

**First Nations police service recommends its own disbanding at suicide inquest
'It's heartbreaking that we're still here,' says Nishnawbe Aski Police Service board chair**

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Lena Anderson, 23, took her own life while she was left alone in a Nishnawbe Aski Police Service pickup truck. (Aboriginal Legal Services Toronto)

The suicide of a First Nations woman in the back of a police truck is causing Canada's largest Indigenous police service to do some soul searching.

The Nishnawbe Aski Police Service, which covers 34 First Nations in northern Ontario, told an inquest into Lena Anderson's death that it has neither the resources nor the legal foundation to do its job properly.

So it took the drastic step on Wednesday of asking the jury at the inquest to recommend the police force be disbanded if Ontario does not bring it under the province's Police Services Act by March 31, 2017.

"Enough is enough," said Nishnawbe Aski Police Service (NAPS) board chair Mike Metatawabin. "We can't do this all the time where you promise something and then turn around and say you can't do it."

Metatawabin's eyes filled with tears as he listened to testimony about the last hour of Anderson's life.



Nishnawbe Aski Police Service says it should cease to exist in March 2017 if Ontario does not pass legislation that requires it to meet basic safety standards. (Jody Porter/CBC)

On the evening of Feb. 1, 2013, Anderson's daughter was apprehended by a child welfare worker after reports of a drinking party in Kasabonika Lake First Nation, where alcohol is prohibited.

Witnesses say the young mother became frantic. That's when Const. Jeremy Swanson said he took the 23-year-old into custody for her own safety.

At that time, the remote First Nation had no holding cells and the police practice was to confine prisoners in the passenger compartment of the police pickup, a four-door Ford F150.

'Heartbreaking'

Swanson left Anderson alone for 16 minutes, according to his notes, while he went to wake up the only other police officer in the isolated community to assist him.

"For me it's heartbreaking, heartbreaking that we're still here, we're still waiting, we're still trying to make it better," Metatawabin said, recalling a previous inquest in 2009 into the deaths of two young men in Kashechewan First Nation.



'It's heartbreaking,' says NAPS board chair Mike Metatawabin of hearing again about the death of a young person in the NAPS custody.

Ricardo Wesley, 22 and James Goodwin, 20 burned to death on Jan. 8, 2006, while being held for intoxication in cells that did not meet the fire code.

Nishnawbe Aski police are not required to meet the adequacy standards set for other police services in Ontario because they do not fall under the Police Services Act.

Metatawabin believes that having that legislated backing would help the police service pressure its funders — the federal and provincial governments — to provide the money it needs to meet those standards.

Currently, he says, the police force receives less than half of what the provincial police have said it would cost it to provide service to the same communities.

"Every other person in Ontario, other than people living on reserve, have rights that the police are there to serve and protect ... to make the community safer," said Christa Big Canoe, who represents Anderson's family at the inquest.

'Fold the whole program'

Big Canoe and Mike Maher, the lawyer for Swanson, added their support to the suggested recommendation from the Nishnawbe Aski police.

"From the perspective of my client, if they're not willing to put their money where their mouths are, we just need to fold the whole program," Maher said.

But the coroner's counsel asked jurors to be cautious about how far they should take their recommendations.

"Advocacy is not evidence," David Allan told them.

There is no timeline for when jurors must deliver recommendations, but it could be as soon as Thursday.

Ontario's Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services says it plans to introduce legislation in the spring that will "modernize" the Police Services Act and that it is consulting with First Nations on "exploring a legislative framework for First Nations policing."