

# Kehewin Cree Nation



## Housing manager builds on ideas and opportunities for success

Building comes naturally to Lorna Youngchief, Kehewin Cree Nation's Housing Manager.

Take, for example, the way she has been building on her career skills since graduating from Athabasca University in 1999 with a degree in administration.

Youngchief, who previously worked as a community health representative and health manager in Kehewin Cree Nation, stepped into an administrative role in the band's housing department in 2012, understanding the importance of health and safety for good housing. She then took on the role of joint manager of both the housing and public works departments in 2014—a very busy position in which public works demands dominated the agenda.

Her career accomplishments are even more impressive considering that she was enrolled in the First Nations Housing Management Certificate Program offered by the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) Polytechnic at the same time!

The program, sponsored by SAIT and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), gives students the skills and tools to manage housing programs and projects. Courses range from project management, maintenance management, and tender and contract management to bookkeeping, effective policies, property management, housing manager relations and more.

"I really enjoyed the planning part of it—the five-year plans, assessing the needs of a community and how to assess your capital needs within that time frame," says Youngchief. "That was probably my favourite part of the course."

To help the 10 students enrolled, courses were taught during an intensive Tuesday-to-Thursday period once a month between December 2013 and November 2014. For Youngchief, the staggered schedule was far preferable to an on-site residency because it allowed her to continue caring for her family, including an adult daughter with medical issues.

Capacity development funding from CMHC covered Youngchief's transportation and lodging costs. "That was very, very beneficial because a lot of First Nations—and mine is one of them—just don't have the resources in their housing administration department," she says.

The program also gave Youngchief valuable contacts and ideas. Her fellow students were already working in housing and they would exchange their own community's housing strategies with each other. "There was a lot of networking between communities and sharing of ideas that was very useful to me," she says.

With a population of more than 2,000, Kehewin Cree Nation faces the same housing shortage as many First Nations. The community has 259 housing units. Of those,

139 are band units that are at least 25 years old and increasingly in need of repairs. The remaining units are rental units. Some 80 people are on a waiting list for housing, mainly young couples with families.

In 2012, the housing department was flooded with requests to fix deteriorating roofs and bathrooms. Hiring electricians, plumbers and other skilled labour was difficult because the First Nation had to compete with oil companies in nearby Bonnyville for workers. Then came the oil crash of 2014 and Youngchief was able to hire workers to complete the needed repairs.

She was also able to cut costs because of a carpenter training program run by the Province of Alberta and Kehewin's social development and housing departments.

The program by Kehewin Works teaches carpentry-related skills like door and window installation to people on social assistance. The province provides funding for the program's supervisor, a Red Seal-certified carpenter, while Kehewin's housing department provides materials so that students get hands-on learning.

"They've put siding on a couple of houses for me, which saved money," says Youngchief. "Without that program, I can't even imagine where we could pull the resources from to address a lot of our housing needs."

Youngchief and her assistant (the department has only two staff members) have since moved on to proactive housing maintenance. In October 2015, they completed a furnace cleaning, vents and ducts program, for example.

One change that Youngchief made to improve cost tracking in tenant files was to assign an accounting code to each housing unit. This way, she is able to confirm whether an expense is just a regular repair and maintenance cost or if it's a capital item.

Youngchief's to-do list includes drafting a five-year plan to coincide with community planning, creating and implementing housing policies and maintenance plans, exploring the best ways to maintain the current housing stock and updating the community's inventory of housing.

"With more time to be able to address capital planning—that's another big item for housing—we'll be able to plan better," she says.

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**CMHC works with First Nation communities to support their efforts to take charge of their housing, to build new and improve existing housing and to further develop their capacity to manage and maintain all aspects of their housing.**

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