



Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc.

For immediate release
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MKO's Statement on High Rates of COVID-19 in Northern Manitoba: Placing Blame on First Nations Leadership Harmful During Fight Against Deadly Virus

Treaty Five Territory, Thompson, MB – Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) Inc. is issuing this statement to provide a response on the continuing high rates of COVID-19 cases in communities Northern Manitoba and to respond to uninformed comments made by the Premier of Manitoba today.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee states:

“We are disappointed to see ongoing high rates of COVID-19 in First Nations in Manitoba. We are worried about the lives of our family and community members. We are grieving from the ongoing losses of our Elders.

We are especially alarmed to see the numbers of COVID-19 cases in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across Northern Manitoba surpass Winnipeg. Although I represent First Nations in Northern Manitoba, I am also a Manitoba citizen who cares about and is concerned about the health and wellness of all people living in our province. Once again, I am reminding the Premier that it is extremely damaging to attack First Nations, who are fellow Manitobans. The statements made today place the blame on us as though we are inviting COVID-19 into our communities.

First Nations leaders, health care workers, pandemic response staff, and all citizens have been working tirelessly in the battle to keep COVID-19 out of our communities. As sovereign nations, our communities do have the ability and the rights to create our own laws to help govern our communities. We do not need the federal government to tell us to respect public health orders. Although we have the ability to govern our own communities, we also work closely with Dr. Brent Roussin and many other health leaders across the province to ensure our public health measures are very closely aligned with the messaging shared by Dr. Roussin.

The fact of the matter is that First Nations were always going to be at a disproportionate risk of contracting COVID-19. The underlying issues of a lack of housing, lack of access to health care, high rates of poverty, and boil water advisories impact our ability to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

As the pandemic started, the Manitoba First Nations Pandemic Response Coordination Team provided early warnings of the potential for outbreaks due to the above and negligent conditions First Nations have had to endure due to years of colonial policies and neglect to infrastructure. We need more provincial and federal funding and partnerships for addiction services and harm reduction. The Premier should know better and stop pointing his finger. Let's not forget the significant amount of people travelling through communities such as Grand Rapids. This community has worked diligently to keep COVID-19 out of their community and yet despite repeated requests for enforcement, they get absolutely no help from the province to enforce the travel restriction.

Due to the lack of health services available in our communities, many First Nations citizens are required to travel to both Thompson and Winnipeg to access health care. It is the wish of First Nations communities that their members who have travelled for medical treatment self-isolate for 14 days before returning to their communities. The fact is, there are no available resources for people to safely isolate for 14 days if they do not first provide a positive COVID-19 test. We have tried working with the Northern Health Region to ensure spaces are available for people to isolate and yet it seems as though they aren't able or willing to assist us to ensure people have space to isolate before returning to their communities to prevent transmission of COVID-19. MKO continues to look for solutions to provide spaces for people to isolate.

First Nations also lack access to rapid tests for COVID-19. All First Nations should have access to these tests as another measure to help stem the tide of this virus.

It is disheartening and counterproductive to relationships when the Premier targets and gaslights First Nations when given the chance. The Premier's views of First Nations apparently do not take into account the historical and current context of colonialism. COVID-19 disproportionately impacts First Nations. Many of us already have underlying health conditions due to colonialism and inadequate health care systems both on and off reserve. We are also accessing services within health systems that are not culturally safe.

One week ago, my staff asked both the Northern Health Region and Indigenous Services Canada to provide us with an update on the epidemiology to show what is causing outbreaks in Northern Manitoba. To date, we have not received a response. We are unclear on whether contract tracing is keeping pace. My office will follow up with both the Northern Health Region and Indigenous Services this week to repeat our request. Both levels of government have a responsibility to ensure First Nations are supported with access to this type of information.

I would like to remind the Premier of the responsibilities and power he has to build and enhance First Nations relationships. I wrote to him again last week inviting him to meet with Northern leaders. We thought that with the growing rates of COVID-19 in our region, he might like to meet with us. He once again declined our invite. I'd like to remind the Premier and all Manitobans that our last meeting with Brian Pallister was on April 2, 2020. The meeting lasted for five minutes. It should be widely known that this lack of engagement with us counters his statements that he is working with First Nations leaders. Mr. Premier, I'm urging you to do better."

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