



ICC PRESS RELEASE

Ongoing Coronavirus Pandemic Highlights Infrastructure Gaps Across Circumpolar Regions Related to Inuit Health – Demonstrates Strength of Inuit Culture

April 21, 2020 – Anchorage, Alaska – As the coronavirus global pandemic continues, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and its Circumpolar Inuit Health Committee (CIHSC) continue to express strong concerns about the potential elevated health risks and exposure faced by our rural and remote Inuit communities. The lack of infrastructure to address the housing crisis, food insecurity, water and sewer services and broadband accessibility are very real and pressing issues in most, if not all, of our Inuit communities across Inuit Nunaat. The region includes communities in Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka (Russia) covering a vast remote area and an approximate population of 180,000.

“Inuit across our homelands are working to maintain our traditional culture under very trying circumstances,” said ICC Chair Dalee Sambo Dorough. “We are used to living together in groups. Social distancing is a foreign concept and our past experiences with such an advisory were triggered by devastating illnesses such as tuberculosis (TB), measles, and polio. This is why we must adapt. The issues we have been working to overcome for decades, such as overcrowded housing, lack of proper sewage and potable water systems, high rates of TB, and poor broadband connectivity become starkly evident during a pandemic, and increase the risks of spreading the disease.”

ICC’s Circumpolar Inuit Health Steering Committee (CIHSC), composed of representatives from the four countries met last week via teleconference and discussed the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee notes that high rates of overcrowding and insufficient housing have already proven worrisome with the elevated respiratory conditions faced by many in our communities. Coupled with the high rates of food insecurity experienced by many, our concerns are real and complex. The gaps in accessible medical services are also a very real and an even more pressing concern. If not addressed, they will contribute to increased risk of infection and potential loss of lives. While those outside of the Arctic are simply turning to technology for work and otherwise, access and availability to basic and affordable broadband across much of Inuit Nunaat, especially during this time of a global pandemic, has created an unfortunate and stark disparity. Connectivity is essential. These disparities have been seen to have adverse effects in other populations and have shown to increase the rates of COVID-19.

The CIHSC also underlined that physical distancing and social isolation, while necessary to flatten the curve, have an impact on us. For Inuit, as a distinct people, family is at the core. Sharing food, supporting each other and being together physically defines us a culture. But, in these uncertain times we are learning new ways to keep our connections and to support each other and we look forward to a time when the pandemic has subsided and we can get back to the ways that have sustained us for millennia. In addition, with a forthcoming Inuit Health and Well-Being Summit, the committee is considering how to bring forward the lessons learned from this pandemic to ensure future preparedness, and identify strategies and priorities to fully close the existing gaps and end the disparities.

Since our initial call to governments to close the infrastructure gaps throughout Inuit Nunaat through major new investments in our communities, prioritizing basic infrastructure such as housing, water, and sewer and broadband connections, we are seeing similar demands being echoed by other Indigenous peoples across the globe. Social and economic equity, and supporting population health, and reducing vulnerability to virus and disease is critical. Our concern has only increased because we see the compounded threats to our basic health and well-being manifesting themselves in a very real way.

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The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) is an Indigenous Peoples’ Organization (IPO), founded in 1977 to promote and celebrate the unity of 180,000 Inuit from Alaska (USA), Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka (Russia). ICC works to promote Inuit rights, safeguard the Arctic environment, and protect and promote the Inuit way of life. In regard to climate change, we believe that it is crucial for world leaders and governments to recognize, respect and fully implement the human rights of Inuit and all other Indigenous peoples across the globe.