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Nishnawbe Aski Legal Services gives feedback to police oversight review

Celina Reitberger says meeting with review panel allowed time to give feedback on the system

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(Tony Smyth/CBC)

The head of Nishnawbe Aski Legal Services in Thunder Bay, Ont. says meeting with representatives of a panel who are travelling the province, gathering feedback about organizations that oversee police conduct in Ontario left her feeling hopeful.

Executive director Celina Reitberger told CBC News she feels a review of oversight bodies, including the Special Investigations Unit, the Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD) and the Ontario Civilian Police Commission, is "long overdue."

"We have had complaints to the OIPRD and they have not been handled well, I think," she said. "They certainly did not favour the Aboriginal people, and we're hearing these stories over and over again from others."

The panel, led by Justice Michael Tulloch, stopped in Thunder Bay to hold meetings with stakeholders, as well as a public session on Wednesday. During her meeting, Reitberger said a number of instances were discussed where she said the oversight process failed First Nations people.



Celina Reitberger, head of Nishnawbe Aski Legal Services says she's hopeful, following a meeting with a panel reviewing police oversight in Ontario. (Nicole Ireland/CBC)

"That's only the tip of the iceberg," she said. "Because a lot of Aboriginal people just take their licks and say 'well, you know, there's nothing we can do about it.'"

One instance Reitberger said was discussed involved a woman from Mishkeegogamang First Nation, north of Thunder Bay, **who had her shoulder broken by police during an arrest**, according to a judge's ruling in 2015. The Special Investigations Unit declined to press charges against the officers involved.

[The SIU] made a finding that it was an old injury," Reitberger said, "when the forensic evidence did not support that."

The woman is now suing the province.

'How do we make things better?'

One idea that was presented to the panel came from a First Nations elder, Reitberger said, and it would involve a system where Indigenous people would oversee the reviews of alleged police misconduct against Indigenous people.

"So, there's going to be a different outcome than having been brushed under the carpet," she said. "It would be with an attitude of how do we stop this, and how do we reform things and how do we make things better?"

"If they come up with a solution that says it's going to be civilian oversight of abuse by police on civilians, we say we want Aboriginal oversight of abuse of Aboriginal people."

Meeting with the review panel was productive, Reitberger said, adding that the big test will be to see how much political will there will be to implement any of the forthcoming recommendations.

A number of other consultation meetings have been scheduled across the province, including northern Ontario stops in Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie.