

Anonymous donor pledges \$380K for suicide prevention plan in Wapekeka First Nation after 2 girls die

\$30K of \$380K donation sent to remote First Nation on Monday

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Jolynn Winter, 12, left, and Chantel Fox, 12, centre, from the community of Wapapeka First Nation in Ontario, died by suicide this month. Chantel is survived by her twin sister, Chanel, pictured far right. (Supplied by the Winter and Fox families)

An anonymous donor is pledging \$380,000 for a plan to prevent more young people from dying by suicide on Wapekeka First Nation in northern Ontario, after Health Canada denied funding last summer.

Difficulty in obtaining government funding was made public last week after the death of two 12-year-olds, Jolynn Winter and Chantel Fox, in the remote community, about 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay.

Wapekeka had alerted Health Canada to a suicide pact among young girls, and proposed a \$376,706 community-based prevention plan while asking

for funding last summer. As of last week, Wapekeka had not received any government funding for the program.

"We are grateful that a private donor has stepped in where the government of Canada has failed," Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler said in a news release on Wednesday.



Alvin Fiddler is grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, representing 49 First Nations in northern Ontario, including Wapekeka. (Alvin Fiddler)

The donor sent an initial instalment of \$30,000 to Wapekeka on Monday, and is committed to fund approximately \$380,000 for a youth mental health program in the First Nation, according to the release.

"We are overwhelmed with this act of generosity and cannot express how grateful we are that this donor is stepping in to help our people," said Wapekeka Chief Brennan Sainnawap.

'They want to help'

Fiddler said Nishnawbe Aski Nation wants to "tap into" people's desire to help First Nations by looking for more ways to seek charitable donations from individuals or corporations.

"The public heard what was happening in Wapekeka, and they're telling us it's not acceptable and they want to help," he said.

Even in Wapekeka, there is more work to be done, he said. The youth mental health program is just one aspect of an overall strategy to prevent suicide.

According to the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, there are 49 other northern Ontario First Nations where more than 500 people have committed suicide in the past 30 years.

"This should not let Canada or Ontario off the hook in terms of supporting our communities, especially with children and youth and the need for mental health supports," Fiddler said.

In a statement last week, Health Minister Jane Philpott said First Nations have developed a "First Nations mental wellness continuum framework, and we intend to continue to support that. We have invested \$300 million this year in mental wellness across the country."

She was travelling back from the cabinet retreat in Calgary on Monday, so couldn't immediately be reached for comment Wednesday.



"If First Nations have to start begging for charity to keep children from dying, then we have a real problem in this country," says NDP MP Charlie Angus. (Adrian Wyld/Canadian Press)

NDP MP Charlie Angus said the Liberals are spending the same amount that the Conservatives budgeted and the government knows it's not enough to prevent suicides on First Nations.

Government documents obtained by Angus through access to information show the government receives advice on its legal liability when it comes to providing health care in First Nations.

"There is a shortage of mental wellness services for children in Canada generally, with access more limited in remote and isolated communities," says a document titled "Vulnerabilities to FNIHB [First Nations Inuit Health Branch] Programming resulting from January 2016 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal."

The document says the legal risk level identified for the mental wellness programming is identified as "high."

"With respect to FN [First Nation] children, access is further limited due to higher needs; limited or no federal mental health services for FN children and youth other than services provided through the National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy; lack of culturally appropriate treatment and counselling approaches that where they exist have limited overall capacity to effectively address intergenerational trauma linked to residential school experiences and cycles of poverty, violence and addiction," the document says.

"This government knows these services are badly underfunded and they're badly underfunded because the government doesn't want to spend money on First Nations kids," Angus said. "So if First Nations have to start begging for charity to keep children from dying, then we have a real problem in this country."