

Police watchdog seeks ideas to improve relations between Thunder Bay police, Indigenous people

First Nations, police association among groups making submissions

By Jody Porter, CBC News Posted: Jan 31, 2017 6:00 AM ET Last

Updated: Jan 31, 2017 6:00 AM ET



"No one is precluded from sending me information or comments or recommendations or suggestions of things I should look at as I carry out this review," says Ontario's police watchdog Gerry McNeilly. (Cathy Alex/CBC)

Ontario's police watchdog remains open to public input for his wide-ranging review of the Thunder Bay police, despite Tuesday's deadline for written submissions.

The systemic review was prompted by complaints that the drowning death of Stacey Debungee in 2015 was too quickly deemed non-criminal by police. Similar concerns were raised about the investigations into the

deaths of First Nations students who drowned while attending school in the city.

Ontario's Independent Police Review Director, Gerry McNeilly, said the January 31 deadline was set to motivate people to get their comments in early, but he's still interested in hearing from people.

He'd like to hear "any concerns they might have, any suggestions they have, any recommendations they think I should be making to improve the situation in Thunder Bay and to improve the situation between Indigenous members of the community and police."

Community meetings planned

At least two community meetings will be held in Thunder Bay "during the next few weeks" to gather more input, he said. A meeting was already held at Rainy River First Nations — Debungee's home community.

McNeilly said the police union has also reached out to him to offer comments and he's looking forward to their input.

"I want to know if they think they need more training in dealing with Indigenous communities, I want to know if they need more outreach or if they should be doing more community policing and only the police officers will be able to share some of that with me," he said.

The systemic review of Thunder Bay police is separate from two conduct reviews also underway involving the actions of Thunder Bay police officers, McNeilly said.

The agency is looking into the **conduct of officers who investigated the death of Stacey Debungee** as well as allegations that a **Thunder Bay police officer posted offensive comments about Indigenous people on Facebook.**

There is no firm timeline for the completion of the systemic review, but McNeilly said he hopes to have a public report available this spring.