

Standing Committee on
Social Development



Report on Long-Term Post-Pandemic Recovery: Recommendations to the GNWT

19th Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Chair: Ms. Caitlin Cleveland

**MEMBERS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Caitlin Cleveland
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Chair

Lesa Semmler
MLA Inuvik Twin Lakes
Deputy Chair

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MLA Deh Cho

Julie Green
MLA Yellowknife Centre

Rocky Simpson
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Alternates

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MLA Nunakput

Rylund Johnson
MLA Yellowknife North

Frieda Martselos
MLA Thebacha

SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Social Development is pleased to provide its *Report on Long-Term Post-Pandemic Recovery: Recommendations to the GNWT* and commends it to the House.

Ms. Caitlin Cleveland
Chair, Standing Committee on
Social Development

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
REPORT ON LONG-TERM POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY:
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GNWT

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

REPORT ON LONG-TERM POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GNWT

INTRODUCTION

The Standing Committee on Social Development developed the following recommendations to the Government of the Northwest Territories concerning the Northwest Territories long-term, post-pandemic recovery, with a specific focus on the departments for which the Standing Committee has oversight: NWT Housing Corporation (NWT HC), Education Culture and Employment (ECE) Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ).

COORDINATION OF SOCIAL AND HEALTH RESPONSES TO PANDEMIC

Overall Committee appreciates the work of the GNWT to integrate and align systems and resources to address the needs of NWT during COVID. Committee is especially supportive of coordinated efforts taken to make available housing, income, health and addiction supports to residents most in need. Committee will be focusing on these areas in more detail as longer term work undertaken over the four years of the 19th Assembly.

Limited access to programs and services in small communities is a long-standing concern. Throughout the government's COVID response, Committee Members observed differences between the resources and planning made available to address the needs of residents in communities and those made available to address the needs of residents in Yellowknife. To improve the GNWT's response to future pandemics, including a potential second wave of COVID, Committee would like to see an increased focus in the coordination of social development resources, policies and programming to support emergency management planning with Indigenous and Community governments.

At this time Committee recommends the following important resources and policies remain in place to support NWT residents during the GNWT's post COVID recovery efforts. Committee acknowledges that additional research and cost analysis may be needed by the GNWT in order to fully investigate and advance the following recommendations.

Income Supports

Committee appreciates ECE's recognition and responsiveness throughout the pandemic to support clients by making key policy changes to the Territory's Income Assistance program. Committee fully supports the Department's use of client focused

policy and programming to address immediate financial needs. Preventative measures that have been put in place by all levels of government to cope with the pandemic and slow its spread appear to have succeeded in fending off worst-case scenarios. Preventative measures include ensuring vulnerable populations have access to stable and consistent income. Stable income is one of the most important socioeconomic factors to positively influence all aspects of life and reduce downstream costs on other areas of social systems. The lack of adequate income underlies poverty and contributes to nutritional vulnerability, inadequate shelter, and compromised health and well-being. Committee recognizes economic recovery planning may increase the use of the Income Assistance program as many NWT residents were ordered to reduce their hours, stop going to work and have lost jobs. Many private businesses have been ordered to shut down or reduce operations and are now struggling financially to reopen. Committee feels continued support from ECE is required to support NWT residents to access a stable and reliable source of income.

Recommendation 1:

*Standing Committee on Social Development recommends ECE make **permanent** the policy changes made to support clients in response to COVID.*

- *To continue to reduce the amount of verification information required to apply for Income Assistance, to ensure clients are registered as quickly as possible, and automatically assessed for both basic needs and enhanced benefits.*
- *To continue with the allowable income exemptions and to increase the annual income limit for unearned income per year, on top of the money received from Impact Benefit Agreements, Treaty or Land Claim agreements.*
- *To continue to allow for clients to select self-care as a Productive Choice option, and reduce the requirement for face to face monthly reporting.*
- *To continue to Payroll long term, vulnerable IA clients, to increase consistent payments to a three month reporting.*

Health

Committee appreciates the concerted efforts made by the GNWT to prevent the spread of COVID in the NWT. While the GNWT has done a remarkable job in preventing the spread of COVID, Committee is concerned about the supply of standard and rapid testing kits available to the NWT residents, both currently and for future waves of the COVID. Testing units assist in diagnosing at a more rapid rate for situations where contact tracing is critical and actions to contain transmission can be put in place faster. With global shortages in the supply chain, the DHSS reports that the number of tests received weekly, *may* fluctuate and is expected to continue to fluctuate going forward. Committee understands all COVID tests need to be validated through an accredited lab. For the NWT the closest accredited lab is in Alberta. Committee shares concerns about potential delays in receiving test results given the NWT's remote geographic area spread across 33 communities.

Recommendation 2:

Standing Committee on Social Development recommends DHSS continue to work with national partners to increase testing supplies, materials and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to maintain a robust inventory for the anticipated second wave of COVID 19.

Housing Affordability

Committee supports the changes in policy and processes made to the Transitional Rent Supplement Program (TRSP) to create greater accessibility for those renting in the private market. In Yellowknife and Inuvik, where most private market rentals are located, many renters experience challenges with affordable housing as a result of the high rent and shelter costs¹. In 2016, CMHC's Market Rental Report states Yellowknife has the highest rent in Canada. In 2020, results from the Energy Hub on energy rates across Canada, also report that Northwest Territories residents are paying the most for electricity in Canada, contributing to the high cost of living in the territory². Recently CMHC has reported on the potential for a new affordability measure. The current affordability measure, known as the 30% shelter cost-to-income ratio (STIR), is a similar metric used to calculate the NWT subsidy rate under the TRSP. The Housing as a Hardship measure considers both housing and non-housing expenses when assessing affordability and is more sensitive to family size and location than the commonly used 30% standard³. Committee recognizes COVID has brought many social issues front and center, including the lack of housing and housing affordability in the NWT. As the GNWT begins the *Emerging Wisely* process, Committee is interested in resilient action from government to ensure residents struggling with housing affordability issues are stabilized and for residents who do not have housing, to receive financial support to access healthy affordable housing.

Recommendation 3:

Standing Committee on Social Development recommends the NWT HC retain the policy changes made to the TRSP during the pandemic and to continue to improve access and affordability within private market housing until such a time that the Canadian Housing Benefit (CHB) is operational.

Childcare Supports

Committee supports the additional financial resources provided by ECE to licensed childcare programs and services to address costs associated with the pandemic and

¹ Government of the Northwest Territories. Housing Indicators, 2019 NWT Community Survey. Newstats, GNWT Bureau of Statistics

² Electricity Prices in Canada 2020. energyhub.org

³ Introducing the Housing Hardship Concept. CMHC December 2019.

measures to sustain programming. Committee understands the continued need for affordable childcare and recognizes the fiscal and organizational challenges in the developing and maintaining childcare organizations in the NWT. Some of the challenges noted within ECE's review of administrative funding processes under Early Childhood Programs include the need to revise the funding allocations to meet the needs of child day care facilities. This includes improving and increasing funding models to address challenges with fixed operating costs⁴. Issues childcare organizations face include attendance based funding, problems occur when attendance drops and operation costs remain the same, leaving childcare organizations without enough funds to continue to pay for fixed overhead costs. Other issues for childcare programs include having enough funding for staffing costs, which represent approximately 80% childcare programming costs. Subsidy rates vary depending on community, location, age of children and full/part-time status. In communities, the barriers to establishing a non-profit society and oversight board for child care programs is particularly difficult including locating safe, adequate and affordable spaces, the high maintenance costs and lack of funding to support necessary renovations.

Recommendation 4:

Committee recommends the GNWT advance universal childcare by maintaining the additional funding provided during the pandemic to support operational, cleaning costs, employee wage subsidies and food insecurity issues anticipated to be more severe post COVID.

Education Supports

Committee supports ECE in efforts to provide home-based schooling during the pandemic, including the District Education Councils (DECs) approach to provide learning opportunities for JK-12 students with flexible, home-based resources. Some examples from DEC's of home-based supports include; supplying jump drives, turbo sticks, devices and modems for digital learning, distributing paper learning packages to students and families. DEC's provide support to families to address food security and financial challenges through the distribution of gift cards. DEC's also support mental health initiatives, like wellness checks and online or phone-in counselling services. Committee recognizes there are socioeconomic and the geographical factors that contribute the limited access to technology and internet in the NWT and that this can interfere with home-base learning. Approximately 20% of homes in the NWT are without internet access and in regions like the Dehcho and Tlicho; 50% of homes are without internet access⁵. In a recent international review of children without access to internet or digital technology, educators and policymakers have been called to expand their

⁴ REVIEW OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM ADMINISTRATIVE AND FUNDING PROCESSES (Action 15 – Early Childhood Development Action Plan) REPORT 1 OF 2. Prepared by the Department of Education, Culture and Employment. 2015.

⁵ Government of the Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics. Poverty Indicators.2018.

education strategies beyond online learning to include community based resources like radio and television broadcasts⁶.

Another important area committee felt was necessary to make school systems stronger is the need for family outreach and engagement in education. Committee is aware students often do better when parents are engaged in their child's education, particularly when they ask questions about what they are learning at school. Children of low-income families in the smaller communities are of interest to Committee, as Members observe and have been informed schools frequently struggle to build meaningful connections with parents. To reduce any further inequalities caused by school closures during COVID, Committee believes that for students living in vulnerable homes, greater financial, peer support and outreach is needed to help parents work with their children to complete school work. To do this Committee feels it is important for schools to build meaningful and non-judgemental relationships with families deemed "high risk" to ensure families feel they can accept supports or reach out for help from schools.

Recommendation 5:

Committee recommends ECE to direct the District Education Councils to keep technology to support student home- based learning during COVID. Committee also recommends ECE focus on positive interventions and outreach to improve relationships between families of 'high risk' or vulnerable students.

Wage Top-Up

Committee appreciates the work of the Department of Finance to increase support to low income workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The GNWT made it possible for businesses to increase wages for employees 15 years and older earning less than \$18 per hour through a temporary wage top up. NWT minimum wage legislation states employers must pay workers a minimum of \$13.46 per hour⁷. In contrast to the minimum wage, Living Wage is what full time workers must earn to afford basic living expenses based as closely as possible on the actual cost of goods and services within their community. In this way, community Living Wage rates can be an indicator of affordability⁸. In 2019, Alternatives North released living wage estimates for Yellowknife, Inuvik and Hay River. All three communities came in at more than \$23 an hour. A living wage is what it takes for a household to cover its basic expenses without severe financial stress. The calculation is based on a household with two full-time working adults and two young children. It accounts for government benefits and deductions, such as the Canada Child Benefit and income taxes. It doesn't factor in things like debt payments, home ownership, saving for children's future education, or the costs associated with caring for a disabled or elderly family member. In the NWT there are

⁶ [UN News. Startling disparities in digital learning emerge as COVID-19 spreads: UN education agency. April 12, 2020](#)

⁷ [Government of the Northwest Territories Minimum Wage Changes.](#)

⁸ [Northwest Territories 2019 Living Wage. Yellowknife. Hay River. Inuvik.](#)

approximately 2,999 households who report they had difficulties paying for living expenses including transportation, housing, food, clothing and other necessary expenses⁹. Committee believes a wage top-up program can assist with economic recovery by supporting service sector workers providing key programs and services to continue to employ NWT residents.

Recommendation 6:

Committee recommends the GNWT continue to offer the wage top-up as a permanent program to businesses, providing financial assistance to NWT workers aged 15 or over and earning less than \$18 per hour.

CONCLUSION

This concludes the Standing Committee on Social Development, *Report on Long-term Post-pandemic Recovery: Recommendations to the GNWT*.

Recommendation 7:

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that the GNWT provide a response to the recommendations contained in this report within 120 days.

⁹ [Government of the Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics. Poverty Indicators.2018.](#)