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HOST: LIVING ROOMS is our new digital series looking at the transformation in where and how we live. Read, listen, and watch at [thewalrus.ca/livingrooms](http://thewalrus.ca/livingrooms).

You can't talk about homes and housing without talking about homelessness. It's a problem that has plagued Canada for too long. Short term solutions cannot eradicate a problem so deeply rooted in our society. In her talk, Kaite Burkholder Harris says that the solution is to look at fixing the context, instead of the person. Burkholder Harris is a community planning officer at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

KAITE BURKHOLDER HARRIS: A number of years ago, when I was a young, impressionable Carlton social work student, I ended up getting a summer job at a drop-in centre downtown for people who have experiences of homelessness. And as soon as I got into the job, I discovered that my main role that summer would be to plan the annual picnic, the biggest deal of the whole year or so. I was told when I got in, and this was basically a day where we went down to each Lake, we had two busloads of folks and we were able to take them and have barbecues and games and prizes just a day at the beach. And when we actually got to the day, I think what was so striking to me as I looked across and saw everybody out doing stuff, flipping burgers was how completely normal it was. And the people who the day before were actually, you know, maybe tripping out and we're having an altercation with the police. They were leading the volleyball team and the woman who was in a serious crisis the day before was the one helping to flip burgers. And I thought of that moment as a young student, that if we want to have an impact on ending homelessness, we need to fix the context, not the person.

This is where we are. This is the context. We have a system that is predicated on the idea of escalating risk before we provide help. And so what that looks like in tangible terms is that an 18 year old has to turn 19. And on the Eve of that 19th birthday are asked to leave the group home they're at, if they're with children's aid, it looks like somebody's having to stay in shelter cumulatively for six months before they can access affordable housing and be bumped to the top of the priority list. It looks like young women feeling like the only option to get affordable housing is actually to become pregnant because that's how you can actually get bumped to the top of that list. But I propose to you thinking about this differently. We can do better. This is where we need to go, where we focus our resources, not only on emergency response, but we actually completely realign and focus on long-term accommodation and supports for people. And we also focus on prevention.

Yeah.

And I think what is really exciting, we're doing it. Success is happening across the world and it is happening in this country. In fact, it's happening in this province, actually, Finland has effectively ended homelessness and they've done that because they've invested in housing. Hamilton, Ontario has seen a 30% reduction in the last seven years in people becoming homeless. Waterloo, Ontario regularly has 60% reductions in people entering into the shelter because of diversion protocols and trying new approaches, landmark County in Kingston, nearby us. They both have seen significant reductions in youth homelessness because they focused on school-based prevention model.

And finally, the gold standard that we often talk about in Canada of course, is medicine hat, Alberta, who effectively ended chronic homelessness in 2015. And they have maintained that standard for the last number of years, because anybody who enters into their system only stays



homeless for 10 days before they are immediately given housing. And long-term supports it's amazing doing this. So how people actually making this work well, first of all, data data, data, data, we're getting nimble and creative and effective at having real time, robust, comprehensive data, where we can see any new person that enters into the homelessness system. When they enter in yesterday. We now know that, and we know maybe where they're coming when our data is really good. We know that maybe there's a hospital, that's actually discharging a lot of people directly into the shelter. So maybe we can have a conversation with that hospital and develop a better policy. We also are starting to see what I would refer to as systems integration, this idea that rather than wearing my individual agency hat, we're going to focus on having a systems approach instead of one agency referring to other places. We actually have a person coming into the system and being able to access all of the collective resources of the system. And finally, what this really is, is a change in philosophy. We are stop. We have stopped asking people to fix themselves before we provide a basic human. Right.

Okay. Yes, exactly. So what about taking it to the next level this last year? Um, Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I apologise. So I work at the Canadian observatory on homelessness should have said that, um, my name's Katie Burkholder Harris, and this last year, I've had the privilege of working with communities all across this country, uh, in being able to do local systems planning. And specifically I was focused on a project where we asked the question, what does an end to homelessness look like? How do we define it? How do we measure it? What does it look like in concrete terms? And one of the things that came up again and again, I mean, lots of people talked about systems integration and data and prevention and all the technical stuff, reallocation of funding, but they also talked about something that was, I think, interesting and not something we often hear about in this space.

And that was community people said at the end of the day, you know, people who experience homelessness, if I get rehoused and the only person in my life is somebody who is paid to be there. It's not enough we can do better. And when we started to scratch the surface of what that actually meant for people, it was a sense of belonging. And it was also access to something that we also don't talk about all that often in this space, social capital and the idea that somebody people don't get jobs because of job programmes, people get jobs because of connections and networks. And I think what's exciting about this is that we understand this intuitively as Canadians, because we have a model, the sponsorship programme that we have for people who are coming into this country as refugees is exactly this idea of re-imagining the village.

It's bringing people to support a person or a family that's coming into the community and being like, Hey, here's the good grocery store. Here's the doctor that you could connect with. Let me help you sign up for ESL classes. Let's do this together. Let's have dinner together. These are the sorts of things that help people be a part of community. And if we, and thinking about ending homelessness are not actually addressing this part of the work. We're not going to have a long-term impact, but I think that we actually understand this and we know how to do this. And what's exciting about this is that it's not about service providers alone who are in this work to end homelessness. It's all of us. This is a group project. So I encourage you to be a part of that group project and find ways to engage with folks in your community. Both after they may have had a brush with homelessness or before a lot of suburban moms that I talk to have kids who stay on their own coaches, who are friends of their kids. We already know how to do this. Thank you very much.

HOST: Kaite Burkholder Harris spoke at The Walrus Talks at Impact in 2019, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked, wheeled and web-cammed into the virtual stage at The Walrus Talks.

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Kaite Burkholder Harris from The Walrus Talks



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