

Supporting Early Childhood Development

Mr. Speaker, this Legislative Assembly has committed to support early childhood development and today I want to provide Members and the public with an update on our work to provide equitable access to a range of inclusive, culturally informed programs and services for and children under five years of age and expecting parents.

In June 2017, our government tabled a renewed three-year Early Childhood Development Action Plan designed to help us take action at several sensitive times of a child's development. For the past two years, we have worked with parents, Elders, health care practitioners, community partners and research organizations to improve services to young children and their parents and caregivers in order to improve developmental outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, to support the best health and social outcomes for children under five, the Department of Health and Social Services has been doing work in a number of areas including maternal-child health.

The Department has been advancing work to establish a territory-wide program to enhance access to midwifery services, including safe options for birthing as close to home as possible. The NWT Midwifery Practice Framework has been updated, and we are acting on the recommendations of the NWT Midwifery Stakeholder Engagement Report. Prenatal care and education is available to expectant mothers through several programs, including the Midwifery Program and the Northern Women's Program, and

during one-on-one appointments with Community Health nurses. As part of the Early Childhood Development action plan, the Department is taking steps to improve the delivery of prenatal education by developing a standardized prenatal program.

Related to this work, officials met with Indigenous community partners in Fort Smith to pilot the first Indigenous Doula Training course in the NWT. This training can strengthen the capacity of the community to support pregnant mothers and partners. An evaluation of the pilot course will inform our next steps.

Since 2016, expectant mothers who travel to one of the NWT birthing centres receive the essential items that new parents need for the wellbeing and safety of their newborn, as well as information about programs and services they can access in their communities when they return.

The Baby-Friendly Initiative is our government's approach to maternity and community services that focus on providing quality care and enabling supportive environments in the NWT.

In order to better understand infant feeding practices in the Northwest Territories, the Department commissioned the Aurora Research Institute and an Advisory Circle of Knowledge Keepers. This partnership resulted in a report that includes many stories discussing traditional knowledge practices, and has generated new knowledge that will contribute to the advancement of the Baby-Friendly Initiative.

In December 2018, the Inuvik Regional Hospital received official designation as a baby-friendly facility, becoming the first hospital in the arctic, and the most northern hospital in Canada, to receive this designation. Four other health care facilities in the Northwest Territories are currently working towards their Baby-Friendly designation.

We also funded Moms, Boobs and Babies to develop a volunteer peer support breastfeeding program to help build local breastfeeding support and capacity in all regions.

In addition, we are working with Hotii ts'eeda, to renew the Healthy Family Program. Hotii ts'eeda is a research support centre for community members, organizations and researchers involved in Northwest Territories health and health research. To support the renewal, the project team is visiting nine communities in five regions to research and design an innovative model that reflects the unique needs and features of communities. The team is learning about specific needs and cultural practices related to parenting which are unique to Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, newcomers, families in smaller communities and parents without family support. They want to hear the views and perspectives of communities where the Healthy Family Programing is not offered. Hotii ts'eeda will make recommendations this spring to pilot a new program design.

Mr. Speaker, the Department has made significant progress to identify resources available to children and families to enhance healthy growth and development. When developmental delays occur in a child, it is important for these concerns to be identified early, so that interventions can begin as soon as possible, and before school entry.

All parents and caregivers can schedule Well Child Baby visits for children between the ages of 0-5 with Community Health Nurses and Public Health Nurses to ensure early detection and referral to appropriate services, such as rehabilitation services.

Mr. Speaker, since the inception of the Early Childhood Action Plan our government has made strategic investments to better meet the needs of children with specialized needs. We are improving access and follow up to rehabilitation services for children ages zero to five in small communities, and enhancing diagnosis and case management services for children with Autism and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Children and parents who need specialized services will be supported by the Stanton Hospital Child Development Team with a satellite team in the Beaufort Delta.

We are currently in our second year of the three-year action plan and we are making significant progress. We will continue to implement the Right from the Start Framework and action plans and use data from the Early Development Instrument to help update the action plan when it is renewed in 2020. We will also renew our monitoring, evaluation and accountability plan to ensure that we are looking at the impacts of our actions in the longer term.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize it takes a community to raise a child, and we are doing our part to assist in this. We have made some great progress to date and although we have a lot of work ahead during the rest of this 18th Legislative Assembly, we know how critical our work is and we welcome the challenge knowing that our efforts will assist our most valuable resource - children.

Mr. Speaker, supporting early childhood development is critical work for our government. We are committed to working with families and communities to ensure they have the tools and resources to support the best outcomes for their children.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.