

Private donor steps in to help Wapekeka First Nation after Health Canada refused

Since the deaths of Jolynn Winter on January 8 and her friend Chantell Fox, who followed Winter two days later, another four girls were medivaced out of the community and are still receiving treatment.



Chantell Fox, 12, left, committed suicide on Jan. 10, two days after her friend Jolynn Winter. Here, Chantell is pictured with her twin sister. ((COMMUNITY SUPPLIED PHOTO))

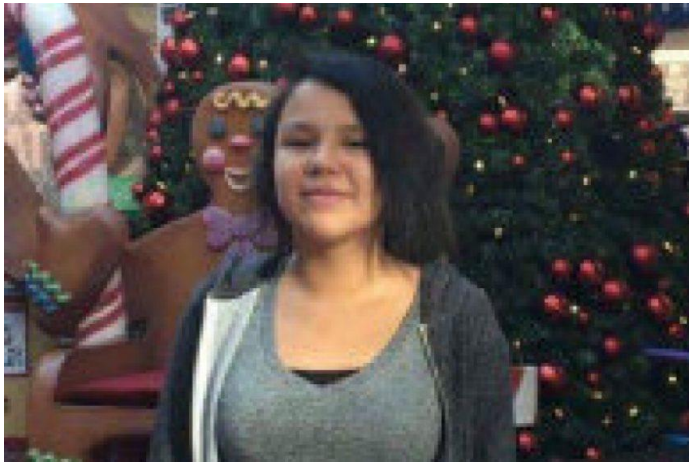
By **TANYA TALAGA** Staff Reporter

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A private donor, moved by the suicides of two, 12-year-old girls in remote Wapekeka First Nation, will fund the \$380,000 that Health Canada refused to give them for youth mental health workers.

Wapekeka Chief Brennan Sainnawap wrote Health Canada last July, begging for funding as they feared a youth suicide pact in the community but the federal department refused.

The donor, who contacted Wapekeka last week, is a private citizen who wishes to remain anonymous. The donor has already wired \$30,000 to Wapekeka to help pay for emergency mental health crisis team needs and the rest of the money will follow later this week to reinstate the youth mental health program.



Jolynn Winter, 12, took her own life earlier this month.

Since the deaths of Jolynn Winter on January 8 and her friend Chantell Fox, who followed Winter two days later, another four girls were medicated out of the community and are still receiving treatment. Another 26 students have been classified as “high risk” for suicide and are being watched.

Both Sainnawap and Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, who has spearheaded the call for a national suicide strategy in the wake of the girls deaths, are overwhelmed and grateful to the donor.

“We are overwhelmed with this act of generosity and cannot express how grateful we are that this donor is stepping in to help our people. Our community is in crisis and there is an urgent need to get this program back in place as soon as possible,” said Sainnawap in a statement.

Chantell Fox was Sainnawap’s granddaughter. He wrote the letter to Health Canada in July, 2016, asking for mental health supports for their youth. The

community said they were told Health Canada couldn't fund the request because it came at an awkward time in their budget cycle.

"Words cannot express how grateful we are that this donor has committed to helping our young people with their mental health struggles. We are extremely disappointed that despite the loss of two of our youth we have never received a commitment from Health Canada or the Government of Canada to get this program back in our community."

Since the suicides, NAN, provincial and federal authorities have swooped in to try and respond to the crisis, but indigenous leaders maintain a national mental health strategy is urgently needed to stop the youth suicide epidemic in many First Nations. Fly-in squad response teams are not an answer to sustained, national funding, he said.

Fiddler said the anonymous donation does not replace the need for Ottawa and the province to do their part and properly fund indigenous mental health and health care.

"We will still go after both the Feds and the province to support our communities," Fiddler said and added that they fully "respect the donor's wish to remain anonymous, but I would like to express our appreciation for this tremendous response to a community in crisis."

The fact remains that two young children died because Ottawa cut funding to programs, said New Democratic Party MP Charlie Angus, whose riding of Timmins-James Bay, has faced a suicide crisis for decades.



Since the deaths of Jolynn Winter and her friend Chantell Fox (pictured), another four girls were medi-vacced out of the community and are still receiving treatment.

“They were warned children could die. Last week (at an Ottawa press conference), they were warned more children could be at risk and they have done nothing. Is this how we celebrate Canada’s 150th birthday?” Angus asked.

“This is about political will. The prime minister could state this (a national suicide strategy) is a policy in our country and make sure the funds are there,” Angus added.

Instead, they are defending themselves against Cindy Blackstock and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, in a decade-long human rights tribunal case about Canada’s failure to adequately fund services for indigenous kids. Thursday is the one-year anniversary of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling that found the Canadian government is discriminating against 163,000 First Nations kids by not providing equitable child welfare services that other Canadian children receive.

“This government is willing to spend half a million dollars on lawyers to fight Cindy Blackstock to deny services to children and they won’t give money to help a community to stop children from dying” Angus added.