

MEMBER'S STATEMENT — KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

Pandemic Lessons Learned

May 26, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, monsieur le President. Like many residents of the Northwest Territories, I have been mulling over the dramatic changes to our lives as a result of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Very few of us could have predicted in January where we are today. Many have lost their jobs or had their income severely reduced. Students have lost the opportunity to fully complete their studies this year. Many parents and guardians are struggling with adapting to work from home.

On the positive side, there have been significant government assistance programs developed and delivered in very short order. We are on the verge of a guaranteed basic income. We have found housing for homeless people, including a managed alcohol program here in Yellowknife with remarkable results.

Here are some of the concerns that have been foremost in my mind during the COVID-19 public health emergency. They are largely a result of the concerns brought forward by constituents and residents across the NWT:

- Need for better communications from Cabinet;
- Stronger and better-coordinated border controls, follow-up, and enforcement;
- Clearer definition and communications around essential service workers; and
- Appropriate precautions being taken to ensure that southern workers do not put northern residents at significant risk.

There are still some gaps in the assistance programs including:

- Financial assistance for renters and small landlords;
- Targeted assistance for seniors and vulnerable populations;
- More tools for communities around liquor restrictions;
- Improved benefits and wages for essential service workers;
- Better-coordinated financial assistance for small businesses;
- Financial and other assistance for critical supply chains, including regional air carriers and trucking services; and
- Greater support for those activities and sectors that build greater self-reliance and economic resiliency, including food security.

We also need to start to turn our minds to what life can and should be like in a post-COVID world. We need:

- A thorough and public review of GNWT's pandemic planning and response;
- A re-evaluation of 19th Legislative Assembly priorities and Cabinet mandate;

- A thoughtful discussion of how to restart our economy without losing some of the significant assistance and program gains; and
- Increased initiatives to build a more self-sufficient economy.

As Northerners, we always help each other. We will get through this together and be that much stronger for it. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.