



Alternatives North

May 28, 2020

Hon. Diane Thom
Minister of Health and Social Services
Government of the NWT
P.O. Box 1320
Yellowknife, NT
X1A 2L9

RE: Mental Health Concerns in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear Ms. Thom,

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of Canada's best-know addiction specialists, Dr. Gabor Maté, wondered whether the bigger threat would be the virus or a breakdown in mental health caused by extended isolation. The answer to this question has started to emerge. For example, The Tamarack Institute estimates mental illness will cost \$29.1B in lost productivity. We therefore want to point out some concerns regarding mental health in the NWT, and are offering recommendations for your consideration.

At the start of the lockdown in mid-March, the government was quick and decisive about instituting social distancing and stay-at-home regulations, contributing to our physical health. We also appreciate that residents were encouraged to go outside and that on-the-land funding was made available by various Indigenous groups. Other special funding aimed at high-risk populations also contributed to positive mental health outcomes to some extent. We also applaud the community efforts and the support of the governments to house some of the homeless population. Unfortunately, up to 60 were left on the streets with nowhere to go.

As you are well aware, the NWT was already dealing with major mental health issues, including substance abuse, prior to the pandemic and these became worse during this social distancing period. We've heard first-hand accounts that domestic violence has increased since early March 2020. We believe many people were locked into abusive situations and could not reach out for help. Lyda Fuller, long-time Executive Director of the YWCA, expressed concern recently that no one had stayed at the Alison McAteer House in April – the first time in its history the home had been empty. She wondered if that vacancy was either the result of women not knowing it was open, not allowed to call, or too afraid to be in a “public” place during the pandemic.

People suffering from substance abuse problems, PTSD, depression and anxiety are also having a harder time coping during this time. Eight weeks of social distancing, coupled with mounting pressure caused by financial insecurity and uncertain futures are overwhelming many. A look at the rising angst expressed on social media appears to support this.

CBC recently reported that calls to kids' hotlines have increased radically with calls coming from both kids and adults; some from children afraid their parents were going to die and some from adults who could not get through on the regular adult line. We were also informed that there was an average increase of 15-20% of calls to the NWT Help Line during the last eight weeks.

The NWT Help Line, which is operated under contract by the Ottawa Distress Centre, is a much-needed service. Having been in operation for 51 years, the Centre is an expert in this field. The training their volunteers go through is rigorous, as it should be. However well trained and intentioned these southern volunteers are, they are not as familiar with our communities or our people as northern volunteers would be.

We can also appreciate that mental health services are currently offered through the Community Counselling Program with 20 counsellors living in communities and travelling or providing online service to other communities. However, wait times to access these services are too long, there are not enough counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists, and there are not enough experts in youth mental health.

While the lockdown has been in place for only a couple of months, it could be many more months for people to recover from the stress this has caused. Going forward, we have some recommendations for you to consider.

During this pandemic/emerging wisely period:

- With school out until at least September and uncertainty with schools opening during a possible second-wave, youth and teenagers need more support. Evaluate improvements to kids' hotlines, and the use of school counsellors over the summer and during school-at-home periods
- Promote the availability of Alison McAteer house and other shelters, as well as safe access to them
- Promote mental health services, including the NWT Help Line, through local media and social media.

A public health policy designed to move people through a pandemic cannot be based on physical health alone. Without attention to people's mental health, the plan is incomplete. Realizing that there will probably be another pandemic, make sure that both a physical health plan and a mental health plan are presented at the same time:

- Include on-the-land and general outdoor activities as part of suitable response to physical and mental health
- Ensure communications are positive in tone

- Ensure at-risk populations are taken care of
- Ensure adequate resources are available for youth
- Promote programs and services that help people who are suffering from mental health problems
- Work with the Ottawa Distress Centre to start recruiting and training northern volunteers.

In general, the government needs to make mental health a major part of the treatment equation going forward. We encourage the GNWT to update its mental health strategic framework to:

- Incorporate lessons learned from the NWT Disabilities Council managed alcohol program in regards to homelessness and addictions management programs
- Consider managed alcohol programs for other communities along with Yellowknife
- Incorporate lessons learned from this pandemic
- Review access to service and wait times for services, and consider hiring more professionals
- Explore the creation of peer support groups
- Increase funding for Housing First programs with attached supportive services
- Increase community support for people suffering from substance abuse problems and for people returning from residential programs
- Increase mental health services available to youth and their parents.

We appreciate the resources and time you will invest in this vital issue.

Sincerely,

Nancy Vail
For Alternatives North

c.c.:

Lyda Fuller, Executive Director, YWCA
Judy Grunwald, Director of Operations, Ottawa Distress Centre
Patty Hajdu, Federal Minister of Health