

Ottawa commits \$382 million to begin raising services for on-reserve kids ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

THUNDER BAY - Jordan Rivers Anderson, age 5, died while stuck in hospital for two years while various levels of government jurisdictions argued over who was responsible for his home-care bills.

Anderson belonged to Norway House Cree Nation in Manitoba. His death was a glaring example of the unequal levels of health care - and all social services - indigenous children in Canada receive compared to nonindigenous children.

The movement to fill the gap so that all on-reserve children with a disability or a short-term condition in Canada are treated equally is called Jordan's Principle; and late Tuesday, Federal Health Minister Jane Philpott and Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett announced up to \$382 million will go toward fixing that disparity.

The funding inequities between indigenous and non-indigenous children have been a global black eye for Canada.

The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled in January that the Canadian government was racially discriminating against 163,000 First Nations children and that to change this, Ottawa should implement Jordan's Principle. The government had until Wednesday to respond, said Cindy Blackstock of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada.

Blackstock, who has advocated for the principle, was stunned by Tuesday's sudden announcement. "If it is new money for the kids, I am much more optimistic about this," she said.

Bennett's office confirmed this is a new money-funding announcement, late Tuesday.

But Blackstock questions how Ottawa will define Jordan's Principle and if they will apply it to all services for children including education.

"I do think this is a positive sign. It shows the strength of the tribunal's decision," she added.

Last week, one of the 145 recommendations coming out of the joint inquest into the deaths of seven indigenous students in Thunder Bay was for Jordan's Principle to be put into place for all services.

The seven students died between 2000 and 2011. All died hundreds of kilometres from their home communities, after leaving their reserves because there were no adequate high schools for them to attend.

In a joint statement, Bennett and Philpott said they have listened to concerns and there is "no question - we believe children must receive the health care and social services they need, when they need them."

The \$382 million will be used to "put the needs of children first" by supporting this approach, finding a "broader definition" of Jordan's Principle and used to fix service access disputes to make sure all partners are working together.

Health Canada will work with First Nations and a regional service co-ordinator to help assess children's needs and come up with care plans, according to a government backgrounder.

Many First Nations children living in remote, fly-in communities experience unnecessary delays in care, said deputy grand chief Derek Fox of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), a political organization of 49 First Nations.

"We now look to the government of Ontario to join this process and come to the table with their federal counterparts to ensure that children in all NAN First Nations have access to the same level of care and services as all children across Ontario and Canada," Fox said in a statement.

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