

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

News Release

September 28, 2021

JUSTICE DENIED: FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL FRUSTRATED TO HEAR CROWN NEGOTIATED SAUNDERS PLEA DEAL

(Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-
Waututh)/Vancouver, B.C.)

The First Nations Leadership Council is frustrated to learn of the plea deal struck by Robert Riley Saunders, the Kelowna man who stole thousands of dollars from vulnerable youth in government care while he worked as a social worker for the Ministry of Children and Family Development with a falsified social work degree. Saunders was arrested in December 2020 after being in hiding for several months and was charged with a total of 13 charges for fraud, theft, breach of trust and for uttering a forged document. Saunders pled guilty today to three of the thirteen total charges: breach of trust, forgery and one count of fraud.

“The power and privilege evident in this plea deal is beyond frustrating. This man spent over ten years intentionally and strategically preying upon vulnerable youth for his personal gain, managing to siphon nearly \$600,000 from 102 youth in government care – almost all of whom were Indigenous. He abused his position of authority as their social worker to open bank accounts in their names and to steal their money. He witnessed firsthand how many of these youth ended up homeless, sexually exploited, and abused in vulnerable situations as they tried to have their own basic needs met and he continued without a second thought. Robert Saunders is an evil man, who can be directly implicated in the deaths and lifelong traumas of over 100 young victims and today the (in)justice system once again has told us that Indigenous lives don’t matter there. We stand with his victims and their families as they are left to process this disgusting deal,” stated Chief Don Tom, Vice President of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

BC Assembly of First Nations Regional Chief, Terry Teegee stated: “All along the way Saunders has been protected by colonial and racist systems. For years he was able to exploit these children and was protected by the province, and then went to hide in broad daylight while the RCMP contemplated charges. Now this. When he was finally arrested, we spoke out and expressed dim hopes that there would be actual justice served for Saunders victims, and that the BC Prosecution Service consider the severe impacts his actions had on the lives – and deaths – of so many vulnerable Indigenous youth. Instead, we see another situation where the lives of Indigenous children are dismissed, and the interests of a privileged white man are protected. As long as these systems and structures continue to uphold genocide under the guise of justice, reconciliation will forever remain a buzz word.”

“Adding further insult to injury, Saunders has said he intends to dispute the Crown’s argument that his actions caused any devaluation to his victims. The devastating impacts upon the youth he preyed upon were heard last year when the BC Government agreed to a substantial class action settlement brought by several of his victims, some of whom were eligible for over \$200,000 in damages for the devaluation and harm they faced. While we are extremely frustrated that there has been a plea deal struck in this case, we hope the court will take all these factors into consideration when he appears for sentencing in March of 2022. This despicable human being, and the systems that protected him, cannot be permitted to continue to avoid responsibility while his victims and their family



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members continue to suffer. Even with this plea deal, we continue to call upon the courts to use the full extent of the law to hold Saunders accountable. We further call upon the province to take immediate steps to ensure all social workers working for the Ministry of Children and Family Development are required to be registered with a public body to put in place monitoring and accountability safeguards. There must be actual justice for his victims, including all those who have passed away, and concrete steps taken to ensure this does not happen ever again," closed Cheryl Casimer of the First Nations Summit.

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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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