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National Chief Congratulates Weeneebayko Area First Nations on Historic Health Deal

OTTAWA - Today, Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief Phil Fontaine congratulated First Nations in the Northern Ontario Weeneebayko region on successfully concluding a deal that will lead to better health care services.

The deal, known as the Weeneebayko Area Health Integration Framework Agreement, integrates federal and provincial health services under a First Nations community-controlled organization. The agreement will streamline health care services and give First Nations greater control over them.

"We've always said First Nations control over health care services is key to giving our citizens the quality and timely health care they need," National Chief Phil Fontaine said. "In this case, we're seeing a real investment in these communities' infrastructure so they can determine how best to meet their urgent and ongoing needs."

The deal has been 22 years in the making.

"It's a historic day. This is what the chiefs visualized more than 20 years ago. We've had a lot of people falling through the cracks, an epidemic of people losing limbs or going blind from diabetes," said Chief Jonathon Solomon of the Kashechewan First Nation, one of five First Nations to sign the deal. "This is going to address the many gaps causing us problems, plus it's going to invest capital into the community. This model can become a model for other First Nations."

AFN Ontario Regional Chief Angus Toulouse also praised the deal.

"Whenever we see First Nations control over health services increasing, community health improves," Regional Chief Angus Toulouse said. "It's just good sense to communities who know first hand what their health care problems are to use their expertise to design their own health care system."

The Weeneebayko Area is made up of remote communities along the western Ontario shores of James Bay and Hudson Bay. Approximately 10,000 predominantly Cree residents living on and off reserve fall under the agreement. Traditionally, both federal and provincial governments provide health services in the area that often resulted in a wasteful overlapping or duplication of some services, while other needed health services were underfunded or not offered at all.

The Agreement will:

- Integrate federal and provincial health services under a community-controlled organization;
- Provide capital funding for new projects;
- Incorporate traditional healing practices into health care;
- Allow cost sharing on certain health care services to create greater economies of scale;
- Amalgamate the federal Weeneebayko General Hospital with the provincial James Bay General Hospital.

Over time, the agreement will evolve to expand public health and mental health initiatives, demographics and performance standards.

First Nations covered by the agreement include: the Attawapiskat First Nation, Fort Albany First Nation, Kashechewan First Nation, and the Weenusk First Nation. Mocrebec Non-profit Development Corporation and the Corporation of the town of Moosonee are also parties to the deal.

The deal was signed late Friday afternoon with provincial and federal governments

represented by Ontario Health Minister George Smitherman and federal Health Minister Tony Clement.

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