

Emerging Wisely - Vaccine Uptake in the NWT

Mr. Speaker, as we approach the end of this sitting, I know Members of this House and residents of the Northwest Territories are looking forward to spring and summer in the North and all that it offers. This is a good time for us to reflect on the past year to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been a long haul for all of us.

The first case of COVID-19 in the Northwest Territories was confirmed on March 21st, 2020. That was just shortly after the first Public Health Order restricted travel within the NWT and required all travellers coming in to isolate for 14 days in one of the four hub communities.

In an effort to protect NWT residents and our health system, the Chief Public Health Officer also advised that all non-essential services and businesses were to be closed. The Emerging Wisely Plan was released in May 2020. It provided a framework for how the NWT would maintain the strong public health measures developed to contain the spread of COVID-19 and eventually ease them.

Mr. Speaker, we are in a very different place than we were last year thanks to our collective efforts to follow the public health orders and measures for our own safety and the safety of our communities.

While other provinces and territories have gone through repeated lockdowns, we have stayed the course to limit the spread of COVID-19 and avoid some of the most devastating impacts of the virus. NWT businesses, community groups and other orders of government have created innovative ways to comply with the public health orders, or they have been granted permission to open up earlier than envisioned. Residents can enjoy sports such as

hockey, squash and curling. Businesses have increased their capacity, while still maintaining physical distancing and other controls.

Mr. Speaker, we have learned how to reduce and live with the risk of COVID-19. Over time, we have been able to enjoy relative freedom within our borders because of the orders in place, and residents' willingness to follow these orders. We all recognize this has not been easy. Restrictions on businesses, gatherings, travel, and the requirement for mandatory self-isolation have all taken a toll. We look forward to the day when all restrictions can be lifted and we are getting closer.

The Chief Public Health Officer has advised that she is currently working with the COVID-19 Secretariat to assess the future and look at targeted initiatives to ease some restrictions. She has committed to review Emerging Wisely during the month of April. There are a number of variables that will inform her decision including:

- How effective the vaccine is to prevent transmission of the virus;
- When vaccines will be approved to be administered to everyone. Some measures must be maintained to protect children under 18 and others who cannot take the vaccine for whatever reason; and
- How well the vaccine protects against the emerging variants such as those from the UK, South Africa and Brazil.

High overall vaccine uptake will be important to take into consideration as the Chief Public Health Officer assesses the risk level in the NWT. We strongly encourage all eligible residents to get vaccinated to help protect themselves and their communities from COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, as of Monday, March 29 over 23,722 people have received dose one of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine in the NWT, and 13,933 have had both doses. Vaccine teams are currently going for third visits to many small communities to reach those who may have missed the clinics before or are ready to receive the vaccine now. All residents aged 18 and over in all 33 communities across the NWT are able to book vaccine appointments.

I anticipate a significant number of NWT residents will be fully vaccinated by the end of April, months ahead of many southern provinces.

Having as many people vaccinated as possible is the key to moving forward. I am happy to be part of the group of NWT residents who are now fully vaccinated and would like to express my appreciation to the vaccination teams.

Mr. Speaker, with a vaccine uptake between approximately 58 to 62 percent, we will require higher vaccine uptake in order to relax public health measures. That could mean larger groups of people getting together at home, at community gatherings and at business locations. The Chief Public Health Officer will then look at how to modify the self-isolation requirements and travel restrictions, while we watch how the rest of Canada manages the spread of new variants and the roll out of the vaccine.

While the NWT has responded effectively to date to protect NWT residents, we need to remember that we are still in the middle of a global pandemic. We will see more and more things open up this spring and summer.

Mr. Speaker, we still must maintain some measures to protect those who are not able to receive the vaccine. I urge residents to remain patient, to do their part and get vaccinated if they are able to do so, encourage friends and loved ones to get their vaccine, and to keep up those healthy habits we have adopted since the beginning. It is through collective efforts that we have so far been successful in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, and we will count on these efforts as we move forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.