws, make sure they're suitable for your society.

   - Option 2: Create your own bylaws: you may also use the model bylaws as a guide and start from scratch. It is recommended to get legal advice if you require assistance in drafting or changing bylaws. A society's bylaws must:
     - Comply with the *Societies Act* and contain the matters (provisions) required by Section 11 of the *Societies Act,*
     - Be written in English,
     - Be in a format that can be uploaded, copied and compared (DOC, DOCX, PDF, RTF, TXT or WPS).

3. Next, you must assign director(s). A director is responsible for managing a society.
   - An ordinary society *must* have at least 3 directors. One of them must be a resident in B.C.
   - A member-funded society needs one director. They do not need to be a B.C. resident.

A director must be qualified under the Societies Act and the bylaws of the society. They must:

- Be a person – not an organization or a corporation,
- Be at least 18 years old,
- Not be found by a court to be incapable of managing their own affairs,
- Not be a person for whom a certificate of incapability is issued,
- Not be undergoing bankruptcy,

- Have not been convicted of fraud or corporate offence within the last five years unless a pardon was issued, and,
- Meet any qualifications noted in the society’s bylaws.

4. Next, reserve a name. This can be done online for a $30 fee. For obvious reasons, societies must have their name approved and confirm that it doesn't conflict with a name already being used by a corporation. Once your request has gone through and been approved, you'll receive a name request number you can use to incorporate the society.

5. Finally, you’ll need to apply to incorporate. This you can do online for $100 CAD. You'll need:
   - Your name request reservation number,
   - The society's purpose,
   - The society's bylaws,
   - Names and contact information for each applicant,
   - Names and addresses of all directors,
   - Mailing address for the society's registered office in B.C.,
   - Delivery address,
   - An email to send notifications.

You will also be asked to create a registry key (or password) for the society that will be needed for making future filings using Societies Online. Once the incorporation process is complete:

- Notification of the incorporation will be published as part of the public record,
- The society will receive certified copies of documents, including a certificate of incorporation, constitution and bylaws, and a statement of directors and registered office.

Geographical Boundaries

To operate effectively, your society will need strict geographical operational boundaries. It can be easier to use a pre-defined area such as a Regional District Electoral Area, a municipality boundary, or a local neighborhood. To decide this, it may be helpful to look at what types of emergencies your organization will prepare for and the assets your organization will have access to. The RDBN may be able to assist in creating a boundary and/or map of your group’s chosen area.

Types of Emergencies

When considering the types of emergencies your community might face, it is important to consider and address several things.

The first step in preparing for emergencies is understanding the risks your community faces. Begin by identifying potential hazards, both natural and human made. These could range from natural disasters such as floods, wildfires, or earthquakes, to technological or infrastructure risks like power outages, hazardous material spills, or water supply issues. Look at past events—what emergencies has your community dealt with before? Are there hazards that are more likely due to your specific geographic location, such as being in a floodplain or near a fault line? A good resource for this is the RDBN Hazard Risk and Vulnerability Assessment. This can be found on the RDBN website at https://www.rdbn.bc.ca/hrva.

Not all emergencies are equally likely or impactful. Focus your group's efforts on emergencies that are both frequent and severe in their potential impact. For example, if seasonal storms cause regular issues like power outages or flooding, these should be a priority. As you assess risks, keep in mind how changing conditions could increase the frequency or intensity of hazards like wildfires, floods, or heat waves. This forward-thinking approach will ensure your group remains prepared for both current and future challenges.

Your group will be most effective if it reflects the concerns and priorities of the broader community. Talk to your neighbors and hold meetings to understand what types of emergencies people are most concerned about. By involving the entire community in your planning, you ensure that your group is addressing the most relevant risks and has the backing of the people it will serve.

As you plan, take stock of your group's ability to plan for and respond to different types of emergencies. Do you have the necessary training, equipment, and communication systems in place? Are there partnerships with nearby communities or organizations that can be formed to strengthen your response efforts? Focus on what you can realistically manage and build capacity where needed through training or by reaching out to experts.

Assets

When assessing your community's assets and vulnerabilities for emergency preparedness, it's important to look at the resources available. First, consider the community's assets, which include human resources such as people with specialized skills like first responders, healthcare professionals, or individuals trained in first aid or emergency management.

There are many different types of skills that are important in a community. Consider:

- educators,
- cooks,
- childcare providers,
- heavy equipment operators,
- people who can haul and handle livestock.

Additionally, community leaders, whether formal or informal, are important assets because they are trusted by residents and can help mobilize and communicate during an emergency.

Another important consideration is physical resources. Think about buildings that can be used as shelters - such as schools or community centers. Equipment and supplies like backup generators, medical supplies, personal protective equipment or communication tools, should also be considered.

Vulnerabilities

Identifying community vulnerabilities is just as critical. Vulnerable populations, including seniors, people with disabilities, children, low-income households, and non-English speakers, may need additional support during emergencies. It's important to ensure these groups are included in your group's planning, with clear communication strategies and accessible resources. During an emergency response, the organization of jurisdiction will oversee official evacuation routes and community exit points. With this being said, it is crucial for each and every member of the public to have a personal preparedness plan (including personal/familial evacuation routes) and to take responsibility for their own safety.

Infrastructure weaknesses, such as electricity grid, roads, public transportation and communication lines, should be considered when thinking about personal and unofficial community evacuation routes. Areas prone to power outages, unreliable water supply, or slower emergency service response times (especially in rural or isolated areas) also present significant vulnerabilities.

Communications

Establishing effective communication is crucial for any community group – both internal - between members - and external – between the local authorities, response organization and visitors to the area. Timely and clear communication ensures everyone is informed, coordinated, and prepared to respond to whatever might arise.

Social Media

Social media platforms, like Facebook or Instagram, can be powerful tools for community groups to disseminate information quickly. These platforms allow groups to post real-time updates about ongoing emergencies, share vital preparedness tips, and engage with members of the community. Chat groups, on platforms like WhatsApp or Messenger, are equally important for internal coordination among group members. These chat groups provide fast, two-way communication, enabling members to discuss logistics, share resources, and respond to urgent needs.

Note: Misinformation can spread quickly, creating unnecessary fear and confusion. To combat this, groups must establish clear protocols for verifying and sharing information from trusted sources, such as local governments and verified emergency management agencies - they should also monitor and address any false information circulating within their communities.

Contact Lists

Another communication tool to utilize is contact lists. Email and phone lists serve as more structured communication methods. Email provides a reliable way to share longer, formal updates or documents like emergency plans, meeting minutes, or status reports. It ensures that essential information can be referred to at any time. Phone lists are critical in situations where internet access might be disrupted, allowing for direct voice contact to coordinate actions. Having both email and phone lists ensures redundancy in your communication plan, ensuring no one is left out during critical moments.

Meetings

Regular meetings—whether in person or virtual—are essential to maintaining the effectiveness of the group. Meetings provide a platform for discussion, decision-making, and long-term planning. In-person meetings foster stronger connections and engagement, but virtual meetings (via Zoom, Teams, etc.) offer flexibility, ensuring everyone can participate regardless of location.

Emergency and Public Alerts

The RDBN hosts a service called Voyent Alert! Residence can sign up to receive real time information about emergencies by cell phone, text, email or land line. More information can be found on the RDBN website at https://www.rdbn.bc.ca/departments/protective-services/bulkley-nechako-emergency-public-alerts.

Partnership and Relationship Building

A frequent mistake groups make is that they focus on the 'doing', often in isolation and not on maintaining strong relationships. Building partnerships with local governments and response agencies (BCWS, RCMP, BC Ambulance, Search and Rescue, Conservation Officer Service etc.) is crucial for any community group focused on emergency preparedness and/or response. Local governments have access to resources, knowledge, and networks that can significantly enhance the effectiveness of a community group. By maintaining strong relationships, community groups can ensure they are aligned with municipal and regional emergency plans, understand legal requirements, and tap into local funding or grants. Governments provide critical information during emergencies, such as evacuation orders or hazard notices, that can aid community groups in their own efforts. Partnership with local government helps ensure that the group's actions are coordinated, compliant with regulations, and supported through official channels.

Collaboration with other community groups is equally important. These partnerships can help share resources, expertise, and labour during times of crisis, allowing for a more comprehensive response. Different groups may bring diverse skills, such as food distribution, first aid, or communications, which can complement the capabilities of a local emergency group. Working together can also help in long-term recovery efforts, fostering community resilience.

Finances

Managing finances carefully is essential for any community group, especially in emergency response. Clear financial planning allows the group to operate sustainably, ensuring there are funds for activities, equipment, and unexpected needs. Sound financial management builds trust within the community, shows accountability, and can support the group's eligibility for grants, donations, and partnerships. Whether funds come from community fundraising, donations, or grants, maintaining transparency in financial practices will keep the group on stable footing and help secure additional support.

Grant Writing

Grant writing is a key method for securing funds from government programs, private foundations, and other organizations such as community forests that support local initiatives. A successful grant proposal should clearly outline the group's mission, objectives, and how the funds will be used, usually including a detailed budget.

Some grants that can be utilized by community groups include:

- Community Forest Grant
- Co-Op Grants
- The RDBN Grant Writing Program

Many grants require specifics on measurable outcomes, so emphasizing the anticipated impact of the funding on the community is important. Researching grants that align closely with the group's goals, adhering to application guidelines, and submitting accurate, well-prepared proposals can greatly increase the chances of receiving funding.

As mentioned, the RDBN offers free, confidential grant writing services to non-profits and may be a valuable resource if there is no one in your community group that is adept at grant writing. Reach out to the RDBN grant team on the RDBN website, here:

https://www.rdbn.bc.ca/departments/economic-development/assistance-for-non-profit-societies/grant-writing-assistance

Fundraising

Fundraising offers community groups a chance to generate financial support while engaging directly with the community. This can include events, online donation campaigns, or partnerships with local businesses. Effective fundraising usually aligns with the group's mission, showcasing how contributions will strengthen emergency preparedness or response capabilities. While some events or campaigns may need upfront costs, successful fundraising strategies can often become reliable, recurring sources of income. Building donor relationships and recognizing contributions also encourages ongoing community support.

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Appendix 1 - Case Study: Chinook Emergency Response Society (CERS)

In the summer of 2024, CERS representatives were interviewed in an effort to highlight a well-established local community group.

Introduction

What is CERS, and how did it come to be?

CERS is a community group created out of the need for enhanced community resilience for the residents of the RDBN Electoral Area E. After the 2018 wildfire season, many key community leaders, wanted to create a community group to help better prepare for emergency situations and make the community stronger and more resilient. The Chinook Emergency Response Society (CERS) was officially incorporated October 2018.

Mandate

What is CERS's mandate?

"To assist in the preparation of community members and businesses in the Electoral Area E to respond and react to any and all emergency situations."

How does CERS accomplish their mandate?

Through coordination, communication and education CERS works to keep their community safe, prepared and organized in the event of an emergency or disaster.

Non-Profit

Why did CERS make the decision to formalize into a non-profit? Would you recommend other serious community groups do the same – if so, why?

Forming a non-profit society allows for donations to be given and grants to be applied for. CERS relies 100% on grants and donations.

Structure

What is CERS's basic internal structure and how does it work?

CERS has an active Board of 10 members. Each member manages a role within CERS. We have members responsible for inventory, education, media, event planning, Pod Leader coordination, and for trailer maintenance. Having an active Board that has the passion to support the health and wellness of the residents of Area E makes CERS work.

Does CERS have a board/paid employees?

CERS has one paid position: a Program Support Consultant. This position reports to the Board and is available to assist all members of the Board with their roles. This position is administrative and is a huge support to the many hours of volunteerism given by Board members. This position is paid for through grants.

Geographical Boundaries

What are the geographical boundaries CERS operates within? How do the Pods operate?

CERS operates within the RDBN Electoral Area E. This large electoral area is located south of the village of Burns Lake and is unique because there are many unincorporated communities, but there is no municipality within its borders. Many residents in this area rely on the Francois Lake Forester ferry to commute to Burns Lake and the Highway 16 corridor. Ranching and acreage parcels are the norm. Area E is divided it into 18 Pods - grouping residences as if they were in neighborhoods. CERS has a resident (or two) in each Pod that is designated as the Pod Leader. The Pod Leader has a list of all the people in their Pod, as well as addresses and phone numbers that are only utilized in the event of an emergency in that Pod.

Pod Leaders also take it upon themselves to know the more vulnerable people in their designated area. CERS classifies 'vulnerable' as those that may need extra assistance should there be an emergency. This includes those that do not have phone service/internet and/or do not have reliable transportation. The Board member that oversees Pod Leaders is called to help support and coordinate when there is an emergency. A great example of this is when there is a heavy snowfall event. Based on the recommendations of the board member, community members will coordinate and provide plowing services, food delivery and daily check-ins if needed.

Communications

What are CERS's primary means of communication and how do they function?

There are usually two ways CERS is notified about an emergency (for example, a fire). Residents text or message the Facebook Page/Group or they call a well-known community contact. When CERS first gets word of a wildfire, they ask three questions right away:

1. Have you reported it to BCWS/911?
2. Has someone seen the fire with their own eyes?
3. Where exactly is it and can it be accessed easily?

Once that information is recorded and the appropriate authorities are contacted, the Pod Leader closest to the emergency is notified and the event is posted to the official CERS Facebook page. The CERS Facebook page has become know as a trusted source of information and provides important situational awareness for community members. CERS has also created a website: https://Chinook-ers.ca .

Partnerships

With whom have you found are the most important connections and partnerships to form when creating a community group like CERS?

CERS has found that partnerships with the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako, BC Wildfire Service, Local First Nations, RCMP, Search and Rescue, Waterbridge, and BC Health Services to be key to its success.

CERS began as a way to organize residents and for the community to become more resilient and self sufficient. CERS has since evolved and building strong relationships with local government representatives to ensure community voices and perspectives are heard and are part of the decision-making process. CERS has helped build trust with local governments and response agencies - sharing knowledge, recognizing strengths and understanding all the areas from which we can teach, and we can learn.

Finances

Briefly, how are CERS finances structured and managed? How does CERS pay for its projects?

CERS finances are managed by the Treasurer of the Board. CERS utilizes the Program Consultant and the grant writing program at the RDBN to assist with writing grants. This year (2024), CERS successfully obtained the BC Community Gaming Grant to help pay for operational expenses. This will allow other grants and donations to go towards education opportunities and purchasing equipment.

Nice-To-Knows’

Are there any tips you would offer new community groups? Things that worked well or didn’t work well?

Host local training opportunities!

CERS uses grant money to host training opportunities for residents at no charge. This training is much appreciated by residents and has a positive impactful in the relationship CERS holds with government agencies. In 2024, CERS hosted five Wildfire Information events. CERS visited local schools and encouraged children to think about fire preparedness. We discussed campfire safety and how to look after a fire. CERS also hosts regular community events and posts regularly on Facebook. The aim is to educate people on wearing proper safety equipment, remind them to report fires before responding, and teaching them about how to FireSmart™ their properties.

Be prepared!

Each of CERS’s fire response trailers have:

- 1 large tote filled with water,
- 2 pumps
- Endless hoses and hose adapters
- Firefighting backpack water tank and pulaski
- Safety equipment such as hard hats, hi-vis vests, first aid kits,
- 1 location tracker

They also include a spare tire, extra fuel and a hitch to pull them behind any pickup truck. Items are marked with spray paint to assist with identification. The trailers are placed in specific places of RDBN Area E and are available for any one in the community to hook up and take to a wildfire.

1) <u>Educating residents and government agencies</u>
CERS feels that educating all responding parties, both governmental and community is beneficial. CERS is invested in building positive communication between these agencies and our residents. Our goal is to keep our community safe. We need these agencies and likewise, these agencies not only need our support but also, with the added challenge of our remoteness, they often do need our help. We ask the agencies to attend our Wildfire Preparedness Day and provide educational information while improving relationships. It is important to our residents to have access to those we hope will have our best interests in mind.

2) Build strong relationships with key response agencies
Local BCWS staff and CERS Board/ admin have dedicated time to building a solid relationship. BCWS acknowledges that due to the uniqueness of Area E, residents are not only going to respond but they also can be key to reducing fire spread. To that end, BCWS has worked with CERS to assist with educating residents to action fire with safer strategies. BCWS is creating a program to hire trained locals to work, get paid, and have liability coverage while fighting local fires. BCWS Information Officers provide updates to CERS on the larger fires in Area E. CERS posts these for the residents, who appreciate and value that BCWS is acknowledging the needs of local residents.

3) Build strong relationships with local governments
The relationship between the RDBN and the residents of Area E has come a long way since the fires of 2018. By meeting as a small group to speak with them, and listen, CERS has built a mutually respectful relationship with RDBN staff. In 2023, the RDBN asked CERS members to operate evacuation area checkpoints with RCMP patrolling but not actively engaging with residents. This was a positive step for residents as local knowledge is important when interacting with a community. Residents were allowed to go in and check their properties during safer hours of the day. In 2024, the RDBN asked CERS to notify residents along Ootsa lake of the implementation of an Evacuation Alert. By informing CERS of the incoming alert just ahead of the official announcement, CERS was able to have phone lists ready and all impacted residents were notified within one hour of the official alert release. There was no leak of information as trust had been built between the two organizations and the protocols had been strictly set out beforehand with all parties onboard. This notification process, if carried out through Search and Rescue and/or the RCMP, would have lasted well into the night to complete - using valuable time and resources in the process.

4) Bulk buy
CERS allocates money every year to replacing equipment and increasing inventory for fire fighting. Working with local businesses, CERS is able to offer better prices to the residents to purchase their own equipment to prepare and protect their own property. This has become a valued opportunity for both residents and businesses to support each other.

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