



CHIEFS COUNCIL

MEDIA RELEASE

Friday, April 1, 2022

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MATAWA CHIEFS COUNCIL EXPRESS CONCERNS ABOUT ONGOING BIRTH ALERTS ON INDIGENOUS NEWBORNS IN THUNDER BAY DESPITE GOVERNMENT DIRECTIVES TO DISCONTINUE THE PRACTICE

[Thunder Bay, ON:] – Late last week, the Matawa Chiefs Council (MCC) raised concerns about reports of ongoing birth alerts on Indigenous newborns in Thunder Bay despite government directives to discontinue the practice. During their discussion—they directed that [informational material](#) be developed and distributed in locations where pre-natal and post-natal services are provided including the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre's Labour and Delivery/Maternal Newborn Unit so that parents know there is support. Informational material is also destined for hospitals in municipalities like Greenstone, Hearst and Sioux Lookout where women from Matawa deliver their babies.

In 2019, the MCC initiated the Social Services Framework to respond to assist families in navigating the child welfare system. Shortly thereafter, it was gifted the Oji-Cree name "[Awashishewiigiwayiin](#)." The program works with families from the Matawa First Nations (on and off-reserve) to support them through their involvement in the child welfare system through prevention, planning and goal setting using community-based, culturally-appropriate/responsive care models for children with a focus on prevention and family reunification.

A birth alert is a practice in Canada, in which a social or health care worker notifies the staff of a hospital if they have concerns for the safety of an expected child based on their parents' history. This can include past instances of poverty, domestic violence, drug usage, and history with child welfare. Birth alerts are typically issued without the parents' consent, and often result in apprehension and placement of the child into foster care after birth. Birth alerts have been considered a controversial practice, as they have been disproportionately used for Indigenous children. In June 2019, the [Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#) recommended the abolishment of "the practice of targeting and apprehending infants (hospital alerts or birth alerts) from Indigenous mothers right after they give birth", as they were "racist and discriminatory and are a gross violation of the rights of the child, the mother, and the community." Following the release of the report, the practice of birth alerts was discontinued in multiple provinces in the years that followed.

On July 14, 2020, Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues Jill Dunlop directed Ontario's Children's Aid Societies to stop issuing birth alerts by October 15, 2020. Dunlop stated that "we're trying to work to collaborate with families. That families have a voice in their plans moving forward. And birth alerts just do the exact opposite."

A woman in Winnipeg, Manitoba whose newborn was removed by police and social workers in a video broadcast live on social media has initiated a class-action lawsuit against the Manitoba government. The woman, in a statement of claim filed the week of March 17, 2022, said that “birth alerts are unlawful, breach charter rights and cause significant harm to mothers and children.” The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs have provided their support through their First Nations Family Advocate Office.

QUOTES

“It is distressing to the Matawa Chiefs Council that—after 2 years of their being mandated by the Ontario government to be discontinued—we are still hearing that birth alerts are still taking place in Thunder Bay and in municipalities where Matawa women are birthing their babies. It is not right and services should be in place prior to/during a birth so that an Indigenous baby is not apprehended at the hospital. Our People have experienced our children being stolen during the residential school era—we will not allow that to continue as a result of child welfare. We encourage mothers from Matawa who have been victimized by a birth alert to reach out to determine if they are eligible to participate in the class action that is taking place.”

– *Chief Cornelius Wabasse, Webequie First Nation*

“Babies born into our Nations have rights—both at conception and as soon as they take their first breath. We are standing up for them so that they have the chance to bond with their mothers and families and engage in cultural practices when they are first born. Mainstream western non-Indigenous institutions made birth alerts based on assumptions they have of our people. It resulted in another way to govern us, rather than protect us. Birth alerts are nothing short of narrow, racialized, racist ethnocentrism.”

– *Chief Sheri Taylor, Ginoogaming First Nation*

— 30 —

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