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Nfld. grappling to cope with gas-sniffing Innu

Aboriginal leaders press to have kids removed from community

By Michael MacDonald
The Canadian Press

St. John's, Nfld.

Newfoundland's government is scrambling to respond to aboriginal leaders pleading to have about 40 troubled children evacuated from a Labrador community plagued by substance abuse.

The Innu leaders, who held an emergency meeting Thursday with health officials, insisted all children under 16 caught sniffing gas must be removed from Sheshatshiu for their own safety — even if their parents disapprove.

"This is the first time that I know of ... that we've ever asked the government to take children en masse," Innu Nation president Peter Penashue said from Sheshatshiu, Labrador's largest Innu community with 1,200 residents.

"It's a big step for us."

Penashue said the unprecedented move was needed because the number of young gas sniffers continues to climb at an alarming rate, although he isn't sure why.

In St. John's, Health Minister Roger Grimes said the province would end up in an ugly legal quagmire if its social workers tried to remove children from

their homes without their parents' permission.

"You can't just take a child without some justified cause," he told a news conference.

Unless parents voluntarily give up custody, an assessment is required to determine if the child is in a safe environment, the minister said. If the home is deemed unsafe, then the child can be forcibly removed.

Grimes said he recognized he has to act fast.

"There's a great task to be undertaken in the shortest time frame," he said. "The (Innu) must really feel there's a need for some extraordinary action."

As a result, Grimes said he would send in extra social workers to talk to the 35 to 40 children who have been identified as high-risk addicts. If assessments are needed, they will be completed before Friday afternoon.

Another meeting with health officials is scheduled for 3 p.m. Friday.

Paul Rich, the Innu chief in Sheshatshiu, said gas sniffing has become so commonplace in his home town that the young addicts are now getting high in full view in the middle of the day.

"Before, they used to sniff in the evening," he said. "Some

carry a cigarette in one hand and a gas bag in the other. It's a deadly combination."

The Innu communities in Labrador, which include about 1,800 people, have been plagued by abnormally high suicide rates and solvent abuse for many years.

More than more than half of all teenagers in Sheshatshiu drink, sniff gas, take illegal drugs and have thought about committing suicide, according to a survey by the public health nurse.

Rich said the young people in Sheshatshiu have few outlets to combat chronic boredom and the community doesn't have the resources to help them.

Penashue said once the gas sniffers have been removed from the community, counselling and treatment can then be offered to parents who are suffering from their own addictions.

The Innu have long complained they feel powerless to deal with gas sniffing because they don't have the authority to remove troubled children from their homes.

Penashue has called for changes to provincial and federal legislation that would make gas sniffing an offence. But there has been no movement on that front.

On Thursday, Grimes would not commit to changing the law.

Last spring, an 11-year-old boy from Sheshatshiu died after the gas he was sniffing caught fire, razing his home in central Labrador.

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