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News / Canada

Inquest begins into deaths of 7 First Nations youth in Thunder Bay

Families of the seven, who were studying far from their remote northern homes, are dismayed by the few seats reserved for them at hearing.

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CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Alvin Fiddler, grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, said the lack of seating in the main inquest room for all the parents and families of the seven dead youth is "disgusting."

By: Tanya Talaga Global Economics Reporter, Published on Mon Oct 05 2015

After a three-year wait, an inquest into the mysterious deaths of seven First Nations youth who lost their lives while living far from home as they attended high school in Thunder Bay begins Monday.

The broad inquest, presided over by Dr. David Eden, will be one of the largest ever to be held in Ontario. Teams of lawyers representing various interests are expected to call nearly 200 witnesses until March 2016.

The inquest was called after a [Star series on the lack of investigation](#) into deaths of the six males and one female who died between 2000 and 2011. Three of them — Reggie Bushie, Jethro Anderson and Jordan Wabasse — were only 15 years old. The others were Curran Strang, 18, Paul Panacheese, 21, Robyn Harper, 18, and Kyle Morrisseau, 17.

Each came from remote First Nations in the north, and each had to move to Thunder Bay in order to attend an appropriate high school.

On Friday, the families of the lost youth were shocked to learn that the room chosen in the new Thunder Bay courthouse for the hearing is quite small, and that just 10 seats will be available at the back for the seven families, their supporters and members of the public.

An overflow room has been set up inside the building, but for Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, this is not an acceptable solution.

"This is disgusting," Fiddler said. "The parents and families of the seven have the right to be in the room (as the inquest proceeds)."

"There is lots of room in the jails for our people," he said. "Yet when our community

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tries to access the justice system, there are barriers in the way.”

(Only 4 per cent of Canada’s population is indigenous, but nearly 23 per cent of Canada’s prison population hails from an aboriginal background.)

Prominent politician Bob Rae and novelist Joseph Boyden quickly took to social media to denounce the lack of accommodation for the families.

“Fix this now,” tweeted Rae, Ontario’s former premier and a previous leader of the federal Liberals.

“Courts sure make plenty of room for FN in jail cells. Victims families’ can’t attend,” tweeted Boyden, author of award-winning books, including *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce*.

It has been nearly 15 years since Jethro Anderson’s body was found in the Kaministiquia River in Thunder Bay.

Jethro’s mother, Stella Anderson, said the inquest will be difficult in many ways, given such a long passage of time.

“Half of me wants to know what happened to Jethro, and the other half of me wants to leave it alone,” she said in a statement through the family’s lawyer, Christa Big Canoe with Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto.

“The day that Jethro’s body was found and I heard the news, my heart shattered into a million pieces,” Anderson said.

“I miss Jethro every day and the thought of learning more about his death is frightening and brings up old wounds that have been slowly healing,” she said.

For aspiring hockey player Jordan Wabasse’s mom Bernice Jacobs, the hope is that the inquest will focus on the lack of educational choices for aboriginal youth.

“Our two other sons are now in high school in Webequie,” Jacobs said in a statement. “There is no science lab, no mechanical shop, no art and no music courses available. My one son is taking only two courses because he has already completed all of the available courses for his grade.”

Yet after Jordan’s death, Jacobs said, she can’t bring herself to let her eldest surviving son attend school in Thunder Bay, 500 kilometres from the remote First Nation.

Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day credited the “tenacity” of the northern First Nations, who pushed the province for the inquest. Determined leaders of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation “refused to let go questions that must be answered to why the numbers of lost lives in that region of Ontario are youth from northern First Nations communities.”

The inquest was supposed to begin in 2012 but faced many delays, one caused by the lack of aboriginal people on the inquest jury.

This lack of First Nations participation in the justice system — whether on trial or inquest juries — was the [subject of a major report](#) by former Supreme Court justice Frank Iacobucci. It was also the subject of a Supreme Court challenge.

Inquests are intended to investigate problems and figure out how to prevent future deaths. They cannot assign fault or blame.

The inquest will be live-streamed on the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services website.

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