

Thunder Bay officer suspended as watchdog asked to probe alleged racist Facebook post

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Alvin Fiddler, grand chief of the Nishnawabe Aski Nation, said he would welcome the opportunity to meet the Thunder Bay police officer who wrote an anonymous letter to the local newspaper, but it is difficult to have an open and honest conversation with someone who is anonymous. (RICHARD

LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO)

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As the Thunder Bay Police await an Ontario watchdog to conduct a review concerning how they handle indigenous death investigations, the force has also asked the body to handle a probe into alleged racist comments made by their members.

Thunder Bay Police Services announced Wednesday they were suspending one officer with pay, Rob Steudle, while another four officers were reassigned to administrative duties regarding Facebook postings from Sept. 17 and Sept. 18.

Police Chief J.P. Levesque asked the Office of the Independent Police Review Director to “take carriage of the investigation,” according to a news release.

“This request was made to ensure public confidence and transparency in this process. This step recognizes the compelling public interest in this matter,” the release said.

In mid-September, a Facebook user with the name Rob Steudle, posted the racist comments in response to a one-line letter to The Chronicle Journal newspaper by Alvin Fiddler, grand chief of Nishnawbe Aski-Nation, a political organization of 49 First Nations.

Fiddler sent a letter to the Chronicle in response to an editorial published Sept. 15, headlined, “Racism claims not backed up.”

The editorial concerned a female trainer who was providing the force with anti-racism training. The local CBC station had reported that the trainer was verbally abused during a session with the officers. But the police and the city administrator in charge of the training took issue with the CBC report and said the incident was misunderstood.

Fiddler responded to that by writing, “the only thing worse than the conduct of Thunder Bay Police officers as reported by the CBC is the attempt by the police, and this newspaper, to justify it.”

In response, a Rob Steudle posted this on Facebook: “Natives are killing natives and it’s the white mans fault natives are drunk and on the street and its white mans fault natives are homeless and its white mans fault and now natives are lying about how they are treated by white men an explanation is given and it’s the white men who are lying. Well let’s stop giving the natives money and see how that goes.”

The war of words escalated this week in Thunder Bay after an open letter to the editor to Fiddler was posted on The Chronicle Journal’s website on Tuesday.

The letter was by an anonymous Thunder Bay police officer. The letter started off by saying, “You don’t know me. We have never met, never shaken hands, yet you have called me, a police officer a ‘systemic racist.’”

“I have to send this letter asking for anonymity, for fear of repercussions. This is an offer to work collectively, not a negative letter.

“Mr. Fiddler, I don’t know you or your family. I’m willing to find out, in hopes I can understand. Would you be willing to sit down and do the same with police officers?” it asked.

“All things being fair Mr. Fiddler, you don’t know me either. Was my childhood hard? You have no clue. You don’t know where I came from. I acknowledge the horrors your ancestors went through . . . I ask you Mr. Fiddler, when do we move forward?”

Fiddler said he would welcome the opportunity to meet the officer, but it is difficult to have an open and honest conversation with someone who is anonymous.

Fiddler questioned why a newspaper would publish an open anonymous letter about him.

“What is the role of the media? A local paper, in a small town — in Thunder Bay, publishes an anonymous letter attacking an individual, in this case that is myself. This is close to crossing the line,” Fiddler said. “I don’t know what the purpose is of publishing the letter. It is certainly not helpful.”

In relation to the September Facebook posts and the new investigation, Thunder Bay police said it recognizes the “issues of trust and respect that this matter raises in regard to our relationship with indigenous people.

We will co-operate with the OIPRD’s investigation to resolve this matter in the most efficient means possible.”

Thunder Bay Police Executive Officer Chris Adams said the force would not be providing any further comment.

The OIPRD will hold a probe of the Thunder Bay police conduct into the death of Stacey DeBungee this fall after Rainy River First Nation Chief James Leonard and DeBungee’s brother, Brad, complained about how the investigation was handled.

DeBungee’s body was found in a Thunder Bay river last October and Leonard and the family want to know why police quickly called the case non-criminal.

Leonard said the OIPRD probe and the issue of police training and the coverage in the local paper has divided the city. “It has polarized the community. Some of the editorial comments are ridiculous,” Leonard said.

“This is not something I wanted. Lets try to work together to solve the problems,” he said.

After the DeBungee conduct probe, the OIPRD indicated it will also investigate how the police handled the deaths of seven indigenous students between 2000 and 2011.

Irwin Elman, Ontario’s Child Advocate, said he hoped the probe into Thunder Bay police offered all leaders in the city a chance to have an open discussion about racism.

“Thunder Bay needs to do this in order to be the city it wants to be,” Elman said.

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth had standing in the eight-month long inquest into the students’ deaths. It concluded in late June with 145 recommendations.

Indigenous youth bravely came forward in the inquest to discuss the racism they experienced, said Elman.

“This is what the young people have been saying about the presence of racism in the Thunder Bay police and in Thunder Bay itself,” Elman said.