

## Mishkeegogamang Summer 2008 Teamwork

After a two-day drive with a van, truck and trailer, a crew of nine volunteers from Southern Ontario arrived at Mishkeegogamang on August 2, 2008, to do home repairs and build relationships with the community.

Mishkeegogamang, one of the few First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario with year round road access is on Hwy 599, approximately 35 km south of Pickle Lake and 250 km north of Ignace. The Ojibway band has 1510 registered members with 850 on reserve and 660 off reserve.

### Homecoming

In the first week, the volunteer crew assisted with homecoming week festivities. They helped raise the stage, did electrical work, found accommodations for some performers, fed upwards of 20 people, and gave the fiddlers from Webequie a ride to Pickle Lake airport. A First Nation crew member sang twice at the event, and the whole crew enjoyed the festivities.

### Health and safety

The volunteers did home repairs, many to correct health and safety problems. Difficulties getting some materials slowed the project. But thanks to the staff of Mystic North Inc. who worked tirelessly to find alternative building supplies, many projects were completed. Donations to the North-South Partnership paid for the \$12,000 in material costs.

Jeff Loon, maintenance manager for Mishkeegogamang, did a lot of work mapping out strategic work plans for the team. The home repair projects included

- Replacing windows with new, more flexible Plexiglas that will make it harder for windows to be broken - Many more need replacement.
- Replacing some of the many unsafe stoves and chimneys that were fire hazards - repairing them is a high priority for future visits.
- Renovating a bathroom that was so compromised the team had to replace floor-joists and level the home by two inches. The team also added new sub-flooring, a new toilet and sink, and a window for ventilation.
- Repairing plumbing in homes. Even simple repairs were difficult because shut off valves were usually under the floor, far from the opening.
- Repairing water-heating systems (one home had not had hot water for three years).
- Arranging to have a new roof installed once the materials arrive.

The team also did a number of projects for a local church including

- Repairing the steeple to prevent leaks and water damage
- Replacing the chimney for the stove and purchasing a proper floor covering for under the stove to prevent embers from starting a fire.
- Replacing the steps and landing, painting-the doors, and arranging for a team member living in the north to complete and install a new sign within a few weeks.

A team member provided a day at the spa for children and youth in the safe house. The theme was "learning how to relax and cope with life's challenges."

### Insights

The lessons the team and the Partnership learned will help Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win develop best practices for future teams that volunteer in the north. The Partnership is also thinking of far-reaching approaches to supporting and empowering the First Nation people and considers volunteer team investment a small start to establishing positive relationships not only with the current leaders but also with potential future leaders in the community.