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Fort St. John Association for Community Living

Leading Urban Change project profile



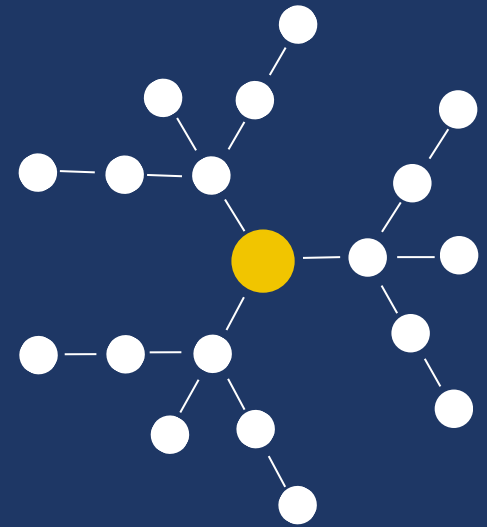
The Leading Urban Change (LUC) program is a hands-on professional development experience for mid- to senior-level professionals advancing workplace initiatives. Participants use the program to move a current or previous initiative forward through structured activities and applied learning – working through barriers, engaging stakeholders, and designing actionable strategies tailored to their leadership goals and local context.

LUC is a project accelerator whereby participants explore strategies and mechanisms to overcome barriers and identify growth opportunities. The program offers engagement with industry practitioners, faculty experts, and peers from across sectors, opportunities to expand professional networks, and one-on-one coaching.

Some key benefits include:

- Practical tools to advance a current workplace initiative
- Strategies for cross-sector collaboration and partnership-building
- Frameworks for systems-level thinking across sectors
- Insights into financing, governance, innovation, and policy
- Opportunities to apply data storytelling and equity-centred approaches
- Access to peer feedback, coaching, and expert instruction
- Option to collaborate in a case study write-up of your initiative, for publication on the School of Cities website

Leading
Urban
Change



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Introduction

In Fort St. John, British Columbia (B.C.), a high-visibility, non-profit housing initiative is taking shape to address interconnected local challenges. The project seeks to bridge critical service gaps in healthcare access and staff housing, youth support, and accessible housing. Led by the nonprofit Fort St. John Association for Community Living (FSJACL), and supported by B.C. Builds¹ and the City of Fort St. John, the project will deliver a multi-functional building featuring some below-market residential units for targeted beneficiaries.

The unique features of the project include a dedicated block of fully furnished housing units for travel nurses and a provincially funded youth clinic housed on-site. By co-locating housing with healthcare and social service infrastructure, the project reflects research findings that integrated service hubs can improve both individual and

¹ B.C. Builds is a housing initiative launched by the Government of British Columbia to lower construction costs, speed up timelines, and deliver more homes that middle-income people who live and work in B.C. can afford.

community outcomes by delivering hyper-local health and care services. This approach reduces costs (such as transportation) and integrates health and social care resources to reduce accessibility-related inequalities.²

The building will primarily serve Northern Health³ staff: 35-50% of units will be dedicated to nurses, 20-30% of units will be fully accessible for individuals with developmental disabilities, and the rest of the units will be market rentals for the community. The project also caters to local families requiring affordable housing options and youth navigating the transition into adulthood.

Projects that blend housing with care services in rural settings often rely on strong cross-sector coordination and robust partnerships.⁴ This is particularly important in this case, given the project's complexity – spanning commercial leasing, health service delivery, multiple partnerships, and inclusive housing needs. The governance structure is managed by the FSJACL, with operational partnerships formalized with Northern Health, the YMCA, and Foundry.⁵

² Iqbal et al., “Defining the Integrated Neighbourhood Model,” 1374; Manis et al., “Community-Informed, Integrated, and Coordinated Care,” 105; Shamaa et al., “Improve Service Coordination,” 32.

³ Northern Health is a regional health authority for northern British Columbia, responsible for delivering health care services across a vast and often remote area.

⁴ Urban Institute, *Emerging Strategies in Integrating Health and Housing*.

⁵ Foundry is a province-wide network of integrated health and wellness services for young people ages 12-24.

Context

Fort St. John is a vital economic hub of northeastern B.C. with significant demand for housing due to growth in the energy and construction sectors and inward migration from other parts of B.C. and Alberta. Yet non-market housing options remain scarce due to rising rents, limited supply, and increased demand from transient healthcare workers.⁶ The city also lacks sufficient walk-in clinics tailored to youth and has limited options to support young people's transition to adulthood – gaps that have significant implications for healthcare utilization and community health.

FSJACL, which has a long history of advancing inclusion and support for individuals with developmental disabilities, recognizes the housing challenges in the community.⁷ It is now leveraging this experience in a broader community-facing project that integrates various housing challenges. With land donated by the City, a development partner on board, and potential B.C. Builds financing through a grant, the organization has been able to start developing this unique housing initiative. The community-focused design responds not only to sector-specific needs but also to local context, where rural and northern settings often have fragmented or siloed services.

⁶ Sterling Management Services, *Rental Market Analysis Report*; Mochrie, Morris, and Halseth, *Northern BC Housing Study*.

⁷ FSJACL, *2024 Annual General Report*.

The project financing includes an estimated \$12 million to be secured through the B.C. Builds program as well as low-cost construction financing through B.C. Builds; ongoing revenue from the Northern Health lease agreement; potential CMHC long-term loans that could reduce monthly carrying costs; and municipal incentives such as waivers for development charges. Research shows that combining diverse financing tools – in this case public land contributions, grants, low-cost financing, and a fixed revenue model – maximizes affordability while maintaining operational sustainability.

Navigating barriers

Owing to strong provincial support and municipal backing, this project has not yet faced any significant challenges, but possible and even anticipated ones include partnership coordination, construction delays, and the negotiation of power dynamics between various actors with differing priorities and values. Nonetheless, the project holds great promise and provides several insights worth sharing.

A key challenge comes from the project's multi-stakeholder nature spanning public health authorities, social service providers, and property management firms. As one of our interviewees noted, one of the biggest risks is the misalignment of partnerships, especially when different partners bring different goals, timelines, or understandings

of impact. For example, health partners will prioritize their staff housing efficiency, while nonprofits like YMCA or Foundry are focused on long-term youth outcomes. To address these concerns, the FSJACL team is implementing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) as a foundational governance mechanism. These MOUs articulate shared values, outline roles and responsibilities, and provide clear exit clauses should value alignment break down. While this approach adds upfront administrative work, it mitigates longer-term governance confusion and builds clarity across domains, enabling resource sharing, technical support, and joint problem-solving. The project will also benefit from a B.C. Builds Project Acceleration Committee, which meets every three weeks and serves as an obstacle removal mechanism as challenges arise throughout the predevelopment period.

The strong partnerships and the integration of housing, healthcare, youth support and, potentially, childcare also demonstrates that rural and northern communities can innovate within the constraints of limited infrastructure. Rather than building siloed services, this project embeds multiple forms of care into a single development that can support affordability, improve resident wellbeing, and reduce strain on the public services systems, especially in underserved regions.

FSJACL's efforts to proactively identify and research potential partners' past projects and values before formally engaging by signing MOUs has helped build credibility and trust in partnerships. A thorough stakeholder mapping and values vetting offer a replicable model for other non-profits trying to broker relationships from a position of limited power.

Construction costs remain high, and anticipated fundraising efforts have not yet begun. The team has not yet secured grants for operational or tenant services, creating uncertainty around the support services. These services are central to the project's identity but are vulnerable without stable funding. However, the use of public land, significant potential upfront grants, and guaranteed leases represent a financing model with strong replication potential for non-profit housing.

Operationally, construction has been affected by delays in a neighbouring building currently under construction by VRS Communities, as their construction materials are currently stored on FSJACL's land, creating logistical constraints and limiting site access. Northern B.C.'s short building season, combined with the need to complete insulated concrete form work within tight weather constraints, requires precise scheduling and risk management. The external delay by VRS has created ripple effects in planning and leasing schedules

for FSJACL's housing project. To address this, the FSJACL team is developing a communication plan aimed at building rapport with neighbouring developers and ensuring transparency about project timelines to strengthen alignment and minimize conflict as both projects progress. The FSJACL project is also exposed to external risks, including the volatility of construction costs and the possibility of policy changes impacting potential grant applications.

Finally, community skepticism persists among some residents who question the need for new housing. Navigating this requires careful communication that not only explains the project's value but showcases its service to health and youth needs, benefiting the whole community.

Conclusion

Upon completion, the project will deliver 60 homes, with 20 to 30 reserved for Northern Health staff, 10 to 20 designated as fully accessible and below market, and the remainder offered as market rentals. This will increase housing supply, improve healthcare recruitment and retention, and expand opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities to live independently within the community.

The youth clinic will address a major service gap, and the planned childcare facility will benefit both healthcare

workers and other families. In the long term, the project could serve as a blueprint for other rural or northern communities across Canada facing similar shortages in workforce and accessible housing. Core elements for replication include secured land, long-term healthcare agency leases for fixed revenue, integrated services, and committed nonprofit governance.

Ultimately, the project's goal is not only to increase housing stock but to do so in a way that enhances community wellbeing through integrated, value-driven design. It reflects an emerging model of community infrastructure, one that sees housing, health, and social inclusion as mutually reinforcing pillars.

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