

Submission of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs on support for Indigenous communities, businesses, and individuals through a second wave of Covid-19.

27 November 2020

The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC) represents the Inuvialuit, the Inuit of the Western Arctic. It was established by the *Inuvialuit Final Agreement* (IFA), signed in 1984, which is a treaty under Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. The basic goals of the IFA, as agreed to by Canada and Inuvialuit are “to preserve Inuvialuit cultural identity and values within a changing northern society; to enable Inuvialuit to be equal and meaningful participants in the northern and national economy and society; and to protect and preserve the Arctic wildlife, environment and biological productivity.”¹

Inuvialuit are fortunate in that, at least for the moment, there has been no community transmission of COVID-19 in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. Nonetheless, Inuvialuit watch the impacts of rapid community spread in Nunavut and other parts of the North with great concern and compassion, especially as cases continue to rise throughout southern Canada. Further, the broader impacts of the pandemic have highlighted the precariousness of Northern communities, both in terms of their extreme vulnerability to the pandemic itself because of poor housing and medical care, and the fact that the supply chains, food systems, and economies of these communities are very fragile.

IRC and Inuvialuit greatly appreciate the support provided by Canada in the first wave of the pandemic. IRC distributed \$5.8 million in emergency pandemic relief during the first wave, including food, harvesting and food preservation supplies, community freezers, sewing supplies, cleaning kits, supplies for elders, and supports for individuals and families going out onto the land to social distance. These funds provided much needed stability to some of the most remote communities in Canada during the height of the global instability caused by the first wave. While the summer provided some respite across the country, the second wave has again exposed the vulnerability of these communities, and IRC asks that Canada commit to providing further funding to support remote Indigenous communities through the second wave and beyond the end of the current fiscal year.

The remoteness of Inuvialuit communities has so far protected them, but Inuvialuit remain concerned about rising cases worldwide. Inuvialuit believe strongly that extending and enforcing the Arctic Cruise Ship and Pleasure Craft restrictions until the end of the 2021 open water season is important to the safety of the Arctic. These are reasonable and pragmatic measures that do not affect essential shipping or the exercise of Indigenous rights.

¹ Inuvialuit Final Agreement, Section 1.

The pandemic has also highlighted the extremely dire situation of housing in the north. Many houses in Inuvialuit communities, up to 50% in some communities, are overcrowded, in poor condition, or unaffordable. Money given by Canada to the Government of the Northwest Territories to address these housing needs has not produced the intended results, as public housing capacity has more or less remained stagnant over the past few decades, while housing inadequacy rates go up every year. IRC has a plan to remedy these issues quickly, in a culturally appropriate manner that keeps economic benefits in the North and builds during housing that is designed in and for the North. However, the lack of any framework to discuss Operations and Maintenance funding for housing makes it an enormous challenge to move forward on projects limits the impact of federal capital funding programs. IRC hopes to work with Canada and the CMHC on addressing this crucial gap.

IRC was pleased to receive a request from Minister Vandal's office about the infrastructure needs in Inuvialuit communities, and submitted a proposal for Elder's housing, which would fill a substantial gap in the housing continuum in remote communities by providing for assisted living for seniors, a service approach that is sadly lacking in the North, allowing Elders to age in place in the communities in a culturally appropriate environment, while reducing the need for long distance medical travel and the overall strain on the health and long term care systems. IRC looks forward to continued work with Canada on enhancing the direct delivery of services through Inuvialuit-led continuum of care approach.

Overall, a key takeaway is that Canada and Inuvialuit can achieve the best results when we work together as part of a nation-to-nation relationship. This extends to procurement as well. Canada has several large procurement projects in the Western Arctic coming online in the next few years. Canada has specific obligations under the IFA to ensure that Inuvialuit are involved in the federal procurement process in the Western Arctic, and in the past has fallen short of those obligations. Additionally, some federal projects are being managed by the GNWT, such as the DND work at the Inuvik Airport. There is sufficient capacity in the Western Arctic to complete these projects, and now more than ever it is essential that we minimize travel into the North from other regions of Canada for public health regions.

The pandemic has brought significant challenges to all Canadians. For Inuvialuit, it has highlighted the insecurity and instability created by remoteness and poor-quality infrastructure. The federal government's response to the first wave was generally commendable and ensured Inuvialuit communities were able to weather the first wave. As the second wave begins, Inuvialuit need additional support, and IRC wishes to work directly and closely with Canada to ensure that Inuvialuit are safe and supported going into the second wave.

IRC appreciates this opportunity to brief the committee.

About the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation

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