

113-2020-86

VIA EMAIL – [dirk.huyer@ontario.ca]

Dr. Dirk Huyer
Chief Coroner for Ontario
25 Morton Schulman Avenue
Toronto ON M3M 0B1

Dear Dr. Huyer:

I am writing to provide Ontario's 2020 response to the jury's recommendations from the Seven First Nations Youth Inquest that were directed toward the province. Ontario is committed to continuing this important work to honour the lives of Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morrisseau and Jordan Wabasse, and is pleased to provide you with a detailed response (attached) consistent with Recommendation 143.

Ontario wishes to recognize Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC), Matawa Education and Care Centre (MECC) and Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO) for their roles in working on behalf of their communities, students and families to ensure their priorities are considered and responded to in a meaningful way throughout this process. Ontario continues to implement and/or work towards completion, as appropriate, the 61 recommendations directed to the province. As of June 2020, Ontario is pleased to report that 33 recommendations are completed and 28 are in progress. There is more work to do and Ontario remains committed to working together across government and with Inquest parties to effectively respond to these recommendations.

Highlights of Ontario's progress since the June 2019 report back are provided below.

Education and Employment Programs and Supports

The Ministry of Education has heard from Inquest parties the need for all students to be safe, and to have flexibility and options available to them as they access education. The Reciprocal Education Approach, which came into effect on September 1, 2019, was developed collaboratively with First Nation partners and the education sector and is designed to improve access, reduce barriers and strengthen parental choice for First Nation students to attend First Nation-operated or federally-operated schools or provincially-funded schools. With the Reciprocal Education Approach now in effect, boards and First Nations will no longer be required to negotiate formal agreements for

the base fee for students who wish to attend a provincially-funded school or First Nation-operated school.

The Ministry of Education continues to work with Inquest parties to support the implementation of education-related Inquest recommendations in a sustainable way to ensure long-term supports for First Nation student safety and well-being. To support this work, the Ministry of Education is providing funding to First Nation Inquest partners for targeted, partner-led initiatives focused on successful transitions between First Nation-operated or federally-operated and provincially-funded schools. Some key initiatives carried out this past year include:

- Providing Seven First Nation Youth Inquest funding to NNEC to support the hiring of a Student Safety Manager, who held the responsibility of overseeing and coordinating NNEC services and supports for students resulting in quality programming targeting student needs. NNEC identified the hiring of this staff member as supporting the implementation of Recommendation #23.
- Providing Seven First Nation Youth Inquest Funding to NNEC and MECC for 10 memorial scholarships, established with communities and families, to honour the lives of the seven youth. The memorial scholarships support the implementation of Recommendation #6.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities continues to provide operating funding for Indigenous Institutes, including an increase of \$1.8 million over previous year funding, as well as funding for mental health supports and COVID-19 emergency response funding.

Both the provincial and federal governments have important roles to play in supporting education for First Nation students, including those travelling to or living in Thunder Bay to attend school. Ontario must work with First Nation partners in seeking the federal government's support and commitment in this area, including the recommendations pertaining to adequately funding schools on reserves to provincial standards.

Broadband Expansion

The recent closure of schools and workplaces in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for reliable access to broadband connectivity across the province. In October 2019, Ontario announced a \$30 million investment in the Matawa Broadband project. This supports the goal of providing reliable, high-speed internet access for youth to be able to attend high school in their home communities, remain connected when they are away, and create career options for youth and their families within their communities. Construction began in January 2020 with communities expected to be connected by early 2021.

In addition, the Ministry of Infrastructure launched a Broadband and Cellular Action Plan that will invest \$315 million over five years to expand access in unserved and

underserved areas, including First Nation communities. This includes an announcement, on June 3, 2020, of a \$150 million investment in reliable broadband and cellular service which will support more economic and educational opportunities in these underserved communities, and is particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic as more individuals take on learning and working from home, including First Nation students who may have returned to their home communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

First Nation Youth and Community Safety

Ontario continues to prioritize the security and safety of First Nation youth and their communities across the province. This includes both short term measures, such as raising awareness about ways individuals can work together to support the safety of youth, as well as longer term measures, such as the implementation of new legislation that better equips police to investigate missing persons.

On July 1, 2019, the *Missing Persons Act, 2018* came into force. This Act creates the legislative framework for missing persons occurrences by providing police with the tools and training to assess risk and better support investigations into missing persons. The Ministry of the Solicitor General is responsible for the implementation of the Act and is required to conduct a review of the Act within five years of it coming into force (i.e., before July 1, 2024).

The Office of the Chief Coroner and Ontario Forensic Pathology Service, along with the Thunder Bay Police, accepted the recommendations from the Office of the Independent Police Review Director's Broken Trust report regarding the reinvestigation of the deaths of nine Indigenous people, four of which were part of the Seven Youth Inquest. Prior to the reinvestigations, the Office of the Chief Coroner and Ontario Forensic Pathology Service ensured that a plan was in place to provide support and counselling to affected families. These supports have been working directly with the Family Liaison Officer involved in the reinvestigations.

Building on a poster campaign to raise awareness about second-party purchasing of alcohol for minors and the associated legal consequences, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) engaged NAN, KO, MECC and Thunder Bay Police Service, in Fall 2019, on a proposed creative approach for a social media component of the campaign. The campaign was launched in late January 2020, with the content posted to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Mental Health, Addictions, and Well-Being

The Ontario government recognizes that mental health and addictions services must continue to be a priority and that access to services must be available to everyone wherever they are located in the province. As such, the province has committed to building a comprehensive and connected provincial mental health and addictions service system and in March 2020 released the *Roadmap to Wellness: A Plan to Build*

Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions System, to be supported by \$3.8 billion in new investments over ten years. The province has started to provide immediate investments in key priority areas as identified by system partners, including \$174 million more in annualized funding for mental health and addictions programs in 2019-20. This includes more than \$5 million for the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services to provide culturally-appropriate mental health services and supports to Indigenous communities, including adults, families, children and youth. The government will invest another \$7 million through the Ministry of Health to fund two additional Indigenous mental health and addictions treatment and healing centres and mental wellness programs, as well as mental health and addiction workers and coordinators for Indigenous communities in Ontario.

In partnership with Indigenous communities and the federal government, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Health continue to support 10 new and expanded Indigenous-led Mental Health and Addictions Treatment and Healing Centres that will provide care using a combination of traditional healing and clinical approaches to help Indigenous youth, adults and families access culturally safe treatment closer to home, on and off reserve. As of June 5, 2020, seven of the 10 Treatment and Healing Centres were operational. The remaining three centres are working towards full implementation. Furthermore, three safe sobering sites were developed and established in Thunder Bay with KO, MECC, and NNEC, for First Nations youth to safely detoxify from substance and alcohol misuse. These sites are now fully operational and are supported by funding through Ontario Health – North over three years, including into 2020-21.

Finally, in the unprecedented circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario recognizes that the continued delivery of mental health and addictions services is essential. The Ministry of Health has supported community-based service providers, including Indigenous providers, to modify their services to move towards virtual care and follow set protocols. Service providers are touching base with clients by phone and secure videoconferencing, if appropriate, and providing more intensive in-person care to clients who are assessed with high needs. In addition, on April 2, 2020, Ontario announced an additional \$12 million in funding to support community-based service delivery and improve access to online and virtual mental health supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ontario continues to work with the mental health and addictions sector, including Indigenous partners, to identify further opportunities to make strategic and focussed investments to maintain service levels, while beginning work to implement the *Roadmap to Wellness*. We remain committed to continuing to work with Indigenous partners as we undertake this important work to ensure that the mental health and addictions needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people are supported in both the immediate- and longer-term.

Supporting Community-Based Approaches

Ontario acknowledges that many Indigenous communities seek greater responsibility and capacity to govern over matters that directly affect their communities. The province is committed to working with Indigenous partners and Canada, as appropriate, to support community-based approaches and to enhance Indigenous participation in decision-making in order to achieve positive socio-economic outcomes. Furthermore, Ontario, Canada and NAN continue to explore options to transform First Nations' health and child and family services systems. In discussing these opportunities for reform Ontario recognizes the importance of services that are available, accessible, and appropriate to the complex needs of Indigenous people, including First Nations students in Thunder Bay. Health system transformation aims to address the recommendations of the Seven Youth Inquest by improving health outcomes for First Nations through evidence-based models, streamlining services, providing accountability to communities and funders, and developing long-term strategies to crisis situations.

Commemoration

In November 2019, the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs provided funding to support a meaningful, joint memorial for two of the seven youth. The memorial was held at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay and was attended by family and close friends of Jethro Anderson and Paul Panacheese.

Also in November 2019, Indigenous education partners in collaboration with NAN organized a Family Gathering in Thunder Bay, to bring together the families of the seven youth who were the subject of the Inquest. The three-day gathering provided an opportunity for the families to connect with each other and to participate in activities and workshops focused on topics such as healing and self-care.

The gathering also provided an opportunity for the Inquest parties to present on the actions and progress on the Inquest jury recommendations to the families. On the second day of the gathering, all Inquest parties were invited to participate in delivering a collective presentation on their Inquest-related work that has been undertaken to date. Among other parties, officials from the Ministries of Indigenous Affairs, Education, Health, and Government and Consumer Services participated in the development and delivery of the collective presentation. The families expressed appreciation of the broad efforts, but also regret that it was only after seven deaths that this work and investments had come forward.

All Parties Collaboration

Ontario continues to participate in post-Inquest processes and meetings, guided by its commitment to strengthening the province's relationships with Indigenous peoples by respectfully engaging with and focusing on the priorities of Indigenous communities in the province. Ontario was pleased to participate in two All Parties Political Table Meetings since June 2019, including a meeting in September 2019 that was attended by Ministers Rickford and Lecce and another in January 2020 that was attended by senior Ontario officials. These meetings have been opportunities to discuss with the

Inquest parties the current or potential barriers and issues experienced by both education providers and students that could hinder progress or outcomes both in implementing the jury's recommendations as well as in their day-to-day efforts to support student safety and well-being.

Ontario is also pleased to have provided funding support to NAN in the 2019-20 fiscal year for capacity to coordinate amongst parties and deliver on recommendations. The Ministry of Indigenous Affairs is working with NAN to determine what funding supports can be provided in 2020-21, especially to address additional or unanticipated costs that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To advance meaningful change, Ontario's approach going into 2020-21 will build on previous progress related to education and employment programs and supports, investing in First Nation youth mental health and well-being, and supporting or facilitating service coordination and accessibility in Thunder Bay. Ontario also requires increased commitments from Canada to ensure that First Nations education institutes both in and outside of Thunder Bay have the supports they need to help navigate provincial and local services and systems for their students, particularly during the challenging time of recovery from the pandemic. Ontario's efforts to examine and more effectively deliver provincial programs and services will consider the unique education, health and well-being needs and supports of students and their families living in or travelling to Thunder Bay.

Ontario will continue to look to collaborative processes with Inquest parties that are responsive to the complex realities for First Nation students attending school away from home, to honour the seven youth that were lost and to work towards practical solutions that can help support Indigenous youth education and well-being, regardless of where they live in the province.

Best Regards,



Shawn Batise
Deputy Minister

Enclosure – Ontario's 2020 Response to Jury Recommendations
Seven First Nations Youth Inquest