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First Nations Child and Family Services Society of Canada
350 Sparks St, Suite 202
Ottawa, ON
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September 25th, 2023

Dear Cindy Blackstock:

For the past 10 years and much longer, the youth and families of Onigaming First Nation have been living in a trauma and grief-filled crisis. As Chief, I am writing this letter to share my frustrations with respect to the federal government's inability to commit funding in support of a critically needed Youth Crisis Centre. This is particularly important because of the number of young deaths we have faced over the past few decades. This past summer we suffered another young suicide and a number of threats to self-harm.

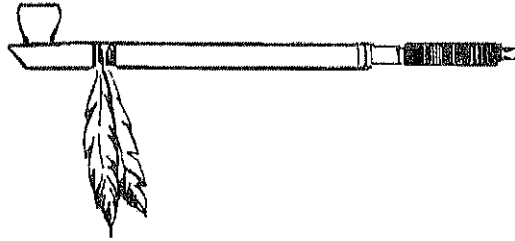
In October 2014 Ojibways of Onigaming First Nation declared a State of Emergency on Suicide and Mental Wellness following the fourth suicide of the year and an increase in suicidal behaviors, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and unresolved grief. Tragically, nearly a decade later, our community remains in state of emergency and our youth and families continue to experience violence, overdoses, and death, at unprecedented levels. We have suffered 31 deaths in our families the past two years along and feel strongly that many could have been preventable if we had the proper infrastructure.

Following the events of the past years, community leadership initiated a feasibility study and conceptual design to advance the development of a Youth Crisis Center in Onigaming First Nation. Through consultation with youth, elders, staff and leadership, it was determined that a community run facility was needed to provide our youth and families with a safe space when encountering violence or experience mental health crises, including addiction.

Currently, youth in crisis in the community are under-served, or served in a makeshift and temporary fashion. When a crisis occurs, Onigaming youth cannot be adequately supported within the community and must be sent to Kenora or Fort Frances, or in many cases across the border to Manitoba - far away from the love & support of friends, family and extended family. There is no safe space in community for children or families fleeing violence or substance abuse and again they must either find shelter outside of the community, or risk staying in unsafe conditions. When children, youth and families seek preventative care, our staff have no access to safe, confidential facilities to



OVERWAYS OF ONI GAMING



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provide care. When children and youth wish to engage in culturally significant experiences, programming is offered ad hoc with no strong connection to place or community.

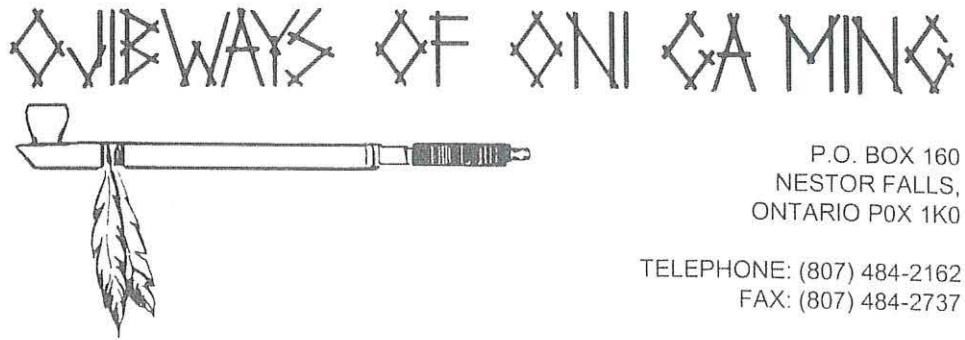
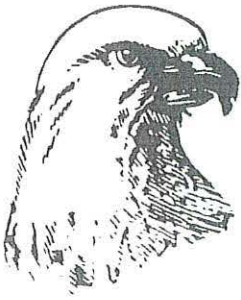
Because of this, our youth are reluctant to come forward given these limited options, and this has tragically resulted in the loss of life in our community from murder, overdoses and suicide most recently. Our community has worked hard to establish our crisis response team, consisting of youth workers, mental health workers and crisis support team members, however we do not have the needed space to administer their programming. In many cases our staff share offices with other departments, or are working from their homes or cars, which is limiting their ability to meaningfully engage with youth and to appropriately respond in a crisis. There have been instances where children are sleeping in office chairs while our crisis workers search out hotel rooms for families escaping violence.

It is beyond critical that we have safe spaces within the community for youth, and the space needed for staff and programming to support them. Without this we will continue to experience preventable suicides, overdoses and increased violence facing the youth in our community.

Despite these challenges, our team has advanced the development of a feasibility and concept design for an approximately 9,000 sq. ft Youth Crisis Centre, which is to be located in the heart of community, in close proximity to our Pow-wow grounds, ensuring access to cultural teachings and healings, in addition to conventional crisis intervention approaches. This facility will provide office and programming spaces for our Jordan's Principle youth workers, crisis support workers (including 24/7 on call resources), and mental health workers. The facility will also provide much needed gathering space for our youth to build relationships as well as a safe space for counselling and traditional healing.

Perhaps most importantly, the facility is designed to have six "safe sober beds", which are fully enclosed rooms with beds, washrooms and kitchenettes, ensuring youth have somewhere safe to stay when experiencing violence or a mental health crisis. These units can also be used by our 24-7 on-call crisis response staff to provide overnight spaces when responding to youth in crisis. The conceptual floorplan is included as an appendix to this letter.

We have submitted our proposal for the design and construction of this facility to ISC's Jordan's Principal team, however we have been met with multiple roadblocks and consistent frustration in our attempts to request the Federal government for their support. We intend to move through to the detailed design phase for this project next but still have no positive response from the federal government to date. Specifically, our concerns include:



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- Lack of collaborative approach from officials, including not having decision makers present for meetings with our leadership and project team.
- An overly complex approval process which does not align with the directives of the CHRT related to Jordan's principle.
- Requests for information beyond what we have experienced with other agencies at the provincial and federal level when soliciting support for community infrastructure projects.
- The information being requested by the federal government has changed since our original approval of \$15,000 for a needs assessment, dated April 2022, with little to no guidance of how to meet these "moving goalposts".

We understand that the intent of Jordan's Principle is to ensure all First Nations children living in Canada can access the products, services, and supports they need, when they need them. However, this is not the experience of Onigaming First Nation. The perceived delay tactics and unanswered requests from federal government officials we've met with have only exacerbated the problems in our community and have undoubtedly resulted in numerous lives being lost and the destruction of families.

Since our original approval in April 2022, we have made several submissions to the federal government requesting funding support to proceed to the detailed design phase. Each submission has been met with more questions and no commitment. As of our most recent re-submission in September 2023, we trust we have met all requirements of the federal government necessary to approve our project for detailed design.

We have included a copy of this most recent needs assessment worksheet as an appendix to this letter. Without a prompt commitment from the federal government, the children of Onigaming First Nation will continue to suffer and face preventable, unnecessary risks to their lives. This is completely preventable with support from our federal government Treaty partner, in accordance with the CHRT directives related to Jordan's Principle.

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Chief Jeff Copenace