



Representing the Districts of Kenora, Rainy River and Thunder Bay

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April 6, 2020

The Honourable Greg Rickford
Ministry of Indigenous Affairs
Suite 400
160 Bloor St. E
Toronto, ON
M7A 2E6

The Honourable Sylvia Jones
Ministry of the Solicitor General
George Drew Building
18th Fl, 25 Grosvenor St.
Toronto, ON
M7A 1Y6

Dear Minister Rickford and Minister Jones:

On behalf of the Board of Directors for the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association, I am writing in regard to the actions addressing COVID-19 and express our gratitude for your Government's focus and attention on this public health crisis. The work and support currently underway are commendable and we sincerely appreciate the level of detail your government has taken to keep Ontarians safe and supported during this unprecedented time.

I do want to address a concern that municipalities in the Northwest collectively share related to the upcoming spring thaw and forest fire season that results in the periodic need to evacuate First Nation communities. Let me preface this with acknowledging our willingness to accommodate evacuees when there are resources in place to do so, but given the situation currently underway, it is paramount for us to share the following:

- As a result of the COVID-19 crisis Municipalities have laid off staff and are working with an extremely reduced workforce. Those who continue to work are focused on essential service delivery and activities associated with continuity of governance and business operations. There is no capacity to deal with the heavy workload of emergency evacuation management normally carried out by host municipality staff.
- Municipal facilities normally used by evacuated people are closed (recreation, libraries, parks).
- Support services in sectors such as mental health, child and family services, are working at greatly reduced capacity.

- The coronavirus is spreading from the south to the north. First Nation communities are undertaking various activities, 'lockdowns', in an effort to keep the virus from entering their communities. Some may be successful, but we are extremely worried about the impact of the spread into remote communities without medical resources available. If a remote northern First Nation has no cases at the time an evacuation is required, it seems to make little sense to endanger their population by evacuating to a municipality to which the virus has already spread.

We respectfully ask that you consult with your colleagues, with First Nations, with your Federal counterparts, and develop evacuation plans that recognize municipal limitations. In an effort to identify some alternatives, you may consider, expanding additional host communities that can relatively house military bases both fixed or temporary or portable housing and facilities set up in serviced Provincial Parks just to name a few. If such amenities are identified, we would further request that the resources needed to support evacuees be provided by the government in both human resources and financial capacities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter in what we know are incredibly challenging times for all of us. Should you wish to discuss this further, I encourage you to contact me at (807) 626-6686 or email wlandry@shuniah.org.

Regards,



Wendy Landry, President
Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association

Cc: Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, NAN
NOMA Member municipalities
Thunder Bay District Health Unit Board
Northwestern Ontario Health Unit Board
Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities