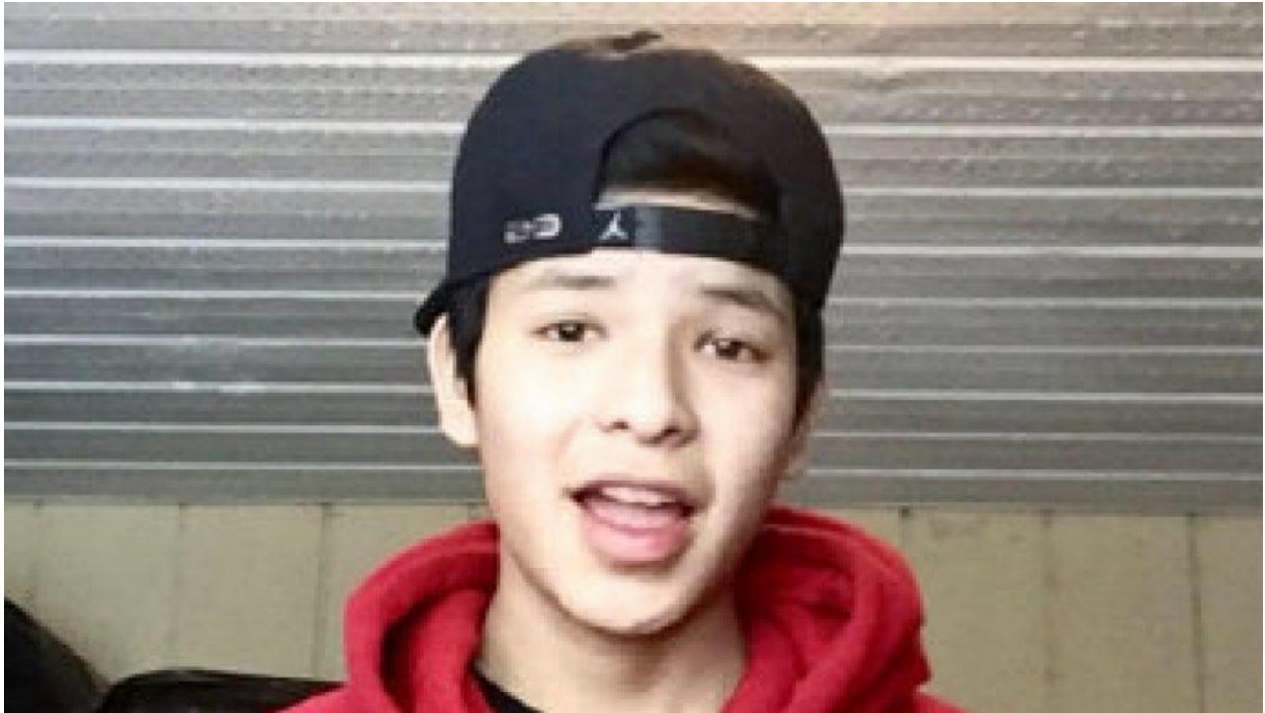


York Regional Police now investigating Thunder Bay Indigenous teen deaths

York investigators will focus on deaths of Tammy Keeash, Josiah Begg, but not on Stacy DeBungee



Josiah Begg, of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation in northern Ontario, disappeared May 7 in Thunder Bay. His body was found by a police underwater team on May 18. (THUNDER BAY POLICE SERVICE)

By [TANYA TALAGA](#) Staff Reporter

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York Regional Police is investigating the deaths of two Indigenous teens whose bodies were [found in Thunder Bay](#) waterways in May.

Ontario Chief Coroner Dr. Dirk Huyer said he contacted the York police service to provide a “new perspective” into the investigation of the death of North Caribou Lake First Nation’s [Tammy Keeash, 17](#), and Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug’s Josiah Begg, 14.

Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service, the largest First Nations police service in Canada, will be assisting York Regional Police. It has close to 130 officers serving northern Ontario Indigenous communities.

“They started Wednesday,” Huyer said, adding that he, the York Regional Police and [Thunder Bay Police](#) met to try to figure out an “operational approach” to the investigation.

“York Region is an external agency, they’ll bring a different perspective into these death investigations They are a moderately, big-sized organization so they have the capacity to be able to provide the investigators to assist us but also they have experience and skill in complex death investigations,” Huyer said.

Thunder Bay has been on edge after the deaths of Keeash, who disappeared from her foster home on May 6 and whose body was found in the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway on May 7, and Begg, who disappeared the same night. His body was found by a police underwater team on May 18. Begg had been in town with his father for medical appointments.

Thunder Bay police have said Keeash’s death was consistent with drowning, even though she was trained in water safety. Begg’s community was concerned that the police said there was “no evidence” that he had gone near the river and the search for the teen was called off early, First Nations leaders said.

The teens’ deaths follow that of Stacy DeBungee, a 41-year-old Rainy River First Nation man whose body was found in a river in October 2015. Hours after his body was found, police said his death was not “suspicious.” DeBungee’s family and community hired an outside private investigator who discovered his bank card was used shortly after his death.

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All 77 northern Ontario Indigenous leaders last month called on provincial and federal authorities to bring in the RCMP to investigate the river deaths.

Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler said Thursday that they had wanted the RCMP to investigate all three deaths.

“This is not the request that we made a few weeks ago when we were in Queen’s Park asking for the RCMP to come in,” Fiddler said. He conceded it was important a “fresh set of eyes come in and help the coroner’s office to fully investigate the circumstances that led to the tragic deaths of Josiah Begg and Tammy Keeash.”

Keeash and Begg were the sixth and seventh Indigenous teens to die in Thunder Bay waters since 2000. Indigenous leaders have long complained about the quality of the police investigations surrounding the deaths, noting many are quick to say that no foul play is suspected. An eight-month long inquest into the deaths of the seven teens — five of whom were found in waterways — wrapped up one year ago. The inquest had 145 recommendations and heard evidence of the racism Indigenous people in Thunder Bay face daily.

The Office of the Independent Police Review Director — an arm's-length civilian police watchdog — has been investigating Thunder Bay Police since November for “systemic racism” relating to all cases of Indigenous deaths and disappearances. The Thunder Bay Police Services Board is also under investigation by the Ontario Civilian Police Commission for their failure to police the police. The OIPRD is now investigating the deaths of Begg and Keeash.

York investigators will travel to North Caribou and Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, both in northwestern Ontario, to meet the families and discuss what is happening.

“They need to understand and know that we are involved. We think it is important the York Regional police take my message and decision to the families and learn from them their concerns and their perspectives,” Huyer said.

Thunder Bay’s acting chief of police, Sylvie Hauth, said in a statement that their force will do whatever it can to assist.

“The Thunder Bay Police Service supports this joint effort and will continue to work on behalf of Tammy and Josiah’s families and their communities,” said Hauth.

Concerning the DeBungee death, Fiddler said that he, Rainy River Chief Jim Leonard and Grand Council Treaty #3 Ogichidaa Francis Kavanaugh were told the OPP did conduct an investigation into the DeBungee case at the request of Thunder Bay Police.

But after completing the investigation, the OPP turned over their report to Thunder Bay Police but “for reasons we don’t understand the Thunder Bay Police is refusing to share the report with the family or the community.”

“We are very concerned about this. We need to make sure the family has access to that report,” Fiddler said.

He added all the northern chiefs want the federal government to step in and address what is happening in Thunder Bay.

“That is still our position. They have a role and responsibility — especially when it comes to ensuring the safety of our students that come to Thunder Bay to go to high school. They are also responsible. The recommendations of the inquest, many are directed to the federal government and they are obligated to help,” Fiddler said.

And that includes ensuring all Indigenous kids have access to safe schooling in safe communities in equitably funded schools.

The chiefs will hold an emergency meeting on July 5 and 6 in Thunder Bay to address concerns for the families that refuse to send their students back to the city in September. But choices are limited. If students don’t leave their home communities and head to Thunder Bay, many won’t have access to a high school education.