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SCO Response to 2021 Federal Budget

Critical Investments Announced, Now We Need to See Results – Grand Chief Daniels

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ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is responding to the federal budget tabled on April 19, 2021 with issues of top concern for southern First Nations in Manitoba.

“Like all of us, the pandemic has presented the Trudeau government with unprecedented health and fiscal challenges,” stated SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. “Now more than ever, we need to move forward with immediate implementation and prioritization of investments in First Nation communities and people to help us emerge from this global health crisis. Our people have faced amplified threats from COVID-19, from the disproportionate risk of infection to the impact on essential workers, we have been making sacrifices. I am hopeful our federal Treaty partner has begun to close the gaps to truly ‘build back better’.”

The 2021 budget includes more than \$18 billion in investments for Indigenous communities, including \$6 billion for improving critical infrastructure, such as new housing and broadband, as well as enhancing economic growth for First Nations.

“We are strong advocates for a distinctions based and sovereign approach when it comes to infrastructure and development in our communities,” said SCO Chiefs' Executive Committee Member and Lake Manitoba First Nation Chief, Cornell McLean. “By making this financial commitment, the federal government is starting to pave the way for us to increase our governance and sovereignty over essential infrastructure, directly invest in jobs and business opportunities for our people, and allow us to elevate ourselves out of colonially imposed poverty.”

SCO is responding favourably to the announced \$30 billion over five years to create a national early learning and child care system, with a specific \$2.5 billion investment for an early learning and child care system for Indigenous families.

Southern Manitoba First Nation children account for more than 50 per cent of the 11,000 children in care in Manitoba — the highest number of Indigenous children in care in Canada. The new national early learning and child care system must prioritize keeping First Nation families together and better meeting their needs where they live. SCO also welcomes the announcement of extending supports by two years for First Nation youth in care when they reach the age of majority.

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SCO also firmly believes that more quality child care spaces means more parents — especially women, who suffered more under the ‘shecession’ and typically shoulder the largest share of child care responsibilities — can enter or re-enter the workforce.

“First Nation women have felt the brunt of so many systemic inadequacies, particularly when it comes to accessing for employment and education,” said Deborah Smith, Chair of the Chiefs’ Standing Committee on Child Welfare and Chief of Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. “By having more options for quality child care, First Nation mothers and grandmothers can now access more opportunities that they have historically been denied.”

This year’s budget earmarks \$2.2 billion to help end the national tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people. This includes funding for a much anticipated National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence. A \$55 million investment in Indigenous organizations to provide gender-based violence prevention programming aimed at addressing the root causes is part of a nearly \$1 billion investment to improve safety in Indigenous communities.

SCO supports the added \$1.2 billion for continued COVID-19 response measures in First Nations and other Indigenous communities as well as the extension of the Canada Emergency Wage subsidy and the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy and Lockdown Support. SCO and the southern Chiefs are committed to continuing to lead the battle against COVID-19 by keeping our communities safe, responding to outbreaks, and supporting our continued vaccine rollout.

The 2021 budget also includes continued investments in health care for First Nations that are essential in order for us to transform the current system, which still reflects considerable inequity. In Manitoba, the life expectancy of First Nations citizens is 11 years shorter than their non-First Nation peers, and the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on First Nation communities has only served to highlight health gaps that have been known by governments for many years.

“Today’s announcement of \$1.4 billion dollars over five years is crucial to our health transformation goals. I look forward to working alongside my fellow Chiefs to advance this critical initiative,” said Pine Creek First Nation Chief and Chiefs’ Health Action Table Chair, Karen Batson. “By improving our health status, we improve not only health, but well-being, quality of life, and the future for our communities, and for the generations to come in our southern First Nations.”

Another welcome investment is \$126.7 million over three years to address racism in health care systems. SCO recently released a survey on racism in health care, with results showing the extent to which racism still exists. Ninety-two percent of First Nation respondents strongly agreed or agreed that racism is a problem in Manitoba’s health care system; 80 per cent reported witnessing a family member or loved one being discriminated against or treated badly because of their race.

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“We all need to demand better from our health care system, because everyone deserves to feel safe and respected,” added Chief Batson. “As we build a strong southern First Nation health care system, I am hopeful this funding will help us continue to provide patient advocates, health system navigators, and cultural safety training for medical professionals.”

The health investment includes \$774.6 million for the essential Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program, which covers mental health services, medical travel, and certain medications. SCO looks to the federal government to ensure that the NIHB program will now receive equitable funding and provide reimbursement in line with other federal programs, such as Veterans Affairs.

Funding was also announced to increase Old Age Security by 10 per cent annually, plus a \$3 billion investment to work with the provinces and territories to improve the standard of care offered at long-term care facilities. SCO is in full support, and calls on all governments to work together to provide a higher quality of care for all seniors, and to create more affordable assisted living for First Nation Elders, in the aftermath of the tragic deaths of so many seniors during the pandemic.

Our youth have also been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, which is why the \$5.7 billion investment over five years for improving their access to education, jobs training, and employment is well received. It’s critical that First Nation youth are prioritized throughout this investment, as they face more systemic barriers to receiving post-secondary education and accessing gainful employment than non-First Nation youth. Youth and other minimum wage workers will also be benefitted by the announcement of a \$15 federal minimum wage, which SCO highly supports as an important step towards establishing a basic income.

A promised three-year investment of \$74.8 million to improve access to justice for First Nation people and support the development of an Indigenous justice strategy may begin to address systemic discrimination and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. SCO continues to advocate for systemic changes within all levels of policing and justice as the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples continues to be a major issue of concern.

SCO is reacting positively to a commitment to provide \$275 million over five years for Indigenous languages, plus \$2 million ongoing to Canadian Heritage, in order to fund and support Indigenous languages as a foundation for culture, identity, and belonging.

Inequitable funding of our traditional languages compared to colonial languages persists despite the introduction of the Indigenous Languages Act in 2019, which committed Canada to funding Indigenous led language reclamation, revitalization, and strengthening activities. SCO and the southern Chiefs expect this investment will ensure that the Act’s mandate can now be fully implemented.

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“In the end, what should drive this and all future budgets are the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action and the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 231 Calls for Justice,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels. “People need to realize there is such a significant socio-economic gap between First Nations and the rest of Canada, and we cannot rest until our largest Treaty partner commits to adequately funding the departments that impact our quality of life.”

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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