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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UPDATE FROM WAPEKEKA FIRST NATION

Wapekeka FN - On January 8th, 2017 the community of Wapekeka First Nation lost 12-year-old Jolynn Winter to suicide. Two days later, 12-year-old Chantel Fox followed in her footsteps, leaving behind a twin sister. The families and community including its leaders have been in a state of shock, grief, and crisis since the deaths of the two children and are calling out for help and support.

Instead of a place of learning, the school now closed to students, and ground zero for the crisis team. Four children were flown out to be on a 24 hour medical watch, lest they be next in this suicide pact that was identified by the community several months ago. Another 26 students triggered by these deaths are identified as high risk for suicide.

“I let my girl down”, said Kerri Cutfeet Jolynn’s father.

“I can't believe I had to bury my daughter. It was so hard to say goodbye”, said Sandra Fox Chantel’s mother. “I honestly didn't think I could survive losing Chantel.”

Wapekeka has been pro-active for years in ensuring healing and suicide prevention through community plans and the successful annual suicide prevention conference attended by numerous communities in Northwestern Ontario. Funding for these vital programs were cut two years ago. These conferences were put in place to provide healing for the survivors of convicted pedophile Ralph Rowe and their families. Rowe’s child sexual assault charges affected many communities in the Nishnawbe-Aski territory. Wapekeka in particular was a community he preyed upon. Many of Rowe’s survivors struggle with suicide, some taking their lives.

The impact of these cases of child abuse, the residential schools and the living conditions of life-on reserve are realities Wapekeka First Nation have been pro-active in creating healing plans to overcome. But without adequate funding, the community is in a state of crisis, once more.

“Every community member is deeply affected. These children could be alive today and their deaths preventable”, said Joshua Frogg Media Relations Liaison for Wapekeka First

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Nation. “We had identified that several children were secretly planning suicide several months ago and we immediately applied for health funding to work with the children in preventing any suicides from happening. Our community plan was turned down by government and now two are dead. Funding this project and our suicide prevention conference is an urgent need in Wapekeka”.

The community calls upon the Government of Canada for a national strategy on suicide prevention, especially for youth and children. Wapekeka also requests immediate health funding to address the needs of Wapekeka in preventing future deaths and for the healing of the families and community members affected by these tragedies.

“We are very grateful for all the support of the surrounding communities coming to the aid of their neighbour and to all who have shown support to Wapekeka in this time of need,” said Wapekeka Chief Brennan Sainnawap

Wapekeka First Nation is an Oji-Cree remote fly-in reserve in the boreal forest of Northwestern Ontario, 600 km from Thunder Bay with a population of 430 members.

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Photos of the youth are available upon request.

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