



Association of Social Workers
In Northern Canada

February 28, 2017

Members of the 18th Legislative Assembly
Government of the Northwest Territories
P.O. Box 1320
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9

Dear Members:

Re: Potential closure of the Social Work Program at Aurora College

The Association of Social Workers in Northern Canada (ASWNC) has been in existence since 1974 and is a partner organization of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW). We are the professional body representing social workers across the Yukon, Northwest Territories (NWT) and Nunavut and our members include practicing social workers, social work students, social work instructors, and retired social workers.

It was with deep dismay that we heard the news of the planned closure of the two-year Social Work Program at Aurora College. While we do understand fiscal realities and the need to trim budgets, we strongly believe that this decision does not represent a cost saving measure. By eliminating the Social Work Program, you will reduce the number of social workers who are specifically trained in northern social work practice to understand the historical, cultural and northern lived realities of residents of the territory. This will lead to costly and negative impacts on our health and social services systems, as fewer people will be able to receive mental health services from these trained specialists. Furthermore, if this program is closed, additional costs will be incurred by government in regards to recruiting, hiring, and retaining southern trained social workers for northern practice. The government of the Northwest Territories has proven to be a leader in the North, being the only territory to require the professional licensing of social workers. We call upon Members of the 18th Legislative Assembly to continue this progressive leadership and the high standards it has set for northern social work practice by taking the long view and keeping this valuable social work program in place.

Social work graduates from Aurora College are currently contributing their valuable skills across the NWT in a variety of areas such as long-term care, victim services, transitional housing, child welfare, family support, adult services and mental health and addictions. Social work education with a northern focus is absolutely necessary in the North as social workers need to be able to provide a flexible and varied set of services in small and remote communities, often under demanding circumstances. Additionally, social workers promote respect for cultural diversity and the strengths that this diversity brings to our communities. Working in collaboration with well-known leaders in the NWT, the Social Work Program incorporates Indigenous knowledge through guest speakers and land-based cultural camps to ensure that northern social work students are aware of the history of colonization, Indigenous self-government and cultural protocols so critical to being able to work effectively in our communities. In this way, the Social Work Program tangibly implements key Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (particularly in regards to the legacy of child welfare and education) and the principals of the Indigenous Education Protocol for Colleges and Institutes, of which the College is a signatory. Closure of this program signals a significant step back by the College on their commitment to the implementation of these vital declarations and the government's support of this.



Association of Social Workers
In Northern Canada

Should the planned closure of this program go ahead, it will be very difficult to rebuild the over 10 year long relationship that instructors have with students, the history and partnerships with employers, and the strong northern focus of the curriculum. Particularly alarming to the ASWNC, is the fact that the closure of this program and that of the Bachelor of Education Program at Aurora College, unfairly targets a largely female cohort of learners, many of whom who have selected to seek out a post-secondary education as mature students. For many of these students, a move out of territory to pursue their education is not desired or feasible due to multiple roles as learners, mothers, caregivers and leaders in community. This program provides a crucial opportunity for the territory to build its own capacity and for students who want to give back to their communities to remain in the North and gain the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute effectively.

Low enrollment and completion rates have been cited by the Honourable Minister Moses as reasons for this program's closure. On the surface and to the general public, this rationale may seem reasonable, but we ask all Members, especially Honourable Minister Moses, to look more critically at the issue. The Social Work Program at Aurora College is offered in partnership with the University of Regina and as such, the curriculum of this two-year diploma program consists of third and fourth year level university courses. In the first year, students complete courses that their counterparts take in their third year of study towards their Bachelor of Social Work degree at the University of Regina and their second year consists of fourth year university curriculum. For students expecting to enter a community college level program, this can come as a surprise and challenge; however, it has produced a high degree of qualified social workers.

What hides in reviewing a single snapshot of graduation rates is the fact that many choose to and are supported by faculty to successfully complete their diploma over three years. What should be celebrated is these graduates' resiliency, dedication and motivation to serve their communities and meet the standards of a program, which requires its graduates to be well educated to work alongside the most vulnerable members of our communities. We call on Members to keep this valuable social work program in place while considering an increase to the funding of Aurora College to ladder student's learning and offer a full, four year Bachelor of Social Work program.

On the eve of National Social Work Month, with the theme "the power to empower" we strongly urge all members of 18th Legislative Assembly to reconsider the proposed funding cuts to Aurora College. There is no doubt that a northern education for northerners empowers people. We urge you to meet with students, instructors, affected community members, your own government departments and not-for-profit agencies who benefit from northern social work students and graduates, to discuss the best way to move forward before taking such short-sighted action.

Sincerely,

Cassandra Yantha
President, ASWNC

Cc: Jane Arychuk, President, Aurora College
Aurora College Board of Governors

Attached: CASW Deeply Concerned by Proposed Aurora College Budget Cuts