



Community Partner Profile: Linda Larcombe, Max Rady College of Medicine, University of Manitoba

Linda Larcombe is a trained anthropologist and received her PhD in Anthropology from the University of Manitoba. Her work focuses on First Nations history and health, cultural resource management, and understanding the socio-cultural and environmental factors contributing to infectious disease in First Nation populations.

How are you involved in issues related to northern housing?

When I started my PhD, a question I had was whether we could know anything about immunity to infections in people in the past. While we were doing some of the genetic work, a Chief in one of the communities I was working in asked about the role of housing in infectious disease rates in northern Manitoba. One of the things I learned through that research was that social determinants of health are probably in some respects, more important than genes because we can address social determinants. Addressing the social determinants of health should be a realistic goal to be able to help First Nations people achieve health equity. That took me on the path of investigating housing. We first documented what the conditions were in some northern communities, and then looked into what culturally appropriate housing might look like.

We investigated everything that was wrong with the houses and one of the things that was apparent was that it was hard for people to imagine what suitable housing would look like, so we applied and received CIHR funding to investigate [what healthy housing might look like](#) for two Dene communities in northern Manitoba. We were working with the Northlands Denesuline and the Sayisi Dene.

We worked with adults and youth and elders in the communities, we had all kinds of activities in the communities that were really fun to engage people in thinking about what housing in general would look like and what a healthy house might look like for the community. We called it *Housing Week*. We did an Elders meeting where the Elders spoke in Dene about what healthy housing would look like.

We then had an exchange program where we had students from the two communities come to Winnipeg and work with the architectural students and the architectural students went to the two communities. They visited elders, they had tours of the houses and people showed them the conditions and talked about what they did and didn't like about the houses. Then, the architectural students created new house designs and built models, it was fabulous. With the designs, we [created a book](#) called [Sekuwe \(My House\): Dene First Nation's Perspectives on Healthy Homes](#) and in that book is all of the information about the designs so that it's available for the communities.

What does a healthy house look like in these communities?

Something that was incorporated into many of the designs was room for processing meat. Dene people rely on caribou and fishing, but their houses don't have any room for processing that

meat. That's when you see pictures of people with cardboard spread out over the floor and processing the meat in the living room, because there's no other room for it. The impact of overcrowding on mental health was also something that people talked about a lot as well.

One of the primary things about the housing that is not healthy is the amount of mold present in houses in northern Manitoba. Sometimes houses are built in wet areas, the houses are often crowded with 8 or 10 people living together, the houses are not built with adequate air exchange to accommodate that number of people, so there is a lot of humidity in the air. Meat is typically boiled for long periods of time, which can contribute to the humidity. Processing raw meat also increases humidity. So, a healthy home would be free of mold, and that would mean that, if you want 10 people to live in a house, you need proper ventilation and enough rooms.

Also, a lot of houses only have one heat source, either a diesel furnace or a wood stove, and one of the recommendations was that the houses need a primary and backup heat source. Oftentimes they will run out of diesel, or hydro isn't working, or they might not have access to wood at certain times of the year.

What challenges exist for building houses in northern Manitoba?

The process of building houses is complicated partly because of funding opportunities and also because of the process that they have to go through to be able to have the housing designs and materials and funding in place all at the same time. Materials all have to be shipped up the year before they start building. Usually what happens is that they will build a number of houses of a very similar design all at the same time because it's cheaper, and the main priority is building as many houses as possible for the funding they have. So, there is a lot of compromising in terms of quality and style. To build houses with unique designs is just not in the funding cards. You have to build immediately and with quantity so you can house as many people as you can.

Are there other exciting projects happening in northern Manitoba?

After the housing project was completed, we had a [land-based learning project](#) with the Sayisi Dene (SSHRC funded). We set up two weeks of activities where we worked with some youth and taught them how to collect traditional land use information in the community; learning from elders, learning about where people were hunting and fishing, learning about where people did traditional activities in the past through archaeological information. Not everyone can be out on the land, and we know that a lot of youth struggle now because they don't have the resources, they don't have a skidoo, a dog team, a gun, they can't do anything on the land and so they feel very disconnected. But being able to talk about the land and think about how people used the land can provide a way of reconnecting without having to go out on the land.

First Nations people are the keepers of their knowledge about the land, and there is a lot of industry, like mining and forestry, that will ask them about the land-based knowledge. The youth could see themselves as the experts and that they could develop skills so they can be that knowledgeable person that can liaise with industry and developers when they come to the community. That was one project that was super interesting because it was about health, it was about land-based learning, and training youth to see themselves in industry.