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# News Release

## A Message to the Residents of the Weeneebayko Region

Most people have likely heard or seen the recent CBC radio and print stories. It is very unfortunate that the CBC have linked the unproven claims of a recent ex-contract mental health worker to the larger WAHA Mental Health Staff Team and even more unfairly to the larger issues facing the community in Attawapiskat, through an almost cause and effect story. This is very disappointing and has certainly created unnecessary anxiety and concern among our Staff, Patients and the Communities whom we serve.

It is important to separate these two issues. The first issue is the complaints of the upset ex-contract worker, who contacted many people, organizations, government departments and media outlets. Unfortunately CBC was the only organization that thought this was “newsworthy”. While Human Resource and Labour Relations issues are best handled internally, they are confidential and privacy must be respected. The connections CBC made to dated information, events and past employees was totally unfair and unrelated to this ex-worker’s short time at WAHA. The second more important issue is the larger social, relationship, communication and inter-generational issues, which are not only found in Attawapiskat but in other Coastal Communities as well. This is the reason why WAHA has mental health workers in these Communities, to support people and the Communities to work through these issues. WAHA is also currently blessed with significant outside support and resources, for the time being, in the Community of Attawapiskat. The developing mental health wellness programs and services in Attawapiskat will be of great support to the other communities in the Coastal Region as the improved program and service model is expanded to the entire region that WAHA serves.

With respect to the first issue accusations, many departments and hospital sites have found that change is a very difficult process. In view of the fast paced environment within which we all work, change cannot be avoided and in some cases has been difficult to adjust to. A few years ago our Mental Health Department found themselves in such a situation and a number of accusations were made about behaviours within the Team. By working with the Unions (and specifically PSAC) and the Staff, WAHA committed to address these issues as quickly as possible and to support a healthy, functioning Team environment. An external mediator was hired, all staff were interviewed, a full review and investigation was undertaken by the Mediator, and a report and recommendations were made. The report and recommendations were given to all staff and debriefing sessions were held. An action plan was put together and follow up meetings were held and continue to be held, to make sure progress continues to happen.

We are very proud of the progress made by those WAHA mental health staff who have committed to work through these issues and remain on the WAHA Team and are dedicated to our clients. They have been facing many challenges most recently but they are up to the task and have been working extremely well with our various partners, especially in Attawapiskat (ie: NAN, Health Canada, the NELHIN, Health Sciences North in Sudbury, Attawapiskat First Nation, Payukotayno, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Child and Youth Services).

I am not aware of any recent accusations around bullying and harassment of our Mental Health Staff, certainly not by WAHA or by our own staff. There have been some outside pressures that could be identified as these types of behaviours, which are not appropriate, and when identified have been dealt with by WAHA. WAHA has a zero tolerance policy on harassment and bullying. We investigate all such complaints, treat them very seriously and make sure that the parties involved are protected in the process and that their privacy is respected. It is unfortunate that the CBC unfairly linked these issues through assumptions that have only created unnecessary anxiety and questioning among our Communities, Patients and Staff. Despite this unwarranted attention at such an important and sensitive time, we all need to continue to work together and support one another in the best interests of our Communities and especially for the Patients whom we serve.

WAHA has been increasing and improving the cultural sensitivity orientation and training for its entire staff, at the time of hire and as refresher training through site visits to each of our staffed communities. It is very important that our staff have a strong understanding and knowledge of the culture and traditions in the Coastal Region in order to be effective, understanding and responsive to our patients in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner. We value the People and Communities whom we serve – each and every one of you. We firmly believe that everyone has the right to receive care in a respectful, safe and secure environment. Our Staff, at all WAHA sites, will continue to work very hard, every single day, to provide the best possible care and services for the People of our Region.

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Bernie D. Schmidt  
WAHA President and CEO

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