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SCO APPALLED BY LACK OF PROGRESS TO IMPROVE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM SINCE TRAGIC DEATH OF PHOENIX SINCLAIR

Children Continue to Die While Province Falls behind on Key Recommendations – Grand Chief

March 12, 2021

ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is appalled by the results of the report, [*Still Waiting: Investigating Child Maltreatment after the Phoenix Sinclair Inquiry*](#), released this week on March 11 by the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY). SCO calls on the provincial government to immediately prioritize the implementation of the five recommendations from this week's report as well as the 62 recommendations on improving the child welfare system that resulted from the public inquiry into Phoenix Sinclair's death.

"It's been nearly 16 years since the tragic and preventable death of Phoenix Sinclair in 2005," said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "There was a large public inquiry into Phoenix's death which produced 62 essential recommendations on how the province can improve the child welfare system. The provincial government knows exactly what is needed to be done, and yet, they have made little progress."

The report studied the lives of 19 children aged five years and under who tragically died from maltreatment between 2008 and 2020. Of those children who passed, 53 per cent of them were Indigenous. Overall, 90 per cent of all children in care in what is now Manitoba are Indigenous.

Still Waiting also tracked the progress, or lack of progress, of the province's implementation of the 62 recommendations that resulted from the inquiry into Phoenix Sinclair's death. In the seven years since the public inquiry issued recommendations, the province has completed only 55 percent of them. Children are still dying in the exact same manner as Phoenix Sinclair, despite the province having full knowledge of what is needed to end these deaths due to maltreatment.

Building on the previous 62 recommendations, this week's report also issued five further recommendations on how the child welfare system must be improved in order to prevent further loss of life. These recommendations include calling on the province to implement all outstanding recommendations from the Phoenix Sinclair Inquiry and to work with First Nation and Metis

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governments and community stakeholders “to ensure access to evidence-informed and culturally-safe parenting programs and resources... with attention to rural and remote communities”.

“In our southern First Nations, reforming the child welfare system is a top priority,” explained Grand Chief Daniels. “We have made substantive, culturally appropriate changes to the way the system works for First Nation children in our communities, even through the COVID-19 pandemic, including issuing directives over the past year to end discriminatory Birth Alerts and to ensure that all parents are made aware of their rights when dealing with child welfare agencies in southern Nations through the Parents’ Bill of Rights.”

In September of 2019, the SCO Chiefs-in-Summit issued a Directive to the Southern First Nations Network of Care (SFNNC) to develop a culturally appropriate and safe alternative to Manitoba’s birth alert practice. In April of last year, SFNNC issued their own Directive, which instituted an end to the practice of issuing birth alerts.

In August of 2020, the SCO Chiefs’ Standing Committee on Child Welfare issued a Directive to SFNNC that requires their child and family service workers to verbally inform First Nation parents of their rights in relation to their children when workers attend to child protection matters. Issuing this Directive has helped to ensure that parents are aware of their rights, and empowers them to assert their rights when working with an agency.

The directives issued have been supported by policies at the SFNNC to ensure that First Nations case managers are able to do good social work in a timely manner.

SCO and SFNNC are also committed to ensuring that services are improved through culturally appropriate processes and policies that enable child welfare workers to practice in an effective way. This includes the development of an overarching Anishinaabe/Dakota First Nation Family Law that will enable southern First Nation communities to enact First Nation Family Laws that are specific to the needs, goals, customs, and priorities of their own communities.

“We have always known that First Nations must become the leaders of change in child welfare service delivery in Manitoba,” stated Grand Chief Daniels. “Southern First Nation leadership has been guiding our child welfare agencies to make fundamental, culturally appropriate changes to the ways in which they serve our families and communities. First Nations must continue to have their rights and jurisdiction upheld and respected to allow us to continue to lead change in Manitoba child welfare service delivery to protect our children and our families.”

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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.

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