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# TAKE OUR KIDS, DESPERATE INNU PLEAD

## GASOLINE-SNIFFING CRISIS

Labrador native leaders call for social workers to intervene

BY ADRIAN HUMPHREYS

A team of social workers is being rushed to a tiny, isolated native village in Labrador after community leaders issued a desperate call for the removal up to 50 children — some as young as six — because of their addiction to gasoline sniffing.

An emergency meeting between social services officials and community leaders in Sheshatahiu was held yesterday after the unprecedented request by Innu leaders, who say the children are "in critical need of protection."

Paul Rich, Sheshatahiu Innu chief, said they want to take the children off the streets and put them in a safe environment.

"Our message is pretty clear: We want the health of these kids to be a priority before anything else happens. If need be, we will have to take them outside the community."

It is a significant departure for a native leader to push for band children to be removed from their homes, especially in light of

the ongoing lawsuits over the abuse of native children while housed in residential schools.

Mr. Rich said it was out of desperation that he and Peter Penashus, leader of the Innu Nation, jointly faxed the call to the government on Wednesday.

The tipping point came that morning when Mr. Rich walked through his community of 1,300 and saw a six-year-old brazenly sniffing gasoline from a plastic bag held around his mouth and nose.

"They are not just doing it at night anymore; they're doing it in the daylight and we see an awful lot of it," he said.

"You see kids with a green garbage bag or a plastic shopping bag. They carry them around with gas inside and they sniff all day. They have a bag of gas in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other...."

"It is breakfast, lunch and supper for them when they're sniff-

ing. They get so high. They don't realize the amount of damage they do to their brain. Pretty soon these kids won't have a brain."

Roger Grimes, the province's Minister of Health and Community Services, said he was shocked at the request but was happy the Innu leadership put the interests of the children ahead of band politics.

"The biggest signal in this is the leaders of the community themselves are suggesting they don't want political correctness to interfere this time, they just want the issue dealt with and they are willing to even stand against the wishes of some of their own community members who would suggest you shouldn't let people take children out of our aboriginal community under any circumstances," he said.

"They are signalling that they are willing to go a step further and acknowledge the problem is so large and so pervasive that the community leaders will not resist this. We can only hope that reflects the view of the individual parents when they are approached about the safe keeping of their children."

The Innu band leaders want social services to seize any child found sniffing solvents and remove them for treatment while community leaders work with their parents on their supervisory skills.

He also said that if the native

## THEY DON'T WANT POLITICAL CORRECTNESS TO INTERFERE THIS TIME

leaders ask for legislative change to make possession of gasoline by minors illegal, then his government is willing to explore the idea.

"We have been reluctant to bring in legislation about those things that are almost exclusively related to the aboriginal communities... without them suggesting that it is the right thing to do," he said.

"There has been resistance in the past on family matters if it is seen as someone else going in and suggesting we know better or have a solution without working

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