



File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council

Treaty Four Territory

Reserve #77

Box 985

Fort Qu'Appelle, SK, S0G 1S0

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STATEMENT FOR THE UN EXPERT ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND COVID-19

WHO WE ARE: The File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC) is the regional organization that provides programs and services to its eleven member First Nations located within the Treaty 4 Territory located in southern Saskatchewan, Canada. The member nations are made up of five distinct cultural and linguistic groups—Nehiyaw, Anishinabek, Nakota, Dakota, and Lakota.

The FHQTC Tribal Council and its 11 member First Nations' actions were very proactive and immediate when COVID-19 hit Canada; in fact, its actions were ahead of its provincial actions. These immediate actions did not come easy due to the current relationship structure between First Nations, the Government of Canada, and provincial Government of Saskatchewan.

CANADA-FIRST NATION CONTEXT: Canada has structured its relationship with the First Nations of Canada to be primarily maintained through the Department of Indigenous Services Canada and Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs—both of which were born out of former Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. The historic implementation of Treaties was delivered through the flawed mechanism of the Indian Act; where First Nations were given legal legislative authority over their citizens and lands but without the necessary sustainable funding to deliver effective programs and services.

FHQTC FIRST NATIONS IMPACT FROM COVID-19

1. What are the **main challenges** faced by Indigenous peoples during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular with respect to **Indigenous people's health and access to health care**, and the protection of their **land**, territories and resources?
 - The onset of COVID-19 amplified the negative impact of existing structural inequities, particularly as they relate to funding mechanisms and formulas. First Nations scrambled to establish supporting mechanisms for citizen homes structures as the current reality was homes were already overcrowded and not necessarily conducive to creating isolation areas.

2. What has been the role of traditional practices and medicines during the pandemic?

- One of the main positive outcomes of the pandemic is the renewed interest and return to cultural and traditional ceremonies and use of traditional medicines to proactively mitigate the viral affects. However, the demand quickly depleted the supply. First Nations were challenged to replenish supplies due to the provincial limitations imposed (travel).

3. How has COVID-19 affected Indigenous people's economic, social and cultural life?

- This is a result of the history Canadian First Nations face because of systemic racism and bias within Canada. The *Indian Act* and subsequent funding has First Nations leaders struggling to meet citizen basic needs in area of health, education, and social necessities while economic and own source revenue opportunities from its lands are limited.

4. What is the particular impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities?

- The First Nations population continues to grow at increased rate compared to provincial population growth. However, standard of health in comparison to other Canadian citizens is one of lowest; therefore, disproportionately represented on health and disease. It was readily identified that First Nations were deemed to fall under Canada's 'most vulnerable' sector. For the FHQTC region, a large population of our tribal council is not just seniors, but also of citizens with compromised health issues.
- One of the main issues the First Nations of FHQTC faced immediately was a proximity issue—this is where the citizens/populations of the FHQTC First Nations have the ability to go back and forth to their home First Nation from the Regina and towns due to the close distance between First Nations and cities and towns. It is important to note that the majority (two-thirds) of the FHQTC First Nation citizens live off-reserve, but are located within 1-2 hours' proximity to their home First Nations.
- The challenge the leadership of First Nations faced due to this proximity was securing appropriate resources to support the increased demand from urban citizens to help them prepare themselves with precautionary supplies (PPE, food security, etc.) that all governments were promoting.
- COVID-19 has revealed the stark reality of family and domestic violence, the majority impacted by this are women and children.
- The First Nations within FHQTC also found themselves dealing with increased presence of unknown vehicles and individuals trying to access lands in an attempt to abduct and/or exploit women, children (most vulnerable).
- It is known that the chronic underfunding of First Nations in Canada has resulted in low health and social levels of First Nation citizens. A subsequent systemic outcome is mental wellness stability and subsequent reliance on alcohol and drugs. This pandemic caused immediate repercussions as a result of inability to effectively set up alternate support structure.

5. What are some of the good practices developed by Indigenous peoples and Member States, specific to Indigenous peoples, in alleviating the negative effects of COVID-19?

- First Nations were quick to develop local pandemic plans and strategies that would support their citizens most effectively. They established border security patrols and closed or restricted access to their citizens only.
- Leadership were quick to secure large storage instruments to store food security, personal protective equipment and supplies.
- There were a number of First Nations that explored opportunities to bring in animals (buffalo, cattle, pigs) to support future need of meat.

6. What measures are being taken or could be taken to ensure the protection of indigenous rights in the recovery stage and the aftermath of COVID-19?

- While First Nations have been dedicating enormous human and financial resources to protecting their citizens during a global pandemic, outstanding issues regarding treaty and inherent rights remain ongoing.
- One of the major inequities currently being faced by First Nations peoples in Canada, is the current capacity to deliver quality education in a pandemic environment. The continued technological and broadband divide has posed great challenges to implementing distance learning models, and there is a lack of adequate resources to fill this gap. To resolve this, First Nations institutions that deliver 1st, 2nd, and 3rd level services from early-learning to post-secondary education require major investments.
- Increased federal funding would go a long way to First Nation provision of adequate housing that supports basic right to live in a healthy safe environment.
- The early resolution of outstanding land and specific claims would support First Nation economic sustainability and subsequent increase efforts to develop appropriate programs and supports.

7. What do Indigenous peoples need to help them overcome this crisis?

- The key solution to helping First Nations overcome this crisis is to establish equitable fair funding that flows directly to First Nations; this allows First Nations the ability to take leadership in establishing relevant proper plans for members.
- Canada needs to then reduce the funding aimed at urban Indigenous that flows to provincial governments and redirect those to First Nations. In Saskatchewan, the government offered very little supports and services to urban First Nation citizens; however readily asked for and received funding from federal government. When First Nations requested accountability they were met with no response.