

# 'Beggars in our own land': Canada's First Nation housing crisis

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## FULL TEXT

A caravan of trucks carrying material for new homes is currently winding through northern Ontario, on its way to a remote Indigenous community. The trip along a seasonal winter road is a slow one, passing over frozen lakes and muskeg, and involves cutting down trees along the way for the vehicles and their trailers. Members of the isolated reserve, Cat Lake First Nation, say there is no time to waste.

Home to roughly 700 people, the reserve declared a state of emergency in January over excessive mould, leaky roofs and other poor housing conditions. The crisis then deepened when one of its residents, 48-year-old Nashie Oombash, died from respiratory issues. Her family blamed the death on extensive mould problems in her home.

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Sol Mamakwa

Oombash's death sparked outrage, and added fuel to concerns that almost half of the homes on Canadian reserves have enough mould to cause serious respiratory problems and other illnesses.

"The government's complacency is usually at the cost of our people's lives. There's just no will to fix the problem," said Sol Mamakwa, the member of provincial parliament for Kiiwetinoong, a vast district in northern Ontario that includes Cat Lake.

Canada's federal government has responded to the crisis by promising to send \$10m (£5.7m) to address substandard housing in Cat Lake First Nation, and is sending portable homes and construction material to build new ones. But Mamakwa says that is just scratching the surface of the problem.

"There are a lot of Cat Lakes in the north," said Mamakwa, a member of the Kingfisher First Nation. "When you see these conditions on a daily basis, you start to accept it as normal. What we see as status quo here would never be accepted in other parts of Canada."

Indigenous leaders say an epidemic of mould, undrinkable water and overcrowding inside First Nations homes remains a nationwide problem that has been largely ignored for years. In Neskantaga First Nation, another fly-in community that Mamakwa represents, residents have been officially advised to boil their tap water for the past 25 years.

"We need to do better," said the federal Indigenous services minister, Seamus O'Regan, at a press conference in Thunder Bay on 21 February. "We don't want children living like this anywhere in the country. So, where we can work with communities and where we can find resources available, we attempt to fix the problem."

Many Indigenous leaders across the country say they have heard this before.

"We've had water problems and mould in our homes for years. Imagine how much frustration that causes. It's almost like a crockpot waiting to pop open," said Conrad Ritchie, a band councillor with the Saugeen First Nation in southwestern Ontario.

"It's like we have to be beggars in our own land. It's frustrating because it happens all over."

The federal government is taking steps to address the drinking water problems by investing in infrastructure projects to bring potable water to reserves that have long gone without. The government says 79 boil-water orders have been lifted since November 2015, but 61 First Nations reserves still live under long-term drinking water advisories.

When Mamakwa visited Cat Lake First Nation in mid-February, he said he was taken aback by the respiratory illness and skin ailments he saw, which many blamed on toxic levels of mould in their homes. One mother told him her 12-year-old daughter was so ashamed of her facial sores she asked for a closed casket at her funeral if she dies.

"I saw a lot of children with scabs around the mouths and hands. The mould in their homes was outright visible," he said. "It's a very big issue, especially in winter. You have a lot of young babies who are medically evacuated out of the north because of respiratory issues."

According to a report commissioned by Cat Lake First Nation, 87 houses in the community need to be demolished due to mould and other problems. Overcrowding is another problem, with as many as three families in one home, Mamakwa said.

Part of the challenge is that few First Nations communities have adopted building codes, and inspection on building sites is rare. Many homes are poorly ventilated and built to be disposable. Some residents try to treat mould infestations with bleach, which creates more problems.

"There is a lot of mould in these communities," Mamakwa said. "Sometimes it's the way they're built. It's not the right kind of housing for the climate."

Some observers think that loosening laws restricting homeownership on reserves would allow residents to take better care of their homes. The federal government owns most of the housing on First Nations reserves.

"This system is not broken, it's working exactly the way it's supposed to," Mamakwa said. "It's a colonial system designed to take away our people's rights to natural resources and lands so we can't take care of ourselves."

## DETAILS

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