

Province causing delays in native teen inquests: NDP



The family of Jordan Wabasse listen to prayers during a memorial service for the teen. Wabasse was found dead in the Kaministiquia River in Thunder Bay.

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An inquest into the deaths of First Nations students in Thunder Bay is being held up by the “runaround” their families are getting from the Ontario government on requests involving aboriginal jurors, the NDP claims.

Since 2000, seven aboriginal teens have been found dead, most in the waterways leading to Lake Superior. All had left their remote northern reserves to pursue an education in Thunder Bay, as there was no appropriate school in their home communities.

An inquest was supposed to begin in 2009 into the death of Grade 9 student Reggie Bushie and those who perished before him while living hundreds of kilometres from their families.

But questions about the lack of aboriginal representation on the inquest jury delayed the proceedings.

Since then, two more students have died: Kyle Morrisseau, 17, and Jordan Wabasse, 15. Both were found drowned.

Toronto lawyer Julian Falconer is legal counsel for Nishnawbe Aski-Nation on the Bushie inquest and on aboriginal exclusion from jury rolls. NAN is a political organization representing 49 First Nations.

“The systematic exclusion of communities of people from the justice system, such as occurred here, is unprecedented, and yet First Nations continue to be denied what would be an automatic for mainstream Canadians — a full accounting from the province’s attorney general,” Falconer said.

The Ontario Court of Appeal ruled in March that the request for information from aboriginal families was quite reasonable but “instead they got the runaround,” MPP Howard Hampton said in the Legislature on Tuesday.

“Can the attorney general explain giving the aggrieved families the runaround and wasting time and money while more young people die on the streets of Thunder Bay?” the NDP member asked.

Bentley replied he would not comment on the specifics of the coroner’s process and told reporters “there is lots of work going on in terms of jury representation.”

“The issue that the Court of Appeal dealt with were some legal proceedings, and now that they are dealt with it has been returned to the coroner’s inquest so they can proceed,” Bentley said.

The Ontario coroner’s office told the *Star* no date is set for the inquest.

“The overarching issue here is about the young people. We are working hard at our level,” Bentley added.

Six of the dead students attended a First Nations-run school that is funded by the federal government, he said. “To be fair ... questions need to be directed to those with jurisdictional responsibility and funding responsibility.”

Ontario is trying to deal with the tragedy but the province didn't set up the school or fund it, said Bentley.

However, the Court of Appeal agrees the families have legitimate questions about representation, Hampton said.

"The attorney general tries every day to miss the point," said Hampton. "The point is, seven young people died and people deserve timely answers as to what happened and what can be done to make sure it doesn't happen again."

