



## What is the history of this issue and how does it impact First Nations?

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to significantly impact our lives, including health care systems, the economy, schools, communities, and families. First Nations have been disproportionately impacted throughout the pandemic, with case rates frequently exceeding those of the general Canadian population. While it appears that we are moving past the pandemic stage of COVID-19, there remains a great deal of uncertainty. Despite the unpredictability, COVID-19 vaccines remain effective in reducing severe symptoms, hospitalizations, and death, and that is a reason for maintaining hope and optimism. The pandemic has taken a significant toll on our mental well-being, we must be gentle with ourselves and continue to care for our loved ones and fellow community members. It is important to thank all who are working to protect us during the pandemic and putting themselves at risk on the front lines.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted existing inequities in housing, health care and supportive infrastructure in First Nations and underscored the health disparities that have made First Nations vulnerable to poorer outcomes from COVID-19. It has demonstrated that the health and well-being of First Nations in Canada continues to be affected by colonial governing structures, inconsistent policies, and underfunding compared to non-Indigenous communities. It has also shown that First Nations responded to the pandemic by drawing on their strengths of culture, community, and innovation. Pandemic responses supporting First Nations were shown to be most effective when First Nations were leaders and equal partners in their interventions.

## How has the AFN's recent advocacy affected this area?

The AFN Executive Committee established the COVID-19 Task Force by way of a motion at a duly convened meeting on April 21, 2020 to ensure the unique needs of First Nations are addressed. The Task Force has been supported by working groups throughout the pandemic. Resolution 03/2020 provides the mandate for the Task Force to provide ongoing support to the AFN Executive Committee for the duration of the pandemic to support the mitigation of impacts of COVID-19 on First Nations.

The Task Force advocated for First Nations prioritization in the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, inclusion of First Nations at COVID-19 decision-making tables and highlighted the need for ongoing COVID-19 support resources. The Task Force emphasized the need for provinces and territories to engage, communicate and work closely with First Nations communities and leaders, including urban and off-reserve organizations, to support the vaccine roll-out campaigns. The



Task Force worked to highlight funding needs and advocated for First Nations' interests at numerous working groups with federal government partners, including those specifically related to COVID-19, providing an opportunity for consistent input into discussions related to the COVID-19 response. Through these efforts, First Nations' concerns have been brought forward.

The Task Force completed two key advocacy papers with the support of the AFN Data and Response and Recovery working groups. *'Lost in the Numbers: Learning about First Nations Health Data from the COVID-19 pandemic'* focuses on data governance through the lens and experiences of COVID-19. *'A New Path Forward: Supporting First Nations throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic'* speaks to the larger systemic issues that led to First Nations being more vulnerable to poor outcomes from COVID-19 and inequities that require action and change, as well as highlighting First Nations-led responses and innovations.

The Task Force hosted the AFN COVID-19 Virtual Forum on September 16, 21 and 23, 2021. A final report from the meeting is now available, and it will help to inform advocacy efforts moving forward.

Funding for the AFN Regions through the Task Force proposals supported AFN regional offices in responding to their regional COVID-19 needs. While there are unique structures and priorities within each region, the funds were consistently utilized by the AFN regional offices to provide capacity support, including support for participation at federal, provincial, and territorial meetings, and helping to fund regional specific communications, research, and advocacy work.

### Where do we hope to go in the future?

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The AFN has emphasized that the work of the Task Force moving forward must focus on supporting post-pandemic recovery for First Nations through the development of a national post-pandemic recovery plan. Given the cross-sectoral implications of recovery, content experts from across the AFN Secretariat will support the Task Force through providing expertise and input into this work, examining lessons learned and assessing impacts by utilizing the Task Force's discussion paper *'A New Path Forward'* as a starting point. This work will be led by the Health, Economic Development, and Emergency Management sectors.

As stated in the AFN's *Healing Path Forward*: "As the country and the rest of the world face the economic challenge of rebuilding following the COVID-19 pandemic, we must ensure First Nations are at the center of this effort and that every single person in this country is aware of how First Nations priorities impact Canada's success."