



## Manitoba Keewatinowik Okimakanak Inc.

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### **COVID-19 Updates from First Nations in Manitoba: MKO Urges Increased Access to Vaccines to Protect First Nations Citizens**

**Treaty Five Territory, Thompson, MB** – Manitoba Keewatinowik Okimakanak (MKO) Inc. is issuing this statement to provide an update on COVID-19 vaccines for First Nations people in Northern Manitoba along with a reminder to citizens to continue to be vigilant in following public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“All First Nations in Manitoba had access to an initial 5300 doses of the Moderna vaccine—all doses have been distributed to First Nations across the province,” shared **Grand Chief Garrison Settee**. “In the MKO region, 2220 doses of the Moderna vaccine were distributed across 23 First Nations.”

“There is a great need for access to these vaccines as we continue to see disproportionately high impacts from COVID-19 for First Nations across the Province of Manitoba. The median age of death for First Nations citizens is 66, compared to 83 for Manitoba. First Nations citizens currently make up 30 per cent of total COVID-19 cases, 36 per cent of hospitalizations, and 47 per cent of admissions to intensive care units due to COVID-19,” stated **Dr. Michael Routledge**, medical advisor to MKO and the new health entity Keewatinohk Inniniw Minoayawin.

“Sayisi Dene Denesuline Nation received 60 Moderna doses to help us vaccinate our Elders and health care workers. We began vaccinating community members on January 19 and the vaccine has been well received,” said **Chief Evan Yassie** of the **Sayisi Dene Denesuline Nation**. “We currently have no cases COVID-19 in our community of about 400 people. While our community members continue to work hard to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in our community, the COVID-19 vaccine provides a ray of light for us. I am encouraging all citizens in Tadoule Lake to continue observing the public health measures we need to follow to stop the spread of the virus.”

Manitoba’s COVID-19 Vaccine Implementation Task Force and sub-working groups have been meeting regularly to develop and implement the vaccine rollout plan for First Nation people of Manitoba. The task force is working with limited volumes of vaccines. Task force representatives for MKO include Dr. Barry Lavallee and Joni Wilson with additional support from Bernice Thorassie, Caroline Chartrand, and Teena Legris on various sub-committees.

“We received 100 doses of the Moderna vaccine to help us vaccinate our Elders and health care workers in the Northlands Denesuline First Nation. Our Denesuline Elders are leading the way by receiving their vaccines, with the vaccination campaign beginning in our community on January 19,” shared **Chief Simon Denechezhe** of the **Northlands Denesuline First Nation**. “We have no cases COVID-19 in our community of 1026 people. I want to thank the citizens of my community for their ongoing diligence in following public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.”

As Councillor John Clarke shares, the Barren Lands First Nation had the distinction of not having a single case of COVID-19 until this past weekend.

“We received 60 doses of the vaccine back in January. It went to some Elders, front line staff, our health staff, and I believe we are getting our next shipment on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February so hopefully that all works out. We have done pretty well. We have been under lockdown after lockdown since last April. We have just encountered our first case this past weekend, which I believe was from an out of province traveller. There were three others identified as close contacts. Those folks were tested yesterday and all of them came out negative,” shared **Councillor John Clarke** of the **Barren Lands First Nation**. “We are still hopeful this virus doesn’t go anywhere. We contained this as quickly as possible. We are still on full lockdown... we thank the people for trying their best.”

A second allotment of 5300 Moderna vaccines for First Nation communities is scheduled for February 2021 (exact timing is to be determined). This will provide second doses to Elders and health care workers who had received their first dose.

Task force partners also have 4000 doses of the Moderna vaccine to facilitate “shared priorities.” Partners identified the following groups as “shared priorities” to be vaccinated from the 4000 Moderna vaccines presently available:

- Congregate living settings including correctional facilities, homeless shelters, assisted living facilities, and group homes
- Provincial health staff in the North that meet the current criteria
- First Nations’ health staff and the workforce at First Nation nursing stations
- Residents of the Kekinan Centre (First Nation assisted living facility)
- Elders aged 70+ in Northern/remote communities, Bayline communities, Churchill, and communities adjacent to First Nations in the North and South

As more vaccines are made available, priority groups will be expanded.

Vaccine clinics have been established for health staff at the Thompson Regional Community Centre along with “pop-up clinics” in The Pas, Flin Flon, and Winnipeg.

Due to a shortage of Pfizer vaccines, the opening of the Vaxport supersite in Thompson has been delayed to March 1. The facility has been extensively renovated and site recommendations shared by First Nation, health, and local partners have been implemented. MKO First Nations and remote communities will receive the opportunity to use this site for community-wide vaccinations, travelling by chartered planes and buses. This will be coordinated by the Vaxport team. No individual appointments can be made for this site.

In the coming weeks, members of the Vaxport team will contact each First Nation for an engagement session to inform communities of the Vaxport supersite and start arrangements for scheduling community members into the supersite. MKO and Keewatinohk Inniniw Minoayawin will support the vaccine clinics at Vaxport by arranging for boxed lunches for all community members receiving vaccination, providing on-site translators and greeters, and organizing overnight accommodations for groups should they need to stay overnight in Thompson due to unforeseen weather conditions.

“First Nations people in Northern Manitoba need access to a larger and more readily available supply of COVID-19 vaccines,” stated Grand Chief Settee. “I want to thank all of the experts who have been working hard to prioritize the limited supply of vaccines in Manitoba. We do expect that First Nation people receive vaccines of the highest efficacy to help them access the best protection from the COVID-19 virus. In the meantime, we continue to encourage public health recommendations for social distancing, wearing masks, handwashing, and limiting travel.”

MKO will continue to provide updates on the COVID-19 vaccine for Northern First Nations as more information becomes available.