



## **So You Want to Be A Member of the NWT Legislative Assembly?**

### **Here's What You Can Expect**

#### **Overview:**

Being an MLA is not a typical job. There is no formal job description. Each Member performs their duties in their own unique way. The closest thing they have to a boss is the people who elect them. This document describes the compensation, support services, working conditions and the basic things that an MLA would normally do. If you are elected, you are not bound by this document. Its purpose is to help people thinking about running for elected office and know what may be expected of them.

#### **Qualifications:**

Many people think you need to be a lawyer or have an advanced university degree to be an MLA. In fact, the only mandatory requirements are that you:

1. are 18 years old;
2. are a Canadian citizen; and
3. have lived in the NWT for at least 12 months prior to election day.

That's' it! Of course you need to get elected. But the real strength and wisdom of a Legislative Assembly comes from the many different types of people who are elected. No matter if you're a childcare worker, a volunteer, an injured worker or a stay-at-home mom, you have something valuable to contribute.

#### **Compensation:**

MLAs earn an annual salary of **\$117,986**, paid every second Friday. Additional pay is provided if you become Speaker, Premier, Minister or the Chair of a Committee. All Members are paid a northern living allowance depending upon the community they live in. Members are also entitled to extended-health, dental, disability and life insurance benefits as well as a pension plan.

## **Expenses and Allowances:**

In addition to the annual salary, MLAs are reimbursed for expenses related to the job. This includes normal travel costs to and from Yellowknife and per diems at standard government rates as well as the following:

- A housing allowance of up to \$31,000 a year for non-Yellowknife MLAs to cover the cost of an apartment or hotels while in Yellowknife. MLAs with families who chose to relocate to Yellowknife are eligible for up to \$49,000 a year (taxable) depending upon the size of their family;
- Fully equipped offices in the Legislative Assembly Building and in one or more of the communities the MLA represents;
- A constituency work allowance between \$94,000 to \$110,000 a year, depending upon the Member's riding. This can be used to hire a constituency assistant, hold meetings, publish newsletters, sponsor community events or buy equipment not provided by the Legislative Assembly;
- A non-taxable expense allowance of about \$8,200 a year for non-Yellowknife MLAs to cover the cost of local transportation, supplies and meals while in Yellowknife, etc.;
- A taxable allowance of about \$8,200 a year for all MLAs to cover incidental expenses such as meals with constituents, use of personal vehicles, donations to community organizations etc.;
- Funding to travel to each community the Member represents five times a year including travel, accommodation, meals, incidentals, interpretation and meeting costs;
- Funding to cover the cost of child care for dependent children when Members are travelling or attending meetings;
- Travel assistance to reduce the amount of time MLAs are separated from their families;
- Transition and retraining assistance when the Member stops being an MLA, based upon the length of service.



## **Support Services:**

Once elected, MLAs are provided with support and assistance to help them learn the ropes and do their jobs. Most first-time Members are pleasantly surprised by how much support they are provided. In addition to a seven-week orientation program, MLAs have access to the following support services:

- The Office of the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly has a staff of approximately 30 people dedicated to helping you with travel, purchasing, hiring an assistant, finding a constituency office, renting an apartment and helping you understand how things work in the Legislative Chamber and in committees;
- A team of knowledgeable advisory staff to assist you with writing questions, statements and reports, research projects and understanding how government works;
- The Assembly has a team of lawyers to provide you with legal opinions and advice to help understand and even write your own laws;
- The Legislative Library contains many books, magazines, newspapers and government documents to help MLAs do their jobs. The Library staff assist MLAs to locate and compile information they are interested in or need;
- The Public Affairs team can assist you with drafting media releases, purchasing promotional materials, translating documents, writing a newsletter, or arranging tours of the Assembly building;
- All the NWT's eleven official languages have equal status in the Legislative Assembly. Simultaneous interpretation and translation services are available to Members to assist them with their jobs.

## **Working Conditions:**

Being an MLA can be both incredibly rewarding and, at times, stressful and frustrating. Because there are no political parties in the NWT Legislative Assembly, MLAs are largely free to vote how they wish on any decision. MLAs sometimes support their cabinet colleagues and sometimes disagree with them. Although Cabinet usually votes as a “block” in the House, the 11 non-cabinet members don't always agree.

Learning to adapt your style to accommodate the unique experiences, cultures and motivations of your colleagues takes time, understanding and patience. Some master it quickly and others never do. Building and maintaining relationships of trust, cooperation and accommodation are critical to your success.



Being an MLA is a full-time job. While non-cabinet Members are able to carry on outside business activities if they don't conflict with their work, most find it challenging to find the time. If elected to cabinet, all personal business activities and financial assets must be placed in an arms-length trust.

The Legislative Assembly sits in formal session for about 50 days a year. Normally there is a two-week sitting in late-May/early-June, a three-week sitting between Thanksgiving and Remembrance Day, and a four-week budget session in February and the first two weeks of March. You are expected to be in Yellowknife during these days but are often able to travel home on weekends depending upon where you live. Daily sessions start from Monday to Thursday at 1:30 p.m. and end at 6:00 p.m. On Fridays, the House starts at 10:00 a.m. and adjourns at 2:00 p.m. to allow Members to travel home on weekends. On occasion, the House will sit past 6:00 p.m. to get its work done. The Sessional weeks are four-day work weeks with Session either beginning on a Monday and ending on a Thursday, or beginning on a Tuesday and ending on a Friday.

Committees of the Legislative Assembly often meet in the mornings and some evenings when the House is in formal session. Committees frequently travel to communities outside Yellowknife for three or four weeks of the year depending on the Committees workload.

Meetings of the House or committees are not normally scheduled on or around statutory holidays, over the Christmas or Easter holidays or in July or August. Members may miss meetings if they are ill, have recently had or adopted a child, are attending to other duties or important personal matters such as the death of a loved one. Most travel is by scheduled air service but occasional travel by small, chartered aircraft, vehicle, or boat is required. Nutritious meals are provided by the Assembly's in-house caterers when meetings take place during normal meal times. Members may purchase meals from the Legislative café at other times.

As an MLA, you are under constant public scrutiny. Individual attendance, expenditure and travel reports are made available to the public and often reported on by the media. Members are required to swear to abide by a Code of Conduct and comply with detailed conflict of interest rules. Members must, each year, provide the Integrity Commissioner with a detailed listing of the business interests, income, assets and liabilities for themselves, their spouse and dependent children. A summary of this annual report is made available to the public. Failure to disclose a conflict of interest can have serious implications for an MLA up to and including the loss of their seat.



## **Duties:**

An MLA's duties normally fall into four broad categories: helping constituents, making laws, approving budgets and holding the cabinet to account.

### Helping Constituents:

- Hold regular meetings with constituents, Indigenous governments, band and community councils to understand their concerns and needs;
- Meet with individuals or groups who have specific concerns with government and advocate on their behalf;
- Help individuals and groups resolve issues and solve problems;
- Communicate constituent concerns with Ministers and help identify solutions;
- Make statements and ask questions to Ministers in the House on behalf of constituents;
- Present petitions on behalf of constituents;
- Exchange ideas with other MLAs;
- Attend community events, graduations and public meetings;
- Keep constituents informed of government services and your work through newsletters, websites, social media, media releases and interviews;
- Make speeches at public events and issue congratulatory messages to constituents.

#### Making Laws:

- Identify problems with existing laws or the need for new ones;
- Carefully read laws that the government is proposing;
- Communicate your ideas about proposed laws in committee meetings;
- Consult with your constituents and the public about proposed laws once they are introduced;
- Propose amendments to improve new or existing laws;
- Vote in favour of or against proposed laws;
- Write and introduce laws that are important to your constituents.

#### Approving Budgets:

- Take part in committee meetings to review departmental business plans;
- Carefully review cabinet's proposed operating and capital budgets;
- Ask questions to Ministers on each department's proposed budget;
- Suggest changes to each department's proposed budget;
- Vote in favour or against each department's budget and the budget as a whole.

#### Holding Government to Account:

- Follow current events by reading reports, attending meetings and monitoring the media;
- Make statements and ask questions to Ministers in the Legislative Assembly;
- Draft emails and letters to Ministers expressing your concerns;
- Attend and participate in committee meetings that review government programs and services;
- Create special committees to study specific issues;
- Monitor and review how the government actually spends budgeted funds;
- Issue media releases and conduct media interviews to express your concerns;
- Meet with independent officers of the Legislative Assembly, such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Commissioner or the Auditor General in committees.



## **Other Documents:**

Additional detail on the job of an MLA can be found on the Assembly's website <https://www.ntassembly.ca/meet-members/role-members> as well as in the following documents and pieces of legislation:

*The Northwest Territories Act (Canada)*

<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/N-27.05/>

*The Legislative Assembly and Executive Council Act (NWT)*

<https://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/en/files/legislation/legislative-assembly-and-executive-council/legislative-assembly-and-executive-council.a.pdf>

*The Financial Administration Act (NWT)*

<https://www.fin.gov.nt.ca/en/financial-administration-manual/financial-administration-act>

*Rules of the Legislative Assembly*

[https://www.assembly.gov.nt.ca/sites/default/files/rules\\_of\\_the\\_legislative\\_assembly\\_0.pdf](https://www.assembly.gov.nt.ca/sites/default/files/rules_of_the_legislative_assembly_0.pdf)

*Consensus Government Principles and Process Conventions*

[https://www.assembly.gov.nt.ca/sites/default/files/td\\_207-182.pdf](https://www.assembly.gov.nt.ca/sites/default/files/td_207-182.pdf)

For additional information, please feel free to contact the Office of the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly by telephone at 1-800-661-0784 or (867) 767-9130 ext. 12010 or by email at [Danielle\\_mager@ntassembly.ca](mailto:Danielle_mager@ntassembly.ca)