



Community Partner Profile: Pertice Moffitt, Research Associate, Aurora Research Institute

Pertice Moffitt has a PhD in Nursing from the University of Calgary. She has lived in the Northwest Territories for over 30 years where she has practiced nursing as an educator and researcher. She is now a Research Associate with Aurora Research Institute where she focuses her work on women's health, currently that includes intimate partner violence and maternal and child health.

Can you talk about your work and involvement in issues of housing and homelessness?

I have done a lot of research on intimate partner violence, and so that is where I approach housing and homelessness from. Most recently, when the pandemic occurred a group of us [decided to write about what was happening in the territory for people in violent situations](#). I have not done research that I would say is focused directly on housing and homelessness, however it comes up so often for survivors of violence because it is an important prevention strategy. Having stability in your housing is an important health outcome, and housing instability is a barrier to well-being.

Although not directly related to housing, I also want to note that I recently received a SSHRC grant to develop what we are calling [A Borealis Journal](#), which will be an Indigenous journal housed at Aurora Research Institute. We have been working with Indigenous territorial people to develop a journal where Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars can showcase their work in the territory.

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

Most of the housing issues occur for these victims when they flee violence and go to a shelter, but there are insufficient shelters for emergencies like leaving a violent relationship. Also, women can only stay in the emergency shelter for 30 days in the NWT. So then where do they go? We have very few shelters and very little transitional housing here, and if you have children, it becomes more complicated and challenging.

During COVID-19, suddenly victims were housed with their perpetrator, there was nowhere to go. There was a greater fear of leaving that situation because of COVID-19, and it was used as a manipulative factor. During the pandemic we saw some women placed in a hotel because our bed capacity decreased. Shelters had to implement public health regulations and so there were fewer beds than before. There was also miscommunication. We had never seen this before, but there was one month when we saw no women in the shelter because people thought the shelter was closed due to the pandemic. It was not closed, but bed capacity had decreased. So, there were all these factors that made people uncertain and fearful. Fearful for their safety at home, and fearful to go to a shelter because of COVID-19.

The other disadvantage is that there are structural vulnerabilities for women who are in violent relationships because of poverty, marginalization, colonization. If you are on the street, women are very vulnerable and there is a lot of gender-based violence. All these things contribute to the issue. In our remote communities we noted that violence was increasing for women during the pandemic because there was an increase in emergency protection orders, so women were getting protection orders so they and their children were safe from their perpetrators in their own home.

There is also the issue of community pushback about where to locate shelters. Where I live, in downtown Yellowknife, there is always controversy over shelter locations, where to locate a shelter, and so it's a real challenge finding permanent shelter for homeless people. We see a lot of angry outbursts from people on the street because many of them have mental health issues and addictions and residents say they are scared for their personal safety, but homelessness people are also concerned about their own safety.

What are some of the strengths and opportunities in the NWT?

There is good collaboration in Yellowknife between some governments and non-profit organizations. There are still people and departments who are siloed, but I see people reaching out and people coming together to develop housing plans. The City of Yellowknife just announced [\\$800 000 to support a local NGO for the operation of sustainable housing](#) as part of the \$1.2 million in funding from the federal government's Reaching Home initiative.

The Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation and the Yellowknife Women's Society is also trying to secure more funding which will really help a lot of people. The GNWT also received federal funds to build new housing in the communities, and that will also employ local people, so that is a real strength. During COVID-19, since we got the Spruce Bough and the managed alcohol program and the Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation, I feel that there are fewer outbursts than there used to be, which is real evidence for harm reduction programs.

I think we have a long way to go, and [recent flooding in some of our communities](#) has resulted in the loss of a lot of housing. The cost of getting lumber and supplies to the community, the remoteness of our territory and expertise and labour to build houses are a barrier. There is an opportunity to employ local people to build houses.

So, sometimes it feels like we are taking one step forward and two steps back.

What would you like to see from the AHIN Partnership?

I think a lot of the recent collaboration is related to AHIN because it has brought together such a broad spectrum of people to work and talk and because of that it has highlighted housing so much. We have been talking about housing and the social determinants of health for such a long time, and it is such a difficult issue, sometimes it can be discouraging.

I think housing insecurity for intimate partner violence survivors is a huge issue, and I think they need stable housing for themselves and their children. Our Rockhill building burned to the ground and that was a wonderful unit operated by the YWCA, the YWCA was in the building to support the families that lived there, and they had security. It was a well thought out unit. We need to keep pushing for that kind of alternative for women when they need to get out of these violent relationships, they are in such a precarious situation.

I think another important issue is the need for harm reduction and addictions treatment. I think we need to keep pushing people and learning more about what we can do to address addictions. We don't have a treatment centre. These things affect the ability of people to get and maintain housing. I think we need some sort of housing-based emergency response, we need more services. We have an outreach van that goes around addressing some emergencies as they arise on the street, but maybe we need a task force or something that really looks at what happens not only to victims but also how we address the people who are committing the violence. How do we treat the underlying trauma and make it better for them? Why don't we have a harm reduction centre? Those questions are important.