



Community Partner Profile: Bonnie Kryswaty, Program Director and Social Researcher, Lakehead Social Planning Council

Bonnie Kryswaty is involved with numerous programs and initiatives related to housing, homelessness, and harm reduction in Thunder Bay, Ontario. She is the coordinator of the Poverty Reduction Strategy at the Lakehead Social Planning Council and manages the federal funding for homelessness initiatives through Reaching Home. She also manages the Out of the Cold program and is the coordinator for Age Friendly Thunder Bay. She conducts research for a variety of organizations, including bibliographic documentation related to expert witnesses in land claims cases in the Robinson-Superior Treaty area.

How are you involved in issues related to housing and homelessness?

There are two streams that come from Service Canada aimed at reducing and preventing homelessness in Thunder Bay. There is the Designated Stream, which I manage, and there is the Indigenous Stream which is managed by the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre. We make all our decisions cooperatively. We also work very closely with the province because in Thunder Bay the province manages housing, social assistance, and childcare, not the city.

Through the two streams, we received almost \$2 million in funding last year because of COVID-19. As the Community Entities, we have to make decisions about how to spend that money to make the greatest impact. We get together and come up with some ideas and then we present them to our respective Housing and Homelessness Coalition Advisory Boards. These are groups of people who work in the housing industry, we have over 40 groups and organizations and the Indigenous Stream has their own groups as well. The chairs of those groups as well as the Community Entities then make the final decision on spending. We also take into consideration what is already happening in the city, we don't ever want to duplicate anything, we don't want to waste money or efforts.

Right now, through the Designated Stream, we are funding 8 Social Navigator positions between our main shelter, Alpha Court Community Mental Health & Addiction Services, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Northwestern Ontario, and the John Howard Society of Thunder Bay. We also fund 4 or 5 transitional housing units. All these organizations are doing incredible work, they are all succeeding equally well in what they do.

We also receive funds to collect data using HIFIS, so we collect data on who is being housed, their demographics, their reasons for homelessness, etc. We also collect follow-up data about whether people are getting housed successfully, and why or why not.

What are some of the challenges for housing and homelessness in Thunder Bay?

We have an epidemic of homelessness here. We have done 3 PIT counts in 2016, 2018, and 2021. Our numbers this year were a bit lower because of COVID-19, but in 2018 we counted over 500 people in Thunder Bay. We only have 100 000 people here. Just to put that into perspective, Winnipeg has 750 000 people and they counted 1300 people. So, it is an epidemic.

Our biggest challenge is the intermittent funding. Last fiscal year, because of COVID-19, we received \$1.9 million, and this fiscal year we received \$300 000. I'm worried about every program that I'm overseeing. All the Social Navigators, the transitional housing, the manager of the managed alcohol program, I'm worried about all of them. I don't think the community really understands how much of a difference that these individuals and these programs make in the city.

Another issue is getting people on board with understanding the reasons for homelessness and the solutions to those problems. In our PIT count, we noted that at least two thirds of the people surveyed were Indigenous. We need to look at the reasons for Indigenous homelessness. Is the reason for a person being homeless just that they can't pay their rent? Or is the reason that they are a survivor of generational trauma or the residential school system? A lot of the time, simply paying rent isn't the only solution. Often there are other resources and supports that need to be offered to ensure successful housing.

The amount of housing we have, and relationships with landlords is also an issue. When we talk to people who work directly with landlords, they say that when a landlord sees an Indigenous person they say "no, we don't want to rent to you." So, racism is a huge issue in Thunder Bay.

What are some of the strengths and opportunities in Thunder Bay?

Thunder Bay really benefits from being a small city. It is easy for me to knock on someone's door or go get lunch with a colleague and work on these issues. We all have a common goal, and we are constantly working together. There is constant communication and transparency, and we evaluate everything collectively. That collective impact is our biggest strength. That doesn't happen in big cities like Toronto. I'm in the same meetings week after week with the same people, we see each other all the time, we are always in contact.

Are there projects in Thunder Bay related to housing and homelessness that excite you?

For the last 4 years we have been running the Out of the Cold program, which is an overnight emergency shelter for people who cannot get emergency shelter anywhere else for any reason. It could be that someone's partner is at the main shelter, but they have a restraining order against them, so they can't stay there. There are a million reasons why someone can't stay in a shelter. Because of the extra funding we got from the federal government, this winter we are able to fund that program for the entire season with 15-18 beds. Before this program, many people were dying on the street in Thunder Bay at night. This program has literally saved lives.

What would you like to see from the AHIN Partnership?

Some advocacy around Indigenous housing and what that means would be valuable. Information and data about what makes housing successful for Indigenous people that have experienced homelessness. It is great when I can say I'm working with a national study that is looking at these important topics and there are so many experts working toward this common goal. Again, it's about the collective impact.

I do a lot of peer reviewed writing with researchers at universities, but I don't work at a university. I'm a community-based researcher. I see a great marriage between the two types of research, and I think that that is something that AHIN is doing really well and should continue doing - being inclusive of community data collectors and experts. We don't all work in the ivory tower. Some of us, especially in the North, are in locations where there is no university.