



Developing a Men's Shed in Your Community: First Steps



Should we start a Men's Shed?

You may have heard about Men's Sheds and are wondering if it would be something that would appeal to the men in your community.

Or you may have been approached by a group of men wanting to start a Men's Shed and are wondering where to start.

We'd like to help and hope that what follows will provide you with some good information to consider as you decide how to move forward with this important new opportunity to address men's health in your community.

Please consider this document as the first steps you will need to consider – it will not answer all your questions or meet every circumstance perfectly. It is meant to be an overview and comes at the end with an offer of more specific help if you find yourself still unsure.

So, let's begin.

What is a Men's Shed?

A Men's Shed is a space for men to come together and enjoy each other's company while they pursue shared interests. Often this involves building or fixing things, but there is no set structure. The participants determine their own interests and make their own plans.

Activities in Sheds vary greatly. The saying goes, "If you've seen one Men's Shed, you've seen one Men's Shed," because they are all different. You'll find Sheds that focus on woodworking, or metalworking, bicycle repair, electronics, model buildings, or even car repair and restoration.

Local Men's Sheds are part of a provincial, national, and international movement that offer men that camaraderie and sense of a shared purpose that is often found in the workplace. A Men's Shed is open to all men who want to have that kind of connection: retired men, shift workers, men with leisure time on their hands, or anyone else who wants to enjoy camaraderie with other men and constructive pastimes.

Does your community need a Men's Shed?

For many men, working life is more than a job – it's a social outlet, it's where they meet people and make friends. After a long working life with work friends and acquaintances and common topics of conversation, many retired men are left without a social network and spend too much time alone. Other men may thrive in the company of their work buddies, but their non-working hours can leave them feeling disconnected and alone. Typically, men are reluctant to talk about the social and physical challenges they face which can lead to negative health outcomes and even suicide.

A Men's Shed offers a gathering place and an opportunity to pursue common interests with other men. By choosing projects and activities that are suited to members of each Men's Shed, the group can work together with a shared purpose while enjoying each other's company.

We believe that every community needs a Men's Shed.

What are the benefits of a Men's Shed?

The positive mental health impact of men's participation in Men's Sheds worldwide has been shown in research to decrease social isolation, enhance self-esteem, and in some cases, increase access to health information (see below).

While men with low social interaction often experience loneliness, depression, and other negative health outcomes, a Men's Shed is not a mental health agency. It's a place for healthy interaction, meaningful contribution, and good fun – but one with proven mental health benefits.

[The Mental Health Benefits of Men's Sheds in Rural Alberta](#)

[Men's Sheds as an Alternative Healthcare Route?](#)

[The Role of Community-Based Men's Sheds in Health Promotion for Older Men](#)

What role can you play?

If you want to explore your community's potential interest in a Men's Shed, you may wish to start by creating awareness. Spending time introducing the community to a Men's Shed will give you a foundation from which to begin. These steps may be helpful:

1. Talk about a Men's Shed with other people or organizations in the community.
2. Place an article about Men's Sheds in local media (i.e., newspapers, social media, etc.).
3. Hold a public meeting and gauge interest.
4. Create a planning group from the meeting.

At any time in this process, the Alberta Men's Shed Association can help by providing material, giving advice, making a presentation to a group, etc.



Issues to consider:

Leadership and group dynamics

Finding a leader from within the group is critical to startup and long term Shed success. You will need someone with energy, vision, and the ability to work with other men to emerge from the group during your initial conversations or progress will be slow and difficult. Finding that person may make all the difference.

Number of participants

The number of participants who initially come forward will likely be small. You will need to decide what is the minimum number to get the ball rolling or to keep it rolling. While typical marketing will help somewhat, offering food, and word-of-mouth promotion are often how a Shed is built, one person at a time. Expect to start small and build from there.

While small is typical, there are some groups that have had the opposite experience – a large turnout that led to challenges over time managing conflicting ideas and group cohesion, all of which take time to manage and overcome.

If a large group has a variety of interests (e.g., woodworking, metalworking, vehicle repair, etc.) and trouble settling on one, more than one interest group can be formed and use the same facility at different times. This mediated solution would require group leadership to come together and find a cooperative way forward.

Space

One of the group's early questions will be where the Men's Shed would be set up in the community. We suggest that you do not spend lots of time addressing location in the beginning. The actual facility needed to house the Shed will depend on what the men who join eventually decide to do and the type of space that will best accommodate that activity. Finding the right space and being able to financially sustain it will be an issue that will unfold over time.

Funds

The kind and amount of startup and ongoing funding that will be needed will be determined largely by the space that is selected and the organizational structure the group chooses. Sheds which have higher costs often focus on generating income through their work (e.g., selling products they produce) while others don't want to be that encumbered. Others have community benefactors who donate space and equipment while some pursue local fundraising.

There are several grants available that can help Men's Sheds get started. HelpAge Canada is a Canadian charity with a commitment to increase the number of Men's Sheds in Canada and has both Shed startup and project grants.

[HelpAge Canada](#)

The New Horizons for Seniors grant through Social Development Canada has also been used in the past to support Men's Shed development.

[New Horizons for Seniors](#)

Women and Men's Sheds

Behind almost every successful Men's Shed, there are usually a few women (often wives of potential Sheddors) who have helped to get a Shed going. Some women have skills for organizing and want to help the men in their lives get involved. As helpers in the process, women can be invaluable.

There will also be women in your community who will ask if they can join the Men's Shed. It is well to remember that one of the foundational purposes of a Men's Shed is to promote men's health which is more easily facilitated in male-protected spaces as they interact with other men. Having women participate regularly in a Men's Shed generally does not contribute to that overall purpose – it changes the conversation among the men while they are together and moves the dynamic away from men's health. That said, there are Sheds that have women participants, but it is generally not the case. That decision will be one of many that the men in the group will have to make when the question arises.

Insurance

As Shed activities may revolve around power tools, purchasing liability insurance is becoming a standard in Men's Sheds worldwide. It can be expensive for a new or existing Shed to shop for stand-alone insurance. The AMSA is currently working on providing a province-wide insurance coverage for member Sheds.



Men's Shed Models

Once the decision has been made to start a Men's Shed, how that Shed will operate will need to be determined.

A Men's Shed can operate independently as a stand-alone non-profit organization, or it can function under the umbrella of an established organization. There are Sheds in Alberta and across Canada that operate successfully under either structure.

Non-profit Men's Sheds

While some Sheds start out meeting informally at the coffee shop or in someone's garage, eventually they may want to organize themselves so they can attract more participants, find a place to operate, and acquire funding, which all may require a non-profit registration. This option will more likely be chosen if there is someone in the group who has non-profit experience and can commit to the accountability required of a non-profit society.

Currently in Alberta, this is the most common Men's Shed operating structure. It provides the group with the most autonomy and is therefore the most attractive.

Information on how to register a non-profit society in Alberta is available at:

[How to Incorporate a Non-Profit Society in Alberta](#)

A Men's Shed in partnership with a community organization

Some men wanting to develop a Shed will want to avoid the bureaucracy that comes with a non-profit registration and reporting. Some groups will start out on their own and decide that a partnership with an existing non-profit organization may be more suitable. Finding the right organization that has a parallel mandate and negotiating a beneficial partnership with them is a common option that can work out well for both organizations.

The organization partnership option requires a word of caution:

Research has shown that one of the three key factors that contribute to the success of a Men's Shed is participant-driven management and organization. Men will join a Shed and be more likely to remain members if they are able to feel that it is their group and not controlled from the outside. Experience has also shown that the Men's Shed model does not lend itself well to coming under an existing agency that will not support and encourage the Shed's autonomy in selecting their own direction and making their own decisions. Finding that balance while existing within a community organization is important and will require discussion and negotiation over time.

Prior to approaching an existing organization, the group will want to consider finding one with a similar mission and focus and the organization should feel that the Men's Shed will bring something to them that will assist in their work. The Men's Shed group will want to be clear on what they need (e.g., access to space to operate the Shed, administrative support, funding, etc.) and what they can bring to the organization (e.g., new members and traffic to the organization, heightened community visibility, perhaps minor maintenance and repair services, grant spill-over, etc.).

Finding the right policy balance around funding, insurance, volunteer management, and program accountability will be an ongoing discussion and require some trial and error.

Men's Sheds and FCSS

Alberta municipalities have a leg up on other Canadian communities when it comes to starting a Men's Shed because of the existence of Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) which is a provincial/municipal funding partnership to support community development that is driven by local needs and interests. Individuals and organizations can seek out their local FCSS program for advice and support in creating a Men's Shed their community.

Conclusion

Helping to develop a Men's Shed will be one of the best things you can do for the men in your community. Engaging men, especially older men, in programs that will address their mental and physical health is not easy. A Men's Shed has the potential to go a long way toward filling that gap in a creative, non-threatening way in your community.





The Alberta Men's Shed Association can help you!

We have resources and materials available that can help you navigate most of the common problems of starting a new Shed.

We also have experience in the startup process and can help you with your questions or troubleshooting concerns.

An AMSA representative can meet with you in person, by phone, or online to offer support and suggestions.

For more information, please contact:

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