

Retired General Rick Hillier
Chair – Ontario COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Task Force
Sent Via Email

Monday, January 25, 2021

Dear Retired General Hillier:



RE: Call for Inclusion and Prioritization in Phase 1 of Ontario's Vaccination Plan

By manner of introduction—we are the First Nation communities of Constance Lake, Aroland, Long Lake #58 and Ginoogaming First Nations situated near Trans Canada Highway No. 11 in northern Ontario as you will note on the above map. Within our Tribal Council, we are known as the Matawa First Nations from the road-access communities. We are writing to call for inclusion and prioritization in Phase 1 of Ontario's vaccination plan which has excluded us to date.

As members of Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (NAN) and the Chiefs of Ontario (COO), we have been privy to updates on the activities of the *Ontario COVID-19 Vaccination Distribution Task Force* and the *First Nation Vaccination Distribution Sub-Table* (to a lesser degree), where officials of NAN and COO have been participating.

In early to mid-December 2020, it had become apparent that the prioritization of our communities for Moderna vaccination had been down-graded in favour, understandably, to remote First Nations through "Operation Remote Immunity (ORI)." While we are happy that our relatives in the remote First Nations will be receiving their vaccination—we are, at the same time, frustrated in being left out of this Phase 1 roll-out initiative. We feel that the Task Force should be placing priority in First Nation communities in northern Ontario where outbreaks are currently taking place and where States of Emergencies are being called as a result. At the very least, surplus vaccines from ORI should be earmarked for our communities. We are happy that remote First Nations have received specific dates for when they will be receiving the Moderna vaccine and we are calling for the development of dates for our First Nations.

To-date, we have not had an opportunity to provide our specific input and we feel that some of the guiding principles and assumptions in decision-matrixes that were used to prioritize remote First Nations in Phase 1 such as: risk of evacuation, quality of water, access to health services—ignore equally important challenges we are currently facing in our communities. We would like to point out some of the reasons why Phase 1 of the vaccine needs to include and prioritize our communities. The reasons are as follows:

- a) There is loss of Indigenous language amongst all our communities due to contact/colonization; some of our communities are experiencing up to 90% of loss of language so there is a strong need to protect Elders who are keepers of the Indigenous languages and particular historical dialects
- b) There is a lack of personnel and burn-out being experienced due to our small size (combined, our total on-reserve population amongst our four communities is approximately 2,087 and less if delineated by the COVID-19 vaccine age of 18 years and older
- c) We are experiencing an inability to sustain a long-term response to combat COVID-19 outbreaks due to how our communities historically socially operate; social interactions differ in First Nations wherein our communities are more closely knit, homogenous and akin to being understood as a cluster

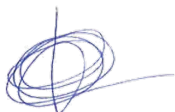
- d) In relation to the above, our communities are seeing increased transmission of the COVID-19 virus due to the interconnectedness amongst ourselves (ie. the virus has been moving from a couple of our communities to another and vice versa)
- e) Although closer to urban centres—we experience similar or the same socio-economic conditions as remote First Nations being serviced by ORI like overcrowded housing and overrepresented chronic health issues
- f) We have a large high-risk population of individuals with mental health and addictions issues who we are experiencing as harder to track and treat
- g) Our health care services are less specialized and smaller compared to Southern Ontario, we experience doctor shortages and our medical facilities are already strained
- h) Although closer to urban centres—we experience a lack of or poor broadband/internet connectivity which prevents access to information, and remote health services
- i) Our communities are less economically diversified; in some cases, our communities rely on 1 or 2 sources of employment; when these industries are infected with the virus, we fear our entire economic system will crash
- j) COVID-19 is hindering on our ability to participate in local, regional and national environmental assessment processes that are taking place due to the inability to congregate members to share information and obtain feedback

We would like an opportunity to relay our concerns further at your earliest convenience and demonstrate our readiness to have the Matawa Health Co-operative (MHC) assist in the administration of Phase 1 of the vaccine roll-out in our communities. The MHC currently has health staff consisting of 8 nurses and 1 physician. Since the start of the pandemic, their health staff have safely administered over 4,000 COVID-19 tests in the Matawa communities and in Thunder Bay. MHC is also currently undergoing health staff vaccination and training and obtaining infrastructure for vaccine storage and travel suitable for the Moderna, Pfizer or other approved vaccines.

Due to the outbreaks currently taking place in our communities, our inability to address them and the unique challenges we have outlined above—we are strongly urging the consideration of the *Task Force and First Nation Vaccination Distribution Sub-Table* to include and prioritize our First Nations in Phase 1 of the vaccine roll-out in Ontario. Should you have any comments or questions, please feel free to contact the undersigned.

Sincerely,

ON BEHALF OF THE MATAWA FIRST NATIONS FROM THE ROAD-ACCESS COMMUNITIES/



David Paul Achneepineskum,
Chief Executive Officer.

- c.c. Matawa Chiefs Council
- Premier Ford and Ontario Minister of Health Christine Elliot
- Minister of Health, Patty Hajdu PC MP
- Ontario Regional Chief RoseAnne Archibald, Chiefs of Ontario
- Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, Nishnawbe-Aski Nation
- Greg Rickford, Minister of Energy, Northern Development and Mines, and Minister of Indigenous Affairs
- Deputy Minister Shawn Battise, Ontario Ministry of Indigenous Affairs
- Homer Tien, President and CEO, ORNGE Air Ambulance

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