



**Government of the Northwest Territories Response to
Committee Report 50-19(2): Strengthening Community
Supports, Lifting Youth Voices: Recommendations on Suicide Prevention**

Background

The Standing Committee on Social Development (SCOSD) presented their Committee Report, “Strengthening Community Supports, Lifting Youth Voices: Recommendations on Suicide Prevention” on March 27, 2023. This Report contained 11 recommendations that reinforce the importance of suicide prevention for youth in the Northwest Territories.

The following is the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT)’s response to the Report in accordance with *Rules of the Legislative Assembly, Rule 9.4(5)*.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends 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.

GNWT Response

The Department of Health and Social Services’ (Department) Community, Culture and Innovation (CCI) Division has been the lead in supporting territorial youth mental wellness initiatives. During winter 2022, CCI hosted a youth panel during the Territorial Wellness Gathering. Learning from this panel has assisted with planning on how to support NWT youth. During the current fiscal year, CCI will be sponsoring a variety of youth mental wellness initiatives in the territory.

The first initiative being sponsored is the Ełèts’ehdèe Gathering, that took place May 30th and 31st in Yellowknife. This event was hosted by Hotù ts’eeda and co-hosted by the Western Arctic Youth Collective (WAYC).

Another youth gathering that is being sponsored by the Department and hosted by WAYC is an On the Land Youth Gathering in Sachs Harbour. This gathering will be taking place during the summer 2023.

The Department will also be delivering the Weaving Our Wisdom gathering, which is planned for February 2024 in Yellowknife. This gathering will bring together the community wellness initiative network, share wise practices, and support community capacity for program delivery. To prepare for this, CCI will be facilitating three sessions with youth and organizations that support youth. These sessions will be used to assist with the design and vision of the youth topics/discussions that will be explored during Weaving Our Wisdom. Through previous engagement, CCI has knowledge of many different topics and needs related to youth mental health and wellness; therefore, engaging in visioning/design sessions will assist with identifying priority topics at the Weaving Our Wisdom conference.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends 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.

GNWT Response

The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority (NTHSSA)'s Suicide and Crisis Response Working Group is currently exploring opportunities to enhance aftercare services for individuals who present with suicidal ideation. A standardized discharge planning process was developed (January 2022) for those with mental health and addictions concerns who are being discharged from acute care. In addition, safety and wellness plan handouts outlining available resources and teaching for individuals and families who are leaving a health centre after presenting with suicidal ideation are being updated, with anticipated completion date of October 2023. Improvements will be made to increase the ease of access to these documents for frontline staff.

NTHSSA is also reviewing the information available to the public via their website, to ensure that clients and families experiencing impacts from suicide or suicidal ideation know what resources are available to them.

One of these resources is the Community Counselling Program. This program's delivery has shifted to increase access to a wider variety of aftercare supports, including same day counselling, eMental Health, 24/7 access to peer support and a variety of skill building and crisis supports.

For the 2023/24 fiscal year, NTHSSA has prioritized training opportunities related to suicide identification, intervention and prevention for staff. This includes, Applied Suicide

Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), START (Livingworks – introduction to talking about suicide) and Mental Health First Aid – Northern Peoples.

Recommendation 3

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

GNWT Response

Over the past few years, the Department has enhanced community-based programming options for mental wellness and addictions recovery. The approach to creating more community-based options was guided by the vision of promoting self-determination and building partnerships that support mental wellness and addictions recovery, while recognizing the uniqueness of each person's journey. As such, funding is made available for Indigenous governments and community groups under broad program areas to provide the greatest amount of flexibility possible to support community defined priorities and objectives, which may include youth supports for addictions recovery. Examples of funding include the On the Land Healing Fund; the Community Suicide Prevention Fund; the Addictions Recovery Peer Support Fund; and the Addictions Recovery and Aftercare Fund. In response to feedback from Indigenous Governments the Department has recently combined three of funds (On the Land Healing Fund, Addictions Recovery Peer Support Fund and Addictions Recovery and Aftercare Fund) into one Community Wellness and Addictions Recovery Fund. The fund will help to reduce the administrative burden IGs experienced applying for multiple funds and will support provide enhanced autonomy and flexibility on how fund are allocated.

In addition, the Community Wellness Initiatives funding provides funding to 31 Indigenous governments and community organizations throughout the NWT. Indigenous communities and organizations decide for themselves, within the parameters of the funding requirements, where wellness funding should be directed, and priorities of their community wellness plans, which may include treatment supports for youth.

The NTHSSA is currently assessing how mental health and wellness resources can be expanded and/or established to develop a holistic, integrated approach to a territorial specialized services treatment model for children, youth, and their families. While this assessment is underway, to meet the immediate needs of youth, the NTHSSA will be collaborating with an Indigenous-led program to offer on-the-land programming to youth

considered to be high-risk and who have complex needs. Together, this work will support more children and youth with complex needs to remain in the NWT and receive the services necessary to support their wellbeing.

Based on engagement, we know that a single territorial addictions treatment facility will not meet the treatment and cultural needs of all residents. Solutions to these needs likely lie in partnership with Indigenous governments and communities and we have initiated these discussions to see how we can work together and look forward to continuing these important conversations so that we can better meet the needs of NWT residents in territory.

Recommendation 4

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

GNWT Response

The Department acknowledges the crisis facing many communities over the last year and recognizes that some communities may not have the capacity to write lengthy applications and reports. During these difficult circumstances, the Department supports communities to access the Suicide Prevention Fund. While the application requirement has never been waived, the fund was designed to be a low barrier fund with minimal reporting requirements by applicants. Additionally, Department staff are available to support communities with their applications if needed.

The funds administered through the Mental Wellness and Addictions Recovery Division (Community Suicide Prevention Fund and the Community Wellness and Addictions Recovery Fund) already use a common application and report form. Additional work is underway for implementation in 2024-2025 to adjust the application process of the Community Wellness and Addictions Recovery Fund to include deadline of January 31 to ensure that applicants have confirmation of funds prior to the beginning of the next fiscal year.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends 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.

GNWT Response

The overall goal of the Community Suicide Prevention Fund is to support NWT communities to develop and deliver culturally safe and appropriate programs that support the prevention of suicide by increasing community wellness and reducing stigma. This ensures that there are enhanced support options across the continuum of care including community-based prevention initiatives. These initiatives are defined by the community as preventive measure against suicide, including recreational activities for youth, on the land activities, elder supports, art and other recreational activities.

The Department has also recently received an additional \$500,000 to support suicide prevention, including the development and implementation of the suicide prevention strategies and community-based suicide prevention activities and programming. This funding has been added to the overall Community Suicide Prevention Fund and eligible activities have been updated to include the development of suicide prevention strategies.

Recommendation 6

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

GNWT Response

The Department does not have sufficient resources to increase the Community Suicide Prevention Fund to \$1 million dollars annually. The current Community Suicide Prevention Fund is funding through a bilateral agreement with Health Canada in the amount of \$225,000.

The Department has also recently received an additional \$500,000 to support suicide prevention, including the development and implementation of the suicide prevention strategies and community-based suicide prevention activities and programming. This funding has been added to the overall Community Suicide Prevention Fund which brings the total up to \$725,000 annually.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends Housing NWT develop a supportive community housing strategy focused on youth and youth aging out of care.

GNWT Response

Recognizing the unique circumstances of each community, at the request of Indigenous governments and community governments, Housing NWT works with community partners to support the development of Community Housing Plans. These plans help provide community partners with the tools to plan and direct the future of housing in their communities. These plans often include a community needs assessment that could be adapted to include more of a youth-focus in the planning process if it is requested by the community.

Also, Housing NWT is currently exploring the possibility of amending the age at which residents would be able to access Housing NWT programs. Housing NWT's programs are currently available to applicants who have reached the age of majority. In order to move forward with this initiative, coordinated efforts between multiple GNWT departments will be required. Housing NWT is committed to working with all relevant stakeholders to advance its mission of "Increasing the wellbeing of individuals and communities by providing fair access to quality housing support for people most in need."

Furthermore, Housing NWT will work with other departments on the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy, including potential collaboration on solutions for youth at risk of experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends Education, Culture and Employment review and amend the Career and Education Advisor job description to recruit Indigenous persons in these positions.

GNWT Response

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) is working to implement its Indigenous employment action plan under the GNWT's Indigenous Recruitment and Retention Framework. As part of this broader government exercise, ECE is conducting a detailed review of all positions, including the Career and Education Advisors (CEA) job descriptions, to ensure that the framework is being effectively implemented. Indigenous employees make up a quarter of our CEA positions at this time. ECE is working with Human Resources to find an interested intern to learn the role of the CEA through mentorship. This is a step towards building capacity within ECE to support Indigenous recruitment and retention.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends 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.

GNWT Response

Education Bodies are expected to act in accordance with all territorial legislation, policies and regulations that support and protect the rights of all members of the school community. The Guidelines for Ensuring LGBTQ+ Equity, Safety and Inclusion in the Northwest Territories Schools have been developed to provide support to education bodies and to ensure compliance within the legislative framework, which includes the Safe Schools Regulations and Territorial School Code of Conduct.

The NWT Human Rights Act, the Education Act and Safe School Regulations are in place to support and ensure that all members of the school community, including those who identify as or are perceived to be LGBTQ2S+, feel safe and are treated equitably, and with respect and dignity. The Guidelines for Ensuring LGBTQ2S+ Equity, Safety and Inclusion in Northwest Territories Schools were released in February 2020 and expand upon safety needs for one vulnerable sector of our community.

ECE and education bodies provide and/or support training programs that build educator capacity to safely and effectively prevent and address incidents. ECE supports alignment with the Safe School Regulations by facilitating training annually for all educators across the territory in evidence-based healthy relationships programming. ECE collaborates regularly with the Northern Mosaic Network and the Centre for School Mental Health at Western University to support education body needs around ensuring LGBTQ2S+ safety, equity, and inclusion. ECE also organizes annual or bi-annual educator training in evidence-based healthy relationships programming, including Healthy Relationships Program (HRP) for LGBTQ2Q+ Youth.

Currently, professional planning and learning is guided by the Ministerial Directive on Strengthening Teacher Instructional Practices (STIP). Although the Directive sets the minimum hours and structure for professional planning and learning, with identified promising practices, teachers and education bodies are given some autonomy in determining the focus of their individual and collaborative STIP hours. Training in the area identified could be completed during STIP time, as it would be considered a promising practice for effective collaborative STIP time under the Directive.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends 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.

GNWT Response

The Department of Municipal and Community Affairs (MACA) remains committed to providing Youth Centres in the NWT with funding support of up to \$500,000 as approved in the 2023-2024 Main Estimates. Youth Centres may also be eligible for additional support through funding provided under the Youth Corps and Youth Contributions application/proposal-based programs.

MACA will work with Youth Centre administrators to create inclusive, engaging spaces offering relevant programs that meet the needs identified by Youth, as outlined in the SCOSD report. MACA will also provide community governments with a template policy promoting safe places, including making them drug and alcohol free, and encourage community governments to adapt and adopt the policy to further support making youth centres a safe place for youth.