



September 24, 2021

Kate White
Vice-Chair
Standing Committee on Public Accounts
Box 2703
Whitehorse, YT Y1A 2C6

Dear Kate White:

I am pleased to provide our responses to the Public Accounts Committee's clarification questions provided in your letter dated August 27, 2021, following the public hearing on the *Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Legislative Assembly of Yukon – Mental Health Services in Rural Yukon – Department of Health and Social Services*.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional information to the Public Accounts Committee on the work of the department. The responses to the clarification questions are attached to this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Samis
Deputy Minister
Health and Social Services

Department of Health and Social Services (HSS)
Responses to the Public Accounts Committee August 27, 2021 Questions
Re: Auditor General report on Mental Health Services in Rural Yukon

1. The action plan identifies multiple actions with a timeline listed as “Ongoing”. Can the department provide any further details for these actions, with information on when specific steps are expected to be accomplished?

- Now that the community hubs have a fulltime manager and two fulltime supervisors, HSS has been able to integrate a number of actions into regular business activities. These are listed as “ongoing” in the action plan.
- HSS can provide further details in regards to some more time-limited actions, such as:
 - Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services (MWSU) will continue to respond to provide support in Watson Lake and Lower Post to community members effected by the demolition of the residential school, as and when requested by Liard Aboriginal Women’s Society, Liard First Nation and Daylu Dena Council.
 - Please see question 8 for a detailed timeline for the development and launch of culturally relevant training.
 - A specific example of ongoing collaboration with First Nations is the Roots of Hope project:
 - The Yukon government is joining nine other Canadian jurisdictions in becoming the newest participants in the Roots of Hope and National Suicide Prevention Initiative. Roots of Hope was designed to help communities develop suicide prevention guidelines and tools that meet specific needs of the area’s population. The project builds upon community expertise to implement suicide prevention interventions that are tailored to the local context.
 - The Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services branch is leading the department’s participation in Roots of Hope, and is exploring partnership opportunities with various First Nations governments, the Council of Yukon First Nations, non-profit organizations, and Yukon University.
 - The first meeting of the Recruitment and Retention Advisory Council is taking place in Fall 2021.

2. Is the department able to provide more details on how progress on the ongoing actions will be determined? What are the anticipated results? Example: Over the next year the department has said that the newly established Population and Public Health Evidence and Evaluation (PPHEE) Branch will work to determine appropriate

**performance measures and reporting for mental health and substance use services.
How will this branch report both publically and internally?**

- The progress made on the ongoing actions will be seen through the planned evaluation of the provision of mental wellness and substance use services, as described in the response to Question 12. Please see the response to question 12 for more detailed information regarding the collection of data and use of performance measures.
 - Anticipated results of our ongoing actions include:
 - Improved structure for meeting, consultation and responding to First Nations partners;
 - Staff will participate in surveys and provide input to improve services as well as staff retention;
 - Direct client input on community programming;
 - Positive results from the implementation of our retention and recruitment plan;
 - MWSU will learn from and adjust services based on survey responses (including clients, staff and community partners); and
 - Increased participation by MWSU staff in community events.
 - PPHEE works to support department program areas in the development of evaluation plans and data gathering. With support from PPHEE, MWSU will gather its own data and use this information for continual service improvement. This evaluation of services may also inform the department's strategic or annual plan.
- 3. On page 2 of the action plan, one of the department's responses states "HSS will continue to seek to adjust and improve participation in trilateral processes with Yukon First Nations and the Government of Canada such as quarterly meetings of the Trilateral Table on Health and the identification of community needs through the Administration of Justice Agreement negotiations." The committee would appreciate further clarification on this item. Can the department explain the connection to the Administration of Justice Agreement and how it relates to mental health services?**
- Administration of Justice Agreements take a broad view of community wellbeing and this includes both the physical and mental health of community members. In past agreements, First Nations governments have identified actions in Administration of Justice Agreements that are specific to services provided by the Department of Health and Social Services and it is possible that future agreements could include actions related to Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services.

4. While developing its recruitment and retention strategy for positions in rural Yukon, is the department considering offering higher salaries? If yes, what are the budget implications for these increased costs?

- Salary ranges for all Yukon government positions are determined by the Public Service Commission and HSS works closely with PSC to have ongoing conversations about remaining competitive with other jurisdictions wage-wise. Our recruitment and retention strategy is about reaching a wider pool of applicants, for instance by reaching out to professional associations and post-secondary institutions directly to promote Yukon employment opportunities.
- HSS is working on its recruitment materials to tell potential candidates what it means to live and work in the Yukon so that new staff are excited and committed to being part of the community and the Yukon. This will be beneficial for staff recruitment and to find the right fit for these positions, thus strengthening staff retention as well.

5. Currently 25 of 33 positions in the hubs are staffed. Is the department confident that all 33 positions will be filled? If so, when does the department expect to have all the positions filled?

- There are current competitions to fill all of the vacant Hub positions.
- If all current competitions are successful in recruiting new staff, we anticipate having all positions filled in the first few months of 2022.
- HSS will continue to implement the recruitment and retention strategy we have developed to address staff turnover.

6. What was the science and reasoning that informed the department's decision to relocate three mental health nurse positions from the hubs to Whitehorse?

- Mental Health Nurses are highly specialized professionals who serve individuals with complex, severe and persistent mental health disorders who require specialist care. Mental health nurse are not counsellors. They are specially trained to inform and administer medications to clients, assess clients for changing symptoms, report back to physicians and psychiatrists on symptom changes or development, and support clients through medication changes (i.e. increasing or tapering). This service is for a very specific population living with a complex diagnosed disorder, such as schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder. According to Canadian Mental Health Association of Canada, these complex disorders affects less than 2% of the population. Given the size of the rural hubs, this means the caseloads for the mental health nurse are quite small, compared to counselling caseloads (with more generalized mental health affecting up to 25% of the population).

- The mental health nurses will be able to see clients both in the rural community and meet them in Whitehorse when needed, improving their ability to provide coordinated support for clients with psychiatry, medication monitoring and, if needed, opioid treatment. Having a mental health nurse that can meet the client in Whitehorse as well as in the community is ideal.
 - When the mental health nurse is not visiting the community, mental health support workers and counsellors, which have been much easier positions to fill, will be able to monitor and support clients in their home communities.
 - Mental health nurses will continue to provide itinerant service in communities, as well as virtual services, and can see clients when they attend appointments in Whitehorse.
- 7. The department noted that communities would prefer continuity over other staffing models such as six weeks on and six weeks off. Will the department be considering models that may be less desirable to the communities if recruitment and retention issues continue?**
- The department will continue to meet regularly and consult with each community and will aim to provide services in the way that best meets the needs of every individual community.
- 8. The department is working with Yukon First Nations governments on the development of culturally relevant training for service providers. Can the department provide a more detailed timeline on when specific steps will be accomplished? When will the training program development be completed and when are all existing staff expected to have completed the training?**
- The following is a more detailed timeline for the development of culturally relevant training for service providers:
 - Establish contract with San'yas (contract is now in place)
 - Develop advisory committee for the Yukon First Nations content for the training (anticipated completion, October 2021)
 - Advisory Committee content development (complete by April 2022)
 - Testing of content with the Advisory Committee (April – June 2022)
 - Launch training in Summer 2022
 - Offer training on an ongoing basis to all staff – each 6 week course can accommodate 20 participants; precise rollout plan is in development now.
 - In addition to the San'yas program, MWSU staff will be taking culturally relevant training as offered by Yukon First Nations governments. For example, all Dawson MWSU staff are registered to take Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation 101 in the

next few months and staff in other communities are participating in on-the-land activities.

9. How will what is learned in the First Nations culture and history training courses be translated into the provision of mental services? How will the department measure the impact of the training?

- First Nations Cultural and History trainings are meant to raise the awareness of clinical staff on Indigenous issues, history, culture and traditions. Specifically, these trainings are to inform staff of the history of the residential school system in Canada as well as other means by which the Canadian government's treatment of First Nations peoples impacted their culture, wellness, and livelihood. These trainings are meant to inform staff of how intergenerational trauma may impact the individuals with whom they work as well as the communities in which they work. Importantly, these trainings are also to highlight the importance of culture and tradition in First Nations communities and how cultural resources and traditional ways of being and healing may contribute to the wellness of Indigenous clients.
- Culturally aware practice, managing cultural differences and understanding potential biases are a staple of counselling training as well as for social workers and master's level clinicians. These courses improve service delivery by allowing clinicians to adjust their general cultural practice ability to our specific Yukon population. This effectively increases awareness, cultural sensitivity and manages potential cultural differences between clinicians and clients.
- We will continue to measure the effects of on-going cultural training through client surveys, staff feedback, clinical supervision and performance evaluation.

10. Can the department provide more details on the Mental Wellness and Substance Use Patient Advisory Committee? What is the committee's mandate and purpose? How frequently is the committee expected to meet and will the meetings have minutes?

- The Mental Wellness and Substance Use Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee) is composed of representatives from CYFN, MWSU, community First Nations partners and persons with lived experience. The Committee will meet a minimum of four times per year and minutes will be kept for each meeting, including a list of attendees and decisions made.
- Mandate:
 - The Advisory Committee shall:
 - Consider and provide suggestions to MWSU on ways to improve quality, access and sustainability of mental health services in Yukon.

- To advise on monitoring and evaluation of both program and system level impacts; and
 - Ensure that cultural representation and safety are addressed in the development and implementation of services in Yukon.
- Purpose:
 - The Advisory Committee is a shared oversight and advisory group that includes Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services, and a group that is representative of the Yukon population, including Yukon First Nations, that represents, as best possible, all Yukon residents and persons with lived experience. The Advisory Committee will provide advice to Mental Wellness and Substance Use (MWSU) branch of Health and Social Services on service delivery and program design for a territory-wide mental health system, including advice on the implementation of the Mental Wellness Strategy.

11. The department noted during the hearing that interest in the First Nations partnership committee waned. What measures are being taken to ensure the Mental Wellness and Substance Use Patient Advisory Committee does not face the same issues?

- The purpose of the committee is to improve services for clients and it directly involves persons with lived experience. This will include hearing from those who live in the communities and have experienced our services and it will give them an opportunity to directly impact the delivery of services.
- The department is making sure that individuals on the committee have regular input to make sure it remains relevant and is meeting the needs of members and communities to maintain momentum.

12. Can the department provide more information on how the data from the new electronic medical records will be used to evaluate and report on how mental health services are provided? What performance indicators have been identified? How will collected data be analyzed and reported?

- Data from the electronic medical records will be used to submit data to national reports, such as:
 - The Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) Shared Health Priorities. CIHI is currently reporting on wait times and is developing reports on navigation through the mental health system.
 - National Treatment Indicators annual reports coordinated through the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.

- Internally, data from the electronic medical records is being used in ongoing evaluation of the service delivery model for Old Crow and will be used for ongoing evaluation of overall programming as well.
- Electronic medical records are also a key data source for the performance measurement plan that is being implemented for the Community Hubs.
- Performance indicators that may be used include:
 - Referral sources
 - External service providers/level of case management
 - Waitlist info
 - Demographics
 - Intakes (year over year increases or decreases)
 - Treatment length, including information on goals and progress
 - Discharge reasons, is a performance measure to improve successful goal attainment
 - Tracks assessment results over time (see improved mood, self-assessed satisfaction changes)
 - Attendance
- MWSU is working closely with PPHEE to establish the best methods for analyzing the data collected and used for internal quality improvement activities.