

Anti-Indigenous Racism in Health Care

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to voice my commitment as Minister of Health and Social Services, as a Member of this Legislative Assembly, and as a resident of the Northwest Territories, to address racism in all its forms in the NWT health and social services system.

Throughout the Northwest Territories, the health and social services system works to provide quality services for all NWT residents, care that is respectful, responsive and accessible. However, research shows that Indigenous peoples experience a disproportionate amount of negative health and social outcomes in comparison to non-Indigenous people. It is our responsibility as a government to address this inequity directly by making sure that all aspects of health and social services system are culturally respectful and safe for Indigenous peoples. This also includes respecting Indigenous understandings of health and wellness and finding ways to accommodate traditional healing in our system.

Mr. Speaker, leadership at all levels is critical in taking the steps necessary to address racism in the health and social service system and is essential to sustain it.

The need for coordinated leadership is one reason I appreciated the opportunity to participate in recent national dialogues to address Anti-Indigenous Racism in Canada's Health Care Systems.

The meeting included 500 people from across the country and offered a powerful opportunity for governments and organizations to listen, reflect and consider ways to advance this work at the national, provincial and territorial level.

Mr. Speaker, the Department of Health and Social Services established a division dedicated to addressing Indigenous health disparities and included a priority focus on cultural safety in 2013.

Staff conducted research, and worked collaboratively with Indigenous residents, knowledge holders and leaders to set our strategic vision to meet our overall goal of ensuring that clients and their families feel safe, respected and free from racism and discrimination when they access our health and social services system.

Mr. Speaker, in 2019, the Department advanced this work with the release of the Cultural Safety Action Plan. Grounded in community voices, the Action Plan took a nothing about us without us approach; over 30 meetings were held across the NWT over approximately nine months.

The Action Plan includes 27 actions organized under four key themes:

- Create an organizational culture of cultural safety;
- Strengthen staff capacity to deliver culturally safe care;
- Honour traditional knowledge and healing approaches in care; and,
- Improve client and community experience.

Mr. Speaker, since the release of the Action Plan the Department has worked to pilot 13 cultural safety training sessions. The pilots included content on Indigenous medicine teachings, Indigenous experiences of residential schools and inter-generational impacts, and understanding racism at interpersonal and systemic levels. Approximately 225 health and social services system employees participated in these pilots.

The Department is now developing an NWT Cultural Safety Framework, which is being reviewed by the Indigenous Advisory Body and Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Leadership Council. Once finalized, I will share it with Members.

As a final point, Mr. Speaker, we've heard that cultural safety and anti-racism work must be led by Indigenous people.

Much of the work that I have just outlined will be led by a new Cultural Safety and Anti-Racism unit dedicated to leading our system's efforts to embed cultural safety and anti-racism into the fabric of our health and social services system.

The existing team is comprised almost entirely of Indigenous staff from multiple nations and regions in the NWT. As the team expands, we are committed to ensuring that positions are open to applicants from any community in the NWT, and that the senior positions are all filled by Indigenous staff that have been mentored and supported to take on leadership roles to advance this work.

Mr. Speaker, we have done the research, and the collaborative development with Indigenous peoples and communities in the territory to set our strategic vision and the action plans to guide this work. Now the focus is on embedding cultural safety and anti-racism in a meaningful and sustainable way to achieve our vision of a territory where Indigenous peoples, families and communities enjoy physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health and wellness.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.