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SCO STATEMENT ON FEDERAL AUDIT OF SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO CITIZENS IN CUSTODY

Systemic Racism Rampant in Federal Prisons

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ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is calling for major changes in how First Nation people are treated in the current colonial justice system. This following Tuesday's release of a devastating report by the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) that found Corrections Services Canada has once again failed to address and eliminate the systemic barriers that disadvantage Indigenous offenders.

"While the findings of the report come as no surprise, they're still troubling to me and they should be for anyone who wants to see fair justice delivery in this country," stated SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "Today I am calling on Corrections Services Canada (CSC) to immediately address and eliminate the systemic barriers that persistently target our people."

The focus of the OAG audit was to determine if CSC's programs respond to the diversity of the population and whether they support a safe and successful return to the community as mandated in the CSC Act. The OAG found systemic disparities in security classification and in parole and programming and that CSC failed to address and eliminate the systemic barriers that persistently disadvantage Indigenous and Black people.

One of the more glaring issues is the CSC "Custody Rating Scale" which staff members frequently override. This has resulted in male Indigenous offenders being placed in maximum security institutions at disproportionately higher numbers. The same system resulted in Indigenous women being placed in maximum security at more than three times the rate of non-Indigenous women.

The OAG also found that Indigenous offenders faced greater barriers to a safe reintegration into society than other incarcerated people due to a marked lack of access to programming. Specifically, the report reveals that Indigenous male offenders serving 2-4 year sentences had not completed 94% of the correctional programs they needed before they were first eligible to apply for day parole. It should be noted this was a major issue highlighted in previous reports, yet changes have not been made.

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“Here at SCO, we have made great efforts and strides to support justice through traditional systems of governance and law,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels. “Our mandate is to reduce the overrepresentation of First Nation citizens within the Canadian criminal justice system, and I am dismayed to see our federal treaty partner does not share that same sense of urgency.”

Indigenous people made up 27 per cent of federal prisoners, despite comprising approximately four per cent of the adult population. Indigenous women now make up 50 per cent of the female population in federal prisons.

In addition to a number of previous OAG reports, in 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its *Calls to Action*, including number 30 which calls on the federal, provincial and territorial governments to commit to eliminating the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in custody by 2025, and to issue detailed annual reports that monitor and evaluate progress. *Call for Justice* number 5.21 of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls also calls on the federal government to make systemic changes by fully implementing the many previous reports.

SCO’s First Nation Justice Strategy has been expanding to address the needs and gaps that exist within the criminal justice system. SCO’s First Nation Court Worker Program will soon be launching to provide culturally appropriate justice services, supports, and advocacy for our citizens, as well as working to reduce access to justice issues that are prevalent in the court room. For more information, please go to: <https://scoinc.mb.ca/justice-and-rights/>

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The Southern Chiefs’ Organization represents 34 First Nations and more than 81,500 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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