



Press Statement

CAP calls on Health Minister to Intervene to Protect Prisoners

January 8th, 2021 (Ottawa, ON) – The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) is calling on federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu to intervene to increase protections for inmates in Canada’s correctional system.

Reports shared earlier this month from CTV National News and other news outlets detail hundreds of COVID cases at federal and provincial institutions, with prisoners expressing fear of “leaving in body bags”. Protective measures have been insufficient to prevent outbreaks, and measures such as extended solitary confinement and denial of contact with family and support networks for prisoners violate their fundamental human rights.

Inmates are legally the wards of the state during their incarceration, and Indigenous people are a federal responsibility as established under the CAP-Daniels Supreme Court decision. Failure to provide protections that respect the rights of inmates would undermine the Honour of the Crown.

The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is the National Indigenous Organization that speaks for the off-reserve and non-Status Indigenous population in Canada. Indigenous people are disproportionately over-represented in federal and provincial institutions, and face elevated risk from COVID circulating in Canada’s correctional institutions. A failure to protect inmates is not simple a violation of human rights, but also a violation of the federal government’s unique responsibility towards Indigenous peoples.

As the minister responsible for the health of Canadians, the Honourable Patricia Hajdu must take a lead role in advocating for protective measures that prevent inmates from infection. Federal health officials can take the lead on ensuring universal access to PPE, cleaning products, and prompt testing in coordination with corrections services. Further, Health Canada can consult with Corrections Services Canada in ensuring that prisons follow federal guidelines for COVID safety through social distancing, cleanliness and testing.

The vaccine rollout prioritizing inmates is an important step, however that measure will take time to become effective and protective measures need to be adopted immediately.

In March of 2020, CAP called on government to take steps to release low-risk and non-violent offenders, and to increase the number of inmates approved to serve their sentences in the community. These recommendations have become even more urgent, in particular as new and more virulent strains of COVID are identified.

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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 70% of Indigenous people live off-reserve.