

Death toll from on-reserve fires rises to 175 after death of First Nations elder

By [Jesse Winter](#) Staff Reporter
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Another person has died in a house fire on a First Nations reserve, this time on the Pikwakanagan First Nation, about 90 kilometres west of Arnprior, Ont.

Pikwakanagan First Nation Chief Kirby Whiteduck said the fire happened early Sunday morning and claimed the life of 78-year-old Darwin Bernard.

Sunday's death brings the total number of people killed in on-reserve house fires to at least 175 since the federal government stopped keeping track in 2010, and one Indigenous fire chief says despite government commitments to take action, Bernard's death likely won't be the last.

"I can tell you at least 10 or 12 (Indigenous) people are going to die this year in Ontario alone," said Six Nations of the Grand River Fire Chief Matthew Miller.

Miller is also the newly-elected president of the Ontario Native Firefighter's Society, and has been a leading voice pushing the federal government to enact a series of long-standing recommendations aimed at saving lives in this country's Indigenous communities.

People who live on First Nations reserves are 10.4 times more likely to die in a fire than anyone else in the country, according to a 2007 Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation report, compiled when the government was still collecting the data.

In February, on the heels of a Star investigation into fatal on-reserve fires, Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett pledged to take action.

Bennett promised to create an Indigenous Fire Marshal's office and new federal legislation that will enact a basic national fire code which currently doesn't apply on First Nations reserves.

It's been months since those promises were made.

"Things are starting to change, but they're not changing fast enough," Miller said.



Fire fighters and Ontario Fire Marshall officials attend the scene of a house fire on Oneida Nation of the Thames, southwest of London, Ont., in December 2016. At least 175 Indigenous people have died in house fires since 2010. (DAVE CHIDLEY / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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In particular, Miller wants to see more Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada funding for his fire department to train other volunteer firefighters from remote and semi-remote communities.

His department did exactly that in April, graduating 10 volunteer firefighters from its state-of-the-art training facility in Ohsweken, Ont.

Indigenous Affairs provided \$195,000 to support the Ontario Native Firefighters Society's 30th annual conference and contest which took place in Thunder Bay this week.

Minister Bennett handed over the letter promising the funding herself, Miller said.

In a statement, the department said it “has been working in close co-operation with AFAC (Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada) on possible implementation strategies for the Indigenous Fire Marshal’s Office since mid-March, 2017” and that work continues.

Miller said the work to create new legislation is important, but in the meantime he wants a commitment for more money to fund another round of training in September, and a greater focus on shorter term regional needs.

But Blaine Wiggins, the executive director of AFAC, says that until the underlying challenges in many First Nations are addressed, training more firefighters to put out blazes isn’t the best way to save lives.

“If you’re fighting a house fire, you’re often already too late,” Wiggins said. “It means you’ve failed at everything else, like fire prevention, smoke alarms, etc.”

The best way to prevent fire deaths, Wiggins said, is to have fewer house fires to begin with, and to make sure people get out when they do happen. In many First Nations communities, that means things like better education and outreach, ensuring smoke alarms are installed and working, and having a basic national building and fire code that applies on reserves.

Those are exactly the roles that an Indigenous Fire Marshal’s office would take on, he said.

“The most important thing that office can do is to exist,” he said.

Like a provincial Fire Marshal, an Indigenous Fire Marshal’s office would have the authority to ensure that there is mandatory data collection about fires in First Nations communities. It could work with band councils and residents to make sure that fire codes are followed and — most importantly — to make sure that on-reserve fire prevention and protection strategies are co-ordinated and cohesive across the country, Wiggins said.

Ontario’s Indigenous adaptation of a celebrated arson prevention program for children — called TAPP-C — illustrates the coordination problems that currently exist.

“We took the original TAPP-C and rebuilt it to include our culture, our language and our teachings, to make it more geared toward Indigenous communities,” said Beausoleil First Nation Fire Chief Allan Manitowabi.

Many of the fatal house fires on reserves, the Star found, are caused by children playing with matches or lighters. Fire investigators found the December 2016 fire that killed Kurt Antone and his four children in Oneida Nation of the Thames, west of London, Ont., was set by one of the children.

The Indigenous version of the TAPP-C program was created about eight years ago in partnership with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the Ontario Fire Marshal’s office. Copies were printed and sent to every Ontario First Nation.

But after the initial print run, the program was mostly shelved, Manitowabi said, because of a lack of funding and coordination.