

## RESEARCH COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

*Meet **Lorie Steer**, Director of the Urban Health and Homelessness Services Department at the Neighbourhood Group.*

*The Neighbourhood Group is a multi-service organization striving to respond to a wide variety of community needs, and formed by a fusion between St. Stephen's Community House, Neighbourhood Link Support Services, and Central Neighbourhood House. The Neighbourhood group is one of MARCO's community partners. Visit their website [here](#).*

### **Can you tell us a little bit about the communities served by the Urban Health and Homelessness Services Department?**

The Urban Health and Homelessness Services Department (UHHS) is located in Kensington market, right on Augusta Avenue. We primarily serve people who are experiencing homelessness and people who are living in poverty. Often we see people who are struggling with mental health and substance use challenges, and many other issues related to poverty and marginalization.

### **What have been the biggest challenges during COVID-19 for the Urban Health and Homeless Services Department?**

As an agency overall, it's been very challenging to figure out which services can be open and which can be virtual, how to actually provide those services, and how to keep our service users and our staff safe. At the UHHS Department, we've stayed open from the very beginning, because we have a number of essential services. One of the essential services we operate is the overdose prevention site, a supervised injection site which operates six days a week. Another essential service is our voluntary trustee program, which is a case management program to help people manage their money. The program pays members' bills, including rent, and helps them create a budget. It's the member's own money, but we help them manage it. Some people come every day to pick up money, so we couldn't close that program.

UHHS also has a large drop-in centre, which has been one of the biggest challenges to manage during COVID-19 because it's a large open room with 200-250 visitors a day. We provide essential services like access to food, showers, laundry, and social connection. There are also many services attached to the drop in, such as primary care, nursing, psychiatric services, housing help, employment support, and mental health case management. Many people rely on our drop-in, so it was essential to keep it open. In the beginning, there was very little information and we didn't have a lot of personal protective equipment. We had to work really hard to source personal protective equipment and come up with some good procedures to keep everybody safe. We went through a number of changes as time passed because direction from the City and province changed frequently. Eventually, we landed on allowing 15 people into the drop-in centre at a time. One person could sit at each table. We needed extra staff for

screening, sanitizing, and serving coffee, tea, and snacks, which people would normally get for themselves. We had to create a very controlled environment.

Throughout, I have to say, the service users have been amazing. People have been so patient. I think many of the people who use our services are very thankful that we've been able to stay open, since many day drop-in programs had to close because they just didn't have the staff or resources to stay open. We were able to stay open only because our drop-in is not an isolated program, and is based inside of our main service location. Because many other programs at our main service location were not running, we could pull staff to help in the drop-in and with screening.

**Why is your agency involved in MARCO, a project that seeks to evaluate programs that serve marginalized communities during COVID-19?**

I wanted to get involved in MARCO because I want to shine a light on some of the challenges and new experiences that we've had during the pandemic. For example, The Neighbourhood Group has been very involved in the isolation and recovery hotels, and our peer staff have been working at the sites. We hired over 70 people with living/lived experience from across the city. It would be great to take a closer look at some of the programs we have been part of during COVID-19 and see what has worked, and why.

**What moves you about the response to COVID-19 by the Neighbourhood Group, and the community that the Neighbourhood Group serves?**

I'm really moved by the commitment of the staff team at UHHS in working through many challenges and fears. The staff are incredibly committed to the service users. They make sure to come in to work every day to keep the doors open and they are flexible and accommodating. They have been amazing and I am thankful. In the early days of the pandemic, I could not sleep as I was deeply worried about the people we serve. Figuring out how to continue to provide services felt like a monumental and complex task. Our dedicated managers and amazing staff worked together and not only did we keep our services running, we also expanded services and developed new partnerships.

The agency was also very flexible figuring out how we could support staff. For example, we revised work hours, we brought in lunch every day for the staff, and provided transportation support so the staff would not have to go on TTC as often.

As for the service users, I've mentioned this already, but I can't believe how incredibly patient people have been. Service users have been extremely willing to work with us and be flexible. There are lots of new rules, like we're going to do things this way, you have to line up here, you have to sanitize before you come in, you have to be screened every single day. Despite it all, we've had very few complaints or even people expressing frustration, which amazes me, because if I was out there I would be incredibly frustrated. COVID-19 has been a nightmare for people who are homeless. The places where people would go to sit down, cool off, and use the washroom were all closed. And then, there are residents in Toronto who are complaining that they don't like seeing tents, or they don't like seeing people sleeping outside. Although most of the businesses in this neighbourhood have been good, some of them have been saying they don't want people who are homeless around. But where are they supposed to go? People have been treated terribly. I think COVID-19 really shines a light on how we treat people who are living in poverty or experiencing homelessness in the city. A lot of it has been terrible. But, we've also had so many neighbours, local businesses, and people across Toronto donate so generously. People

have provided food, donations of PPE, water, and grocery gift-cards that we can give to people so they can get fresh food from the grocery store. There have been lots of amazing things, and lots of generosity.

We have tremendous support from various agencies in Toronto, and people are working together and just getting the work done. I have had the pleasure of working with many committed partners throughout the pandemic. There are too many to name, but in particular I want to mention Angela Robertson, Executive Director at Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre and Bill Sinclair, our CEO at TNG who have been constant, reliable supports, ensuring that those who are experiencing homelessness or living in poverty are not forgotten. They have been creative, persuasive and relentless in advocacy and planning work.

*To learn more about the MARCO Project, visit <https://maphealth.ca/marco>*