



Community Partner Profile: Rebecca Alty, Mayor of the City of Yellowknife, NWT

Rebecca Alty was born and raised in Yellowknife and has a Bachelor of Communication Studies from the University of Calgary. Rebecca has worked in community relations and communications for the Government of the Northwest Territories, Diavik Diamond Mine, AVENS – A Community for Seniors, and Stanton Territorial Hospital Foundation. In 2012, she began working in municipal government as a Yellowknife city councillor, and in 2018 was elected mayor of Yellowknife. In this profile, she speaks to the challenges and opportunities for funding housing programs in Yellowknife.

How is the municipal government involved in programs for housing and homelessness?

The city is the community entity that receives federal funding through the Reaching Home program. We receive just over \$1 million per year for 5 years to help provide programs and services to address the needs of residents experiencing homelessness. At the city level, from a zoning and tax perspective, we can incent people to develop a full spectrum of housing. When it comes to providing wrap-around services, that is run through the territorial and federal government.

With the \$1 million, the three big programs we run are Housing First for adults, for youth, and for families with children. Once you divide up that \$1 million between 3 programs, and there are a few other programs as well, we can support some residents but there are still gaps. Our last PIT count found 338 individuals experiencing homelessness, so there are still a lot of people in need.

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

There is a lot of funding coming from the federal government, and I applaud them for focusing on ending homelessness and getting all this money out. However, the parameters don't work for every community and particularly here in the North. The city is supposed to receive funding through Rapid Housing, but the timeline is so tight to create a project that there is a possibility that we won't receive the funding. So, I think one of the biggest challenges is that the federal government creates programs in Ottawa that are great for Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, but aren't great for the rest of Canada. There hasn't been a willingness to make more flexible programs.

I have expressed to the Prime Minister that it's not necessarily that there is a lack of funding – although we could always use more – it's the policies that are getting in the way of us using that money. We received \$1.6 million last year to help address COVID-19 and there was no flexibility. We used the funding and the programs we developed are good, but we could have used it better.

I am really trying to express to them that we all have the same goal, we all want to end homelessness, so why won't they listen to some of the challenges we are experiencing and try to find solutions so we can get people into homes? We all have to collaborate, as well, and collaboration takes time, and that is not being written into these program deadlines. It's both a challenge and an opportunity, if the federal government is willing to listen.

NGOs are also stretched thin. It is great that the federal government is making this funding available for new programs, but there is no money coming in for operating costs or having staff to actually deliver these programs. How many more housing projects can the YWCA or the Yellowknife Women's Society or Home Base YK take on before they burn out or before the program isn't run as well? I think we really have to look at funding for capacity at the NGO level.

What are some of the strengths and opportunities in Yellowknife?

I do think that all the funding is a good opportunity, and our NGOs are always willing and eager to take on projects and try new things. I think we've been able to start some great new projects, like Housing First or the On The Land program we started using some of the COVID-19 funds. The Yellowknife Women's Society purchased a motel and turned it into transitional housing and they were running a managed alcohol program, I think that is a great success model. Home Base YK (formerly Side Door) is looking to acquire another apartment building and I am excited for that program because it is for youth and can help end the cycle of homelessness at a young age. The YWCA hopefully will get some federal funding to expand Lynn's Place, which is transitional housing for women. I think if all this funding comes through it would be amazing.

Unfortunately, a lot of the funding is either one time funding or only has a 5-year period, and then what will happen? We can get these programs off the ground, but there are no sustainable dollars. When that contract is up, will we get more funding? Or will that be the end of these programs? We were renewed for a second round of Reaching Home funds, but that came through at the final hour. The funding was expiring on March 31st of 2019 and we didn't know it would be renewed until early March. We had NGOs worried that they would have to lay off their employees, employees thought they wouldn't have jobs at the end of March. These aren't just deadlines on paper, these are peoples' lives, it has a real impact, and it doesn't help with burnout or employee recruitment and retention.

What would you like to see from the AHIN Partnership?

I think we really need to do an exercise of mapping out all the programs that exist because I think there are redundancies, and then see where the gaps are and how we can fill them. I think we are all doing so much, and we aren't stopping to evaluate where there are duplications and how we can work more efficiently. I would love to see all levels of government do an evaluation of all our programs. We are often too busy that we don't think about how we can get some time back. If we just carve off one day to think about these things, we can get back so much more time.

The GNWT also has a department called Integrated Case Management where a resident can be referred if they are struggling to access services, and a case worker will help them work through the system. They are also supposed to identify those hurdles and try to remove them, and they make recommendations to other departments, but those recommendations aren't necessarily being implemented, so I think that is also important to look at.