

'People have to move sometimes': Chretien weighs in on Attawapiskat crisis

CTV Northern Ontario: Ideas for solutions



Youth in Attawapiskat are stepping up to have their voices heard. Natalie van Rooy reports.

CTV Northern Ontario: Healing foundation



Man believes his Aboriginal healing foundation would have helped with Attawapiskat. Jessica Cosselin reports.

Suicide a silent epidemic



Efforts are being made to reduce the number of suicides on Saskatchewan reserves as the emergency in Attawapiskat gets national attention.



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Former prime minister Jean Chretien has weighed in on the crisis in Attawapiskat, suggesting that the residents of the struggling First Nation should move elsewhere.

Chretien was responding to a question on whether the 2,000 residents of Attawapiskat should stay and have resources brought into the northern Ontario community.

"People have to move sometimes," said Chretien, who was on Parliament Hill Tuesday on unrelated business. "It's desirable to stay if they want to stay, but it's not always possible."

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Ottawa is trying to figure out how to help Attawapiskat after local officials declared a state of emergency earlier this week after a spike in suicide attempts.

Local health officials later confirmed that more than 15 youth had planned to overdose on prescription pills as part of two separate suicide pacts.

Officials on the reserve say that the situation is dire, and blamed poverty and a lack of resources.

As the crisis continues to make headlines, health workers and politicians converged on Attawapiskat on Wednesday, to figure out ways to get mental-health aid into the community. Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins, who toured the community, announced the province will provide \$2 million to pay for round-the-clock mental health

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Former prime minister Jean Chretien leaves the swearing-in ceremony for seven new senators on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Tuesday April 12, 2016. (Adrian Wyld é THE CANADIAN PRESS)

services in Attawapiskat.

The crisis, which has been gaining worldwide attention, was the focus of a rare emergency debate in the House of Commons on Tuesday night as the federal government tries to figure out how to help the people of Attawapiskat.

NDP MP Charlie Angus, whose riding includes Attawapiskat, said during the debate that the solutions must come from the community itself.

He said most Canadians do not understand the relationship many indigenous people in Canada have to their land.

"We need to put the resources there to help, because they know where the solutions are," said Angus, who is also the NDP's northern affairs critic.

During Tuesday's emergency debate, NDP MP Niki Ashton suggested that encouraging aboriginals to relocate was tackling the matter from an "assimilationist" viewpoint.

"A former prime minister of Canada, when asked about the suicide epidemic in Attawapiskat perpetuated such assimilationist views in suggesting that First Nations peoples should just leave their communities," Ashton said, adding, "First Nations people, and many people that work in solidarity with First Nations peoples know that these views are unacceptable."

Newly appointed Sen. Murray Sinclair, who led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that examined the effects of Canada's residential schools, said relocation is up to the people of Attawapiskat.

"I don't think that's your decision or my decision to make, I think it's their decision," Sinclair told reporters.

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett did not directly comment Wednesday on whether it was appropriate for Chretien to suggest relocation. She only told reporters that she thought "the context probably wasn't there" and that "everyone is entitled to their opinion."

Bennett went on to say that she wants the children of Attawapiskat and other aboriginal communities to live with hope. "It is about people's attachment to the land, people having the right to live a tradition life but also with economic opportunities," she said.

Health Minister Jane Philpott said after an "an incredibly difficult and emotional" week for the people of Attawapiskat, there are signs of hope, including news of provincial funding and the possible forming of a council and action group led by Attawapiskat youth.

Philpott added that there is a "tremendous amount of work to be done, but we're determined to get it done."

Amy Bombay, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Dalhousie University, suggested that moving away from Attawapiskat is not necessarily a solution. In an interview on CTV News Channel on Wednesday, Bombay cited a recent study that showed similar levels of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among both off-reserve and on-reserve aboriginals.

"We know it's not just about living in reserve communities, there's a lot more to it," Bombay said. "And part of it for those living on-reserve is, these policies that only affect them and they're suffering from specific injustices, but First Nations living off-reserve are also still dealing with the long-term effects on colonization and residential schools."

The people of Attawapiskat, as well as Canada's aboriginal population in general, need adequate, long-term mental health supports, added Bombay, who has led projects investigating factors related to mental health among indigenous adults and youth.

Protest in Toronto

Calls are growing to find a long-term solution for the people of Attawapiskat.

In Toronto, protesters with the Idle No More and Black Lives Matter movements entered the offices of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada to demand that more resources be sent to the struggling community.

They said they will remain in the office until real measures are taken to help support the community.

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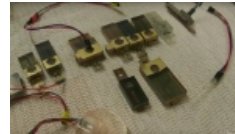
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