

This letter was published in the Prince Albert Daily Herald in February, 2017

Letter to the Editor

The Prince Albert branch of the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers (SASW) voice our collective concern about the recent suicides of young people in our province's north. SASW is a member-based organization that governs the profession of social work. As a profession and an association, we promote social justice through collective advocacy and aspire to contribute to human and social well-being.

First, we want to extend our deepest condolences and support to families, friends and communities who have recently lost loved ones to suicide. While the recent suicides of the six First Nations youth in the North highlight the growing issue of suicides and mental health in Northern Saskatchewan, it is by no means a new issue. For those of you who are in the role of providing supports through counselling and crisis work, know that your work is valued and appreciated.

Many of our members here in Prince Albert and surrounding areas either have worked or do work directly with First Nations and other Indigenous people who are striving to recover from the devastating effects of the oppression, colonization and cultural genocide. The effects of which are still alive and well due to inadequate responses and attitudes of our governments and our society at large.

We often hear that Indigenous people should just "get over what has happened in the past" and to "stop using the past as an excuse to not get on with life." We most often hear this from people who have no real understanding of the breadth and depth of destruction that has been caused in people's lives.

In response to this idea and to the people who say such things, we would like to respond that when you are able to directly see the actual harm that has affected First Nations families, you get a very different idea of the complexities and difficulties involved with healing from the devastation that has been caused. We would like to point out that the racist and oppressive ideas that led to and perpetuate the problems that lead to many of the issues facing Indigenous people are alive and well amongst us. Oppression and colonization are not things of the past. We need only look at the huge discrepancies between funding to education and the Child and Family Services agencies operating in First Nations communities, compared to the funding for services off reserve, to make this point.

Following a crisis in our north we see different levels of government sending help to the communities. We see this as a reactive response, which is far short of what needs to happen. Reactive support can offer some positive connections and some good outcomes can be achieved. However, sustainable change that allows communities to heal requires strong, community-led preventative work. Qualified staff and opportunities for local helpers to get training and mental health support are essential. Paying attention to and addressing the social determinants of health in the northern communities are imperative. These are some of the real solutions; ones that should be undertaken by governments if they have the genuine desire to contribute to meaningful change for people in our northern communities.

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