

Improving Programs for Inmates in NWT Correctional Facilities

Mr. Speaker, during my time as Minister of Justice, I have often spoken about the Corrections Service and the important work they are doing to improve the programming and supports available in our facilities to help address the needs of individuals in our corrections system.

I know that Members of the Legislative Assembly share with me the hope that people in our care are able to return to their communities on their way to becoming healthier members of our society. Over the past four years, we have made fundamental changes to the programs available to inmates, have been investing in our correctional facilities, and have been advancing legislative changes to better position inmates for success.

Knowing that some of the most prevalent risk factors for incarceration are substance abuse, violence, and relationship violence, evidence-based programs have been implemented that address these root causes of why some individuals find themselves in contact with the criminal justice system.

By working in close collaboration with Elders, Traditional Liaison Officers, and Indigenous staff, our Corrections Services continues to take special care and attention to ensure that programs delivered in our corrections facilities recognize the importance of Indigenous cultures and traditions. We are also delivering a suite of programs aimed at supporting inmates to become better aware of the triggers that lead them to engage in unhealthy and unsafe behaviours. Specific programs include Substance Abuse Management, Living without Violence, and the Respectful Relationships programs.

More recently, the Corrections Service has implemented the Northern Addictions Sessions at the South Mackenzie Correctional Centre. Work is also underway to develop a Northern module to be included as part of the Living Without Violence and Respectful Relationships programs as well.

Mr. Speaker, changes have also been made to the release planning process to ensure that case managers are considering which community programming options for inmates are available upon release. Where possible, clients are matched with similar programming that they received while in custody so that they can continue to build the skills that they need to be successful once at home.

We also recognize the importance of offering programs and opportunities to inmates so that they may advance their educational goals while in our corrections facilities. Inmates have access to adult literacy, basic education and upgrading, high school and exam preparation, trades exam preparation, life and employment readiness skills, and assistance with pursuing post-secondary studies.

Mr. Speaker, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the critical role that the men and women working in the corrections field do to provide the high quality correctional programming and care to inmates we have put so much effort into developing in the Northwest Territories. The reality is that there are few others in our society who are closer in contact, on a prolonged basis, with members of our society who are facing such challenging and complex social issues, than those working in the corrections service. As the NWT Corrections Service has evolved to find new and innovative ways to better support inmates, it is the dedication and professionalism of our corrections staff that has been, and will continue to be, key to our current and future successes.

Hand-in-hand with modernizing our legislative framework and improving our programming and supports, we have also focused on modernizing our correctional facilities. Later this month, the grand opening of the newly constructed women's unit of the Fort Smith Correctional Complex is planned, with building occupancy scheduled for later this fall. The design for this facility reflects the current and future needs of adult female offenders in the Northwest Territories. Access to family support to aid the healing process and to improve reintegration of inmates into their communities; access to northern-developed and northern-specific programming; and limiting access and connection with southern inmates, where gangs, drugs, and organized crime are prevalent were all factored into the design and creation of the new women's unit.

Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to advise that our government is moving forward with work to transition the South Mackenzie Correctional Centre in Hay River into a facility that operates under a Therapeutic Community model. Under this model, substance abuse is seen as a symptom of much broader problems and as such, a holistic approach is used that touches on every aspect of an offender's life. With an emphasis on social learning and mutual self-help, individual participants take on some of the responsibility for their peers' recovery. Providing help and support to others is seen as an important part of changing oneself under this model.

The transition of the facility to this new model is anticipated to take place in the spring of 2020, and in the coming weeks, officials with the Department of Justice will be making presentations on the Therapeutic Community model to the Town of Hay River, Indigenous governments, and community groups.

Mr. Speaker, the people in the Northwest Territories have been clear. They want inmates prepared and ready to rejoin their communities. The programming, facilities and legislative changes we have worked hard to advance during the 18th Legislative Assembly have laid a strong foundation for an improved NWT Corrections Service. Through the efforts of our dedicated staff and the continued partnerships we have with other departments and stakeholders, our Corrections Service is making a difference in the lives of Northerners and helping to create safer and healthier communities throughout the Northwest Territories.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.