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FEB 13 2019

CHIEF CORONER

February 12, 2019

Ref: 242460

Lisa Lapointe, Chief Coroner
PO Box 9259 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC V8W 9J4

Dear Ms. Lapointe:

Thank you for your letter in which you provide a copy of the verdict at Inquest concerning the death of Deanna Desjarlais. I apologize for the delay in responding.

In response to the recommendations from this Inquest, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing provides the following:

Recommendation 4: Significantly increase the availability of easily-accessible low-barrier and publicly-funded housing as a core harm reduction measure for Indigenous women, women with HIV, vulnerable women and women recently released from custody.

Presiding Coroner Comment: The jury heard evidence that the existing network of unregulated recovery houses is not a satisfactory environment to ensure the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable women with substance misuse issues.

Through *Homes for BC: A 30-Point Plan for Housing Affordability in British Columbia*, released as part of *Budget 2018*, government is making a commitment to significantly increase the supply of affordable housing for vulnerable women and children. Together, *Budget Update 2017* and *Budget 2018* provide an investment of over \$7 billion over the next 10 years to improve housing conditions for British Columbians in every corner of the province – urban, suburban and rural, including Indigenous Peoples.

In recognition of the need for better programs and supports that serve Indigenous women, children and families, the Province of British Columbia announced in *Budget 2018* the \$550 million Building BC: Indigenous Housing Fund to help Indigenous organizations and First Nations build and operate 1,750 units of social housing both on- and off-reserve over 10 years. This is the first provincial fund in the country to include on-reserve housing.

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- Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Program (AHOP) – Designed to specifically address the disproportionate number of Indigenous people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Outreach workers from Indigenous, community-based organizations provide services for people 19 years and older, and connect individuals under 19 with appropriate social programs and services.
- Women’s Transition Housing and Supports Program – Provides space for women and children fleeing violence through safe homes, transition houses and second stage housing. These programs are encouraged to shelter and support young women under 19 by having a protocol with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. These programs will sometimes bring in young women who have Agreements with Young Adults and work to find space for them. This is especially true in northern communities where many of the women accessing the services are Indigenous. In 2017/18, BC Housing provided more than \$36 million to support 863 spaces for women and children affected by violence through this program.

Budget 2018 also invests \$116 million over three years to increase the average benefit under the Rental Assistance Program for working families and the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters program. Due to these enhancements, more than 35,000 households are now eligible for increased monthly benefits, including 3,200 newly-eligible seniors and families. Indigenous women can access these programs.

Recommendation 8: Engage in cooperative ministerial action, within the appropriate framework of privacy and security safeguards, to implement an effective continuum of services to foster communication and information sharing among providers of health and social supports and custodial care.

Presiding Coroner Comment: The jury identified significant gaps in the continuum of care between correctional settings and community living. They heard evidence about limited information sharing between various services providing supports to Ms. Desjarlais (including shelters, hospitals, and correctional centres).

An effective continuum of services and collaboration across government is important to effectively supporting vulnerable populations. Government understands that homelessness can be caused by system failures such as inadequate transition planning for youth aging out of foster care, or a lack of discharge planning from hospitals or correctional facilities. Over the last year, government has worked collaboratively in the development of the Homelessness Action Plan. Strategies to better support distinct groups, such as Indigenous people and youth, as well as individuals as they transition between government services, have been identified as key priorities for future work.

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The Office of Housing and Construction Standards at the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing is a member of the Cross-Government Approach to Social Sector Related Indigenous Initiatives, which will increase multi-ministry dialogue and coordination to manage a wide array of social sector Indigenous-specific strategies and initiatives. The committee involves executive directors from 10 ministries. The expected outcome of this work is enhanced coordination of initiatives and strategies that will support our Indigenous partners, stakeholders and clients.

Government, along with health authorities and police agencies, has also developed an information-sharing toolkit to guide interagency cooperation in support of people with mental health and/or substance use issues. The kit includes information to support the development of local protocols and is intended to further integrate approaches between agencies.

I trust that you will find this information responsive to your thoughtful recommendations, and I appreciate having the opportunity to respond.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Robinson', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Selina Robinson
Minister

pc: John McNamee, Executive Director, Legal Service and Inquests
BC Coroners Service

The Province also announced that all Building BC programs are open to Indigenous organizations and First Nations to produce housing both on- and off-reserve. These programs include:

- Building BC: Community Housing Fund – \$1.9 billion over 10 years to deliver 14,350 affordable rental homes, built through partnerships and municipalities, non-profit housing providers, housing co-operatives and Indigenous organizations.
- Building BC: Women’s Transition Housing Fund – \$734 million over 10 years to build and operate 1,500 new units of housing including transition housing, safe homes, and second-stage and long-term housing.
 - **Transition houses** are staffed 24/7 and provide safe, short-term shelter and supports – typically for 30 days – for women and children fleeing violence.
 - **Safe homes** provide safe, short-term shelter and supports – typically for 10 days – for women and children fleeing violence in rural and remote communities.
 - **Second-stage housing** provides safe housing and supports for women after they leave an abusive relationship or situation. Women can stay for 6 to 18 months while they prepare for independent living.
- Building BC: Supportive Housing Fund – \$1.2 billion over 10 years to build and operate 2,500 units of supportive housing for those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Building BC: Rapid Response to Homelessness – \$291 million to deliver a mix of permanent and temporary supportive housing units in response to the growing issue of homelessness. In addition, \$170 million will be provided over three years for 24/7 staffing and support services. As of October 31, 2018, 1,632 of 2,064 units committed were completed or under construction, with some oriented to women experiencing transitional situations.

In addition, government remains committed to several existing programs that are intended to provide supports and services to Indigenous women experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, including:

- Homeless Prevention Program (HPP) – Supports individuals of Indigenous descent, youth transitioning out of foster care, women who have experienced violence or are at risk of violence, and people leaving the correctional system and hospitals by providing portable rent supplements and support services to help them access rental housing in the private market. As of March 31, 2018, almost 1,690 HPP portable monthly rent supplements were allocated to service providers in 38 communities throughout the province.