

RETURN TO WRITTEN QUESTION 13-19(2):
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES COVID-19 TESTING AND CONTACT TRACING
CAPACITY

August 24, 2020

CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Mercer): Mr. Speaker, I have a return to written question asked by the Member for Yellowknife Centre on May 28, 2020, regarding Northwest Territories COVID-19 testing and contact tracing capacity.

For regular tests, the territory-wide average turn-around time for final confirmed test results remains just short of three days. The biggest contributor to testing delays is transport to Alberta Precision Laboratories. Once the tests arrive at their destination, results are available within hours. There is currently no shortage of the type of swab used for regular testing on Alberta Precision Laboratories machines. Our current stockpile of these Aptima swabs is 9,500, which is enough for three months.

Currently, the only type of rapid test unit in the Northwest Territories (NWT) is the GeneXpert. Its turn-around time is about one hour. However, each test unit must have a minimum of 65 tests confirmed by Alberta Precision Laboratories before they can be considered a valid and independent means of testing. At this point in time, the biggest challenge with the GeneXpert is the global shortage of reagents and cartridges needed to run the tests. The swabs used on the GeneXpert are the same ones typically used during influenza season, and there is currently no shortage of these.

There are currently two GeneXpert test units at Stanton Territorial Hospital laboratory. Two more are anticipated, although the timelines are unknown at present. The National Microbiology Laboratory (NML) has taken responsibility for ordering for certain provinces and territories, including the NWT, and for allocating based on need. NML had anticipated sending a minimum of 40 test kits per week to the NWT. However, as the bulk orders have not been arriving to the NML as expected, test kit availability for individual provinces and territories is inconsistent. The number of kits delivered to the NWT will continue to fluctuate as a result. To date, we have received between zero and 20 test kits per week. In the absence of a guaranteed supply of GeneXpert materials, the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority (NTHSSA) has established a protocol for use of these rapid tests and is allocating a limited number of tests for weekly use. This will help build a small stockpile for later use, when urgent rapid testing is required, such as in response to an outbreak.

In the NWT, all Community Health Nurses (CHN) and Public Health Units have the initial responsibility for contact tracing. Community nursing staff and public health nurses are supported by the Territorial Epidemiology team in carrying out contact tracing. There is a decision-making process and on-call system established for urgent contact tracing. Additional support within our current Population Health and CHN resources can also be mobilized virtually.

Further planning is underway to refine our contact tracing approach in the event of a second-wave surge. A process to deliver large-volume contact tracing is the priority. The NTHSSA is using guidelines from Alberta to adapt to NWT needs. We have been

approved to have up to six CHNs in Yellowknife to redeploy in the case of a community outbreak. As of yet, we have not been able to fill this resource completely, but staffing is ongoing.

A process for redeploying and training Community Health Representatives and local Canadian Rangers to monitor contacts is also being developed and should be finalized with the next couple of weeks. We also have access to the Public Health Agency's contact-tracing surge team, which can be mobilized in the event that we require additional resources outside of our system.

As initial contact tracing is carried out by community nursing staff and public health nurses, we rely on our health system's existing Indigenous-language interpretation services. In regional health centres and long-term care facilities, this often includes staff who have received the bilingual bonus for Indigenous languages. When fluent staff are unavailable, CanTalk services are used. CanTalk is available 24 hours a day by phone, on-site, e-mail, and the internet. They offer services in Chipewyan, Cree, Tlicho, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, North Slavey, and South Slavey, as well as over 200 other languages. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.