

Testing the testers

Many welcome national standards, regular reviews for home inspectors

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If anyone knows the value of investing in the services of a home inspector, it's Julie Fournier.

In 2006, Ms. Fournier fell head over heels for a new townhome in Orléans. But after hearing rumblings about poorly drained land and unstable foundations in the east-end community, she paid \$500 to have her dream home examined by a professional.

The inspection found serious cracks in the foundation and cracked walls in other townhomes in the same block. Spooked, she nixed the deal, and eventually bought in another Orléans neighbourhood.

"The home had a crack that had been patched, and re-cracked and patched again," she recalls. "I really wanted the place, but the inspector said 'You better be aware of what you are getting into.' So I walked."

Small wonder that Ms. Fournier favours the recent establishment of the Professional Home & Property Inspectors of Ontario (PHPIO), a new provincial umbrella group for home inspectors headed by Paul Wilson, the Ottawa home inspector who found the cracks in the townhome.

The association, which has been operational since mid-October, is the only provincial group of inspectors in Canada that requires members to adhere to the rigorous requirements set out in the National Certification Program (NCP), a professional standard for Canada's home inspectors.

NCP was established in 2005, when Canada's minister of housing announced that a national body, the Canadian Association of Home and Property Inspectors, would be given the mandate to administer a certification model for all Canadian home inspectors. The program has the blessing of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Canadian Real Estate Association, the Insurance Bureau of Canada and the Canadian Bankers Association.

The national program was intended to rid the system of inequities that allow anyone to call themselves a home inspector by taking a quick course on the Internet or simply printing business cards and advertising their services.

"Some inspectors out there are not qualified. They become certified online, or pay for business cards and go to work and the consumer doesn't have a clue," says PHPIO vice-president Wayne Fulton of Napanee.

PHPIO, on the other hand, trumpets the fact that its members can't inspect a home unless they enroll and pass national certification courses that take two years and promise to have their skills field tested before a panel of their peers.

"To be a member of PHPIO inspectors have to show a group of seasoned inspectors they know what they are doing," says Mr. Fulton.

The peer review costs \$300.

Mr. Wilson says PHPIO is not attempting to do battle with other home inspectors' groups in the province, including the 21-year-old Ontario Association of Home Inspectors. OAHI bills itself as "the voice" of the Ontario home inspection profession and grants its members the Registered Home Inspector (RHI) designation if they complete a series of baseline courses, technical background in the building field and successful completion of hundreds of actual home inspections.



CREDIT: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen

House inspector Paul Wilson on the job.



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Paul Wilson shines a light and critical eye on a heating system during a recent home inspection.

On its Web site, OAHI says its members require a peer review to achieve the RHI designation, but Alrek Meipoom, the organization's director of external affairs in Toronto concedes "a few hundred" of OAHI's veteran members have not had the review.

The arrival of PHPIO is good news because the organization welcomes inspectors regardless of their past or present affiliation and qualify for national certification. This will improve the credentials of all home inspectors in the province, says Mr. Fulton.

"Because home inspectors in Ontario are not licensed or regulated we felt there was a need to provide a direct path to national certification," says Mr. Fulton.

"We've raised the bar in Ontario by giving candidates a clear route to the national standards that will give the province a better breed of inspector," he adds.

PHPIO, unlike other home inspectors' groups, requires members to have additional peer reviews every five years to prove they are up to date on current practices and products, "just like members of the health care profession," says Mr. Wilson, whose company, Home Inspectors, has been in business since 1980.

"Things are changing out there ... green housing and energy efficient housing is all the rage and a lot of inspectors don't understand the ramifications because they are not keeping up to date on new developments. We are saying this is not good enough."

PHPIO's bid to produce a better brand of home inspector in Ontario is welcome news for homeowners including Ms. Fournier who works in health care sales, but maintains her nursing credentials in case she returns to her former profession.

"As a nurse, I have to prove annually that I have kept up with reading and the latest information. Part of my licensing includes peer review. Why shouldn't it be the same for the home inspector who is looking into my home, which is my major investment?"

For more information about PHPIO, visit www.phpio.ca

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The most frequent problems found by home inspectors

1. Improper surface grading/drainage: Responsible for the most common of household maladies: water penetration of the basement or crawl space.
2. Improper electrical wiring: Includes insufficient electrical service to the house, inadequate overload protection, and amateur, often dangerous, wiring connections.
3. Roof damage: Old or damaged shingles or improper flashing, which causes water leakage.
4. Heating systems: Broken or malfunctioning operation controls, blocked chimneys, and unsafe exhaust disposal.
5. Poor overall maintenance: Cracked, peeling, or dirty painted surfaces, crumbling masonry, makeshift wiring or plumbing, and broken fixtures or appliances.
6. Structurally related problems: Damage to foundation walls, floor joists, rafters, and window and door headers.
7. Plumbing: Old or incompatible piping materials, as well as faulty fixtures and waste lines.
8. Exterior flaws: Windows, doors, and wall surfaces responsible for water and air penetration. Inadequate caulking and/or weather stripping are the most common culprits.
9. Poor ventilation: Over-sealed homes resulting in excessive interior moisture that can cause rotting and premature failure of structural and non-structural elements.

Source: The Canadian Association of Home and Property Inspectors

Readers Update: Since this article first appeared in 2008, PHPIO has now gone national in scope and is known as the Professional Home and Property Inspectors of Canada (PHPIC) www.phpic.ca