

COVID-19 Lessons Learned Report

Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged our entire society on a fundamental level, forcing us to grow and adapt in the face of unprecedented threats to the health and wellbeing of our loved ones and our communities. Three years since the outbreak of the pandemic, it is still easy for many of us to recall the fear and uncertainty of those early days, as the world searched for answers amid reports of rapidly rising death tolls.

Almost every Northerner has a story of how the pandemic touched their lives in some way. Some lost loved ones or were forced to miss out on major life events. Some saw their businesses suffer, while others had to rethink their livelihood altogether. All faced a sacrifice of some kind as we dealt with this deadly crisis together.

After declaring a Public Health Emergency in the Territory, the Government of the Northwest Territories continued to respond with urgency, launching what would become an intense, whole-of-government effort to protect the residents of our territory; especially the most vulnerable. We had to maintain our already limited health resources, redirecting, and refocusing our services on the go, while avoiding the kind of systemic failures and social disruptions that were happening in other jurisdictions around the world.

Through much hard work and sacrifice on the part of all Northerners, together we have largely succeeded in minimizing the worst impacts of the pandemic. Now, as a government, we need to take a moment, to step back and learn from our actions over the last three years, and take the lessons we have learned about our systems and processes and apply them to improve how we respond to a future public health emergency.

Mr. Speaker, later today I will table the COVID-19 Lessons Learned Report. We are one of the first jurisdictions in Canada to initiate this kind of public review of our actions during the pandemic. We heard from public servants most directly involved in responding to the

COVID-19 pandemic, and from residents, Indigenous governments, and other northern leaders about the GNWT's operational management of the pandemic.

We learned a lot from this exercise about the need to better coordinate emergency responses specific to a long-term public health emergency. The COVID-19 Lessons Learned Report includes 23 recommendations to assist the GNWT to better coordinate measures, improve accountability and better serve the public, and support employees in responding effectively to an emergency. We have already begun implementing some of these recommendations.

I want to thank those who participated in our surveys and interviews. They described very real challenges, but also showed how people made their best efforts to respond to rapidly changing and unprecedented circumstances. These are lessons that we will carry with us into the future.

I would like to take a moment to thank all the people who worked tirelessly, within the GNWT, and across the Northwest Territories, responding with all their heart to the call to protect and care for their fellow Northerners. I also want to acknowledge my fellow Northerners for demonstrating resilience and resourcefulness as we grappled with unfamiliar and often frustrating realities. We were greatly challenged, but we met that challenge with strength, unity, and compassion.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.