

BC Association of Aboriginal  
Friendship Centres  
**BCA AFC**

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

April 23, 2021

# **Indigenous leaders calling for inquiry into recent deaths of Indigenous residents in BC Housing facility**

**SMITHERS, B.C.** – Six Indigenous residents have died at a BC Housing facility located in Smithers within the past 12 months—marking the highest number of annual deaths to occur at one facility within the province. Local community members feel that the deaths are connected to a lack of culturally safe housing programs for Indigenous people.

Indigenous leaders are calling on BC Housing to conduct an inquiry into the recent deaths of Indigenous people who were clients of Smithers' supportive housing and undertake a full review of the cultural safety available at supportive housing facilities.

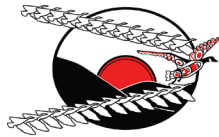
"We know that Indigenous led, culturally safe supportive housing is needed to provide equitable care to Indigenous people accessing housing assistance," said Annette Morgan, Executive Director of Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre, "Smithers has the poorest example of Indigenous housing support in the province and we need to change that."

The Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre is part of a Canada-wide network of Indigenous social service organizations. In 2020, the Smithers Community Services Association (SCSA) indicated they did not support the Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre's new Indigenous Housing Support Program, stating that the Friendship Centre's program duplicated SCSA services. "It is unacceptable that Smithers Community Services Association continues to be unwilling to recognize the value of a longstanding Indigenous organization providing support services that will contribute to community capacity to handle the housing crisis in a culturally appropriate manner," said Morgan.

"We are seeing funding intended to support services for Indigenous people awarded to non-Indigenous agencies across all social service sectors," said Leslie Varley, Executive Director of the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCA AFC), "Non-Indigenous agencies controlling services for Indigenous people perpetuates the barriers to equitable care. This can have deadly consequences when we are hearing from Indigenous people that they do not feel safe accessing social services."

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The impacts of colonization is inextricably linked to homelessness and addiction experienced by Indigenous people. Historical harm, systems of oppression and anti-Indigenous racism increase the risk for isolation, poverty, intergenerational trauma, and loss of connection to culture and community for Indigenous people, factors that must be considered in order to provide culturally safe, holistic care for Indigenous residents in supportive housing.

“The loss of Indigenous people accessing social services needs to be addressed at every government level,” Morgan said, “We all need to be asking if these services are ensuring people have the necessary supports to move towards holistic health.”

Smithers is located along the Highway of Tears, a corridor of Highway 16 linked to a high number of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), which Indigenous leaders said must be a part of the investigation into the deaths of Indigenous residents in SCSA housing.

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