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Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee)
Grand Conseil des Cris (Eeyou Istchee)

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Cree Nation Government
Gouvernement de la Nation Crie



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PRESS RELEASE

GRAND CHIEF DR. MATTHEW COON COME APPEARS FOR THE GCC(EI)/CNG BEFORE PUBLIC INQUIRY COMMISSION ON RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND CERTAIN PUBLIC SERVICES IN QUEBEC: LISTENING, RECONCILIATION AND PROGRESS

VAL D'OR, Quebec (June 14, 2017) – Grand Chief Dr. Matthew Coon Come appeared today before the Public Inquiry Commission on Relations between Indigenous Peoples and Certain Public Services in Quebec: Listening, Reconciliation and Progress on behalf of the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) / Cree Nation Government.

The Commission's mandate is to look into, identify, prevent and eliminate the systemic causes of discrimination in providing public services to the Indigenous people of Quebec: police services, correctional services, justice services, health and social services as well as youth protection services.

The Grand Chief noted that the mandate of this Commission could not be more important as it touches all the Indigenous people of Quebec and all the Cree of Eeyou Istchee. The Grand Chief stated:

The Commission's mandate concerns, first and foremost, the most vulnerable among us: our mothers, daughters and sisters (and sometimes our fathers, sons and brothers, too), who have too often had to bear the weight of discrimination, marginalization and violence. We cannot and will not turn a blind eye to misconduct that harms our people; it must be eliminated.

Grand Chief Coon Come stated that the approach of the Cree Nation will be positive and orientated toward working with the Commission and other stakeholders to find solutions. The problems are largely known, and so are their causes. What has been lacking is the will to address them. He concluded with the preliminary observations set out in the Appendix.

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PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

1. Severe poverty, lack of adequate health and social services, overcrowded and substandard housing, lack of educational and job opportunities and many other factors create health and social stresses in Indigenous communities that lead some Indigenous people to leave their communities for urban centres. There, many are at risk of homelessness, violence and abuse. These conditions are not new; they have existed for many years and, in some cases, are getting worse, not better.
2. One of the most urgent needs in Indigenous communities is the critical shortage of social housing. Until this housing shortage is addressed through concrete action, other actions will come to nothing. Until Indigenous people are no longer living 10, 12 and 20 persons in a single house, conditions commonly encountered in Northern Quebec, they will continue to fall victim to violence and abuse.
3. Until this single issue is resolved, Indigenous people will continue to be forced from their communities to urban centres, where many will be at risk of homelessness and violence. More social workers and shelter beds in the cities are necessary, but not enough. These measures reduce distress on the margin, but they will not solve the real problem.
4. The Val d'Or events have led many Indigenous people to conclude that the criminal justice system, with its complex rules of evidence and procedure, simply does not work for them. Many feel that the criminal justice system has failed them.
5. Specific and adapted mechanisms must be put in place urgently to allow Indigenous women and men to feel safe in making complaints regarding the police and criminal justice systems without fear of retaliation.



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6. Of itself, the criminal justice system is not well suited to address the underlying causes and the effects of systemic discrimination. However, a system which is more inclusive of and sensitive to Indigenous peoples and their reality, values and way of life could contribute to reducing the over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system.
7. The lack of women's shelters and related programs and services in Indigenous communities force Indigenous women to seek shelter outside their communities. But shelter for them in urban centres is too often lacking, leading to homelessness and the risk of violence and abuse in the streets. The need for specialized facilities and services for women in Indigenous communities must be addressed.
8. The excessive reliance on police officers as first (and sometimes only) responders in the context of social issues involving Indigenous people in urban centres has contributed to creating tension and mistrust between them. Other, better adapted resources must also be deployed to help address these issues.
9. Police officers need better training in the culture and realities of Indigenous peoples. Experience has shown that greater exchange between Indigenous communities and police forces can foster greater understanding, and with it, greater trust and respect, while reducing tensions and the potential for abuse.
10. More Indigenous police officers need to be recruited, trained and deployed in urban centres, without cannibalizing understaffed and underfunded police forces in Indigenous communities.
11. These problems are well known, and so are their causes. What has been lacking to date is the will to address them. That will require concerted action between federal, provincial and Indigenous authorities, and the commitment of significant new resources. Given its human cost, inaction is not an option. The work of this Commission of Inquiry can and must lead to the action that is urgently needed.