

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

Addictions treatment centre closures in Alta., B.C., could mean more obstacles for N.W.T. patients

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Some addictions treatment centres that take in N.W.T. patients are not accepting new clients due to COVID-19

Three of the four addiction treatment centres that accept patients from the Northwest Territories have closed their doors to new clients from the territory during the novel coronavirus pandemic — but they maintain that treatment goes on for those already inside.

In an email from a territorial Department of Health employee, obtained by CBC News, counsellors were informed that three of the four treatment centres — which are all based in Alberta and British Columbia — will either only accept local provincial residents during the pandemic, or will not be accepting new patients at all.

"We ask you to note that ... three centres have requested that case managers do not call to do any new assessments at this time," the email reads in part.

Addictions treatment centres are where N.W.T. residents receive intensive individual and group therapy and other services "to support a life of recovery," according to the territorial government's website.

The N.W.T. does not have any "live in" addiction treatment centres, so wellness counsellors refer patients to one of the four sites in Alberta or British Columbia.

'Recovery isn't cancelled'

Stacey Petersen, executive director of the Fresh Start Recovery Centre in Calgary, said the N.W.T. government informed them of the territory's border closure on March 21— five days after the centre made the decision to close its doors to protect the health and safety of patients and staff.

There are 10 men from the N.W.T. currently at the centre, Petersen said. All of them were given the option to return home, he said, but all decided to stay.

"Recovery isn't cancelled," Petersen said. "People have free will and if they choose to stay with us, they can stay with us, and we're taking all the precautions necessary to safeguard against COVID-19."

Fresh Start Recovery offers an intensive 14- to 16-week program for men that includes daily individual and group counselling sessions that are "conducive to physical, emotional, mental and spiritual growth," according to its website.

It has also created online support groups and virtual meetings that will be able to support any of the men and alumni of their program during the novel coronavirus pandemic, Petersen said.

Treatment lodge sends N.W.T. patients back

Kim Turgeon, executive director of the Aventa Centre of Excellence for Women with Addictions, said in an email to CBC News that the centre does have N.W.T. patients with them who "are doing well."

The centre, based in Calgary, is still taking in new patients, Turgeon said.

The health department's email stated that Poundmaker's Treatment Lodge near Edmonton has sent all its clients back to the territory.

On Tuesday, the territorial government confirmed in an email that this decision was made by the lodge on March 16 due to concerns about the future availability of flights and "how this might impact their ability to return out of province clients home."

At that time, they said five individuals were accessing treatment at the lodge.

"As part of this process to return individuals to their home communities, their NWT Case Managers were also notified and worked with their clients to ensure that they had a safe place to self-monitor," the email states.

The email adds that those patients continue to access phone support through the lodge and the Community Counselling program, which provides free counselling services to all N.W.T. residents.

Poundmaker's Treatment Lodge did not respond to CBC's multiple requests for comment.

In an email from the territorial government, they confirmed that the three other out of territory treatment facilities have advised they can continue providing treatment to residents from the N.W.T. already in their care.

Edgewood, a medical detox centre in Nanaimo, B.C., requires that N.W.T. residents get prior approval from the Health Department before being accepted into its programs.

A spokesperson from Edgewood refused to say whether they had any patients from the N.W.T. staying with them, citing patient confidentiality.

In an update Wednesday morning, the spokesperson clarified that the centre is only accepting clients from B.C.

Closures could 'impede' path to recovery

Addictions patients can also get support through some community programs, including a two-week withdrawal management program at the Salvation Army in Yellowknife.

Derek Pluchinski, the Salvation Army's programs manager, describes it as a "pre-treatment" program that gives people a safe environment to detox and make decisions about their care. Clients can then be referred to one of the four treatment centres down south, he said.

Pluchinski said putting treatment programs on hold could "impede" the path and I to recovery for people with addictions.

"Sometimes the window for opportunity to receive help can be brief, so that window could close," Pluchinski said.

The Salvation Army has also closed its doors to new patients as a result of COVID-19, but is letting their current clients stay until the pandemic is over.

Pluchinski said anyone looking for addictions treatment at this time should consider online resources such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings.

The territorial government has also released a list of mental health and wellness tips. There is no mention of where to seek addictions support on that list.

Clarifications - This story has been updated to include information Edgewood Treatment Centre provided on April 1, 2020. - 12:19 PM CT