

With Residents in Mind: Partnership-Driven Research for Supportive Housing Practices

with Dr. Christiana Bratiotis (UBC School of Social Work), Jana Sasaki (Lookout Housing and Health Society), and Dr. Sheila Woody (UBC Department of Psychology)

[Intro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

0:05

I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the University of British Columbia School of Social Work. This is the Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast highlighting community-engaged partnerships within and outside the University of British Columbia School of Social Work which is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Musqueam people. This episode features Dr. Christiana Bratiotis, Dr. Sheila Woody, and Jana Sasaki. Dr. Christiana Bratiotis is an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia School of Social Work. Her research focuses on hoarding treatment and intervention, particularly in the context of affordable and community-based housing. Dr. Sheila Woody is a Professor in the Department of Psychology and Director of the Center for Collaborative Research on Hoarding. Her research is on hoarding disorder with an emphasis on understanding its behaviours in order to improve its treatment and intervention. Jana Sasaki is the Director of Operations – Vancouver Region at Lookout Housing and Health Society. Jana has significantly contributed to Lookout's harm reduction approach to decluttering in housing through the creation of the Assisting Reduction in Cluttering and Hoarding, also known as ARCH team. Coming together, Jana and Dr. Bratiotis and Dr. Woody discuss their multidisciplinary collaboration and the development of the Home Environment Assessment Tool for Hoarding, also known as HEATH. Their conversation highlights the importance of knowledge exchange which advances the practice and scholarship on hoarding and decluttering.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis

1:45

I'm Christiana Bratiotis and I'm an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia.

Jana Sasaki

1:52

Hi, I'm Jana Sasaki. I'm Director of Operations for Lookout Housing and Health Society. We're a nonprofit agency offering solutions to homelessness in shelters and housing across the Lower Mainland.

Dr. Sheila Woody

2:09

And I'm Sheila Woody. I'm a Professor in the Department of Psychology at UBC and Director of the Center for Collaborative Research on Hoarding.

Dr. Barbara Lee

2:20

Tell me about the work that brings you all together.



Dr. Christiana Bratiotis

2:25

Sure. Sheila and I actually have been collaborating on community-based research for hoarding since 2013, I think. Is that right? The official partnership?

Dr. Sheila Woody

2:39

Yeah, I was going to say 2011.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis

2:41

Okay. Sure. 2011. So a long time. And when I joined UBC in 2017, it was shortly thereafter that we got connected with Lookout Housing and Health Society. I had a then Master's student in the social work program stop by my office one evening and it was, during the break of an evening class and he said, "are you the lady that does research on hoarding?" And I said, "I am!" And he introduced himself and said he was from Lookout Housing and Health and that they were interested in getting some training on hoarding so that they could do some things differently. And so shortly after that, I met Jana.

Jana Sasaki

3:26

Yeah, we as an organization in our housing, often find that there are folks with clutter and an excess amount of collecting and we were just finding that facing inspections for people was really traumatizing and really stressful and we were really just looking for solutions and of ways to avoid having to just clear everyone's belongings out and really get an understanding of hoarding disorder. We didn't know much about that at all. And that's how we sought out the department at UBC.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis

4:11

Yeah, and then I think it was shortly after that, maybe six or so months later, after some initial training that Sheila and I started meeting with Jana and Lookout and the partnership. I would say it was still really informal at that point, at least initially, while we got to know each other and got to understand the program a little bit.

Dr. Sheila Woody

4:33

We were developing relationships with community organizations like Lookout all over Canada. And Lookout's especially appealing because it's in town and we can see you in person. But trying to see what kind of things could we learn about community-based responses to hoarding by partnering with people who are actually doing that work.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis

5:02

I think one of the important things for us around the kind of low barrier housing that Lookout provides in study is that it really is a setting where Sheila and I are quite committed in our research to making sure that it is useful on the ground as immediately as makes sense after conducting good sound research and Lookout was really eager to partner with us. And I think it's been a really fruitful partnership from the beginning. Community-based research is tricky. It's interesting, it's hard a little bit on both sides and I think it's worth every minute of the investment. I feel like our students have benefited from the opportunity and maybe Jana, you can talk about what it's been like to have some of our students embedded at Lookout over time.



Jana Sasaki**6:02**

Yeah. Right from the beginning, I think, we were information seeking, trying to find alternate solutions of different approaches to the way we were trying to create safer spaces for people while giving them ownership of their own belongings and the things that were important to them. And by having this group of outside perspective come in not only was it giving us just a new lens tips and tools and broadening our outlook, but it was also a different perspective of what we were doing. I think initially I was very, I was always feeling that I, I was uninformed, and I didn't have a lot of knowledge, and the encouragement that the two of you and the students brought was like, "oh, you actually have a lot of knowledge and a wealth of information and an insight to things that we don't have from our perspective".

As we slowly gained confidence in the work that we were doing, it was really validating and helpful from your end. I think the great thing with students and we've worked with a handful over the years, everyone brought a new unique skill set or project to working with us. So, not only were we working with our guests and residents but we were also just stimulating our own thoughts and getting new ideas. And yeah, it was just, it was a, it's a great process, but also giving us really tangible tools to use getting into some of the more specifics of the projects, I guess. We were able to have one of the students, Raymond, help us develop a tracking system and using this cloud based platform to start tracking our progress and utilizing a confidential system where we could actually be able to see the, you know, some evidence of the progress of the work that our staff and team are doing.

Dr. Sheila Woody**8:34**

I think that's – leaving something behind is something that's really important to Christiana and me as we work with communities, because we're getting something we're getting data, we're learning things that we then get to go out and disseminate to other people. So that's our scholarly, work, but also we want to make sure that we leave something that's tangible behind, that, that is of immediate use as you were saying, Christiana, immediate use to the organization that we're working with, and that would be different for each organization, so I'm really glad to hear that, that you're finding that it, that we are leaving behind something that is has value to you.

Jana Sasaki**9:20**

Yes. Absolutely. And even just the community connections and the extra resources that we've learned, learning about like the external conferences through the IOCDF [International OCD Foundation], the hoarding disorder workshops, and becoming part of a community to help inform us but also working within the communities within our own work. I think one of the really important things that we were all collectively working on was the knowledge exchanges. Being introduced to other keyplayers: the inspectors, the bylaw officers, the Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services, and being able to open, informing dialogue that gave those different perspectives to our work.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis**10:19**

Yeah, I agree. I will it will be a long time before I forget that knowledge exchange. It was a very powerful day, I think. When you have what we call in hoarding carrots and sticks in the room, so you have the enforcers and the supporters in the room and you're able to really hear one another, exchange information, gain new perspectives, it makes the cooperative work than that much more



important and easier to achieve, I think. I think having a little glimpse as researchers being in the room that day was so important for us to really hear from everyone who's on the front line. I wonder, Jana, maybe you can just talk about the ARCH program itself a little bit at Lookout, because that's a direct outgrowth, actually, of that initial contact for some training and being able to institutionalize a response within Lookout.

Jana Sasaki

11:23

Yeah. I think we were finding our environments are really busy. We have a variety of different housing models and realizing just the time and patience and intensity of working with folks that collect and creating the safer spaces for them. We really determined that there was a big need to have a designated team and we sought out extra funding and looked for grants and were able to find a grant through the Vancouver Foundation for systems change. And through this grant, it enabled us to build a little team that was designated to helping folks declutter. And as an organization, we really wanted to take a harm reduction approach so that we were giving people choices and autonomy and the ability to have their own decision making. And so, our team would be able to go and work one on one, really take the time to develop relationships, to be patient, to get a broader understanding of what people were going through, because we, everyone's really unique and different.

So, having this designated team, we're able to be fluid and take a different approach and. Alongside with that, we really wanted to change the dialogue of what does it mean to, for people – we were trying to avoid forced clear outs. There was a tendency back when we first started where if there was an inspection or if there was a serious incident like the propensity for a fire or something like that, we would just go in and force clear the room or we would be told by a fire department or the inspector that you just had to clear everything out and start fresh and this was a good thing. So, we, we were really looking at that and while it was a good thing from one perspective, it wasn't a good thing from all perspectives. And so, I think that's where we were both growing with the information seeking and getting tools and utilizing the different resources from the UBC team. But also, being able to use the funding to take some time and have this harm reduction approach to decluttering.

Dr. Sheila Woody

13:58

I'm really glad you mentioned the Vancouver Foundation funding, because I think that's another really important piece of our work together is how we've been able to draw on different sources of funding. None of the pieces of funding that we got, we would have been able to get without the partnership. So, we've been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. And it's the partnership that was funded. It's that we're partnering, we look out with other agencies as well but they're funding. us because we're doing this kind of work. And Vancouver Foundation, I think we were an integral part of helping them to see that, oh, systems change is possible here. And here's the vision for how that would occur. And then there was the MITACS funding for, to support a student to come and, be mentored by us in research, but be mentored by you in the real world. And that also wouldn't have happened without the partnership. It's defined as partnership. And so those three, you have to have money to do this kind of work. And those three things that we all worked on together have made partnership have the gasoline that it needs.



Jana Sasaki**15:15**

Yeah, I, going back a little bit to the impact that the student work has had and now that you mentioned the MITACS grant – just to expand on that, it, it wasn't just tracking systems, but just having an insight to help us look at different grant proposals or give some feedback for reports that we're writing really help us hone in and elevate our statistical evidence. I think that the ethics and confidentiality that comes behind and through the research work also helps elevate and aligns with our confidentiality. We've had some really great feedback interviews and engagement sessions with our residents and they were able to provide their insight to the program and to our ARCH team and how effective that is and being able to have that performance quality improvement through the feedback from the work the students have been doing.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis**16:28**

Yeah, I think when I think about the partnership, it really is bidirectional, and I think that's intentional on all of our parts, and I also would say it requires maintenance, like any relationship, you know, we meet, gosh, for a while there, we were meeting once a week for, gosh, what was that, a year and a half, two years? It was a while. We were meeting really regularly just to be sure that we were staying connected with each other, that the work was on track, also that we were continuing to build our relationship. I think, Jana, you have been just such a champion of this work, and it really, I don't think Lookout Housing and Health would be exactly where they are had you not been the champion that you are for this work.

And because of what it is that you bring, your enthusiasm and commitment, other staff at Lookout have followed and we've had the opportunity to get to know them through our really regular contact as research partners, and I think about your role on the steering committee for our Partnership Development grant through SSHRC and again, this enormous time commitment in a world where you don't have very much extra time to contribute really meaningfully to us conducting research that is grounded in the needs of the community and the professionals so that people with lived experience of hoarding can receive, as you say really compassionate trauma informed harm reduction care in terms of their support for hoarding. And I just really, I think these kinds of partnerships are so special and I know neither Sheila nor I take it for granted and are very grateful for what you've personally contributed to the specifics of our research in addition to the partnership pieces.

Jana Sasaki**18:39**

Thank you. Yeah. Definitely it's been both ways. And so, I just think back to the growth that as an organization and as our project has had just the feedback and the time spent and the learning from both of you has been enormous really. And we've really, we really have grown a lot and just, made little shifts here and there, but now when we look back to 2018 or whenever it was, we started, like we, we really have elevated a lot of things and really just the, subtle shifts in language and the thinking of, seeing, observing you and your aspect of the research and the development of the HEATH and things has just been a fascinating process and I really do appreciate it now.



Dr. Sheila Woody**19:39**

I really appreciate – you couple times said that you feel like the partnership with us has elevated what you're doing and I feel like for us, the partnership with you in something that feels so important to us because the residents at Lookout are, like, they have such tough lives, and they are at risk of being evicted not from Lookout, but just their lives are, like, they're dire issues that they're facing. It's not a mad people think of hoarding and they think of, “oh, it's just a messy home, right?” And it isn't. People can lose their housing. And that feels just so urgent to all of us.

Jana Sasaki**20:27**

I think even the understanding of for our residents...the tools we've been able to give and just some understanding and some grace for themselves, that the decision over discarding personal belongings for someone that has maybe been homeless or been living on a street, giving some school, some skills and conversation around that has really been helpful too. As well as giving folks the understanding of why there are inspections and why we need to talk about fire safety and how they can achieve this without necessarily discarding but perhaps rearranging or storing things in a different way and so that's been really valuable for our residents also.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis**21:26**

Sheila, maybe you could talk a little bit about the development of the HEATH and the role that Lookout has been playing with us in that.

Dr. Sheila Woody**21:37**

Yeah, so the Home Environment Assessment Tool for Hoarding is something that, that we developed as a way for people, professionals from any background to go into a hoarded home and assess not for how much clutter is there or how tidy things are, but for how safe things are in, in very explicit ways and of course we don't have that expertise ourselves so we had to partner with professionals who do frontline work in hoarding across the U. S. and Canada and people at Lookout and other people in Vancouver as well were part of the, that team and each person contributed from their expertise and so we created this tool that is very explicit in what makes for safe. Like, how, why does the door need to open? Oh yeah, the smoke alarms need to work, the sprinklers need to work and so it's a checklist with a severity rating for how risky it is from a variety of different perspectives.

And I think when I think about the HEATH, everybody contributed their own thing, but when I think about what stands out about the Lookout and your contribution, Jana, was a really opening our eyes to “where is the baseline, what is the lowest score going to mean?” because if you come from a mental health kind of perspective, the people who are walking in our door are people who say, “oh, I have a problem. Can you please help me with it?”. And that's a, like they have different goals for their home. And instead, what we're talking about with the HEATH is an inspection that's being conducted in somebody's home where they didn't necessarily want anybody there. In fact, they would prefer you to not be there. And so, then that seems like a different standard. And you helped us to make that really clear about what is it. Given that people where the HEATH is being conducted in their home, this is not something they sought then what is a reasonable...what do we have a right to expect? And we have a right to expect that the fire code gets met and that people



are safe. That's all we have a right to expect or there's a pest management ability so that all the neighbors don't also have the pests that they're in that unit. We have a right to expect that, but we don't have more. And that, so I really think that your perspective coming from a, like the lowest barrier but also what do we have a right to tell people to do in their home? I think that was an enormous contribution that everyone who uses the HEATH will be able to benefit from.

Jana Sasaki

24:23

Yes, yeah talking about the non-negotiables, working with the non-negotiables, but also trying to soften up that approach so that.

Dr. Sheila Woody

24:39

Maybe say a little bit about what non negotiables are.

Jana Sasaki

24:42

Yeah, speaking on as you were saying, these are the life safety factors. These are things that we all have to do, and we can't negotiate on this. So, you have to keep your smoke detector, your alarms clear and functioning program properly, because that's going to be a lifesaving element and you can't hang things from your sprinkler systems that may block the flow of water. But you do have autonomy over what you want to collect and why you want to collect things and how you want to store them as long as we can talk about keeping those pathways free and the doors can open and how you know so a life saving measure can you know, a first aid attendant can enter your room, if necessary, those types of things.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis

25:39

Yeah, I think in addition to that Sheila mentioned that you contributed. I think it was always your perspective brought us back to the client, to the service user all the time in our meetings. And so not only could you talk about those non negotiables or the kind of minimum standard for the, being safe and healthy in one's home, but also how things would land with clients and the language. Certainly, we had our Lived Experience Advisors who also helped us around that, but I think you would bring a perspective of can we say this? This way, this might land this way and I so appreciated because again, that's the kind of thing that as researchers, we just don't know.

We think about what needs to be accomplished, but the bringing in the client's perspective to all of our discussions was incredibly valuable in the development of what are the most basic items as well as how do we communicate those most basic items to include on the HEATH. And I think this was not a thing that happened in a moment in time. Your perspective on the steering committee was a regular engaged event with us, but it was a lot through our weekly conversations. And Sheila and I would leave those meetings having taken a few notes. We'd written things down that you said, or you talked about that are the non-negotiables, we began to generate a small list of things from that. And so, I think just that prolonged engagement where we had a chance really to understand your perspective and through your perspective, your service users' perspective as well.

Dr. Barbara Lee**27:38**

Can you share about your thought forward and some next steps on together?

Dr. Sheila Woody**27:44**

Well, I think one thing that we're working together on now is a student from our team is working with Jana to try to get next step funding. Because the funding that we had for the partnership and for MITACS even, and for Lookout, all of those things are coming to an end. Then what is the next step in in funding. Ideally, I think drawing upon the kind of relationships that Lookout has built with other stakeholders in the community and the evidence that we've been able to gather that the ARCH team is doing something valuable for residents. Hopefully that will provide a compelling basis for getting some funding because I know the ultimate goal is to get stable funding for the ARCH team and stable funding for Lookout probably is in all of its services, is probably like this pie in the sky dream, that's the ultimate goal.

Jana Sasaki**28:50**

Yeah, I would say we're definitely looking towards stabilizing the funding. The funding is the biggest aspect to having a designated team and the more stability that we have as a team and that we have with our staffing, then the more stability that we can provide for the folks that we serve. So actively looking at, higher level, having some more, looking at our stakeholders and how they can be interested in providing the support. So, it's education, it's continuing along with our community partnerships. We're still constantly learning from the perspectives of the fire departments and the other city inspectors and so forth. So, I would like to hopefully see some more of that information sharing and knowledge exchanging moving forward. Yeah.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis**29:51**

I think one of the really beautiful things actually of partnerships like this is that I think there is a period of kind of intense work together – which we have been doing – and that at some point things are Rolling along, not that everything's perfect, but that we have an ease and a comfort and an understanding among us such that Lookout can now take some steps forward knowing that, though the intensity of our meetings is not the same and that as, students finish up and move on and out of Lookout that changes things, but instead that we're here, we're right here and we know you're right there.

So, the partnership will ebb and flow at this point after this intense period, but both have the comfort and probably the gift, really, of knowing that we're right there and you can ask us for these things and we can ask you for those things. I think one of the things I'm really proud of that has happened more recently is that through the student, we've had the opportunity to help you really think about how to use the data that you've collected also to generate some case studies that you might be able to use for funding applications to really think about storytelling so that you have some of the capacity already at your fingertips when you do go to seek funding and when you're talking even within your organization and I think that's the natural flow of things in the next steps. Yeah, I think of this as a partnership for a long time to come.



Jana Sasaki

31:44

Yes, absolutely.

Dr. Sheila Woody

31:46

I also think we're engaged right now in a knowledge mobilization effort. So, Christiana and I have been traveling around and training people how to use the HEATH. But we've also been working with Lookout on training people how to use the HEATH is training professionals who are working in the field. They're intervening. But we've been working with you, Jana, through our student, on developing knowledge mobilization for the residents. What do they need to know about keeping their unit safe? And how can we communicate? What we know about safety to them in a way that's accessible and even maybe appealing?

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis

32:26

One of the things I think that Lookout has been focused on developing is some kind of resident information sheet or guide, infographic that can be given both at the time of move in to Lookout properties, but also perhaps as tied to the inspection process. And the items that would be on that checklist or infographic would really come directly from the items that have been generated for the HEATH while adjusted just slightly to fit in the in the Lookout context. So, I guess that's one way that residents will be the end user of some of the knowledge generated and mobilized through the HEATH.

Dr. Sheila Woody

33:21

Jana has been working – every unit gets inspected every month but there's so many different properties at Lookout and they all have different managers and different people who are doing those inspections and it seems like Lookout has been trying to think about, “oh, let's have some, consistency across all of this”. And the HEATH, it seems like, is being influential in "what does that consistency look like?", even among people in different properties who've never even had training about hoarding. But what kinds of things are they looking for and provide knowledge about the safety and the non-negotiables that are important to that organization, and using language that is respectful, some kind of tangible standard about what does passing mean?

Jana Sasaki

34:15

And coming from a place where, across our organization, there are so many different varying levels of understanding of hoarding and collecting and so trying to create information that makes sense, that's easy to read for our residents, trying to make it engaging or interesting and not threatening because there's enough pressures and enough stress in a day-to-day life without having to, evoke fear of inspections and so kind of making these tips and tools a little more engaging maybe a little fun so that there is an interest to learning instead of immediately just a desire to push away and disengage.

Dr. Sheila Woody

35:06

Turn, dial down the threat level. I feel like it's a great privilege to partner with people in the community who want to learn more about what's the current state of evidence? To simultaneously have the current state of evidence be influenced by them, what they know, their knowledge, but



also what are their needs? What do they need to know? And we can't provide all of that, but we can have, we can be influenced by it.

Jana Sasaki

35:46

I go back to our, in the beginning, how we just felt like, “what do we do and are we doing it right and where do we go from here?” And stumbling upon this relationship has just had such a fantastic, positive impact and really strengthened us in so many different ways and I think that just the empowerment that comes from that and the various different ways of learning has just had such an impact on the program itself and our learning as a group and as a team has gone from...yeah, it's just it's been exceptionally beneficial.

Dr. Christiana Bratiotis

36:36

I think of Lookout as a forerunner in the field. There are few housing organizations across North America that have made the kind of commitment to supporting people with lived experience of hoarding and that commitment is both at an organizational level and also at a very personal level among some of the staff. And, as a forerunner, it's often difficult because, you look to your left and you look to your right and you think, “where can I get some support? Who else is doing what?” And when you're out ahead, it requires this level of innovation. It requires a level of, “well, we're going to be brave and try this on and see how it goes”. It requires a level of creativity and also, a deep commitment to learning, to continuously learning. And so it feels especially good to be partnered with an organization that is really out ahead and has such a willingness to share with other organizations in the Lower Mainland about what you're doing and how you're doing it and building capacity across the community, certainly within Lookout but larger than that.

[Outro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

38:14

Thanks for listening to The Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast! This podcast is a University of British Columbia Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholars initiative funded by the UBC Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation's Knowledge Exchange unit. I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the School of Social Work, podcast host, and executive producer. Michelle O'Kane is the podcast producer. Cathy Jiu, Qian Zhou and Maddie Cathcart are our podcast producers and editors. Podcast cover was designed by Cathy Jiu. Podcast music is open source, called Motivational Day, Audio Coffee by Denis Kyshchuk. Thanks for listening!

