

Youth Mental Health Supports

Mr. Speaker, today on Pink Shirt Day we come together to commit to creating safe spaces for each other and for our youth, places where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected us all in significant ways and has highlighted the importance of supporting one another and advocating for those who need help, and for youth in particular.

We know that the harms associated with bullying can have devastating and long-lasting impacts on individuals, families, and communities. Having accessible mental health services is critical to support both victims and people who use bullying to heal from the wounds this behavior inflicts.

Mr. Speaker, over the last three years, the Department of Health and Social Services has worked closely with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment on the phased establishment of Child and Youth Care Counsellors in NWT schools and communities.

This approach was informed through engagement with NWT youth who told us they wanted access to confidential and flexible mental health services.

The GNWT is currently in phase three of a four-year implementation plan. I am pleased to report that staffing these positions is going well. A total of 33 out of 39 child and youth care counsellor positions are been successfully filled through the NWT, along with five Clinical Supervisor positions. The Child and Youth Care Counsellor initiative, in combination with our work to eliminate wait times and

establish same day access for counselling supports, has greatly improved access to services for all NWT residents when they need it most.

Mr. Speaker, we have heard from Northerners about the need to provide a variety of options when it comes to mental wellness supports. One of the ways we are expanding options is through the implementation of e-mental health options such as the Strongest Families Institute. A year ago, the GNWT partnered with Bell Let's Talk and NorthwesTel to have the Strongest Families Institute provide telephone-based support for children and families experiencing mild to moderate anxiety, depression and behavioral concerns.

So far we have seen a positive response to this service, and I would like to share some of the testimonials we received from parents. A parent of a 12-year old said "the coaching was instrumental in teaching me the skills and techniques I needed to feel more in control of my situation, build a stronger relationship with my son and feel hope for the future". A parent of an 11-year old had the following to say, "My coach with Strongest Families was super helpful, understanding and supportive. She helped me to see and understand parenting on so many levels. The skills and strategies put in place are effective and are definitely worth learning."

While the pandemic has produced innovation in the area of virtual care, government recognizes that these types of services may not be easily accessible by all. As a result, staff across the territory are working to ensure that creative solutions are in place to support children and families who may not have access to a phone in their home. Some of these solutions include making space available within health centres, dropping off packages with information and resources at people's homes and making use of community partners to ensure information about the availability of services is shared.

The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority now has a the Child and Youth Mental Health Coordinator who is leading the way with several key

initiatives that will improve our approach to caring for children and youth with mental health needs. Some of these initiatives include:

- working with the Stanton Territorial Pediatric Inpatient Unit to develop inpatient psychiatric admission processes and programming;
- working with the Stanton team to build care pathways, therapeutic resources, aftercare, and staff capacity;
- supporting health centre staff across the territory with mental health system navigation and building their skill sets to care for children and youth in need of mental health services; and,
- leading the implementation of the Northwest Territories partnership with the Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto to improve access to specialized child psychiatric services across NWT regions and communities.

Mr. Speaker, the Department of Health and Social Services is also working with schools to support the delivery of the Talking About Mental Illness program, TAMI for short. TAMI is a school-based program focused on increasing awareness and reducing stigma about mental illness. Programs such as this increase comfort talking about mental health and help to increase the likelihood that youth will access help if they need support.

Additionally children and youth can also access the NWT Help Line and the Kids Help Phone 24 hours, 7 days a week for free and confidential support.

Mr. Speaker, there is no single approach that will work for everyone when it comes to addressing youth mental health. But by providing a variety of options we ensure that we are better positioned to support youth when they need it most. I urge each of us, on this Pink Shirt Day, to take the time to consider how we can support and lift each other up. Remember, a little kindness and compassion can go a long way.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.