

THE HONOURABLE JULIE GREEN
MINISTER OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Self-Isolation Exemptions

Mr. Speaker, I have a Return to Written Question asked by the Member for Kam Lake on May 28, 2021 regarding Self-Isolation Exemptions.

There is no single policy document that guides travel exemption decisions. Each request is unique, though they do fall into overarching categories. Decisions are based on a public health risk assessment conducted by public health officials. According to the Public Health Order for Travel Restrictions and Self-Isolation Protocol, as amended on December 1, 2020, travel within the Northwest Territories, or NWT, that originated across any interjurisdictional border is prohibited for all persons. However, the Order lists categories of travellers who are considered exceptions to this prohibition.

Each exception under the Order is subject to further conditions, and in some cases, a person must receive approval from the Chief Public Health Officer, or CPHO, in order to receive the exemption. CPHO approval can provide the person permission to travel within the NWT, as is the case for compassionate or family reunification requests; permission to work during the self-isolation period, which will include further requirements; exemption from the self-isolation requirements; or permission to isolate in a community outside of one of the four communities, such as Norman Wells or Fort Simpson. The process for submitting a travel exemption is described on the GNWT COVID-19 website.

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Nunavut travellers may also apply for an exemption from self-isolation requirements. They are asked to provide their location history, vaccination status, isolation hub community, and to respond to a variety of questions used to measure their risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19.

Non-residents can apply for exemptions from travel restrictions within the NWT on a case-by-case basis for family reunification, compassionate reasons, and other exceptional circumstances, such as the care or retrieval of property and the management of an estate. If the applicant demonstrates a legitimate need to travel within the NWT and has a suitable self-isolation plan, an approval will be granted.

In the case of family reunification, an applicant must have a familial relationship to an NWT resident. If the applicant is seeking to reunify with a family member in one of the four hub communities, or Fort Simpson, or Norman Wells, and has demonstrated a suitable self-isolation plan, the applicant will receive an approval. ProtectNWT will ask the applicant various questions to determine the suitability of the self-isolation plan and to inform the public health risk assessment. Questions typically focus on an assessment of the dwelling, the number and risk level of those living in the space, and the vaccination status of those living in the space, but additional questions may be asked depending on the situation.

In order to isolate in a non-hub community, the applicant must demonstrate that there is an important circumstance or reason they are unable to isolate in a hub community. The threshold for these exemption requests is higher, as non-hub communities do not have the same level of health resources to deal with a COVID-19 outbreak. Some of the reasons that may be considered include an illness in the immediate family that the applicant needs to tend to, someone in the immediate family that is terminally ill, an elderly applicant or unaccompanied minor who is unable to safely stay in a hotel in a hub community, etc. While these reasons do not constitute an exhaustive list, they are some of the more common examples considered.

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The Office of the Chief Public Health Officer, or OCPHO, reviews requests and if an exemption is granted, a letter will be emailed to the applicant from ProtectNWT. Each day, a committee consisting of the Chief Environmental Health Officer, Deputy CPHO, and other staff from the OCPHO meet to review exemption requests received from the previous day. Exemption requests are received and processed over weekends and holidays as well, with two staff members responsible for processing, reviewing and approving urgent requests during these periods. Staff from the Department of Health and Social Services Public Health and Communicable Disease Unit are also notified, and their advice sought when an applicant identifies that they were a contact of COVID-19, were part of an outbreak, or have previously tested positive.

If an application is denied, the individual will receive a denial letter which outlines the rationale for the decision. The most common denial will be for travel to a small community if there is no urgent circumstance or reason why they are unable to complete the isolation period in a hub community. The applicant may seek a reconsideration of the request, and if they can demonstrate a need or provide supporting rationale, an approval may be granted. If the request does not meet family reunification, compassionate or other exceptional circumstances criteria, it could be considered as “leisure travel”. Currently, leisure travel is not permitted under the Public Health Order.

Later today, at the appropriate time, I will table self-isolation exemption data for March, April, and May 2021. We now include the reason for exemptions in the Consolidated COVID-19 Statistic Report, which is posted weekly on the GNWT’s Response to COVID-19 website.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.