March 3, 2021

Premier Doug Ford
Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier Ford,

RE: Closure of Youth Justice Facilities and the Impact on Children from Northern First Nations

We write today on behalf of our children as we are learning in real time that the Government of Ontario is abruptly closing 26 youth justice facilities across the province.

As Grand Chiefs, respectively representing Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Grand Council Treaty #3, we write to raise our collective horror about the impact on youth, from northern First Nations in particular, resulting from the abrupt closure of these facilities. We can confirm that the youth, as well as the staff, are reeling with confusion and trauma from the shock of such a sudden and unexpected change in the course of their lives. We need not remind you, Premier, these are children who were already fragile.

With the closure of these youth justice centres, there will be no proximate detention facilities for youth from northern First Nations. And by proximate, we mean within hundreds, if not thousands of kilometers.

The careless manner in which these facilities have been shut causes us deep concern. We have been told that lack of appropriate notice and lack of reasonable transition plans are causing great turmoil. The timeframes being imposed are unreasonable. For example, we have been informed about a facility that was provided approximately one-hour notice to transfer children to another facility and that staff requests to accompany the children to the new facility were denied. Staff have described being told that they had no idea this transition was happening at all, not to mention that it was imminent. Staff requested details on where children were being transferred and whether their families would be notified. Staff were told to refrain from informing the children about the transition and that communication to the families would be addressed by the Ministry. Staff have described deep anguish at watching these children being removed in shackles and placed on planes, without time to say goodbye. This is a heartbreaking and incredibly callous way to treat children, their families, and the staff at these centres.

We must never forget that we are talking about a deeply vulnerable population: detained children aged 12 to 17. These are children who have faced many hurdles and who have fallen through the

cracks of several government systems. These are children who have increased needs yet limited access to much needed wrap-around services that would assist with their transition to productive and flourishing adulthood.

Like any other child, and as a matter of basic humanity, these children need to be as close as possible to their families and communities. Now, we have children being shackled and flown to distant regions of the province, without appropriate notice or transition planning and without any regard to the long-term impact that this will have on them, their families and their communities. This is nothing less than tragic and completely unacceptable.

There is an undeniable need for youth detention services in the north, yet these services have just been decimated for the sake of cost-cutting. These agencies have tried to develop innovative ways to expand their services to include secure treatment and services for at-risk youth; however, these solutions have been ignored by your government. This province-wide closure of youth detention services feels like a slap in the face for local providers who are willing and able to serve Indigenous children in the youth justice system.

We seek your immediate attention to this matter and call for an urgent meeting to address what is now the real-time displacement of children to youth justice facilities in unfamiliar and inaccessible regions.

Sincerely,

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler
Nishnawbe Aski Nation

Ogichidaa Francis Kavanaugh
Grand Council Treaty #3

Cc: NAN Executive
Hon. Todd Smith, Minister of Children, Community & Social Services
Hon. Sylvia Jones, Solicitor General
Hon. Greg Rickford, Minister of Indigenous Affairs
Deborah Richardson, Deputy Solicitor General, Correctional Services
Kim Murray, Assistant Deputy Attorney General, Aboriginal Justice Division