Factors Influencing Community Recovery Decision Making:
A Case Study of Recovery from the 2016 Fort McMurray Wildfires

Presented by Erica Woolf, MADEM

Findings

Methodology

Discussion

Study Context: Fort McMurray Wildfires

Background

Questions

Recovery and Decision Making

- Women Will Rebuild Miami: A Case Study of Feminist Response to Disaster (Enarson & Morrow, 1998)

- Recovery is Political

- Excluding from recovery decision-making process impacts recovery, and increases vulnerability.

- Need to study community recovery decision-making to improve.

Vulnerability and Recovery

Politics and Recovery

Public Participation and Recovery

Social Vulnerability and Recovery
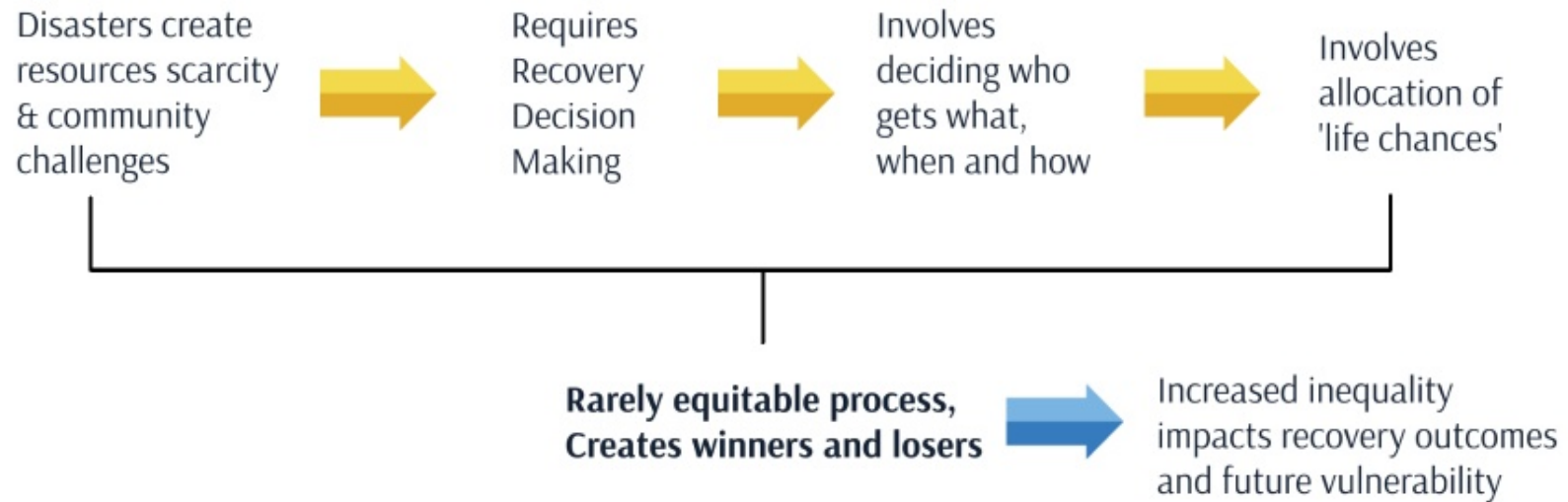
- Recovery is a social problem

- Disaster risks, impacts, and rates of recovery are disproportionately distributed

- Social vulnerability impacts recovery

- Conditions that produce vulnerability are not spontaneous

Power Relations and Vulnerability

- Structure of community power influences recovery

- Politically influential may or may not include or exclude certain interests

- Powerful and well-connected groups better able to impact decisions

- both social structure and power relations play a significant role in recovery

Politics and Recovery

Disasters create resources scarcity & community challenges ➡ Requires Recovery Decision Making ➡ Involves deciding who gets what, when and how ➡ Involves allocation of 'life chances'

Rarely equitable process, Creates winners and losers ➡ Increased inequality impacts recovery outcomes and future vulnerability

Public Participation and Recovery

How do we improve the recovery decision-making process? → Improve Public Engagement

→ Decreases Vulnerability

→ Improves Resilience

→ Decreases Political Conflict

→ Improves Equitable Recovery

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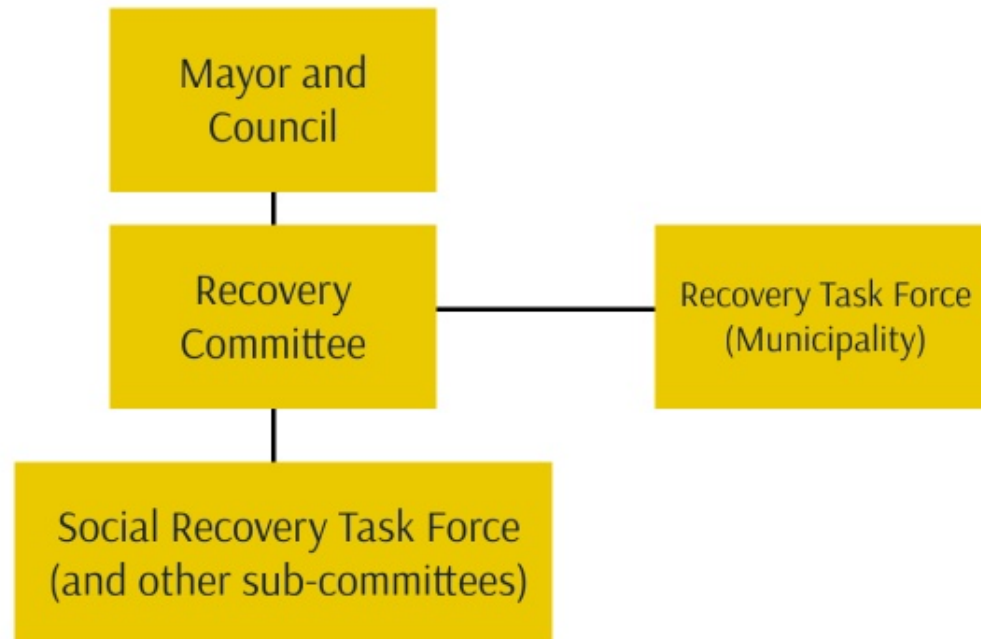
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- 88,000 evacuated

- $3.6 million in insured damages

- 45,000 insurance claims;

- $615 million in recovery funding from government

- Over 2,500 homes destroyed

- 80% still not fully restored

Study Context: 2016 Fort McMurray Wildfires

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│   Mayor and     │
│    Council      │
└────────┬────────┘
         │
┌────────┴────────┐         ┌─────────────────────┐
│    Recovery     ├─────────┤  Recovery Task Force│
│   Committee     │         │   (Municipality)    │
└────────┬────────┘         └─────────────────────┘
         │
┌────────┴─────────────────┐
│ Social Recovery Task Force│
│ (and other sub-committees)│
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Methodology

Unit of Analysis	Community Groups • Organizations play a central role in recovery • Assists with sampling • Long-standing tradition of advocacy
Data Collection	Semi-structured, in-person interviews
Participant Characteristics	"Community Groups" includes: • NGOs, professional associations, advocacy organizations, emergent groups. 16 participants: • 3 Recovery Committee Members • 13 Community Group Members
Ethics	Confidential participation, protection against deductive disclosure

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"Which factors influenced whether and how the needs and interests of community groups in Fort McMurray were identified, solicited and prioritized in recovery decision-making following the 2016 wildfires"

Organizational Capacity

Relationships

Perceived Value

Organizational Capacity

Staffing

Workload

Knowledge

Funding
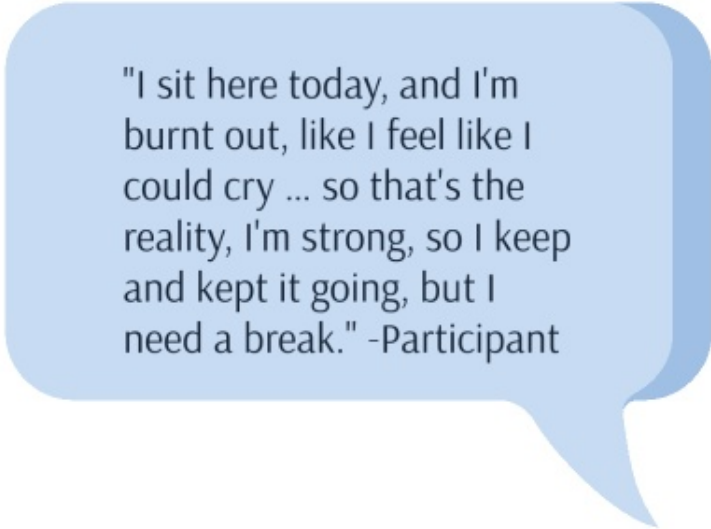
Reduced capacity during recovery

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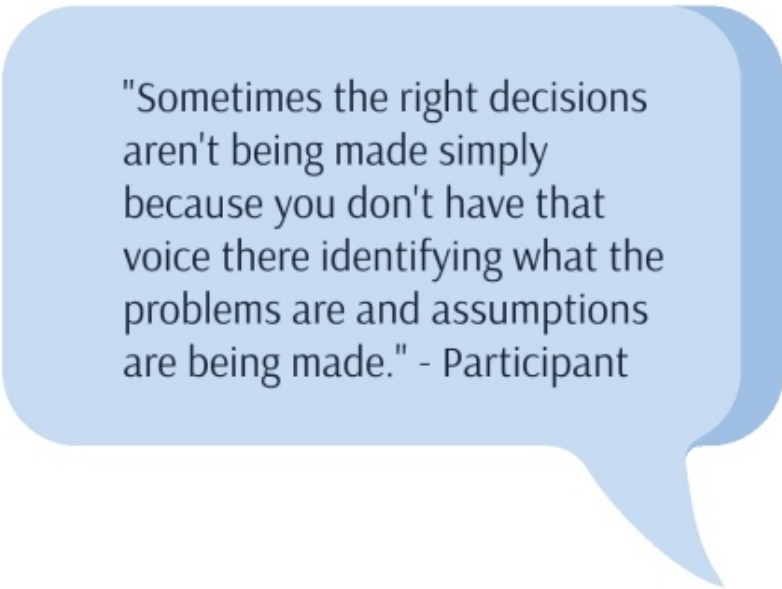Reduced ability to participate in recovery decision-making.

Staffing

- Managing recovery work required "doing more with less"

- Workload increases:
  - Business Continuity work
  - Increased demand for services
  - Work required to participate

- Organizations impacted by loss of leaders, staff, and volunteers

- Staff capacity challenges:
  - Financial barriers
  - New opportunities
  - Stress, fatigue, burnout

- Staff victims too

"I sit here today, and I'm burnt out, like I feel like I could cry … so that's the reality, I'm strong, so I keep and kept it going, but I need a break." -Participant

Workload
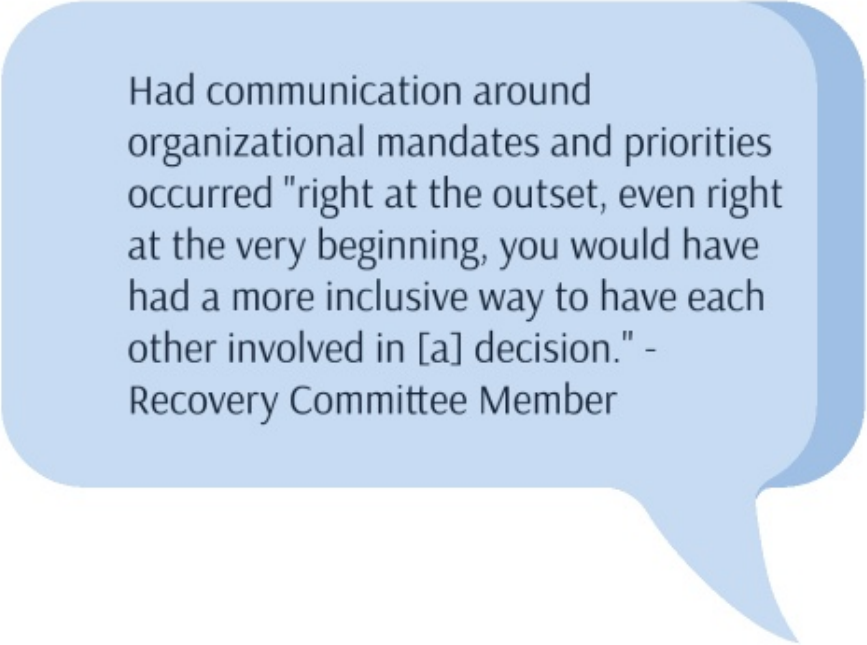
- Recovery workload constrained capacity

- Community engagement & decision-making requires work and capacity

- Workload challenges resulted missed and declined involvement in recovery engagement initiatives

"Sometimes the right decisions aren't being made simply because you don't have that voice there identifying what the problems are and assumptions are being made." - Participant
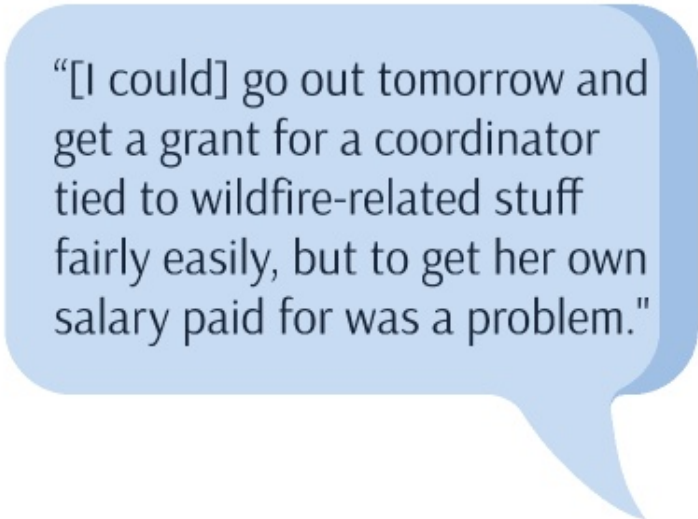
Knowledge

- Lack of understanding of group mandates impacted how groups' inputs were solicited, and which groups were called to the decision-making table.

- Groups providing services well outside their mandate or capacity due to assumptions.

Had communication around organizational mandates and priorities occurred "right at the outset, even right at the very beginning, you would have had a more inclusive way to have each other involved in [a] decision." - Recovery Committee Member

Funding

- Financial barriers, as well as financial supports, influenced capacity.

- Financial supports were inaccessible because it was tied to new programming.

- However, majority of recovery funding needs centered on "just keeping the doors open."

- Funding challenges were especially impactful for emergent groups.

"[I could] go out tomorrow and get a grant for a coordinator tied to wildfire-related stuff fairly easily, but to get her own salary paid for was a problem."

Organizational Relationships

- Generally **well-connected** community groups were **more likely to be frequently involved** in community recovery decision-making

- Both formal and informal relationships with municipal and provincial levels of government were important

- Emergent organizations found **lack** of relationships to particularly **constrain** their ability to participate in decision-making

- Participants cited **lack** of pre-existing relationships as a **barrier** to their involvement

Perceived Value

- Primarily identified by non-profit participants

- Perceived disregard for the skills and services of organizations contributed to the lack of priority they were given during recovery decision-making.

- Historical undervaluation of non-profit organizations

- Failure to consider certain organizations as essential during recovery

Discussion

- Capturing the experiences of community groups during disaster recovery decision-making helps us understand the barriers they face when trying to participate.

Capacity

Relationships

Perceived Value

Organizational Capacity

- If governments and communities rely on community groups to provide essential services, there is a need to support organizational capacity.

- Remember that the leaders, staff and volunteers of community groups need support during recovery.

- When capacities are constrained, services may also be constrained.

- Capacity constraints impact groups abilities to participate, engage, and advocate in recovery decision-making.

Relationships

- High levels of social capital is linked to better, more resilient recovery outcomes.

- Our relationships are some of our greatest assets when times get tough.

- To ensure inclusive community engagement, it is everyone's job to evaluate how our pre-existing relationships impact who is included, and who is excluded.

- Forming and establishing relationships can be the key to participation.

Perceived Value

- Work organizations took on during recovery was an extension of the work they undertook every day before the fire.

- Community groups felt relied upon by government and the community during recovery, but this did not translate into decision-making authority.

- Tokenism is sometimes an issue with community group work.

- Prevalence of the command and control model in recovery might have impacted engagement

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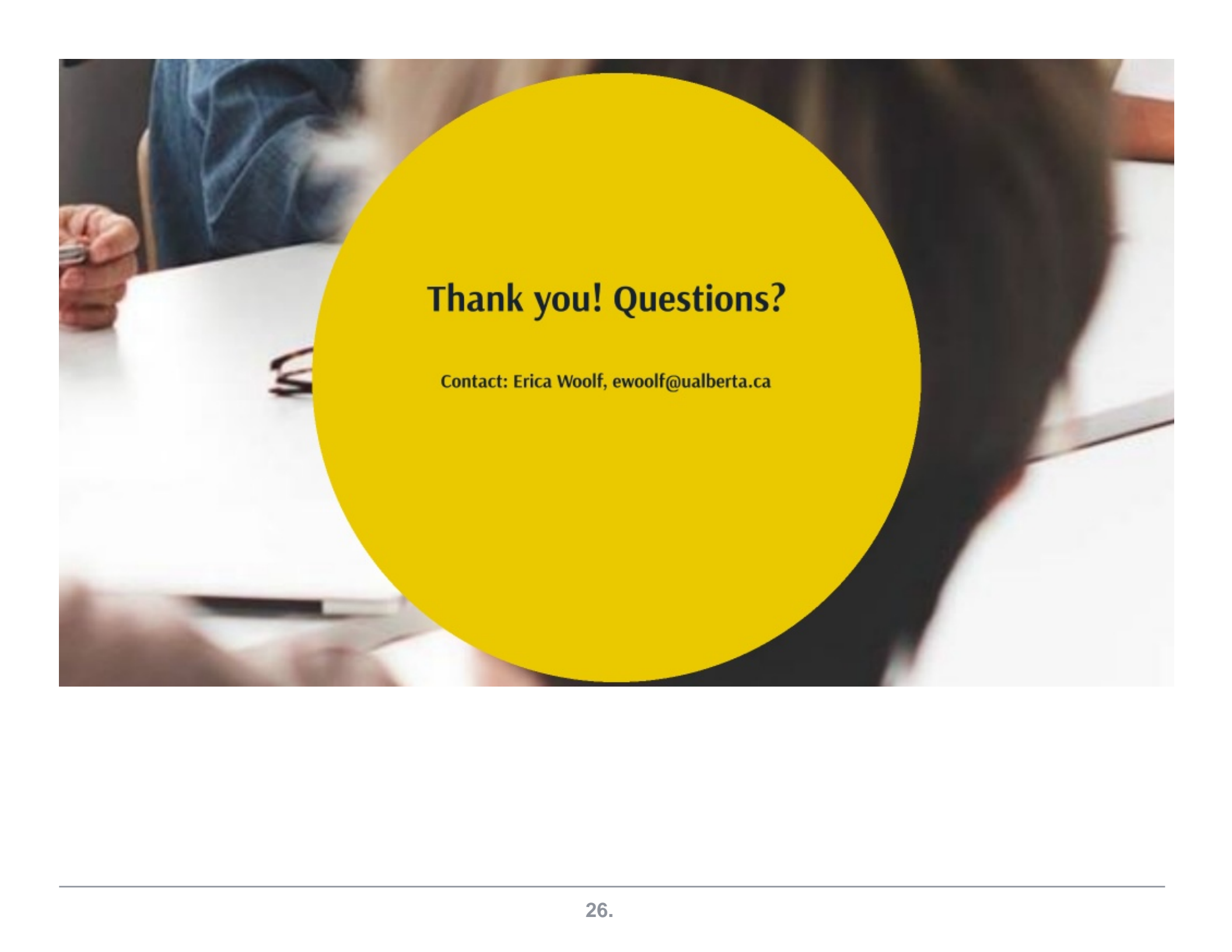
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Thank you! Questions?

Contact: Erica Woolf, ewoolf@ualberta.ca

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