



November 22, 2021

Response to Letters Received from Health Care Providers

Thank you for your letter and for sharing this information and your concerns with me. Your letter reflects the pressure and disproportionate demands that the pandemic has placed on those of you at the frontline of the healthcare system, and the significant impacts you have experienced. I also recognize that strains on the NWT nursing workforce existed before the pandemic, and that these have been made worse over the past year and a half.

In the interest of providing a clear response to the matters raised in your letter I will address the content of the letter in the same format, by topic:

Pandemic Funding Allocation in the NWT

In the NWT the GNWT received approximately \$20 million dollars as part of the federal funding identified in your letter for specific health system supports. These funds were primarily used for the following initiatives:

- COVID-19 testing, tracing, data management (devices, people, supplies, systems)
- Wastewater sampling
- Virtual care systems and supports
- Funding to non-profits offering health-related services
- Support for the COVID-19 immunization drive (logistics, staff)
- Isolation centre costs, COVID-19 enforcement
- Additional frontline staff were added in lab services, long term care, emergency departments and some other areas.

These dollars were not specifically allocated to salary increases or bonuses for health or front-line employees; however, some of the funding did flow to front-line staff as staff salaries to undertake work such as COVID testing and/or the vaccine campaign delivery.

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Lost Vacation and Sick Leave

The Collective Agreement between the GNWT and the Union of Northern Workers includes provisions for time recovery when staff is recalled from scheduled leave. Anyone who experienced a recall but was not provided with a leave recovery should work with their supervisor to figure out what they may be entitled to. If leave recovery was requested but not reinstated this oversight should be corrected.

If you were on leave and recalled, you can request a recovery of all your leave and receive your first shift on return paid at 1.5 times your regular pay rate.

In addition to the recovery option, there were additional financial compensation options for employees who may have had travel expenses related to their recall or reasonable expenses incurred if leave was cancelled prior to the actual time off such as cancellation fees. If you were not aware of this at the time, please speak with your supervisor to get more details.

Employees are entitled to "Injury on Duty" leave if they have an approved Workers Safety and Compensation Commission (WSCC) claim. While I can't speak for WSCC, it is my understanding that a positive COVID diagnosis that stemmed from the workplace would be considered by the WSCC.

Employees who were directed to self-isolate because of a workplace exposure were required to use Special Leave under the specific self-isolation code during this time to maintain safe environment for other employees, patients, and the public. Special Leave Banks were uncapped/opened to ensure employees had access to paid leave during the pandemic. The GNWT put this in place to ensure employees were supported to follow the direction and recommendations of the Chief Public Health Officer.

Again, if you were unaware of these options, I encourage you to reach out to your supervisor to discuss after reviewing your leave. Each matter is specific to the individual and requires collaboration between the employee, supervisor, and Department of Human Resources to rectify.

Compensation Issues

There were a number of issues related to compensation, specifically the request for an hourly raise, consideration of hazard pay, and bonuses. Unfortunately, we do not have an easy or available mechanism to provide these payments because matters related to compensation are dealt with in the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the GNWT and the Union of Northern Workers. The current two-year collective agreement provides a 1.5 per cent salary increase in this fiscal year and again in the next.

We do not have a way to break out a group of employees to provide additional compensation without considering all employees through the bargaining process.

I am committed to looking at what options may be available to us to ensure we remain competitive with other jurisdictions and particularly how we can recruit and retain health and social services staff throughout the territory. I do not have details to share now regarding these options, but I believe that the ongoing work to complete both exit and recruitment and retention surveys are important to informing our next steps.

I encourage you and your colleagues to engage with these surveys so we can learn from your experience,

Inconsistencies

I recognize the frustration in bringing these issues forward and feeling that they may not have been adequately or formally addressed up to this point. As you can see in the details provided in this letter, these are complex issues with many factors at play. The NTHSSA or any specific department may not have the ability to solve an issue such as increasing benefits; it requires cross-government collaboration and often significant time and resources.

I also know that the volume of information and communication that has come out over the past two years may be overwhelming. The process and policy changes along with all of the regular communications have been unprecedented. I hope the detail in this letter provides some clarity on some of the processes put in place to support staff, particularly about your leave.

To reiterate; if you were unaware of some of these options and feel you have not received what you are entitled to under the Collective Agreement, I ask that you bring this matter to your supervisor for assistance to understand what resolution may be available.

In closing, I want to thank you again for bringing your concerns to me and for advocating for yourself and your colleagues. Across the country we are seeing the impacts of this pandemic play out and one that concerns me particularly is the impact on the health and social services workforce.

I am committed to finding solutions that make life and work better for NWT residents and specifically for those on the front-line in our system who we depend on to provide care and services to residents.

Again, I ask for your help to understand your issues, please fill out the survey by using the link below. Your feedback will be used to help guide our decisions and actions. I look forward to working together for benefit of staff and patients.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JAGreen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Julie Green
Minister of Health and Social Services

Attachment

c Members of the Legislative Assembly

The 2021 Nursing Recruitment and Retention Survey

Estimated Time: 15-20 mins

Closing date: November 28, 2021

- Link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/83LJC2Q>

The 2021 Nursing Recruitment and Retention Survey, is being administered by the Registered Nurses Association of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut (RNANTNU).

It was designed with input from on-the-ground nurses in the Territories and has been expanded from previous surveys to include the four professional categories of nurses - LPN, NP, RN and RPN.

This survey asks nurses to speak directly and anonymously about recruitment and retention of nurses in the Territory.