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Anonymous donor gives \$380,000 to remote First Nation for suicide prevention

GLORIA GALLOWAY

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A private donor has stepped forward to provide a remote First Nations community in Northern Ontario with money for a suicide prevention program that was refused by Health Canada seven months before two 12-year-old girls took their lives.

The anonymous donor has committed \$380,000 to reinstate Wapekeka's mental health program for youth, and has already paid an initial instalment of \$30,000, said a statement issued Wednesday by Wapekeka Chief Brennan Sainnawap and Alvin Fiddler, Grand Chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation.

Nishnawbe Aski Nation includes Wapekeka, a community of about 500 people located 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay.

"The community is happy. They are relieved that they can proceed with developing and establishing a program that they had wanted back in July when they submitted a proposal [to Health Canada] to establish a mental health team for the youth," Mr. Fiddler said in a telephone interview.

“We will still go after Ontario and the feds to continue supporting the community,” he said. “It shouldn’t let Canada or Ontario off the hook with this donation.”

Mr. Sainnawap wrote to Health Canada last summer to say that there had been many suicide attempts by young people in Wapekeka over the previous year, and the community believed that some young girls had made a suicide pact. He asked Health Canada for \$376,706 to pay for four counsellors to help address the suicide issue as well as an increase in the use of oxycontin and prescription drugs.

That request was not approved, though the federal department did tell community members last fall that it would pursue funding opportunities.

Jolynn Winter and Chantel Fox took their lives over a weekend earlier this month, prompting widespread media coverage of the problems in Wapekeka.

Mr. Sainnawap said he and the other members of the community were “overwhelmed” by the generosity of the donor and also disappointed with the federal government’s failure to assist. The community has already begun to hire mental health workers.

The Globe and Mail reported Wednesday that the department provided Health Minister Jane Philpott with a bleak assessment of the First Nations health program in February of last year. That report said the government is failing in almost every respect to deliver adequate treatment and medical services to people living on reserves, including mental wellness programs for indigenous people.

The document provided to Dr. Philpott by her department said there is “limited or no federal mental health services for First Nations children and youth other than services provided through the National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy.”