



CHIEFS COUNCIL

MEDIA RELEASE

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MATAWA CHIEFS COUNCIL RESPOND TO WEQUEDONG LODGE ANNOUNCEMENT TO REDUCE SERVICES TO FIRST NATIONS ACCESSING HEALTH SERVICES IN THUNDER BAY

[Thunder Bay, ON] – Following the December 9, 2023 update to communities [letter](#) by Donna Kroocmo, Executive Director of Wequedong Lodge, the Matawa Chiefs Council issued the following statement:

“Matawa Chiefs understand the difficult decision that management of Wequedong Lodge has made to reduce the number of clients it serves because of inadequate government funding. We know firsthand the challenges caused by unstable, annualized federal funding, which is needed to run our health programs and services both on- and off-reserve.

“This reduction in service forced on Wequedong Lodge will have a tremendous impact on our community members – particularly Elders, those with young children, and vulnerable people who must travel to Thunder Bay to access healthcare. Most are from remote First Nations. The disruption and uncertainty caused by this service reduction will add stress and anxiety to what is already a broken, difficult-to-navigate system, designed to save government funding at every opportunity.

The lack of funding required to increase staffing and capacity at Wequedong Lodge means our community members will suffer. This will inevitably result in our community members waiting hours at the airport, sometimes without food, for transportation to their accommodations. The transfer of healthcare services back to the federal government will result in delays and missed appointments for clients travelling to Thunder Bay for chemotherapy, dialysis, surgery, and specialist appointments. It can take months, and up to one year, to reschedule missed appointments.

Our community members already face delays in approval for funding of healthcare services through the federal government’s Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program, which is mandated to cover healthcare services for Indigenous Peoples including travel, accommodations, meals, equipment, and prescriptions. Delayed approval for NIHB requests means our community members are sometimes left stranded in Winnipeg, Sioux Lookout, Thunder Bay, and Toronto, without the means to get back to their home communities. To ensure the healthcare needs of community members are met, some of us spend upwards of \$80,000 to \$100,000 per year from other budgets to cover travel, accommodation, and related costs. Some

First Nations, like Neskantaga are looking at different options on how to move forward, whether they are moving somewhere else or if they will continue to support Wequedong Lodge.

Investing resources for improved health services in the communities is part of the answer to this problem. The Matawa Health Co-operative administers some primary healthcare services in our communities, but insufficient accommodations and aging healthcare facilities pose challenges for doctors and nurses as they try to provide a level of service that meets the needs of our communities.

Increased and stabilized federal healthcare funding – including investments in primary care – is necessary to prevent delays and improve health outcomes for our community members who already experience health inequities due to inadequate and unequal access to services. Providing more resources for equipment, infrastructure, and capital for Matawa communities will permit us to hire more healthcare providers, in turn allowing our members to access these services within their communities, thereby sparing them the challenges of travelling to Thunder Bay and other service centres for healthcare.

We empathize with Wequedong Lodge's decision to reduce their number of clients in light of funding restraints, and we look to the federal government to provide a timely resolution that limits the negative impacts on our community members.”

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