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Office of Grand Chief Garrison Settee

Grand Chief Settee's open letter to the editor of the Winnipeg Free Press

January 13, 2021

I'm writing to the Winnipeg Free Press today to thank you for your ongoing commitment to covering stories of interest to Manitoba residents as we live through the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm also writing to ask that you carefully consider the headlines you develop around stories related to the distribution and administration of the COVID-19 vaccines when it comes to First Nations in Northern Manitoba.

Yesterday I had the honour of hosting a press conference with three MKO Chiefs and one of our Elders who has chosen to receive the Moderna vaccine. Elder Mervin Garrick received the vaccine on January 7 in Pimicikamak Cree Nation and explained during our press conference that he had nothing negative to say about the vaccine.

Along with this firsthand testimonial, the Chiefs of Pimicikamak, Norway House Cree Nation, and York Factory First Nation all explained that the uptake of the vaccine amongst the seniors who are eligible to receive it has been phenomenal.

As you referenced in your story: In Pimicakamak, only two Elders have initially declined to take the vaccine. In Norway House, it was only 3 out of 120 Elders (2.5 percent) who have initially declined, and those three Elders indicated that they simply wanted to talk to their own doctor before deciding. The uptake of the vaccine amongst 97.5% of people who are eligible to receive is an amazing and encouraging number for any vaccine, especially one like the COVID-19 vaccine that is brand new.

This good news story that I heard from the MKO Chiefs yesterday is one that is important

to share, and not the message that comes across in your headline “Some vaccine trepidation on First Nations: Northern Chiefs”. Compare this with a headline from an Indigenous publication such as Windspeaker, which attended the same press conference and yet came out with a story called “Sense of hope for First Nations in Northern Manitoba as vaccine shots begin.”

First Nations people in Manitoba continue to be disproportionately impacted by the ongoing pandemic. Our leaders have advocated strongly to ensure our citizens have timely access to vaccines, and the early indications are that our Elders have stepped up to protect their communities—despite a historical and well-founded mistrust of colonial health systems. We are requesting that the Winnipeg Free Press consider its role in sharing information about the COVID-19 vaccines in a strengths-based and culturally relevant way.

The excitement and response from our Elders when it comes to accepting the Moderna vaccine is remarkable. I hope we can see headlines that reflect this type of positive news from your publication as we move forward with our vaccination campaigns.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Garrison Settee". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G'.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee
Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc.