



Sol Mamakwa

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Kapuskasing, Sioux Lookout and Timmins, March 16, 2020

The Hon. Christine Elliott,
Ontario Minister of Health
5th Floor, 777 Bay St.
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

The Hon. Marc Miller,
Minister of Indigenous Services, Canada
10 rue Wellington
Gatineau QC K1A 0H4

RE: COVID-19 Pandemic Plan for First Nation Communities in Northern Ontario

Ms. Elliott and Mr. Miller,

We are writing to you today to share our concerns with respect to Canada and Ontario's COVID-19 pandemic plans for First Nations in Northern Ontario.

Last week, Grand Chief Jonathon Solomon of Mushkegowuk Council, and the President and CEO of the Weeneebayko Area Health Authority (WAHA), Ms. Lynne Innes, shared their concerns with respect to the "low risk/low allocation" designation of WAHA under Ontario's pandemic plan.

As Ms. Innes noted in her letter, this "low risk/ low allocation" designation suggests that "any additional supplies outside of what [WAHA] ordered are not being filled, as vendors have been notified by the Ministry of Health to limit all supplies to the typical amount ordered by WAHA."

On March 13, Chief Harvey Yesno of Eabametoong First Nation, noted that the boil water advisory that has been ongoing for 6,799 days puts the very principles of basic hygiene of Eabametoong people at risk. Chief Chris Moonias of Neskantaga First Nation also noted that the lack of infrastructure and the housing crisis affecting most northern First Nations contravenes the very principles of self-isolation and local preparedness.

Doctors working out of Sioux Lookout have indicated that the already grossly under-resourced nursing service across the north, will be even more taxed, perhaps to the point of collapse, in responding to COVID-19. With this new threat, staffing shortages render northern First Nation patients disproportionately vulnerable to COVID-19 compared to Canadians of non-First Nations descent.

Overall, the endemic socio-economic difficulties affecting the remote, isolated First Nations - sheer poverty; the absence of suitable food and clean, drinking water; housing shortage and overcrowding; and lack of infrastructure - coupled with historic sub-par, third world-like basic health services, all add up to create a perfect storm in the isolated northern Ontario First Nations.

A medical [study](#) published in 2017 in the Public Library of Science (PLOS One) journal found that during the early months of the 2009-2010 Influenza A (H1N1) pandemic, indigenous peoples, Métis and Inuit accounted for a disproportionate number of the confirmed H1N1-related deaths. Access to health services (or lack thereof) and structural socio-economic determinants, including poverty, have been found to be related to higher death rates in Indigenous communities.

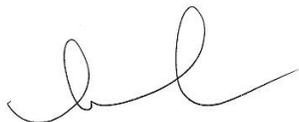
The colonial history of Canada and Ontario's health system is repeating itself in 2020. As Chief David Nakogee of Attawapiskat First Nation said in an interview with the [CBC](#) last week: if COVID-19 arrives in the area, "it's going to spread like wildfire."

Let us remind you that Canada and Ontario have Treaty obligations with the First Nations communities in northern Ontario. In light of both legal and ethical principles, both federal and provincial governments should and **must** do **more** (not less) when it comes to developing emergency response, operations and coordination in First Nations.

We are thus calling on both the federal and provincial governments to do the right thing and thereby to reconsider the "low risk/low designation" of WAHA and to ramp up the preparedness plans for northern First Nations in Ontario before it is too late. Extraordinary times require extraordinary measures, Ms. Elliott and Mr. Miller.

And the clock is ticking.

Sincerely,



Sol Mamakwa
MPP, Kiiwetinoong



Guy Bourgouin
MPP, Mushkegowuk-James Bay



Charlie Angus
MP, Timmins-James Bay

CC: Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, Nishnawbe Aski Nation
Grand Chief Jonathon Solomon, Mushkegowuk Council
David Paul Achneepineskum, CEO of Matawa First Nations
Lynne Innes, President and CEO, WAHA
Heather Lee, President and CEO, Meno Ya Win Health Centre