

**THE HONOURABLE GLEN ABERNETHY
MINISTER OF HEALTH AND
SOCIAL SERVICES**

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Cannabis Public Education and Awareness Update

Mr. Speaker, as most NWT residents are probably aware, the consumption of cannabis is legal across Canada as of today. Our government committed in our Mandate to create the policy, program and legislative regimes necessary to support legalization, and with that comes a firm commitment to public education and awareness.

Public education and awareness efforts are well underway across the Northwest Territories. The Department of Health and Social Services has been working in partnership with other GNWT departments and agencies, and the federal government to make sure that NWT residents have the important, evidence-based information they need about the health, social and legal aspects of cannabis use they need to make informed decisions.

Mr. Speaker, we have taken a harm reduction approach that builds off of Canada's Lower Risk Guidelines for Cannabis Use, developed by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

Using this harm reduction approach, our government has made it a priority to make sure that residents are aware of the significant risks of cannabis use on brain development and other health issues, and its potential effects on children, youth, pregnant and nursing women, and people with mental health issues.

As a government, we have been working diligently since August 2016 to ensure public education materials were developed to meet the needs of our residents and help them prepare for the legalization of cannabis. This included new web content, direct mail to all households and businesses in the NWT, parent talk kits, traditional and social media advertising, radio and web content in all NWT Indigenous languages, as well as school-based education events. The campaign has included informational videos, materials for teachers and students in schools, community surveys, and the identification of community champions to help provide messaging to residents. Cannabis education and resources are also being provided at Community Health Fairs which are held throughout the Northwest Territories.

Recently, our campaign included hosting Dr. Matthew Hill, a neurologist from the University of Calgary's Hotchkiss Brain Institute. Through a series of in-person and online streaming events, Dr. Hill was able to field questions from youth, teachers, parents and caregivers and health professionals about health considerations related to cannabis use, especially where it relates to brain health. We had over 125 NWT residents tune into a live Facebook chat with the neurologist. Approximately 200 high school students here in Yellowknife as well as 30 classrooms across the territory benefited from a live question and answer sessions with Dr. Hill.

Making sure that our health professionals have access to the information that they need to do their jobs now that cannabis is legal has also been a focus area for the Department of Health and Social Services. Approximately 60 health professionals from around the territory participated in a special session focused on the latest research pertaining to the effects of cannabis use on mental health and specifically, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This was

the second cannabis health expert we have brought to the territory to present on public health evidence related to cannabis use and to directly answer northerners questions about cannabis and their health.

Mr. Speaker, we understand that many NWT residents have concerns related to the legalization of cannabis and its potential impact on individuals and communities. These concerns are not baseless, and it is our responsibility to provide messaging and materials that are culturally relevant, are tailored to our NWT population and are understood by residents so that they can make informed decisions about cannabis use. For youth under 25, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and those experiencing mental health issues, there are very real health considerations. The legalization of cannabis opens up new opportunities for honest, straight-forward conversations with NWT residents about the known health considerations for those who use cannabis. These conversations weren't always happening prior to legalization when cannabis was still readily available on the black market and widely used throughout our territory. We welcome this opportunity for frank dialogue.

Mr. Speaker, now that cannabis is legal, the efforts of our government to provide information and education sessions to our residents doesn't stop; more sessions are in the works. Our presentations of cannabis health information at Community Healthy Living Fairs will continue. These fairs offer a very personal and direct way to communicate with NWT residents living in our smallest communities about health issues that are important to them. We will also have a presence at festivals and sporting events and other places where people gather and cannabis is likely to be consumed.

New and engaging cannabis health education materials are also under development and will be rolled out over the coming weeks. We have invested significant time and energy developing and pilot testing these materials and engaging uniquely northern voices in the communication of key health messages.

As our public education campaign continues, we will be partnering with the federal government to expand cannabis public education efforts in NWT communities. This will include community and school activities, visual and social media content in all NWT official languages, and community resources.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to the health information our government is sharing about cannabis, the federal government is active on this issue as well. Their cannabis public education efforts include social media, paid advertising and promotional materials, all of which are helping to provide important information to residents in our territory and throughout Canada. We are working alongside our federal counterparts to ensure consistency in our messaging and ensure we compliment rather than overlap in our efforts.

Mr. Speaker, we have made a long-term commitment to ensuring that our residents have the most up-to-date information on cannabis so that they can make informed decisions about its use. We know from our extensive consultations with youth from across the territory that they want health information delivered in a manner that is interactive, builds on the knowledge and experience they already have, and is creative. These expressed needs shaped our cannabis public education plan, and will continue to inform our public awareness and education efforts as a government going forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.