

An Examination of First Nations Housing Management Training Programs

INTRODUCTION

It is in the best interest of every First Nation to have a housing manager who is well-trained and suited to the position, and a local housing committee or authority, which is well managed and financially sound.

This along with long term strategies, can reduce the incidence of crises and alleviate housing pressures.

The primary goal of this research project was to identify what skills a housing manager in a First Nation community needs to be effective and what training opportunities are available or required.

METHODOLOGY

Input was sought across Canada specifically from educational and governmental institutions involved in the delivery of training programs, experts in the housing field, government officers and housing managers in First Nations, in order to:

1. Identify what specific skills are required to be an effective housing manager in First Nations communities;
2. Determine what training programs currently exist to provide the necessary training to housing managers in First Nations communities;
3. Through a gap analysis determine the extent to which existing training programs are meeting the identified specific skill needs required to be an effective housing manager in First Nations Communities; and
4. Produce a model training plan for housing managers in First Nation communities that is generic and can be utilized in any First Nation.

First Nations communities were selected to represent a cross section of large, small, urban, rural and remote locations. Where it was possible communities were selected from various Tribal Councils in each region to provide further diversity of the sample set.

The researchers initiated contact with 37 First Nations communities. 17 housing managers responded and expressed an interest in participating in the research.

This resulted in:

- 7 face-to-face interviews with housing managers.
- 10 telephone interviews with housing managers using a survey questionnaire.

The researchers also examined job descriptions and evaluated the effects of geography and demographics on the position.

This included an analysis of task identification and what skills were required to perform those particular tasks. Because the performance of a housing manager or department is directly related to the environment where the activities take place, the following were examined:

- the geographical location of the community,
- the First Nation affiliated population both in and outside of the community,
- the financial status of the First Nation,
- the existing policies,
- the local community cooperation with the housing manager, and
- the level of experience that the housing manager has.

Research Highlight

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RESULTS

Job Functions

The researchers found that in order for the housing department in a First Nations community to run effectively there are three distinct types of functions:

1. The functions of a housing manager coordinator or director;
2. The functions of a housing finance administrator; and
3. The functions of a housing project manager.

The functions of the manager involve developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the community's housing strategy on a daily basis. This includes making recommendations to Chief and Council, looking after maintenance and new construction budgets, enforcing policy and doing contract administration.

The position of housing finance administrator is to plan, control and report monthly on the cash flow and budget. In addition, the administrator can perform rent collection, respond to housing inquiries, review insurance policies and procedures, process loans and monitor budget take-up. Usually the finance position is shared with other departments and interacts with Chief and Council.

The position of a housing project manager involves overseeing the renovation and construction of housing, the development of the community's infrastructure, contract administration, specification review, estimation of costs and budgets. This position requires a broad knowledge of housing technology.

Each position identified requires a fair amount of the "soft skills" of diplomacy, confidentiality and common sense. At times these skills, along with the ability to manage numerous priorities in spite of a limited number of staff and budget restrictions, can be the most important skill set within each job.

Skills for Housing Managers

Skills for housing managers were classified into four categories in decreasing order of priority:

- Housing construction knowledge,
- Housing administrative knowledge,
- Housing financial management skills, and
- Communication and interpersonal skills

Specific skills and knowledge are itemized in Table 1.

Skill Area	Important Specific Skills
Housing Construction	<p>Knowledge of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Construction materials and methods ■ Blueprint reading ■ Building codes ■ Construction coordination ■ Lot servicing ■ Contract administration ■ Tendering processes ■ Specification writing ■ Maintenance protocols
Housing Administration	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Time manage ■ Develop policy ■ Process applications and loans ■ Keep detailed records of transactions ■ Generate reports ■ Create an organized filing system ■ Develop emergency measures ■ Develop a protocol for general inquiries ■ Develop a housing manual ■ Develop maintenance protocols ■ Computerize the department
Housing Financial Management	<p>Knowledge of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Funding procedures ■ First Nation budgeting – Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) ■ Subsidies ■ Resource planning ■ Leasing processes ■ Cash flow management ■ Financial statements ■ Accounting principles ■ Bookkeeping
Communication and Interpersonal	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communicate effectively in writing and verbally ■ Deal with stress ■ Provide leadership ■ Motivate staff ■ Be culturally sensitive ■ Have community awareness ■ Resolve conflicts

Table 1 Required Skills and Knowledge for Housing Managers

The most important attributes are shown in Table 2.

<p>1. Housing Construction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Diploma or classroom training acquired ■ Knowledge of residential construction ■ Ability to schedule maintenance programs ■ Hands-on experience ■ Knowledge of the subtrades
<p>2. Housing Administration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ability to prioritize ■ Writing skills ■ Record keeping ■ Computer skills
<p>3. Housing Financial Management Skills and Knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Budget preparation ■ Cost estimating ■ Property management ■ Mortgage financing
<p>4. Communication and Interpersonal Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communication skills ■ Stress management ■ Conflict resolution

Table 2 Most Important Attributes for Housing Managers

Environment

The researchers identified six distinct work environments:

1. Remote First Nation communities without road access,
2. Remote First Nation communities with road access,
3. First Nation communities adjacent to small rural communities,
4. First Nation communities adjacent to large rural communities,
5. First Nation communities adjacent to small urban centres, and
6. First Nation communities adjacent to large urban centres.

They found that the housing manager must have a wider range of skills and be increasingly sensitive to cultural differences the more isolated the community.

In remote communities:

- The housing manager must be able to assist with virtually every aspect of the housing department.
- The access to training is very limited.
- High transportation costs lead to a reduction in the homes being constructed, which in turn increases housing pressures in the community.
- Reduced building inspections affect the quality control of housing.
- There is greater need for cultural sensitivity, diplomacy, and awareness of potential language barriers.

In First Nations communities adjacent to urban areas:

- Traditional urban property management skills are necessary, including the hiring of renovation staff, knowledge of accounting practices, purchase agreements, leasing options and rent collection.
- There is need to provide more financing options for community members.
- Access to training is more readily available.
- Accessibility to industry, materials and roads can allow for an increased production of houses.

Training Available in Canada

Currently, there are approximately 155 accredited colleges and universities across the country, with many having rural and remote satellite campuses. There are also courses given by agencies which are not accredited.

The researchers found that housing management training specifically aimed at First Nations where individuals need to be aware of the politics and financial approaches specific to First Nations is very limited.

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Federal Agencies

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation offers information on programs that target specific issues that housing managers in First Nations communities will encounter. These include Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP), Non-profit On-Reserve Housing Program (Section 95), and On-Reserve Loan Insurance Program (Section 10).

CMHC has also developed courses such as the First Nations Builders Series Workshops that can be integrated into a formal course curriculum.

Training Needed

The researchers found that there are several areas of training that would be useful for housing managers in First Nations communities but that are not presently available. These include:

- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Construction knowledge
- Financial management with a focus on housing planning and funding
- The opportunity for internship programs, job shadowing and mentoring.

Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Very few courses deal with the softer side of housing management such as communication, negotiation skills, cultural awareness, stress management, socio-economic studies or behavioural sciences.

Courses of this nature are highly recommended due to the complexity of First Nation housing issues.

Housing Knowledge

Many of the housing managers lack formal training in housing construction and had limited practical experience.

Those training programs available are generally of a longer duration than is practical for most housing managers. Shorter training sessions are recommended, and particularly those where the house is viewed as an integrated system.

Financial Skills

Financial Skills management training is needed that is specifically focussed to the needs of First Nations housing managers, across the country but especially in northern and remote communities. This should assist housing managers to efficiently perform their financial duties and daily transactional routines.

Organizational Skills

There are courses related to financial management, computerization, policy development and time management, but very few for housing managers in First Nations communities who have to meet the challenges of housing authorities or departments that do not have a formalized infrastructure and who have limited staff.

Other factors were identified that contribute to the difficulties that many First Nations housing managers have in obtaining the necessary training:

1. Distance which must be travelled to get to courses.
2. The limited funding that is available for training the housing manager.
3. The formal education that is required to participate in training courses, and the individual motivation of a trainee or trainer.
4. The lack of time to travel and attend classes.
5. The difficulty in adapting to an urban centre or non-native community.

CONCLUSIONS

The researchers identified skills needed by housing managers in First Nations communities in regard to housing construction, administration, and financial management and communication and interpersonal skills. They found that remoteness of First Nations communities and lack of courses specifically focused on First Nations commonality issues and environment contribute to the general lack of sufficient training for housing managers in First Nations communities.

The researchers made the following recommendations.

1. Develop a national training and certification program for housing managers with First Nations.
2. Establish a First Nation advisory board.
3. Establish a First Nation Housing Managers Association.
4. Prepare a matrix of credit courses for certification by the association.
5. Establish a network of all existing Aboriginal institutions.
6. Prepare a database that provides current listings for funding and courses.
7. Provide preferred training methods as pilot programs.
8. Investigate the practicality of mentoring and job shadowing.
9. Develop two types of curriculum, student and adult.
10. Provide shorter training sessions for housing managers, supplemented by additional take home materials.
11. Develop a needs assessment tool for use in profiling each workplace and skill sets required for it.
12. Develop a needs assessment tool to profile each housing manager and identify any training needs for that particular person.
13. Review pay scales once certified.

Research Highlight

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research.

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