

Wapekeka First Nation asked for suicide-prevention funds months before deaths of 2 girls

Health Canada says request came at 'awkward time' in the budget cycle, when funds were already allocated

By Jody Porter, John Paul Tasker, CBC News Posted: Jan 19, 2017 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Jan 19, 2017 3:50 PM ET



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)

First Nations leaders in northern Ontario say the federal government ignored their pleas to help a group of suicidal children last summer and is only now stepping forward with funding, days after two pre-teens died by suicide.

The girls, both 12, died within days of each other earlier this month in Wapekeka First Nation, a small community of about 400 residents located approximately 450 kilometres north of Sioux Lookout, Ont.

Jolynn Winter died on Jan. 8, while Chantel Fox died two days later. Four other children were flown out of the community for medical treatment "lest they be next in this suicide pact that was identified by the community several months ago," said a statement released from Wapekeka.

Another 26 children were "triggered by these deaths and are at high risk for suicide," the statement said.



"We had identified that several children were secretly planning suicide several months ago and we

immediately applied for health funding to work with the children in preventing any suicides from happening," Wapekeka spokesperson Joshua Frogg said

Joshua Frogg on the suicide of his niece1:41

'Awkward' time for funding

Health Canada said it received a funding proposal from Wapekeka First Nation in September, though the proposal was dated for July 18.

That's an "awkward time" in the federal funding cycle when all the available money has already been allocated, said Keith Conn, the regional executive for Ontario with the First Nation and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada.

The community had requested \$376,706 to hire and train four mental health workers to help establish counseling sessions for young people on the remote fly-in reserve.

"We just didn't have the funding to support the program," he told CBC News. "We don't have necessarily a flexible fund that we hold back for different projects."

The proposal specifically mentioned the threat of suicide and aimed to connect a group of high risk youth and their families with cultural activities on the land.

"The question our community is asking today: When is it the right time for this government to act and support our communities, especially for our youth and our children?" Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler told reporters Thursday.



Kids from Wapekeka First Nation are shown in a music video they made and posted on YouTube earlier this month. (YouTube)

NDP MP Charlie Angus balked at the department's suggestion that the timing was awkward.

"An awkward time for who? Too damn bad. It has to be said if these were white kids in a provincial school system or a provincial health system ... people would be fired. But when it comes to the federal government, [Indigenous Affairs] and Health Canada, it's just another day at the office," Angus said.

Conn said Health Canada kept Wapekeka's proposal on an "active" list and is now able to fund it through "slippage" — money that has gone unspent in the annual budget.

There's also been an emergency response and related support from Health Canada since Winter and Fox died.

"It's really sad that young people — in this case two young girls — had to die before Health Canada got around to approving any proposals from that community," Fiddler said.



Wapekeka, in northern Ontario, is home to about 400 residents. (YouTube)

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pledged an additional \$69 million over three years for First Nations mental wellness programs **at the height of the Attawapiskat suicide crisis last summer**. That brings total federal spending to roughly \$300 million a year, which is enough to fund 43 mental wellness teams to fan out across the country and minister to those in need.

"Is that enough? Obviously not enough if it's still continuing," AFN National Chief Perry Bellegarde said. "It's a system that's flawed, and it's sucking the hope out of these children."

The leaders present at the news conference in Ottawa on Thursday were unanimous in their calls for a national suicide strategy, and said that while

Jane Philpott, Canada's health minister, seems personally concerned with the issue, she is overseeing an incompetent bureaucracy.

"She's got good intentions, but she has people who are dragging everything. Governments announce initiatives but it takes months and months to get started and it's because of the bureaucracy."

Philpott said she is focused on long-term solutions for First Nations communities like Wapekeka.

"This is not the only community that is struggling, and we are continuing to provide resources. We are dealing with a legacy of generations of trauma, of people feeling disconnected from their culture. We also need to address those deep-seeded realities of why people have lost hope."

'Burnt out'

Nishnawbe Aski Nation represents 49 First Nations in northern Ontario, including Wapekeka. Its own statistics show there were more than 500 suicides in those communities between 1986 and 2016, with more than 70 of deaths involving children aged 10 to 14.

For several years, Wapekeka was a shining example of suicide prevention in the region, Fiddler said, developing its own "Survivors of Suicide" program to respond to a crisis in the 1990s and hosting an annual conference.

That started to change as federal funding for the program was cut two years ago, he said.

Wapekeka has gone through some "tragic experiences and they've learned lessons the hard way," said Fiddler.

"They've been able to formulate strategies based on experience and that's something governments need to support."

Conn said a planning exercise is currently underway at Health Canada examining what "continuum of care" is needed to prevent suicides among Indigenous youth and how can it be sustainable.



Wapekeka's proposal to Health Canada to fund a suicide-prevention program came at the wrong time in the budget cycle, says Keith Conn, of the department's First Nation and Inuit Health branch. (Jody Porter/CBC)

"We've had process after process, study after study, but to no avail," Mushkegowuk Council Grand Chief Jonathan Solomon said Thursday.

"Our front line workers are burnt out, our communities are tired. Yes, the government may announce initiatives but sadly they are just dragging their feet while we continue to bury our loved ones. Certainly, actions would be louder than words."



Wapekeka First Nation

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July 18, 2016

Tracey Clarke
Health Canada
tracey.clark@canada.ca

Dear Tracey,

Re: Youth Mental Health Submission

Please see our application, enclosed, for your review and acceptance. We are in direct need of addressing some mental health needs and supports. We have had some dire experiences with youth suicides in the past and we are hoping to establish support systems in place to help out our young people in their mental health struggles.

I thank you kindly for your understanding.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brennan Sainnawap', written over a horizontal line.

Chief Brennan Sainnawap

Cc: Wapekeka First Nation Council

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**Wapekeka First Nation
Youth Mental Health Program
Submitted to: Health Canada
2016**

WAPEKEKA FIRST NATION

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

SUBMITTED TO: HEALTH CANADA

JULY 2016