



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: April 30, 2024

Peguis First Nation Declares State of Emergency to Address Health Crisis Exacerbated by Repeated Flooding

Peguis, Manitoba – Today, Peguis First Nation has officially declared a state of emergency in response to the ongoing health crisis affecting its community. This declaration is a direct response to the compounded social, mental, and physical health challenges that have escalated in the aftermath of repeated and devastating floods, the most severe of which occurred in 2022.

Background of Crisis:

Peguis First Nation has endured persistent flooding over the years, which has resulted in significant damage to infrastructure and housing. More critically, the floods have deeply impacted the mental health and social stability of the community. Reports indicate a significant increase in mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. The Peguis Wellness Team reports that the displacement caused by floods has severely disrupted lives, contributing to overcrowded living conditions and exacerbating stress and mental health issues among evacuees.

Since 2000, Peguis has suffered an average of 1 flood every 2 years. The worst flooding in 2022 (“2022 Flood”) caused severe and widespread damage, including the evacuation of Peguis members to Winnipeg hotels. About 549 members are still evacuated since the 2022 flood, as well as 235 members since flooding evacuations in 2014 and 2017.

The spring thaw has further deteriorated the conditions of our community where 300 kilometers of community roads are unsafe, disrupting essential services including school bus routes, pharmacy deliveries, and health Centre transportation.

Key Health Concerns:

- The ongoing health crisis is most acutely manifested in the significant rates of emotional distress and mental health disorders among children and adults alike. The community has seen a rise in self-harm among youth, increased drug addiction, and heightened incidents of family and domestic violence.
- Health services are overwhelmed, with the Peguis Wellness Team emphasizing the urgent need for expanded mental health support and resources.

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The team has been forced to prioritize emergency mental health responses over sustainable, long-term care due to the sheer volume of crises.

Government Action Required:

Despite the formation of a working group with federal and provincial governments, there has been a lack of substantial progress in implementing long-term solutions. Peguis First Nation calls on these bodies to extend the same level of flood protection and emergency response afforded to other communities along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.

Chief's Statement:

"Our staff are overwhelmed; our people continue to face a life of uncertainty. This has caused immeasurable suffering on children, families, and community," stated Chief Stan Bird. "Despite these challenges, we are committed to a path of recovery, protection and justice." Commitment to Community:

Peguis First Nation is committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of its community through transparent and continual communication. The leadership vows to keep the public and community members informed as they navigate through these challenging times and work toward sustainable recovery and resilience.

Contact:

Chief Bird will have media availability by contacting Peguis' legal counsel:

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Breakdown of Issue of Concern - Intake and After Hours

Child Afraid to Return Home	5
Child Exploitation	4
Conduct of a Child	49
Conduct of a Parent/Caregiver	293
Emotional Abuse	3
Medical	28
Mental Health - Child	38
Mental Health - Parent/Childgiver	24
Missing Child	116
Child Neglect	16
Absent Child	51
Non-Child Welfare Matter	38
Other	1027
Parent/Caregiver - Child Conflict	4
Physical Abuse	13
Sexual Abuse	27
Supervision	84
Voluntary Services	1146
Notice of Maternity	2
Total	2,968

Exerpt taken from Peguis Child and Family Services Report: April 1, 2023 - March 1, 2024
<https://www.peguiscfs.ca>



**Chief Dr. Stan Bird, Peguis First Nation on the Declaration of a State of Emergency -
April 30, 2024**

Introduction:

- Good afternoon. As we gather here today, on the land that Chief Peguis once protected, we are compelled to declare a state of emergency in Peguis First Nation. This declaration is driven by a severe crisis that affects not just our land and homes, but the very spirit and mental well-being of our people.

Historical Context and Current Crisis:

- Just as Chief Peguis stood with the Selkirk Settlers, offering protection and fairness, today we invoke his spirit as we seek justice and equitable treatment for our people. Our community has endured repeated devastating floods, with the severe 2022 event leaving a lasting impact.
- These floods have not only damaged our physical environment but have deeply penetrated the mental health and social fabric of our community. The scars left by these waters are not visible on buildings alone but are evident in the eyes and hearts of our people.

Detailed Mental Health and Social Issues:

- Our community faces a mounting crisis in mental health and social stability, severely exacerbated by the trauma of displacement and chronic environmental threats. Reports from our wellness team indicate a sharp increase in depression, anxiety, and substance abuse among all age groups.
- Children, our most vulnerable, are showing alarming rates of emotional distress, leading to self-harm and severe psychological issues. Our reports detail over 38 cases of mental health crises in children just last year, a stark indicator of the scale of trauma experienced by our youngest members.
- The ongoing displacement, with many families still living in temporary accommodations since the floods of 2022, continues to contribute to a sense of instability and helplessness, aggravating mental health conditions and leading to increased incidents of domestic violence and substance abuse. At last report, we have 180 condemned houses, but many families have been forced to move into them because, in Peguis, there are no other places to live.

- The need for mental health support has overwhelmed our existing resources. The Peguis Wellness Team has had to shift focus dramatically, prioritizing crisis intervention over long-term therapeutic support. The team's efforts, while commendable, are like placing a band-aid on a deep wound—they provide temporary relief but do not address the underlying trauma.

Failures and Calls to Action:

- Despite our efforts to collaborate with federal and provincial governments, the response has been woefully inadequate. The protective measures afforded to other communities along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers have not been extended to Peguis, despite our similar risk profile.
- Our lawsuit, demanding \$1 billion for damages, is a testament to our determination to fight for our rights and to secure the necessary resources for our community. It highlights our resolve to ensure that the days of neglect and oversight at the expense of Peguis are over.

State of Emergency Declaration:

- This state of emergency is declared to urgently address these critical mental health needs, along with ensuring housing safety and implementing a permanent flood solution. We are mobilizing every resource available to confront these challenges head-on.
- We urgently call on the federal and provincial governments to engage with us, to listen to our needs, and to implement lasting solutions that will prevent future crises and support our community's recovery.

Conclusion:

- As Chief of Peguis First Nation, it is my sacred duty to uphold the legacy of Chief Peguis, ensuring the safety, well-being, and dignity of our people. We are committed to a path of recovery and resilience, ensuring that our community not only survives but thrives.
- Thank you for your attention. We will maintain transparency and continue to keep our community and the public informed as we tirelessly work towards resolving these urgent issues.