



## Ontario First Nations threaten to disband police service over funding issues

GLORIA GALLOWAY AND KATHRYN BLAZE BAUM

OTTAWA and TORONTO — The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Jul. 21, 2016 9:38PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Jul. 22, 2016 2:46PM EDT

The organization that represents nearly 50 First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario is threatening to disband the region's indigenous police service if the province and Ottawa refuse to spend the money needed to run the force properly and to keep people safe.

The 130 members of the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service, which has operated for more than two decades, have voted to strike in the face of what their union, the police bosses and the leadership of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation say are dangerous working conditions and dismal wages. The police officers routinely patrol alone, must contend with broken radios, a lack of equipment, stations infested by mice, problems with heating and cooling and, in some cases, they operate out of trailers.

They make 18 per cent less than other Canadian police officers with comparable skills and training, says Nishnawbe Aski Nation lawyer Julian Falconer, and patrol a region where the crime rate is five times the national average.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada, which represents the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service members, has applied for conciliation. But that is just a required step on the way to a likely walkout because the police board says it has no money to increase salaries, to make necessary additions to staffing, or to upgrade equipment.

Ontario and Ottawa pay for the force and hold the purse strings. And indigenous leaders say that, despite repeated entreaties, neither level of government has been willing to come to the bargaining table.

If the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) police walk off the job, which could happen before the end of the summer, First Nations leaders say the province plans to send officers of the Ontario Provincial Police to the remote communities.

But, if the OPP arrives in the First Nations now served by the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service (NAPS), it should plan to stay forever, says Alvin Fiddler, the Grand Chief of NAN, in a letter to David Oraziatti, the Ontario Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services.

"If the proposed response is to simply dispatch the OPP, this would severely undermine the authority of NAN and NAPS," Mr. Fiddler wrote. "It would also be flagrantly disrespectful to the officers who have struggled for decades in dangerous and embarrassingly inferior working conditions for a fraction of the salaries made by similarly trained and experienced officers elsewhere in Ontario."

The Globe and Mail referred Mr. Oraziotti's office to the letter from Mr. Fiddler and pointed out the intention to disband NAPS if the OPP are sent to replace striking officers. When asked how the government would respond to the Grand Chief's concerns, the Minister did not answer directly.

Mr. Oraziotti said in a statement that he hopes the parties will resolve their issues and come to an agreement that prevents a walkout. He also said his ministry is working with First Nations and the federal government to find "long-term solutions to ensure First Nations policing is delivered in a sustainable environment." But he did not commit to placing a representative of the Ontario government at the bargaining table.

Mr. Fiddler wrote in his letter that the province and the federal government must open the channels of communication and develop a credible plan for averting the strike by the time the chiefs of NAN meet on August 9, or "we will obtain instructions from the chiefs to begin the permanent transition to the OPP. If this situation is permitted to deteriorate any further, such that the OPP is imposed on our communities, we expect them to remain permanently."

The OPP will have a difficult time maintaining safety across the vast region, and the service they provide will lack cultural sensitivity, Mr. Fiddler said in an interview. The contingency plan proposed by the province was created for urban areas and it is clear to the chiefs that it will not be workable in a First Nations territory, he said.

But the provincial force would undoubtedly ensure that its members work under better conditions in the First Nations than those imposed on the officers of NAPS because of lack of funding, Mr. Fiddler said.

Mr. Fiddler has also written to Ralph Goodale, the federal Minister of Public Safety, to explain that "if NAN communities must face the turmoil of being handed off to the OPP as an 'interim' measure, they might as well permanently enjoy the resources and attention that all non-First Nation residents receive in support of public safety."

When asked how the federal government intended to respond to the situation, Scott Bardsley, a spokesman for Mr. Goodale, said no decisions have been made about the implementation of a planned renewal of indigenous policing. But Mr. Goodale's office has been in touch with the province, he said, to ensure that contingencies are in place to maintain public security in the event of a strike.

Mike Metatawabin, the chair of the NAPS board, said, unless the province and the federal government participate in the negotiating sessions, the board cannot talk about improvements to salaries or working conditions "because we don't have any funds, we don't have anything to offer."

The potential strike comes as the federal government and the provinces are preparing to spend \$40-million over two years to conduct an inquiry into Canada's more than 1,181 missing and murdered indigenous women.

It also follows a 2014 report of the federal Auditor-General that said insufficient funding makes it impossible for First Nations to deliver policing that meets provincial standards.

In a recent interview with The Globe and Mail, NAPS Chief Terry Armstrong said the service has outgrown its designation as an enhancement program to the OPP. He said the status quo and resource shortfalls not only jeopardize the safety of communities and police officers but also, in some instances, the quality of investigations.

"It's just not fair," he said. "That's what it comes down to. There's a lack of equality ... The people up north deserve the same protection as everybody else in Ontario. If you pick up the phone, you should get a cop – not a promise that you'll get one tomorrow or the next day."

At any given time in some communities, there is just a single officer on duty. Around Christmastime last year, this was the case in some 20 fly-ins. In one instance, an officer had to respond to a homicide, secure three crime scenes and respond to a call that shots had been fired. Weather prevented the crime unit from arriving until the following day.

"We've got some really good [officers], but we're killing them – we're burning them out," Mr. Armstrong said. "Per capita, our crime unit probably does twice the calls we should be doing."

He said federal and provincial funding has not kept pace with the needs of the service, which last received an increase in 2009. He wants to boost his staffing from 145 officers to 205, and he wants a budget increase of about 40 per cent.

"When I meet with [chiefs of police in Ontario], they're always talking about policing in the 21st century and how costly it is," he said. "And I say: 'Well, they've left us in the 19th.'"