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Photo by Vince Fedoroff

FOOD FOR THOUGHT – Shadelle Chambers, the executive director of the Council of Yukon First Nations, and grand chief Peter Johnston discuss the planned food program during Wednesday's news conference in Whitehorse.

First Nations to participate in hot meals program

First Nations children and youth will have access to a new hot meal program in their schools, the Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN) announced Wednesday.

By Gord Fortin on November 21, 2019

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First Nations children and youth will have access to a new hot meal program in their schools, the Council of

Yukon First Nations (CYFN) announced Wednesday.

The new initiative is the result of \$4.4 million in federal funding through Jordan's Principle. The money will be divided based on the number of children up to 18 years old in each community.

The participating communities are the Liard First Nation, Little Salmon-Carmacks First Nation, Vuntut Gwitchin government, Carcross/Tagish First Nation, Ross River Dene Council, Selkirk First Nation, First Nation of Na-cho Nyäk Dun, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, Kluane First Nation, White River First Nation, Champagne and Aishihik First Nation and the Teslin Tlingit Council.

Peter Johnston, the CYFN's grand chief, and Shadelle Chambers, its executive director, presented the initiative at a Wednesday afternoon news conference.

Johnston said there are some challenges to First Nations in the territory.

Many children are going to school unprepared. Some are suffering and have trouble with day-to-day living.

The CYFN has reached out to the communities. Johnston said food security is an issue, which means nutritious meals can be a problem.

He pointed out that in Old Crow, the price difference between an apple and a can of pop can be "alarming".

"A lot of families now are being forced into this reality where they are not getting the super-nutritious food," Johnston said. "They choose the cheaper options because they have to financially."

He added that it can be hard to get out on the land and live a traditional lifestyle. He said the results are observable all over the world with the food epidemics and cases of diabetes. He said this is due to the prevalence of processed foods.

The traditional diet is meat and fish, Johnston pointed out.

"That rich diet of fats and protein is what our bodies desire, let alone need on a daily basis, but now we're forced to eat processed foods," Johnston said.

He is thankful for the help to rectify this issue. He said the \$4.4 million will be used to purchase and prepare traditional food for schools.

"It's more than just food, it's about helping and supporting building community," Johnston said.

Chambers said the money will ensure that every Yukon First Nations community has a nutritional food program. Both youth and children will have access to two hot meals a day during the school week. There will also be weekend initiatives.

The funding will go directly to the First Nations. The CYFN has been able to hire two food co-ordinators to help each First Nation develop and implement its program.

The \$4.4 million will cover the cost of the program for the remainder of this school year, which will end in June 2020. The money will cover the costs of the food itself as well as to pay cooks and for kitchen supplies.

There is a provision for training, Chambers added. This will cover preparing a menu, incorporating traditional food and shipping.

Chambers said the CYFN is looking to ensure that this is an entrenched program that is available and led by Yukon First Nations.

This also represents an economic opportunity. She explained that many First Nations citizens own food stores, and this will help those businesses. The co-ordinators will be working with food distributors.

They plan to work with farmers and local food producers once in season, Chambers added.

She hopes it will be a permanent program with funding, but this will have to wait until the federal government defines the parameters of Jordan's Principle.

"We are still anticipating that this will become a fully-funded program," Chambers said.

Some communities already have their own food program, she noted, and this funding should help those communities enhance their services. She added it would help sustain existing programs.

There are provisions to help fund traditional hunting.

Fresh food is not always available in northern and remote communities, Chambers pointed out. The costs of food can be very high.

The next phase is working on the urban Yukon First Nations, which will be more complex due to the number of schools.

The CYFN will be working with First Nations to develop the urban plan as well.

Dr. Brendan Hanley, the Yukon's chief medical officer, supports the plan.

"Food insecurity is an urgent public health challenge in Canada that disproportionately affects First Nations peoples," he said.

"Canada is the only country in the 34-nation Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) without a national school food program."

Comments (31)

