

# Mike Holmes sets sights on native reserves

Contractor and TV star to help build green, affordable homes while teaching building trades

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Mike Holmes has a new project: Fixing Canada's native reserves one home at a time.

And it may just be the burly contractor's most ambitious move yet.

Partnering with the Assembly of First Nations, the man behind the hit show *Holmes on Homes* is planning to build green, affordable housing on a large scale in native communities across the country, and to retrofit subpar homes that currently exist.

"The First Nations were the first to live off the land and give back to the land," said Holmes. "So why not do it today?"

It all began last year. Holmes was on a speaking tour of reserves in Quebec and British Columbia, and saw a common problem.

Community members wanted to get into the skilled building trades and learn new building technologies that are environmentally sustainable. But the current system just wasn't cutting it.

Holmes was also taken aback by poor housing conditions.

It's estimated that about 85,000 homes are needed to deal with

overcrowding in native communities. And around 40 per cent of existing homes on reserves are in need of repair. Mould and fire hazards are of particular concern, as is clean water. Some 116 communities must boil water for their homes because of contamination.

To this day, there are still homes being built that do not have hot and cold running water or a means to dispose of waste.

"No one in Canada should live like that. It's inexcusable to me," said Holmes. "They asked for my help. And I said, 'That's easy.'"

A few months later, the 47-year-old, affectionately dubbed "Canada's working-class hero," was a man with a plan. He would help build homes for First Nations communities. And, while doing so, teach people how to build using mould-resistant materials and incorporate clean-energy sources.

It all sounds simple enough. "If you give a man a fish you feed him for a day," said Holmes, reciting the well-used proverb.

"Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

But will it work?

The project will be financed entirely by First Nations communities, not Holmes himself. "I'm just one guy. I can't finance the world," he said.

"They're working on it to make it happen in their own way," he added. "All they needed was someone like



Mike Holmes, right, the contractor behind the hit show "Holmes on Homes," and Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo signed a statement of partnership in July.

me to help them put it together so they could do it easier."

Details still need to be hammered out, but plans are moving ahead. Within the next month, a pilot community, located somewhere in Ontario, will be announced.

A "Centre for Excellence" is also in the works. It will act as a virtual hub, connecting one community to another and keeping everyone informed of the latest building technologies.

Holmes is hoping to build at least 50 homes within a year, all modelled after "Wind Walk," a community he's erecting near Okotoks, Alta., with 450 eco-friendly homes.

First Nations concepts of family, health and traditions will also play a prominent role in design.

For their part, the national Assembly of First Nations is 100 per cent on board.

"Mike is a guy who cuts through issues," said Shawn Atleo, national chief of the assembly.

"This is a chance to do something about housing and to really raise awareness about the dire crisis that exists in First Nations right across the country.

"It's just a start," he added. "But it's an important start."

Over the next five years, Holmes would like to see more than 500

units go up.

"I won't fail at this. I am very confident in this," he said.

"It's not about me. It's just the right thing to do and I'm about doing the right thing the first time around."

The renovating guru will be taking his experience working with Brad Pitt and the *Make It Right* project in New Orleans to heart. After hurricane Katrina in 2008, Holmes travelled to the devastated city to help Pitt build green homes. He's also helped build earthquake-resistant homes in Los Angeles.

These days, his good works are set closer to home.