



# Attawapiskat in Crisis

**T**he Attawapiskat First Nation is an isolated community located in northern Ontario at the mouth of the Attawapiskat River on James Bay. Attawapiskat has a population of approximately 2,000 people, but lacks the resources necessary to properly support the mental and physical health of its residents.

A state of emergency was declared in Attawapiskat after 11 people attempted suicide on April 9, 2016. Just two days later, a group of children including an eight-year-old were brought to the local hospital and assessed amid concerns they were part of a suicide pact.

During March of 2016, there were 28 suicide attempts. The number of attempted suicides continues to grow, with over 100 Attawapiskat citizens trying to kill themselves since September.

## Reasons cited for suicide attempts:

- ▶ Overcrowding – up to 15 people living in one home
- ▶ Bullying at School
- ▶ Residential Schools
- ▶ Physical, Sexual and Drug Abuse

The reserve was without a permanent mental health worker for nine months due to a housing shortage. The new worker started on April 18, nine days after the 11 people attempted suicide in one day.

Additionally, the local 15-bed hospital has no full-time doctors and only has the ability to care for one quarter of the needs of its residents. Doctors are periodically flown in – four days a week, three weeks per month

– and only two nurses are on duty on evenings and weekends. The hospital is now overrun by the amount of suicide attempts.

## First Nations Suicide Statistics:

- ▶ Nearly one-quarter of First Nations adults have contemplated suicide
- ▶ Suicides rates are five to six times higher among First Nations Youth aged 15 to 24 than non-aboriginal youth
- ▶ Young First Nations males have a suicide rate of 126 per 100,000 people vs. 24 per 100,000 for non-aboriginal males
- ▶ First Nations people are more likely to report moderate or high levels of psychological distress

Several years ago, Ottawa turned over the duty of healthcare delivery to the provincially funded Weeneebayko Area Health Authority. After the state of emergency was declared, federal and Ontario health ministers announced the Weeneebayko hospital would fly in a crisis team including mental health nurses and social workers.

Attawapiskat is in crisis. It is highly apparent additional efforts need to be made to hire mental health workers to permanently serve the community and its students.