

# Position Paper on a Common H.I. Standard

By Claude Lawrenson – NHICC Chair

This document provides a brief documented background and framework to the question and/or need to speak to the development of a common home inspection standard. This paper is not intended to impose a process for curriculum development and/or training. However, it will provide references to uphold the value of taking into consideration what has already been created without the unnecessary pursuit of finding a new “common” standard.

## Background

In December of 1992 CMHC released a report based on a study of “The Canadian Residential Inspection Industry” by Wagner, Daigle, Revay Lte´e. In the executive summary one of the principle findings notes “there is widespread support among both municipal officials/inspectors and private sector house inspectors for the establishment in their respective fields of standards and a certification system by which qualified inspectors may be identified.

In November of 1996 representatives of the Home Inspection profession in Canada met and agreed in principle to develop a national strategy to guide the future of the Canadian Home Inspection profession. The session focused on a strategy and a basic framework thus providing “a rationale for change”. The recorded comments included:

- There is currently no single group which reflects all elements of the profession.
- While existing groups appear to share a common goal – to improve the lot of the home inspection industry – there is no mechanism in place allowing different groups to work together towards a common goal.
- There is considerable fragmentation within and between existing associations representing the profession.
- Create a system to develop national standards as they might apply to – industry regulation, standards of performance for training, base qualifications for individuals entering the profession.

*“CMHC research has shown that currently there are a number of private inspection associations and organizations across the country each with different inspection standards and levels of qualifications. The difference in standards for certifying private inspectors in Canada has caused confusion in the minds of consumers as well as within other sectors of the housing industry.”*

*“In 1996, CMHC conducted an industry survey and convened a meeting of industry leaders. The 1996 survey indicated that there is a strong desire to have a unified national body that represents the private inspection industry and the public building officials, but as separate entities.”*

*“In June 1997, a report was published entitled, “A Strategy to Provide Coordination of the Canadian Home Inspection Profession” which outlined a strategy to develop certification for the entire home inspection profession at a national level and to develop national standards leading to:*

- *Industry regulation*
- *Standards of performance for training*
- *Base qualifications for individuals entering the profession.”*<sup>1</sup>

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Participants in the follow-up planning session in April 1997, worked from the principle that a national certification criteria must be developed and must be equally applied to all those seeking certification. This included existing members of the profession, to eliminate concerns and criticism relating to unpredictability and favouritism.

This vision and research provide the momentum for change. The objective clearly intended of the profession articulated the commitment to work towards achieving a position of respect and trust through the provisions of striving for excellence in conducting a home inspection.

In order to accomplish these goals the first step in any certification criterion required the completion of a “National Occupational Analysis”. This would help in defining the source for the requisite knowledge and skills of the individual performing a home inspection. The Occupational Analysis would also serve as the fundamental tool for the development of education and training curriculum, examinations and evaluation procedures, and an industry specific standard of performance.

## **Establishing a National Occupational Standard (NOS)**

The Canadian Home Inspectors and Building Officials Steering Committee for National Standards were formed to conduct an occupational analysis and establish National Occupational Standards for Professional Home/Property Inspectors and Professional Building Officials. The committee explored the commonalities and differences and arrived at the need for three distinct “standards”. One for each profession and a third that provides the “Common Core Competencies” that overlapped each profession. The three standards were completed in May of 2001. The NOS documents focuses on the knowledge and abilities of the applicable sector pertaining to single family dwelling. It does not include code compliance activities for home inspectors.

The primary focus of this paper is the NOS for the Professional Home & Property Inspectors. The main funding for this work was achieved largely through Human Resources Development Canada and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which included oversight of the process by representatives from both federal bodies.

*A steering committee called CHIBO (Canadian Home Inspectors and Building Officials) was established in 2000 with the mandate to conduct occupational analyses and establish minimum National Occupational Standards, a national code of ethics, inspector criteria and consistent performance standards for home and property inspectors and building officials across Canada. CHIBO was comprised of seven representatives from the MBO sector and seven representatives from the HPI sector, as well as a non-voting independent chair and a number of ex-officio members.*

*Phase one of the Canadian Home Inspectors and Building Officials National Initiative is complete, and resulted in National Occupational Standards (NOS) for the HPI and the MBO sectors which will benefit both consumers and the home inspector and building official professions. The NOS are very detailed, describing the range and depth of skills, knowledge and ability necessary to perform their tasks at a professional level.*

*In December 2003, the Canadian Home Inspectors and Building Officials National Initiative moved into Phase Two, the development of certification and accreditation*

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*models to facilitate the application of the National Occupational Standards across Canada. To conduct the project, which is funded by CHIBO (representing the three sectors of the industry), CMHC and HRSD through the CSC, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in December 2003 between CHIBO-II and the CSC.*

*The primary objective of the CHIBO Development of Certification and Accreditation Models Phase Two project is to establish certification and accreditation models that will lead to a recognizable and credible inspection industry and also increase worker mobility between jurisdictions. <sup>2</sup>*

The first version of the NOS was completed in 2001 by a DACUM (Developing a Curriculum) process. DACUM provides an occupational skill profile which can be used for instructional program planning, curriculum development, training materials development, organizational restructuring, employee recruitment, training needs assessment, meeting ISO 9000 standards, career counselling, job descriptions, competency test development, and other purposes.

Under the facilitation of an independent consultant the design and development of competency-based outcomes, content, learning activities, and performance-based assessment strategies. A review and revision update was last completed in June of 2008.

## **Defining a Common Standard**

A professional standard requires inspectors to exercise reasonable care and diligence and to observe the principles of serving the public interest and maintaining the highest degree of integrity, objectivity, and independence in applying professional judgment to all aspects of their work.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) defines a National Occupational Standard as a standard that describes the skills and knowledge needed to perform competently in the workplace. HRDC refers to National Occupational Standards as “Roadmaps for the Skills of Today and Tomorrow.” Creating performance “benchmarks” compels professional educators and certification bodies to ensure that where training is conducted that it must be designed and delivered on valid evaluative techniques or skill-based testing methodology that reflects competent performance at both the training and certification stages.

*“Occupational standards identify and group tasks associated with a particular occupation and describe the knowledge and skills that a worker must demonstrate to be considered competent in that occupation.”<sup>3</sup>*

Competency based education addresses what the learners are expected to do rather than on what they are expected to learn about. Competency based education is more than an effort to describe or list educational and behavioural objectives. Competencies clearly define what the learner will do to demonstrate learning for a workforce-related need.

*“Competency based education is a systematic learning process in which the primary concern is the learner’s attainment of the knowledge and skills relevant to his or her*

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*selected occupational goal. The time required to learn theoretical concepts and practical skills is secondary to the demonstrated accomplishment of the objectively verifiable learning outcomes.”<sup>4</sup>*

The other important element of competency is assessment. Primary functions of assessment are those in which the candidate being assessed is the object of the evaluation and it is intended to provide information for the improvement of learning to certify individual accomplishment. Of course this now draws attention to - what competencies are being assessed.

As an example the TIPR (Test Inspection with Peer Review) assessment process provides attention on real problem-solving through the process of completing a home inspection. The home is selected by a team of Peer Review Examiners based on presenting a home that has known and predetermined defects. The other premise being the home has not been previously inspected by the candidates being tested. Through the practical assessment the candidate must identify significant defects, health and safety issues, identifying components near the end of life, and evaluation of the communication skills through a peer review and submission of a written home inspection report. All of these are critical elements for the performance of a conducting a home inspection. The TIPR process has been utilized in well over 500 home inspections to date.

## Home Inspection Standards of Practice

A quick review of the various home inspection associations websites notes that no one universal Standard of Practice exists. In fact research indicates most are derived from the (ASHI) American Society of Home Inspectors Standards of Practice. ASHI was established in 1976. It is considered the grandfather of home inspection associations.

In fact the ASHI Standards of Practice (SOP) states that the SOP is a “guide home inspectors in the performance of their inspections”. In addition under “Purpose and Scope” it states – *“The purpose of the Standards of Practice is to establish a minimum and uniform standard for home inspectors who subscribe to these Standards of Practice. Home inspections performed to these Standards of Practice is intended to provide the client with objective information regarding the condition of the systems and components of the home as inspected at the time of the home inspection.”<sup>5</sup>*

The ASHI – SOP outlines what is required and what is not required in a standard home inspection. The SOP also states specific limitations, as well as that inspectors are not limited to the prescribed services, more or fewer may be provided if requested by the client.

In reviewing the various SOP differences can be noted. One such example is the difference over the term inspecting a “representative number”. This simply means that when an inspector inspecting a room to such a standard is not required to check all the windows, doors, electrical outlets, and fixtures found therein.

Furthermore there are a significant number of home inspectors that do not believe that the client should be entitled to a copy of the SOP. One would only have to surmise that

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the client might actually hold the inspector accountable for not at least fulfilling the obligations outlined in the SOP.

Recognition of the differences in the numerous variations in the SOP, coupled with a moving target of what is deemed as the normative standard for what is included or not in a home inspection, is a large part of why the SOP must be considered as a “guideline” and not a “standard”.

What is even more troubling is the fact that significant variations exist even with those associations that subscribe the ASHI – SOP based on the version used as the associations benchmark.

In reality the SOP can be viewed as the “scope of work” and as a “guideline” that does not accurately reflect the inspector’s performance of a home inspection. In addition what the SOP fails to address is “the skills and knowledge needed to perform competently in the workplace”, as noted earlier by HRDC in defining the term “standard” in relationship to the “established occupational requirements”.

## Curriculum and Training

The NOS provides the base for the proper development of home inspection curriculum and training. Since 2006 over 15 education/training providers nationally have successfully completed curriculum mapping of home inspection courses using the NOS.

However, caution is noted that the value assigned by credit hours of “accredited” training indicated only reflects that learning outcomes mapped against the NOS are provided credit. The other notable concern is the proliferation of home inspector training offered that has never been independently audited against the NOS.

## Certification

Certification programs acknowledge the accomplishments of individuals and verify that they possess the necessary knowledge and skills for the occupation. The purpose of certification is to identify individuals who meet a specified standard that defines competence in an occupation.

The intent of a “certification program” is to evaluate the ability of the candidate to actually perform the required task. In order to accomplish a uniform solid foundation for a certification program it would seem logical to utilize the NOS and the detailed associated task specific analysis as the guide for the development of a minimum National Performance Standard for the home inspection profession.

Along with the importance of certification best practices requires that the certification body must have a documented structure which safeguards impartiality, including provisions to assure partiality of the operations of the certification body. As an example the CAN-P-9 Criteria for Accreditation of Personnel Certification Bodies (ISO/IEC 17024) states in 4.2.5: “The certification body shall not offer or provide training, or aid others in the preparation of such services, unless it demonstrates how training is independent of the evaluation and certification of persons to ensure that confidentiality and impartiality are not compromised.”

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Similarly the National Commission of Certifying Agencies requires in its standards that a certification agency *“The certification program must analyze, define, and publish performance domains and tasks related to the purpose of the credential, and the knowledge and/or skill associated with the performance domains and tasks, and use them to develop specifications for the assessment instruments.”*<sup>6</sup>

Inspectors and inspection organizations have a responsibility to maintain independence so that opinions, conclusions, judgments, and recommendations will be impartial and will be viewed as impartial by knowledgeable third parties.

## Consumer Protection

One of the key principles the Advisory Committee report noted – the Standard should be driven more by a valuable service to the client – not simply serving as a means of “protecting the inspector’s butt”. Far too often the SOP (Standards of Practice) is weighted in the favour of protecting the home inspector, and fails to address the related smaller details such as the implication or impact of deficiencies on the client. Some have even raised the question “why bother hiring an inspector who provides such limited work and concentrates more on protecting themselves against just about any mistake”?

The National Occupational Standards addresses the base line standard of what home inspectors need to know and should be doing. The NOS clearly identifies the skills that are required to complete the task. A key component of determining the importance of the task in the NOS was the completion of a Task Priority Analysis. The rank ordering of tasks based on their importance allows for recommendations of which tasks MUST be evaluated in the certification model.

The key to any successful certification program is the ability to certify individuals that meet the required competence for their occupation – in this case that standard is the NOS. The key to consumer protection is proper attestation of education and experience to operate as a home inspector.

## References:

1. Source <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection/NH18-22-100-131E.pdf>
2. Source <http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/odpub/pdf/63547.pdf?fr=1322189372000>
3. Source <http://www.councils.org/our-priorities/occupational-standards-and-certification/>
4. Source - Challenge and Opportunity: Canada’s Community Colleges at the Crossroads, John Dennison, UBC Press - Vancouver
5. Source <http://www.ashi.org/documents/pdf/standards.pdf>
6. Source Certification – The Ice Handbook, NCCA Standards, <http://www.credentialingexcellence.org/portals/0/STANDARDS%20-%20Updated%20January%202010.pdf>

Claude Lawrenson served as a home inspector education sector representative on the Home Inspector National Initiative and CHIBO – I & II, from 1999 to 2006.