

Head Office

Swan Lake First Nation 200-200 Alpine Way, Headingley, Manitoba R4H 0B7

Winnipeg Sub-Office

1572 Dublin Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3E 0L4

Phone: 204.946.1869 Fax: 204.946.1871 Toll Free: 1.866.876.9701

www.scoinc.mb.ca Facebook: @SCOIncMB



GRAND CHIEF STATEMENT ON THE ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF COVID-19 IN MANITOBA

March 12, 2021

ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — One year ago today, the first presumptive positive case of COVID-19 was identified in Manitoba. The following 365 days have been unprecedented for southern First Nation communities and citizens.

“Today, we mourn the loss of 150 First Nation citizens, and grieve with their families and loved ones,” said Grand Chief Jerry Daniels of the Southern Chiefs’ Organization (SCO). “Those families are feeling the losses today and every day, robbed by the virus of the chance to say their good-byes. We honour those lives, and all the health professionals who risked their lives to try to save them.”

In March of last year as the world became aware of the health risks of the new coronavirus, southern First Nations took immediate action to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. As part of that response, SCO declared a State of Emergency on behalf of the Chiefs of its 34 member Nations and began to advocate for additional resources to fight the pandemic.

“I credit our Chiefs and Councilors, community leaders and staff at SCO for understanding the danger and for taking immediate action,” stated Grand Chief Daniels. “Chiefs locked down their communities, installing security check points and distributing much needed cleaning supplies, protective equipment, and emergency kits. These measures saved lives and kept the deadly virus from our communities for many months.”

However, after the provincial government launched a campaign to restart the province’s economy, a predicted second wave hit. The surge of infections in the fall left Manitoba with the second-worst COVID-19 fatality record in all of Canada.

“Our hearts go out to all Manitobans who lost loved ones, including thousands in long term care facilities where almost half of the fatalities occurred,” stated Grand Chief Daniels. “This did not have to happen if Manitoba had only learned from other provinces. We had time to prepare and that is the tragedy.”

First Nations are all too painfully aware that we are especially at risk during pandemics. As of March 11, 2021, there were 10,419 recorded cases of COVID-19 among First Nation people in Manitoba, a staggering third of all cases in the province. First Nations recorded 16 per cent of all deaths, and the median age of death is 66, a full 17 years younger than the average for the rest of Manitoba.

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Many systemic factors contribute to this reality, including the ongoing impact of colonization, systemic racism and economic apartheid which result in entrenched poverty, overcrowding housing, poor water quality, food insecurity and limited health services. Life expectancy for First Nation people in Manitoba is 11 years shorter, on average, than all others in Manitoba.

“After many months of strong advocacy and stark evidence, our people are being prioritized for vaccines and many of our Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Traditional Healers and other health care professionals have already received their first dose,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels. “All eligible First Nation citizens 18 years and older will have an opportunity to be vaccinated by May, and despite the worrying variants there is hope for a post-pandemic world and an end to the loneliness and isolation. As we have done so many times before, our people have come together in the face of crisis and I know we will emerge united as a result.”

The pandemic has exposed the inequities that have oppressed First Nations for generations. With the arrival of vaccines, the Chiefs of the southern First Nations do not want a return to normal, but instead are demanding change and a future free from the systemic racism and oppression that create inequities. SCO is calling on all levels of government to commit to closing the gaps faced by First Nation people.

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The Southern Chiefs' Organization represents 34 First Nations and more than 80,000 citizens in what is now called southern Manitoba. SCO is an independent political organization that protects, preserves, promotes, and enhances First Nations peoples' inherent rights, languages, customs, and traditions through the application and implementation of the spirit and intent of the Treaty-making process.

For Media Inquiries:

Caitlin Reid, Manager of Communications, Southern Chiefs' Organization

(204) 557-2399 | Email: Media@scoinc.mb.ca

www.scoinc.mb.ca