



VOICES FROM THE FIELD

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

EPISODE 13

Inuit risk and response to COVID-19

In this episode, Aluki Kotierk, the President of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), speaks to the ongoing inequities that put Inuit at greater risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. She also speaks to the challenges that some Inuit communities and households face when trying to follow public health guidelines around physical distancing and hand hygiene. We also learn how Inuit organizations and communities, in addition to Nunavut's Chief Public Health Officer, have responded to the pandemic and ensured that Nunavut has remained COVID-19 free.

BIO



Aluki Kotierk was sworn in as the 8th President of [Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated](#) on December 13, 2016. During her campaign, Aluki focused on empowerment, Inuit language and culture, collective healing and Inuit identity. Originally from Igloolik, Aluki lives in Iqaluit with her family. She grew up in a bi-cultural home as the oldest of seven children. After attaining a bachelor's and master's degree from Trent University, Aluki worked for various Inuit organizations including [Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada](#), Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now [Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami](#)) and [Nunavut Sivuniksavut](#). Aluki returned to Nunavut where she has held several senior management positions in the Government of Nunavut and the [Office of the Languages Commissioner](#). Kotierk was most recently Director of Inuit Employment and Training for NTI. Aluki has a passion to empowering and improving Inuit lives and has a keen interest in how Inuit culture and language can be better incorporated into the way programs and services are delivered.

TRANSCRIPT

Rick Harp: Aluki, can you speak about the funding and infrastructural deficits in the North that put Inuit more at risk during a pandemic like COVID-19?

Aluki Kotierk: Well I think the infrastructure deficits in Nunavut, as well as the other Inuit regions across Inuit Nunangat, have been well documented over the years. I think now that we find ourselves in a global pandemic, we were very concerned about the impact and the spread that would occur when and if COVID-19 arrived into our communities. We know we have a housing crisis. We know that there's a large portion of our population that are challenged with food security. We know many Inuit live under the poverty line and we can see that infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis or RSV, continue to be prevalent in our communities, before the global pandemic, and so we knew that. If and when it arrived into our communities, the likelihood of it would spread quickly because of these infrastructure deficits that we have. When we listen to the public

health messaging about the global pandemic, we hear the way in which to approach it is to practice physical distancing but that's very difficult when you have an overcrowded housing unit where many people of all generations are living in the same dwelling. We hear that Elders are particularly vulnerable so in that circumstance, for instance, we particularly worry about how, in an overcrowded housing unit where there are many generations living in that same dwelling, how it will spread. We know, for instance, the circumstance of tuberculosis, the two main factors that contribute to the spread and maintenance of tuberculosis continuing to be a challenge in our community is the overcrowded housing as well as food insecurity. We also know that, for quite some time now, I've been talking about how, in Nunavut, we know children go to bed hungry every night, that it's 7 out of 10 Inuit children going to bed hungry every night. Recently, in the spring, there was a new study that came out that indicated that instead of getting better, it is actually getting worse. So even though currently we have no confirmed COVID-19 case, we have the circumstances under which Inuit live that highlight the inequity Inuit live under and that are, in my view, already a crisis mode, and then on top of that we're in a global crisis where we're all trying to fight and to make sure COVID-19 does not come into our community. So in that context, I praised the Chief Public Health Officer of Nunavut who put in, at a very early stage, very strict travel restrictions, limiting who could travel into Nunavut. It was possible because every community in our territory is a fly in community so it was more manageable to be able to limit who could travel into our jurisdiction.

One of the things I want to highlight is that, once the federal government committed to providing funds specifically for Indigenous communities, and we became aware of how much was going to be allocated to Inuit, at the Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated board, we determined how to further allocate that amongst the four Inuit Nunangat regions. In Nunavut, when we became aware that 22.5 million dollars was going to be allocated to Nunavut, the Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated board continue to this day to have regular board calls and one of the things we determined was how to spend the money, how to allocate this money that was being directed for Nunavut Inuit. One of the first announcements that we made was to invest 1.25 million dollars to address water and sewer delivery to our communities. There are 25 communities in Nunavut and we know that not every household receives water delivery on a daily basis. One of the public health messages is to wash your hands frequently for 20 seconds and we know that many houses are overcrowded and we know many Inuit have the mentality of conserving water, so one of the measures we put in place in support of this was to ensure there is a daily water delivery so that Inuit could start using water and following the public health message and use water more liberally. The other initiative that we worked with the Government of Nunavut with was to start addressing food insecurity. With the schools closed, we know that many children rely on the breakfast program or the lunch program, whatever program each community has, and so the concern is, knowing the statistics about the food insecurity challenge that we have, how do we support households when we are telling people to stay at home to practice physical distancing? How do we support them to be able to stay at home when they might not have the means? There were some investments made to ensure that the communities were in a position to address food security. Another aspect of that was that we provided funds to each of the hunters and trappers organizations in each community so they could do a community hunt, and we asked that the Hunters and Trappers Association would go and do the community hunt and whatever animals they harvested, they would then share that in our cultural sharing mechanism and share that with a priority for Elders, as well as widows and widowers, as well as anyone who are self isolating or in quarantine.

I know that recently we had a false positive in one of our communities. It was ironic because the community where the false positive occurred was the community where they had recent media attention because they didn't, and still don't, have a functioning water pump in their community to be able to provide the water delivery. So each day, the water truck drivers would have to go on top of the lake, drill a hole to be able to pump out water to fill up the water tank and then be able to be in the position to deliver water into the community. So when we heard that there was a positive case in that community, it put even more of an urgency about these infrastructure deficits and how do we address that. Some days later, and I say some days later because we don't have the diagnostic capacity in our territory yet to be able to determine whether or not tests are positive or negative, and we very much depend on airlines to provide not only our food supply,

medical supply, but also to take out swabs from our territory to southern laboratories where these tests can occur. So once that we found out that it was a false positive, I was so extremely pleased and proud of communities who had impromptu celebrations and they weren't even part of the community where the false positive occurred. So you could see on social media, for instance, a community outside of Tunnganik have an impromptu parade which still practiced physical distancing but showed, in a very community sense, that we were extremely pleased and happy that there still was no confirmed COVID cases in Nunavut.

Rick Harp: Aluki, as you noted the number of cases of COVID-19 in Nunavut remains at zero. Is there more you want to say about how communities themselves have kind of taken ownership over that outcome, in terms of their responses and in terms of their strengths?

Aluki Kotierk: I mentioned that the Chief Public Health Officer had put in strict travel restrictions. I think certainly that has helped. The messaging on a daily basis from the Government of Nunavut, from the public health messaging, has been very helpful to emphasize the importance of physical distancing, about washing hands differently. Also in addition to that, I think that they bring memories, a living picture, of Inuit being sent away from their families for tuberculosis in the 1940s and 1950s is still very current in the memory of people. So I think people have taken it very seriously that we do not want to get to a point where this very infectious disease is ramped in our communities, and so people have been very creative in the way they continue to show a sense of community, the importance of *ilagit*, kinship. I've heard so many stories that have been shared with me, for instance, where young Inuit have gone off to get ice and have delivered them to different Elders' homes so that they can have ice water for their tea. I've heard of many community initiatives that have encouraged staying at home by having window decorating initiatives, for instance. So thinking of different competitions or contests that people can participate in from home, and I think that encourages the sense of community and connectedness amongst Inuit, which is very helpful. I think many Canadians don't realize Nunavut is quite unique than other jurisdictions where the public majority language isn't French or English. It is such a given for me. That was one of the first things that we did at NTI when the school closed, we worked with Inhabit Media, who produced books in Inuktitut. We said okay, we need to have these all available electronically on this website and we need audio books, someone reading them as well. We reached out to the federal government and said "Hey, is anything going to be in Inuktitut?". If you don't have the capacity, please send the materials to us and we will make sure it is available in Inuktitut. By the end of the day, we don't care whose responsibility it is, it needs to be done because it is a matter of life. People need to understand.

Rick Harp: Aluki, we sometimes hear about a new normal as a result of COVID-19. How might that play out among Inuit communities?

Aluki Kotierk: That's a very interesting question because I know that I've been listening to the national news and I hear references to going back to normal. I don't think we should go back to normal. I don't know what the normal was for other Canadians, but I think this is an opportunity to highlight the inequities in our territory, Inuit communities, compared to other Canadian communities. We shouldn't go back to normal where we just let it be as it is. We need to look at it and start addressing the inequities. Late last week, I was listening to the national news and there was commentary about the Canadian unemployment rates, how it was soaring to 13% and how aghast everyone is. I have no ill will for any Canadians who are going through a hardship, but I went back to my computer to look at what is the unemployment rate for Inuit in Nunavut [was] and in 2016, according to the Census, the unemployment rate for Nunavut Inuit was 22%. So I listened to the national narrative about some of the very hard realities Canadians are now facing due to the global pandemic, and I sometimes catch myself thinking but that's our normal. That's our day to day life that we've been trying to bring light to when we speak to the federal government, to the federal ministers, and we have been trying to say, we are Canadians too. We should be awarded the same sorts of life, quality of life and life expectancy as other Canadians. So when I hear people talk about back to normal, I hope that this very devastating and hard pandemic that we're all going through, is used as a way to have those deeper discussions about how to address the inequities in our country.

Rick Harp: Aluki Kotierk, thank you.

Aluki Kotierk: Thank you very much.

Rick Harp: To hear more podcasts in this series, head to the *Voices from the Field* on the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, nccih.ca. Music on this podcast is by Blue Dot Sessions. It appears under a creative commons license. Learn more at www.sessions.blue.

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