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Statement

Canada Must Invest in Indigenous Peoples, Not Prisons

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OTTAWA (September 29, 2025) – As Canada prepares to mark the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, on Friday, Senator Kim Pate was humbled to visit Stony Mountain federal prison with AFN National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak and Member of Parliament Leah Gazan.

Across Canada, shameful and costly practices of mass incarceration of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples demonstrate the urgent need for a new approach that supports, builds up and invests in Indigenous Peoples, communities, and inherent rights to sovereignty and self-determination.

“This month and year mark the deadline established by Call to Action 30 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the elimination of the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in federal prisons. In the ten years since the federal government committed to implementing the Calls to Action, mass incarceration of Indigenous Peoples has only continued to skyrocket,” stated Senator Pate. “Despite representing 5% of Canada’s population, Indigenous Peoples represent one in three men, and one in two women, in federal prisons. 3 out of 4 men imprisoned at Stony are Indigenous.”

“At Stony Mountain, we met with First Nations men in isolated units. Limiting access to community connections, supports and healing prevents prisoners from getting what they need to successfully integrate and contribute to communities,” observed Ms Gazan. “Spending on prisons and the criminal legal system costs Canadians billions of dollars per year, and perpetuates the legacy and trauma of residential schools and other colonial policies through the forced separation of Indigenous Peoples from their families and communities.”

“The human and social cost is enormous and the financial costs of hundreds of thousands of dollars per person per year can and should be invested in Indigenous communities if we ever hope to see an end to these current versions of residential schools,” continued Pate. “It is time for Canada to question this wasteful and destructive use of resources, and to reorient spending priorities to the health, social, economic, educational, housing and other supports and infrastructure that will build up Indigenous communities, redress long-standing and discriminatory inequalities, prevent crime, and save money and lives.”

Tona's Law, Bill S-205, whose measures to provide meaningful alternatives to prison and solitary confinement have already been endorsed by many organizations and three times by the Senate of Canada, could be a vital step toward returning people and jurisdiction over issues of criminal justice—along with necessary funding and other resources—to First Nations as well as Métis and Inuit governments and communities. And, the criminal record expiry process in Bill S-207 would help people move on and more easily access jobs and housing as they work to integrate and contribute to their communities.

Investing federal resources into honouring commitments and obligations to Indigenous Peoples—in accordance with Canada's constitution, the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, the calls of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls—will build both Indigenous and Canadian communities and economies and will help us build a future where all are empowered and included.

- 30 -

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