

# Government blamed as gas sniffing resumes

NEWFOUNDLAND (CP) - Dozens of gas-sniffing youths are again roaming the squalid streets of Davis Inlet.

Their sudden return to this northern Labrador community suggests a year's worth of high-profile treatment programs has failed.

"There's dozens and dozens (sniffing gas)," said one resident of the island community, which is home to about 600 Innu.

"It's worse than it was before. ... A bunch came back and got the others into the gas-sniffing mood after Christmas."

Simeon Tshakapesh, the community's outspoken Innu chief, said federal health officials are to blame because they haven't approved funding for a community treatment centre.

"It's stubbornness from Health Canada," he said Tuesday. "It's something they're trying to impose on us. ... We keep saying it's not going to work until we get our hands on these programs and run them ourselves."

Health officials couldn't be reached for comment, but the RCMP and some residents say the disturbing resurgence in solvent abuse can be traced to other factors.

RCMP Sgt. Dave Shuttleworth, who was in Davis Inlet until Dec. 27, said the island community was quiet when he

was there because harsh weather kept residents indoors and the airport was largely shut down.

But things changed when the weather cleared and flights resumed. With a renewed supply of alcohol, many adults turned to heavy drinking, he said. That's what prompted the children and youths to resume sniffing.

"The kids revert to solvent abuse when the parents are abusing alcohol at home," Shuttleworth said. "The alcohol wasn't coming in as quickly before and the parents were home and sober."

In the past, many solvent abusers in Davis Inlet and other Labrador communities have said the main reason they sniff gas is to numb the pain caused by their hard drinking parents.

"It's Christmas and the parents are telling them to get out of the house and that they don't want them no more," said a resident who asked not to be named. "What are they going to do?"

Others in the community, including former chief Katie Rich, have complained nothing has been done to help the community's many alcoholics.

But Tshakapesh said that's not true. Many families have taken part in "mobile treatment programs" that teach traditional skills for living in the Labrador bush, he said.

However, the program wasn't offered during the holidays. Again, Tshakapesh blamed federal officials.

A gang of young vandals recently ransacked a few homes and the band council garage, resulting in 10 people being charged.

RCMP Const. Frank Gallagher, who was working in Davis Inlet between Dec. 27 and Jan. 8, said the children are simply looking for a way to escape boredom.

Those who received treatment in St. John's, Nfld., are now missing the city's shopping malls, theatres and video games, so they're looking for a way out, he said.

In January 2001, about three dozen youths and children were taken from Davis Inlet to a makeshift treatment centre in St. John's after Tshakapesh complained that sniffing gas was out of control.

The move followed a similar plea a few months earlier by Innu leaders in Sheshatshiu, a town of 1,300 in central Labrador.

The federal and provincial governments, embarrassed by TV images showing tiny children sucking gas fumes from plastic bags, responded by promising more money for treatment programs.

Many of the children and youths taken from Davis Inlet were not returned home until late last year.