

York Regional, Nishnawbe Aski police to investigate Indigenous teens' deaths in Thunder Bay

First Nations chiefs have called for RCMP to handle Indigenous death investigations in the city

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The investigations into the deaths of two Indigenous teens in Thunder Bay will be done by the York Regional Police Service, Ontario's Chief Coroner announced. (Jody Porter/CBC)

Ontario's Chief Coroner says the York Regional and Nishnawbe Aski Police Services will now be involved in the investigations into the deaths of 17-year-old Tammy Keeash and 14-year-old Josiah Begg, the two Indigenous teens whose bodies were pulled from waterways in Thunder Bay, Ont., in May.

The York Regional police are investigating the deaths at my request," Dr. Dirk Huyer told CBC News Thursday afternoon. "The Thunder Bay police will be working at the same time ... the plan is to collaboratively and cooperatively have the best answers to these questions."

The southern Ontario-based service will report directly to the coroner, Huyer said.

He added that he also reached out to Nishnawbe Aski police to help, citing that service's familiarity with Indigenous cultural perspectives.

The coroner's decision follows a call from First Nations leaders in May to have the RCMP take over investigations into the deaths of Indigenous people in Thunder Bay, specifically those of Keeash, Begg and [41-year-old Stacy DeBungee](#), from the Thunder Bay Police Service.

DeBungee's death will not be investigated by the newly-appointed forces, Huyer confirmed, adding that the Mounties weren't chosen to head the Keeash and Begg investigations because as Ontario's coroner, he doesn't have the authority to request the RCMP's help. He added that he also does not have the authority to remove a police service from an ongoing investigation.

The York Regional service being based in Ontario means they have an extensive working knowledge of investigative procedure in the province and have "a similar language," Huyer said of why they were chosen. He added that they're also at an arm's length and can offer "an external perspective."



Dr. Dirk Huyer is Ontario's Chief Coroner. (CBC)

The Thunder Bay Police Service is **currently under investigation by Ontario's civilian police oversight body** for allegations of racism in the way the force deals with all Indigenous deaths. The Ontario Civilian Police Commission, the civilian watchdog for police services boards, **is also set to probe** the police board in Thunder Bay.

Both the force and its services board have said they will cooperate with the respective investigations.

Bringing in other police resources to investigate Keeash's and Begg's deaths was done because of concerns raised about how the teens' deaths were being examined, Huyer said.

"I evaluated others' concerns and I recognized that there were a number of questions that were in the community and a number of questions that were present from the family and well as the community," he said.

'Joint effort' supported by Thunder Bay police

In a statement released Thursday afternoon, Thunder Bay's acting police chief Sylvie Hauth said the municipal force "supports this joint effort and will continue to work on behalf of Tammy and Josiah's families and their communities."

She added that York police's additional resources "will assist in the continuation of these two death investigations."

The Thunder Bay service's statement referred further questions to the coroner's office.

'A fresh set of eyes'

Thursday's revelation comes as good news to the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), the territorial organization that represents 49 First Nations in northern Ontario. The group was one of the parties that called for outside help into investigating the teens' deaths in May.

"I think it's very important that a fresh set of eyes come in to help provide assistance to the Office of the Chief Coroner during the investigation of these two recent cases," NAN's Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler told CBC News.

Fiddler confirmed that the Nishnawbe Aski police (NAPS) will support the York service, including planned visits to Keeash's and Begg's home communities of North Caribou Lake and Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, respectively.

"To go meet with the family members and relatives, I think NAPS would certainly be helpful in that regard," he said.

With files from Jody Porter