

## Issue Update – 2023 AGA

### Social Branch – Health Sector

#### Issue: First Nations Health

#### History

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The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Health Sector continues to push for transformative change through sustainable adequate funding, capacity building, and improved relationships to support First Nations-led healthcare services and programs. Underpinning this approach is the recognition of inherent First Nations and Treaty Rights to health. AFN resolutions passed by First Nations-in-Assembly mandate Health Sector work. The Chiefs Committee on Health (CCOH), the First Nations Health Technicians Network, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) all provide further guidance to the AFN Health Sector related to this critical work.

First Nations' health and wellness continue to be compromised by deficits across the social determinants of health, evident in poverty, overcrowded housing, and a piecemeal approach to health services and programming. In national and regional dialogues, First Nations have articulated that true health and wellness systems are strengths-based, rooted in cultures, guided by First Nations themselves, and include the Treaty Right to health as foundations to move towards resilience and growth.

#### AFN's recent advocacy

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The proposed distinctions-based Indigenous health legislation is a crucial file with the potential to significantly improve First Nations health outcomes. Resolution #16/2023, *Distinctions-Based Indigenous Health Legislation* provides a mandate for the AFN to continue to collaborate with the federal government on developing health legislation, provided the legislation is consistent with UNDRIP and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples principles; that Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada are part of the legislative process (given the need to recognize the Treaty right to Health); and that the work is led by a newly established Leadership Table, mainly consisting of the CCOH members. The AFN Health Sector continues to provide analysis and updates to First Nations to keep them informed on the process, and meeting with federal government representatives to help guide the federal work on this file. The AFN Health Sector held a national health legislation forum on May 31 and June 1 to further the national dialogue on this topic.

Resolution 10/2018, *Resources for Engagement on Distinct First Nations Accessibility Legislation*, directs the AFN to work with Employment Social Development Canada (ESDC) to develop distinct First Nations accessibility legislation. The AFN secured funding to advance dialogue circles with First Nations persons living with disabilities to gather input on options to inform a distinct First

Nations accessibility law and to develop a draft framework to determine the state of accessibility in First Nations. These dialogue sessions align with funding from the ESDC and AFN Engagement Protocol Agreement to inform Canada's Disability Inclusion Action Plan and National Autism Strategy, which are core to advance elements for a draft accessible framework. The Health Sector also continues to work with other AFN sectors to ensure all large meetings and forums are inclusive to accessible audiences and to help position the AFN as a national model for accessibility for First Nations across Canada.

First Nation clients, leadership, and service providers continue to encounter challenges with the Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program, as identified by NIHB Navigators (representing all regions), as well as the 2022 Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs Report 6 – *Moving Towards Improving the Health of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: Accessibility and Administration of the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program*. Resolution 61/2022, *Reforming Non-Insured Health Benefits Travel Policies*, directs the AFN to continue the NIHB Joint Review and to engage First Nations in isolated, northern, and remote communities to fully comprehend the barriers to equitable health care. The AFN will continue to work with and advocate for First Nations to address NIHB program challenges through advocacy tables, such as the NIHB Navigators and NIHB-AFN Joint Review Steering Committee.

Other key advocacy areas include mental health wellness and substance misuse – ensuring First Nations perspectives are central, and there is a renewed focus on strengths-based and land-based healing, elimination of tuberculosis, anti-Indigenous racism in the health care system, COVID-19 recovery, digital health services, data sovereignty, and collaborating with other AFN sectors to address social determinants of health.

## Next Steps

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The AFN Health Sector will prioritize several engagement processes with First Nations over the coming months. These processes include:

- Co-drafting of distinctions-based Indigenous health legislation, particularly in Fall 2023 (and supporting AFN's Leadership Table).
- Working with First Nations regions and Indigenous Services Canada to determine the process for dispersing the Indigenous Health Equity Fund (\$2 billion over ten years) funding.
- Collaborating with AFN Social Development Sector on policy recommendations for the Government of Canada on a wholistic long-term and continuing care framework (by reforming the Assisted Living and First Nations and Inuit Home and Community Care Programs).
- Hosting a national roundtable to discuss challenges and identify solutions for the NIHB program.

Finally, the AFN Health Sector will be working with the Chiefs Committee on Health and other First Nations representatives to advocate for significant investments in First Nations health funding in Budget 2024 as part of the Pre-Budget Submissions process. This work will include

supporting AFN leadership in meeting with federal government representatives and officials to articulate targeted funding needs that are essential to improve health outcomes for First Nations.