

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

News Release

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First Nations Leadership Council Statement on Class Action Settlement Agreement for Victims of Robert Riley Saunders

(X̣ẉməθḳẉəỵəm (Musqueam), Sḳẉx̣ẉú7mesh (Squamish) and sə́lilẉətaʔ/sélilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh)/Vancouver, B.C.): The First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC) extends our support and compassion to the victims of disgraced former social worker Robert Riley Saunders and demands further accountability for the ongoing harm and trauma caused through his actions.

The FNLC is pleased to see some resolution for the victims of Robert Saunders through the settlement agreement released earlier today, and recognition of the significant harms he caused in the lives of every child and youth he came into contact with over nearly two decades. Financial compensation for these individuals is the first step in offering reparations; however, much more must be done to address the systemic failures that this case has highlighted.

“These children and youth, most of whom were Indigenous, were in positions of extreme vulnerability and Mr. Saunders intentionally sought to further exploit them. Compensation is only part of the package. These victims deserve full justice for what this man did to them,” stated Cheryl Casimer of the First Nations Summit Political Executive. “We expect to see full justice, including criminal charges and prosecution to hold him accountable for what he has done.”

The RCMP completed their investigation into Robert Saunders this spring; however, the BC Prosecution Service has not yet initiated charges against him. It is also unclear what substantial steps have been taken by the Ministry of Children and Family Development to address the systemic failures and racism that allowed a staff person on their watch to operate in this manner for so many years. Court documents show that Mr. Saunders had been previously reprimanded for financial conflict of interest matters. As well employment reviews indicated an individual who demonstrated blatant racism towards Indigenous people and culture and someone who consistently demonstrated a lack of empathy and compassion towards the 102 children and youth he was responsible for over the course of his employment.

“The colonial child welfare system was established on genocidal and assimilative policies and practices towards Indigenous children, youth and families. This has created a structure that enables racism and indifference towards the same individuals they purport to protect,” stated Kukpi7 Judy Wilson, Secretary-Treasurer of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs. “We call for immediate and substantive remedies that will ensure full accountability for any employee within these structures, including the requirement that every social worker be registered with the College of Social Workers and that they are held to the same level of professional conduct as others who are working in the lives of vulnerable individuals.”



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Once certified, the settlement agreement will offer a basic payment of \$25,000 to every member of the class action. Indigenous members will receive an additional \$44,000 related to a loss of culture and identity and the failure of Saunders to ensure their cultural, community and kinship ties were maintained. Class members can also apply for up to \$181,000 in elevated damages if they suffered additional harms, including sexual exploitation, psychological or bodily harm, homelessness, or delayed education as a result of Saunders' actions or inactions while he was their social worker. Specialized psychologists and adjudicators have been assigned to assist in the applications for elevated damages.

"We are pleased that Halie (Kwanxwa'logwa) Bruce and Ardith (Walpetko We'dalx) Walkem have been assigned as the adjudicators in this process. As Indigenous people we are very aware of the significant trauma that can be triggered through these processes and having competent and compassionate adjudicators will be critical for these young people," stated Regional Chief Terry Teegee. "As the First Nations Leadership Council, we will be advocating any way we can to see that there are appropriate supports put in place at the community and Nation level for impacted young people as they navigate these complex and potentially re-traumatizing processes."

The First Nations Leadership Council is comprised of the political executives of the BC Assembly of First Nations (BCAFN), First Nations Summit (FNS), and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC).

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