

Ontario watchdog expands probe of Thunder Bay police

Police review office has asked for the files of two First Nations teens who went missing.



Tammy Keeash, a 17-year-old girl from North Caribou First Nation who was living in a Thunder Bay group home at the time of her disappearance, was found dead in the McIntyre River on Sunday, May 7, 2017. (FACEBOOK)

By [TANYA TALAGA](#) Staff Reporter
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The Ontario watchdog examining the Thunder Bay Police Service for “systemic racism” is now turning their attention to the service’s recent investigation into a 17-year-old girl’s death and the handling of the search for a 14-year-old boy.

Since November, the Office of the Independent Police Review Directorate (OIPRD) — which is an arms length agency of the Ministry of the Attorney General — has investigated the police service’s handling of cases of murdered and missing indigenous people in Thunder Bay after complaints by First Nations leaders. They say cases involving First Nations people are often [closed and dismissed](#) without proper examination.

Gerry McNeilly, the Independent Police Review Director, told the Star that as part of their review — which is currently in the fact-finding phase — they will “be asking the Thunder Bay police for the Tammy Keeash and Josiah Begg case files.”

Tammy Keeash, a 17-year-old girl from North Caribou First Nation who was living in a Thunder Bay group home at the time of her disappearance, was found dead in the McIntyre River on Sunday, May 7. Keeash failed to make it home for her curfew the night before. A post mortem concluded her death was “consistent with drowning.” Keeash, an artist who was receiving counselling in Thunder Bay, was a Junior Canadian Ranger and [well familiar](#) with water safety.

Josiah Begg, a 14-year-old boy from Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) First Nation more than 500 km north of Thunder Bay, was in town with his father Rene Begg for medical appointments. He disappeared the same night as Keeash, on May 6.

On Thursday evening, the body of a male matching the “height, weight, clothing, wallet and watch” of Josiah was [retrieved](#) from the McIntyre River, said Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler. The body was flown to Toronto for a post mortem and results are expected on Sunday, along with a formal, medical identification.

The search for Begg lasted 12 days. A command centre was established by NAN at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School as soon as they

heard he was missing and they began to organize community search parties.

KI Chief James Cutfeet said the police should have stepped in quicker by searching the rivers around Thunder Bay. “The length of time the investigation took was too long. The search near the water should have happened earlier,” Cutfeet said

The death of Keeash and disappearance of Begg has further strained an already fragile relationship between indigenous people in Thunder Bay and the police, noted McNeilly.

“These latest incidents are both tragic and extremely worrisome and have exacerbated the indigenous communities’ crisis of faith in the Thunder Bay police,” he said.

“The police and the indigenous community need to find ways to come together to work on strategies for communication and cooperation when indigenous youth go missing. The onus is on the police in this regard,” he said.

Improved protocols around missing First Nations youth should have been in place for both Keeash’s and Begg’s disappearance as that was one of the recommendations in the inquest into seven indigenous high school students who died in Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011, said Fiddler. Concern over police handling into the seven students’ disappearances and deaths led, in part, to the OIPRD launching their investigation into the Thunder Bay police. Five of those students, all boys, were found dead in rivers and the inquest did not hear any evidence as to how the boys wound up in the water. The other two students Robyn Harper and Paul Panacheese, died in their respective places of residence.

The OIPRD took into consideration the handling of the students’ deaths, along with that of Stacey DeBungee, whose body was found in the McIntyre River on Oct. 19, 2015, when they announced they would investigate the Thunder Bay police. Within three hours of the discovery of DeBungee’s body, police issued a press release saying

there was no indication this was a “suspicious death” but that a post mortem would later reveal the exact cause of death.

The OIPRD will be meeting Thunder Bay Chief of Police J.P. Levesque in the coming weeks to “propose some directions” on how these investigations should proceed.

“It is my belief that investigations should not be closed or have determinations made as to an outcome very quickly,” McNeilly said.

Meanwhile, the Thunder Bay police issued a notice on their Facebook page on Thursday, saying that members of their service are “standing with these families and are doing everything in their power to find answers and provide support during this sad time.”

The police page noted the investigations into Keeash and Begg haven been extensive and that members of their service are emotionally and professionally invested in finding answers for the families.

“We are parents, sons and daughters. The commitment is strong,” the page said.

“This is not the time for pointing fingers. It is the time to join hands and work towards our common goals of finding answers. Together, we can make that happen.”