

**Housing and Homelessness Response to COVID-19**

Mr. Speaker, we recognize that supporting vulnerable residents in need of housing or at risk of homelessness across the Northwest Territories is an essential part of the overall response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Northwest Territories Housing Corporation has been working to ensure that we meet the needs of our residents during this difficult and challenging time.

The need for social distancing due to COVID-19 had a significant impact on how we support our residents and highlighted the need for all of us to work together, respect one another and be sources of hope in these trying times.

To support meeting the housing and shelter needs of Northwest Territories residents during this pandemic, the Government of the Northwest Territories announced \$5 million to support initiatives that recognize that vulnerable residents have limited ability to self-isolate safely. This included \$1.4 million to create housing for persons at risk or persons experiencing homelessness to self-isolate, and \$3.6 million to bring on stream up to approximately 130 units across the Northwest Territories that were either available for occupancy or in need of renovations to meet the core housing needs.

Now that these units are no longer required by the Emergency Management Organization, the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation is in the process of re-allocating these units to the Corporation's rental programs: Public housing, market rental and affordable rental or to support homeownership. The re-allocation of these units will help in alleviating overcrowding in smaller communities. Some 60 of these units are available for immediate allocation. The introduction of these units will decrease the waiting lists across the NWT and make us better prepared should there be a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, we also recognized that some residents were facing economic challenges due to this virus. To meet that need, the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation enhanced the Transitional Rent Supplement Program by extending the program to August, streamlining the application process, and simplified requirements for participants. Where there were approximately 40 program participants last year, this program is now helping almost 150 households.

One of the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the sudden loss of income could lead to residents being at risk of homelessness. In anticipation of that, we increased the budget for the Homelessness Assistance Fund from \$125,000 to \$300,000. This program provides financial assistance for the private rental market for people to find stable housing. We have been working to ensure that these applications are processed as quickly as possible, as we know that these times are extremely stressful for our residents.

Mr. Speaker, we have been working with community partners to access buildings to help serve as isolation centres for those vulnerable people who are at greater risks to contract COVID-19. Under this action, we leased Aspen Apartments from the federal government that has provided 36 units in Yellowknife; and we have accommodated up to 18 people to be sheltered and experiencing homelessness at the North Country Inn in Hay River.

During this pandemic period, the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation continues to be accessible to residents even with the realities of many working remotely. As such, emergency hotlines were set up for homelessness assistance, emergency repair and access to the Transitional Rent Supplement Program.

Mr. Speaker, as we begin recovery, the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation will be an important contributor to the economic recovery of the Northwest Territories. We will be working with communities to ensure that construction, renovation and repair work is done in a safe and considerate manner and bring in much needed economic benefits to our small communities.

Lastly, even though we have entered into Stage 1 of the pandemic recovery plan, I would like to remind our tenants that the risks posed by COVID-19 are not over. I know that with the easing of some social distancing, we want to gather and spend time with friends and families, but we all need to follow the directions of the Chief Public Health Officer. So, let us be considerate, be helpful, be kind, and keep washing our hands.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to take the opportunity to thank all Northwest Territories Housing Corporation staff and the Local Housing Authorities who have been creative, flexible and responsive throughout this pandemic. They have gone above and beyond to provide direct, appropriate assistance to all residents of the Northwest Territories. Your time, energy and countless hours are extremely appreciated.

Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.