

“Our Strength is in Our Community”: The Crisis Centre for Northern BC’s Remote Responders

By: Lina Moskaleva

British Columbia’s Dawson Creek is a northeastern city, bordering Alberta, in a region known as Peace River Country. The city is home to around 13,000 people; one of them is Chenyl Graff, whose family has lived in Dawson Creek for generations. “I grew up on a farm, and my parents still live on a farm, and all of my family are farm folk - they are quite fantastic,” says Graff, her smile coming through the call. Volunteering remotely from her hometown as a Crisis Line Responder with the Crisis Centre for Northern BC has given Graff a unique perspective on crisis care in the province.

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Graff moved back to her hometown from Edmonton. Moving meant giving up her volunteer role at the University of Alberta Sexual Assault Centre, so after Graff arrived home, she felt eager to get back into support work; “There are so many connections that you build with fellow responders and the people that you’re supporting - I missed those connections.”

When she learned about the opportunity to become a remote responder at the Crisis Centre for Northern BC, Graff was elated. “What I really love about remote responding is that we actually get to respond... without it I wouldn’t have been able to volunteer,” she pointed out. That’s because Dawson Creek, just like many other Northern communities, is situated hours away from the nearest crisis centre office.

Profiled in the [first story](#), the Crisis Centre for Northern BC has served Northern B.C. since its inception in 1970 from their main office in the North’s biggest city of Prince George. Their service area stretches from the Alberta border in the east to Haida Gwaii in the west, from Quesnel in the south to the Yukon border to the north.

The community of Dawson Creek is small enough that if a crisis hits, it hits close to home. “When you live in a big city and you hear an ambulance’s siren, it’s powerful but you’re used to it. When you hear an ambulance in a smaller community, your first thought is ‘Oh no, what happened? Who’s hurt?’” says Graff. People care but, in Graff’s experience, what’s missing the ability to respond to mental health crisis is the confidence to talk to people about their mental health and approach the subject of suicide.

“I think a lot of the people in our northern communities are incredibly resilient, not just because we live in awful cold winters, but because we’re living in a place where there aren’t a lot of resources,” reflects Graff as she speaks about how few training programs and services are

available in her community. “Free services that are as barrier-free as possible are important as many folks can’t afford mental health care, especially during our ongoing affordability crisis.”

Crisis centres, like the Crisis Centre for Northern BC, act as the safety net that helps people to keep from falling through the cracks as they navigate their way to stability or find long-term support. “I am in awe of these crisis centres because I think if they didn't exist, there would be an incredibly massive void.”

The Centre’s services also keep people from unnecessarily having to use more resource-heavy services like emergency rooms. Graff refers to the Crisis Line Responders as the “first of the first responders” because if they can get the caller to “make it through the night or get people to find different ways to cope, then maybe that saves a 911 call.”

Across the province, crisis line responders are trained to meet people where they are currently in their life and to empathize and build connections with every caller. However, getting support from a local responder can make a big difference. “Somebody who lives in Vancouver may not know what it's like to live in minus 40 degree temperatures and still have to get to work or have to deal with it still being dark at 9 A.M.,” explains Graff.

“I think there are a lot of differences in how people live and work in different parts of the province so when I'm on calls and I hear somebody from Northern BC I'm like ‘oh what you’re saying makes a lot more sense to me’.”

The Crisis Centre for Northern BC aims to bridge the distances between northern communities and to equip people with the skills they need to support each other by working toward providing training opportunities and connections to all who need them. Volunteers like Chenyl Graff, working in remote and rural parts of BC are the key to providing nuanced support and local knowledge to those in their communities facing their darkest moments. As Graff puts it, “Our strength is in our community.”

—

To learn more about the Crisis Centre for Northern BC’s services and programs, please visit crisis-centre.ca.

—

The Crisis Centre for Northern BC is committed to supporting people during times of crisis. If you or someone you know is in crisis, please reach out, help is available 24/7:

- Northern B.C. Crisis Line: 250-563-1214, 1-888-562-1214, 24/7
- Northern B.C. Youth Line: 250-564-8336, 24/7
- BC Suicide Line: 1-800-784-2433, BC-wide, 24/7
- 310-MENTALHEALTH: 310-6789, BC-wide, 24/7
- 9-8-8: 988 (phone and text service), National, 24/7