

Independent Legal Advice and Representation Program

Mr. Speaker, with funding from the federal government, the Department of Justice is enhancing access to free legal advice and legal representation for survivors of sexual assault and intimate partner violence through the establishment of the Independent Legal Advice and Representation Program.

In 2019, the Government of the Northwest Territories commissioned the Aurora Research Institute to conduct an evidence-based study to use as a guide to better support survivors of intimate partner, gender-based violence and sexual assault in the NWT. Concurrently, researchers contracted by the YWCA NWT completed a study on the experience of victims applying for emergency protection orders. Both studies highlighted the sometimes dizzying complexity of the systems encountered by survivors.

The findings from these studies were also consistent with the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which calls on governments to provide vulnerable individuals facing the threat of domestic violence with access to independent legal services and advice.

The department has completed jurisdictional research and consultation with a variety of stakeholders, including other Independent Legal Advice and Representation Programs in Canada, the YWCA NWT, RCMP, Health and Social Services, the Public Prosecution Service of Canada's Sexual Violence Team, and the NWT Legal Aid Commission to support the design, development and implementation of an Independent Legal Advice and Representation Program in the NWT.

The department is excited to be working with the YWCA NWT to deliver this program. The addition of free legal advice and representation to the existing NWT-wide delivery of emergency protection orders will ensure people are informed about whether they should obtain one, the ramifications of obtaining one, and how to access help in dealing with existing

ones. The program also expands access to free legal advice and representation for survivors of intimate partner and gender-based violence, and sexual assault to support their navigation through the criminal justice system and make informed decisions related to their unique circumstances.

The Independent Legal Advice and Representation Program supports service delivery with an Independent Legal Advice Coordinator who receives and coordinates program referrals from a range of service providers. Survivors may also self refer into the program through a 1-800 number.

The program has a panel of lawyers to provide survivors with up to four hours of free legal advice and representation. The program coordinator receives the initial referrals, conducts client screening and intake, and matches survivors with a lawyer, and will conduct public awareness and training sessions to support program referrals, uptake, and information sharing. The goal is to increase informed decision-making and understanding about legal decisions.

Mr. Speaker, the Independent Legal Advice and Representation Program is now in place and my hope is that it helps improve the safety, security, and access to justice for survivors of intimate partner and gender-based violence, and sexual assault.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.