

Wapekeka First Nation feared suicide pact, says they were denied help

'We lose children literally every single day due to lack of services,' says NDP MP Charlie Angus

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)

By **TANYA TALAGA** Staff Reporter

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One of the last postings made on Facebook by a 12-year-old Wapekeka First Nation girl who took her life this month was a graphic poster that said, "Wake up, pretend I'm okay, sleep."

Jolynn Winter committed suicide on Jan. 8, a Sunday. She was followed two days later by her 12-year-old friend Chantell Fox, who left behind a twin sister.

"I let my girl down," Keri Cutfeet, Jolynn Winter's father, said in a statement released Wednesday.

"I can't believe I had to bury my daughter. It was so hard to say goodbye. I honestly didn't think I could survive losing Chantell," said Sandra Fox, Chantell's mother.



Jolynn Winter committed suicide on Jan. 8, a Sunday. One of her last postings on Facebook read, "Wake up, pretend I'm okay, sleep." (PHOTO SUPPLIED)

Four girls are in crisis and have been flown out of Wapekeka, a remote, fly-in community 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay. And 26 more students are considered "high risk" for suicide because of the loss and trauma of the others.



After a suicide-prevention program in Wapekeka was cancelled two years ago, New Democratic MP Charlie Angus said, "they were extremely worried about a possible suicide pact among young girls in their community." (ADRIAN WYLD /THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Last summer, Wapekeka First Nation wrote to Health Canada to ask for funding to help the community deal with mental health issues affecting young people there. Of specific concern was that a group might have entered into a suicide pact. That funding was denied.

"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," said Joshua Frogg, a member of Wapekeka and the community spokesperson. "Our community plan was turned down by government and now two are dead."

Health Canada offered their “heartfelt condolences” to the families and the people of Wapekeka, said Eric Morrissette, the Health Canada chief of media relations.

Regarding the request from Wapekeka, Morrissette said Health Canada had replied. “In fall 2016, Health Canada indicated to the community leadership that it would pursue funding opportunities in the future to assist Wapekeka in increasing the number of mental health workers in the community,” Morrissette said.

“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.



Chantell Fox, 12, took her own life two days after Winter. A twin sister is among the people she left behind. (PHOTO SUPPLIED)

A suicide-prevention program in Wapekeka was cancelled two years ago.

“The community attempted to get that program back in place because they were extremely worried about a possible suicide pact among young girls in their community, and they were turned down,” said New Democratic MP Charlie Angus.

“That is the frontline face of systemic discrimination in this country. It happens again and again. We lose children literally every single day due to a lack of services and supports that other children and families would take for granted,” said Angus, whose riding of Timmins-James Bay includes First Nations communities along the James Bay coast that are also struggling with suicide epidemics among their young people, he said.



Northern Ontario Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler is joining a press conference in Ottawa on Thursday, demanding a national suicide strategy. (SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS)

On Thursday, Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde, along with Northern Ontario Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler and Grand Chief Jonathon Solomon and a community representative from Wapekeka will hold a press conference in Ottawa, demanding a national suicide strategy.

“This is very frustrating. I was at a funeral on Saturday in Wapekeka. It is tragic. We need to, all of us, work together to create more long-term, sustainable strategies – for all the youth, all the communities to stay well and be well in all aspects of their lives,” Fiddler said.

Wapekeka, with a population of 430, has had its share of tragedy. In May 2015, the Rev. Eleazar Winter Memorial School burned to the ground.

During the 1990s, the community had a suicide crisis, one they were able to deal with after an intensive strategy and follow-up care, Fiddler said.

The community used to run an annual Survivors of Suicide Conference, but lack of funds led to its cancellation.

For years, Wapekeka was “pro-active” in ensuring healing and suicide prevention through community plans and the conference that was attended by many in northern First Nations, the community statement said.

“Funding for these vital programs was cut two years ago. These conferences were put in place to provide healing for the survivors of convicted pedophile Ralph Rowe and their families. Rowe’s child sexual assault charges affected many communities in the Nishnawbe-Aski territory. Wapekeka, in particular, was a community he preyed upon,” the statement said.

Rowe was a former Boy Scout leader, an Anglican minister and a pilot. He used to fly into the community and take young boys camping.

In 1994, Rowe was convicted of 39 counts of indecent assault on 15 boys ages 8 to 14. He was sentenced to six years in prison and served 4 1/2 years. As part of his 1994 plea deal, he was protected from facing more charges of a similar nature.

In 2006, Rowe faced 75 charges involving 31 victims, the Star reported in 2011. But after preliminary hearings, the complainants fell to 25 from 31 and the charges to 57 from 75. Only two cases resulted in convictions.

The documentary film *Survivors Rowe* estimates Rowe’s victims were actually in the hundreds.

Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day said issues of “poverty, sexual abuse, bullying and lateral violence in First Nations must be front and centre as we explore the root causes and the reasons why our people are taking their own lives.”

A national suicide strategy is a must, Day said. “We know this. We need Canada and the provinces to clear a place at the table to discuss this during the transformation of Canada’s health-care system. ... We need an undivided collective on suicide. There is no other alternative.”

