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URGENT ACTION REQUIRED NOW

First Nation Lives On the Line – SCO Grand Chief

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 2, 2020

ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is making an urgent appeal to all orders of government to free up critically needed funds and to drastically step up their efforts to keep First Nation citizens and all Manitobans safe from COVID-19.

“Let me be very clear, our lives are literally on the line,” said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. “It is obvious at the provincial level that the pandemic response is beyond inadequate and now our critical care resources are on the verge of collapse.”

The Grand Chief's demands come on the heels of an [open letter](#) sent to the premier of Manitoba yesterday from more than 200 doctors stating that the province's public health system is overwhelmed.

Meanwhile, as of this past weekend, Manitoba has the worst case count per capita in Canada including daily outbreaks in hospitals, personal care homes, jails, and remote communities. It was only 100 days ago that Manitoba had one of the best case counts per capita in the country. Now, the province's case count per capita is on par with some regions in the US, the country with the world's highest COVID-19 case numbers. From this past Friday to Sunday alone, the province saw a staggering increase of 1141 cases. Add to all of that, frustration caused by long lineups for COVID-19 testing along with a significant backlog in test results and contact tracing.

“The provincial government had six months to prepare for this second wave of the virus,” added Grand Chief Daniels. “Instead of being adequately prepared, we are now bearing witness to the tragic loss of life and system collapse after years of so-called reorganization and red tape reduction.”

Today, the province announced that it will finally reactivate its incident command structure, to help “provide clear direction and ensure co-ordinated efforts are put in place to address the situation.” This is another example of how the Manitoba government is failing to keep First Nations and all Manitobans safe. The command structure was deactivated months ago, and it has taken the province until now to reactivate it, despite the alarming increases in cases which began many weeks ago.

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As of October 31, 2020, 26 First Nation communities across Canada have reported two or more active cases with 17 of them located in Manitoba. There were 516 active cases in the province among First Nation people, 171 of them on reserve. Manitoba's test positivity rate among First Nations is 11%, above the provincial average is 8.6%.

"If the province's system is on the verge of collapse, imagine what that could mean for First Nation's health care resources," remarked Grand Chief Daniels. "Thanks to centuries of colonization, we have been dealing with an infrastructure backlog for generations. Add to that the challenges of a global pandemic and you have a recipe for disaster."

Along with a call for improved transparency, action and accountability from the province, SCO is calling on the federal government to fast track the release of \$200 million in recently announced funding to provide support to First Nations. That money will be immediately used to help build critical infrastructure including badly needed isolation units as well as upgrades for health, social, and educational facilities.

"While we are pleased with the additional funds announced by the federal government last week, we need to be able to access resources immediately to have a real chance at preventing the further spread of COVID-19 and related deaths," concluded Grand Chief Daniels. "The situation is dire, and so we are demanding better for the people we serve."

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.

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