

Ontario police watchdog says review of Thunder Bay force to be complete by spring

Police review director Gerry McNeilly was in Thunder Bay Monday for 1st public forum as part of probe

By Matt Prokopchuk, [CBC News](#) Posted: Sep 26, 2017 10:51 AM ET Last Updated: Sep 26, 2017 4:36 PM ET



An estimated over-250 people packed a meeting room at the Da Vinci Centre in Thunder Bay Monday evening for a public meeting. The forum was part of the ongoing probe of allegations of systemic racism in Thunder Bay police.

(Matt Prokopchuk / CBC)

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The head of Ontario's civilian police oversight body says he still expects to have the findings of his probe into allegations of systemic racism in the Thunder Bay Police Service completed by next spring, even though he'll likely be gathering more input from city residents.

Gerry McNeilly, Ontario's Independent Police Review Director, was in the northwestern Ontario city on Monday, where he and his staff hosted an almost-three-hour-long public meeting. The open forum on police-community relations was designed to help inform his systemic review of city police, specifically the way they treat the deaths and disappearances of Indigenous people.

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"The end of winter [as a completion date] will give me some time to ... have some more in-person meetings and individual meetings in Thunder Bay for the next couple months," he said. "Then we'll start seriously writing a report."

"I think it's absolutely necessary that we move on and I don't want to drag this out," he continued. "This is not one of those inquiries that's going to go on for five years because then I think we lose people and we disappoint people."

The timing is poignant. On Saturday, the body of a **21-year-old Indigenous man** — **later identified** as Dylan Moonias — was found in the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway. Four months ago, two teenagers, **17-year-old Tammy Keeash** and **14-year-old Josiah Begg**, were found in different parts of the same waterway.

The systemic review — which experts and McNeilly himself have called unprecedented — was launched in November 2016, after a complaint by the chief of Rainy River First Nations, over the way police handled the death of one of his community members, who was also found in a river.



The crowd broke into discussion groups at Monday's meeting in Thunder Bay, hosted by the Ontario Independent Police Review Director. (Matt Prokopchuk / CBC)

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Several speakers at Monday's meeting called for additional forums to be held in the city. The medium-sized room at the Da Vinci Centre, which can hold upwards of 250 people, was packed; even after staff brought in extra chairs, a number of people had to remain standing.

McNeilly said he intends to act on some of the suggestions for further public consultation, like speaking to people in shelters and holding additional focus group meetings.

- **Almost 40 Thunder Bay police investigations being reviewed by watchdog group**

McNeilly's report, when it is completed, is expected to identify issues with relation to police practices and make recommendations for improvement. While McNeilly said he can't force police to adopt them, he said he does have "enforcement mechanisms," such as public audits of how the service is responding.

'Open acknowledgement'

Monday's meeting featured people getting into groups and discussing a series of questions posed by the police review directorate's staff, such as describing one's experiences with Thunder Bay police, whether people see racism in policing as an issue in Thunder Bay and what recommendations the final report should include.

Participants were then invited to share answers to those questions with the room, or speak about their personal stories.



Gerry McNeilly is Ontario's Independent Police Review Director. (Matt Prokopchuk / CBC)

Several people who addressed the crowd during the open discussion — which the media was asked not to record — spoke about the need for police to have better communication, not only with families of victims but also when they encounter Indigenous people on the streets.

Others spoke in support of the work that officers do in the community. "They're out there and they're doing their job," Joylyn Dysievick told CBC News before the meeting started. "Sometimes they just get [portrayed] badly."

During the group discussion, some participants took the opportunity to raise larger concerns, like community safety and racism in Thunder Bay as a whole. Mike McKay — the grandfather of Josiah Begg — addressed the audience, saying he's not angry at the city, but it has to acknowledge there is a problem with racism.



First Nations people gathered on the banks of the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway in May as news spread a body had been found during the search for 14-year-old Josiah Begg. (Martine Laberge/Radio-Canada)

"Not just particularly the police service, I think it's just the city of Thunder Bay, has to acknowledge that there exists racism," he told CBC News. "Whether ... [it is] behind doors or whatever, it does exist."

McNeilly said he felt Monday's discussion was a step in the right direction.

"What I've heard is open acknowledgement that there is racism, that there's discrimination and that there is a need for people to recognize that and to talk about it openly and it's time to start that discussion," McNeilly said.

"I heard that a lot tonight and that made a difference for me."

With files from Jody Porter