



Atlohsa/Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services
Partnership, London

INNOVATIONS IN HOUSING *stability*

Housing stability: Everyone can find, and keep,
a home that meets their needs.

Innovation: A novel solution that achieves
benefits not possible through current practices
in the current context.

ONP*h***A**

ONTARIO NON-PROFIT
HOUSING ASSOCIATION

Summary:

- **The innovation:** A donated property grew into 17 affordable apartments – but reached its full potential only when the original owners returned to what they did best
- **Lead and partners:**
 - Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services (OAHS) – owner and property manager
 - Atlohsa Native Family Healing Services Inc. – provides healing services to Indigenous families and youth; previous owner and property manager
- **People served:** Indigenous families and singles
- **Funding:** FIMUR Rental Development Program, municipal grants and conventional financing

THE CATALYST



In 2010, Atlohsa Native Family Healing Services received an offer from Shmuel Farhi, one of London's largest landlords and the owner of the commercial space they had rented for over 20 years. Mr. Farhi donated the entire ground floor commercial space in his 120-year-old building to Atlohsa and sold them the remainder, a four-storey, 16-unit building, at a deeply discounted rate.

After owning and managing the building as affordable housing for five years, Atlohsa concluded it was time to stop being a landlord and return to what it did best. This is the story of that transition.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES



A HOLISTIC APPROACH: Atlohsa was founded in 1986 in response to violence against Indigenous women in London and the neighbouring First Nations. But it recognized that violence was only a symptom of intergenerational trauma. Therefore, Atlohsa works toward healing not only for individuals but also for families and communities.

COLLABORATION: In the early 2000s, Atlohsa worked closely with the London Homeless Coalition to create London's Homeless Prevention and Housing Plan. Today, it joins with corporate and community partners to advocate for truth and reconciliation and for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

EVERYONE DOES WHAT THEY DO BEST: For Atlohsa, that meant returning to its core function as a support provider and advocate, and inviting Ontario's largest provider of Indigenous housing to become the building's landlord.



DEVELOPMENT PROCESS



With the donation of a 16-unit heritage building, Atlohosa saw the potential: spacious, high-quality, family-sized apartments; affordable rents; proximity to downtown services, including their own offices; and a large commercial space that could be leased to generate revenues for Atlohosa's programs.

To turn the dream into reality, Atlohosa obtained funding through the OAHS-administered FIMUR Rental Development Program. The program is similar to the Investment in Affordable Housing program, offering capital funding to renovate the building in return for keeping rents at low-end-of-market for 20 years. The City of London contributed a \$160,000 forgivable loan for additional renovations.

The biggest challenge for Atlohosa was not funding the building, but managing it. The building was too small to support on-site property management specialists. Atlohosa's own staff were counsellors with no training in rent collection, building maintenance or asset management. And as support providers, they felt conflicted in their role as landlord and tenant advocate. By 2015, many tenants were in arrears,

staff were stretched and Atlohosa was in financial difficulty.

In 2015, Atlohosa asked their funder, OAHS, to take over ownership and management of the building, while Atlohosa continued to offer programs in the building. Atlohosa sold the entire building to OAHS, which leased commercial space back to Atlohosa for 15 years at \$1/year. OAHS assumed Atlohosa's debts, sought additional financing and located their Southwestern Ontario regional office in the building.

The negotiations between Atlohosa and OAHS were completed in six months, and were followed by municipal approvals to transfer Atlohosa's forgivable loan. OAHS also had to obtain a loan to pay off the existing mortgage. Even though OAHS was seeking a \$750,000 loan for a property worth more than \$5 million, they found lenders were cautious. Their worry was bad publicity if they had to foreclose on an Indigenous affordable housing development.



THE BUILDING:

- a four-storey historic building in downtown London
- 17 large apartments with 12-foot ceilings: three one-bedroom, seven two-bedroom, six three-bedroom

apartments, and a one-bedroom created in awkwardly located office space

- ground-floor commercial space, now used for Atlohsa's services and OAHS's Southwestern Ontario regional office, with a gallery opening soon to sell and showcase Indigenous art as well as crafts created by Atlohsa program participants

SERVICES OFFERED:

By OAHS:

- all property management services and asset management

By Atlohsa:

- counselling and tenancy supports for tenants in the building
- community-building activities for adults and children
- FoodShare program – tenants contribute \$10/month, staff pools funds from 30 to 40 participants to purchase fresh produce

- City-funded housing help services for the Indigenous community

STAFFING:

OAHS:

- services provided by regional office staff
- no additional staff required for the building
- tenants hired part-time for cleaning

Atlohsa:

- two housing advocates
- counselling and program staff for tenants and the community

FINANCES:

- current rents: \$560 for a one-bedroom apartment, \$600 for a two-bedroom apartment and \$650 for a three-bedroom apartment

ACCESS:

- must meet criteria set by FIMUR program
- people who self-identify as First Nations, Metis or Inuit
- income limits
- many tenants were participants in Atlohsa's programs

- **THERE IS VALUE IN A FRESH SET OF EYES.** In Atlohsa's case, a new Executive Director could bring an unbiased, unsentimental eye to operations and conclude: we're losing money, we can't maintain the status quo, we need to look at our options.
- **BE READY TO MOVE ON.** As Raymond Deleary said, "At first, Atlohsa's Board and staff had the sense that we didn't succeed. We DID succeed. We created housing for the Indigenous community. Now we could provide even more services by stepping out of the property management role."
- **BUILD ON NATURAL PARTNERSHIPS.** OAHS already had a stake in the building, making it easier to negotiate new arrangements and easier for the service manager to approve the transition.
- **EXPECT A TRANSITION PERIOD.** Atlohsa and OAHS co-lead a tenant information session to assure tenants that the transfer would not lead to rent increases or evictions. Atlohsa and OAHS worked in tandem for four to six months while tenants got used to approaching OAHS for tenancy issues.
- **GENERATE REVENUE, BUT STAY TRUE TO YOUR VALUES.** The partners increased their respective cashflows by focusing on their core competencies. Atlohsa was able to generate additional program revenue from expanded spaces; OAHS was able to generate additional revenue from providing property management services; and the community is able to generate new revenue from social enterprise.
- **NEGOTIATE WITH CONFIDENCE.** When you have something good in mind for the community, there is no reason it shouldn't happen. Show the "win" for everyone, and they will see the benefits.



ADVICE FOR OTHERS



BENEFITS

FOR TENANTS:

- Affordable housing for families who were homeless or at risk of homelessness: For most, the rent can be fully covered by their Ontario Disability Support Program shelter allowance.
- In-building access to tenancy supports, counselling and other services: The property management organization specializes in housing for Indigenous people.
- The opportunity to build community: Monthly events, celebrations and on-site children's programs encourage this.
- Downtown location: Other services are conveniently close.

FOR OAHS:

The addition of 17 new units to their portfolio. This opportunity was made possible through Atlohsa's relationship with the donor.

- A needed regional office: The portion of their 1,600 houses located in southwestern Ontario can be better served.

- Economies of scale: With their offices in the building, OAHS did not need to hire additional staff to manage the building.
- An introduction to the community: Atlohsa assisted in a smooth transition and establishment of OAHS as the new building owner-manager.

FOR ATLOHSA:

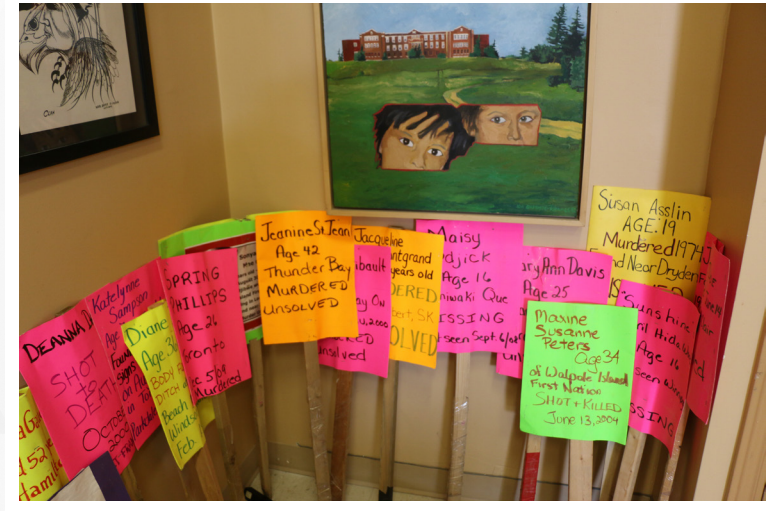
- Better focus of energies: Staff could do what they were hired to do.
- A restoration to financial health.
- Improved program space: Originally located at the back of the building, Atlohsa now has improved street-front offices and new gallery space.
- The satisfaction of success: Atlohsa had helped bring new affordable housing to London.



“You can call it innovation but it was common sense to us.”

– Justin Marchand,
Director of Corporate
Operations, Ontario
Aboriginal Housing Services

“When you have something good in mind that will benefit the community, there is no reason it shouldn’t happen. It’s good to talk about the future with optimism.” – Raymond Deleary, Executive Director, Atlohsa Native Family Healing Services Inc.



RESOURCES



Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services (OAHS)

www.ontarioaboriginalhousing.ca

ONPHA

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