**Proposed Resolution #6: National Database Documenting the Impact of Unsafe Drinking Water on Health in First Nation Communities**

**Club Name**

CFUW Georgetown

**Title of Proposed Resolution**

National Database Documenting the Impact of Unsafe Drinking Water on Health in First Nation Communities

**Resolved Clauses**

**RESOLVED,** That CFUW urge the Government of Canada to establish a national database that tracks and documents the relationship between unsafe drinking water and health outcomes in First Nations communities living on reserves.

**RESOLVED,** That CFUW urge the Government of Canada to make the data easily accessible to health organizations, First Nations communities, all levels of government, and the public.

**RESOLVED,** That CFUW urge the Government of Canada and the provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to use the data collected on health outcomes to inform decision-making regarding funding, building or repairing of infrastructure, additional research, and/or policies.

**Background**

Imagine a family where the youngest child has died of bacterial meningitis, the father has diabetes, the children have severe eczema, and the mother is subject to bouts of dysentery. Similar things are happening with the neighbours. Yet no one is keeping track of these illnesses and deaths that may be caused by unsafe drinking water.

Since 1977, the federal government has investigated, made recommendations, and committed funds to remediate the water and wastewater situation on the reserves. Yet the problem remains acute. (Make It Safe: Canada's Obligation to End the First Nations Water Crisis, 2016)

In 2016, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) noted its concern about “the restricted access to safe drinking water and to sanitation by the First Nations as well as the lack of water regulations for the First Nations people living on reserves.” (The Human Right to Water: A Guide for First Nations Communities and Advocates, 2019)

While there has been progress in recent years, there are still 28 long-term drinking water advisories on 26 reserves as of January 2024, including some that have been in place for over 25 years. (Statement on World Water Day 2023, 2023) It is possible that additional advisories will be required in the future if funding and management practices do not change.

On December 22, 2021, the Federal Court and the Court of Queen's Bench Manitoba issued a joint decision approving a multi-billion-dollar agreement to settle class-action litigation related to drinking water in First Nations communities. (First Nations Drinking Water Class Action, ND)

In addition to the compensation to reserves and to individuals, the federal government has committed itself to more funding and more legislation, such as the proposed new bill on drinking water standards, Bill C-61. (Stefanovich, 2023) We applaud these steps.

However, we believe the true toll of the water crisis in First Nations communities across Canada can’t be known because the government does not track and study water-related illnesses. According to experts interviewed by the Institute for Investigative Journalism, this omission stands in the way of tackling the problem. (The Institute’s year-long investigation titled “Clean Water, Broken Promises,” was conducted in collaboration with universities across the country and a consortium of media outlets.) (Burns-Piper, 2021)

Therefore, we are proposing the creation of a national database that would document the number of illnesses and deaths on First Nations reserves related to unsafe water. Our resolution supports the CFUW Resolution Right to Safe, Clean, Accessible and Affordable Drinking Water and Sanitation on First Nation Reserves in Canada — 2017. Purposely, our resolution is narrow in scope as it is targeting a well-known but little researched Canadian problem. It is another black mark on Canada’s history with Indigenous people.

While this resolution will not directly solve the unsafe water problem, it will provide a tool to help determine funding, building, education and the need for additional research and policies. It will also make citizens and government agencies more aware of the extent and immediacy of the problem.

Globally, more than 50 kinds of diseases are caused by poor drinking water quality, and 80% of diseases and 50% of child deaths are related to poor drinking water quality. Water pollution causes diarrhea, skin diseases, malnutrition, and other life-threatening diseases such as cancer. Therefore, it is necessary to study the impact of water pollution on human health, according to Frontiers in Environmental Science. (Li Lin, 2022)

Yet, surprisingly, few studies have been done in Canada and made public about the health impacts of lacking and failing water infrastructure. Concordia University’s Institute for Investigative Journalism contacted 59 organizations that keep health data across the country, including provincial and territorial ministries of health, ministries of Indigenous affairs, and coroners’ offices to try to find statistics that show how often people living on reserves are sick or even die because of their water. Not one keeps data on deaths and illnesses resulting from unsafe water in First Nation communities. (Burns-Pieper, 2021) Without this data, how can the seriousness or the extent of the problem be assessed?

**What happens when drinking water becomes contaminated?**

Threats to drinking water can occur naturally (e.g. seasonal droughts or flooding), be created by human activity (e.g. agriculture, industrial practices, or recreational activities) or as a result of operational breakdown or aging infrastructure of treatment plants or distribution systems.

In non-reserve communities, water and sewage treatment are typically handled by municipal governments. On reserves, the Chief and Council manage the day-to-day water and wastewater systems. The federal government through Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) is responsible for providing funding for infrastructure and advice. (Roles and Responsibilities, 2021) Health Canada advises and supports the Chief and Councils in making decisions about water quality and monitoring.

When water is known or suspected to be unsafe for human consumption on a reserve, Chief and Councils place their communities under a Drinking Water Advisory (DWA). (Kayla J. Lucier, 2020) Chief and Councils decide when to lift an advisory. If the problem is caused by infrastructure or lack of infrastructure issues, they can apply for assistance from the First Nations Infrastructure Investment Plan (FNIIP). FNIIP is not a funding program but rather a planning tool for managing investments in First Nations infrastructure.

On one hand, FNIIP states that its highest priority is for those projects which mitigate the most urgent health and safety risks. On the other hand, projects are selected based on a variety of factors including costs, timelines, feasibility studies, capability, demonstrated ability to manage transfer payments, etc. (Transfer Payment Program Terms and Conditions: Contributions to support the construction and maintenance of community infrastructure, 2023)

Available funding varies each year depending on the allocation from the federal government. In addition, the approval process sometimes works so slowly that feasibility studies become outdated by the time the projects are ready to proceed. (Clean Water, Broken Promises, 2021)

Specific data on illnesses on a reserve are not required. By not collecting this data, the government is leaving policymakers and First Nations in the dark about what’s effective and what should be prioritized.

**A National Database**

Based on the recent legal settlement between Canada and certain First Nations, twenty-one “specified injuries” – ranging from digestive disorders to mental health – have been identified for possible compensation. (Specified Injuries, ND) We believe these categories could serve as the basis for a national database documenting illnesses in First Nation communities.

Categorizing deaths is more difficult as contaminated water does not directly cause death. It does, however, cause illnesses some of which can cause death. In Canada, coroners are required to record the primary cause of death. They do not have to fill in the secondary cause. Experts say this system makes it hard for researchers or the government to understand what role water may have played in a death. (Burns-Piper, 2021)

A national database could track the number of people who have died from a water-related illness and who have lived on a reserve under a DWA.

In conclusion, the creation of a database of illnesses and deaths on First Nations reserves due to unsafe water is a crucial step towards addressing the ongoing human rights violations in these communities. It will provide a basis for accountability, raise awareness, support data-driven decision-making, and enable targeted interventions for prevention and remediation.

Note: Indigenous people are made up of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. The Métis and Inuit do not live on reserves and, therefore, are not subject to precisely the same drinking water issues, though drinking water issues do exist in non-reserve communities as well.

**Implementation**

* CFUW Clubs could contact their local MPs, MPPs, and MLAs to support the creation of a database to document illnesses and deaths on reserves.
* CFUW Clubs could pursue educating themselves on the status of water on reserves to develop a clear understanding of the problem by including this topic in a speakers’ series or selecting a reserve to investigate.
* Clubs could study how the definition of health varies from Indigenous people and government.
* Clubs could publicize through social media the need for a database.
* On World Water Day, Clubs could use social media to thank the water operators on First Nations Reserves for work that is critical to health and wellbeing.

**Bibliography**

Burns-Pieper, A. (2021, February 22). Bad Water Sickens First Nations. But Government Doesn't Track the Toll. Retrieved January 2024, from The Tyee: <https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/02/22/Bad-Water-Sickens-First-Nations-Government-Track-Toll/>

Canada, I. S. (2021, 03 02). Roles and Responsibilities. Retrieved January 2024, from Government of Canada: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1314034319353/1533665196191>

Class Action Litigation on Drinking Water Advisories on First Nations. (N.D.) Retrieved January 2024, from McCarthy Tetrault: <https://www.mccarthy.ca/en/class-action-litigation-drinking-water-advisories-first-nations>

Clean Water, Broken Promises. (2021, February 18). Retrieved January 2024, from Canada’s National Observer: (Clean Water, Broken Promises, 2021): <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2021/02/18/investigations/clean-water-broken-promises>

First Nations Drinking Water Class Action. (N.D.). Retrieved January 2024, from First Nations Drinking Water Class Action: <https://firstnationsdrinkingwater.ca>

Kayla J. Lucier, C. J.-W.-A. (2020, November 13). Is There Anything Good About a Water Advisory? Retrieved November 2024, from BMC Public Health: <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-09825-9>

Li Lin, H. Y. (2022, June 30). Effects of Water Pollution on Human Health and Disease Heterogeneity: A Review. Retrieved January 2024, from Frontiers in Environmental Science: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fenvs.2022.880246/full>

Make It Safe: Canada's Obligation to End the First Nations Water Crisis. (2016, April 13). Retrieved January 2024, from Human Rights Watch: [https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#:~:text=In%20Canada%2C%20these%20advisories%20are,Canada%2C%20as%20of%20 January%202016](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#:~:text=In%20Canada%2C%20these%20advisories%20are,Canada%2C%20as%20of%20January%202016).

Specified Injuries. (ND). Retrieved 2024 January, from First Nations Drinking Water: <https://firstnationsdrinkingwater.ca/index.php/specified-injuries/>

The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2013 -- Food-Borne and Water-Borne Infections. (2013, October 12). Retrieved January 2024, from Government of Canada: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2013/food-water_alim-eau-eng.php>.

The Council of Canadians. (2023). Safe Water for First Nations. Retrieved January 2024, from https://canadians.org/about/: <https://canadians.org/fn-water/#:~:text=The%20lack%20of%20clean%2C%20safe,rights%20to%20water%20and%20sanitation>

The Human Right to Water: A Guide for First Nations Communities and Advocates. (2019, October 23). Retrieved January 2024, from Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/23/human-right-water/guide-first-nations-communities-and-advocates>

Transfer Payment Program Terms and Conditions: Contributions to support the construction and maintenance of community infrastructure. (2023, March 14). Retrieved January 2024, from Government of Canada <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1386694148066/1615723191777#chp10>