

## Canada

### **Trudeau meets with Ontario indigenous leaders in wake of girls' suicides**

Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler said Trudeau was “very receptive” to the chiefs’ suggestions, but he made no commitments. The meeting came days after two 12-year-old girls died by suicide in Wapekeka First Nation.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reached out to Wapekeka First Nation band council member Joshua Frogg, the uncle a 12-year-old girl who died by suicide on Jan. 10. (ADRIAN WYLD / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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OTTAWA—Prime Minister Justin Trudeau held a closed-door meeting Thursday with some leaders of Ontario’s northern First Nations to discuss a national suicide strategy.

The prime minister reached out to Wapekeka First Nation band council member Joshua Frogg, the uncle of Chantell Fox, a 12-year-old girl who died by suicide on Jan. 10, as well as to Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN)

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler and Mushkegowuk Council Grand Chief Jonathan Solomon.

The chiefs were in Ottawa to hold a press conference on Parliament Hill, demanding a national suicide strategy after the deaths of Chantell and her 12-year-old friend Jolynn Winter. Jolynn died by suicide first, on Jan. 8. Four other girls were flown out of the remote First Nation 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay, and another 26 students are considered at “high risk” for suicide.

Wapekeka Chief Brennan Sainnawap, Chantell’s grandfather, wrote to Health Canada in July to demand help and submit a mental-health funding proposal, saying they feared a suicide pact among girls was present in the community.

Health Canada denied their request.

“The first thing we raised was the urgency of the situation, the fact the community has asked for some supports which they submitted back in July and the government’s need to act immediately to approve the proposal,” said Fiddler after the meeting on Thursday.

Fiddler handed Trudeau a copy of NAN’s declaration of a state of health emergency in their communities and those all the way to the Manitoba border, on Feb. 26, 2016. The declaration outlined how indigenous people are dying of preventable diseases such as rheumatic fever, suffering adverse effects of diabetes and lacking mental-health care and addiction treatment.

The declaration called for a transformation of how health care is delivered to these communities, said Fiddler, who added chiefs in Manitoba and Saskatchewan agree with them.

“The present system does not respond quickly enough. Right now, it almost paralyzes communities and government as well. Even if we make new investments in present system, most likely it won’t make a difference. NAN needs a total health transformation,” he told the prime minister.

Fiddler said Trudeau was “very receptive” to all their suggestions but he made no commitments.

Earlier on Parliament Hill, Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde, New Democrat MP Charlie Angus and the northern chiefs detailed how the youth suicide epidemic is devastating their communities.

Wapekeka's Joshua Frogg spoke softly to the media, clutching the soft grey glove last worn by his niece, Chantell Fox.



Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde says the government's approach to the indigenous suicide crisis has to change. First Nations leaders spoke out Thursday after the deaths of two twelve-year-old girls. (THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Chantell and Jolynn Winter died less than six months after Sainnawap sent a report to Health Canada that outlined the community's "dire experiences" with suicidal youth. The government's response, which came late last year in an email, was that it couldn't provide the nation with the \$376,000 it requested, because it was an "awkward" time for their budget, Frogg said.

"Awkward? It was awkward for us to bury two young children in the middle of the winter, in -30, -40 degree weather. It was awkward to break ground in the permafrost so that we could bury these children. It was awkward for our youth to cry at the funeral," Frogg said.

It's time for Canada to wake up, he added, joining Angus.

“We demand it,” Frogg said.

In a statement provided by her office, Health Minister Jane Philpott said the government is putting \$300 million into “mental wellness” for First Nations this year, including \$24 million for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, which includes Wapekeka and has experienced more than 500 suicides since 1986 — most of which involved people 20 years old or younger.

“It is very tragic to hear about circumstances like this, and this is not the only community that is suffering, where young people are struggling to be able to find hope,” Philpott said.

On July 18, 2016, Sainnawap’s letter said “there have been many suicide attempts by youth in the past year, and it is believed that there is a suicide pact with a group of young females.”

Eric Morrisette, Health Canada’s chief of media relations, said the department “provides approximately \$676,000 annually to the community for mental-wellness programs,” which include suicide prevention and building healthy communities.

Morrisette said the department replied to the community after receiving Sainnawap’s letter. In fall 2016, the department told the community it would “pursue funding opportunities in the future” to assist Wapekeka in increasing mental health workers in the community, Morrisette said via email Wednesday.

“Funding has been identified to assist the community, and Health Canada has been working over the last several days with First Nations and provincial partners to support the community’s vision for youth mental-health programming,” he added.

Sainnawap’s letter detailed a work plan and an annual budget to create a small mental-health team of four workers to provide services to help reduce the “high rate of suicide attempts.”

The plan asked Health Canada for \$376,706 to cover the cost of four permanent workers and their benefits, training, rent and computer costs and to pay for gas so the team could conduct home visits.

Sainnawap wrote there are limited activities for youth in Wapekeka, and “there is no youth mental-health worker that is available on a consistent basis.”

Suicide has been an ongoing issue in the community in wake of the devastation convicted pedophile Ralph Rowe brought to the area. Rowe was an Anglican minister and a pilot. He used to impress the boys in remote, fly-in indigenous communities by flying to the reserves, taking the kids for rides and out on camping trips.

Indigenous leaders believe Rowe’s victims number in the hundreds. Many men have refused to come forward. Others have committed suicide.

Fiddler called Rowe a “monster.” “In addition to dealing with the residential school legacy, we are also dealing with the Ralph Rowe legacy,” he said.

From 1982 to 1999, Wapekeka experienced 16 suicides. But the community rallied with help from an outside agency and a suicide prevention model called Survivors of Suicide (SOS.)

The SOS program included an annual conference open to all northern First Nations. It ran for 22 years, but the funding was cut two years ago.

Dr. Mike Kirlew, a physician who travels to Wapekeka from Sioux Lookout to serve the community, said indigenous peoples must “insist on equity” when it comes to health care and support program funding.

“The health-care system on reserves is far inferior to what other people get. Period,” he said. “This is taking children’s lives.”