

Briefing Note
Department of Health and Community Services

Issue: Reports in the media of children and youth sniffing gas in Natuashish

Background:

- On October 27, 2003, Chief Simeon Tshakapesh called VOCM Night Line appealing for help on behalf of the community of Natuashish for children and youth who are sniffing gas. The Chief reported that about 40 “youngsters” were sniffing gas, some as young as 12 years.
- The Chief was seeking placement of these children and youth outside the community because, in his opinion, existing social systems in Natuashish cannot respond to the problem.
- On October 27, 2003 the Child and Youth Advocate, Mr. Lloyd Wicks, was interviewed by VOCM Radio following his recent trip to Natuashish and other Labrador communities. He acknowledged the need to help the children and youth of Natuashish with their substance and solvent abuse problems and the need for longer term solutions in this community. He said there was a role for both federal and provincial governments, specifically the Department of Health and Community Services (HCS) and the Health Boards, and said he is waiting for the new government to be established before pursuing these issues with the new administration.
- The Canadian Press did a report on this issue which was picked up in the *Telegram*.

Current Status:

- On October 27, 2003 HCS officials spoke with officials of the Health Labrador Corporation (HLC) and determined that the majority of gas sniffers were youth and not children. On October 28th, a conference call was held with senior officials of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Health Canada, the Department of Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs, HCS and HLC. About 35 individuals were identified as sniffing gas. Only seven were children under the age of 16 years. Child, Youth and Family Services is already involved with four of these children and their families and will completing assessments on the remaining three. The others were youths ranging in age from 16 - mid 20's. Of this group, only three were youth who had received treatment at the Grace Hospital.
- For the first time in several year, HLC has two resident social workers in Natuashish. They have made themselves know in the community and attended community meetings, and are assessing referrals as they receive them. Health Canada staff have also been in the community and confirm the substance abuse problems.

Analysis:

- Based on reports from HLC and HC staff, the Chief of the Mushuau Innu is relaying inaccurate information to the public about the situation in the community. Only a small

number of children are gas sniffing. Most of those sniffing gas are over the age of 16 years and are not within the legislated mandate of the Child Youth and Family Services program.

- Developing responses that would meet the needs of these young adults would require individual assessment and planning. The youths would also need to consent to receiving any services.
- It is anticipated that the media interviews/reports may be directly related to the Innu's attempts to put pressure on the federal government to build a safe house/shelter/residential treatment and detox center in the community.
- HC is preparing for a community meeting in Natuashish to try and engage the community in addressing these issues. Other partners in the community will be in attendance including HLC, Band members and RCMP members.
- The problems being faced by this community are systemic and will require continued interventions from the various partners involved with the Innu.

Next Steps:

- There will be an interagency meeting on October 29 to prepare for the community meeting in Natuashish on November 4th.
- Health Canada, in partnership with HLC and other community agencies, will be attending the community meeting on November 4th in an effort to engage the community in finding solutions.
- Contact will be made with the Department of Justice and the RCMP to determine their roles in dealing with substance abuse.
- Communications officers for Health Canada, INAC and the Department of Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs will consult around a joint communications response.
- Health Canada and Health Labrador Corporation will contact the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate to ensure that the Office has accurate information regarding the situation and the plans to address the issues.
- Another conference call with INAC, Health Canada, Health Labrador Corporation and HCS will take place on Friday, November 7th.

Prepared by: Health and Community Services in consultation with Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs

Reviewed by: Cabinet Secretariat

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