

At Home in the North Webinar Series: Covid-19 and Northern Housing

Key Takeaways

- Current challenges facing those who are experiencing homelessness have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- One-size-fits-all housing solutions are inappropriate for many communities and demographics, and different communities require specialized, culturally appropriate support;
- While federal and provincial responses for people experiencing homelessness during a pandemic has improved, significant gaps still exist and questions remain about post-pandemic housing support;
- Research within the Partnership is committed to amplifying the voices of those with lived experience with homelessness and inadequate/inappropriate housing and understanding their unique challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Presentation Summaries

Overview of AHIN, Dr. Julia Christensen (Memorial University of Newfoundland)

The webinar began with an overview of the At Home in the North Partnership and some of the activities currently underway. The project is intended to inform the national housing strategy and is part of the CMHC's Collaborative Housing Research Network (CHRN). There are over 40 partners and 25 university and community-based researchers conducting important work focused on 4 main research directions: 1) supportive housing programs and services; 2) governance, policy, and self-determination; 3) housing, community design, and the built environment; and 4) health synthesis. Due to the current COVID-19 crisis, some of AHIN's funds have been redirected to support research projects focused specifically on the emerging housing challenges caused by COVID-19, some of which we heard about at this webinar.

The overarching theme of this work is that housing is about more than just shelter. It is a matter of building and sustaining a sense of home – how can we generate tools and innovations and promote housing security, but also how can we ensure the longevity and sustainability of these innovations?

Housing and COVID-19 in Thompson, Manitoba, Dr. Colin Bonnycastle (University of Manitoba)

This presentation focused on a case study based in Thompson, Manitoba. Thompson was experiencing issues related to limited shelter and support/transitional housing programs pre-pandemic, and now COVID-19 has created new challenges for the City. This research aims to capture voices and ideas from across the community, including service providers and those with lived experience with homelessness, to promote greater northern housing security. This work is currently in its early stages and involves the creation of a Community Advisory Committee with community stakeholders and knowledge holders from Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations.

Research methods will include both quantitative and qualitative CBPR approaches. Quantitative methods involve collecting statistics from relevant agencies, such as current and pre-pandemic monthly occupancy. Qualitative CBPR methods include hosting a virtual community cafe with stakeholders and developing a digital story-telling project with residents at the YWCA who have lived experience with homelessness.

Filling the Gap: Creating Health Equity for Remote First Nations Through Rapid Deployment of Housing Units, Michael McKay (Nishnawbe Aski Nation) & Dr. Shelagh McCartney (Ryerson University)

In 2014, Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Chiefs declared a housing state of emergency, and in 2018 NAN Chiefs reaffirmed this state of emergency and directed the creation of a new housing strategy. This research works to address the unique housing challenges presented in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated issues of over-crowding and inappropriate one-size-fits-all housing solutions. Additionally, there is a need to identify a variety of housing adaptations necessary for the NAN territory, such as issues related to freight methods and infrastructure.

Community members identified youth as having the least equitable housing, and so this project uses housing designs co-created with youth as a starting point for thinking about housing solutions for the NAN territory. Design exercises were distinctly for youth and asked how these units would be designed and how they would exist within the community. Not only is there a need for adequate space to quarantine during current and future pandemics, but NAN communities also face increasing numbers of crises due to the impacts of climate change. Rapid deployment housing may also provide relief for those experiencing emergency social situations.

COVID-19 and Pandemic Planning in the Context of Rural and Remote Homelessness, Dr. Rebecca Schiff (Lakehead University)

Several important lessons were learned from the H1N1 pandemic, where there were no additional resources for shelters or other service providers, limited capacity to quarantine and treat infected individuals, and little support for vaccination clinics. During the H1N1 pandemic there was no recognition of homeless people as a designated “vulnerable population” despite the fact that people experiencing homelessness have poorer health outcomes and higher morbidity than those who are housed. The federal response to homelessness during the current pandemic was improved from the H1N1 response, but questions and problems remain. Rural and remote communities receive little or no funding to support people experiencing homelessness, and it is also unclear what will happen to the resources that were provided after the pandemic has ended.

This research seeks to understand the experience of rural and remote social service and homelessness-serving systems during the COVID-19 pandemic, with methods involving surveys and semi-structured interviews with service providers. Questions include: how has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the migration of homeless people between urban and rural areas? What are the capacities and needs of rural and remote communities to respond to the needs of homeless people? And what new innovations in service delivery were launched during the first wave of the pandemic?