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NEWS RELEASE

Thursday, February 16, 2012 **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

NAN CHIEFS CALL FOR IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE AS REGION BRACES FOR MAJOR HEALTH CATASTROPHE

THUNDER BAY, ON: Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Deputy Grand Chief Mike Metatawabin said First Nations communities within NAN should brace for a health catastrophe due to the replacement of OxyContin. The ultra-addictive opiate drug that is almost exclusively used illicitly in NAN First Nations will not be manufactured in Canada after February 29, 2012. On March 1, 2012, OxyContin will be replaced by a new formulation of Oxycodone called OxyNEO.

Without OxyContin available, individuals will experience withdrawal. Symptoms may range in severity from stomach upset, muscle and bone pain, anxiety, restlessness, increased heart rate and blood pressure to depression and suicidal ideation.

"Potential for a mass involuntary opiate withdrawal is looming. The number of NAN First Nation community members addicted to OxyContin at risk for painful withdrawal as a result of the change is staggering," said Metatawabin. "The problems are intensified in the remote northern communities for those who are addicted to OxyContin and do not have access to drug treatment programs. It is time for both levels of government to respond with programs and services that are urgently required to implement emergency strategies."

The NAN Prescription Drug Abuse (PDA) Task Force, Chiefs and NAN Executive Council have been applying pressure on Health Canada and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to respond to repeated requests for assistance since the NAN Chiefs- in-Assembly declared a State-of- Emergency in November 2009.

"In the absence of any regular treatment, a public health catastrophe is imminent, as there are thousands of addicted individuals with rapidly shrinking supplies – likely leading to massive increases in black market prices, use of other drugs, needle use/sharing, and crime," said Dr. Benedikt Fischer, a senior scientist at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health.

On February 6, 2012 Matawa First Nations reported that almost 2000 people have an Opioid addiction in Matawa First Nation communities alone. On January 23, 2012, Chief Matthew Keewaykapow of Cat Lake First Nation declared a State-of-Emergency due to widespread opioid addiction reaching 70% of his community members, ranging in age as young as eleven years to over sixty years. With a total population of 25,000 in Sioux Lookout Zone alone, at least 9,000 community members will be impacted.

"We must act now to care for these very vulnerable people and need to access the resources of Ontario and Canada. We require funding for the PDA Task Force to implement the NAN Prescription Drug Abuse framework. We must also resolve jurisdictional issues between Ontario and Canada for Opioid Treatment programs and funding, including better access to Suboxone in NAN territory. We require medical and nursing professionals, appropriate mental health services,

aftercare programming. In addition, security and increased policing resources will be needed within NAN territory," said Metatawabin.

"The need for emergency planning to develop Withdrawal Management Strategies by First Nations, Tribal Councils, NAN and Health Canada staff, Ontario Ministry of Health and hospital networks is vital," said Metatawabin.

Nishnawbe Aski Nation is a political territorial organization representing 49 First Nation communities in James Bay Treaty No. 9 and Ontario portions of Treaty No. 5 – an area covering two thirds of the province of Ontario. www.nan.on.ca

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