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SCO Applauds Increase in COVID-19 Vaccine Allotment for First Nations in Manitoba

Prime Minister Showing Leadership in Time of Need – SCO Grand Chief

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ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is pleased to learn the federal government has earmarked 15% more of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine for Manitoba than originally allocated.

“We commend a political leader who listens to the First Peoples of Canada and we have to give credit when it is due,” said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. “By getting more vaccines to First Nation people and communities, Prime Minister Trudeau is showing leadership on the pandemic, which has been lacking in this province.”

Manitoba will now get more than 75 thousand doses of the Moderna vaccine, when it is approved by Health Canada, instead of the initial allotment of 66 thousand. The Moderna vaccine is a better fit for delivery to some First Nation communities as it does not require the extreme refrigeration associated with the Pfizer vaccine.

The latest data clearly shows the critical need for First Nation people, on and off-reserve, to have immediate access to any approved vaccine. Currently, First Nation people represent a third of the province's COVID-19 hospitalizations and nearly half of all patients in intensive care, but account for only 11.8% of the population of Manitoba.

For months, SCO has been sounding the alarm about COVID-19 and its disproportionate impacts on southern First Nations and their people, including those living off-reserve and those who are incarcerated. Those warning signals were all but ignored by the Pallister government. The premier went so far as to state that non-Indigenous Manitobans would be short-changed when it comes to vaccines because of the province's large Indigenous population.

“What Ottawa is doing should be a lesson for the premier of Manitoba,” stated Brokenhead Ojibway Nation Chief, Deborah Smith. “Instead of creating division, the federal government is looking for solutions, and acknowledging the systemic gaps that have been created when it comes to health care delivery for First Nations. Clearly, the premier is in need of sensitivity training on

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First Nation peoples and what we have been through during this country’s history, the ways in which colonization continues to impact us to this day, and our expectations of his behavior if we are ever going to move towards true reconciliation as Treaty partners. We would be happy to support him in his learning journey, he only needs to ask.”

While SCO welcomes the news of the increase in Moderna vaccine doses for First Nation people in Manitoba, we are still waiting for clarification from federal and provincial governments on how the Pfizer vaccine, which has just been approved by Health Canada, and any other potential vaccines will be allocated. The premier spoke today about a Vaccine Implementation Task Force yet it is unclear if there is any First Nation representation on this crucial task force. It is also critical for First Nation health professionals to be included in vaccine distribution planning alongside their non-First Nation colleagues.

As the data has taught us during the pandemic, all First Nation people are more vulnerable and should be prioritized to receive the vaccine and the devastation is not limited to those living on reserve.

As of December 7, 2020, First Nation citizens living off reserve comprise approximately 60 per cent of new cases and 60 per cent of active cases among First Nation people, and 71 per cent of hospitalizations and 68 per cent of ICU admissions among First Nation people. Sixty-seven per cent of First Nation deaths due to COVID-19 are among those who live off reserve. These statistics clearly show that First Nation citizens need to be prioritized for the vaccine, regardless of whether they live on or off reserve.

In preparation for vaccine availability, we make the following recommendations for prioritization:

- First Nation Personal Care Home residents and First Nation seniors home residents and workers in those homes
- First Nation seniors
- First Nation citizens who are medically compromised
- First Nation families living in overcrowded conditions
- All other First Nation citizens

SCO will continue to advocate for First Nation inclusion during the decision-making process to ensure our peoples’ needs are prioritized for vaccine distribution.

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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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