

**Sessional Statement - October 2020**

Mr. Speaker, I want to welcome Members back to the Legislative Assembly as we resume the Second Session. I look forward to working together as we endeavor to keep residents safe from COVID-19, support industry and residents, and make progress on our mandate commitments.

When I delivered my first sessional statement in this House last December, no one could have predicted what the future was going to hold. This pandemic has been like nothing many of us have ever experienced. Over 37 million people worldwide have contracted COVID-19, and over a million people have died since the pandemic started. More than 9,000 Canadians have lost their lives to this virus in less than a year. Every country, community and family is being impacted by COVID-19.

In Canada, provinces and territories grappled with how best to contain the spread of the virus. All jurisdictions took immediate steps to protect the health and well-being of residents in the face of a challenge we are still learning about.

In the early days, our efforts were swift. Our government responded to the orders of the Chief Public Health Officer and made protecting the health and well-being of residents and our communities a top priority. We implemented travel restrictions, launched ProtectNWT and 811, established border controls and isolation centres. We invested millions in personal protective equipment for both health and non-health workers, testing and contact testing, and ensuring the health care system was equipped to handle an increase in cases.

Mr. Speaker, our early interventions have paid off. Residents of the NWT have been safe; our communities have not experienced loss of life as a result of this virus; and our biggest risks are being managed. Like Atlantic Canada and other territories who implemented strict controls, we were able to limit COVID-19 in the NWT.

It is important to mention that our success in maintaining the low numbers would not have been possible without the collective support of all of us. Indigenous and community governments who supported our measures: MLAs, the media and community leaders who helped spread the messaging; mines, private enterprise and non-governmental sectors who put the lives of residents first, the many individual employees in various sectors putting their own lives on the line to help, and all the residents who abided by the Chief Public Health Officer orders were all critical to keep our numbers where they are today.

Mr. Speaker, the measures the Government of the Northwest Territories took however, did not materialize on their own. Hundreds of public service workers stepped up to help in our efforts. Over 180 employees helped on the front lines, but behind this hundreds more

within departments helped with the organization, policy development, and implementation of our COVID-19 response. Our employees are the backbone of this government and their dedication showed as they worked tirelessly to ensure our response was as effective as possible. I am extremely proud of our civil service and I sincerely thank them for all their hard work.

Parts of the South have recently announced they have entered their second wave and the number of cases in Canada is increasing to levels we haven't seen since the early days of the pandemic.

While our response to the initial outbreak of COVID-19 was successful to prepare for the second wave, we have to use what we have learned from what we experienced. One of the things we learnt was that having necessary resources housed in multiple departments was challenging. Many of the requests and enquiries involved various departments which sometimes resulted in less than timely responses. We also heard that, as much as possible, people want the supports provided by the GNWT pre-pandemic. As well, we heard that our employees and departments were stretched thin trying to help with the pandemic response and doing the best they could to complete their normal work duties.

Keeping NWT residents safe during the ongoing pandemic continues to be our priority, and it is why we proposed the COVID Secretariat. The Secretariat will house the border patrols and enforcement team, isolation units, distribution of personal protective equipment to non-health care providers, 811 and ProtectNWT. The Secretariat will focus on the COVID response which enables departments to focus on service delivery and implementing our mandate commitments.

Mr. Speaker, as was stated by the Governor-General during the Speech from the Throne recently, the last six months have laid bare the gaps in our society. As well as implementing the controls to enforce the Chief Public Health Officer orders we have also provided supports for residents and businesses to help during this pandemic. We invested in child care for returning workers, and financially supported our municipalities and Indigenous communities. We provided supports for businesses, employers, schools, students and income assistance participants. As well, we invested millions in support of our most vulnerable members of our communities.

Our response to COVID-19 will cost money, real money. But as one Indigenous leader reminded me, "how much money is one life worth"?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on our territory and economy, and has created new challenges for pursuing the GNWT priorities. Recovery is key, and we need to ensure our people have jobs and our businesses are thriving. We also have to keep health and safety, housing, food security, and education, top of mind to improve the lives of all NWT residents. Now more than ever before, we need to be investing in our people, and support them through this challenging time.

We know this will cost money and we cannot do this alone. We have been meeting regularly with other jurisdictions and the federal government throughout this pandemic. Canada recognizes our unique realities, and the recent Speech from the Throne identified the exceptional needs of the North.

We will continue to work with all governments to ensure that when we talk economic recovery, investment in housing, transportation, broadband, energy infrastructure and protecting the most vulnerable, the North continues to be recognized as needing special consideration.

We need to close the gap between Northern and Southern Canada, one that existed long before COVID-19. Canada's commitment to ensuring people aren't left behind aligns with the priorities outlined in our mandate to ensure a prosperous territory where our residents can thrive for generations to come. That's why, Mr. Speaker, we need to get on with the business of government. The COVID-19 pandemic is not going to end in the immediate future. While we must ensure we keep the health and well-being of residents at the forefront we cannot lose sight of the work we were all elected to do by residents of the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Speaker, our relationship with Canada is critical to our success as a territory. This morning, alongside Indigenous leaders, the YWCA, and Member of Parliament Michael McLeod, Minister Chinna and I met with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for a roundtable discussion on Northern housing needs. This issue is important to our government, and we hope this meeting has kicked off a broader discussion for how we can find innovative ways to address the dire need for housing in the NWT. This is an example of our commitment to building strong, collaborative relationships with our stakeholders, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue to find ways to work with Canada, Indigenous and community government partners, and the NGO sector to improve the lives of our residents.

We must continue to work towards a strong north and a resilient economy. As we move forward we will continue to pursue economic and social opportunities that provide sustainable benefits, as well as address the direct impacts of climate change that our territory is experiencing. We need to advance our long-term priorities, particularly when it comes to growing our economy, and ensuring a healthy, vibrant, and educated territory for years to come.

Of critical importance as well, we must continue to work with Indigenous governments to conclude negotiations, define the implementation of the United Nation's Declaration of Indigenous People, and work with the federal government in the development of a National Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls Action Plan.

COVID-19 certainly has taken the focus of this government, however departments have still made progress towards meeting our mandate objectives and I'm confident we will be able to complete a number of our mandate areas this term. During the February 2021 sitting we will document in detail the progress we have made on our mandate commitments.

Mr. Speaker, it was just over one year ago that we were all elected as the 19 MLAs to represent the people of the Northwest Territories.

Who knew when we began that we would face challenges like no other government. Because of the seriousness of this pandemic and the needs of our residents, it is essential that we all work together. It is critical that Ministers and MLAs work together, along with Indigenous and community governments, businesses, non-government organizations, and residents, to find solutions that ensure the future prosperity of the Northwest Territories.

By working together on areas of shared priorities, we will advance our objectives and better serve the people of the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Speaker, we must move forward collectively and collaboratively. We have no choice. The safety of our residents and future of the Northwest Territories depends on it, and by working together I am confident we can achieve success as the 19<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.