



Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc.

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MKO Urges Premier of Manitoba to Issue Public Apology and to Work in Partnership with First Nations on Plan for COVID-19 Vaccine

Treaty Five Territory, Thompson, MB – Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) Inc. is issuing this statement to provide updates on the need for the Province of Manitoba to work closely with First Nations regarding the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine in Manitoba. MKO represents and advocates on behalf of Northern First Nations in Manitoba.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee shared the following:

“Manitoba continues to see continuing high numbers of positive COVID-19 cases both within our region and across the province. We are extremely concerned for the health and well-being of First Nation citizens in Manitoba and we are all looking forward to having a vaccine that can help us resume some of our regular activities in a safe manner. Everyone is tired of this pandemic and people’s lives are at stake.

Last week, the Premier of Manitoba shared divisive commentary about Indigenous people in Manitoba receiving the vaccine on a priority basis. Mr. Pallister suggested that if Indigenous people receive priority, this puts Manitobans at the ‘back of the line.’ First Nations people living in this province *are* Manitobans as well.

I have heard from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people about their disappointment in the rhetoric shared by our Premier. The Premier had requested to meet with me about the COVID-19 vaccine today. In response, I wrote to the Premier to ask him to make a public apology to Indigenous people in Manitoba, as well as to all Manitobans, for the divisive and harmful words he has shared. All Manitoba citizens are looking to the Premier to show strong leadership during these challenging times. A part of being a strong leader is working with stakeholders and partners in a transparent way.

It is important that the Premier communicate transparently on the issue of the COVID-19 vaccine. Any meetings we have about the vaccine must include my colleague Dr. Barry Lavallee, who is an expert in First Nations health and the CEO of our Northern health entity, Keewatinohk Inniniw Minoayawin Inc.

MKO asserts that First Nations leaders **must** be involved in the planning for the distribution of the vaccines as there are severe outcomes for First Nations people who have COVID-19 in Manitoba. As leaders, we must work together in unity and we must do this on an urgent basis.

The COVID-19 virus does not discriminate and affects all Manitobans, whether they are First Nations or not. However, provincial data shows First Nations are being disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 virus. Statistics clearly show that First Nations people need to be prioritized for the vaccine, regardless of whether they live on or off reserve. As of today, First Nations people make up nearly half (43%) of all COVID patients in intensive care units in Manitoba.

Last week the Premier of Manitoba stated, 'We believe it's important to develop a coordinated plan' and offered his opinion about what Indigenous leaders do and do not want in terms of the vaccine distribution in Manitoba. In my opinion, it would be impossible for the Premier to know what we want as he does not reach out to speak with us in a proactive way. The last meeting I had with the Premier was more than eight months ago on April 2, 2020, where Mr. Pallister met with me for under 10 minutes in total. The lack of communication we are receiving directly from the Premier, as we live through a worldwide pandemic, is worrisome and disappointing.

If the Premier truly does believe it's important to develop a coordinated plan, we have asked that he work with us in a more transparent way. First Nations have been extremely proactive during the pandemic and we offer workable solutions to the complex situation we find ourselves in. I am imploring the Premier of Manitoba to work with our experts and leadership to navigate a pathway forward that will be beneficial to all people in Manitoba.

I will reiterate that our involvement in any discussions on the COVID-19 vaccine in Manitoba must include a role in Manitoba's COVID-19 Task Force for First Nations experts."

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Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc. (MKO) is a non-profit, political advocacy organization that has represented 26 First Nation communities in Manitoba's North since 1981. The MKO represents more than 72,000 First Nations people.