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Hospitalization caused by heavy drinking highest in Canada

New report suggests NWT stats are five times the national average in recent years

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SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

Hospitalizations resulting from drinking large amounts of alcohol are higher by population in the Northwest Territories than anywhere else in Canada, according to a recent report.

The Canadian Institute for Health released the report, called Alcohol Harm in Canada, last month. It states there were 475 related hospitalizations in the territory in 2015 and 2016.

By population, this translates to 1,315 hospitalizations per 100,000 residents - more than five times the national average - according to Geoff Hynes, manager of population health at the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

He listed a few of the conditions that contributed to the report's numbers.

"People suffering from chronic-use disorders, people who are suffering from alcohol withdrawal, people who have been intoxicated and then you see conditions that are indicative of long-term chronic alcohol use," he said, adding these numbers don't include injuries that occurred while an individual is drunk or injuries sustained to someone by a drinker, although those numbers are quite large too.

Health and Social Services Minister Glen Abernethy said because addiction and mental health are complicated issues, a multifaceted approach is necessary to address the problem.

"What we heard, loud and clear, is that people said they want options when it comes to addiction issues," he said. "We've been trying really hard to increase the number of options available to people."

He pointed to the sobering centre, which opened on Monday, as an example of how the territorial government is addressing the problem.

"We need to provide a whole lot of different types of programs," said Abernethy. "We've got to work with different partners, NGOs, other governments, organizations that can provide local programming and that's really where we focus a lot of our energy."

He said there is also concern that people aren't aware of treatment options in the North and his department could do a better job letting people know what types of help are out there.

"People who are looking for the services may not always be in a position to go out and search all the options," he told Yellowknifer. "Do I think we have a perfect system? Heck no. There's a lot more we need to do ... If there was a magic wand, we would certainly wave it."

Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green disagrees with Abernethy on his assessment of what's available.

"The hospital is really the only place that people can go if they are having a health problem related to alcohol," she said, adding the sobering centre could help bring those numbers down.

In addition to a sobering centre, Green pointed to having physicians do a short screening on individuals to find out how much they are drinking and then potentially refer them to specialized treatment. She said the culture of drinking, especially heavy drinking in the North, also plays a large role.

"There doesn't seem to be much of a campaign except around fetal alcohol syndrome," she said. "We seem to be treating other aspects (of drinking) like drunk driving, fetal alcohol syndrome but not actually getting at the fact that there are a large number of heavy drinkers in this territory."



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