

How do you solve many problems at once? Train marginalized people to fix houses

Social contractors could present solutions to housing crisis, labour shortage and climate change all at once



[Rukhsar Ali](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jul 21, 2023 4:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: July 21



Zubek and Khainza are mentor and mentee as part of the Toronto-based social enterprise Building Up. (Alex Lupul/CBC)

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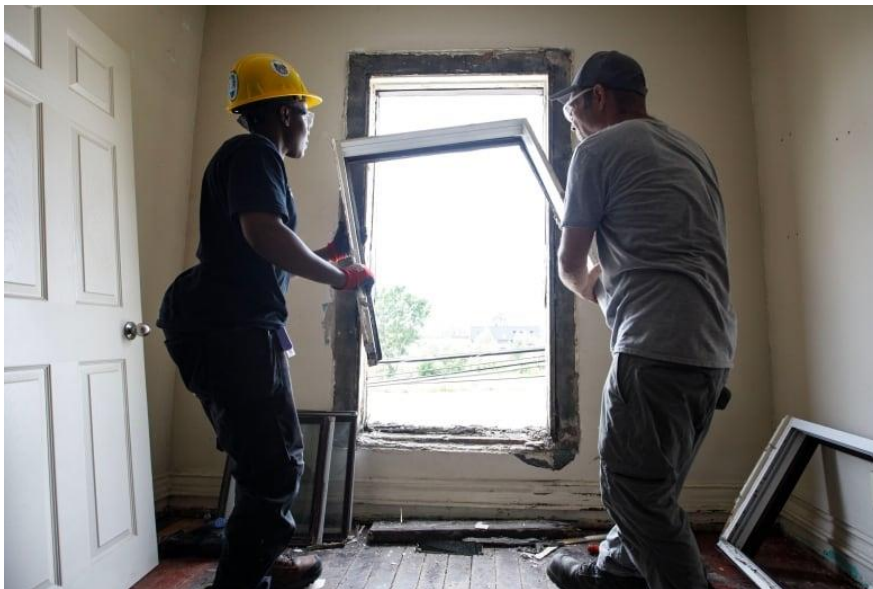
When Dorine Khainza arrived in Canada from Uganda in January, she didn't know anyone in the country or where to start her new life. What she did know was that she wanted to work with her hands.

"I was determined to do things that I was passionate about. I wasn't just going to sit in an office," Khainza said.

Six months later, the 35-year-old, with her hard hat on and reciprocating saw in hand, worked on removing a window from a semi-detached home in Toronto under the watchful eye of her site supervisor and mentor of the day, Tim Zubek.

"It's actually quite fun," she said smiling, hammering a wedge between the window frame and the wall. "Destroying."

"Destroying things to make them better," Zubek responded.



Tim Zubek, right, a site supervisor with Building Up, and apprentice Dorine Khainza are shown inside of a Toronto home under construction. Building Up, a non-profit social enterprise, hires individuals who face barriers to employment to work as apprentices on green renovations for homes, returning them as affordable units. (Alex Lupul/CBC)

The mentor and mentee are part of the Toronto-based social enterprise Building Up. Founded by Marc Soberano in 2014, the contracting non-profit is primarily driven by social causes, and uses the homes it's tasked to retrofit as a training ground for its apprentices — with a focus on green building.

"Where most people train and employ people to run their business, we run our business to train and employ people," Soberano said.

It's one example of some of the work social contractors are doing all across Canada — "multi-solving" in the face of an affordable housing crisis, a labour shortage in the construction industry and climate change.

Building clean jobs in a labour shortage

Targeted to those who often face barriers to employment, such as racialized people, women, those coming out of incarceration, or newcomers, like Khainza, Building Up's 16-week paid training program offers participants an opportunity to become skilled in green retrofitting to eventually gain long-term employment.

That includes a focus on trades like carpentry and drywalling, water retrofits, enhancing a building's insulation and more.

"There's a labour shortage all around the construction sector today," Soberano said. "But as the construction sector continues to evolve, that shortage is going to be more extreme when it comes to green building and energy efficiency. So this home is a great way to help kind of train the next generation of tradespeople with those skills."



By training apprentices in the green practices of trades, like carpentry, water retrofits, enhancing a building's insulation and more, Building Up participants walk away with a knowledge base aimed at helping to meet a massive need for skilled construction workers. (Alex Lupul/CBC)

Over the next decade, Ontario's government wants to build 1.5 million homes [but said it will need 100,000 more workers to do so](#). The construction industry employs around [600,000 workers](#) in the province, but with the sector's [job vacancy rate](#) at 4.6 per cent, there are still hundreds of skilled construction jobs, with no one to fill them.

That's just looking at construction as a whole. A 2022 report by Canada Green Building Council and the Delphi Group forecasts that [the country will see a shortage of workers](#) skilled in green construction over the next few decades, as the demand for clean jobs increases.

"The challenges that we face as a society are also opportunities," Soberano said.

- **Demand for biofuels sparks Canadian boom. But will U.S. subsidies pull investment south?**

Often, Building Up will take trainees from the very neighbourhoods it's working in, so locals are improving their own communities.

The home Khainza is working on is Building Up's 12th project with the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust, a not-for-profit which owns and preserves affordable units to be rented out to low-income households from within the community.

An old, leaky, inefficient house presents the opportunity to offer hands-on experiential learning for apprentices new to construction, Soberano said. And that house, once retrofitted, will be a more sustainable addition to Toronto's affordable housing market.



Marc Soberano is the founder and executive director of Building Up. (Alex Lupul/CBC)

Over the past five years, Building Up has made energy-efficiency improvements to more than 30,000 Toronto Community Housing units, on top of other renovations in residential buildings across the city.

The average wait for an affordable, subsidized one-bedroom [unit in Toronto is 14 years](#), as of 2022. By partnering with other social organizations like the Parkdale

Neighbourhood Land Trust and the YWCA, Building Up says it can restore units that might otherwise be unlivable or made unaffordable due to energy inefficiency.

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This home will soon house a tenant from the city's centralized wait-list — someone with low to moderate income, and likely a single woman or gender-diverse individual and their household.

As for the potential savings, Susan Aharan, facility manager for the YWCA, said she's seen energy consumption lowered approximately 30 per cent in other YWCA units previously retrofitted by Building Up.

Some customers have cut utility expenses by an average of more than \$150 per year following water retrofits that involve swapping toilets, shower heads and aerators to maximize efficiency, according to Building Up.

Eco-retrofitting to net-zero

In 2021, buildings in Canada [represented nearly one-fifth](#) of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions — [higher than emissions](#) from agriculture or heavy industry. Those emissions come from burning gas for heating or generating electricity for use within buildings. In Toronto, buildings account for approximately [55 per cent of the city's total GHGs](#).

"It's really useful to keep in mind that [approximately] two-thirds of the buildings standing today ... will still be standing in 2050," said Maya Papineau, an associate professor at Carleton University who studies environmental and energy economics.



The exterior of a home being retrofitted by Building Up in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood. (Alex Lupul/CBC)

"To meet our 2050 targets, that means that we're going to have to massively reduce the average CO2 that each dwelling and building produces. And that basically entails a very large retrofit project on a national scale," she said. "It has implications for needing an adequately trained workforce."

Papineau's [research suggests](#) the government of Canada's predictions for how much retrofitting is going to save are actually overestimated. One driver of that disparity between modelled predictions and actual savings, she said, is poor quality of installation.

"So if you have somebody who hasn't been trained adequately in these new types of retrofits ... that's going to cause a shortfall," Papineau said. "I think the goal to retrofit homes and to make homes green and shift to electrification has to go hand-in-hand with having a workforce that is trained to be able to conduct these retrofits in a quality way."

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WHAT ON EARTH?

Small backyard homes could offer both housing and climate relief

Building up on a national scale

Scaling up a program like Building Up isn't without challenges.

For one, because the program is rooted in local communities, it may require federal funding to bolster it and other similar initiatives, said Laura Tozer, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto who studies the transition to renewable energy.

The U.S. Inflation Reduction Act might provide a model, said Tozer, because it has clean jobs built directly into its plan for reducing carbon emissions. Connecting apprenticeship programs to energy incentives, the Act has already created [more than 142,000 clean jobs](#) across the U.S. since it was signed into law in August 2022.

But Canada currently doesn't have comparable legislation.



Over the next decade, Ontario's government wants to build 1.5 million homes but said it will need 100,000 more workers to do so. (Patrick Morrell/CBC)

Though there are other organizations like Building Up across Canada — Purpose Construction and Build Inc. in Manitoba, Newo in Alberta, and Impact Construction in Newfoundland, to name a few — the social contractor approach isn't nearly as widespread as general contractors.

And though many construction firms have started to move toward green construction, Tozer and Papineau both said there's still a large need for green retrofitting and skilled workers to help meet Canada's net-zero targets.

"There are massive opportunities for [apprentices] coming out of the program to have not just a job, but a real career," Soberano said.



Laura Tozer is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto who studies the transition to renewable energy. (Lauren Pelley/CBC)

Back at the demolished Toronto home, with about three weeks left of her training, Khainza said she already intends to take her newly acquired skills and pay them forward. In a few years, she hopes to run her own construction firm and employ other new immigrants to perform green retrofits.

"When I was back in Uganda, you could see the dry seasons were [getting] hotter than the ones before," Khainza said. "I'm scared of what is going to happen if we don't do anything about this planet."

"I know that in time [green construction skills are] going to be the new norm, and I would like my team to have that kind of knowledge. And if they don't have it, because I have it, I will definitely teach them."