

Cannabis Public Education and Awareness Update

Mr. Speaker, as the federal government implements its plan to legalize cannabis this summer, the Department of Health and Social Services, in partnership with other Government of the Northwest Territories departments and agencies, has already begun public education and awareness efforts.

Mr. Speaker, in late April, we launched our campaign in order to equip residents with the health information they need to make informed decisions about cannabis use. While all Northwest Territories residents will be provided with cannabis-related health information, groups that are especially at risk for harm from cannabis will be our immediate focus. This includes youth under 25, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and those at risk for adverse mental health outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, this will not be an easy task. The challenge for us is in striking the right balance in providing information about the very real health risks associated with cannabis products while acknowledging that residents will soon have the option to legally purchase and consume cannabis.

Our goal is to provide residents with evidence-based and culturally appropriate harm reduction information on safer cannabis use so that they can feel confident in their ability to make informed health decisions.

Like other controlled substances, there are risks associated with cannabis use that people should be aware of. We know that cannabis use negatively impacts brain development in infants and young people, possibly up to the age of 25. For this reason, some of our most important audiences for this education and awareness

campaign are youth, their parents and youth influencers. To this end, we provided

residents with the Cannabis Talk Kit: Know How To Talk With Your Teen, a publication from Drug Free Kids Canada and endorsed by Health Canada. This simple talk kit was sent to all households and businesses in the Northwest Territories. Over 13,000 kits were distributed to help start and guide a conversation regarding cannabis use. This kit is one of the many initiatives that will raise awareness regarding cannabis use.

To make sure that the important information in the Cannabis Talk Kit reaches all residents, we have worked with local translators to provide a summary of the kit in all of our Indigenous languages. These translations are currently airing on local and commercial radio stations and are available on the Department of Health and Social Services website.

Other elements of our public education and awareness campaign include social media and newspaper advertising, videos, and posters that will provide fact-based health messaging for our target audiences.

Our work with schools and educators is an important part of how we are working together as a government and with our partners to make sure that our youth are getting important information about cannabis.

On June 11, 2018, a brain expert from the University of Calgary will host a live video conference question and answer session with students and educators in schools across NWT on the effects of cannabis on the brain. Similar information sessions are also being provided to health professionals and Northwest Territories recreation leaders on how to talk to youth and people who use cannabis about the health effects. As Community Healthy Living Fairs begin in the fall, we will also have materials available for the wider public.

We hope that these new resources and activities will prompt further discussions in our communities and in our homes.

Mr. Speaker, ensuring that our young people and residents have the most up-to-date information on cannabis is not a one-time effort. We know that we will need to continue to be a trusted source of information for residents, and that this will require longer term planning and dedicated resources. That is why the Department of Health and Social Services has submitted a detailed, multi-year funding proposal to the federal government that would allow us to expand our campaign to support even more public education activities in communities.

Part of this proposal will help us identify community champions and provide information to our communities in culturally appropriate ways. This would be in addition to the scheduled Community Healthy Living Fairs that will take place this fall which provide healthy choices advice and information directly to communities.

We applaud the work that the federal government has begun on cannabis public education, including using social media, paid advertising and promotional materials, all of which is helping to provide important information to residents in NWT and across the country. We hope to leverage this campaign and expand our own campaign.

Our government is committed to making sure that NWT residents and communities have the information that they need to educate themselves and their children in order to make informed decisions on cannabis use.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.