

THE HONOURABLE JULIE GREEN
MINISTER OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Use of Indigenous Languages on Official Documents

Mr. Speaker, I have a Return to Written Question asked by the Member for Kam Lake on March 6, 2023, regarding Use of Indigenous Languages on Official Documents.

Early in 2019, the Business Transformation Committee, an Assistant Deputy Minister Advisory Committee reporting to the Informatics Policy Council, initiated work to establish a working group to address the 2015 recommendations of the Northwest Territories' Official Languages Commissioner. The working group was to support GNWT technical solutions that would allow for the use of Indigenous fonts and diacritics on GNWT-issued identity documents.

A Terms of Reference for the Indigenous Fonts Working Group was drafted in 2020 but not finalized and, to date, no meeting of the Working Group has been held. In the intervening time since the initial thinking on this work, the GNWT now better understands the extent of the interoperability challenges beyond GNWT information systems as a barrier to progress in this area.

In 2017, amendments to the *Vital Statistics Act* removed the requirement for registration of a birth certificate to be in "roman alphabet". However, a birth certificate, as a 'foundation identity document', that incorporates an Indigenous diacritic will not be accepted by key systems that require a birth certificate such as Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada for documents like passports and Social Insurance Numbers. Having a birth certificate not recognized nationally will impact NWT residents when they want to travel, open a bank account, or when accessing health services in jurisdictions outside of the NWT, as examples.

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In 2017, a preliminary high-level estimate determined that the changes to the *Vital Statistics Act* to introduce Indigenous fonts would affect 24 Health and Social Services information systems to some degree and potentially 400 GNWT information systems. In 2019, it was estimated that it would cost \$14 million to accommodate the inclusion of Indigenous characters in the Health and Social Services information systems, if done as an activity separated from broader system replacements. There are no identified resources for this work.

The subject of inclusion of Indigenous characters and diacritics has recently become a topic of federal, provincial, and territorial Ministers tables as more jurisdictions consider this work a commitment to reconciliation. Most recently, federal, provincial, and territorial Ministers' attended the Symposium on Digital Trust and Cybersecurity, which was attended by my colleague Minister Wawzonek. One of the actions items coming from this meeting was that Ministers and DM Tables endorse the development of a Pan-Canadian Workplan on the priorities related to digital trust, credentials and cybersecurity and work on enabling Indigenous languages in identity records.

The GNWT, with our provincial and territorial colleagues, will continue to work with Canada towards enabling federal information systems to accept Indigenous diacritics in identity documents.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.