

Information Note
Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat

Title: Solvent abuse in Natuashish

Issue: Media reports on parents' concerns with incidents of solvent abuse in Natuashish.

Background:

- Members of the Mushuau Innu community have long struggled with mental health and addictions issues; those issues preceded the relocation of the Mushuau Innu from Davis Inlet to the newly-constructed Natuashish in 2002.
- Natuashish is a Reserve under the federal *Indian Act*. The provincial government delivers Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFS) in the community, and is reimbursed only for the services provided to children who are "in care", through a federal-provincial agreement. The provincial CYFS legislation applies and the provincial Minister is ultimately responsible for the program. The provincial government, through the Labrador-Grenfell Regional Health Authority (LGRHA), operates a medical clinic in the community at its own expense. It partners with the Mushuau Innu Health Commission (MIHC), which receives federal funding, in the provision of health care. The MIHC frequently uses Woods Home, a treatment facility in Alberta, for out of province treatment. Health Canada also provides support for mental health and addictions programming.
- In late 2010, the Province became aware of increasing incidents of solvent abuse by community members, most particularly children and young adults. In response, officials with the Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat (IGAA), the Departments of CYFS and Health and Community Services (HCS) and LGRHA, as well as federal and Innu officials and the community, coordinated to assess options and implement a planned approach. Actions taken included the removal of some children from the community for out-of-province treatment; enhanced monitoring by CYFS for children that remained in the community who were deemed in need of child protection and were engaged in solvent abuse; purchase of additional recreation equipment by the Band Council and keeping the local arena open on a 24/7 basis; some parents took it upon themselves to conduct street patrols in an attempt to apprehend or discourage solvent abusers, and there were plans to construct a recreation centre (under construction).
- A multidisciplinary team performs integrated assessments of children and youth in Natuashish with mental health and addictions problems (the "Team"); the Team is comprised of the LGRHA mental health social worker; a CYFS social worker, and a psychologist and other community based mental health and addictions workers hired through the MIHC.
- The Team has continued to work in and with the community in an effort to reduce abuse and prevent relapses. It has been completing integrated assessments on the children and youth abusing solvents. It is notable that the solvent abuse has included abuse of propane, which is generally accepted as more dangerous to human health than gasoline abuse.

- The active caseload for mental health and addictions treatment for all ages in Natuashish averages between 5 and 9 individuals monthly. While mental health and addictions staff can only treat individuals and families that request it, all referrals they receive are seen immediately, thus access is not a problem. Access to both in-province and out-of-province treatment is available. However solvent abuse, while serious in nature, is a symptom of the high levels of social distress within Natuashish.
- To address the high levels of distress and chronic staffing issues, a mobile clinical wellness team, called *Mapping the Way*, travels between Sheshatshiu, Hopedale, Nain and Natuashish (the "Mobile Team"). Partners include LGRHA; the Nunatsiavut Government; the MIHC; the Sheshatshiu Innu First Nation; and Health Canada. The Mobile Team was formed to provide a longer term response to ongoing high levels of social distress in these communities and to enhance mental well-being. Each partner is required to prepare their communities and provide housing for the Mobile Team in advance of visits; although the Mobile Team has been to Natuashish several times, access to housing has been challenging. However more regular visits will be established in the coming weeks as housing arrangements are finalised.
- Budget 2011 allocated funding to LGRHA for a permanent mental health and addictions social worker position for Natuashish. This position was filled but subsequently vacated and, since June 2012, LGRHA has been contracting-out these services in Natuashish. However, the position has now been filled again permanently beginning 01 October 2012, and the position will focus on mental health and addictions.
- CYFS has increased staff resources by two Social Workers and one Social Worker Assistance, as well as increased supervision to a dedicated full-time position since the Department's creation in 2009. There have been chronic vacancies in this area; however, as noted above, the full-time social worker is commencing in this area on 01 October 2012, and there is the possibility of a second placement shortly.

Current Status:

- On 19 September 2012, the media reported an interview with two mothers from Natuashish who expressed their frustration and inability to manage their children's susceptibility or addiction to solvents, and are asking that their children be placed in foster care outside the community, in an effort to receive mental health and addiction services.
- A CBC News story in Summer 2012 reported the MIFN Band Council had been unable to meet certain financial obligations, including payroll for its employees. Although CBC News later reported the payroll obligations had been met, IGAA understands the MIFN continues to struggle with financial issues, although neither the MIFN nor the Federal Government (which provides funding to the MIFN) nor PricewaterhouseCoopers (the federally-appointed Co-Managers of the MIFN), have been forthcoming with details on the extent of the issues, nor have provided any insight into the Band finances.

- Innu Nation held elections for the positions of Grand Chief and Deputy Grand Chief on September 25. Prote Poker was elected Grand Chief and Jeremy Andrew was elected Deputy Grand Chief. A Natuashish community member alleged in a September 20 media interview that there has been an influx of alcohol and drugs in the community as a result of the election.
- Another media report quotes an RCMP member in Natuashish as saying it is uncertain if the number of people sniffing gas has increased but there have been a few significant incidents lately that have occurred among those addicted to that activity. He says there have been meetings organized to address the issue and find help for the children abusing solvents.
- MIFN officials have indicated difficulties in arranging out-of-province treatment for vulnerable children and young adults; it is possible that the financial pressures in the community and the financial crisis of the Band is leading to the community raising the issue of concerns around help with solvent abuse, as the services provided by the Band are being challenged as a result of financial pressures.
- As of July 31, 2012 there were 76 Natuashish children on Protective Intervention Caseloads and an additional 36 children in care of the Province. In 13 of the 76 protective intervention cases, solvent abuse has been identified as an issue and none are under 11 years of age. With respect to those in care, 21 of the 36 are less than 10 years of age and solvent abuse is not an issue. Most are in foster care within Natuashish. The remaining 15 in care are 11-18 years of age and 11 of these are in Out of Province Placements (OPP's). Of this 11, 7 are in treatment for solvent abuse issues.
- In addition to the July numbers provided above, CYFS removed five children in the past few days and placed them in OPP's due to solvent abuse concerns. The actual numbers have remained relatively consistent over the past year, and will require significant and sustained effort to effect change.
- Beyond working on specific cases, on a provincial level CYFS is developing Specialized Foster Homes as part of its Continuum of Care Strategy which will replace some of the out-of-province treatment referrals. Similarly, HCS is developing two treatment centres – a residential treatment centre for children with complex needs in Paradise and a centre for addictions in Grand Falls – which will also reduce out of province referrals. In addition, CYFS is working on a broader level to address protection issues in Aboriginal communities through its Working Group, including representation from the MIFN, to design a service delivery model for Labrador. In addition, staff within the community have had discussions during the last couple of weeks with the MIHC regarding the development of a proposal to bring expertise in from the Out of Province placements to provide parenting programming in the community.
- A community meeting took place September 19 in Natuashish, called by the MIHC and also involving approximately 10 parents from the community, and CYFS and LGRHA officials. Discussions were led by the parents, and focused on how they could keep their children safe within the community. Given the importance of the community taking action in this area, this

was extremely positive. Service providers were there to identify what more they could be doing to support the parents in their efforts. Parents have agreed to continue meeting. CYFS and LGRHA will engage in this process.

- CYFS advises that on 20 September 2012, CBC aired a story regarding statements by an RCMP Officer in Natuashish which implied police had to keep children in the cells (who were picked up for solvent abuse) because social workers were overwhelmed. The Officer contacted CBC to clarify this was inaccurate and that, while he had indicated he felt social workers were overwhelmed, youth were only kept in cells if they broke the law. The police response to solvent abuse in the community involves picking up children / youth who are abusing solvents and returning them to their parents where possible. Protective intervention referrals are made to CYFS and, where a responsible adult cannot be found, CYFS is engaged. The Officer asked CBC to provide him with a copy of the original interview, as he believes his comments were distorted, however he has not received a reply.

Action Being Taken:

- There has been a concentrated focus on this issue by CYFS for the last two years, and the Department is now working to put in place the strategies identified. This will be accomplished in cooperation with the community, and CYFS will also continue its efforts to protect children by responding to all referrals and taking the necessary action.
- Provincial, federal and Innu representatives, including the MIFN, will meet at the Innu Round Table (IRT) in St. John's on 04 October 2012. Separate from this, MIFN Chief Simeon Tshakapesh has requested a meeting with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and Health Canada as soon as possible to "discuss the current situation [of the MIFN]". Federal officials have invited the Province to attend.

Prepared by: IGAA, in consultation with CYFS and HCS
Reviewed by: S. Macdonald, CYFS, and S. Dutton, IGAA
Approved by: Minister McGrath
Date: 26 September 2012

