

Saskatchewan Fire Department refuses to answer call; two children die

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Two First Nations children were killed in a house fire on the Makwa Sahgaiehcan reserve in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan on February 17, after the fire department in the neighbouring village of Loon Lake refused to respond to an emergency call because the reserve was behind on its firefighting services bill.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers were the only first responders to arrive, at 1:30 in the morning. By then, the house was already engulfed in flames. Two-year-old Harley Cheenanow and his one-year-old sister Haley were both pronounced dead at the scene, after being carried out of the burning house by their father. Their grandmother, who was also in the house, managed to escape the blaze.

The mayor of Loon Lake, Larry Heon, who doubles as the village's fire chief, callously defended his decision not to dispatch a fire engine to the scene, arguing that the fire department's resources needed to be rationed for those who paid their bills, and that a firefighting team would have been too late to save the children anyway.

The reserve's firefighting services contract with Loon Lake expired in October 2012, with an outstanding balance of \$3,380.89.

For their part, the reserve's leaders, led by Band Chief Richard Ben, say they believed that the financial dispute between the reserve and the Loon Lake fire department was resolved and that payments were made. They went on to claim that they were not aware that an outstanding balance would prompt the Loon Lake fire hall not to respond to an emergency call from the reserve.

The dispute which cost the lives of two innocent children was over how much the band owed Loon Lake for firefighting costs. Until October 2012 the reserve was charged an annual \$5,000 retainer fee, with an

additional charge for every call the firefighters responded to. Since then, the band has been paying the volunteer fire hall on a per-fire basis.

According to letters between the Makwa First Nation and Loon Lake, the cost of fire services include: \$400 per hour for a fire truck, \$300 per hour for a water truck, \$30 per hour for a fire chief, and \$25 per hour for a fire fighter. Considering how all fires have a minimum three hour call out, one fire response call handled by two volunteers costs at least \$1,350.

Although the reserve has had a working fire truck for five years, it lacks the proper hoses to connect to the reserve's fire hydrants. There is also nobody on site trained to operate the vehicle. A metal shed that once served as the fire hall burned down 30 years ago. Due to a lack of infrastructure, fire trucks kept on reserves in unheated facilities often freeze up in the cold northern climate rendering them useless for emergency calls.

In each of the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 fiscal years, the Makwa Sahgaiehcan reserve received only \$11,000 for fire protection from the federal government, which, under Canada's colonial-style Indian Act, has constitutional authority over First Nation reservations.

In total, Ottawa spends a paltry \$26.3 million a year on fire protection services for more than 600 First Nations reservations across Canada. The level of funding is so low that in the province of Ontario, no First Nation has been able to purchase fire equipment since 2012. In two notorious cases in Manitoba, residents on a reserve were forced to use snow to extinguish a blaze that killed a two-month-old girl and, in another fire, were forced to deploy potable water trucks in the absence of any fire equipment. Last year alone on Saskatchewan's First Nation reserves, five children perished in house fires.

The Saskatchewan tragedy once again lays bare the horrific living conditions faced by Canada's First Nations people. Aboriginal children living on a reserve die in house fires at a rate 10 times the national average. A large amount of housing stock on native reserves is built below standard building codes. Due to housing shortages and endemic poverty, many homes are greatly over-crowded.

An auditor general's report found that 44 percent of existing housing units constructed with government funding need major renovations. In addition, standard fire regulation codes do not apply on reserve properties under conditions where many homes are heated by make-shift wood stoves.

Government neglect and under-funding extend into virtually every aspect of life on Canada's native reserves. A 2013 United Nations report found that 96 of the lowest 100 Canadian communities rated on a "Well-Being Index" were First Nations communities. Life spans for native people fall far below the national average. Diseases such as tuberculosis are rampant in some communities. Education opportunities are deplorable—fewer than 50 percent of students on reserves graduate from high school. Boil water advisories are, on average, in effect at any given time on over 100 of the 631 native reserves. Suicide rates are astronomical. In one reserve that was evacuated because of a contaminated water supply, 21 youth between the ages of 9 and 23 killed themselves in one month alone. Incarceration rates for aboriginals are nine times the national average. A native youth is more likely to go to prison than to get a high school diploma.

Poverty conditions are not restricted to those living on reserves. Natives in urban centres, which comprise about half of the one million overall population, have the country's highest unemployment rate, second only to the rate for native reserves. Nationwide, an estimated 48 percent of aboriginal people are unemployed.



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