

27-20(1)

The Honourable Lesa Semmler  
Minister of Health and Social Services

### **Physician Recruitment and Retention**

Mr. Speaker, I have a Return to Written Question asked by the Member for Yellowknife North on February 6, 2026, regarding Physician Recruitment and Retention.

The Member asked the Minister to provide the number of positions within the Department of Health and Social Services and the Health and Social Services Authorities that are dedicated specifically to the recruitment and orientation of new physicians, as well as the retention of existing physicians.

Within the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority, the Talent and Organizational Development Division and the Office of Medical Affairs and Credentialling provide support for physician recruitment.

There are several positions within the Talent and Organizational Development Division that support physician recruitment; however, this is not their sole responsibility.

A Physician Program Specialist is responsible for planning, researching, designing, and implementing strategies and programs aimed at assisting the health system to attract qualified physicians.

A Program Specialist supports programs focused on attracting physicians, including the bursary program, the Clinical Observership and Job Shadowing Program, and the Family Medicine Residency Program.

Program Officers support an Inuvik specific recruitment initiative and support transition for new and relocating physicians within the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority and the Tlicho Community Services Agency.

Within the Office of Medical Affairs and Credentialling there are two Territorial Physician Recruiters. The focus of these positions is the recruitment of physicians, both locums and staff. They follow up on leads generated during recruitment fairs and conferences and are the initial point of physician contact regarding contracts. Territorial Physician Recruiters also secure dates and bookings for locums.

Additionally, there are Physician Administrative Coordinators in Hay River and Inuvik that provide administrative support for booking and scheduling recurring locums, arranging travel logistics as well as some orientation support.

The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority does not have dedicated positions for physician orientation and retention. Orientation is variable, logistically challenging and is dependent on length of the work term and the date they arrive. For instance, a five-day locum arriving late Friday and starting work on Saturday will not have the same orientation as a new permanent hire.

The Member asked the Minister what lessons were learned from the temporary physician bidding initiative used to fill shifts at Stanton Territorial Hospital, that will be incorporated into future efforts at recruitment and retention of both locums and contract physicians.

A temporary shift bidding initiative was used in Summer 2025 at Stanton Territorial Hospital to stabilize Emergency Department physician coverage during a period of acute vacancy. Lessons learned are listed below.

Bidding allowed for faster filling of urgent shifts by qualified locums, improving coverage responsiveness.

Northwest Territories rates for Emergency Department physicians at Stanton were not viewed as competitive, and that physicians were willing to adjust their schedule for the right price. The initiative worked in tandem with updated locum compensation rates implemented on June 1, 2025, and October 1, 2025, which enhanced the territory's competitiveness.

Timing for implementation was critical. Determining locum rates must be completed in a timely manner so early recruitment and planning can occur. Locums typically book work placements four to six months in advance.

The bidding process did create some administrative challenges. Higher locum turnover meant more time spent on onboarding and orientation, and managing multiple pay rates—along with tracking when each rate applied—added significant administrative burden.

While essential during shortages, reliance on shift bidding must not undermine recruitment into the Standard Physician Contract.

These considerations will inform future approaches to locum management and emergency staffing models across the territory.

The Member asked the Minister what recruitment and retention initiatives specifically target physicians, and what measurable impacts have been observed to date as a result of these initiatives.

The Authority has implemented the Revised Locum Physician Fee Schedule and Long-Term Locum Incentive Pilot. This increased the daily rates, standardized travel stipends, provided premium rates for high demand periods and incentives for locums providing care in territory over 75 days per year.

In addition, system level human resource strategies continue. These include the 2025-2028 People Strategy, leadership development programs, the Family Medicine Residency program, the Health and Social Services Bursary program and the Friends and Family Travel Program. The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority will continue to participate in interest-based negotiation with the Northwest Territories Medical Association towards a new Standard Physician Contract.

Notable impacts of these initiatives are the ability to maintain essential services, despite approximately 65% of physician positions being vacant as of late 2025, improved specialist stability in areas such as General Surgery and Pediatrics, and increased locum participation when incentives are in place.

The Bursary program, since its inception three years ago, has awarded 16 bursaries to medical students or residents. The bursary program includes a return of service component, following graduation (completion of residency). One resident who is supported now works in Family Medicine and the ER at Stanton. Other bursary recipients are still in medical school or are in their residency.

The Family Medicine Residency program has resulted in permanent employment for two former-residents as Family Physicians while four others are recurrent locums.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker