

Incorporating Your Nonprofit in Alberta

2026 VERSION

Welcome!

Starting a nonprofit in Alberta is an exciting and meaningful journey that can help you create positive impact in your community, so we are thrilled that you're here.

This resource has been designed to provide a basic overview of the different legislative options available for incorporating a nonprofit organization in Alberta. It includes a review of the primary acts under which a nonprofit can be incorporated, the key requirements and obligations associated with each option, and considerations to help you determine which structure may best support your mission and activities. While this guide is intended to help you understand the incorporation landscape, it is not legal advice and should be used as a starting point for further research and planning.

It is also important to remember that incorporation is not the right path for every group. Depending on your goals, capacity, and planned activities, you may find that operating as an informal community organization, grassroots group, or collaborative initiative is a more appropriate and effective way to advance your cause. We suggest using this guide to help you decide if this is the right step for you. Depending on your mission and planned organizational activities, you might decide that staying as an informal community organization or grassroot group rather than a formal nonprofit may be the best way forward to contribute to your cause.

Before we begin, we'd like to encourage fellow community leaders to reflect on the communities they serve, the relationships they build, and the responsibilities that come with working and gathering on these lands. As we continue our own (un)learning journey, we see the importance of reflecting on our ties to each other and the land. As a provincially focused organization, our staff, board, and work extend across the territories covered by multiple treaties and we affirm the importance of honoring these historic agreements. This land we call Alberta is the ancestral and present-day home of many Indigenous People who have cared for and advocated for the lands, waters, and animals for many generations despite historical and ongoing harmful actions against their communities. As you seek to establish and grow your nonprofit, we ask that you consider the ways in which you can become a good partner in supporting active Reconciliation through the work in your communities. It is our hope that the nonprofit and voluntary sector can support collective healing and strengthen Alberta's communities, together.





Table of Contents

Some Things to Consider	3
Nonprofit, Charitable Organizations, and Charities	3
Nonprofit organization	3
Charitable Organization.....	4
Registered Charities	4
Diving Deeper: Nonprofit Organization.....	5
Society	5
Nonprofit Company	6
Religious Society	7
Agricultural Society	7
Cooperative	8
Some additional statuses to be aware of:	8
Federal Not-for-profit Corporation.....	8
Extra-provincial Corporation	8
You're well on your way!.....	9



Some Things to Consider

Incorporation is the process of creating a distinct legal entity, known as a corporation, that exists separately from the individuals who establish and operate it. Becoming incorporated requires an investment of both time and financial resources, and it comes with ongoing administrative and reporting responsibilities. For many organizations, however, these commitments are outweighed by the long-term benefits. Incorporation can provide your organization with formal legal recognition as a nonprofit, increase eligibility for funding and grant opportunities, and offer certain protections to board members through limited personal liability. It can also help establish organizational credibility and create a framework for sustainable governance as your organization grows.

That said, incorporation is not the right choice for every group. Many community initiatives choose to remain grassroots movements, collectives, or informal organizations because these structures can offer greater flexibility and allow them to remain closely connected and responsive to the communities they serve. For some groups, the administrative requirements associated with incorporation may not be feasible given their current capacity, resources, or stage of development.

Before deciding whether to incorporate, it may be helpful to consider a few key questions:

- How will incorporation help advance your mission and vision?
- What value will formal incorporation bring to your organization and community?
- Are there opportunities to achieve your goals through collaboration or partnership with an existing organization?
- Does your group have the capacity to meet ongoing governance, reporting, and administrative requirements?
- How will your incorporated organization be financially sustained?
- What flexibility, if any, might be lost through incorporation?

Nonprofit, Charitable Organizations, and Charities

When exploring incorporation options, it is important to understand the differences between nonprofits, charitable organizations, and registered charities. These terms are often used interchangeably in everyday conversation, but they represent distinct legal statuses and may involve different registration processes, obligations, and benefits. If you are starting an organization in Alberta, these are the three categories you should be familiar with:

Nonprofit organization

For most community groups, incorporating as a nonprofit organization is the most common starting point. In Alberta, nonprofits can incorporate under several different provincial legislations, of which the most common legislations will be discussed later in this document, including the Societies Act, Alberta Companies Act, Religious Societies Act, and the Cooperative Association Act. The legislation you choose will depend on your organization's purpose, activities, governance structure, and intended beneficiaries. Each statute has its own incorporation requirements, fees, reporting obligations, and governance rules, so it is helpful to understand which option best aligns with your organization's needs. However, it's important to note that nonprofit incorporation on its own does **not** allow an organization to issue charitable tax receipts.

Charitable Organization

Organizations, whether they are formally incorporated or not, may also need to register as a Charitable Organization under [Alberta's Charitable Fund-raising Act](#). This provincial registration is required when an incorporated or unincorporated organization:

- Uses a fundraising business (an external organization that solicits funds from individuals to raise funds for a charitable purpose) to solicit donations on its behalf, and/or
- Raises more than \$25,000 through solicitations during a financial year.

If your organization unexpectedly exceeds the \$25,000 threshold, you must register within 45 days of reaching it.

It is important not to confuse registration under the *Charitable Fund-raising Act* with becoming a registered charity through the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). Although organizations registered under the *Alberta Charitable Fund-raising Act* receive a provincial registration number, this status does not authorize them to issue charitable tax receipts. Instead, the Act establishes provincial rules and standards designed to protect donors and the public from misleading or fraudulent fundraising activities.

Registered Charities

Becoming a Registered Charity is a federal process administered by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), rather than the Government of Alberta. To qualify, an organization must be established and operated exclusively for charitable purposes and must devote its resources to charitable activities. Not every nonprofit organization is eligible to become a registered charity. While an organization's mission may provide significant community benefit, its purposes must also meet the CRA's definition of being "charitable at law" under the [Income Tax Act](#). **This is an important consideration whether you aim to register as a charity right now or in the future.**

One of the primary advantages of obtaining federal charitable status of course is the ability to issue official donation receipts for income tax purposes. This can significantly strengthen fundraising efforts and may also increase access to grants, foundations, and other funding opportunities. Registered charities also benefit from certain tax exemptions.

Charitable status also comes with substantial responsibilities. In addition to meeting any provincial and municipal reporting requirements, registered charities must comply with federal obligations, including:

- Filing an annual Registered Charity Information Return (Form T3010)
- Meeting annual disbursement quota requirements
- Maintaining appropriate books and records
- Ensuring all activities continue to support charitable purposes
- Complying with CRA reporting and governance requirements

It is important to understand that obtaining charitable status does **not** replace the need for incorporation. A charity must still be incorporated either provincially or federally. If an organization is federally incorporated, it may also be required to complete **extra-provincial registration** in any province or territory where it carries on activities. Depending on the jurisdiction, carrying on activities may include maintaining an address, post office box, or telephone number in the province or territory, as well as

offering services or programs there. Registration requirements vary across Canada, so organizations should review the rules applicable to each jurisdiction in which they operate.

Organizations should carefully assess whether they have the capacity and resources required not only to obtain charitable status, but also to maintain it over the long term. For more information about becoming a registered charity, visit the [CRA website](#).

Diving Deeper: Nonprofit Organization

As discussed earlier, Alberta offers several different legislative pathways for incorporating a nonprofit organization. The most appropriate option for your group will depend on factors such as your organization's purpose, activities, governance structure, assets, and long-term goals.

In Alberta, incorporation is completed through the Corporate Registry using an authorized Alberta registry agent or service provider. To incorporate a nonprofit organization, you will need to work with a provider that offers Level 2 Registry Services. These providers can complete an Alberta NUANS Report, which is a name search that helps determine whether your proposed organizational name is already in use or too similar to an existing name. In addition to government filing fees, registry agents charge their own service fees. These fees are not regulated and may vary significantly between providers, so it is worthwhile to compare costs before beginning the incorporation process. A directory of Alberta registry service providers can be found [HERE](#).

Practical Tip: Before conducting a NUANS search, you can also look through the Governments of Alberta's [public nonprofit registry](#) to see if a name has already been taken or to see similar names that you may want to avoid for confusion.

The following sections provide an overview of the most common nonprofit incorporation options available in Alberta, including the purpose of each structure, key eligibility requirements, and ongoing obligations.

Society

Incorporating under [Alberta's Societies Act](#) is one of the most common ways for nonprofit organizations to incorporate, largely because the process is relatively straightforward and affordable. A society must be formed for a benevolent, charitable, educational, social, cultural, recreational, sporting, or other community-serving purpose, and cannot be established primarily to carry on a trade or business. A society is fundamentally a group of people coming together around a shared purpose and at least five individuals are required to form the organization. These individuals will often become the founding board members and are responsible for overseeing the organization's affairs to ensure it meets its legal and financial obligations. While founding board members do not need to remain involved forever, selecting individuals who are committed to the organization's success can help build a strong foundation during its early years.

Unlike a for-profit business, a society does not exist to generate profits for its members. A society may engage in revenue-generating activities that support its purposes but any surplus funds must be reinvested into the organization's objectives rather than distributed to members. Organizations whose

primary purpose is operating a business or commercial enterprise should consider incorporation under the *Companies Act* instead (see next section).

To form a society, you must provide a society name and address, a NUANS report, the objectives or purposes for which the society is to be incorporated, and the bylaws for the society. When choosing a name, it must contain a distinctive element, a descriptive element, and an approved legal ending such as Society, Association, Club, Foundation, Institute, League, or Council. It is also helpful to remember that your legal name and public-facing operating name do not necessarily have to be the same. Your society's stated objects are particularly important because they define the purpose of the organization and guide what activities it can undertake. The objects should be concise, specific, and broad enough to accommodate future growth while remaining true to your mission. Once incorporated, a society must continue to meet several ongoing obligations. This includes holding an Annual General Meeting (AGM), presenting financial information to members, and filing an Annual Return during the anniversary month of incorporation to maintain its active status.

To learn more about incorporation as a society, see the [Government of Alberta webpage](#).

Practical Tip: Many new organizations focus heavily on the incorporation paperwork and spend less time discussing governance. But having clear bylaws, committed board members, and a well-defined purpose is often more important to an organization's long-term success than the filing process itself. Taking time to carefully develop these foundational elements can help avoid challenges as your organization grows. A useful resource to help you develop these areas is the free Board Development Book in our Resource Library: [Drafting and Revising Bylaws for Not-for-profit Organizations In Alberta](#)

Nonprofit Company

A nonprofit company incorporated under [Part 9 of the Companies Act](#) is often used when an organization expects to manage substantial assets, undertake significant business activities, or operate a social enterprise. While revenue may be generated through these activities, profits must be reinvested into the organization's purposes and cannot be distributed for private benefit.

There are two types of nonprofit companies in Alberta: Private and Public. At least two people are needed to form a private nonprofit company, but it cannot have more than fifty shareholders or members. There are further restrictions on invitations to the public to purchase shares or memberships, as well as the transfer of membership. Public nonprofit companies need at least three people to incorporate, but do not have any of those restrictions; however, they do have more intensive filing requirements. It should be noted that some organizations with over 50 members choose to incorporate as a society and then incorporate a private nonprofit company to operate its business portion – this can reduce the risk as if the business fails it does not eliminate the society outright.

To form a nonprofit company, you must provide a company name and address, a NUANS report, the type of nonprofit company, the purposes for which it will be incorporated, and the articles for the company. If you choose to incorporate under a numbered name (Ex. 123456 Alberta Inc.), you do not need to file a NUANS report.

To learn more about incorporation as a Nonprofit Company, see the [Government of Alberta webpage](#).

Religious Society

Religious organizations that wish to own land in the name of their congregation may choose to incorporate under [Alberta Religious Societies Land Act](#). This legislation is specifically designed to allow religious groups to acquire, hold, and manage land for purposes such as a house of worship or burial grounds. The amount of land that may be held under this Act is generally limited to 320 acres.

It is important to note that being an organization with a religious mandate or focus does not automatically mean you should incorporate under the *Religious Societies Land Act*. Many faith-based organizations choose to incorporate under the *Societies Act* instead, particularly when their primary activities involve community programs like outreach, education, social services, or other charitable work. In other words, this incorporation option is best suited for congregations and religious groups whose primary reason for incorporation is to hold and manage property for religious use. If your organization is religious in nature but does not require these specific land-holding powers, incorporation under the *Societies Act* may be a simpler and more appropriate option.

To form a religious society, you must provide a religious society name (typically including a word that identifies the faith tradition or indicates a religious organization, such as Church, Temple, Mosque, Fellowship, Assembly, or Ministry), a registered address, a NUANS report, and the operational rules agreed upon by the congregation. These rules must identify who is entitled to vote on the society's business, what constitutes quorum, and which officers are authorized to exercise the powers of the society when dealing with property.

To learn more about incorporation as a Religious Society, see the [Government of Alberta webpage](#).

Agricultural Society

Agricultural Societies play an important role in supporting rural communities, agricultural education, local events, and agricultural development throughout Alberta. If an organization is dedicated to the improvement of agriculture and enhancing the quality of life of agricultural communities, they may incorporate under the [Alberta Agricultural Societies Act](#). In order to form, it requires 50 persons (25% or more must be engaged in agricultural production) who are not part of another society and will sign the application form. The main office of this organization must also not reside within 80 km of another Agricultural Society.

To form an agricultural society, you must provide a society name (under the strict naming convention template of "The ____ Agricultural Society") and address, the signed application with 50 members, a signed affidavit, and the bylaws for the society. Once formed, your newly incorporated society will need to ensure that it holds an annual general meeting as soon as practical. As well, in the anniversary month of your incorporation you will need to submit an Annual Return to keep your status active.

To learn more about incorporation as an Agricultural Society, see the [Government of Alberta webpage](#).

Cooperative

A cooperative is an autonomous association of people united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs through a jointly owned corporation. Unlike most nonprofits, cooperatives are member-owned organizations that are operated for the mutual benefit of their members. Decision-making is generally democratic, with members participating in the governance of the cooperative. All cooperatives in Alberta (except utility cooperatives and credit unions which are governed under their own legislative acts) are governed by [The Cooperatives Act](#). Nationally, they are governed by the [Canadian Cooperatives Act](#). Excluding housing and day-care cooperatives, when dealing with surplus, most cooperatives can provide what is known as patronage payments, which are payments to members proportional to the shares they have in the business. At least three people are required to start a cooperative.

To incorporate an Alberta-based cooperative, you need to provide the cooperative's name and address, a NUANS report, articles of incorporation, summary of articles of incorporation and statutory declaration, and a contact list of directors.

To learn more about incorporation as a cooperative, see the [Government of Alberta webpage](#).

Some additional statuses to be aware of:

Federal Not-for-profit Corporation

If your organization intends to operate across multiple provinces or territories, you may wish to consider incorporation under the federal [Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act](#). Federal incorporation provides name protection across Canada and may be more suitable for organizations with a national mandate.

However, federal incorporation does not eliminate provincial requirements. A federally incorporated organization must generally register in each province or territory where it conducts activities. This is known as extra-provincial registration. Organizations should be aware that federal incorporation may result in additional filing and compliance obligations at both the federal and provincial levels.

To learn more about federal nonprofit incorporation, see the [Government of Canada webpage](#)

Extra-provincial Corporation

Nonprofit corporations formed outside Alberta that want to conduct business in Alberta can register as an extra-provincial corporation under the [Alberta Business Corporation Act](#). This applies to an organization that is already incorporated under another jurisdiction so it can carry on operations in Alberta. This removes the need to have separate corporations in every province that the organization does business which can reduce the operational strain. Cooperatives and corporations that have their home jurisdiction in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, or Saskatchewan have a streamlined process to register in one another's provinces thanks to the New West Partnership Trade Agreement.

To learn more about extra-provincial registration, see the [Government of Alberta webpage](#).

You're well on your way!

Thank you for your commitment to strengthening your community. Whether you decide to formally incorporate or determine that another structure is a better fit for your group, we hope this guide has helped you better understand the nonprofit landscape in Alberta and the options available to you.

As your organization grows, Volunteer Alberta is here to support you. [Our membership](#) connects you to a community of nonprofit leaders, staff, volunteers, and organizations working to build stronger communities across the province. As a member, you'll gain access to:

- Exclusive guides, templates, toolkits, and sector resources.
- Recordings from our CONNECT Call Webinar Series, covering topics such as volunteer recruitment, insurance, engaging youth volunteers, and more.
- Discounts on workshops, webinars, and consultation services
- Access to partner benefits, including ACCESS Shared Services for bookkeeping, IT support, group purchasing, and other operational services.
- Discounts on tools and platforms such as Communal CRM and Grant Connect.
- Opportunities to connect, learn, and collaborate with peers across Alberta's nonprofit sector.

Membership also helps make resources like this one possible. By supporting Volunteer Alberta, you're helping us develop new tools, training, research, and sector supports, while providing valuable feedback that helps shape the programs and services we offer.

We would love to stay connected as your organization continues its journey. If you have questions, feedback, or simply want to share your story, please don't hesitate to reach out.

With warm wishes,

The Volunteer Alberta Team

The Association of Volunteer Centres and Volunteer Engaging Organizations of Alberta

Suite 101, 9426 51 ave
Edmonton, Alberta T6E 5A6

Phone: [780-482-3300](tel:780-482-3300)
Toll-free in Alberta: [877-915-6336](tel:877-915-6336)
info@volunteeralberta.ab.ca

