

Police conduct investigated in McIntyre River death

Ontario's civilian police watchdog is investigating the Thunder Bay Police Service's handling of a 2015 case involving the death of a Rainy River First Nations man. "It was clear this was another sad example of a pattern." Police watchdog committed to investigating alleged institutionalized racism with the Thunder Bay Police Service.

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Julian Falconer (tbnewswatch.com file photograph)

THUNDER BAY -- Ontario's civilian police watchdog is investigating the Thunder Bay Police Service's handling of a 2015 case involving the death of a Rainy River First Nations man.

That will lead to a larger systemic review, which will examine police conduct in similar cases.

The Office of the Independent Police Review Director will look into the conduct of police in the case of 41-year-old Stacey Lance DeBungee whose body was [discovered in the McIntyre River](#) on Oct. 19, 2015. Police issued a release a day later deeming DeBungee's death to be "[non-criminal](#)" in nature, before a post-mortem was conducted.

Claiming the Thunder Bay police had treated them disrespectfully in response to requests for information, the DeBungee family hired a private investigator.

Their legal counsel Julian Falconer said that investigation raised "serious questions" as to whether DeBungee might have been murdered.

"It was clear this was another sad example of a pattern, which is that Aboriginal deaths are simply investigated in a fashion that is different from other deaths," Falconer said.

Falconer said the family issued five letters asking that DeBungee's case be assigned to another police service. It also filed a complaint with the OIPRD over the local police's handling of the case.

The OIPRD committed to conducting a systemic review of racism in the Thunder Bay Police Service on July 4.

The OPP finally returned the correspondence on Sept. 16, refusing to take on the investigation, citing the complaint that would be airing before the OIPRD.

"So when faced with a concern over the incompetence of a police service, you leave the death investigation with them because of the complaint," Falconer said.

"In my opinion, that smacks of reprisal against the DeBungee family and against Rainy River First Nations for having the audacity to seek accountability."

At the same time as emergency crews were pulling DeBungee's body from the river, Falconer was representing Nishnawbe Aski Nation at the inquest into the deaths of seven students who left their homes in remote First Nations to attend high school in Thunder Bay.

The causes of three of those seven deaths were listed as "undetermined." Falconer said the inquest's evidence, recommendations and verdict all reinforced a systemic prejudice in the local police department and he expects the OIPRD will conclude systemic racism as an institutional failure when it conducts its systemic review.

OIPRD spokeswoman Rosemary Parker said it's too early to presume what the aims of its intended systemic review might be.

"The director has intentions of doing a systemic review but it has to wait for the outcome of the conduct investigation," she said.

"When and where the director determines he will undertake a systemic review, he will announce that review with terms of reference."

In a written statement, police spokesman Chris Adams said the OIPRD has not yet provided his office with details as to the scope or parameters of its investigation.

Correction: *An earlier version of this story stated the Thunder Bay Police Service was under investigation for allegations of systemic racism. In fact, the parameters of the systemic review will be informed by the conclusions of a preceding conduct review.*

