



huu ay aht

ANCIENT SPIRIT, MODERN MIND

## **Huu-ay-aht declares public health emergency and demands the Province do better for First Nations children in care**

**Anacla – March 8, 2018** – Today, Huu-ay-aht First Nations declared the treatment of Huu-ay-aht children by the Province of British Columbia a public health emergency

“Despite the provincial government saying it is a priority, we continue to see the number of Huu-ay-aht children in care increase,” said Huu-ay-aht Chief Councillor Robert J. Dennis, “The time for endless talk is over – we demand British Columbia take action. It’s time for the province to cooperate and do its part – this is a public health emergency.”

Since August of 2017, Huu-ay-aht has started implementing the 30 recommendations of the [Huu-ay-aht First Nations Social Services Panel Report](#). These recommendations aim to reduce the number of children in care and ensure Huu-ay-aht children grow up safe, healthy, and connected to their home, culture, and values.

To date, Huu-ay-aht has funded the project on its own, paying more than \$600,000 of the \$1.8 million per year required to implement the recommendations. However, the independent panel made it clear Huu-ay-aht cannot be expected to go it alone. Successful implementation of the the Panel Report recommendations is a shared responsibility and depends on the provincial and federal governments providing immediate funding, cooperation and jurisdiction to address this emergency.

“We have a plan that can bring the number of children in care to zero, but we have not received support from either the provincial or federal governments. When we started working on the recommendations from our Social Services Panel, our Nation had 34 of our 220 children in care, and 25 were in non-First Nations homes. That number is now 47, with 36 in non-First Nations homes,” Chief Dennis says. “I was shocked to hear it was increasing. There is a better way, and we need the province and federal government to immediately do their part to find a solution to this crisis for all First Nations communities.”

The need for immediate action was highlighted this week when lawyers for the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) sought to reduce the access the BC Supreme Court had earlier ordered to ensure that one Huu-ay-aht mother and baby could sustain breastfeeding and their maternal/infant bond. Huu-ay-aht challenged the province after it removed a newborn without warning from its mother in a completely unwarranted manner. Huu-ay-aht First Nations had been forced to seek emergency relief from the Supreme Court to ensure the maternal/infant bond was not irreparably harmed while they were forced to wait for Ministry and court processes to unfold.

Office: Anacla Government Office, 170 Nookemus Road, Anacla, B.C., V0R 1B0

Phone: 1.888.644.4555 | 250.728.3414 | Fax: 250.728.1222

Mail: Port Alberni Government Office, 4644 Adelaide Street, Port Alberni, B.C., V9Y 6N4 | Phone: 250.723.0100 | Fax: 250.723.4646

Chief Dennis says, “This case is a clear example of everything that is wrong - this system is broken.”

In a recent article in the Globe and Mail, representative for Children and Youth Bernard Richard, who has read all the files connected with the case, including those not publicly available, said the Ministry’s handling of this case “is egregious and awful”, “reeks of paternalism,” and “raises concerns about systemic racism.”

Such an approach to child welfare by MCFD persists, despite solemn promises from the provincial NDP government to improve the child-welfare system.

“In contrast to this recent apprehension of the newborn, we were able to place another child requiring care in a Huu-ay-aht home due to the quick and ongoing implementation of the Panel’s recommendations,” says Chief Dennis. “While we strive to keep families together, at least in this case, we were able to find the best solution for the child – one that ensures continued access to the child’s own family, culture, traditions, and land.”

The Huu-ay-aht home that was able to help this child was one of the extended family homes that Huu-ay-aht had offered to MCFD to assist the mother and newborn at issue in the Supreme Court ruling. However, MCFD would not consider or accept this home as an option, without explaining why not.

Chief Dennis points out that both the federal and provincial government say they want to keep First Nations families together and provide better supports to keep children out of care. But, the reality is the number of children in care continues to increase.

Huu-ay-aht First Nations expects a full response to this public health emergency at a meeting with MCFD officials on March 15, 2018. Huu-ay-aht also intends to meet with the federal government on this topic next week. At these upcoming meetings Huu-ay-aht expects the province and federal government to provide Huu-ay-aht with immediate funding, cooperation and jurisdiction to address this emergency.

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For more information, contact:

Heather Thomson, Communications Coordinator, Huu-ay-aht First Nations  
[Heather.t@huyuayaht.org](mailto:Heather.t@huyuayaht.org) - 250-723-0100 ex. 222 or 250-720-7776