

**Benefits of the COVID-19 Coordinating Secretariat**

Mr. Speaker, as COVID-19 approached at the beginning of this year, our government was preparing our institutions to respond to the threat of a generation.

Before a case ever reached our borders, we pulled together a team from across our public service to stand up our emergency response. As the threat grew, so too did our response.

We declared a public health emergency; we restricted travel; we required self-isolation planning; and we put restrictions on businesses and people as the first COVID-19 cases were confirmed in our territory.

We step up contact centres like ProtectNWT and 8-1-1 to process more than 21,000 self-isolation plans and get people the information they needed; placed border staff at airports and highways and enforcement officers across our regions; and we established safe spaces for isolation in communities with enhanced medical care.

Mr. Speaker, our initial measures paid off. We were able to keep this virus under control and bring stability to our territory.

Achieving this stability means we are able to keep looking forward, even as many across the country look at tightening up.

Now that we know more about COVID-19 and it's affects on the Northwest Territories we can build a stronger response that better serves communities, residents, and businesses.

Mr. Speaker, this is what the COVID Coordinating Secretariat will do.

It will bring together the pandemic services thousands of residents have counted on since March under one roof, and bring in the leadership and investment required to allow us to better prepare for the second wave.

We know the majority of residents, businesses, and communities want these services and they want them to work well.

The dedicated team at the COVID Coordinating Secretariat will be able to deliver more seamless services for residents and businesses.

Mr. Speaker, these services are necessary. COVID-19 is not going away any time soon. We need these services to continue to operate, so departments can better focus on their normal daily functions and the priorities of this Legislative Assembly.

Rising to a challenge like this pandemic means making real investments. Every jurisdiction across the world has done it. Our territory is no different.

We know that these investments in isolation requirements, border controls and enforcement work, not just from our own experience, but from the experiences of fellow successful jurisdictions like Nunavut, Atlantic Canada, and Yukon; who are all investing in similar services to keep their jurisdictions safe.

But Mr. Speaker, we also must balance the need for these services with fiscal responsibility, and bringing the delivery of our pandemic response under one structure will make controlling costs easier.

The work to find savings has already begun. We are currently reviewing the territory's approach to isolation costs, and considering equitable and fair ways to reduce the financial burden that makes up over half of the costs of our pandemic services.

Mr. Speaker, Indigenous governments and communities continue to play an important role in our efforts to protect the health and safety of residents. We will continue to engage with Indigenous governments, and community leadership, as well as business stakeholders, as we consider important changes to self-isolation requirements and other Secretariat functions.

We know isolation in designated hubs has been tough on people. We have heard of the mental and social harms and we are in a better position to resolve them. Now more than ever, we need to be talking about our mental health and well-being. If you know someone who is having a difficult time, reach out. If you are struggling, please reach out for help. You are not alone.

Mr. Speaker, with strong, territory-wide pandemic response plans, we have built the resilience and capacity we need to respond to cases across our communities.

With expanded rapid testing capacity, enhanced surveillance of wastewater, and improved contact tracing, we are able to consider new ways to mitigate risk for communities, while allowing people to return home sooner.

Mr. Speaker, what this Secretariat will not do is take away from our territory's investments in our health system.

It will instead support these efforts, and the work of Chief Public Health Officer, by taking on pandemic services which in the past had divided the attention of health officials as everyone worked to rise to the early challenges of COVID-19.

Investments like those in new testing devices, wastewater surveillance, nurses and laboratory expertise, and strong pandemic planning will continue, and our government will continue to get our health system the resources to respond to mental health and medical needs for all of our residents as we move forward.

Mr. Speaker, recently it was announced we have several active cases; the first cases the NWT has seen since the Spring. With the arrival of a second wave in Canada, we must do our part to prevent the spread of COVID-19 now more than ever. That includes treating individuals who test positive, either presumptive or confirmed, with respect, empathy and kindness. Even with taking every precaution people may still get COVID-19, and we need to be diligent in our own precautions and support our friends and neighbours. We must be ready, and stay ready.

The guidance, advice, and orders of public health leadership; the expertise on our frontlines; the operational support of the COVID Coordinating Secretariat and the work of each resident to abide by the Chief Public Health Officer recommendations will work together to keep residents as safe as possible.

So far the spread of COVID-19 has been managed. Not because we are lucky, but because we took action. We elected to invest in the health and safety of our territory, and the establishment of the Secretariat allows us to still focus on containing COVID-19 as well as committing to economic and social recovery, and to delivering on our mandate.

So when considering our way forward in this pandemic, I ask all Members to support our actions, because investing in health, safety, and stability is always the right choice.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.