

COVID-19 Travel Restrictions

Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 has affected all areas of social and economic activity in the Northwest Territories and around the world. As the pandemic has evolved and jurisdictions have been able to manage its spread, all governments are looking at the public health measures that have been put in place and are continuing to adjust them.

One area of significant interest to our government and to all people and communities in the Northwest Territories is travel. Due to the restrictions the Chief Public Health Officer placed on travel early on, we have been fortunate in the territory to have only seen five cases of COVID-19 so far.

While our strategy of restricting travel has clearly been a success when it comes to protecting public health, we have to recognize that it is a serious step and there are some significant legal limits and considerations that need to be respected.

One of those legal limits is the requirement to respect the Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees on freedom of mobility. The Charter gives all Canadians the right to travel freely throughout Canada, and the Government of the Northwest Territories does not have the legal authority to override that.

Although this means that our government cannot close the borders to Canadian residents, it does not prevent us from placing restrictions and conditions on travel by people once they are in the Northwest Territories.

This is what we have done under a public health order issued by the Chief Public Health Officer.

Under the current orders, all travelers entering the NWT are greeted at a checkpoint by a Border Officer.

The Border Officer collects their information, and if they do not meet an identified exemption, informs them of the NWT's public health travel restrictions – including the requirement for anyone entering to self-isolate for 14 days.

Travellers have the opportunity to voluntarily turn around. If they choose not to, they are informed that they must seek an exceptional circumstances exemption, and immediately self-isolate if they wish to proceed further in the Northwest Territories.

This is a shift in how the current order was being implemented, Mr. Speaker. Before May 29, border officials asked people to turn around and return to their destination if they did not fit an existing exemption in order to meet our objectives.

Following legal developments in Southern Canada challenging similar actions in Newfoundland and Labrador, we realized we needed to take steps to more closely align implementation of our order with the mobility provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

When I, or the Premier, have spoken about travel restrictions, we have spoken about different aspects of the same order. The bottom line is that our government cannot prevent people from entering the Northwest Territories, but we can restrict and prohibit their movements once they are in the Northwest Territories.

Travel restrictions are a legitimate and necessary measure to help slow the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impact on Northwest Territories residents, communities and the health care system. We will continue to maintain travel restrictions so long as they are necessary to protect our residents.

We will also continue the requirement for people to self-isolate in one of the four regional self-isolation communities, if they have entered from outside the territory. Our plan is to continue to cover the costs for people who need to access one of our

self-isolation centres for Northwest Territories residents, but we will be asking non-NWT residents to cover the cost of their stay themselves.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize that our public health measures have to adjust to meet the realities on the ground. As the threat of the pandemic changes, we will review our measures and adjust them to reflect the current situation. We will also continue to strive to make sure our orders are in line with all the necessary legal requirements and that the way we describe them are clear and accurate.

COVID-19 is a dynamic situation and how we have responded has changed. It will continue to change, Mr. Speaker, and so will the way we describe our response publicly. We recognize that this can be confusing for people, but we will commit to doing a better job to explain those changes as soon as we make them, and speak about them as clearly and directly as possible.

We have two different changes coming on Friday, Mr. Speaker. One change is to the travel restrictions that I have been speaking about this afternoon. As I have said, these changes will line up better with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and will more clearly address leisure travel within the territory.

The second change will be the implementation of phase two of relaxing restrictions under our Emerging Wisely plan. I know that all Members, and all residents of the Northwest Territories, are looking forward to phase two. We will be briefing Members on phase two tomorrow, Mr. Speaker, and making a public announcement on Friday afternoon.

While we are able to start revising our public health measures as the pandemic evolves, Mr. Speaker, I want to remind all residents that COVID-19 is not over and we must still be cautious, and follow the direction and guidance issued by the Chief Public Health Officer to keep our territory safe.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.