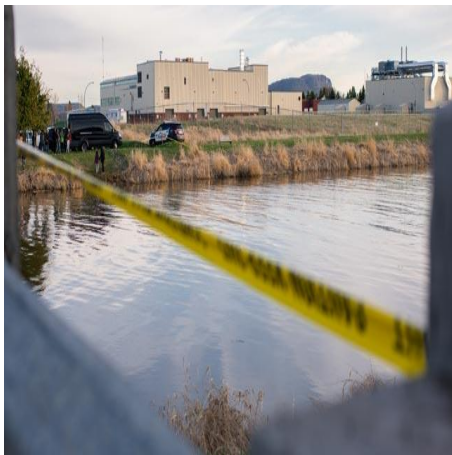


## Ontario exploring ‘options’ for Thunder Bay policing crisis triggered by suspected botched probes into water deaths

[National News](#) | June 1, 2017 by [Jorge Barrera](#) Attributed to: | [2 Comments](#)



**Jorge Barrera**  
**APTN National News**

Ontario’s minister responsible for policing has asked officials to explore “options” to deal with an unfolding crisis in Thunder Bay over the strong perception the city’s police force continually fails to properly investigate the deaths of Indigenous peoples.

Northern Ontario First Nation chiefs have called for the RCMP to take over the investigation into the Thunder Bay waterway deaths of three Indigenous people. The leaders said they have no confidence in the city’s police—which has a chief facing criminal charges while the service is under an investigation for systemic racism—to conduct proper investigations. The First Nation chiefs said they also do not trust the Ontario Provincial Police.

A spokesperson for Community Safety Minister Marie-France Lalonde said the minister did not have the ability to “direct investigations,” but had asked the department to find ways to address the concerns of First Nation leaders.

“We are committed to working with our First Nation partners,” said Lalonde’s spokesperson Yanni Dagona. “The minister has asked officials to explore options for addressing the concerns being raised in the community. That is as far as I can go.”

Dagona did not offer any details on possible options or timelines.

Rainy River First Nation Chief Jim Leonard said it was his understanding officials with the Ontario government would be discussing the issue with Thunder Bay police's acting police chief Sylvie Hauth.

"The province was going to have some discussions with the acting chief of police," said Leonard.

Leonard said the chiefs want the RCMP involved because it is the only force they trust with a cultural component designed specifically for policing Indigenous communities.

"We didn't feel any other municipal police force (in Ontario) could do the job, there is none that have the cultural component," said Leonard. "Pick any city, they don't have a large Aboriginal population, so they don't have that experience."

Leonard, along with Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler and Grand Council Treaty 3 Ojichidaa Francis Kavanaugh, on Wednesday called for the RCMP to investigate the deaths of Tammy Keeash, 17, who was living in a group home and found dead in the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway on May 7; Josiah Begg, 14, who was found dead in the McIntyre River on May 18; and Stacy DeBungee, who was found dead in the McIntyre River on Oct. 19, 2015, and whose death was immediately declared accidental by Thunder Bay police before conducting any serious investigation.



Tammy Keeash, 17, was found dead in a Thunder Bay waterway.



Posters seeking help in finding Josiah Begg, 14, when he first went missing.

The RCMP said Thursday the matter was not theirs to decide. The RCMP's Ontario division referred inquiries on the issue to its Ottawa headquarters which redirected questions to the Ontario government.

"While we are aware of the request, we understand the request from local First Nations leadership was made to the province of Ontario and consequently we would defer to the province," said RCMP spokesperson Sgt. Harold Pfeleiderer.

Dagona said the province's hands are technically tied on the issue because only the Thunder Bay police has the legal authority to call in an outside police force to investigate the deaths.

Serious questions also still remain around the deaths of three of seven First Nation youth who were the subject of a coroner's inquest which ended in June 2016. Five of the seven youth died in Thunder Bay's waterways.

Of those five water deaths, the coroner's jury concluded it could not determine what led to the drowning deaths in the cases of Jordan Wabasse, who was found in the Kaministiquia River in May 2011, Kyle Morrisseau, 17, who was found in the McIntyre River in November 2009, and Jethro Anderson, 15, who was found in the Kaministiquia River in November 2011.

The possibility of foul play behind some of these deaths has been previously raised by lawyer Julian Falconer, who represented the Nishnawbe Aski Nation during the inquest. The prospect is additionally heightened by two separate cases of Indigenous men who were attacked and thrown into a city waterway, but managed to survive.

“It is obvious that sadly one of the reasonable possibilities in some of these cases is that vulnerable folks who are near the water and who may not be in a position to defend themselves are vulnerable to being rolled into the water,” said Falconer, in an interview Thursday. “In my opinion, one of the distinct, reasonable, rational possibilities that what is going on around the river deaths is that, in at least some of these cases, there is a strain of racist, vicious thugs who find tossing indigenous people in the river fair sport.”

Falconer pointed to his cross-examination of forensic pathologist Dr. Toby Rose during the coroner’s inquest as more evidence that supported the possibility foul play played a role in some of the deaths.

During the cross-examination, according to the transcript, Rose said, “forensic pathology cannot distinguish based on pathology findings between drownings that occur by accident, as a result of suicide or by someone else by homicide.”

Falconer said this raises troubling questions.

“It doesn’t matter where you look, the ugly truth has to be confronted,” said Falconer. “There has to be a reasonable possibility that some of these deaths are by brutal, racist thugs who consider tossing an Indigenous person in the river to be an entertaining exercise.”



Lawyer Julien Falconer suspects foul play possibly behind some of the Thunder Bay water deaths.

*APT*N repeatedly called Thunder Bay police seeking comment, but received no response as of this article’s posting.

Ontario's Office of the Independent Review Director has already launched a probe into systemic racism within the police service as a result of the DeBungee case.

The Ontario Civilian Police Commission has also opened an investigation into allegations the Thunder Bay Police Services Board was failing to provide adequate oversight of the police.

The city's police service was recently rocked after its police chief J.P. Levesque was charged with breach of trust and obstruction of justice by the OPP for allegedly disclosing confidential information about Thunder Bay Mayor Keith Hobbs.