



Community Partner Profile: Christina Maes Nino, Executive Director for the Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association

Christina Maes Nino has been the Executive Director for the Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association (MNPFA) since 2018 and has spent her career working to support, organize, and collaborate with people living in poverty. The MNPFA represents and supports over 100 non-profit housing providers in Manitoba through advocacy, education, and partnership development. Below, Christina shares her thoughts on some of the strengths,

opportunities, and challenges for housing and homelessness in northern Manitoba.

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

The MNPFA is governed and made up of the non-profit housing sector in Manitoba. We provide support to the sector through advocacy (to government and to funders), partnership development (by helping to develop partners within and outside of the sector), education and capacity building (we have an annual conference and regular educational sessions on governance, operations, and issues impacting the sector), and other supports to develop the sector. For example, we have a group insurance program and benefits for discounted building condition assessments or other services that the sector needs. I am the Executive Director and I do a little bit of everything. We have a Coordinator of Member Education and Communications who is responsible for our regular newsletters, social media presence, and coordinating educational sessions. We also have a Transformation Team Lead, whose role it is to help the sector prepare for the provincial government's devolution of the public housing management.

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

Government devolution is certainly a major upcoming challenge that will be uniquely challenging in the North. In some communities, particularly Churchill for example, all the housing is public housing. As government pulls out of that role, figuring out who can step in, who has the capacity and resources, and who will be able to continue to get the government resources that are needed are ongoing questions and concerns. But that is the same even for bigger and less remote communities like Thompson. The housing need is also great. In northern Manitoba, there has been pretty hard economic decline in recent years due to the loss of some industries. There are higher vacancy rates in the private market, but there is little affordable housing for very low income people and there is a lot of poverty. I think that's the same across all of the North, the cost of housing is high and incomes are low and Indigenous peoples in particular who are moving into bigger centres in the North are more excluded from housing and have a harder time accessing it. Experiencing homelessness in the North is also different because it's a life-or-death situation.

And what about some of the strengths and opportunities in Manitoba?

First Nations across the North are increasingly getting involved in supporting folks who are moving off reserve and into larger communities. So, there are some First Nations who are developing solutions for housing and homelessness for their people who are not living in their communities despite their incredible lack of resources. Manitoba's housing devolution is both a huge risk to housing but could also be an opportunity for the sector to develop more responsive and community-oriented types of housing. Right now, with things being centrally controlled out

of Winnipeg for the most part, the North doesn't get much attention, there's less political clout there.

Are there any projects, services, or programs that make you optimistic about the future?

In Thompson there has been a fair amount of work on youth homelessness and to bring more community organizations together to work on issues around homelessness. There is a diversity of community organizations like the Canadian Mental Health Association, the YWCA, and Keewatin Housing doing good work with super high needs and tight resources.

What would you like to see out of the AHiN Partnership?

The northern communities across the provinces are sort of in this weird middle area. The northern territories have very unique government structures and southern Canada has its own government structure. The northern provinces don't get a lot of attention when it comes to housing needs and solutions because they're so influenced by their provincial governments, but then also totally ignored by them in many ways. For AHiN to raise both the issues and solutions that are coming out of northern communities and to help bring groups together who are working in those areas is really exciting. I like that there are some academics who have that northern expertise. In Manitoba, developing partnerships between academic institutions and community organizations in the North can be difficult. Community organizations don't want to spend a lot of time educating academics on the issues, they're tired of that because there is such a rotation of researchers through the North, so it's exciting that there is such a capacity to really study and share what is happening in a way that can be used by community organizations.