

THE HONOURABLE JULIE GREEN
MINISTER OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

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Response to the NWT Chief Coroner's Report on Suicide

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to talk about a heavy subject impacting many Northern residents and I acknowledge that my statement may be triggering for some people as it includes subject matter around suicide and mental health in the NWT. I encourage anyone who may find these subject matters to be triggering to take the necessary steps for your emotional safety, which may include stepping out of the House or muting my statement until I finish.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today with a heavy heart. Last week, the Chief Coroner felt compelled to release suicide statistics for the Northwest Territories, earlier than usual, because of an alarmingly high number of suicide deaths so far this year. There have been 18 suicides, most of them men between the ages of 20 and 29. There have been more suicides in a single year in the Northwest Territories than any previous year in the last decade.

I want to express my deepest sympathies to the families and communities who have lost loved ones. The grief that comes with the death of a loved one can be overwhelming, I am committed to providing communities with the support they need to heal.

Mr. Speaker, while I do not use the following term lightly, I believe we are experiencing a mental health crisis in the Northwest Territories. The number of suicides we have seen so far this year, along with increased mental health hospitalizations tells us that more attention and energy is needed to address this crisis. Thousands of NWT residents are currently struggling with their mental health, and while the GNWT is offering more mental health support services than ever before, we know that too often people in need of that support are not seeking it out. We need to step up our effort to reach people. We must respond to this crisis with the focus it demands.

The fact is, there is no simple answer. We know that there are risk factors driven by poor mental health. Depression plays a role. The pandemic. Substance use, trauma. The causes of despair may also include lack of access to employment and educational opportunities, a lack of healthy and safe recreational opportunities, poor housing and inadequate food. These social determinants, combined with the inter-generational trauma caused by forced colonization, systemic racism and oppression continue to weigh heavily on families and communities. Given this complexity, I believe a whole-of-government response is needed and I have initiated discussions with Cabinet about how we can strengthen our approach to suicide intervention and prevention.

I would like to share some information about the approach of the Department of Health and Social Services is taking. I have been working with the Mayor of Tuktoyaktuk, whose community has experienced four suicides since June. In response to their request, we have provided additional counsellors to work with residents in Tuktoyaktuk. We also expedited the community's Suicide Prevention Fund application, which provided the funding to bring Jordin Tootoo to the community last week as an inspirational speaker. Jordin is someone who the community felt could connect with youth and others who are grieving. Communities understand best what they need in times of crisis, and we are working with them to tailor our support, as much as possible.

Mr. Speaker, we have heard from some residents that they are most comfortable talking to counsellors from their own community, and we are trying to adapt to a community-based approach that will make this possible. We have provided funding to support the Dene Wellness Warriors program, and we are assisting communities to hire these Rhodes College graduates.

In addition to the community counselling program, there are child and youth care counsellors in schools across the territory, and residents can access helplines 365 days a year. The Suicide Prevention Fund helps communities deliver programming or to obtain training they believe is effective and appropriate to address mental health challenges.

Mr. Speaker, this issue is critically important for the Department of Health and Social Services. Offering effective and culturally safe mental wellness and addictions programs and services is a priority for this government, and for me personally. While we are putting more resources than ever

into mental wellness programming and resources, I am concerned that more people are not accessing these services. We are working to understand why that is, and on how we can achieve better uptake.

If you, a friend or loved one is struggling with mental health or talking about suicide please listen to them and reach out for help. You do not have to be alone.

I encourage all my colleagues here today to share our Mental Health and Community Wellness Support information with your constituents. I have posted links to these resources on my social media channels. These challenges affect more people than any of us can imagine, and we can all be part of the solution.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.