Kamloops as Host City: 2017 Wildfires in British Columbia: Response-Generated Demands in the City of Kamloops

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Introduction

During the summer of 2017, the province of British Columbia (BC) experienced wildfire disasters at an unprecedented level. Over 1.2 million hectares of land were burned, fire suppression costs were over $568 million, and approximately 65,000 persons were evacuated (Province of British Columbia, 2018). Given the large number of fires occurring simultaneously in south central British Columbia, thousands of impacted residents evacuated throughout the entire region, some due to direct evacuation order, while others evacuated on a voluntary basis to escape conditions such as air quality problems due to smoke. Kamloops is a regional centre of activity for south central British Columbia. Given the city’s size, roles in the administrative and economic functioning of south-central British Columbia, and the connectivity of three major provincial highways passing through the city, the city was well positioned to be a host city for wildfire evacuees. During the 2017 wildfire season, fire did not substantially encroach on the City of Kamloops boundaries, making it a destination for thousands of evacuees seeking temporary accommodations.

Research Questions

This study explores response-generated demands that are specific to cities hosting wildfire evacuees. Response-generated demands are defined as needs that are made evident as individuals, organizations, and communities attempt to meet agent-generated needs (the needs made evident by the hazard itself). When fire evacuees arrived in Kamloops, many entities in the city engaged in various actions to meet the needs of the evacuees. These response actions generated their own sets of demands that needed to be met in order to sustain the emergency operations needed for evacuation hosting. As a result of an influx of approximately 11,000 wildfire evacuees into Kamloops, the study set out to answer the following research question: What are the response-generated challenges that Kamloops faces as a wildfire evacuation host city?

Methods

The researchers conducted fieldwork from August 23 to August 27, 2017. At that time, the Elephant Hill Wildfire (the largest wildfire in the vicinity of Kamloops) was ending and the Philpott Road Wildfire was flaring up. The researchers spent time in offices, operation centres, evacuation centres, fire centres and other local venues in Kamloops. They interviewed 17 people who were stakeholders in the process of hosting wildfire evacuees. These included members of provincial, regional district, and local governments, first nations representatives, non-governmental organizations and other community stakeholders in Kamloops.

Preliminary Findings

The response-generated demands experienced by Kamloops in its capacity as a host city were separated into the following three categories:
Physical Findings: Kamloops was able to absorb the temporary population influx of fire evacuees without major long-lasting physical impacts. Local transportation and parking facilities handled the influx of persons. As events and tourism plans changed due to the fires, space opened for evacuee housing. As Canada’s tournament capital, Kamloops had ample spaces for temporary accommodation, including motels, hotels, university residences, parks and arenas. Public mass sheltering was established at three existing facilities. Through the use of their Pow Wow grounds, the Tk’emlúps Indian Band provided unique services to the evacuees that went beyond the scope of what other social service providers were able to deliver. Finally, logistical complications for Emergency Social Services staff resulted from an initial influx of donations into the evacuation centers, as there was both a lack of storage space and utility for many of the donated items. Gift cards from large retail establishments and gas companies were particularly useful.

Social Findings: The evacuee hosting activities in Kamloops constituted the largest community effort in its recent history. Highlights of social-related findings included the importance of a reliable emergency social services staff, the importance of local volunteers solving local problems, and the roll-out of a three-tiered assistance centre system, which included reception centres, resilience centres, and recovery centres. Pro-social benefits of hosting evacuees included community building, increasing social capital, and gains made in the community as a result of coming together to help others. In nearly all the interviews, these positive impacts outweighed any costs, though potential negative impacts were also recognized. These included an increase in substance abuse and crime, a surge in panhandling, the cancellation of local events as community facilities were converted to host evacuees, and potentially higher social service loads requiring increased funding support in the future.

Economic Findings: Emergency Management British Columbia (EMBC) covered direct costs incurred by Kamloops for evacuee hosting, upon request from the Thompson-Nicola Regional District. Non-governmental agencies (such as the Canadian Red Cross) also absorbed the financial burdens of hosting evacuees. The local Chamber of Commerce was the private sector champion in Kamloops in organizing relief from the private sector. A number of private businesses in Kamloops provided free or discounted goods and services to assist evacuees. The full extent of economic impact on Kamloops for hosting activities could not be adequately determined at the time of the study.

Conclusion

This study suggests that four important lessons can be learned from the experiences of the City of Kamloops during its 2017 wildfire hosting activities. Firstly, communication and coordination are key. It is recommended that regular times for information sharing be included as a part of the operational pace. Secondly, no hard stop dates for services provided by Emergency Social Services units. Despite the pressures to return to normalcy as soon as possible, it is important to demobilize services for evacuees slowly. Thirdly, evacuees do not respect governmental boundaries. Establishing intergovernmental cooperation prior to the disaster can reduce the administrative hurdles in managing affairs incumbent with an evacuation host city. Finally, it is important to not overlook simple support needs for disaster relief workers, such as catered lunches. Given the long hours and intense nature of the work involved in hosting fire evacuees, supporting the physical needs of front-line aid workers can help generate feelings of appreciation, reduce burnout, and make taxing and traumatic work a little more pleasant. The recommendations and lessons learned from Kamloops’ experience as a host city can be applied to other cities of 70,000 to 90,000 persons, as they will likely have the infrastructure and services to become host cities for up to 10,000 additional persons without becoming overwhelmed.