

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL



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ASSEMBLY OF
FIRST NATIONS

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April 13, 2021

Charlene Belleau, Chair
First Nations Health Council

Richard Jock, CEO
First Nations Health Authority

Dr. Bonnie Henry, Provincial Health Officer
Ministry of Health

Honourable Adrian Dix, Minister
Ministry of Health

RE: Inclusive and Transparent COVID-19 Vaccination Planning

Dear provincial and First Nations health leaders:

We write to you with regards to the issue of COVID-19 vaccination planning and implementation in First Nations communities. Resolutions on this matter were respectively presented, affirmed and endorsed by consensus at the BCAFN 17th Annual Special Chiefs Assembly in March 2021 (enclosed) and the UBCIC Chiefs Council Meeting in February 2021 (enclosed). Discussion on this issue also took place at the February 2021 First Nations Summit meeting.

Firstly, we wish to acknowledge the tremendous energy and expertise each of you and your organizations have dedicated toward supporting the health and well-being of First Nations people throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you.

Despite this, we must continue to press for more responsiveness to First Nations' unique needs, and for the recognition of First Nations human rights and jurisdiction in the context of the ongoing health crisis, which is tied to and exacerbated by the pandemic, the opioid crisis, intensifying mental health challenges, intergenerational trauma, and longstanding disparities in access to basic services and healthcare. This pandemic has tested and stretched existing mechanisms and channels of communication and has exposed gaps in our health systems' ability to respond to local, culturally-specific needs. Moreover, it has highlighted the need for First Nations' jurisdiction with regard to health to be upheld and respected.

With the province in the midst of the third wave of the pandemic, we must move these conversations forward in a meaningful way. We must find effective ways for information to flow and decision-making to be done in partnership with First Nations communities immediately.

We all know how hard First Nations Chiefs and leadership have worked during this pandemic to protect their members, which is their sovereign responsibility and mandate. We support First Nation communities in exercising their self-determination and jurisdiction over the health of their own members, regardless

of residency on or off reserve, including full partnership with the FNHA and regional health authorities in determining how COVID-19 vaccines are rolled out to their members;

We urge the province, regional health authorities, and the FNHC and FNHA to commit to work collaboratively with First Nations community leaders so they can continue to effectively uphold this responsibility. As highlighted in the report, In Plain Sight, developing a robust pandemic response and planning structure that addresses jurisdictional issues, and which upholds the standards of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, would help dismantle systemic barriers that First Nations governments face in protecting the health and safety of their citizens. There is a need to review the current health governance system and recognize First Nations jurisdiction through legislation as a foundational piece to supporting self-determination.

We have also heard specific concerns with regard to the COVID-19 vaccination roll out. Many First Nations were not included in vaccination planning and implementation in a meaningful, partnership-based manner, which unfortunately led to gaps in communication and vaccine delivery. We wish to note concerns that some frontline workers were left out of the initial vaccination process, as well as Elders, language speakers, and other high-risk parties in our communities. Additional attention may be necessary to ensure vaccines and vaccination information are made accessible to these groups, where required.

We urge the FNHA, the Ministry of Health, and Regional Health Authorities to increase access to immunization services in ways that reduce health inequities without further stigmatization and discrimination, and to actively engage BC First Nations in immunization planning, ensuring that no communities are left out of the planning and implementation process.

Sincerely,

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

On behalf of the FIRST NATIONS SUMMIT



Cheryl Casimer



Robert Phillips



Lydia Hwitsum

On behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS



Grand Chief Stewart Phillip



Chief Don Tom



Kukpi7 Judy Wilson

On behalf of the BC ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS:



Regional Chief Terry Teegee

Enclosures (2)

cc: Kukpi7 Rosanne Casimir, Tk'emplúps Te Secwépemc
Kukpi7 Ron Ignace, Skeetchestn