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SCO Response to Federal Fiscal Update

First Nations Want to Create a New “Normal” – SCO Grand Chief

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ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs Organization (SCO) is responding to the federal government’s latest fiscal update with a call for urgent implementation and prioritization of investments in First Nation communities and people.

Yesterday, Ottawa unveiled a plan for the largest economic relief package in decades, totaling up to \$100 billion, to restart the economy and support businesses for when life returns to normal post-COVID-19.

“The federal government needs to understand that First Nations don’t want to return to ‘normal’” said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. “Our normal in Canada consists of economic apartheid, infrastructure deficits, increased violence, poverty, systemic racism, and the worst health outcomes. The pandemic has only served to exacerbate these glaring gaps.”

As part of her speech, federal finance minister Chrystia Freeland stated that a plan is in place to rollout a COVID-19 vaccine to Canadians in 2021. With a First Nation test-positivity rate of close to 20%, SCO has made it clear that the Anishinaabe and Dakota First Nation people must be a priority for vaccination.

As of Monday, First Nation people in Manitoba accounted for 25 percent of all hospitalizations and 38% of all Intensive Care Unit (ICU) patients. These figures are a direct result of centuries of colonization that have left First Nations with worse health outcomes, including a life expectancy that is 11 years shorter on average than non-First Nation Manitobans.

Critical to improving health is addressing the infrastructure deficit, and First Nation people are less likely to have safe options to isolate or quarantine due to the lack housing on reserve. Ottawa has earmarked \$1.8 billion over the next seven years to support Indigenous community infrastructure, but the reality when divided between First Nation, Métis, and Inuit communities over the seven years equates to about one to two houses a year per community, and the pandemic has clearly shown housing to be a glaring infrastructure gap that must be addressed as quickly as possible.

The federal government also re-iterated its commitment to ending boil water advisories in all First Nations communities with a \$1.5 billion investment in related infrastructure.

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“The need for clean water has never been greater for First Nations. As health professionals constantly remind us, hand hygiene is essential to battling the coronavirus,” added Grand Chief Daniels. “With so many First Nations not having access to clean water, we continue to be relegated to second class citizens in this country. This is why SCO is prioritizing a new Water Authority that can protect and guarantee safe, high quality water sources and infrastructure for southern First Nations in Manitoba.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has also disproportionately impacted First Nations people financially. According to a recent survey by Statistics Canada, First Nation participants more often reported that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs than non-Indigenous participants. This is particularly true for women. The recent National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls clearly shows that First Nation women already experience heightened financial vulnerability. COVID-19 has accentuated that precariousness, with women more likely to report job loss or reduced hours due to the pandemic.

Employment disruptions often have a larger financial impact on First Nation participants because of greater pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as lower income levels and higher proportions living in poverty and experiencing food insecurity. While the government did announce a \$1,200 annual supplement for middle- and low-income families, it is not enough to recover from the hardships of the past year.

The federal government also announced additional summer job placements for youth and for young people who lost their job or are unable to work due to the pandemic. It’s unclear, however, how First Nation youth will be prioritized for these programs given that they face more systemic barriers to gainful employment than non-First Nation youth, and that First Nations have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Welcome news came with the \$238.5 million announced for body cameras for frontline RCMP officers. The Indigenous Lives Matter movement across the country has shone a spotlight on systemic racism that exists throughout the RCMP. Body cameras will hopefully be a first step in addressing this discrimination and reducing unwarranted force used by the RCMP against First Nation and racialized peoples.

“The evidence is clear that this past year has taken a devastating toll on First Nation people,” concluded SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. “Ottawa is planning one of the largest relief packages in decades, but they must prioritize vulnerable populations most in need of relief, the First Peoples of this land.”

SCO and the Chiefs of the southern First Nations in Manitoba will continue to advocate that government do more, in partnership with First Nations, to help our communities overcome the

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disastrous and disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our communities and our citizens.

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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