



**Government of the Northwest Territories Response to Committee
Report Report 3-19(2): Report on the
Long-Term Post-Pandemic Recovery: Recommendations to the GNWT**

Introduction

The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) recognizes the difficulties that the COVID-19 pandemic and health measures being taken to combat the virus' spread is causing NWT businesses, service providers, residents, governments and non-government organizations. There is a need for planning a path forward for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The GNWT remains committed to mitigating the social, health and education impacts of this crisis on our delivery of programs as part of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The GNWT acknowledges it will play an important role in supporting the social recovery of the Northwest Territories as part of the Long-Term Post-Pandemic Recovery along with other key stakeholders like Indigenous governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the federal government.

A new Business Advisory Council (BAC) has been established to support the GNWT in the development and implementation of "*The Emerge Stronger Plan*" to support the economic and social recovery of the Northwest Territories.

Planning is underway for the establishment of additional Committees including the Joint Advisory Committee on Reconciliation and Indigenous Affairs, and the Special Committee on COVID 19 Economic and Social Recovery. The revised Terms of Reference for these two proposed joint MLA Cabinet committees, one related to COVID-19 response, and the other respecting efforts related to Indigenous reconciliation, were provided to the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight on August 7, 2020.

Collectively, these Committees will ensure that the experience, talent, and resources of the private sector, the Northwest Territories' Indigenous communities, Members of the Legislative Assembly and NGOs who deliver critical GNWT funded programs or services to the public are considered in the development and implementation of the economic and social recovery plan.

The GNWT would like to thank the members of the Standing Committee on Social Development (Standing Committee) for the work in developing this report. The recommendations of the Standing Committee will be considered in developing a recovery plan and preparing for future phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the limited time that the GNWT has had to assess the recommendations, it is difficult to anticipate how the recommendations will inform the development of the recovery plan and therefore there will need for further engagement with Standing Committee as the recovery plan is developed.

It should be noted that the GNWT in preparing this response to the recommendations contained in CR3-19(3) did also consider the recommendations from Standing Committee on Economic

Development and Environment (SCEDE) in CR1-19(2) and the Standing Committee on Government Operations (SCOGO) in CR2-19(3).

Background

On June 9, 2020, CR 3-19(2) was considered in the Committee of the Whole. The seven recommendations were carried, including a recommendation that the Government of the Northwest Territories provide a comprehensive response to the report within 120 days.

Recommendation 1:

1. Standing Committee on Social Development recommends ECE make permanent the policy changes made to support clients in response to COVID.
 - To continue to reduce the amount of verification information required to apply for Income Assistance, to ensure clients are registered as quickly as possible, and automatically assessed for both basic needs and enhanced benefits.
 - To continue with the allowable income exemptions and to increase the annual income limit for unearned income per year, on top of the money received from Impact Benefit Agreements, Treaty or Land Claim agreements.
 - To continue to allow for clients to select self-care as a Productive Choice option, and reduce the requirement for face to face monthly reporting.
 - To continue to Payroll long term, vulnerable IA clients, to increase consistent payments to a three month reporting.

GNWT Response

The GNWT does not accept this recommendation due to the time limitations in providing a response.

The GNWT will commit to conduct an analysis of costs associated, while taking into account its current fiscal situation, reduced revenues, and other additional COVID-19 related costs. This analysis will include a review to see if the changes to the delivery of Income Assistance (IA) made by the interim IA COVID-19 relief measures should be continued. Once this analysis is complete, the GNWT commits to provide a briefing to the Standing Committee to see if there are any options to move forward, in whole or part, with this recommendation.

In the interim, on July 22, 2020 the GNWT did announce the extension of all IA COVID-19 relief measures currently in place until the end of September 2020. The GNWT committed to review whether an additional extension of the IA COVID-19 relief measures is warranted at the end of September 2020.

Recommendation 2:

Standing Committee on Social Development recommends DHSS continue to work with national partners to increase testing supplies, materials and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to maintain a robust inventory for the anticipated second wave of COVID 19.

GNWT Response

The GNWT accepts this recommendation.

The GNWT is committed to ensuring that it holds an adequate supply of testing supplies, materials and PPE. The GNWT is working through existing and new supply chain channels to ensure an adequate supply within the territory.

Recommendation 3:

Standing Committee on Social Development recommends the NWT HC retain the policy changes made to the TRSP during the pandemic and to continue to improve access and affordability within private market housing until such a time that the Canadian Housing Benefit (CHB) is operational.

GNWT Response

The GNWT accepts this recommendation.

The GNWT is committed to creating and maintaining access to adequate housing for all NWT residents. The NWT HC will commit to retain policy changes to the Transitional Rent Supplement Program and continue to try to improve access and affordability within the private market housing system until such a time that the CHB is operational.

Recommendation 4:

Committee recommends the GNWT advance universal childcare by maintaining the additional funding provided during the pandemic to support operational, cleaning costs, employee wage subsidies and food insecurity issues anticipated to be more severe post COVID.

GNWT Response

The GNWT does not accept this recommendation since it will be difficult to determine the costs associated with implementing this recommendation within the timelines of providing a response to the recommendations.

The GNWT will commit to conduct an analysis of costs associated, while taking into account its current fiscal situation, reduced revenues, and other additional COVID-19 related costs. This analysis will include the review of the proposed actions and timelines as outlined in the 2019-

2023 Mandate of the Government of the Northwest Territories (Mandate) to advance the following priorities of the 19th Legislative Assembly:

- Advance universal child care by increasing availability and affordability
- Increase food security through locally produced, harvested, and affordable food

Once this analysis is complete, the GNWT commits to provide a briefing to the Standing Committee to see if there are any options to move forward, in whole or part, with this recommendation.

In the interim, the GNWT announced on August 4, 2020 the availability of new funding for early learning and child care infrastructure in support of the Mandate action item "*Implement a program that provides non-government organizations with funding for facility repairs, to address code issues, and to undertake retrofits to support new childcare spaces*". This action is being implemented ahead of the planned Spring 2021 timeline as outlined in the Mandate.

Recommendation 5:

Committee recommends ECE to direct the District Education Councils to keep technology to support student home-based learning during COVID. Committee also recommends ECE focus on positive interventions and outreach to improve relationships between families of 'high risk' or vulnerable students.

GNWT Response

The GNWT accepts this recommendation.

The GNWT and District Education Councils are collaborating to complete all school risk assessment plans for the reopening of schools for the upcoming 2020-21 school year. Through this planning process, the GNWT will determine what type of additional supports, including technology supports and funding, that the JK-12 education system requires to support continued student learning throughout the duration of the COVID pandemic.

Education Councils have some existing capacity to distribute and loan technology to limited numbers of students to support continuity of learning. ECE with the assistance of Finance is pursuing additional technology to support Education Councils so that they may increase the number of students who have access to technology for learning and to have a reserve that can be deployed to locations in the eventuality that there are closures due to confirmed cases of COVID-19.

In the interim, the GNWT hosted a teleconference on July 7, 2020 with Northwest Territories (NWT) Education Leaders and the NWT Teachers' Association (NWTTA) to reflect on lessons learned from the final months of the 2019-2020 school year during the COVID-19 pandemic. All leaders recognized the benefit of the high level of interagency collaboration and communication maintained since March 2020, including daily meetings between ECE and education

superintendents, biweekly education leaders' meetings, and regular communications between ECE and the Office of the CPHO in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is commitment to continue to meet as required to coordinate the actions of all involved in delivering education services to students.

In addition, the GNWT has committed to review the extension of broadband Internet connectivity across the territory as recommended by both the SCEDE in CR1-19(2) and the SCOGO in CR2-19(3). The "*Support the development of fast and reliable broadband internet services for NWT communities*" has been identified as a key action within the Mandate. The implementation of broadband Internet connectivity will be critical technology to support student home-based learning. The completion of the business cases of the communities not connected to the fiber link is currently scheduled to be completed in Winter 2022. The GNWT will assess our ability to advance this work more quickly. The GNWT will keep the Standing Committee updated on this initiative.

Additionally, within the Mandate, the GNWT committed to ensure distance learning opportunities are available in all NWT small communities. This will support the implementation of this recommendation by supporting student home-based learning. The GNWT will keep the Standing Committee updated on this initiative.

The GNWT is committed to working across Departments to provide effective programming supports and services for at risk and vulnerable students.

Recommendation 6:

Committee recommends the GNWT continue to offer the wage top-up as a permanent program to businesses, providing financial assistance to NWT workers aged 15 or over and earning less than \$18 per hour.
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GNWT Response

The GNWT does not accept this recommendation since it is difficult to determine the fiscal impacts of making the wage top-up a permanent program within the timelines to provide a response to the recommendations.

The GNWT does agree that a formal review of financial supports for low wage earners should be completed when there is a catastrophic impact to the NWT economy. Once this analysis is complete, the GNWT commits to provide a briefing to the Standing Committee to see if there are any options to move forward on the committee's request.

In the interim, the GNWT did announce that the wage top-up program will be extended until October 3, 2020 to match the federal extension of the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit on July 28, 2020. The GNWT will continue to review the costs to determine if it is able to extend the wage top-up program for the duration of the pandemic.

Recommendation 7:

The Committee recommends that the Government of the Northwest Territories provide a comprehensive response to this report within 120 days.

GNWT Response

The GNWT accepts this recommendation. This document, Response to Committee's Report, is duly submitted within the required timeline.