

Ontario Public Health Association statement on the discovery of the remains of 215 children in British Columbia

June 1, 2021 — The staff, Board of Directors, and members of the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) are devastated by the recently acknowledged remains of 215 children found at the site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation. We recognize this is reflective of the colonial genocide and ongoing racist treatment of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island, including Ontario. We recognize this unmarked, undocumented burial site acknowledgement and public confirmation re-ignites trauma and mourning for Indigenous peoples. Our deepest condolences go to Chief Rosanne Casimir, her community, and the Indigenous peoples around Turtle Island and globally.

Indigenous communities and advocates have long communicated the existence of burials at residential schools. Many Indigenous children did not return home. The recent findings at the site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation are a strong reminder of the necessity to deliver on the Call to Actions in [The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada \(TRC\)](#). Below are the specific Call to Actions from the “*Where are the children buried? Cemeteries and unmarked burials,*” section of this report:

“73) We call upon the federal government to work with the churches and Aboriginal community leaders to inform the families of children who died at residential schools of the child’s burial location, and to respond to families’ wishes for appropriate commemoration ceremonies and markers, and reburial in home communities where requested.

74) We call upon the federal government to work with churches, Aboriginal communities, and former residential school students to establish and maintain an online registry of residential school cemeteries, including, where possible, plot maps showing the location of deceased residential school children.

75) We call upon the federal government to work with provincial, territorial, and municipal governments, churches, Aboriginal communities, former residential school students, and current landowners to develop and implement strategies and procedures for the ongoing identification, documentation, maintenance, commemoration, and protection of residential school cemeteries or other sites at which residential school children were buried. This is to include the provision of appropriate memorial ceremonies and commemorative markers to honour the deceased children.

76) We call upon the parties engaged in the work of documenting, maintaining, commemorating, and protecting residential school cemeteries to adopt strategies in accordance with the following principles:

- i. The Aboriginal community most affected shall lead the development of such strategies.*
- ii. Information shall be sought from residential school Survivors and other Knowledge Keepers in the development of such strategies.*
- iii. Aboriginal protocols shall be respected before any potentially invasive technical inspection and investigation of a cemetery site.”*

Published 6 years ago, too much time has already passed. We cannot wait.

Indigenous health, reconciliation, and racism against Indigenous peoples are public health crises. OPHA supports the Indigenous leaders and community and is committed to aligning and advocating for the Calls to Action in the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. We are striving to improve our own understanding and knowledge of the impact of colonialism and genocide, racist treatment, and the needs of Indigenous communities. This includes the work of our Anti-Racism Task Group. We are dedicated to amplifying Indigenous voices in our mission of providing leadership on issues affecting the public's health and strengthening the impact of people who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario.

Please note the following resources available if you or someone you know needs to talk.

Hope for Wellness Help Line

Toll-free: 1-855-242-3310

Online chat: hopeforwellness.ca

Talk4Healing Crisis Line

Toll-free: 1-888-200-9997

Thunder Bay: 807-346-HELP (4357)

Talk4Healing Help Line

Toll-free: 1-855-554-HEAL (4325)

IRS (Indian Residential School) Support Line

Support Line: 1-800-464-8106

Kids Help Phone

1-800-668-6868

About the Ontario Public Health Association

The Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) is a not-for-profit member-based association focused on advancing public health in Ontario. Our Association represents over ten public and community health disciplines and our membership represents many sectors in Ontario. Collectively, we represent over 2,000 public and community health professionals in the province. Our mission is to provide leadership on issues affecting the public's health and to support those active in public and community health throughout Ontario.