

23-20(1)

The Honourable Lesa Semmler  
Minister of Health and Social Services

**Health Care Professionals Returning as Locums**

Mr. Speaker, I have a Return to Written Question asked by the Member for Yellowknife Centre on October 31, 2025, regarding Health Care Professionals Returning as Locums.

The Member asked how many physicians who previously held full-time or part-time positions in the Northwest Territories have returned to work as locums in the past three years.

In total 14 physicians have left the Government of the Northwest Territories between April 1, 2023, and December 15, 2025, and have returned as locums:

Nine Family Practice Physicians have left the Government of the Northwest Territories, seven of whom have returned as locums at least once since their departure.

Five Specialist Physicians have left the Government of the Northwest Territories, three of whom have returned as locums at least once since their departure.

During this time, the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority has hired three specialist physicians, one of whom was a locum who chose to become a staff physician and four family physicians, two of which were locums who chose to become staff physicians.

The Member asked how many nurses who previously held full-time or part-time positions in the Northwest Territories have returned to work as locums in the past three years.

The term 'locum' is not technically a term of employment under the Government of the Northwest Territories and Union of Northern Workers Collective Agreement; however, it is commonly used to describe 'casual' nurses. The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority does not track this data. A fulsome analysis would require a retrospective analysis by the Department of Finance, Human Resources, with regional validation.

The Member asked what is the average cost difference to the Government of the Northwest Territories between employing a full-time or part-time physician versus hiring the same individual as a locum.

While the goal of the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority is to fill physician vacancies with full-time or part-time positions rather than locums, the health care human resource crisis following COVID has created a remarkably different landscape for hiring health care workers.

Since COVID we have seen a trend of physicians taking a work-life balance approach and taking partial Full Time Employee roles, with some local physicians opting to take locum contracts rather than full time positions.

The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority recognizes that using locums comes at a financial premium compared to hiring staff physicians, however the majority of the additional costs are related to travel and accommodations. Locums are a necessary and critical part of ensuring service continuity in our health care system.

Locum rates for physicians and permanent staff are difficult to compare on an apples-to-apples basis. At first glance, locum compensation may appear to be significantly higher than permanent staff as locum rates account for the lack of benefits, pension contributions, paid vacation and other leave and paid statutory holidays. Analysis shows that when accounting for all benefits and incremental costs such as professional dues and licensing, permanent staff are being compensated better than locums.

Locum physicians fill high-need, often hard-to-staff roles. Thus, their compensation must account for the realities of temporary placement, geographic mobility, and the lack of long-term security. This is not comparable to the compensation structures used for permanent staff.

The Member asked what is the average cost difference to the Government of the Northwest Territories between employing a full-time or part-time nurse versus hiring the same individual as a locum.

The term locum is not technically a term of employment under the Government of the Northwest Territories and Union of Northern Workers Collective Agreement; however, it is commonly used to describe casual nurses.

Casual nurses are paid at the same rate as a Union of Northern Workers nurse; however, casual employee benefits and entitlements are limited. These entitlements are spelled out in Appendix A5 of the Union of Northern Workers Agreement.

Full time or part time Nurse entitlements are found in the body of the Collective Agreement, along with the provisions under Appendix A10.

Agency nurses, when used, are not Government of the Northwest Territories employees, rather they are engaged through third-party contracts, making comparisons with permanent or casual Government of the Northwest Territories nurses difficult to compare directly. Agency rates are higher than Government of the Northwest Territories rates to compensate for the lack employer-provided benefits and pension contributions. The use of agency nurses also requires the contracting health authority to incur travel, accommodation, and other contract-related costs.

The use of agency staff is a short-term measure to fill temporary vacancies in specialized nursing positions and are used only as a last resort when, without this option, units would be closed, or health services severely reduced. The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority use of agency nurses has reduced steadily and significantly in the last few years.

In 2025-2026 on average only one agency nurse is being used to staff the obstetric service at the Inuvik Regional Hospital. Between May 2025 and December 2025, agency nurses were used to support Stanton Territorial Hospital's Operating Room, Emergency Department, and Intensive Care Unit. No agency nurse use is anticipated at Stanton in 2026.

Given the limited use of agency nurses within the Northwest Territories, a detailed comparative cost analysis has not been undertaken at this time.