

Feds to blame for reserves suicide rate: Reform MP

BIRDTAIL SIOUX FIRST NATION, Man. (CP) - A Reform MP says federal mismanagement is to blame for problems plaguing aboriginal communities such as this tiny reserve where seven residents have killed themselves since January and 20 others have tried.

That's a suicide rate eight times the provincial average, despite the fact the 500-member reserve is one of the smallest in Manitoba.

"The federal Department of Indian Affairs is not accountable for its administration, they're not accountable from the point of view of monitoring programs (and) monitoring the money," Dauphin-Swan MP Inky Mark said Wednesday.

Mark met with controversial Chief Nelson (Kelly) Bunn and band councillors in this close-knit community 145 kilometres north-

east of Brandon where everyone has been touched by tragedy in the past year.

In addition to the rash of suicides and attempts, one man was hit by a train, two people died in a house fire and another was fatally shot.

Some blame a high incidence of alcohol abuse and a lack of youth facilities for the troubles. Runaway unemployment and poor social conditions have also led Mark and others to question how band money is handled.

A financial statement obtained by the Brandon Sun for the fiscal year 1997-98 shows the reserve received more than \$4 million from Ottawa, including \$850,000 for social services. Even so, the reserve is more than \$842,000 in debt.

"How do you make a living on a reserve like this?" Mark said, surveying the vast, barren vista.

"It's really pitiful. There's not much here. With all the money they get, I don't know what they do with it."

In recent months, Bunn has come under fire for being an absentee chief. He's only been at his office a few times since his election in March despite earning \$40,000 last year plus another \$34,000 in expenses.

On Tuesday, Bunn attended a council meeting and survived calls for his resignation.

He told his people he had to deal with alcoholism - he was convicted recently of his 11th drunk driving charge since 1968 - and the loss of his sister and nephew in the house fire before he could return and lead the people of Birdtail Sioux.

"Kelly feels he should hang onto his job yet," resident Elvan Benn shrugged after Tuesday's meeting. Benn thinks people didn't push the issue because they aren't sure of the legalities involved in ousting a chief.

The meeting was the first formal opportunity for residents to voice their anger and frustration. Some seemed reluctant to accept council promises to do better.

"They're talking about issues they've been trying to deal with for the past four years," said Florence Bunn.

"It's the same old story. They say they'll do this and they'll do that. They say they'll put policies into place and then they don't."

Chief Bunn would not allow the media at Wednesday's meeting, saying the issues to be discussed were political.

"I don't feel that we should publicize everything that we're doing," Bunn said, chastising reporters for focusing on the string of tragedies on the reserve.

"Why don't you go out and do something with the other 500 people who see what's going on here and appreciate the effort being made and the good things that are happening?"

But Mark again suggested better money management is vital if the lot of aboriginal people is to improve.

"I still say it's the system that is at fault - it's not so much the people," he said.

"(Indian Affairs) spends about \$6 billion a year. I believe there's only about 20 per cent that reaches the grassroots level - most of it is eaten up by bureaucracy."

"We have to ask for accountability of expenditures of these billions of dollars - at all levels. That money is not doing the job it should."