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Andrew Boozary is a primary care physician, and Executive Director for social medicine and population health at the University Health Network. And he's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked, wheeled, and web-cammed into the virtual stage at The Walrus Talks.

ANDREW BOOZARY: As a person who has benefited from social housing, whose family has over our time in Canada as well as, primary care clinician - not to speak for patients and communities.

But I think where we've seen so much resilience and strength that I feel has been lost along the way and in the conversations both pre-pandemic and currently, um, and, and really from a policy perspective about how for us to truly have a universal healthcare system we really do need to see housing first and housing and health connected in ways that I don't believe we've made that fulsome connection in the way that we need to. I think from the learnings that we've had through the pandemic in the ways that so much of the inequities have been pulled back, have been magnified. Um, really the curtain has been pulled back on inequities that for far too long, we've really accepted as a country and I think one of the, the hope that I have, and I know many share is that we can actually build something better.

But with people and with communities that best understand how the lack of housing how homelessness has really upended, um, people's lives and the sort of supports and, um, design that needs to take place, um, for people to have the meaningful lives and choices that only they can make. Um, and I think one of the pieces that we can't shirk any longer is just how racialized poverty and homelessness are in our country. Um, we've seen this in terms of, of Black, Brown and Indigenous communities through COVID the latest data showing over 80% of COVID cases, disproportionately harming, um, communities of colour, um, over 50% of the cases in Toronto effecting low-income households. And so much of this, we're not even seeing in terms of the data's not capturing, um, of the suffering that the pandemic has brought for people who have been under housed and who are also grappling and struggling with the other pathologies of poverty.

That again, we have long seen take hold in our country and I, I really do also have to give so much credit to the community response through the pandemic. I think this is where the innovation has been to really rise up to the challenge early around the idea that when the public health messaging was a stay at home, if you can't for too many, for thousands, they couldn't. And we were fortunate as N to be able to partner with Parkdale Queen West community health centre, inner city, health associates, Toronto public health, the neighbourhood group, and the inner city family health team in trying to pull together hotel recovery sites for people experiencing homelessness as places to recover from COVID, but also get access to harm reduction supports and social and community supports that again, have been far too long denied to people.

And I think we can see just how much we need to have that audacity to get COVID to zero. , we've had complacency with COVID and have initially set thresholds that were only inhumane for certain communities to experience going into this winter. But I also believe we need that same audacity to get homelessness to zero in our country and it's a challenge and it's a mission that many in the room that many in so many other spaces have been advocating for decades. And I believe that we've seen more and more evidence about just how tightly connected housing and health are people who are experiencing homelessness before the pandemic would



not be expected to make it past their 55th birthday we also know about how disproportionately concentrated disease and the burden of disease are for people who have mental health and physical health for people living on the streets or sleeping rough and people experiencing homelessness.

And really the task is on us. I believe coming out of the pandemic and coming through the pandemic to protect people through the winter. We have now currently have over a thousand people sleeping outside and encampments. And I know that it makes people uncomfortable seeing that, but it should only speak to our failure on housing. And if it creates such discomfort, then we need to see the housing take place. And I think it needs to be a call to action that people who have felt neglected and shut out of our shelter system of our housing system have had to respond with their own creativeness, with their own ingenuity to save their own lives. And I believe we really need to come together now, like never before to address the housing crisis, COVID crisis, the overdose crisis with the sort of complexity that has, um, that we have, we have not been willing to bring that collective effort for that will require all policymakers, all levels of government and public and private sector to really come together and acknowledge that these, that we have long allowed life years to be syphoned away from people.

And we need this response now if we're ever going to be able to talk about our country as one that puts health first.

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