



## OAHS Closes 2009 as the Recipient of Two Prominent Awards

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The work being done by Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services (OAHS) to put Aboriginal people into safe, affordable housing is not going unnoticed. OAHS received two prominent awards in 2009 in both the housing and general business arenas.



OAHS Executive Director, Don McBain (left), accepts the Northern Ontario Business Award (NOBA) Judges Choice Award from Armando Plastino, CEO of Essar Steel Algoma Inc.

Photo credit: NOBA



In September 2009, the National Aboriginal Housing Association (NAHA) presented OAHS with an award for Outstanding Achievement by a Group in Aboriginal Housing. While the geographic focus of OAHS is Ontario, being recognized by the National voice of Aboriginal Housing reinforces the direction of the work being done and the plans in place to house even more people.

Subsequently, in October 2009, OAHS was again recognized for its growth and achievements by the general business community. While OAHS is certainly a non-profit corporation, the Northern Ontario business community wanted to acknowledge the critical role of having citizens, and Aboriginal people in particular, in safe and affordable housing. Having this strong foundation allows individuals and families to focus their efforts on contributing to society and providing a better future for themselves and their children.

Below is a reprint of the article written by Northern Ontario Business, also available at: [http://www.noba.ca/2009/winners/judges\\_choice.html](http://www.noba.ca/2009/winners/judges_choice.html)

By Andrew Lo, Northern Ontario Business Awards



Imagine living in a Far North remote community and being diagnosed with diabetes. You need treatment, but it's hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest hospital, clinic or out-patient facility. Not only are you sick, but you are about to be homeless too.

This is when the Ontario Aboriginal Housing Support Services Corporation (OAHSSC) steps in to find a home, a safe place to live while treatment continues until the patient is better .

Work like that makes the Sault Ste. Marie-based, not-for-profit company the winner of the 2009 Northern Ontario Business Awards (NOBA) Judges' Choice category, which celebrates the most deserving nominee from the host city.

The corporation has been providing housing for Native Canadians living off-reserve since 1996. It owns 1,600 rental properties and is the first mortgagee on 650 other homes in communities of 5,000 or fewer (people) across Ontario. The units are given to the neediest applicants.

“The basis of economies for everyone is having a safe, affordable place to live and if you don’t have that, health suffers, education suffers, the whole gamut of what creates individual and community economies suffers,” says Don McBain, executive director of the OAHSSC.

OAHSSC has been selected as an NOBA winner because of the humanitarian work staff does everyday to find and build places for Aboriginal people. Special recognition is also given to their commitment to building environmentally friendly homes and utilizing Aboriginal skilled tradespeople.

McBain is not sure exactly how many people he and the 25-person staff have helped over the years, but estimates it’s in the thousands.

He says the success stories are when they provide housing to families to get them back on their feet.

“Because this is a rent-geared-to-income program, we put people in with small children and maybe seasonal employment or one member of the family working. The really good part of the program is seven or eight years later we see both members of the family working. The rent is now higher in our program and they can go out and rent anything in the community. That’s a success story.”

It’s been a big year for the OAHSSC. In April, the corporation officially took over ownership of its Ontario portfolio from the federal government’s Rural and Native Housing Program.

“Now, we have the ability to direct ourselves in good business practices, where before, it was so confined by different government housing programs,” says McBain.

“Now that we own our entire portfolio” we focus our dollars on greening, by installing solar technology into the building,” he says.

The technology is easy to maintain without expertise and is more cost effective to deliver and operate since they can train people in the community to operate the systems.

McBain works with 10 Aboriginal contractors to build and maintain homes with each.

Each employs five or six people, making the total number of full-time jobs created by the OAHSSC about 75-80 people.

One of the OAHSSC’s goals is to employ Aboriginals as much as possible, a challenge that is getting easier as time goes on.

“There’s a really significant increase in the middle class for the Aboriginal people,” he says.

“I really firmly believe that our ability to deliver safe, affordable housing to them is providing these opportunities for their children to be educated and be great contributors to society.”

Building homes in Far North communities has additional challenges with high transportation costs, a shorter building season and material life expectancy. Cultural differences also have to be taken into consideration.

For example, Native culture involves boiling a lot of water inside the house, says McBain. This causes mold in a typical home with inadequate ventilation. To counteract this problem, the OAHSSC is looking at using new materials such as paperless drywall or marble wallboard.

The recent economic stimulus has been beneficial for the affordable housing sector since members were willing to jump into the market, unlike the private sector, which was cautious due to the poor economy, says McBain.

“Our long-term goal is to be economically self-sufficient with no subsidy required to provide affordable housing (to anyone who needs it).”

The corporation is also developing educational programs for youth. As a former commercial real estate broker, McBain says the satisfaction he feels after working to find people homes is far greater than selling real estate.

“I love to come to work every day. Every day we make changes to people’s lives and that’s why we do what we do.”

[www.OntarioAboriginalHousing.ca](http://www.OntarioAboriginalHousing.ca)