

COVID-19 Health and Social Services System Response Update

Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us all in many ways but none of us more so than within the health and social services system.

The protection of our residents is our number one priority. In order to meet the challenge, our system quickly mobilized a number of critical pieces that enabled our territory to respond effectively to the pandemic. We did this through the implementation of decisive public health measures and a coordinated approach to health services. We provided the necessary testing, tracing and care to manage cases and make best use of our limited health resources.

The public health measures and orders put in place by the Chief Public Health Officer and the diligence of our residents and businesses in following them has meant that we have been able to contain cases in the NWT. These measures have not been easy and have had a significant impact on everyone, but we have been successful in protecting our residents from the spread of COVID-19 and avoiding the return to more stringent measures.

Mr. Speaker, the expansion of territory testing and analysis within the territory has been critical in order to respond quickly to positive cases and implement the necessary care and safety precautions to individuals and community members. We now have rapid point of care testing capacity in all of our community health centres, which can deliver initial results in as little

as 15 minutes. Confirmatory testing is completed using the “gold standard” Polymerase Chain Reaction testing methodology at the Stanton and Inuvik hospital lab sites, significantly improving turnaround times to an average of 24 to 48 hours.

Mr. Speaker, wastewater testing has proven to be an effective early warning system detecting COVID-19 in our communities. To date we have implemented this testing in Yellowknife, Hay River, Fort Simpson, Inuvik and Fort Smith. This surveillance program is a collaborative effort between community governments, Environment and Natural Resources, Municipal and Community Affairs, Health and Social Services, and the Public Health Agency of Canada. Wastewater testing has enabled us to detect COVID-19 in Yellowknife, Fort Smith and Hay River.

When we identify positive results, public health officials begin contact tracing and implementing other essential public health prevention measures to manage the spread of COVID-19. We saw how this works last month as part of the public health response to contain the cluster of COVID-19 cases in Fort Liard.

When wastewater testing in Hay River picked up a positive viral signal, we launched a coordinated response that included enhanced sewage surveillance, targeted testing for people who had been self-isolating, and dedicated clinics and extended hours to test individuals for COVID-19.

When the source of infection was traced to Fort Liard, a rapid response team was immediately deployed to assist with contact tracing, self-isolation

logistics and other essential tasks to contain the virus and help protect vulnerable people.

Mr. Speaker, the responses to prevent exposure and transmission of COVID-19 among our residents have had unintended impacts on our mental health and sense of well-being. The health and social services system is committed to assist residents to cope with these impacts through improved service delivery, community partnerships and ongoing communications.

Some of the actions that we have taken to support individuals and families include providing short-term financial support to families who cannot get assistance from other GNWT programs; and providing services to vulnerable residents in Yellowknife, Inuvik and Hay River. We have also increased the frequency of our advertising campaign to raise awareness of the availability of key services like family violence shelters, community counselling programs and help lines.

To support residents with mental health or addictions concerns, we established the territorial COVID Navigator in partnership with 8-1-1 and ProtectNWT. The COVID Navigator can help residents connect or reconnect with the appropriate health and social services resources, including their local community counselling program.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, on behalf of Cabinet, I want to thank residents and businesses for staying the course, for following the public health orders and for coming forward for COVID-19 testing when asked through the public health advisories. Our current success would not be possible without the commitment made by every resident of the NWT. I am impressed and inspired by the resiliency of Northerners.

I also want to provide thanks to all the health and social services staff. The response to this crisis is a testament to the hard work and dedication of all these professionals to protect the health and safety of NWT residents.

I am asking residents to continue to follow the recommended measures to keep us protected while we work through the vaccine roll out. Please continue to practice the healthy habits that we know work to stop the spread of COVID-19. These measures include self-isolating when required, staying home if you are sick, getting tested at the first sign of symptoms, wearing a mask when you're out, washing your hands frequently, and keeping a safe distance from others, even if you have had your vaccine.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.