

Best Practice

Women in Government Program

CONTACT

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Project video: https://youtu.be/qmQ24ota_UY

THE PRACTICE

What was the issue?

Across Saskatchewan, women are underrepresented in municipal government. Reviewing Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM) statistics, we found that only 6% of Councillors and 5% of Reeves are women. These numbers are disproportionately low compared to the percentage of women that make up the general population (50.3%). A lack of gender diversity on Council results in fewer unique perspectives. This lack of representation can create challenges for municipalities working to make balanced and innovative decisions. Having different perspectives on Council allows for more opportunities for discussions and creative problem-solving solutions.

There are many possible reasons for why women are underrepresented in government, including:

1. Social, professional, and familial obligations;
2. Limited knowledge of the municipal election process;
3. Few female-political role models;
4. Limited opportunities for leadership training;
5. Negative working environments;
6. Low self-confidence;
7. Intimidation and harassment;
8. Poor socialization as leaders; and
9. Limited practical support for women in government.

One possible reason for the low number of women in government is that they are less likely to win elections – but in fact, women are just as, if not more, likely to win elections

(43% for women compared to 37% for men). Instead, the reason for poor representation is a lack of candidacy. Women do not put their names forward for council at the same rate as men, resulting in imbalanced representation.

What was the project?

With the above factors in mind and accounting for the benefits of diversity within government, the Rural Municipality of Edenwold No. 158 adopted the Women in Government Program on March 8th, 2022 (to coincide with International Women's Day). This program aims to attract and encourage women to put their names forward for candidacy so that at least 30% of all candidates for municipal elections are women. While not representative of the overall population of 50.3%, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) has identified 30% representation as the minimum ratio required to ensure government policy reflects the needs of residents of all genders.

The Women in Government Program comprises three project streams: a research stream; an internal action stream; and an external action stream. Each stream involves various components and initiatives. These include a Campaign School, a Regional Women in Government Committee, Elementary and High School Workshops, and the development of inclusive municipal policies and practices. The Women in Government program has highlighted the importance of gender inclusivity in municipal government and created avenues for engagement for residents and visitors. The program has also led to an overall shift in how the municipality sees gender equity and the role of government in supporting women candidates, councillors, and residents.

THE PROCESS

Women in Government Program development is largely divided into 3 stages:

1. **Program Document** – Focusing on improving representation amongst women in government as a policy goal, RM staff reviewed best practice documents from around the world concerning women in government. The RM compared and analysed these documents, with staff borrowing the best and most appropriate initiatives for local implementation. As such, the Women in Government Program document was not necessarily specific to the RM but instead outlined several practices and programs that were successful in other communities. The research stage allowed these practices to be contextually-selected for implementation.
2. **Research Report** – To ensure program initiatives were appropriate for the local context, RM staff organized several public engagement activities. These activities included an online survey, interviews with elected women officials, and an analysis of local electoral data. The survey was open to the public from March 8th to March 31st, 2022. There were 39 responses from across the region. Survey questions focused on demographic information, attitudes towards Council and municipal government, and the challenges women face participating in local government and elections. Survey results supported the program document's

findings, indicating that the program document was accurate in highlighting themes like education, anti-harassment and anti-bullying, 'old boys club' thinking, and exclusion.

RM staff also interviewed 7 currently elected women officials. These included councillors, reeves, and mayors from across the region. Interestingly, the interviews presented a much more positive view of women in government when compared to survey or best practice findings. Elected women were largely positive in conveying their experiences on council. While some interviewees highlighted themes similar to those in the survey and research, in general, they did not see municipal government as a particularly challenging field – instead highlighting personal characteristics of the individual as the primary challenges (compared to systemic concerns).

Lastly, RM staff reviewed local electoral data from municipalities across the region. Across the area, women are generally underrepresented in government. Representation slightly improves for urban municipalities (compared to RMs) but is still largely below the 30% program goal.

Based on the surveys, interviews, and electoral analysis, RM staff chose several initiatives to implement. These included a campaign school, a regional women in government committee, and municipal policies that promoted equity. Further, participants in the campaign school highlighted the importance of school education in supporting engagement and equity – with school workshops being added to the list of initiatives for the program. RM staff summarised research findings in a 'Research Stream Report.'

3. **Implementation** – As a result of the research findings and the program document, RM staff implemented several different initiatives, all aiming to improve the number of women candidates in the November 2022 election and strengthen municipal capacity to support women councillors and women in the community.

The most significant program was the Campaign School. This series of 4 workshops introduced participants to municipal government and gave them the tools and knowledge to succeed as candidates and councillors. These sessions focused on topics like the roles and responsibilities of Council, how to campaign and build support, public speaking, and finished with a mock council session. Overall, 15 people participated in the sessions, and 2 attendees chose to run for Council because of their involvement in Campaign School. RM staff also began offering municipal government workshops to area schools on the recommendation of a campaign school attendee. These workshops emerged through a desire to get students interested in municipal government early, with the intention being that if they are informed as youth, they are more likely to be municipally-minded as adults. These workshops focused heavily on activities that got students debating and delved into the different responsibilities of government, how

elections are organized, and the importance of respectful discussion within the governance process.

Another initiative that started because of the program was a Regional Women in Government Committee. This committee meets quarterly and aims to systematically change how residents and stakeholders see women in municipal government. While the RM can promote change within our boundaries, if women are to be represented more equally across the region, municipalities must work together to change how municipal government and women in government are seen as a whole.

This project was developed through partnership between Council and administration. Council provided municipal support and made women in government a policy priority. Administration conducted best practice research in drafting the Women in Government Program document and has played an ongoing role in designing and leading program initiatives. Administration has also secured additional project funding through the FCM's Canadian Women in Local Leadership (CanWILL) program. This funding, provided by Women and Gender Equality Canada, has allowed the program to reach more participants and improved overall program outcomes.

As the project is ongoing, Council will continue to play a role in the program, specifically in the Regional Women in Government Committee. This committee is composed of elected and staff representatives from the communities of Regina, Balgonie, Pilot Butte, White City, Grand Coulee, Lumsden, and the RMs of Edenwold, Sherwood, and Lumsden. This committee aims to encourage systemic change in how women are perceived within municipal government and encourage greater participation amongst women in elections moving forward.

Staff will similarly continue to support the various Women in Government Program initiatives. For example, staff led several workshops with elementary and high school students. These workshops introduced students to municipal government, the roles and responsibilities of Council, and used engaging activities and a field trip to the RM office to create life-long voters. Staff have also drafted new policies that improve government inclusion for women. This includes a maternity leave policy, new standards regarding public engagement, and a focus on inclusion as a policy priority.

While RM staff and council are experts on municipal government, they are not experts on women's issues. As such, the RM worked with Equal Voice to develop the Women in Government Program. Equal Voice is a national non-profit organization committed to reaching gender parity in politics. They advocate for gender representation by working with community organizations, holding national, provincial, and local events, and combating the harassment and abuse of women in politics. Equal Voice ensured all program documents and materials were accurate and relevant and supported RM staff in organizing the Campaign School sessions and the Regional Women in Government Committee. - <https://equalvoice.ca/>

In addition to Equal Voice, RM staff also worked with FCM in organizing program documents and funding. As mentioned above, CanWILL funding allowed the program to reach more participants and had an overall positive effect on project outcomes. The

CanWILL grant provided the RM with \$5,300 for advertising, project deliverables, materials and supplies, and a childcare stipend during Campaign School sessions. - <https://fcm.ca/en/programs/women-in-local-government/wilg/canadian-women-in-local-leadership>

As RM staff initially conceived of the Women in Government Program as a no-budget program, RM staff and Council used resources from various free online sources – including Equal Voice, FCM, Women and Gender Equality Canada, and other municipalities across Canada. These best practice resources allowed RM staff to meet project outcomes and be successful in program implementation. Specific resources included campaign school workbooks, equity strategies and programs, reports, studies, analyses, and other government and non-governmental documents. Based on this best-practice research, RM staff drafted the Women in Government Program Document, followed by the Research Stream Report. Both the program document and the research report are attached to this application.

THE RESULTS

As a result of the Women in Government Program, 33% of all candidates in the November 2022 election were women. The RM has begun to focus on equity and diversity as a municipal policy priority and has taken concrete steps to improve representation in future elections. The RM has developed stronger relationships with other communities and groups through the school workshops and the regional committee. The RM has also taken a leadership role in championing diversity in municipal government in the region and putting forward policies and programs that work to improve representation.

LESSONS LEARNED

We would recommend advertising initiatives before program implementation. By building support and awareness for events early, residents are more likely to attend. Even if program details are still being finalized, by advertising early, people can put events in their calendars and are more likely to attend.