

NINA MOINI: For this next conversation, we're going to look just over Minnesota's northern border with Ontario, Canada. Both sides of that line share a remote landscape of forests, water, and, right now, wildfires. There are more than 100 fires burning in Ontario, and they've devastated two First Nations communities, according to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Others have had to evacuate, including the Gakijiwanong Anishinaabe Nation, which has ties to the nearby Bois Forte Band of Chippewa in Minnesota.

Many evacuees are staying in Thunder Bay, where local organizations like the Ontario Native Women's Association are working to support them. That group's CEO is Cora McGuire-Cyrette, a member of the Bingwi Neyaashi Anishinaabek First Nation. I talked with her about how her organization has shifted its focus to helping people displaced by the wildfires.

CORA MCGUIRE-CYRETTE: I was in Geneva at the United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People. We were attending the session down there to do interventions when we started to hear about the wildfire situation back home, once we had started to hear one of the local communities was completely devastated that the entire community had burnt to the ground. Once that had gotten over to us, we mobilized our leadership team, our managers, our frontline workers, and said, OK, we need to respond to the evacuations happening in Thunder Bay, and we need to be able to open our doors and look at what can we do to help support the community, to be able to welcome our relations that are coming in from all of these communities into Thunder Bay, because they're going through such a traumatic event. And we really wanted to show leadership of welcoming people to our community in the best way that we can. And very proud to say that we're one of many agencies here locally who have opened their doors, their arms, and their hearts to these communities.

NINA MOINI: How many evacuees would you estimate you're helping support right now?

CORA MCGUIRE-CYRETTE: I would say it's ranging anywhere from 100 to 150. We're providing a variety of different supports to them, everything from cultural supports. We have knowledge holders and people who do ceremonies that have come into the city to be able to help provide that connection to our spirit going through such a traumatic event. We also provide food, different types of clothing, and item-based supports. We set up like an internet cafe at our office, just recognizing people may want need to connect with family members. And so different toiletries and hygiene supplies, children's toys. They can always get-- children are now-- they've had to leave everything behind, and so diapers and formula.

We also run a clinic. And so looking at how we can help provide medications, prescriptions. What we do is we pivot. We call ourselves a living organization. So we do debriefs every day or every couple of days. OK, what do we need to change in order to meet their needs? One response that we've been hearing is that our outreach vance is getting a stronger response for need. We're going to be continuing to pivot where we're bringing the services to the people, as opposed to waiting for the people to come to us.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, you must be so busy. Tell us a little bit, if you would, about what it's been like where you live surrounding these wildfires over recent years. Is this worse than what you've seen? One of the difficult things about this that we've been hearing over here in Minnesota are these fire officials saying that this has been just unprecedented. They're having a really hard time, it sounds like, managing some of these more remote lightning strike-based fires. What has the environment been like for you all?

CORA MCGUIRE-CYRETTE: I think one thing we have to remember, I think as a community, climate change is real. But what we're seeing now, I think it's going to continue to happen and occur. I think when you're looking at what scientists have been telling us for years and our own people as indigenous peoples and looking at our responsibilities to Mother Earth, she's telling us something. She's telling us that change needs to happen. The lesson learned, I think, for us going forward is always going to be how do we as a community respond to these crises and be able to plan for them, and how are we going to support each other during crisis?

NINA MOINI: Well, to your point about climate change and perhaps events like this unfortunately becoming more common as the years go on, that's why coordination is so important with different government entities, with everybody in the area, perhaps with your neighbors across the border in Minnesota. And I understand several First Nations leaders have called for an official inquiry into the Ontario government's handling of the evacuation, saying communication has been just poor and slow. How are you reflecting on that? What are your thoughts?

CORA MCGUIRE-CYRETTE: Our thoughts are always like, we're going to remain focused on the needs of the community. Recognizing that there's many different levels of government here in Canada, in particular around when it comes to First Nation jurisdictional issues and always having to remember Canada's responsibility and that direct relationship with the First Nation communities. One part of the work that we do as an organization, we take a non-partisan approach to our work, that we work with any government partners and build those relationships. So that way, we can look at how can we work together going forward. And so I think I just would continue to call on our community to remain focused on the needs of the community right now while we go through this crisis together.

The one story that I really want to bring forward is how much love and support the community has provided to these communities, especially here in Thunder Bay. Thunder Bay tends to get a lot of negative press over the years, I'll say, just due to the systemic issues we face here as a community, and to be able to see such an outpouring of love, support, donations from so many people in Thunder Bay, all the agencies coordinating together to prioritize these communities that have been displaced and the families and the children and our elders.

And it's not just us as indigenous organizations doing this. This is also non-indigenous agencies coming together. And it's your everyday citizens here in Thunder Bay that have stepped up and are saying no to racism and discrimination, which can occur and does occur. We know racism is alive and well. And so I think the one thing that I'm really seeing and hearing from the community is that some of the First Nation chiefs had said that their phones have not stopped ringing, with so many people reaching out to them, offering their support. And so I think that's something I think we need to continue to build off of.

NINA MOINI: How closely connected are First Nations in Canada with tribal nations here in Minnesota, and how can people in Minnesota continue to help?

CORA MCGUIRE-CYRETTE: Yeah, it's a really good, I think, question. I think when we're looking at some of the work that we do as indigenous peoples, we have to remember that we do have our relations that are so closely connected and not let the border stop us from building those relationships. And I think there's that opportunity, I think, going forward around how do we support each other and build those relationships to be even stronger.

So us as an organization, for instance, we've been building relationships with indigenous women globally, like the Maori Women's Welfare League in New Zealand. There's a number of aboriginal women's agencies in Australia, and we're having meetings to look at how can we share resources and support each other going forward in all of our advocacy. And so I think locally with the First Nation leadership, and here, I think that's also an opportunity maybe that they want to explore.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. Cora, thank you so much for your time and for your work. Is there anything else that you wanted to share or you want people to know?

**CORA
MCGUIRE-
CYRETTE:** I just want to say hello to our relations across the border. And yeah, just want to thank you for covering the story and meegwetch to each and every person out there who's taking up the responsibility.

NINA MOINI: That was Cora McGuire-Cyrette, CEO of the Ontario Native Women's Association and a member of the Bingwi Neyaashi Anishinaabek First Nation.