

For Immediate Release

Community Groups Raise Call for Action Regarding the Shooting of Byron Debassige

February 27, 2008

The **Urban Alliance on Race Relations (UARR)** joins **Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto (ALST)** in condemning the fatal shooting of 28 year old Byron Debassige by two officers from Toronto Police Services. We call upon the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario to confirm that the mandatory inquest into Mr. Debassige's death will be called without delay.

“We are greatly concerned that a new trend is developing within the Toronto Police Service - the shooting of Aboriginal people,” says Kimberly Murray, Executive Director of Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto. “This is the second police shooting of one of our community members in 5 months. The Chair of the Police Services Board on June 21, 2007 announced that the Board was in the process of developing a Statement of Relationship with the Toronto Aboriginal community. Seven months later we continue to wait its completion. The time to act is now.”

Mr. Debassige struggled with on going mental health issues. His tragic death was the end of a long road littered with discrimination, misunderstanding, and the denial of appropriate services faced by many Aboriginal and racialized peoples who suffer from mental illness.

According to the 2002 Statistics Canada report, *The Health of the Off-Reserve Aboriginal Population*, “In 2000-2001, approximately 13.2 percent of the Aboriginal population living off-reserve had experienced a major depressive episode in the past year. This is 1.8 times higher than the non-aboriginal population”¹. Issues of crime, mental health and a lack of access to appropriate services are linked. These issues are compounded by the racism and marginalization faced by Aboriginal communities.

“At the 2000 conference, UARR and other community groups called for the strengthening of the Mobile Crisis Intervention Team, a joint partnership between the Toronto Police Service and the mental health unit at St. Michael's hospital. Eight years later, the demand for greater support and expansion of this project remains crucial,” according to Tam Goossen, Co-Chair of the conference ‘Saving Lives: Alternatives to the Use of Lethal Force by Police’.

Urban Alliance on Race Relations is a non-profit, community-based organization established in 1975. Our mission is to work with all Ontarians to build an equitable and inclusive society for all.

Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto was established 1990 following a needs assessment by the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto in the mid-1980s. ALST's mission is to strengthen the capacity of the Aboriginal community and its citizens to deal with justice issues and provide Aboriginal controlled and culturally based justice alternatives.

For more information, please contact:

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¹ The Health of the Off-Reserve Aboriginal Population. (2002). Catalogue 82-003. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

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