

Justice During and Beyond COVID-19

Like other Departments across the GNWT, the Department of Justice saw its operations, administration, programs and service delivery impacted by COVID-19. Some functions or activities were delayed as more urgent tasks took over and staff were redeployed. Yet as we begin to take stock of the last few months, there are both challenges and opportunities that have appeared. I want to speak today on the response and emerging opportunities within Court Services and Corrections.

Our correctional facilities have implemented numerous measures including modifying intake assessment procedures and practicing physical distancing. The Department worked closely with the Chief Public Health Officer on developing new protocols.

One of the first and more critical responses to COVID-19 was to reduce the number of inmates at the Correctional facilities. With support and cooperation from all those who work within the justice system including the judiciary, the Federal Public Prosecution Service and the Defense bar, there has been a strong focus on some of the core principles of both judicial interim release, or bail, and sentencing to ensure that only those who must by law be separated from society are directed to the Correctional facilities. Within the Department of Justice, we are ensuring that inmates who are eligible for temporary absence release are aware of their opportunity to apply, have support from case officers to make those applications, and will have those applications

examined promptly. The application process for temporary absences includes a thorough risk assessment because one of the goals of the Correctional Service is to preserve public safety. But it has been an opportunity for many individuals nearing the end of their formal custodial sentence to complete their period of rehabilitation outside the walls of the correctional facility. All of this work monitoring access to bail and supporting applications for temporary release, can continue past the current COVID-19 measures.

Another challenge that we are still facing is the lack of internet services available to inmates. For safety reasons, inmates do not have unrestricted access to the internet. With visits cancelled in order to reduce the risk of an outbreak in our correctional facilities, this created a very real challenge to ensuring that inmates can keep in contact with their loved ones. The Department of Justice has responded by bringing in dedicated lines that can be set up to facilitate virtual contact sessions. Looking forward, this improved connectivity could also help facilitate access to new and innovative education and programming opportunities.

Court Services have also implemented measures to allow court operations to continue in accordance with the protocols set by the Chief Public Health Officer, and as directed by the Judiciary. To reduce the number of people present in a courtroom, hearings are only being held for urgent matters, and video appearances and videoconferencing are being utilized where feasible. Court circuits have been postponed to protect our communities. Additionally, we have reduced the hours of our Court Registries and installed depositories for the safe drop-off of court documents to protect both staff and the public.

Like other jurisdictions across the country, we are now examining how technology worked for us during the pandemic and considering how we may be able to continue to provide the Court with flexible tools so there are options available in the future. The pandemic forced an increased reliance on technology for the delivery of Court Services, but going forward we have an opportunity to decide how technology can mean better service for the people of the Northwest Territories. That can include not only the efforts made to date but also looking at where we can continue to grow, including improvements to video and other telecommunication processes and electronic filing opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Court Services and Corrections were not the only divisions within the Department of Justice impacted by COVID-19 and that worked to deliver a swift response. Lawyers in Legal Division have been called on to provide opinions and draft documents in a situation without precedent; Community Corrections has worked to deliver their programs even when our method of community engagement has been upended; Legal Registries and the Public Trustee developed new work processes and found new ways to interact with clients. In every case, we are seeing some of our challenges more acutely but also seeing opportunities for improved service delivery and innovative responses. The Department of Justice will continue to ensure health and safety first for all residents and will also continue to grow the creativity and innovation that has been a part of our response to COVID-19.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.