

First Nations Leaders Feel Vindicated by Systemic Racism Report; Say Ministry of Health Must Share COVID-19 Data Immediately as Part of Its Response

Turpel-Lafond report finds pandemic is magnifying racism and disproportionately impacting Indigenous people, including a lack of “timely and complete sharing of data related to positive or presumptive cases of COVID in or near First Nations Communities.”

BELLA BELLA, BRITISH COLUMBIA (December 1, 2020) – A coalition of First Nations leaders who have been calling on BC’s Ministry of Health to share COVID-19 case information with their governments for months, say they feel vindicated by Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond’s report on systemic racism, and expect BC’s provincial health officer and Minister of Health, to implement the report’s recommendations immediately, including addressing COVID-19 information sharing.

The nations are deeply troubled but not surprised by the extent of anti-Indigenous racism laid out in the report, as they have lived with this for many years. This includes the report’s finding that Indigenous governments have faced systemic barriers to protecting the health and safety of their citizens during the pandemic, including a lack of timely and complete sharing of COVID-19 case information.

“Dr. Turpel-Lafond’s powerful truth-telling report underscores the importance of eliminating systemic racism on an urgent basis,” said Marilyn Slett, Chief Councillor of the Heiltsuk Nation. “We are calling once again on the BC government, and its new task force, to eliminate discrimination in our health care system, including the Ministry of Health’s failure to share vital COVID case information with Indigenous governments, which puts our people at risk.”

The nations have been requesting the following COVID-19 information since May 2020, and have been engaged in government-to-government negotiations for months, but with no result:

- The location (not the personal identity) of proximate, presumptive and confirmed COVID cases near their communities;
- Whether the proximate case involves a person that has travelled to one of the nation’s territories within the last 14 days; and
- The name of a person infected by COVID who is a member of one of the nations, to be used for culturally-safe contact-tracing.

“The Ministry of Health’s ongoing refusal to share this information is based on stereotypes about First Nations governments,” said Judith Sayers, President of the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council. “Our governments receive and work with confidential information every day. It’s insulting to suggest that we can’t be trusted with this information. The racism must stop now.”

In September 2020 the Nations filed a complaint with the BC Information and Privacy Commissioner to compel the Ministry to disclose information, arguing non-disclosure violates section 25 of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, which states a Minister must disclose information about a risk of significant harm to an affected group of people. The Nations are currently awaiting the Commissioner’s decision. First Nations should never have to go to this length to get life-saving information, and based on Dr. Turpel-Lafond’s report, demand the disclosure of this information without delay.

For more information, or to arrange interviews:

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