

MUTUAL AID AND SERVICE AGREEMENTS: WISE PRACTICES FOR FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Mutual Aid and Service Agreements Wise Practices Guide (herein called the Guide) was created to increase the emergency management (EM) planning and response capacity of Indigenous communities to access needed services such as hazard identification, fire response, search and rescue, and evacuation and accommodation services. It recognizes that First Nations are responsible for the creation and implementation of their own EM plans.

The Guide was developed with funding from Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. In addition to completing an environmental scan of available information from Canada and abroad, the team conducted 10 key informant interviews involving individuals from coast to coast to deepen the knowledge base.

Mutual aid and service agreements (MASAs) are created between two or more local authorities for the provision, or sharing, of a needed good, service, or equipment. Agreements may also exist between emergency management organizations and nearby private corporations, especially in Canada's far North. In Canada and internationally, MASAs and other inter-local agreements are increasingly seen as a tool for more decentralized, bottom-up governance that allow regions to effectively self-organize. As such, they are useful for First Nation communities as they continue to decolonize, heal from the impact of historic trauma and work on developing self-sufficiency and independence. In addition, the growing emergence of these partnerships in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts recognizes that joint problem solving at the local level is a practical way to deal with issues affecting both communities.

In *mutual aid agreements*, two or more local authorities have resources to share and agree to do so under specific circumstances. In *service agreements*, a community purchases a needed service from a neighboring jurisdiction, provincial or territorial governments, or contracts with a company for a specific service.

From a Western perspective, MASAs can range from being formal or informal. However, this binary distinction can be questioned as being rooted in colonial thinking. For First Nations communities an agreement made – whether oral, by handshake or signed – is binding and holds the expectation of being honoured. In an oral tradition, agreements could be “signed” by singing a song.

The Guide lays out 1) the background about MASAs, 2) the benefits and challenges, 3) information to help communities decide if a MASA could be appropriate, 4) the importance of relationship building, 5) the steps for developing an agreement, and 6) the components of an agreement. Wise practices are embedded into each section. The Guide highlights five case studies where MASAs are in place and are contributing to community disaster resilience in a variety of ways.

Some of the key insights outlined in the Guide, provided by project participants, include:

- Without evidence of adequate emergency management planning, band councils may be liable or face insurance problems, should a serious incident occur.
- If your community faces evacuations, consider a MASA with another First Nation community. This can avoid, or reduce, the cultural and other impacts of being dislocated to a major city centre.
- To get the benefits that come from working cooperatively with other First Nations, smaller communities could consider working through a Tribal Council or developing a regional collaboration among nearby neighbours.
- There are institutional differences between a rural municipality and a First Nation that can lead to confusion – e.g., declaring an emergency is the Chief’s responsibility and not controlled by provincial legislation or policies.
- The typical documents that form the basis of agreements should be reviewed by First Nation people to ensure that cultural differences and other needs are addressed. Consider reviewing the approaches taken in emergency social services documents, which often have better language around cultural sensitivity.
- Get to know the people who you are in a MASA with. In the height of a crisis it helps to know the people you're calling on. It still boils down to the strength of personal relationships.
- Know your hazards, needs, capacities, do your risk assessment, build your plan and figure out what you may need to get from your neighbours. Make sure that what they have will meet your needs.
- Make sure there are no surprises in the agreement, ensure what you think you're signing, is what you're signing.
- Ultimately, it is the responsibility of Chief and Council to engage with their neighbours and figure out how to provide adequate fire safety and emergency management protection for their community. This can't be left to fire chiefs.

The bottom line? Choose the MASA style and level of formality that is right for your community. Enter into any agreements with your “eyes open”. Know what your community needs and what a potential partner can offer. Design your agreement to meet your cultural needs, as well as other logistical or operational considerations.

Consider working toward an informal MASA as a first step along the path towards being more prepared for emergencies. This could be for fire response or mental health; think creatively about the many other ways services could be improved by working together. Perhaps jointly hire a regional emergency coordinator, become an evacuation host community or enter into a partnership to reduce the impact of a key hazard such as fire or flood.

First Nations communities face many ongoing challenges and will require extensive ongoing support to revitalize and reinvigorate cultural practices, Traditional Knowledge, and governance structures. MASAs are but one small piece of that puzzle. The Guide is intended to help communities think about what could be possible along the road to becoming more disaster resilient.