



United Way Centraide Canada Submission to Inform the Rural Development Action Plan

February 20, 2026

Executive Summary

United Way Centraide (UWC) is Canada's largest non-government funder of community services, with a presence in 5,000 communities and deep expertise in rural, remote, and Northern regions. In 2025, UWC invested **\$68 million** in **1,500 rural-serving organizations**, supporting **2.5 million residents**. Through 211 and extensive local partnerships, UWC plays a critical role in community navigation, emergency response, and social service coordination nationwide.

Rural communities are essential to Canada's economic and social fabric but face persistent challenges: workforce shortages, aging populations, limited services, housing gaps, inadequate transportation, and uneven broadband access. Federal programs are most successful when they are **place-based, flexible, multiyear, and locally delivered**. To support long-term rural prosperity, UWC recommends the following priorities for the Rural Development Action Plan.

Key Recommendations

1. Provide predictable, multiyear funding (3–5 years).

Stable funding enables planning, workforce retention, service continuity, and reduced administrative burden—particularly for small and volunteer-run organizations.

2. Create rural-specific federal funding streams.

Rural realities require tailored eligibility criteria, timelines, and performance measures that account for distance, dispersed populations, limited capacity, and aging demographics.

3. Increase flexibility and reduce administrative barriers.

Simplified applications, flexible use of funds, and pre-development support are especially important for rural community halls, multipurpose centres, and volunteer-led organizations.

4. Strengthen rural workforce and local employment.

Invest in training, credential recognition, apprenticeships, childcare, youth retention, and workforce housing to address labour shortages and support economic transition in trade-exposed regions.

5. Treat housing, transportation, and broadband as essential infrastructure.

Deeply affordable housing, rural transportation networks, and universal broadband—including affordability and digital skills supports—are foundational to rural participation and wellbeing.

6. Invest in health, social, and care systems.

Expand seniors' supports, mental health services, childcare, food security initiatives, and homelessness prevention tailored to rural contexts.

7. Support small towns as regional service hubs.

Invest in downtown revitalization, commercial infrastructure, and business development to strengthen regional sustainability.

8. Fund trusted local organizations and build community capacity.

Core operational funding, governance support, and backbone coordination improve service continuity and system integration across health, housing, food, transportation, and settlement services.

9. Improve rural representation and data.

Regional rural advisory boards and equity-focused data systems will strengthen policy design, ensure fair access, and better capture rural realities—including aging, cost of living, and hidden homelessness.

High-Impact, Nation-Building Opportunities

UWC identified several transformative investments for long-term rural prosperity:

- Universal rural broadband and cellular coverage
- A national rural housing build/rehabilitation initiative
- Regional and inter-community transportation networks
- Community hub infrastructure integrating health, social, family, and virtual services
- Renewable energy and climate resilience projects that create local jobs

Conclusion

United Way Centraide Canada is committed to working with the Government of Canada to build resilient, healthy, and economically vibrant rural communities. With deep roots in local communities, strong systems for funding and accountability, and a proven record of federal partnership, UWC is well positioned to support the design and delivery of the Rural Development Action Plan.