

Thunder Bay

Ontario chief suggests class action lawsuit to stop Indigenous youth suicides

Highest rate of suicide is among children aged 10 to 14, according to First Nations statistics

By Jody Porter, CBC News Posted: Jan 20, 2017 7:30 AM ET Last Updated: Jan 20, 2017 7:59 AM ET



The federal government is 'only responsive to courts and conflicts,' says Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day. (CBC)

It's time for First Nations leaders to consider a class action lawsuit against the federal government on behalf of Indigenous young people who have died by suicide, says Isadore Day, the Ontario regional chief with the Assembly of First Nations.

Day's comments came as Wapekeka First Nation revealed this week that it had asked for help to prevent a suicide pact in the remote community, months before two girls, both 12, died by suicide in January.

Health Canada said the request to fund a \$376,706 community-based suicide prevention plan came in September when the year's budget had already been allocated, but money for the program was found this month.

"It's always predictable what the government will say in these types of circumstances," Day said in an interview with CBC News. "However, we

don't have time for this any more. We're facing an epidemic in many of our communities."

More than 500 people have died by suicide in the past 30 years in the 49 First Nations that make up the Nishnawbe Aski Nation in northern Ontario, according to statistics collected by the First Nations. The highest rate of suicide is among children aged 10 to 14.



Jolynn Winter, 12, left, and Chantel Fox, 12, centre, from Wapapeka First Nation in Ontario, died by suicide this month. Chantel is survived by her twin sister, Chanel, pictured far right. (Supplied by the Winter and Fox families) (Supplied by the Winter and Fox families)

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau met with Joshua Frogg, who represents Wapekeka First Nation, Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler and Mushkegowuk Grand Chief Jonathan Solomon on Thursday afternoon.

The private meeting came after the First Nations leaders held a news conference in Ottawa, accusing the federal government of "dragging its feet," and ignoring the deaths of children in their communities.

"The prime minister acknowledged what the communities are facing in their direct engagements with the government, and committed to working

together to improve the situation on the ground and better track progress," the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement about the meeting.

But Day said time is running out for rhetoric and "bantering back and forth," while children die.

Unequal services

"I believe we've come to a juncture on this issue of suicide where we need to look at, what is the justice and the legal recourse for those who have lost their lives to suicide?" he said, suggesting a class action suit against the federal government could force action.

Last year, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that the federal government discriminates against First Nations children on reserves by failing to provide the same level of child welfare services that exist elsewhere.

The family doctor for Wapekeka First Nation said the inequity of the services First Nations children receive contributes to the suicide crisis.

"You have this triple threat," said Dr. Michael Kirlew, who also attended Thursday's news conference.

"You have inadequately funded health care, you have inadequately funded education, and you have inadequately funded child services [in First Nations]. Those three things serve to suffocate First Nations children."