

**THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE COCHRANE
PREMIER OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES**

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GNWT COVID-19 Response and COVID Secretariat Activities

Mr. Speaker, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, the health and well-being of Northwest Territories and residents has been our number one priority.

Today, we are slowly emerging from the worst outbreak of COVID-19 our territory experienced. At one point, the NWT had the highest number of active COVID-19 infections per capita in Canada. However, through collaboration and partnership between GNWT departments and authorities, community governments, and Indigenous government partners, we have been able to support residents and communities in need.

ProtectNWT is responsible for many of the measures put in place to minimize the risks to residents, including managing 8-1-1 phone lines, self-isolation plans and the various exemptions for employers and employees. At the start of the outbreak in August there was a backlog in self-isolation plan review and delays in getting through on the phone. Mr. Speaker, the team at ProtectNWT worked diligently to improve response times, and the recent launch of a new self-isolation plan process and technology update will ensure we continue to make life easier for residents by processing and responding to submissions in a timely manner.

Mr. Speaker, since mid-August the Secretariat has hosted those who are medically advised to self-isolate in our isolation centres in regional hub communities. There were challenges including finding suitable isolation arrangements for people from the underhoused community. In these instances we worked with the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authorities to offer additional wrap around supports.

During other outbreaks in small communities the efforts of communities to provide isolation supports for those requiring these arrangements is to be commended.

Isolation spaces have provided a valuable service for residents that would otherwise have no other place to safely isolate. Providing this space has lowered our collective risk of ongoing community transmission of COVID-19 infections in our communities.

Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 Coordinating Secretariat continues to operate our border check points providing necessary information to residents returning to the NWT, helping to ensure that residents understand and are following the self-isolation guidance.

Our Compliance and Enforcement Officers have provided support to residents, community governments and leadership in the response to community outbreaks. The team does more than just enforce compliance with public health orders; they have also been on the front lines educating the public on their obligations under the Public Health Orders. The educational approach, whether it was passing out flyers or one-on-one conversations, has helped to increase knowledge and compliance with the requirements to keep us safe.

Similar to other remote communities that experienced an outbreak, in Tuktoyaktuk Compliance and Enforcement Officers are on the ground supporting the public health orders. Teams are in the community to ensure public health orders are understood by community members to increase the level of safety and reduce the risk of continued spread of COVID-19.

The focus on education has helped keep residents safe throughout the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, as we look to the future we can see a time where the pandemic winds down and risks of COVID-19 will become further minimized due to a high national vaccination rate as well as a successful immunization program here at home in the Northwest Territories.

It is at that time that we will begin to shift our focus from a pandemic to an endemic response. This response to COVID-19 will likely require a significantly scaled down version of the Secretariat to manage and respond to the virus efficiently and effectively. Functions that may continue to operate include an 8-1-1 Call Centre to respond to COVID- related questions from the public, Compliance and Enforcement to provide support during local community outbreaks, continued coordination of communications in support of outbreak

response and public safety, logistics to rapidly respond to outbreaks and provide isolation facilities, and policy support to assist with the development of public health orders and other policy measures.

The GNWT is committed to providing these services, as long as is needed, to ensure our residents remain safe and we can minimize the risk of future COVID-19 infections and outbreaks.

Northerners should be proud of our collective response to the pandemic. It has not been easy. Our territory has come a long way since the first infection of COVID-19 was announced inside our borders on March 20, 2020.

It is important we all continue to do our part and continue to follow the public health orders so we can stay as healthy as possible navigating this Public Health Emergency to its end.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.