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First Nations Must Be Priority for COVID-19 Vaccine

Matter of Life and Death for Anishinaabe and Dakota Peoples – SCO Grand Chief

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 26, 2020

ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is wanting answers from the federal government when it comes to prioritization for approved COVID-19 vaccinations.

“The data is glaringly obvious and devastating,” stated SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. “The COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately impacting our Anishinaabe and Dakota communities. Canada must prioritize our people in order to end this health care crisis that is impacting so many First Nation lives.”

First Nation people make up approximately 10 per cent of Manitoba's population, but this week, First Nation citizens accounted for nearly 20 per cent of the province's daily COVID-19 case counts, and made up 27 per cent of hospitalizations and 38 per cent of intensive care unit (ICU) patients as of November 23, 2020.

Southern First Nations are doing their best to slow the spread of COVID-19, which is taking a huge toll on people and economies. Chiefs and Councils have had to impose extremely strict lockdown measures in an attempt to slow the spread of this deadly virus. Drastic action had to be taken due to limited access to healthcare facilities on reserve and in remote communities.

“You're seeing first-hand the grim reality of what centuries of colonization and systemic racism have done to our people and our communities,” added Grand Chief Daniels. “Even before the global pandemic, equitable health care for Anishinaabe and Dakota peoples was never a priority for any order of government. Now, we are in the fight for our lives because of this neglect.”

Canada has yet to commit to when vaccines will be readily available in this country, and when vaccine procurement will become vaccine distribution. The federal government must give First Nations a realistic timeline so that our governments and health leaders can effectively and properly prepare. Planning must also begin to ensure First Nation people living off reserve are prioritized for vaccination.

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“If Ottawa wants to walk the reconciliation walk, then it must make vaccination a priority for our most vulnerable citizens,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels. “For all First Nation people, this is literally a matter of life and death.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has further shown how essential it is for First Nations to have self-determination over our health systems. Earlier this year, SCO entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Canada, which will allow Anishinaabe and Dakota peoples to assume greater control of their health and wellness. We will continue to work with all governments and partners to transform the health and wellness of southern First Nations.

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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