

**Department of Justice Progress Report on Mandate
Community Wellness and Safety**

Mr. Speaker, our government has committed in its mandate to pursue innovative ways to prevent and reduce crime. The Department of Justice recognizes that to make a difference, our response must address the root causes that lead an individual to break the law in the first place. Based on the disproportionate number of Aboriginal people in the justice system, we know any approach must also offer offenders the chance to reconnect with their culture and traditions. I would like to tell you today about a promising new program being delivered in our Corrections Service, and give you an idea of other work that Justice is doing to advance our commitment to reduce crime.

On examining the profiles of offenders in our facilities, it is clear that the most prevalent issue is substance abuse. Programming is available, but many of the programs take longer to complete than the average inmate spends in a facility. As a result, inmates are reaching their release date before they can finish our longer-term programs. As well, people who receive community sentences, and don't enter a corrections facility, are not able to benefit from the facility-based programs. I want to highlight a new program that attempts to address all of these issues.

The Substance Abuse Management program, or SAM, is designed to help inmates with shorter sentences, as well as those serving their sentence in the community. The SAM program model recognizes the importance of treating the person, not just the addiction. Sessions are presented in a non-judgmental, educational manner, allowing participants to focus on their learning, without having to be defensive about their history or current situation.

Participants are assisted to identify the triggers that most often lead them to abuse alcohol or drugs, as well as behaviours that they would otherwise try to avoid. They learn to apply this understanding to their daily lives. Offenders get help to develop a prevention plan that includes an inventory of resources they can turn to as they continue their recovery.

The SAM program recognizes the importance of Aboriginal culture and traditions. Aboriginal Liaison Officers or Elders attend the group session to assist participants - helping them reflect on their culture and learning. Currently, both the North Slave Correctional Complex and the South Mackenzie Correctional Centre offer the 12-session SAM program daily over a three-week period. There are plans to extend this program to the Fort Smith Correctional Complex in 2017-2018.

The SAM program also extends support outside the walls of our correctional facilities. Inmates on probation who are returning to their community from a facility have support for successful reintegration, including the continuation of a program they know. Offenders who are serving their entire sentence in the community, and have not been in a facility, have an opportunity to access the SAM program helping them make positive changes.

To acknowledge some of the issues that returning offenders face, and to allow time for Elders to be brought in to make important cultural connections, the community program is delivered over 12 weeks. At the end of these sessions, probation officers also connect participants with community supports available through Health and Social Services.

The SAM program is presently being delivered by probation staff to small groups of approximately five participants in Hay River, Fort Providence and Yellowknife. Early indications are that this program is being very well received, and there are plans to expand it to the Inuvik probation office in the coming weeks.

This program does not stand alone. We currently have a range of supports for offenders in facilities and in the community. We will be adding more programs and continuing efforts to work with inmates to address the root causes of crime. We will also continue our important collaboration with the Department of Health and Social Services and with local and regional providers, on the continuity of care for addictions and mental health services.

As Members are aware, culturally appropriate correctional programming is not the only commitment that has been made by this government. The Department of Justice is taking action to reduce crime through many paths. I want to highlight just a few other promising approaches.

Specialized courts in the NWT include the Wellness Court that sits in Yellowknife, and the Domestic Violence Treatment Options Court that accepts offenders from Yellowknife, Behchokò, Hay River, K'atl'odeeche and Enterprise. The Wellness Court has been sitting since October 2014, and as of mid-January a total of 63 individuals have been referred to the Court. The Domestic Violence Treatment Options Court has also delivered encouraging results; as of this January, 79 individuals have participated in the program.

The Integrated Case Management pilot project in Yellowknife provides a holistic approach to supporting those in our community who are faced with a variety of complex needs. Participants are supported through a comprehensive assessment, and are assisted by their case manager to address these needs, including a lack of suitable housing or homelessness, poverty, substance abuse and unemployment. Participants are referred by social program departments, and as of January, 103 individuals have been accepted into the program, with seven applicants currently being considered. The pilot project is under review with results expected by the end of March. I look forward to sharing the results with Members.

In other areas, I am pleased to report that policing action plans are in place in all NWT communities. These plans are a collaborative effort between the RCMP and local leadership. They work together to identify priorities specific to each community, as well as determining how best to address these issues.

The Government of the Northwest Territories has also made a mandate commitment to improve access to justice. I can also report that progress has been made in collaboration with the Law Society to establish ongoing access to legal resources through the resource centre. As well, the Legal Aid Commission is continuing to offer outreach services in Yellowknife and across the NWT, with an expansion scheduled for this year that will enhance operating hours for the walk-in clinic, increase community visits, and introduce family law duty counsel services. These initiatives, along with efforts to reduce family violence and assist families who are separating or divorcing, are all part of the Department's overall commitment to improve access to justice and our response to crime.

I think that we all recognize that a social response to crime reduction takes resources, and the concerted efforts of all levels of government, local agencies and community members. We also know that if we don't address the root causes that lead to crime, we will continue to see some of the same people in the justice system again and again. Through these innovative programs, and the support of this Legislative Assembly, we are making a difference.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.