



What is the history of this issue and how does it impact First Nations?

The COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented in its global spread and impact. Across Canada, we have seen its impact on the economy, on health care systems, on education, on families, on individuals. We have lost loved ones who are near and dear to our hearts. Our communities have struggled with the mental health impacts of long-term lockdowns and continued uncertainty about the future. We have also seen strength, innovation, and leadership across our Nations.

Through setting up borders, curfews and other security measures, First Nations fared better than many other Canadians during the first wave of the pandemic. Over the summer, public health restrictions lifted across the country as numbers went down. With that, more movement happened in and out of communities. Once the virus got into communities, over-crowding, lack of isolation spaces, testing challenges and delays often caused the virus to spread quickly despite best efforts. The fall and winter saw an increase in COVID-19 cases across the country, including First Nations. In January 2021, First Nations people living on-reserve had an active case rate that was five times that of the general Canadian population.

In December 2020, the first COVID-19 vaccines became approved for use in Canada, and First Nations adults were identified by the National Advisory Council on Immunization as a priority population. Through the efforts of First Nations leaders and health workers in partnership with federal, provincial, and territorial governments, many of our people were amongst the first to receive their COVID-19 vaccines.

How has the AFN's recent advocacy affected this area?

As mandated by AFN Resolution 03/2020, *Addressing Priority Concerns and Needs of First Nations around COVID-19*, guided by the AFN COVID-19 National Task Force (COVID-19 Task Force), the AFN advocated for First Nations prioritization in the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, inclusion of First Nations at COVID-19 decision making tables and highlighted the need for on-going COVID-19 support resources. The AFN has emphasized the need for Provinces and Territories to engage, communicate and work closely with First Nations communities and leaders, including urban and off-reserve organizations, to support the vaccine roll-out. Through participation at numerous COVID-19 working groups with federal government partners, the AFN has provided consistent input into discussions related to the COVID-19 response and through these efforts, has brought forward First Nations concerns. This has included an emphasis on the importance of communication from all levels of government to improve trust and understanding of the vaccine science and roll-out.

The AFN is the national organization representing First Nations citizens in Canada.

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Where do we hope to go in the future?

The AFN will continue to advocate for First Nations pandemic supports as long as the pandemic persists, recognizing that we will be managing the virus in some capacity for the foreseeable future. Our efforts to ensure that all First Nations children, youth, adults and our Elders who want vaccines are offered one, and are able to safely access them, will continue. The COVID-19 Task Force will continue to listen to regional concerns and identify new priority areas for advocacy as needed.

As we begin to move into a pandemic recovery period, the AFN will continue to advocate for resources to support community healing. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges and gaps, and we must look at the lessons learned and ensure that what the pandemic experience has shown us is met with real changes to systems and structures. The AFN will continue to advocate for First Nations led systems that are fully resourced to strengthen systems, address inequities and rebuild resiliency. Beyond this, we must look forward and ensure that First Nations voices are included as decision makers with federal, provincial and territorial governments as we begin the process of ‘building back better.’