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GRAND CHIEF STATEMENT ON COVID-19 VACCINE DISTRIBUTION TO OFF RESERVE FIRST NATION PEOPLE IN MANITOBA

Traditional Healers and Knowledge Keepers to be Prioritized

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: February 01, 2021

ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB – The Grand Chief of the Southern Chiefs' Organization is providing this statement as an update on the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine to First Nation people in Manitoba.

Public health officials today announced the next step in vaccination plans for First Nation people across Manitoba to help protect them from COVID-19. This announcement follows last Wednesday's general update of Manitoba's vaccination program.

"We support the expansion of eligibility for the vaccination of First Nation people, especially for our Traditional Healers and Knowledge Keepers," commented SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "The data clearly shows that First Nation people are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, regardless of where they live. Therefore, all First Nation people must be vaccinated as quickly and safely as possible in order to ensure that we can protect our citizens and prevent the further spread of this deadly virus and the concerning new strains."

An additional 1200 doses of Moderna have been made available for the following First Nation priority groups:

- Traditional Healers and Knowledge Keepers, including those living off reserve, in recognition of the essential role that they play in the First Nation health workforce. This new prioritization will mean those who previously did not meet the age criteria or who live off reserve are now eligible for vaccination.
- Health care workers with direct patient and client interaction such as doctors, nurses, health care aides, home care workers, medical transportation drivers, and other direct service providers in non-remote First Nation communities. This group has been eligible for vaccination since early in January however, health care workers in non-remote communities were encouraged to access the Pfizer vaccine supersites to preserve supply of the vaccine for communities that did not have access to the supersites.
- First Nation alternative isolation accommodation (AIA) employees at sites managed and/or supported by First Nation organizations.

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The 1200 additional doses of the Moderna vaccine will be available through a temporary pop-up site in Winnipeg as well as at hubs in Thompson, The Pas, and Flin Flon. First Nations with larger numbers of eligible healthcare workers may get the doses shipped directly to their community.

Dr. Maria Anderson, Vice-Dean, Indigenous Health at the University of Manitoba and Executive Director, Ongomiizwin Indigenous Institute of Health and Healing, also announced an age differential for vaccinating First Nation people. In Stage Two of the vaccine rollout, when the general public becomes eligible starting with people over 80 years of age, First Nation people who are 60 years or older will be eligible. This is to ensure equity and follows an evidence-based approach to address the higher levels of risk experienced by First Nation people during this pandemic.

As of January 29th, 2021, there were 8,383 recorded cases of COVID-19 among First Nation people in Manitoba. First Nation people represent 80 per cent of all active cases, 52 per cent of the province's total hospitalizations and 45 per cent of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) patients in Manitoba.

Additionally, the median age of hospitalization due to COVID-19 for First Nation people is 51 years, and the median age of death is 66, 17 years younger than the average for the rest of Manitoba. First Nation people already have a life expectancy that is on average 11 years shorter than all others living in Manitoba.

"Using the same age range for First Nation people as for the general population would only have furthered the systemic racism and inequities that First Nation people already experience within the health care system," said Grand Chief Daniels. "It is clear that the Vaccine Task Force understands this. The prioritization updates shared today will save lives."

This week, a focused Immunization Team will visit KeKiNan Centre, an assisted-living facility for Indigenous seniors in Winnipeg, offering vaccinations.

Public health officials also announced prioritization sequencing for congregate living facilities, including homeless shelters and correctional facilities, both setting which have had outbreaks of COVID-19.

"SCO will continue to advocate at Manitoba's Vaccine Task Force table for prioritization of the First Nation population, both on and off reserve," concluded Grand Chief Daniels. "We are committed to this issue as a top priority and will continue to do everything we can to ensure the safety and protection of our people during this deadly pandemic."

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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