



For Immediate Release

Needs of Aboriginal People Living in Urban Centres Ignored on Agenda for First Ministers' Meeting on Aboriginal Affairs -- *National Association Urges Action Plan to Address Crisis*

OTTAWA, November 18, 2005 – While census data show the number of Aboriginal people living in most urban centres doubled between 1981 and 2001, and in many cases more than tripled, funding for services to help them transition to urban lifestyles has not kept pace, according to the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC), the primary Aboriginal provider of programs and services to Aboriginals living in cities and towns. The number of Aboriginal people living in urban centres increased from 47 per cent in 1996 to 49 per cent in 2001. Today, 52 per cent of Aboriginals live in cities.

“National Aboriginal leaders and governments must act to address the serious deficiencies in the delivery of services and programs to Aboriginal people living in urban areas. This is absolutely essential if Aboriginal individuals and families are to achieve their aspirations for a decent quality of life,” said Vera Pawis Tabobondung, President of the NAFC. She noted that the needs of urban Aboriginals have not been given adequate consideration during the 18-month process leading up to next week’s First Ministers’ meeting on Aboriginal issues. No other organization has the experience -- or capacity -- in service delivery to urban Aboriginals that Friendship Centres have, yet the NAFC, with all of its front-line expertise in communities across Canada, was granted only occasional participant status during the policy development process leading to next week’s meeting.

Aboriginal people living in urban centres face overwhelming problems that are rooted in cultural dislocation and powerlessness, discrimination and poverty. “Canada is creating a permanent underclass that needs specific services and interventions, yet nothing on the agenda specifically addresses these people,” Pawis Tabobondung said.

The NAFC called on the federal government to develop a concrete and adequately resourced *Action Plan* to address the social, cultural and economic needs of urban Aboriginals. The Government of Canada’s present *Urban Aboriginal Strategy* is woefully inadequate, providing only for pilot projects in a small number of communities across Canada. The NAFC also said that public services for Aboriginal people living off-reserve must be adapted to their culture and lifestyles and that this should not solely be determined by federal, provincial and municipal bureaucracies.

“The most effective way to respond to the needs of Aboriginal people in urban centres is to provide services staffed and administered by Aboriginal people. Friendship Centres should have an active role in the conception, design and delivery of programs and services for urban Aboriginals,” said the NAFC President. “To this end, a *Service Delivery Accord* that carefully defines the role that Friendship Centres will need to perform in order to overcome what all governments have acknowledged are shameful conditions should be signed between the NAFC and the Government of Canada,” Pawis Tabobondung said.

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Speaking on behalf of the NAFC's Aboriginal Youth Council, President Alexis Wawanoloath said "Aboriginal youth want to contribute meaningfully to their communities and broader society as well. We need to move away from the current 'crisis intervention model' and instead create real opportunities for Aboriginal youth."

A 2003 *Report on Urban Aboriginal Youth* by the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples also concluded "solutions need to be proactive and preventative, rather than coming into action only when a problem or need becomes acute."

Half of all Aboriginal people are under age 25, compared to age 38 for the general population. Fifty-one per cent of the First Nation population have less than a high school graduation certificate compared to 31 per cent of all Canadians. The next 10 years will see the birth of over 315,000 Aboriginal children.

Wawanoloath said that Aboriginal peoples are attracted to the opportunities offered by a predominately urban Canada and there is little reason to think this trend will change. To meet the needs of Aboriginal youth living in urban centres, the NAFC is calling for: the removal of status-based restrictions to make post-secondary student support available to all Aboriginal youth, including the Métis and non-status Indians; the development of a national strategy with specific measures to address high school drop-out rates among urban Aboriginal youth; employment and training programs for urban Aboriginal youth that provide long-term strategic training in accredited programs; increased funding for the *Urban Multipurpose Aboriginal Youth Centres* program; and the establishment of a national 'clearing house' of Aboriginal youth programs and best practices.

The 2001 *Census* found one-quarter of Aboriginal peoples live in just 11 Canadian cities (in order): Winnipeg; Edmonton; Vancouver; Calgary; Toronto; Saskatoon; Regina; Ottawa-Gatineau; Prince Albert; Montreal and Victoria. The 55,755 Aboriginal people in Winnipeg are 8.4 per cent of that city's total population. Saskatoon's 20,275 Aboriginal people represent 9.1 per cent of that city's population. By comparison, Toronto and Montreal's Aboriginal populations of 20,300 and 11,085 respectively disappear in these cities' much larger urban backdrop, comprising 0.4 per cent of Toronto's population and 0.3 per cent of Montreal's.

For more than 50 years, Native Friendship Centres -- located in all provinces and territories, with the exception of Prince Edward Island -- have played a vital role in assisting Aboriginal individuals and families integrate into urban communities after relocating from their reserves. Friendship Centres provide assistance with education, skills training, employment, housing and health care, and serve as a reciprocal link to other community organizations.

Friendship Centres are recognized by local service agencies as an important part of the final social safety net for urban Aboriginals who continue to struggle. In 2004, 116 Centres assisted more than 750,000 individuals through 900 separate programs and services. For more information, please visit www.nafc.ca.

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