

Standing Committee on
Social Development



Strengthening Community Supports, Lifting Youth Voices: Recommendations on Suicide Prevention

19th Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Chair: Ms. Caitlin Cleveland

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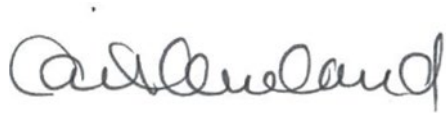
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March 27, 2023

SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Social Development is pleased to provide its report *Strengthening Community Supports, Lifting Youth Voices: Recommendations on Suicide Prevention* and commends it to the House.



Ms. Caitlin Cleveland
Chair
Standing Committee on Social Development

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

REPORT ON TRANSITION MATTERS

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

REPORT ON SUICIDE PREVENTION

A MESSAGE TO YOUTH

Thank you to the youth who shared courageously on suicide prevention with the Standing Committee on Social Development (Committee). We heard you. We respect you. We believe in you. From you, we learn and take your lead. We hope you see your thoughts, ideas, and perspectives; and the resources and supports you asked for; reflected in the following report and its recommendations.

INTRODUCTION: YOUTH KNOW WHAT THEY WANT

All youth are sacred. Northwest Territories (NWT) youth are talented, brilliant and powerful. Youth have so much to contribute to the North and to the world. Yet, many youth in the NWT are facing a mental health crises due to complex challenges that diminish the overall quality of their lives. Far too many youth do not have access to sports and recreation; Indigenous languages; Indigenous culture; on the land programming; mentors; addictions supports; places of healing; safe schools and other safe spaces. Some youth struggle with having basic human necessities like stable and safe housing. Indigenous youth face additional challenges due to the Indian Residential Schools legacy; the child welfare system; and loss of culture and land as a result of colonization. Youth touched by the loss of life to suicide, face added layers of loss and grief. These risk factors increase the likelihood of suicidal ideation and loss of life to suicide.

Youth need leaders and champions throughout the NWT who believe in them and will advocate for the resources and supports they need to live quality lives. *Youth need action taken now.* The Committee invited youth-led and youth serving organizations to share their thoughts, ideas and perspectives on suicide prevention and the kinds of strategies needed to empower youth and prevent loss of life to suicide. Five youth-led organizations, one youth serving organization, and one Dene counsellor who facilitates on the land healing with youth and communities stepped forward and provided responses to the Committee's three questions:

1. If it were up to you, what (supports) would you give to youth in your community to prevent loss of life to suicide?
2. What do youth need in your community to build resilience and inspire hope?
3. How can the government empower youth to lead mental health and wellbeing solutions?

Youth were clear in their responses. Youth know what they want:

- Youth want a territorial youth-led conference that focuses on mental health and wellness;
- Youth want consistent aftercare supports from health professionals and community members following and suicidal ideation or attempts;
- Youth want access to individual and family-oriented addictions and healing supports;
- Youth want an increase to accessible programs including programming sports, recreation, culture, language, and on the land programming;
- Youth want to be cared about.
- Youth want safe schools and safe spaces that are free of alcohol, drugs and violence; and
- Youth want safe and stable housing.

Youth said these were suicide prevention strategies. A territory wide response focused on building resilience and strengthening community supports is key to protecting lives and reducing loss of life due to suicide.

LOSS OF LIFE TO SUICIDE IN THE NWT

In October 2022, the Office of the Chief Coroner released the *2021-2022 Early Release of Suicide Dataⁱ* to raise alarm on the upsurge of deaths to suicide. At that time, 18 deaths to suicide were reported, more than any one year in the two decades prior. According to the Office of the Chief Coroner, the majority of those impacted were males between the age of 20-29 in the Beaufort Delta and North Slave regions of the NWT. Community leaders have shared that most were Indigenous. Loss of life to suicide occurred in all five regions.

See Appendix A for more information.

In response to the loss of life among youth to suicide, Committee prioritized speaking to youth on the topic of suicide prevention efforts and advocating for accessible resources and supports. Youth are defined as an individual under 30.

COMMITTEE APPROACH

Committee took two approaches to this report. First, a suicide prevention approach that is focused on strategies that reduce the likelihood of someone losing their life to suicide, participating in suicidal behaviours, or suicidal thoughts (suicidal ideation). Second, a trauma informed approach that recognizes a person holistically and acknowledges that a

person may have or is currently experiencing trauma. Committee incorporated this approach several ways including centering the voices of individuals with lived experience, providing private and confidential listening sessions, and only asking questions with consent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth-led Mental Health and Wellness Conference

“Throughout the process, avoid tokenization. Have lots of youth. Value their lived experience. The youth of today have the insights and experience needed to represent what NWT youth are experiencing.” - Community Building Youth Futures

Youth want a youth-led territory wide conference in a regional centre or small community outside of Yellowknife that focuses on fostering mental health and wellness with workshops and activities. Potential topics for workshops and activities mentioned were positive relationship development; emotional intelligence; healthy ways to manage grief; anti-bullying; practicing advocacy and grassroots movements; sobriety; self-care; Indigenous languages; Indigenous culture; trauma and intergenerational trauma; mental health first aid; grant proposal writing; sports; and arts. Youth require support from the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) to advance this undertaking. Youth-led organizations want to lead and develop a conference but need the GNWT’s financial and human resources support.

Committee believes a youth-led conference can be organized within six months. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 1: The Department of Health and Social Services provide financial and human resources support to youth-led non-governmental organizations to host a territorial youth conference on mental health and wellness before the end of the 19th Assembly.

Aftercare

“When we reach out for help, we need something to happen.” - Home Base YK

What happens when a youth ends up at a hospital or health care centre in the NWT following suicidal ideation or attempt of suicide? According to many youth, nothing. Nothing happens. Committee heard story after story of youth who attempted suicide or had suicidal ideation who were not triaged, provided only physical health support if needed and no mental health support, and did not receive an aftercare plan or any kind of meaningful aftercare. Youth shared that in addition to their parent or guardian, they would like to be accompanied by counsellor or health advocate while they are in the

hospital or health care centre. Additional support persons provide comfort and knowledge in challenging situations. After discharge, youth and the persons who care for them want consistent aftercare support from health professionals and community members.

Committee believes that aftercare plans support a youth's journey out of crises and towards recovery and mental health and wellness. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 2: The Department of Health and Social Services develop aftercare processes for persons discharged from hospitals and health care centres following suicidal ideation and attempts to reduce suicide re-attempts and loss of life.

Addictions Supports and Healing Centre

"Piecemeal stuff doesn't work with addictions or suicide prevention." - Donald Prince

Addictions are a major contributor to poor mental health and wellness. While many youth in the NWT do not identify with having a drug or alcohol addiction, youth in the NWT have the highest rates of hospitalization caused by substance abuse in the country.ⁱⁱ Leaders and community members are concerned about the impact of drug and alcohol addiction among youth, and the increased availability and new types of drugs entering the communities. Current approaches to preventing alcohol and drug abuse do not work. For many people in the NWT, alcohol and drug abuse is seen as a response to trauma, with holistic healing needed for the individual and family. Youth described the land as a place of healing. Youth want an addictions and healing centre here in the NWT where they can deepen their support circles with family and loved ones. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 3: The Department of Health and Social Services establish a youth and family addictions support and healing centre in the Northwest Territories.

Community Suicide Prevention Fund

In October 2022, following the upsurge of deaths to suicide, the Minister of Health and Social Services acknowledged the NWT was in a mental health crisis and "expedited" the Community Suicide Prevention Fund. The Community Suicide Prevention Fund provides financial support for community-based prevention activities. At the direction of the Minister, the Department of Health and Social Services provided funds directly without application. Committee believes this was an appropriate response. Many communities do not have the human resources capacity to write applications, budgets or provide reporting required. As a result, many communities do not apply to the Community Suicide Prevention Fund or other Mental Wellness and Addictions Recovery Funds, leaving these funds underutilized. Eliminating administrative burdens allows communities to focus on self-determining their own suicide prevention strategies and will increase the likelihood these funds will be utilized. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 4: The Department of Health and Social Services expedite and streamline the application, approval, and reporting requirements for the Community Suicide Prevention Fund.

“We are talking about more cultural programming and events in community. What if we had small activities happening every week, every month that makes us feel supported. Various things like going on walks, drum dances, anything that helps youth connect with others. Connecting with identity and culture is suicide prevention.” - Supporting Wellbeing

Youth want opportunities to be involved in sports, recreational activities, and do arts to develop friendships, gain confidence and be part of the community. Youth want to know their identities and have opportunities to practice their culture, language and on the land skills with Elders and knowledge keepers. Doing so instils pride and empowers Indigenous youth. Youth want access to consistent programming and activities daily, weekly, and monthly. Youth who are in crises or experiencing challenges may need access to a lot of different programming, with the understanding that their participation may take time to develop interest and/or trust. Youth want mentorships with Elders and respected members of the community. Youth are seeking simple experiences with their mentors like going on a walk, getting coffee, or just having a conversation. They want to be sincerely cared about. Home Base YK staff said, “One act of kindness will make a huge difference in someone’s life.” Youth want youth-led programming that builds resilience and strengthens their community supports. *This is what youth said is suicide prevention.*

Committee believes that eligible projects under the Community Suicide Prevention Fund should be expanded to include strategies youth have identified as suicide prevention. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 5: The Department of Health and Social Services expand the eligibility for projects under the Community Suicide Prevention Fund to include sports, arts and recreational programming; culture, language and on the land programming; and informal Elder/respected community member-youth mentorships.

Currently, the maximum funding available for the Community Suicide Prevention Fund is \$225,000 per year. Committee believes that \$225,000 annually does not adequately respond to the mental health crises and upsurge in deaths to suicide. Additional funding is required to strengthen community supports. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 6: The Department of Health and Social Services increase the Community Suicide Prevention Fund to \$1 million dollars annually.

SAFE PLACES, SAFE SPACES

Housing

Youth need housing for shelter and their basic human needs. Housing is a first step for stabilizing youth and reducing loss of life. The probability of experiencing homelessness increases for youth who do not have access to housing. Youth in care are especially vulnerable if they do not have family or close relationships to support them as they transition out of care and secure housing. Youth need access to different housing options that are safe, affordable, and supportive. For example, Home Base YK Youth Dorms in Yellowknife offers programming every day and has staff on site 24 hours a day. Currently there are no Housing NWT units targeted toward youth. Few to no studio or one-bedroom units are available in NWT communities. Youth need housing options. Safe and stable housing is directly related to quality of life. Quality of life is linked to the likelihood a youth will lose their life to suicide. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 7: Housing NWT develop a supportive community housing strategy focused on youth and youth aging out of care.

Schools

“For years I have been hearing parents and students need an Indigenous guidance person, and a space open to them for support in the schools. The better life we can give them, the better quality of life they have.” - Dene Nation Youth Council

Indigenous students and their families want additional supports in schools that will:

1. Improve academic success and university readiness including tutoring; course planning; and completing post-secondary applications.
2. Increase the presence of Indigenous language, culture, and community.
3. Provide emotional support and advocacy when needed.

This aligns with United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Articles 14, 15, and 21 relating to rights including the right to self-determine education systems and accessing education without discrimination; the right to cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations reflected in education; and the right to improve Indigenous people’s economic and social conditions in the areas of education.ⁱⁱⁱ Indigenous students and their families want schools that support their academic journeys and set them up for success. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 8: Education, Culture and Employment review and amend the Career and Education Advisor job description to recruit Indigenous persons in these positions.

“Educators need to be committed to maintaining safe spaces. If not, kids then don’t trust their schools to keep them safe.” -Northern Mosaic Network

Youth who identify as 2SLGBTQIPA+ may experience discrimination, harassment and violence from other students, educators, community members and leaders. Many youth do not feel safe expressing their sexual orientation and gender identity in the NWT. Indigenous youth who identify as 2SLGBTQIPA+ may face additional layers of harm due to the intersection of racism and homophobia. One youth said that many Indigenous 2SLGBTQIPA+ youth are on the “fringes” of their communities. Research has shown that 2SLGBTQIPA+ students suffer from greater rates of mental health issues and suicide.^{iv} Their sexual orientation and gender identity does not inherently put 2SLGBTQIPA+ youth at a higher risk for suicide,^v but rather, the lack of acceptance, mistreatment, and hatred for the 2SLGBTQIPA+ community increases the likelihood of suicidal ideation and loss of life to suicide. It is not enough to “tolerate” 2SLGBTQIPA+. Adults including educators, leaders and community members need to actively educate themselves and work to be accepting and inclusive of 2SLGBTQIPA+ youth in schools and the broader community. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 9: Education, Culture and Employment make the *Guidelines for Ensuring LGBTQ+ Equity, Safety and Inclusion in the Northwest Territories Schools* training mandatory in Northwest Territories schools.

Youth Centres

“Youth know what they need, and they know what they want.” - AYDA Women

Youth shared what they want in a youth centre:

- Physical spaces that are free from drugs, alcohol and any forms of violence;
- Environments that are inclusive, positive and uplifting;
- Consistent, healthy and fun programming and activities that give youth meaningful things to do;
- Indigenous youth want cultural and language programming and activities with Elders and knowledge keepers. Some examples include Elders stories; cutting dry meat; making a tipi, igloo or sod house; learning how to trap; singing Indigenous songs, etc.;
- Leadership opportunities including youth-led programming;
- Celebrating success and success stories with people who have similar life experiences;
- Dedicated staff who truly care.

Youth centres are important places in the community.^{vi} They are safe spaces where youth can gather with friends and have healthy outlets for their emotions. Diverse programming and activities give youth opportunities for learning and skill development and building

confidence and resilience. Indigenous youth's identities are nurtured and empowered with culture, language and on the land programming. Connections in the community are strengthened. Youth shared that these spaces combined with the factors of success described above (what they want) are directly linked to suicide prevention. Committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation 10: Municipal and Community Affairs increase funding for the Youth Centres Initiative to a maximum of \$100,000 for each recipient to ensure that youth have positive and safe spaces to be free of alcohol, drugs and violence.

CONCLUSION

This concludes the Standing Committee on Social Development's *Building Resilience, Strengthening Community Supports: Youth-Led Recommendations on Suicide Prevention* report. Committee looks forward to the Government's response to these recommendations.

Recommendation 11: The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends the Government of the Northwest Territories provide a response to this report in 120 days.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Giving Thanks:

Once again, thank you to everyone who shared their thoughts, ideas, perspectives, experiences, knowledge, expertise, and stories with Committee to inform the report and its recommendations, including:

- AYDA Women;
- Dene Nation Youth Council;
- Community Building Youth Futures;
- Donald Prince;
- Home Base Yellowknife;
- Northern Mosaic Network; and
- Supporting Wellbeing

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Northwest Territories Coroner Service, *2021-2022 Early Release of Suicide Data*, <https://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/en/files/coroner-service/Annual%20Reports/2021-2022%20Early%20Release%20of%20Suicide%20Data.pdf> (accessed March 10, 2023)

ⁱⁱ Canadian Institute for Health Information, *Hospital Stays for Harm Caused by Substance Abuse Among Youth Age 10 to 24*, 2019. <https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/hsu-youth-report-2019-en-web.pdf> (accessed March 13, 2023)

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, https://social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/migrated/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf (accessed March 14, 2023)

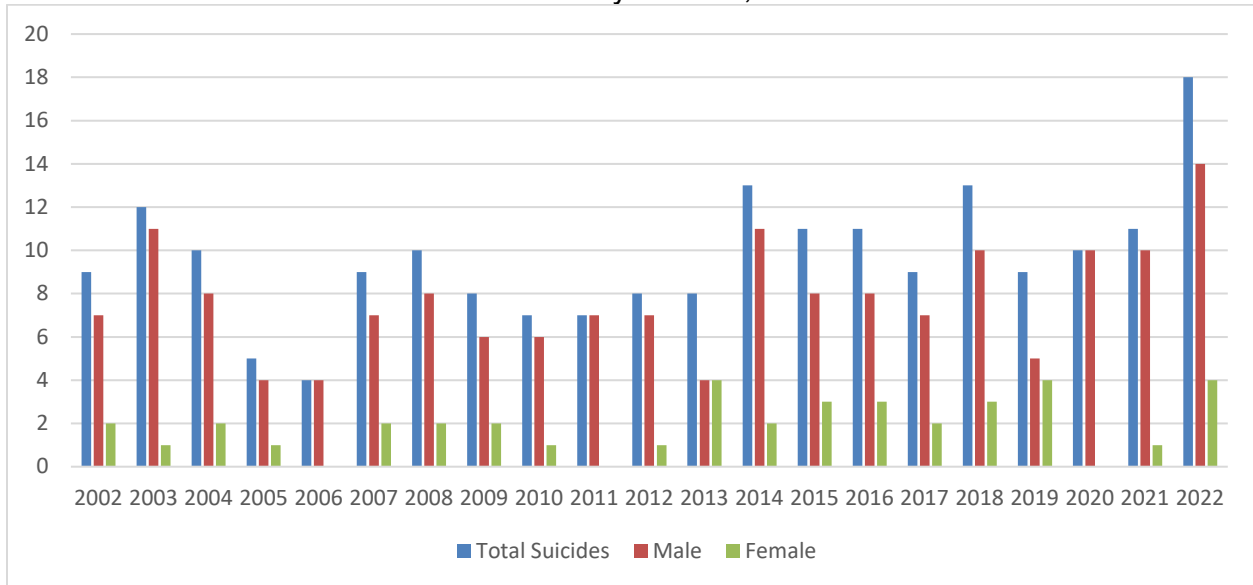
^{iv} Government of the Northwest Territories, *LGBTQ2S+ Equity, Safety and Inclusion*, https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/final_eng_lgbtq2s_infosheet.pdf (accessed March 13, 2023)

^v Trevor Project, *Facts About LGBTQ Youth Suicide*, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/facts-about-lgbtq-youth-suicide/> (accessed March 13, 2023)

^{vi} Please see Appendix B for a list of youth centres compiled by Municipal and Community Affairs.

APPENDIX A

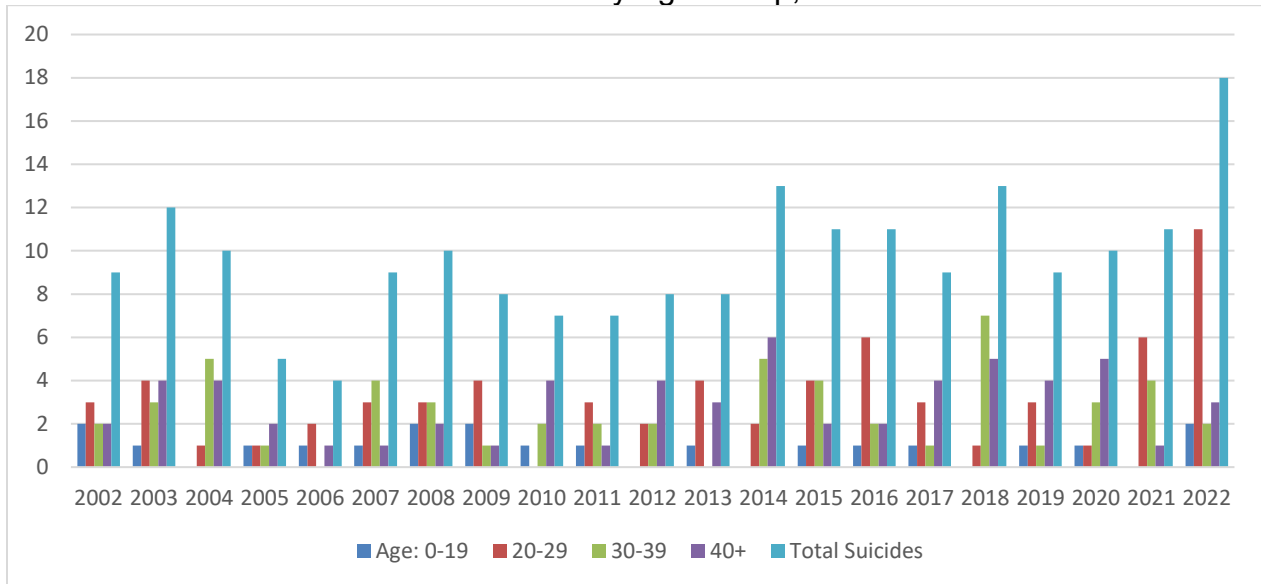
Table 1: NWT Death to Suicide Statistics by Gender, 2002-2022



Source: Office of the Coroner Annual Reports 2002-2022

Note: Men are more than four times more likely to lose their lives to suicide than women during 2002-2022. 2022 includes data only from the first three quarters.

Table 2: NWT Death to Suicide Statistics by Age Group, 2002-2022



Source: Office of the Coroner Annual Reports 2002-2022

Note: On average, individuals aged 20-29 lose their lives to suicide at greater rates than other age groups. 2022 includes data only from the first three quarters.

APPENDIX B**List of Youth Centres Compiled by Municipal and Community Affairs**

Youth Centre Name	Community	Region
Aklavik John Arey Youth Centre	Aklavik	Beaufort Delta
Youth and Elders Centre	Fort McPherson	Beaufort Delta
Inuvik Youth Centre	Inuvik	Beaufort Delta
Paulatuk Youth Centre	Paulatuk	Beaufort Delta
Ajgaliq Centre	Sachs Harbour	Beaufort Delta
Tsiigehtichic Youth Centre	Tsiigehtchic	Beaufort Delta
Jason Jacobson Youth Centre	Tuktoyaktuk	Beaufort Delta
Arctic Fox Youth Centre	Ulukhaktok	Beaufort Delta
Fort Liard Recreation Complex	Fort Liard	Dehcho
Dehcho Friendship Centre	Fort Simpson	Dehcho
JMR Youth Centre	Jean Marie River	Dehcho
Nahanni Butte Recreation Centre	Nahanni Butte	Dehcho
Sambaa K'e Youth Centre	Sambaa K'e	Dehcho
Wrigley Youth Centre	Wrigley	Dehcho
Ko Gocho Sportsplex	Behchoko	North Slave
Dettah Youth Centre	Dettah	North Slave
Edzo Youth Centre	Edzo	North Slave
Gameti Youth Centre	Gameti	North Slave
Lutsel K'e Youth Centre	Lutsel K'e	North Slave
Ndilo Youth Centre	Ndilo	North Slave
Wekweeti Youth Centre	Wekweeti	North Slave
Phillip Nitsiza Youth Centre	Whati	North Slave
HomeBase Yellowknife	Yellowknife	North Slave
Rainbow Youth Centre	Yellowknife	North Slave
Colville Lake Youth Centre	Colville Lake	Sahtu
Brian Kenny Youth Centre	Deline	Sahtu
FGH Youth Centre	Fort Good Hope	Sahtu
Norman Wells Youth and Elder Centre	Norman Wells	Sahtu
Hamlet of Tulita Youth Centre	Tulita	Sahtu
Enterprise Community Hall	Enterprise	South Slave
Northern Loco, Fort Prov Youth Centre	Fort Providence	South Slave
Hamlet of Fort Resolution Youth Centre	Fort Resolution	South Slave
Youth Night	Fort Smith	South Slave
Hay River Community Centre	Hay River	South Slave
K'atl'odeeche Youth Centre	K'atl'odeeche	South Slave
Youth Centre	West Point First Nation	South Slave