

Makivik Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health

COVID and Nunavik: Needs of Nunavik Inuit in the Face of a Pandemic

This brief will discuss the immediate federal and provincial response to the COVID 19 crisis in Nunavik from Makivik's perspective and bring forward some thoughts about the successes and deficits this crisis has exposed.

Recommendations are made to strengthen Canada's response now and, in the future, to make certain the rights of Nunavik Inuit are respected as we work to protect our communities and peoples.

Makivik response to COVID's unique challenges in Nunavik

Makivik is the body which represents the rights of Inuit in Nunavik – the Inuit territory of Northern Quebec. Makivik is an organization mandated to speak on behalf of the Inuit of Nunavik, and protect the rights, interests and financial compensation provided by the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), the first comprehensive Inuit land claim in Canada, and the more recent offshore Nunavik Inuit Land Claim Agreement (NILCA) that came into effect in 2008.

Makivik's negotiations with Canada continue. In June 2019, I signed an MOU on Self-Determination with Minister Bennett. Under that process, we will discuss Canada's respect for the Nunavik Inuit right to self-determination and jurisdiction over our homeland. This is the next step in Nunavik Inuit's path towards self-determination and becoming a self-governing Inuit nation.

The Corporation's distinct mandates range from owning large profitable business enterprises and generating jobs, to social economic development and improved housing conditions, to the protection of the Inuit language and culture and the natural environment and protecting the rights of Inuit in Nunavik.

COVID-19 brought several political and economic challenges to the region.

We are the first Inuit region to have a serious outbreak of COVID-19. At the time of writing this submission, the community of Puvirnituk currently has 11 active cases and Inukjuak has one.

The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted the inequality and inadequacy of resources available to Nunavik Inuit. Many of the communities are serviced by only a small nursing station. There are only two hospitals for our region, and these are essentially clinics that do not have the capacity

to treat serious conditions. People with serious medical emergencies are medevac'd from their community on planes and brought to Montreal.

Under the JBNQA responsibilities for health care for 14 Inuit communities were handed to a regional health board which is now called the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services (NRBHSS). The principal mandate of the NRBHSS is to organize health and social service programs in the region. The NRBHSS is a public government agency not an ethnic based agency. For this reason, Makivik must make certain Inuit are taken care of.

Recommendation 1: The federal and provincial government must work primarily through birthright representative Inuit organizations daily, especially so in a crisis.

Governed by an Act of the Quebec Government (the *Act respecting Health Services and Social Services*), the NRBHSS is a public body, non-ethnic organization serving the needs of Nunavik residents. Because the NRBHSS must follow the Act and the directives coming from provincial health authorities, it does not always reflect the unique interests of Inuit in Nunavik. There must be regular and ongoing communication between Inuit political leaders and the Provincial health authorities.

Makivik's role is to protect the rights of Inuit. This is especially so in a crisis.

To address gaps in communication, Inuit have created a new body called Nunavik Leaders Group (NLG) and is composed of the president/chairperson of each of the four regional organizations of Nunavik (Kativik Regional Government, Kativik School Board, NRBHSS, Makivik).

Recommendation 2: Recognize the value of Canadian North and Air Inuit as critical Infrastructure in Nunavik and:

- **Support a financial package for northern airlines recognizing the unique needs**
- **Support regulations that ensures safe shipping for Arctic re-supply**

Canadian North and Air Inuit are critical pieces of our economy and provide essential services, Air Travel, and Cargo, in our remote communities, bringing in the food and supplies needed to operate the community networks and all aspects of life. There are no roads or highways to the extreme parts of the north. Air is the only way to access the Nunavik Region of Quebec and its Inuit communities. Our airlines need support so they can serve our communities and be viable for the essential services they provide.

As the lifeline of Nunavik, Canadian North and Air Inuit do not have the option of parking their airplanes as is being done by many airlines in Canada during COVID-19. The government has issued a general travel ban, which means that means aircraft must fly practically empty except for food and cargo, something the north cannot do without. They are providing essential

services for the north – carrying up medical staff and medical supplies at a great financial loss, which the company and its Inuit owners are expected to fund with their own resources. It's an essential service that requires Federal and Provincial input financially.

Recommendation 3: The Government of Canada should work with Inuit organizations to build funding solutions that meet the needs of Inuit. The funding strategy should be comprehensive and look at long term solutions, rather than ad hoc and disjointed.

On March 18th, the government announced a \$305M Indigenous Communities Support fund to provide relief related to COVID-19. The four Inuit representative/rights organizations and governments (Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR), Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), Makivik and Nunatsiavut Government) were allocated \$45M of this money, which was divided between the regions according to a formula approved by Inuit leadership.

There is a \$5000 limit on expenditures for capital assets (unless approved by the Minister directly). This means it would not be possible to use the funds for community freezers or tents and small buildings to house people who need to self-isolate or quarantine. In communities where 25% of people do not have their own housing and must live with relatives in an overcrowded dwelling, self-isolation is very difficult to manage. We have not had clear, concrete support that would have enabled Makivik to respond to the Inuit. This is unacceptable.

Recommendation 4: Nunavik should be considered a territory or funded through Inuit Nunangat policy in times of federal funding and not rely on Quebec provincial measures

Although Inuit Nunangat is a single Inuit homeland/region, the government, whether federal, provincial or territorial, must deal directly with the organizations that represent the rights of the Inuit in that region. Therefore, the four rights holding organizations are the first point of contact. The National Inuit organization, called Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) is our national voice on matters of shared concern, but it is not a government and it does not represent the rights of Nunavik beneficiaries.

This geographical fact alone makes it imperative that the Government of Canada view Inuit as one region for policy decision and include all Inuit equally.

Recommendation 5: Housing in Nunavik is still at critical levels, there is no private housing market, and the military could intervene by building housing units eliminate the housing deficit in the region.

We are dealing with a COVID-19 pandemic in an area where housing shortage is a major problem. In Inuit communities some homes are shared by 3-4 families, a perfect recipe for spreading a virus without control.

Recommendation 6: Canada must move quickly and prioritize negotiations for self-government and provide the necessary funding so Inuit may achieve the needed structures and funding to achieve equality withal Canadians.

Having an Inuit government in Nunavik would solve many of the challenges we are currently facing. A Nunavik Government, built on Inuit values and knowledge, would be well-positioned to quickly implement culturally appropriate responses to the COVID crisis. Furthermore, it would allow Inuit of Nunavik to coordinate their efforts more effectively. The Nunavik Leaders Group mentioned above goes some distance in coordinating the various organizations' efforts, but it is a major challenge overcoming the administrative and governing structures in Nunavik that are the product of the now dated JBNQA regime.

Funding is critical to the success of a Nunavik Government, specifically the increased self-sufficiency in the distribution of funds. Self-determination funding will allow for more coordinated and streamlined financing, allowing for a coordinated regional governing strategy rather than piecemeal funding to many different organizations. To ensure that we overcome the challenges discussed above, with the constant insecurity of federal funding, Inuit of Nunavik require reliable block funding from the federal government to properly govern and administer programs and services to our people.