

Community Profile: Gwen Healey Akearok, Executive and Scientific Director for Qaujigiartiit

Gwen Healey Akearok is a trained epidemiologist and co-founder of Qaujigiartiit, an independent, non-profit community research centre that conducts multi-disciplinary research across Nunavut to address health inequalities in the territory. Gwen spoke about the important work being done by Qaujigiartiit and shared her knowledge about the challenges and strengths for housing and homelessness in Nunavut.

Can you talk about your organization and the work you do?

Qaujigiartiit grew out of an environment where research was being done here on topics that were of interest to researchers and not necessarily topics that we needed information on to make effective, action-oriented decisions in the territory. Our goal from the outset was to ensure research was being done here in a way that is mindful of Inuit epistemologies, and then embracing and harnessing other ways of knowing and being if we're all working together for the improved health and well-being of Nunavummiut.

We're really here for the long-game, the 7 generations concept – we want to effect change for future generations in a positive way. The way we operate is heart-centered, we work from our hearts. That comes from our elders, they say that when you teach a child you teach them to their heart and then their minds will follow, and so that's our approach too.

We work to address the health questions and priorities of our communities, so we work on what people bring us. That runs the whole spectrum of everything and anything that might have an impact on health and wellbeing in our communities. Inevitably housing is part of that because it's one of the determinants of health and self-actualization. We know it's a critical component. We've done a lot of work with the poverty reduction roundtable in Nunavut, looking at the determinants of poverty and the role of trauma in the health and wellbeing of our communities. One of the projects explored the perspectives of families who move from a crowded housing situation to a less crowded housing situation. We've worked on the Inuit Health Survey and continue to support ongoing iterations of that survey. We worked with the Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council many years ago on assessing the hidden homeless population in Nunavut and the impact of housing or lack of housing on women and children.

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

We have an overcrowding problem where there are too many people for the number of rooms in a home. The cost of housing is extremely high. There are very few private homeowners partly because of those high costs and they continue to increase without a good commercial explanation as to why. Despite massive investments from the federal government to build more units, it's still nowhere near enough to address the shortages. All that leads to the crowding situation that we have.

There are people living in tents or assembling small shacks out of old plywood and trying to be innovative and assembling their own shelters because of the housing shortage, which is not adequate or safe. The term is "hidden homelessness," you can't really be 'homeless' in Nunavut, in the way people usually conceptualize it, because it's so cold. Trying to assess homelessness and the hidden homeless, people who move from place to place seeking shelter, is always a challenge.

And what about some of the strengths and opportunities in Nunavut?

Nunavummiut are so innovative and so solution seeking. Everyone has been trying to work on this and find solutions to these challenges for years in spite of systemic challenges. Everyone

helps each other, a lot of people give their time, space, and resources to try to help those who need it, and there are creating initiatives that have arisen to support the population that needs both shelter and food.

What would you like to see out of the AHiN Partnership?

The exponential increase in costs for building in the North is inexplicable, so having a shared space to look at that, to look at regulations in Canada around build costs and contractors. Rents are so high because the building costs so much to build, and it's not really clear why those costs are so high other than higher shipping costs. It's significantly higher compared to building in the south. I think that's a piece of evidence we'd look forward to seeing evolve from this kind of project. We also just want to see and learn from others who are innovating in this area where we might learn about other solutions that are working in other rural and remote regions. We want to see if they have solutions that can be applied here or if we have any innovations or solutions that we can share with others.