

VIA EMAIL

June 28, 2021

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 2021 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. As of June 2021, Ontario is pleased to report that of the 61 recommendations directed at Ontario, 36 recommendations are completed and 25 are in progress.

I would also like to acknowledge that our response this year is being provided following the tragic news of the remains of Indigenous children found buried at former Indian Residential School sites across Canada, including the recent findings in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. These findings are a national tragedy and this is a difficult time for many Indigenous people across Canada who continue to cope and heal from the ongoing intergenerational trauma of the Indian Residential School system. I also recognize the additional pain and sadness being experienced by the families of the seven youth who died after leaving their communities to attend school in Thunder Bay, and the incredible dedication and resiliency of the First Nation partners working to address the recommendations of the Inquest.

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.

This year's response marks the fifth anniversary of the release of the jury's recommendations and is an opportune time to acknowledge the impact the recommendations have had in driving more integrated service approaches across ministries to support Indigenous youth education and well-being. This juncture also presents an opportunity to consider the path forward in the ongoing approach to addressing the remaining recommendations. We want to ensure that the objectives and recommendations of the Inquest continue to guide and inform priorities across government, particularly in light of the recent tragic news, which further heightens the critical importance of this work being centred on the holistic needs of students, families and communities.

Ontario is committed to addressing remaining Inquest recommendations, ensuring its approach is grounded in student safety, success and well-being. We look forward to meeting with First Nation Inquest partners to determine future priorities including equitable access to quality education, transition supports, mental health and well-being supports, and broadband connectivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused significant disruptions to the education and overall well-being of students, including First Nation students. COVID-19 response and recovery will be an underlying and cross-cutting theme as we continue to move forward. Ontario has already laid a solid foundation for future action in the priority areas, given notable progress over the past year. Highlights, as of June 2021, are provided below.

Equitable Access to Quality Education and Transition Supports

Ontario has heard from First Nation Inquest parties about the need for sustainable, multi-year funding to ensure long-term supports for First Nation student safety and well-being, particularly as students transition between First Nation-operated or federally-operated and provincially-funded schools. Predictable, sustainable funding also supports improved educational outcomes for First Nation students attending First Nation-operated or federally-operated schools off-reserve.

To address this, the Ministry of Education is providing sustainable, reliable, multi-year funding to NAN and partner organizations, including Inquest partners, to support the implementation of education related Inquest recommendations and for activities addressing student safety and transitions. This is a commitment of \$12 million over the course of three years from 2020-23 (\$4 million per year). Funding supports partner-led activities that respond to locally identified priorities, including:

- Memorial Scholarship Awards, established with communities and families, for First Nation youth who excel at the talents in which the seven youth were gifted;

- Education Systems Navigator, Transition Coordinator positions and Reengagement Programs;
- Children and Youth Identification Coordinator position to address the backlog of unregistered children and youth and help families access provincial services to support students;
- Circle of Care Development Coordinator to improve student access to health services and aftercare;
- Distance Education Program Coordinator to support students accessing remote learning; and
- Continuity of Care gathering and development of a Continuity of Care implementation plan.

Postsecondary institutions identified major challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly disparities related to virtual learning. In 2020-21, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities launched the Virtual Learning Strategy for Postsecondary Education. As part of its ongoing operational funding to support Indigenous Institutes, one-time funding of \$2.5 million in virtual learning supports was allocated to the Indigenous Institutes as part of the Virtual Learning Strategy to enable Indigenous Institutes to create and/or improve digital content, digital capacity, digital fluency, and/or digital delivery to address the unique needs of Indigenous learners.

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 will continue to 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 reserve to provincial standards to reflect an inclusive, equitable and culturally responsive model.

Mental Health and Well-Being Supports

Improving the mental health and well-being of Indigenous youth in Thunder Bay as well as throughout Ontario, continues to be a priority for the province.

The Ministry of Health has approved annualized funding beginning in 2021-22 through Ontario Health-North to support the continued operation of the safe sobering sites by KO, MECC, and NNEC for First Nation youth in Thunder Bay to safely detoxify from substance and alcohol misuse.

As part of the *Roadmap to Wellness: A Plan to Build Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions System*, released in March 2020, a number of Indigenous-specific programming investments have been made in Northern Ontario. These include:

- Joint funding from the Ministries of Health and Children, Community and Social Services for two new mental health and addictions Treatment and Healing Centres in Northern Ontario, one led by Constance Lake First Nation, which is in development, and the other by Dilico Anishinabek Family Care, which was launched in September 2020;
- Funding from the Ministry of Health for Indigenous mental health and addictions System Coordinators, including funding to NAN, to help improve service pathways, client journeys, and coordination between providers serving Indigenous communities in the mental health and addictions system;
- Funding from the Ministry of Health to expand services through the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Services (CAPS) program in Thunder Bay, with satellite service locations across Northwestern Ontario, led by Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre and St. Joseph's Care Group;
- Funding from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services to deliver culturally grounded and coordinated support for high risk Indigenous youth and young adults in Northern Ontario, specifically in Thunder Bay, who have serious mental health needs in addition to a developmental disability, and who are at high risk of suicide. Funding will support service coordination, case management and access to Indigenous healing and wellness activities;
- Funding from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services through the Indigenous Healing & Wellness Strategy for:
 - New Youth Mental Health & Recreation programming in northern and remote First Nations, including dedicated funding for the NAN Oshkaatisak (All Young Peoples') Council to design and implement youth-led programming for First Nation youth in NAN member communities, and
 - An Indigenous Care Coordinator pilot between Indigenous partners and the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre to provide Indigenous-specific health and mental health navigation and discharge planning services;
- A \$5 million increase in funding for the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services' Family Well-Being program. This program funds Indigenous communities and service providers, including NAN, to develop and deliver services and programs that are holistic, culturally safe, community-based and prevention-focused. These supports help Indigenous children, youth and their families to heal and recover from the effects of intergenerational violence and trauma, reduce violence, and address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in child welfare and youth justice systems; and
- Beginning in 2020, \$13.75 million in funding over ten years from the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs to support the creation and implementation of 11 new Social Emergency Manager positions in NAN and Grand Council Treaty #3 (GCT#3) First Nation communities, which will build capacity around social emergency prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

Through the *Roadmap to Wellness*, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities also provided \$500,000 to Indigenous Institutes for mental health supports in 2020-21, an increase of \$150,000 from the previous year.

Additionally, in response to COVID-19, the Ministry of Education received \$3,608,300 in one-time emergency mental health and addictions funding in 2020-21 from the federal government via the Safe Restart Agreement with Ontario to support the coordination, delivery of and connection to critical mental health supports and resources for First Nation, Métis, Inuit and urban Indigenous students. This funding is supporting increased access to mental health services; the provision of tools and resources to support well-being and continuity of learning; and improved access to essential technology for communities.

In January 2021, the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs further provided \$1.325 million to support the Mushkegowuk Fire Keepers Patrol, a mobile Indigenous street outreach program to serve Mushkegowuk and Wabun members and other Indigenous people residing in the Timmins area. The program utilizes a model of care reflective of Indigenous cultural knowledge and values to deliver outreach and street patrol services, harm reduction, mental health counselling and assistance navigating access to other social services.

Ontario remains committed to continuing to work with Indigenous partners 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, including culturally appropriate, trauma-informed supports for Indian Residential School Survivors, their families and Indigenous communities relating to the identification, maintenance, protection and commemoration of Indian Residential School burial sites.

Broadband Connectivity

The shift to remote work and online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last year, including for many First Nation students who have returned to their home communities, has reinforced the need for reliable access to broadband connectivity across the province.

The Matawa Broadband Project, a \$30 million investment announced in October 2019, will connect five remote Matawa-member First Nations communities (Nibinamik, Neskantaga, Eabametoong, Marten Falls and Webequie) to modern fibre-optic cable broadband service. As described in Ontario's 2020 response, this project 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 is well underway with almost 50% of the cable installed. The first communities are expected to be connected in the Fall of 2021 with full completion targeted by Fall 2022.

On January 20, 2021 Ontario announced an investment of \$10.9 million for six broadband projects to bring faster broadband to several towns and First Nation communities across Northern Ontario. This includes a \$1 million contribution to a fibre optic network to six GTC#3 communities and a \$168,000 contribution to upgrade the speed and capacity of the K-Net network which serves more than 80 First Nation communities.

IAO also provided \$252,000 in funding in 2020 to K-Net to upgrade speed and capacity in 16 northern and remote NAN communities, while supporting future upgrades. Under the 2019 *Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan*, the province launched Improving Connectivity for Ontario (ICON), a program to bring high-speed internet to underserved homes and communities. This program was designed to leverage funding from the private sector and other levels of government, including the federal Universal Broadband Fund, a similar program to support better connectivity. Ontario and Canada received applications from all across the province, including ones that will specifically serve remote First Nations. Both governments are working together to move forward with projects and expect to announce projects in the coming weeks. Ontario recognized that, despite this program, more is needed. That is why the 2021-22 Ontario Budget released March 24, 2021 included an additional \$2.8 billion investment targeted for the expansion of broadband infrastructure. These investments will ensure that every region in the province, including northern and remote First Nation communities, has access to reliable broadband services by the end of 2025.

Ontario recognizes that broadband is a federally regulated sector and while the province provides funding, support from the federal government is critical for developing broadband solutions in underserved and unserved parts of the province.

With all Inquest parties submitting their fifth annual responses this year, this is also an important milestone marking the collaboration and partnership across the parties in implementing the recommendations. In the coming months, Ontario wishes to invite the parties to a discussion of what has been achieved to date and the key priorities that will facilitate addressing the remaining recommendations. The province seeks to ensure that a shift away from crisis response to one guided by actions and initiatives in the outlined priority areas and centred around students' safety, success and well-being as they complete their secondary school education, is aligned with the direction other Inquest parties, particularly First Nation Inquest partners, will be taking to address remaining recommendations.

Ontario, working across ministries, will continue to honour the seven youth that were lost and work towards practical, action-oriented, outcome-focused solutions that can help support Indigenous youth education and well-being, regardless of where they live in the province. We look forward to meeting with the Inquest parties in the coming months to discuss this important work and the path ahead.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Shawn Batise', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Shawn Batise
Deputy Minister