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## **Federal Government Undermines Orange Shirt Day With Scheduled Closure of Residential School Survivors' Support Program**

### **Critical Programming for Survivors to be Shuttered Next Year**

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**ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB** — The Southern Chiefs Organization (SCO) is calling on the Federal Government to extend the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program (IRS RHSP), which is scheduled to be shut down in March of 2021.

“It is heartbreaking to have to debate this issue on Orange Shirt Day,” said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. “Today should be about coming together in the spirit of healing, to honour Survivors and the children who did not make it home. Instead, we are having to continue our fight to right the colonial wrongs inflicted on our people and our communities.”

The IRS RHSP was created as a result of the hard fought Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Its purpose is to provide former students and their families with cultural, emotional, and mental health counselling services in response to the traumas they experienced in residential schools.

“We call on the government to participate in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action by providing increased funding to the IRS RHSP programs nationally. Our survivors have said ‘We are not looking for your pity, we are looking for your support in our healing.’ Healing and Reconciliation must continue to move forward,” stated Eva Wilson Fontaine, Team Leader of Anish Corporation, a organization that provides health and wellness programming to Survivors in Headingley, Manitoba .

In the first seven years of the program (2011-2018), federal government statistics show that almost 900,000 Survivors and families reached out for cultural and emotional support 5.8 million times. In addition, more than 65,000 Survivors and families participated in almost 500,000 counselling sessions across Canada.

“There is no arguing with this kind of evidence, especially when we see the damaging impacts of residential school over multiple generations,” added Grand Chief Daniels. “This programming is critical

and is being accessed by those who need it. It would be an incredible injustice for the Trudeau government to stall the healing process.”

A movement to continue the IRS RHSP is being led by Survivors across Canada, supported by local Survivors, SCO and others. The committee is also calling for transitioning the program from Canada to First Nation governments and organizations, to put healing in the hands of First Nations where it belongs.

“A lot of people are now coming forward, after a long time of not speaking about what happened to them at the Indian residential schools” said Wayne Mason, Executive Director of Wa-Say, an Indigenous Healing Centre in Winnipeg and Headingley, Manitoba. “Now, we are finally starting to learn what really happened and can help them heal, especially through our traditional ways. We need to expand on this healing, not end it. It is a critical time in our healing journey and would be disastrous for the IRS RHSP to end. Our healing must continue.”

SCO has additional concerns about the timing of the program’s proposed ending. Currently, there is a Survivor’s crisis exacerbated by the isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Elders in their seventies and eighties have time to reflect on the past and to relive their experiences, reawakening previous traumas and painful memories.

“I cannot stress enough this program or something similar must exist, always and forever, for Survivors and their families,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels. “Anything short of that amounts to nothing less than betrayal by the federal government.”

Survivors and their families looking for information on supports and programming available can visit the [IRS page](#) on the SCO website for more information.

*The Southern Chiefs’ Organization represents 34 First Nations 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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