

CTV NEWS

Chief coroner asks outside force to probe indigenous teen deaths in Thunder Bay



Thunder Bay Police Service vehicle



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Ontario's chief coroner has asked an outside police force to assist Thunder Bay police in investigating the deaths of two indigenous teens that garnered national attention due to concerns levelled by First Nations leaders.

Dr. Dirk Huyer said Thursday he asked the York Regional Police to get involved because it has the capacity to further investigate what happened to 14-year-old Josiah Begg and 17-year-old Tammy Keeash. The force can also provide additional personnel, he added.

Keeash's body was found in a Thunder Bay floodway early last month and the body of Begg was found less than two weeks later.

"I felt that this was an opportunity that we could enhance the ability to get the best answers to fully understand the circumstances of these two deaths by asking for the York Regional Police to get involved and help me to get the best understanding of these deaths," Huyer said in an interview.

The chief coroner has also asked Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service to bring an indigenous perspective to the investigation and has requested that York police visit the First Nations communities that Begg and Keeash are from to speak to their families.

Keeash is from North Caribou Lake First Nation and Begg is from Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation.

Thunder Bay police, who have been heavily criticized by indigenous leaders, welcomed the coroner's decision to bring outside help.

More investigative resources will serve the interests of the public and the families, said acting police chief Sylvie Hauth.

"These additional investigative resources and support serve the families' and the public's interest," she said in a statement. "The coroner's goal is to fully understand the circumstances of these tragic deaths."

At the end of May, indigenous leaders went to the Ontario legislature at Queen's Park and called for an RCMP investigation, citing mistrust of police in Thunder Bay.

Federal Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale has said municipal police jurisdiction is entirely within the purview of the provincial government.

Nishawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler said Thursday that he welcomes fresh sets of eyes to investigate the mysterious circumstances of the deaths.

"It is something that I think is very much needed at this point, especially while the office of the chief coroner is still conducting an investigation into these two recent, tragic deaths," Fiddler said.

"Right now, our priority is to support the two families in their quest to find out what may have happened ... I think it is important we support them and

their efforts. If it takes an outside police service to come in to complete that investigation, it is something that needs to be done."

Safety remains a central concern for First Nations parents who have to send children away from their communities to go to school in Thunder Bay, Fiddler added.

Last week, Statistics Canada released figures from 2015 that peg the northwestern Ontario city with the highest rate of police-reported hate crime in a metropolitan area, accounting for 29 per cent of all anti-aboriginal hate crimes across Canada that year.

Questions remain about why youth appear to be targets of violence in Thunder Bay, said Ontario NDP MP Charlie Angus.

Earlier this month, he wrote a letter to Goodale echoing the call for the Mounties to investigate the deaths of Keeash and Begg.

"Until we have that investigation, we will never really know what is going on and why these youth have been victimized," Angus said.