



Voices from the Field

Welcome to *Voices from the Field*, a podcast series produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. The NCCIH focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada.

Episode 19 – Emergency management planning - a climate change and health adaptation project of the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq

In this episode we hear from Amber MacLean-Hawes about the emergency management planning that has been done by the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq. Over the past five years, this adaptation project comprehensively supports the 8 First Nations member communities with emergency preparedness using a holistic approach through a climate and health lens.

Bio

Amber MacLean-Hawes has recently transitioned (Feb 2022) to Nova Scotia Health as a Health Promoter within Public Health. Previous to this Amber held the role of Emergency Management Program Manager with the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (CMM) and worked with 8 Mi'kmaw communities in Mainland Nova Scotia. Amber started with CMM back in 2017, in the initial stages of a Climate Change and Health Adaptation project aimed to support communities' emergency preparedness using a holistic approach through a climate and health lens. Since then, Amber has had the joy of seeing this project develop into a more comprehensive program, which provides support and resources to increase overall community emergency management capacity and efforts. Amber attended Dalhousie University where she completed a BSc Chemistry (2014) and a BSc Health Promotion Honours (2017). She has research and work experience focused in community development, health promotion, environmental health, social justice, and underrepresented populations including systems impacted youth of colour.



Transcript

Amber MacLean-Hawes - My name's Amber MacLean-Hawes. I am currently the emergency management program manager with the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (CMM). I'm talking to you today from the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People here in Nova Scotia. I've been with CMM for almost five years, and working on the emergency preparedness initiatives and programming with 8 First Nation member communities that we serve and support. We work with Acadia First Nation, Annapolis Valley First Nation, Bear River First Nation, Glooscap First Nation, Millbrook First Nation, Sipekne'katik First Nation, then we have Paqtnkek Mi'kmaq Nation and Pictou Landing First Nation.

Roberta Stout - Can you tell me about the work you've been doing on emergency management with First Nations communities in your region and how it relates to climate change?

Amber MacLean-Hawes – Over the past five years, we really started doing work and were really getting a sense of seeing where communities are related to emergency preparedness, but with a heavy focus on climate change and how that impacts emergencies and also the health impacts of both of those on our communities.

So when our communities are going through an emergency event, we're seeing if climate change has an impact, and also what are the health impacts from these emergency events that are happening to our community members and how are these things kind of stack on top of each other.

Currently, right now we're working with multiple communities on developing their response plans. We've done risk analysis with the majority of our communities that then feed into our response plans.

We've done multiple levels of training across everything from different types of emergency management training or incident command systems training. We've also done stuff that are kind of outside of the main emergency management but stem [from] some of those issues of climate change that our communities are concerned about. For our communities, that's where the big driving focus is for emergency management planning is really behind the change in our climate. We're aware of when we've looked at some of the things that our communities have noticed as trends in our area, we are seeing stronger storms.

We're seeing the frequency of events such as hurricanes happening more often. We're seeing changing in our rain and snow patterns within our winters in Nova Scotia and what our winters are looking like. We're also seeing there's more drought happening in our area, which we're preparing for more wildfires as a result of that. Community members have also mentioned a change in animal migration patterns coming, so we know that that's also an aspect of climate, but that's something that also leads into emergency planning, say the example of the increase of ticks in Nova Scotia which, in turn, someone might not see that as an emergency management response, but if we see this increase in ticks and then we see an increase in Lyme disease, that is then turning into like a health emergency, right, and how our province deals with that and especially our communities and awareness around that.

I think we are on that track to start looking a little bit more broadly of what we're considering as an emergency event and how we frame it, and also who is all involved in that. So, it might be emergency managers and it's probably health that is probably going to step in quite a bit there, but really working together [because] I think there's key aspects in both sectors that really help with something like that. And then we're also seeing with our climate, since our climate is changing, we're also seeing a decrease in animal habitat which has also impacted our communities with some of their traditional harvesting and different events like that, and where they're going for some traditional foods and how they're getting that supply is shifting. As well, community members have noticed that the animals that we'd usually hunt, they might not be okay to hunt anymore and especially okay to eat, based on our climate and based on different aspects that have been happening within our area and the environmental issues that we're all facing. So those are some of those climate change things that we're so aware of and they're always in the background and happening.

So probably within the second year of the project, and doing a bunch of surveys and community workshops and engagements, wildfires, not that they occur often in our region, but it was a large concern due to the potential impact that they could have on our communities and where they're situated. So we've also done a lot of wildfire assessments [and] different levels of training. So wildfire, suppression, just providing skills into our community members so that they can increase their capacity to respond if something were to happen. We've also been focusing on a large wildfire prevention project, which is really looking at ways our communities can prevent the risk of wildfire. So everything there from like training and engagement to focusing on the individual homes and what they can do around their home, to then expanding it to the broader community and what the community can do collectively, and then looking at some of the larger mitigation actions that we can take as we're working this spring to do a firebreak surrounding Bear River First Nation. We piloted that project with them, based on their high risk for wildfires and also where the community is situated. It's heavily

forested and it's also up on a hill, and based on current wildfire occurrences in Nova Scotia, they were kind of at that high priority. And kind of a good pilot community to start working with to focus on some of those levels of preparedness with an emergency management, related to wildfire.

Then also looking at climate, how our climate is shifting. We are seeing warmer temperatures and especially that southern region of the province. We're seeing more climate data that is saying that it's getting warmer and especially within wildfire season, we're seeing that as well. So that's kind of what we focus on there. But the thing to really mention is a lot of this is community focused and community driven.

We are trying to find more ways [be]cause this project started out very heavily focusing on climate change and health adaptation and finding ways to adapt to our current climate. Then we shifted a little bit more into emergency preparedness, but also really adding that health impact, like health aspect to that.

Because typically the emergency management world, and it is changing, which is wonderful, but when I started, it was really focused on natural disasters and natural events and very standardized to those things. It was more of a challenge trying to bring in those health aspects into emergency management and what that looks like, the psychosocial aspects and elements of an emergency event, and how our community members are impacted by those.

And not just short term, also like the long-term impacts of those events. We've done surveying within the first year, the project to see like a lot of the things community members have experienced in emergencies that are concerning for them is when they're either due to emergency event, they feel like they're being isolated or they're being displaced from their home and from their community. At times, we're also seeing damages to structures and then a lot of rebuilding that has to take place to the physical community. But I think sometimes we forget about the rebuilding that has to take place to the individual and the community members [when] someone goes through an event such as that. So we're always being mindful of that and finding ways, like how do we incorporate recovery into our emergency management planning?

Roberta Stout - Can you tell me some of the health implications that you've been observing?

Amber MacLean-Hawes - When we look at health, we broke it down and based on the medicine wheel and looking at kind of the physical aspects, the mental aspects, emotional and spiritual, to see what communities, what their take is... like what their take on those aspects of how they've been impacted. So given a range of emergency events that have happened [like] power outages, winter storms, hurricanes, flooding, water boil advisories that happen - a lot of the physical stuff was more around like body pain, different levels of injury, and sometimes infectious diseases because of the situations. But then we start really expanding more into like the mental health aspect and looking at like how we've had stress and anxiety play a role in emergency events.

Communities did mention a concern around addictions when an emergency event happens. So we know that there are folks struggling with addictions and trying to be mindful of that while we're planning for emergencies because we know that could also be a challenge, and also add an extra level of concern on someone when they're already currently dealing with something and then have to deal with an emergency event on top of [that]. Then we have things like post-traumatic stress injury or depression, and some people were even mentioning stuff with like their sleep habits and stuff have changed after an emergency event.

A lot of folks were feeling like anger, sadness, panic. A lot of times there was like periods of grief felt. Then there was a lot of like pain and suffering felt on that emotional side and then also loneliness, and that's usually happening when we see people... say an example, we have a power outage and someone, so they no longer have access possibly to social media, access to their families. Maybe they have to relocate to somewhere where there is no power. So that could create a sense of loneliness in the event of emergency.

Spiritual[ity] plays a role as well as how the community comes together during an emergency event, what someone is doing to cope on their spiritual level during an event. But looking at family, coming together, some people mentioned loss, having a loss of connection during those events, and loss of hope, and some other things like that.

Multiple things like social determinants of health that our communities might face differently than other communities, also looking at where our communities are situated. They probably aren't in the best like geographical area.

So that also creates an extra level of stress on a community too, when we're having an emergency event within their infrastructure, and also how we're recovering from that when systems are already at capacity. Then we know that there's still a lot of work within like housing. So looking at more of some of those health promotion aspects and how that'll actually go hand in hand with the emergency preparedness and management. I think if we start incorporating some of those ahead of time within our planning, like we're planning and doing preparedness so that we don't have to... really hoping that we never get to the event, that the event doesn't happen. And if it does, then we're prepared for it. But we really want to be proactive and not reactive within our planning as well, which is also looking at... we need to focus a little bit more on the upstream approaches even with an emergency management compared to downstream.

If we do have a storm and say we're having a large power outage ... and [in] Nova Scotia [it] happens quite easily based on our infrastructure, but what are ways that we can at least support our communities in that, or maybe even with communications so that we're not seeing as long a period with them losing communication or power or access, so really looking proactively into some of those things.

Roberta Stout - Can you tell me why it is important to have an emergency plan in place for First Nations communities?

Amber MacLean-Hawes - The importance of it is so communities kind of understand where their resources can be focused in the event of emergency. Plans are extremely important, but something that's a next step up from that is actually understanding and exercising our plans. We have an emergency management plan that's been created and then what happens is, if gets put on a shelf and we're not exercising it, then we're kind of losing that level of preparedness that we put time into. So where a plan is extremely important, it's also important to exercise that, keep them updated regularly, and continue to bring in the folks that need to be in that plan.

But, plan development takes a long time [be]cause it takes consistency. We've been working at this for the last five years, really trying to develop these plans. Risk assessments, we've done those quite extensively with our communities as well [be]cause they all go into our emergency management plan. But the risk assessments, they can take a lot of time to accomplish, but communities are quite aware of the risk generally and based on historically what has happened. So communities kind of know like, yes, every March, once the snow thaws, we're going to get flooding in this area [be]cause it's happened over and over and over. Or communities are like, yes, we know that there's a rail line that goes through our communities so we know that that could be a potential risk. So there's certain things like that the communities are always aware of, but it's just how we're rolling it out within our emergency management plan and creating just maybe a little bit more ease when that event actually happens, that if you have a plan, you might be able to easily flip through it and find what you need and work with the team.

Last year it was Hurricane Dorian came into our communities, and communities prepared knowing that it was coming within ... we had a couple of weeks' notice that that event was happening. So you see community starting to get ready, getting their supplies and resources ready for their members. But also seeing how communities would - if another neighboring community, say they required a generator because their

power outage was going to be out longer than another community - we're seeing communities donate those to other communities to support them. We're seeing that support and that neighboring support from our First Nations communities to each other, but also seeing that within other communities that surround other First Nations communities and other municipalities and seeing them support them in ways was really positive.

And then also just seeing community members just step up and help their neighbor, like help someone if they need to get their driveway shoveled because someone needs to get out or feel okay to go clear some trees in an area or check in on maybe an Elder to make sure that they have what they need during this power outage.

A lot of times we focus on what could we have done better, maybe what were some of the negatives and maybe what where sometimes that we weren't prepared. I think sometimes we lose focus on acknowledging like what we did really well and how those... how us doing those things really well, really gave us more time to focus on some of those areas where we needed more work within our planning.

So I think sometimes just to be reminded and mindful that we need to look at yes, there are weaknesses, but we also really need to highlight our strengths that we do in emergency related events.

Roberta Stout - Well on that very strengths-based conclusion, I really want to thank you, Amber, because the work that you're doing and the work that is being done by the communities that you're working with surely will support them as we see more and more climate changes happening within the regions.

And it's really important to, as you say, to have those emergency management plans and processes in place so that communities are safe during these events that will be coming in, in future years. So I really want to thank you for taking your time to talk with us today, Amber. And it's been a real pleasure to hear of the work that's underway.

Amber MacLean-Hawes - Oh my gosh. Thanks Roberta, for having me in, welcoming me on to this. It's been kind of exciting and it's been kind of our first time [that] we've kind of done something like this. So we really appreciate it and I always want to like, just remind folks that like, it's really, our communities [that] are driving this and we're just helping to coordinate some of the efforts.

Roberta Stout - To hear more podcasts in this series, head to the Voices from the Field, on the National Collaborating Center for Indigenous Health's website, NCCIH.ca. Music on this podcast is by Blue Dot Sessions. It appears under a creative commons license. To learn more, go to www.sessions.blue.