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STATEMENT ON TRAGIC DEATH OF SANDY BAY CITIZEN

Grand Chief Continues to Demand Answers

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 9, 2022

ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) continues to push for more answers in the death of one of its citizens.

"It's now going on 15 months since the tragic death of Lillian Vanasse in an Alberta hospital," said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "I want to assure her husband and family that we will continue to advocate for the truth about her death and that we will fight for systemic change in how First Nation people are treated by the health care system."

According to published reports, on Christmas morning in 2020, Vanasse, from Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation in Manitoba, woke up with flu-like symptoms. That night around 8:30 p.m. she called out to her husband Cory Ashley telling him it hurt to breathe. He called 911 and tried to make his wife as comfortable as possible while they waited for the paramedics.

A short time later the paramedics arrived and assessed Vanasse, and they found she had restricted breathing in the right lung. They called for a second unit to help do a carry-out, so there were four paramedics who all witnessed Lillian struggling to breathe. They carried her out to the ambulance and asked Ashley to give them a few minutes head start, so they could admit Vanasse to the hospital before he arrived.

Shortly after 9:00 p.m., Ashley arrived at the Hanna Health Center and was escorted to the COVID-19 room where Vanasse was lying on a bed with nothing but a pulse oximeter on her finger. There was still one paramedic with Vanasse and a nurse, and when Ashley asked why his wife was not on oxygen, the nurse stated they were waiting for the lab technician and the doctor before they would do anything else. Ashley continued to advocate for oxygen while they were forced to wait. At approximately 9:40 p.m., the lab technician entered the room and forced Vanasse to walk down to the lab, where they did an ECG, blood work, and X-ray. She was then brought back to the COVID-19 room shortly after 10:00 p.m. by security in a wheelchair.

Around 12:00 a.m., a Hanna police officer came to the room to tell Ashley he had to leave the hospital because he had started to record the situation when he felt his wife's treatment was not fair. After he was escorted out, he reluctantly went home. Ashley was awakened by phone calls

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from doctors just after 2:30 a.m. telling him that his wife’s breathing had become worse. He returned to the hospital, but unfortunately Lillian had already passed away before he got there.

When asked what he thinks of the care Lillian received in the hospital, Ashley’s responds with “Lillian did not receive any care and in fact it was the exact opposite, they did everything possible to stay away from the room. When the nurse did enter the room to give my wife her nightly dose of her prescribed medication, I begged them to pick up the stethoscope and prove me wrong,” he said. “I told them I know there is something wrong with my wife, but the nurse scoffed at me and walked away.” The nurse told him “We are waiting for the test results”. Ashley repeated his pleas for them to help his wife and then began to record the situation on his phone.

Ashley filed complaints in January 2021 with the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons, the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA), Protection for People in Care, and the Alberta Human Rights Commission. In Ashley’s complaints to all these entities he demanded that the doctor and nurses should immediately be relieved of their positions until a full inquiry into his wife’s death was completed. Ashley states that he fully believes hospital staff are responsible for the death of his wife and is seeking criminal charges against them.

Ashley also provided SCO with documentation that he filed complaints with the Civilian Review Complaints Commissioner against four officers, alleging collusion, interference, tampering with evidence, evidence not collected in time, and failure to do their jobs correctly. He also believes that the RCMP General Investigations Section (GIS) in charge of the investigation are now attempting to keep the autopsy report from being released to him and the family.

Ashley contacted Alberta Premier Jason Kenney on February 19, 2022, to explain his belief that there has been police interference from the start and that the RCMP already have the officers involved under investigation. He does not believe they should be allowed to keep a key piece of critical evidence from him, something all lawyers say they need to file any lawsuits at this time. Premier Kenney’s office forwarded Ashley’s complaints to the Minister of Justice and the Solicitor General for their consideration. A further response has not yet been received.

In Alberta, there is a law that states you have two years from the time you know there was malpractice to file any lawsuits. Ashley says this case is almost 15 months since the time of death and time he knew there was malpractice, and he believes the RCMP are attempting to further delay him from filing any lawsuits by keeping the autopsy report from him and the family.

CARNA has finished their investigations into both nurses and have set two [hearing dates](#). There are 52 allegations against one nurse, and 30 allegations against another. Protection for People in Care completed their investigation and made recommendations for a nurse’s performance review

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and a review of the hospital's policies, procedures, and infrastructure. The College of Physicians and Surgeons recently finished their investigation and it is going through a peer review process with an Indigenous doctor and the final decision should be in Ashley's hands soon. The Alberta Human Rights Commission's investigation is still underway.

"Mark my words, we will be watching those proceedings very closely", added Grand Chief Daniels. "All too often, the deaths of First Nation people in the health care system have been dismissed or pushed aside. No matter where it happens in the country, I will not sit by and watch that happen yet again."

"When will humanity evolve and stop the racism and unequal treatment?" Ashley said. "We are all one people, the human race. I want to see justice and the people responsible for my wife's death held responsible, everyone who is involved, no matter how big or small their involvement. Doctors, nurses, lab technicians, police, lawyers, and all Canadians need to know that there are consequences for mistreating someone in crisis, regardless of their race or social status. I don't want to see this happen to anyone ever again, no one deserves to go through what my wife went through in her last hours," concluded Ashley.

A damning report was published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* on January 17, 2022, which looked at 11 million emergency department visits in Alberta from 2012-2017 and statistically confirmed that First Nation people seeking emergency care are not triaged and treated at an equal level as non-Indigenous people. A summary of that report can be found on the University of Alberta's [website](#).

Overwhelming experiences of systemic racism towards First Nation people is also evident in a survey report produced by SCO on Manitoba's health care system. Seventy per cent of respondents said that they have experienced instances of racism when accessing services and programs in the Manitoba health care system, and nearly 80 per cent report witnessing a family member or loved one being discriminated against or treated badly because of their race. A staggering 92 per cent of survey respondents agreed that racism is a problem in the Manitoba health care system. The survey report can be found on [THE SCO WEBSITE](#).

"I know the hearings will do little to alleviate the pain Lillian Vanasse's family is feeling," concluded Grand Chief Daniels. "My hope is that it will lead to equal treatment for our people in any colonial system, and that we will finally see a day when all First Nation people receive equitable access and culturally-appropriate health care."

The hearings called by CARNA are scheduled for September 12-16, 2022, and September 26-30, 2022.

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The Southern Chiefs' Organization represents 34 First Nations and more than 81,000 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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