



Ontario



1 April 2021

Hon. Sylvia Jones  
Ministry of the Solicitor General  
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## Open Letter: Safe Release of Indigenous Women, Transgender, and Two-Spirit People from Prison

Dear Solicitor General Jones,

We are a collective of community members, Elders, Healers, front-line workers, researchers, educators, and students that advocate for the rights of Indigenous people in contact with the Canadian criminal justice system. We are writing to call upon the Government of Ontario and the Ministry of the Solicitor General to address the unsafe release of Indigenous women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people from prison and take immediate action to ensure that individuals are released in a timely and safe manner.

In a community-led response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society (TWHLS) launched a program to assist individuals being discharged from correctional facilities. On multiple occasions over the past several months, TWHLS has responded to calls for assistance from Indigenous women who are released from these institutions with no transportation, shelter, or resources late into the night. In one such instance, a TWHLS outreach worker arrived at the Vanier Centre for Women at 11 am, and by 8 pm the woman had not been released and having received no communication from the institution, the outreach worker concluded that the woman was not being released. Later, the staff learned that the woman had been released at 10:30 pm. TWHLS is now waiting until 9 pm for women as the last two women we picked up were released at 8PM and 7:30 pm.

To release anyone, particularly Indigenous women, with little consideration of timing, resources and re-entry plan is **irresponsible and dangerous**. Canada is the site of a crisis of deaths and disappearances of thousands of Indigenous women and girls. **The 2019 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) highlighted how Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people leaving prison become entrapped in a cycle of incarceration, are at greater risk of traffickers who use the carceral system to target, lure, and exploit women who do not have access to the supports necessary to return home safely.**

We have frontline exposure to how correctional institutions under the oversight of the Ministry of the Solicitor General have released women into precarious circumstances – actions which are in direct opposition to the province's 2020 commitment to respond to the MMIWG National

Inquiry's Calls for Justice. Often Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people across Ontario and Canada are released from correctional institutions without resources for a safe re-entry to their families or communities. On January 23, 2021, Kimberly Squirrel was found frozen to death in Saskatoon just three days after being released from a provincial correctional facility. No one in her family was notified of her release despite Kimberly's known struggles with her mental health and substance use. Kimberly's death was entirely preventable.

If the provincial government is truly committed to ending violence against Indigenous communities, the release of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people would be one of care and that of a thoughtful process to address recommendations and reduce risk and harm. Under current circumstances, it is only a matter of time before another Indigenous woman is harmed as a direct result of the Ministry of Solicitor General's lack of oversight, inefficiency, and disregard for the appropriate policy for the safety of Indigenous women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people.

The urgency of these issues is further underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on Indigenous communities. Without re-entry plans and adequate safety measures or communication in place, individuals are released in precarious circumstances without access to shelter or are unable to safely self-isolate to prevent spreading the virus to family and community.

We call upon the Government of Ontario and the Ministry of the Solicitor General to immediately:

1. Develop release and re-entry plans for all releasees, including provisions for adequate financial and transitional supports;
2. Publicly release current policies and measures in place for the safe release of Indigenous women in response to the National MMIWG report; and,
3. Publicly release COVID-19 safety measures for individuals prior to and upon release from correctional institutions

Indigenous women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people deserved to be valued. Indigenous ***lives*** deserve to be valued.

In solidarity,

Aboriginal Legal Services  
Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division  
Elizabeth Fry Kingston  
Elizabeth Fry Toronto  
Native Women's Resource Centre Toronto  
PASAN  
Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society  
Tipi Moza (Iron Homes)  
Waakebiness-Bryce Institute for Indigenous Health, University of Toronto

cc: Hon. Doug Downey, Attorney General  
Hon. Christine Elliot, Minister of Health  
Hon. Greg Rickford, Minister of Indigenous Affairs  
David Corbett, Deputy Attorney General, Attorney General  
Helen Angus, Deputy Minister, Health  
Shawn Batiste, Deputy Minister, Indigenous Affairs  
Mario Di Tommaso, Deputy Solicitor General, Community Safety