**Community Partner Profile:** Mary Kozorys, Program Coordinator, Elizabeth Fry Society of Northwestern Ontario

Mary Kozorys is the Program Coordinator for the Elizabeth Fry Society of Northwestern Ontario, a charitable organization that supports and advocates for women in prison, women transitioning back into the community, and women at risk of criminalization. Below, Mary shares some of her knowledge about the challenges and opportunities for women leaving the correctional system and speaks about the organization’s recent partnership with Lakehead University.

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

The Elizabeth Fry Society for Northwestern Ontario is one of 26 Elizabeth Fry Societies in Canada and one of many who have delved into the provision of housing. Our Elizabeth Fry Society is based in Thunder Bay, we provide services in Thunder Bay but we also service an area that is geographically quite large, between Sault Ste. Marie and Kenora. Specifically, there is a correctional centre in Kenora where many women are transferred to when there is not enough space at the Thunder Bay correctional centre, so by proxy we end up offering services there as well.

**What are some of the challenges for housing and homelessness in Northwestern Ontario?**

Northwestern Ontario is a region which I think is very similar to many in the North and to Northeastern Ontario, where there are a series of small communities that do not have a range of housing options. The housing options tend to be social housing delivered through the social services administration boards by municipalities, but there are not a lot of options within that system. And we find that the relationship between homelessness, housing security, and criminal justice system involvement is really highlighted in the gaps in housing services. When you are housing insecure, it really increases the likelihood of recidivism.

A gap for us is that there is no specific space where women from the correctional system can go. We have women’s shelters for women fleeing domestic violence, we have a community shelter for both men and women who are experiencing homelessness, but there is nothing specific that addresses the need for a wrap-around service for women who are being released from correctional centres. The inability to secure housing really threatens women’s safety by increasing the likelihood of exploitation. If I am released without a place to go, I am likely going to couch surf which is going to increase the likelihood that I will be exploited by someone who is involved in illegal activity.

**Are there any projects or initiatives happening in Northwestern Ontario that excite you?**

What is really interesting has been the opportunity to have been involved in research with Lakehead University. That has really opened up the door for non-profit organizations like ourselves having recognition for working on these issues. Being able to partner with post-secondary institutions has really elevated those research results and has made them available to so many more people. Doing research with Lakehead University has helped broaden the discussion on housing gaps and the links between homelessness and criminalization and the need to provide a continuum of housing, and now we have started to take action on some of those gaps.

As a result of this partnership and doing this research, the next step was to engage with other communities who have been involved in trying to fill in some of these gaps. From that engagement we gathered a lot of really helpful information about what sheltering or transitional housing might look like. We have always had an intent to create our own housing projects, and we formed a housing committee to look at different options and different funding streams to do this. The pandemic has certainly highlighted what the precarity of housing can lead to, and we were able to apply for pandemic funding to help address housing gaps in a broader sense. Our application was for a project to secure a unit or multiple units for emergency transitional housing.

We secured the funding and began speaking with landlords, but we suddenly found ourselves in the same scenario as many of the women we work with – when landlords find out that you are being released from incarceration, they don’t necessarily prefer you as a tenant. So as an organization we found ourselves experiencing this same challenge. We went back to the funder, who also manages the social housing stock in Thunder Bay and asked if they had any vacant homes that they could make available to us. Lo and behold they had a three-bedroom home, and we were able to quickly organize and secure the unit and we are now happy to say that two of those rooms are occupied. The third is available as an emergency room, for example for someone who is going into pretreatment and requires a safe place to stay for a couple of days.

We are able to offer a circle of care for individuals who are going into these units and support them in their journey to secure more permanent housing. We are able to support the occupants by making sure they are getting to their medical appointments, methadone clinics, counselling appointments, and other things they need, and just be there for them. Working with the occupants has also given us an idea of the kinds of services we want to provide once the pandemic restrictions are lifted.

It has really been an absolute joy to go from doing the research to now being able to say that we have this three-bedroom unit available.

**What would you like to see out of the At Home in the North Partnership?**

I have been looking at the objectives of AHIN and looking at what CMHC has launched in terms of their housing challenges, and I see a lot of parallels in trying to overcome some of those structural issues in northern communities. I can see AHIN challenging us to look at the continuum of housing needs and how we can be creative in overcoming the legislative hurdles or other requirements or restrictions placed on service providers and non-profit organizations who are trying to address housing gaps and challenges.