



Community Partner Profile: Travis Hay, Assistant Professor of Humanities, Mount Royal University

Travis Hay was born and raised in Thunder Bay where he completed a HBA and MA in History at Lakehead University. He received a PhD in Canadian History from York University before returning to Thunder Bay to teach and conduct research as a Postdoctoral Fellow. He is a historian of Canadian federal Indian policy and settler colonialism.

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

I work from the context and outlook of Thunder Bay because it is one of those northern service hub cities: it is where many First Nation communities must send their kids and their elders to access schools and the hospital. We also have a very visible and very acute problem related to homelessness, mental health, and addiction in Thunder Bay and there is a lot of pathologizing and a lot of racism that shapes the way those issues are looked at here.

My training is as a historian. I was not previously someone who was a housing scholar. I was very interested in community safety and so I joined community safety patrol groups here. Then, there was a wonderful proposal for a transitional housing project for Indigenous youth in Thunder Bay and, unfortunately, several city councilors as well as many members of our city rose up against it, saying “we don’t want this in our backyard, we don’t want this in our community.” We had a Conservative member of our local political scene putting out notices saying, “we can’t have transitional housing in this neighbourhood.”

When you grow up in Thunder Bay and you know the issues we have here, it was like someone was handing us a solution funded by all these great organizations, but the municipal leadership turned it away. This pushback set up what became a many months long battle to defend transitional housing against racist attitudes and NIMBYism, and this is what got me into the housing field. I embarked upon an open letter writing campaign and I worked with an Indigenous-led media production company to [produce videos to educate people about transitional housing](#). The good part of the story is that [the project was successfully defended](#), but it was not an easy process.

Mostly recently, I have been lucky to be part of a team of researchers, led by Dr. Ravi Gokani, who have received a SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant to help conduct a PIT Count to understand the landscape of homelessness in Thunder Bay, which will include questions related to Indian Status and Band Membership.

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

There are lots of stories in Thunder Bay speaking to the unfortunate history of NIMBYism as well as anti-Indigeneity and racism, which I think are major causes of homelessness and really exacerbates homelessness here. I would also cite the segregated healthcare system in Canada as a number one cause of homelessness. In Thunder Bay, it is very common for Indigenous peoples who lack access to medical services in their home communities to come here for everything from gynecological and obstetric care, palliative care, any form of surgical care, dialysis, even x-rays. If they’re lucky, they’ll have someone come with them that is funded, but sometimes they won’t and having to move to another community for medical appointments really increases the risk of homelessness, including hidden homelessness and couch surfing.

So, I think the service gaps we have in Northwestern Ontario, especially on reserve, is a powerful contributor to homelessness in Thunder Bay.

It is also a very dangerous city for Indigenous youth. There just aren't safe spaces for Indigenous youth to hang out in Thunder Bay, and this is exacerbated by the lack of medical facilities and schools on reserve. There is a lack of care for Indigenous youth that is pretty stark, and you can see that when city councilors set up an entire public meeting to say, "we don't want Indigenous youth in this transitional housing in this community, that makes my children unsafe." Non-Indigenous youth are seen as precious, whereas Indigenous youth are seen as this scary contaminating influence. A combination of federal Indian policy, settler colonial inequities, and a community that has shown itself unwilling to care about Indigenous youth, I would say those are things that really make homelessness much worse and very deadly here. I mean, if you've read *Seven Fallen Feathers* by Tanya Talaga, which discussed the deaths of seven Anishinabe youth in Thunder Bay, you'll know why this is a very acute crisis of care.

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

We have many wonderful organizations. We have Beendigen, a women's shelter, we have many tribal councils like Nokiiwin Tribal Council, or Kinna-away legal clinic, they do great work to coordinate services for people coming to Thunder Bay. Indigenous women and Two-Spirit folks are always at the forefront of the community initiatives that are really addressing the problems. There is a community safety patrol group called Wiindo Debwe Mosewin, and they patrol the neighbourhoods that are pathologized and they do a lot of really needed, immediate harm reduction and grassroots care. Those folks save lives very regularly in Thunder Bay. There is a lot of leadership in the grassroots community here.

Dr. Rebecca Schiff's is also looking to map all the services and wrap around services in Thunder Bay. I think that we not only have a problem with racism in our city administration, but I also think that Thunder Bay is a case study of poor city planning. It is two cities that joined in the 1970s and a lot of poor folks are forced to live in the inter city area with poor transit and a lack of services compared to the rest of the city, so I think that we need to understand both the structure and the policy of how homelessness in the city happens, and I don't really see that happening much within the city's leadership. So having Dr. Schiff lead this project is exciting.

What would you like to see from the AHIN partnership?

Having an inventory and service mapping here will go a long way. I don't think that the region of Northwestern Ontario is well accounted for in terms of a mapping of services. In December 2020 the Auditor General's report for Ontario came out and reported [that Ontario mostly doesn't know where its money for Indigenous programming is going](#). The report simply said that more than 70% of the funds are unaccounted for.

This lack of coordination of services is mirrored on the municipal level, and I don't see a very strong relationship forming between, for example, Nishnawbe Aski Nation and the corporation of the city of Thunder Bay or its city council. Though Nishnawbe Aski Nation is often willing to come to the table, there is very little understanding (in my view) on the other side of that table. So I think one of the big problems is that at the provincial and municipal level people in Thunder Bay who are in positions of leadership simply don't know Indian policy. They don't know treaty rights. They don't understand the intricacies and complexities of Indian policy to the extent that they can act as good treaty partners, so I really think the knowledge mobilization from At Home in the North will go a long way. Even just knowing what is happening, what is going on, will really help facilitate advocacy at the provincial and municipal level since I am very confident that people working at that level currently do not have a working understanding of the issues that they are trying to resolve.