

First Nations National Building Officers Association

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**First Nations National
Building Officers Association
presentation to the:
Standing Senate Committee on
Aboriginal Peoples
November 23, 2005**





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1. Introduction

The First Nations National Building Officer's Associations (FNNBOA) represents First Nations Building Officers (FNBO) who provide residential, commercial and institutional construction and renovation technical services. These services include plan reviews, inspections, repair recommendations, technical advocacy and advice for buildings located in First Nation/Aboriginal communities.

Some officers also provide services to neighboring off-reserve communities under various programs such as Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporations' Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP)¹; or work as Certified Energy Advisors under the EnerGuide for Houses program² (EGH); and provide inspection services for corporations such as Manitoba Hydro and institutions such as banks.

There are approximately 250 to 300 aboriginal home inspectors employed in the sector, servicing 651 First Nations communities. Our Association has approximately 120 members, and represents individuals who work either full- or part-time for Tribal or Band Councils, or work independently.

Recently, more individuals have been moving towards working independently as they have realized that there are excellent opportunities to provide a wide range of services.

As the federal government announces more funds for First Nation housing on reserve and considerable funds for the EnerGuide program for Low Income Households, First Nations Building Officers will be in greater demand to inspect new and older homes, and also to perform energy efficiency assessments.

Consequently, there are great business opportunities for building officers. FNNBOA has been working with government departments at the federal and provincial levels, and with financial institutes providing mortgages to individuals wanting to own their own homes on and off reserves. First Nations Building Officers are professionally prepared to respond to these business opportunities.

2. FNNBOA – An Overview

FNNBOA is a nonprofit organization registered under the *Incorporation Act* of Canada in September, 2003. Since the inception of the association, FNNBOA has accomplished the following major projects:

- Has established a website www.fnnboa.ca
- Has established national occupational standards
- Has established an independent Certification Council
- Has established Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics

¹ RRAP programs help low-income Canadians, people with disabilities and Aboriginal Canadians live in decent, affordable housing. For more information see: <http://www.cmhc.ca/en/prfias/index.cfm>

² See <http://oeo.nrcan.gc.ca/houses-maisons/english/homeowners/grant/grant.cfm>



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- Has established business cases for funding
- Has conducted an industry profile on the sector³
- Has established an accreditation model and completed a related two-volume report
- Has participated in national training initiatives for Part 9 of the National Building Code and the implementation of an objective-based code
- Has been very proactively communicating by:
 - Making presentations to stakeholders and government officials
 - Providing information and making presentations at conferences
 - Printing two newsletters
 - Holding networking opportunities for stakeholders and partners
 - Participating in the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Round Table

In the next few months, FNNBOA will be focusing on projects that include training courses to supplement the national building code; looking at the feasibility of hiring an education and capacity development coordinator; expanding the mandate of the association to include building maintenance workers; and providing support for the Certification Council.

3. Standing Senate Committee Presentation

Upon reviewing the mandate of the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal People to investigate elements that enable Aboriginal communities and businesses to succeed and or identify the obstacles to their achievement, we feel that FNNBOA can address this mandate as it relates to business services in the area of housing. We will focus on the successes and later on the obstacles.

3.1. Successes

1. As an organization, FNNBOA is an excellent example of capacity development. Prior to the formation of FNNBOA, First Nation Building Officers across the country had very little opportunity to communicate, network and consult with each other with respect to technical issues, housing development, business opportunities, skills development and training. Nor did the sector have a national voice on housing conditions and other grassroots level issues.
2. The association works in close partnership with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), Natural Resources Canada (NRCAN), National Research Council (National Building Code), and Health Canada (Mould and Healthy Housing).

Recently, the association formed a partnership with the Alberta Safety Codes Council and the Ontario Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs. The association is working in partnership with other groups such as the

³ Report is available on the website at www.fnnboa.ca



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Construction Sector Council, the Alliance of Municipal Building Officials and the Canadian Association of Home and Property Inspectors to ensure reciprocal recognition of competencies and skills, in order to provide additional business opportunities.

3. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation was instrumental in supporting the development of the association for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that being able to work with FNNBOA fills a major void for them by bringing Native technical service providers together under their capacity development and Native Inspection Services Initiatives.

The creation of an association gives CMHC the means to consult directly with inspectors in the field on numerous issues and projects, helping them obtain valuable and informative national input. In the same way, other government departments now rely on FNNBOA and its members to provide information on various housing issues and consult with the group in terms policy implementation issues.

Since the inception of the association, FNNBOA attends meetings across Canada making presentations to inspectors about business opportunities, provides input on housing policy initiatives, helps identify training needs, and is helping the membership to work with each other to resolve building quality issues.

4. FNNBOA, in close cooperation with CMHC, has identified the need for training and course development. CMHC, NRCAN and INAC have developed specialized courses geared towards improving the knowledge and competencies of First Nations Building Officers, which will lead to better qualified inspectors. It is anticipated that many of these courses will be adopted by community colleges and incorporated into their curriculum. This will enable FNNBOA members to obtain college diplomas and will promote further recognition of the profession.
5. FNNBOA has introduced an independent Certification Council that is responsible for the certification of First Nation Building Officers. The Council is now receiving applications. This is a major accomplishment, as no other housing inspection sector, including both the municipal building official and home inspectors, has either a national certification system or a Certification Council.
6. The FNNBOA have also established standards of practice and a Code of Ethics. The standards of practice have the objective of enabling First Nations Building Officer to better understand their roles and responsibilities to deliver services with the highest standards. The standards are aimed at encouraging First Nations Building Officer to maintain and increase the quality of the professional practice, while respecting the values of their profession and communities and protecting the public.

3.2. Obstacles

Despite the recent developments to promote the business opportunities of First Nation Building Officers, there are some major obstacles that prohibit this sector from reaching its fullest potential. These are as follows:



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1. Inspectors are unable to access or obtain affordable errors and omissions insurance. Home and property inspectors working off reserve can obtain errors and omissions insurance either directly or through their professional associations. However, First Nations Building Officers providing similar services within their communities are unable to obtain this type of insurance.

One of the reasons for this is that the officer provides the services of both a municipal building official to ensure compliance to building code requirements and a home/property inspector who inspects existing homes for prospective home buyers. Insurance policies are not geared towards this type of service.

Consequently, from a business development perspective, many First Nations Building Officers may not be able to carry out their professional services, in spite of an increase in the number of business opportunities, especially with the increase in demand for new housing.

2. Another obstacle relates to the inequalities of payment for services provided by First Nations Building Officers in First Nations communities. For example, in the past, it was the practice that inspectors working for provincial or national agencies (off reserve) were providing home related inspections for those in First Nations communities.
3. These type of inspections included plumbing, electricity and sewage systems, and the inspectors were being paid for their services. When, however, these activities were transferred to First Nations communities, the First Nations Building Officers were sometimes expected to perform their services without remuneration if no funds were available.
4. Consequently, in some communities these inspection activities are not carried out while others are paid for by communities who have the funds. This double standard for reimbursement cripples any business opportunities especially in the remote communities where many inspectors will not be paid.

Furthermore, First Nations Building Officers will provide inspection services for CMHC housing and be paid for the services, whereas remuneration for inspection services provided for INAC housing varies among the regions. For example, in Atlantic provinces, inspectors do not get paid to inspect INAC homes, whereas in Alberta fees are paid. From a business opportunity perspective, First Nations Building Officers cannot establish a viable business in those areas where inspection services will not be paid.

5. Although FNNBOA agrees that there are a number of professionals that are accomplished in First Nations communities, the Association believes one of the key ingredients to success is official recognition of standardized skill levels through certification.

Currently, FNNBOA's certification is voluntary. However, in order to encourage First Nations Building Officers to become certified and for certified First Nations Building Officers to obtain credibility, the certification needs to be officially recognized by government departments such as CMHC and INAC who are responsible for funding and delivery of First



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Nation housing programs as well as by our own Band and Tribal Councils who are responsible for the construction of homes.

One way to get official recognition of the professionalism of First Nations Building Officers is for CMHC and INAC to require that all homes inspected in First Nation communities be inspected by a certified building officer. Furthermore, the Band and Tribal Councils should pass By-laws requiring that homes be built to national building codes and be inspected by certified individuals.

It is also important to point out that FNNBOA's certification is in response to the Auditor General's report on Federal Government Support to First Nations –Housing on Reserve⁴ where the Auditor writes about the need for compliance to the building code and calls for improved training.

Currently, mandatory inspections are not required for INAC housing programs. The development of certification addresses several of the Auditor's recommendations.

6. Another obstacle facing our sector is access to training funds. Last year, FNNBOA conducted a profile⁵ of its sector and found that many have considerable experience in the construction and homebuilding trades and a core group became inspectors after having worked at least ten years in construction/trades elsewhere.

Consequently, our sector requires training and continuing education to ensure our professional skills are maintained. For example, as the sector moves towards certification and the introduction of a new national building code, our sector requires continuing education. However, under existing Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements (AHRDA), we cannot access these education funds. Some of the training that we receive is paid for by CMHC under their capacity development program, some is paid for by the Bands that have available funds, while some individuals pay for their own training. FNNBOA, however, believes that education funds should be coming from AHRDA.

FNNBOA approached an AHRDA holder which is First Nation community or organization that has an agreement with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). The proposal was that FNNBOA work with an AHRDA holder to identify and organize training for the inspectors. The education would be based on the national housing initiatives and the need for consistent training across First Nations Communities. The training would also be based on the policy objective of compatibility. That is, the same skill set and training for an individual providing the same work off reserve, should be the same on reserve. FNNBOA would have an education coordinator to take on this task.

⁴ Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2003) "Chapter 6 – Federal Government Support to First Nations – Housing on Reserves" in *Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the House of Commons* April 2003.

⁵ Kiedrowski, J. and Guerra, T (2003) Profile of First Nations Building Officer's Sector. Report available at www.fnnboa.ca



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However, HRSDC rejected this model, as the individual inspectors had to seek funds from their local AHRDA holder. The problem is that if the AHRDA holder does not view the training as a priority as the current push from HRSDC is that individuals be made employable. Currently, personal development is not a priority. Additionally post secondary funding does not include the inspection industry; the inspector will not receive the funds for training. Yes, there are appeal formalities, but many people will not spend their time challenging decision making. We are planning to raise this issue directly with the Minister.

7. Higher levels of training appear to be the key to improved recruitment and retention and increasing of our sector as a viable business. Traditionally, training is provided in classrooms or on site. This is an appropriate method for some learning objectives. However, to access other types this group may be a good candidate for new-media-based learning such as on-line and video conferencing training. Currently, Humber College in Toronto is providing on-line training to the inspection and construction sector. However, there are many more specialty courses that must be put on-line. This involves substantial costs because of the limited number of people in our sector.
8. The profile study also pointed out that our sector is aging. The average inspector is around 48 years old, except in Quebec. Consequently, there is a need to focus on recruiting Aboriginal youth to this sector. Currently, there is a real shortage of inspectors especially with the increase demand for new homes in First Nations communities.



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4. Recommendations

1. Government agencies support the inspection industry in First Nation communities through the Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business to enhance economic development opportunities.
2. Government agencies formally recognize the Certification model developed by FNNBOA.
3. Establish incentives to insurance companies to enable First Nations Building Officers to purchase appropriate errors and omissions insurance.
4. Inspections services be funded by organizations requesting the inspections.
5. HRSDC establish a policy whereby national organizations can provide training based on national initiatives rather than on local AHRDC policies.
6. Provide special funding to allow educational materials to be put on line (e-learning) for individuals in communities, especially those in remote access areas can learn on line.
7. Establish a program to encourage youth to become more involved in the construction/trade sector.
8. Any funds allocated to promote the construction trades in First Nations communities should also include First Nations Building Officers and the property maintenance workers. Although the property maintenance workers are not part of our organization at this time, they will most likely become part of FNNBOA next year. Collectively, FNNBOA would represent around 2,000 people servicing the communities.