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Press Release

"The System Failed Him" - statement by CAP Vice Chief Kim Beaudin on Curtis McKenzie suicide

Content note: the following press release addresses the issue of suicide and self-harm. If you are struggling with thoughts of suicide or self-harm, the following crisis lines are available in your region: <https://www.crisisservicescanada.ca/en/looking-for-local-resources-support/> Indigenous crisis supports are available at: <https://www.lifevoice.ca/crisis-supports/indigenous-crisis-supports>

March 12th, 2020 – The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) has learned that Curtis McKenzie, a member of Lac La Ronge Indian Band in Saskatchewan, has died of suicide while in the custody of Correction Services Canada (CSC).

CAP National Vice-Chief, Kim Beaudin, former justice of the peace, had supported Curtis McKenzie as an outreach worker.

He spoke out about the case: "I am deeply disturbed about what has happened to Curtis. I know that he cried out for help and Correctional Services Canada refused to acknowledge that he was suicidal. I believe CSC was derelict in their duties. The Saskatchewan Coroner has been notified. I will also be sending out an email to the Office of the Correctional Investigator."

Senator Kim Pate shared the following statement:

"My heart goes out to Curtis's family, friends and community. Whenever a prisoner is driven to the point of suicide or other self-injurious behaviour, we should all be concerned. When people are trying to take their own lives, we have an obligation to investigate all of the circumstances that led up to that point — not only so that we can understand what happened in each individual case, but so that we can remedy the wrongs that gave rise to it in the first place and prevent others from facing similar harms."

At the end of a previous sentence, Curtis McKenzie was made to sign a "Section 810" order before he would be released. Refusal to sign an 810 can be punished by up to an additional year in custody. He was re-incarcerated for violating the order when he returned to drugs, an addiction he has struggled with for many years.

"The Section 810 Order was his death warrant", said CAP vice-chief Kim Beaudin. "How many times has the corrections system failed Indigenous people? He was struggling with trauma, mental health issues and addiction, and not once received proper care from Correction Services Canada. His mental health deteriorated after CSC put him in extended solitary confinement. That is considered torture by the United Nations. He needed treatment, not torment."

Section 810 bonds impose a range of conditions on individuals, and criminal penalties for violating those conditions. They do not provide resources for mental health, physical health, or addictions treatment. Neither CSC nor provincial authorities collect demographic data on use of 810 orders, raising fears that they are disproportionately applied to Indigenous people.

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“These orders were created to protect individuals who have reasonable grounds to fear for themselves or their family’s safety”, said CAP National Chief Robert Bertrand. “But now they are being used on a wide range of cases, laying conditions on people even if no specific individual has reasonable grounds to fear for their safety.”

Before being re-incarcerated, McKenzie was receiving support from “Str8 Up”, a local community organization for those who have lived or are living criminal street lifestyles and who want to make positive changes in their lives.

Mr. McKenzie was a survivor of abuse in the foster care system. During a previous parole hearing, the presiding judge heard that “McKenzie had been doing well on statutory release: he was sober and had secured a job; but when stressful situations arose in his life, he coped by mixing alcohol with meth”¹. The parole board previously acknowledged that his mental health issues “remained unaddressed” while he was in custody². Despite numerous requests by Curtis and advocates on his behalf for treatment, CSC did not provide it.

Curtis McKenzie had previously spoken out about the failure to address addictions and mental health in the justice system, and the use of criminal sanctions instead of treatment. In an article on his experiences in November 2019, he said “I hope they don’t do it to me again”. How many more lives will be lost before this broken system is addressed?

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The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is the national voice representing the interests of Métis, status and non-status Indians, and Southern Inuit Indigenous People living off-reserve. Today, over 80% of Indigenous people live off-reserve.

¹ <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/man-who-assaulted-officer-during-river-rescue-was-high-on-meth>

² <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/curtis-mckenzie-section-810>