

Update on Recruitment and Retention of Health Professionals

Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by again expressing my gratitude to all health and social services workers in the Northwest Territories. These dedicated professionals have been serving the needs of residents through some very difficult times. I want to assure staff, as well as my colleagues here today, and residents of the Northwest Territories, that the Department of Health and Social Services is working hard to find solutions that will ease the pressure on the system.

The results of the Retention and Recruitment Survey of nurses, conducted in November 2021, indicated that in the first year of the pandemic, 94 percent of nurses in the territory experienced symptoms of burnout, and 90 percent were asked to work overtime. This problem has reached a point where many health professionals are choosing to leave their field, retire, or reduce their working hours. There is tremendous competition to recruit physicians, nurses, and nurse practitioners to work in every jurisdiction in the country. Staffing shortages have become so severe that service reductions in health care have not only become necessary, but in many places they have become routine.

As of June 2022, the vacancy rate for nurses in the territory was 25.7 percent. That rate, while slightly lower than the same period last year, is a significant increase from September 2020, when the nurse vacancy rate was 9.7 percent. The vacancy rate for family practitioners and specialists in the Northwest Territories was 42 percent in June.

Mr. Speaker, our health and social services leadership team has heard the concerns of staff, and we recognize their need for a better work-life balance. Their mental health, safety, job performance, and satisfaction depend on it, as does the sustainability of the system.

We have taken several steps to address staffing shortages. Indeterminate staff have been temporarily reassigned, as needed, to support critical service areas. The health authorities have used a combination of locums, casual and agency nurses to cover staffing gaps.

Mr. Speaker, we have begun using paramedics to assist in hospitals and acute care emergency room operations, as well as to provide support to small community health centres.

To address the regular staffing challenges during the holiday season, we introduced the Friend and Family Travel Program in which all casual, term, and indeterminate front-line nurses and physicians, scheduled to work at least five days between December 20 to January 4, can bring two family members or friends to their northern place of employment.

Based on our survey results and our engagement with nurses, we know that 85 percent learned about employment opportunities in the Northwest Territories by word of mouth and by visiting the government's website. To encourage more word-of-mouth recruitment, we have created an incentive for GNWT employees to refer health care professionals to work in the territory.

Mr. Speaker, we know that building relationships with staff early in their tenure in a new community increases their likelihood of success in their role and increases retention rates in these positions. Four Onboarding Specialist positions have been created within the health authorities to provide a thorough orientation and help new hires settle into their new environment.

We have increased locum pay to remain competitive with other jurisdictions in Canada. In addition, locum physicians are reimbursed for the cost of licensing fees upon completing a contract with the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority. We continue to cover nurse licensing fees. We are also working to issue licenses to physicians as quickly as possible so they can work as soon as possible.

These are the immediate steps the department has taken to address staffing shortages. The Health and Social Services System Human Resources Plan, which was tabled in June, outlines our medium and long-term plans for recruitment and retention.

Mr. Speaker, these initiatives will help Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority to avoid further service reductions and improve work-life balance for employees. We recognize the value of the wonderful staff we have, who are devoted to serving the residents of the Northwest Territories. We must ensure that retention remains our top priority, as we continue to find creative ways to stay competitive in our recruitment efforts.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.