



September 2023

Letter to program participants, staff, and the community of Yellowknife from the Yellowknife Women's Society's board of directors following the Yellowknife evacuation experience

Like so many others, the Yellowknife Women's Society spent the last several weeks trying to support our community as they evacuated away from the threat of the NWT fires and into the path of other harms. We were surprised and unprepared for the Yellowknife, Ndilq, Dettah, and the Ingraham Trail evacuation order. Even at the tail end of a summer of community evacuations across the NWT, from our neighbours in Behchokq, to the South Slave and Dehcho communities of Hay River, Fort Smith, Enterprise, and Jean Marie River – somehow, we did not imagine that our own community and programs could be faced with a similar situation.

Because of this, before anything else, as a board of directors we want to express to our program participants and staff, especially those participants from the Women's Centre and Housing First programs, our deep and profound sorrow and regret for not being more prepared to weather this storm with you. We are so sorry for the stress and fear that you experienced throughout these past few weeks. We are so sorry that we weren't better prepared and equipped to support you through this time. We are so sorry to have not had a place for you to go, resources to help you while you were there, and the comfort of knowing you had a safe way home. And to our staff, we are so sorry for not equipping you with the time and resources to be prepared for such an event, and for putting you in such challenging positions.

As community leaders, we believe in accountability for our own actions. We take these organizational failures seriously and vow to do better for our program participants, staff, and the community. We make this apology in the hope that other community leaders will also humbly identify where they have fallen short so that we can all learn and improve from one another.

With the goals of being more prepared for future emergencies, for solving the unreasonably normalized ongoing emergency of homelessness and under-housing in our community, and to thank key individuals who helped us during the past three weeks, we invite Yellowknifers to consider the following:

1. Respectful, timely communication between and across government and non-government entities is possible

Throughout this experience, we found it difficult to receive timely, accurate information and to effectively communicate our needs to the right decision-makers at the right time, to have our needs considered and met. We learned we needed to evacuate the Spruce Bough supported living program on the morning of Wednesday August 16. At that time, we learned that plans were already underway for evacuating long-term care patients of



the NTHSSA. With help, we were successful in organizing the complex evacuation of 47 service users through a dedicated charter, to a dedicated facility north of Fort McMurray, accompanied by several of our staff.

Recognizing that in an emergency, time is often not available, we still wish and think it is reasonable that we could have had the same advance warning to evacuate our program participants as was provided to other long-term and vulnerable population programs. With another 6, 12, or 24 hours, we could have made better and safer decisions, such as ensuring all our program participants had the option of traveling together to the Fort McMurray location where they would have been supported by staff. We proposed this solution to our funder in the rushed hours before the charter plane departed, and this solution was denied. We look forward to understanding why this decision was taken, when no other safe option for the underhoused and homeless community was offered. You can read more about the sequencing of events from our perspective in our evacuation experience timeline, found on our website.

As providers of essential services in Yellowknife, we need to be part of the decision-making processes that affect our program participants. Though we are not government, we need mechanisms to engage in, connect with, and inform government. No level of government should make decisions about our essential service programming without our input and the input of our program participants – ever.

Despite the challenges in timely, respectful communication, there were successes. We would like to thank the following individuals who helped us evacuate the Spruce Bough respectfully, quickly, and safely; especially Stu Impett and team at Det'on Cho Logistics and Tracey Pope at NTHSSA.

We also had the opportunity to see successful collaboration and coordination between the non-profit community and municipal government in Calgary, where a key non-profit liaison role helped us locate and support many of our program participants and other NWT residents experiencing challenges. We know this kind of collaborative, supportive coordination is possible here at home too, thanks to exceptional GNWT staffs Connie Lee, Nina Larsson, Danielle McIntyre, Rowan Zouboules and others on the ground who helped us in Calgary, Edmonton, and Fort McMurray. These individuals bridged connections with Calgary and Fort McMurray area shelters and services, walked the streets to look for program participants who were struggling, lobbied their own leadership to provide resources, and helped people board planes to return home. Thank you for being there when we couldn't be.

2. Harm reduction and wrap-around supports works

The evacuation experience provided an unintended comparison between two program models: a harm-reduction and wrap-around support program model, and a housing-only



program model. Harm-reduction means that individuals are supported to make safe choices, but are not penalized or shamed for choices that are unsafe. Wrap around supports means that individuals are provided with a variety of supportive options that meet their needs, from counselling and addictions management, to housing, to income support, to recreation, and more.

At our evacuation location in Fort McMurray, participants who were already part of the managed alcohol program were able to continue this program. Participants had access to 24-hour health care and familiar shelter support workers. They had access to their choice of snacks at any hour in addition to three meals a day. It wasn't perfect, but there was privacy, dignity, recreation, and care. Some participants chose to come and go from the facility to use drugs or consume alcohol. Whatever their choices, they were met with judgment-free support and able to return to the safe environment of the facility when they chose. You can read more about harm reduction and the experience in Fort McMurray, from our Deputy Director, Zoe Share. Her description is available on our website.

This approach kept people housed and safe throughout the stressful period of the evacuation. Some individuals chose to leave, but they made this choice independently and safely rather than under duress. In this model, all program participants who wanted to return to Yellowknife with us, were able to do so. In addition to our incredible YKWS staff who travelled with and supported participants at the Fort McMurray location through the duration of the evacuation, we also want to thank Hannah Bond and Megan Lowry from the NTHSSA for their dedication and on-the-ground support in Fort McMurray during this time.

For our many program participants who wound up in Calgary or Edmonton, they were offered a hotel and food or restaurant vouchers as evacuees. This represents the 'housing-only' program model. In the initial 7-10 days of the evacuation, there were very few additional supports available. For example, there were no or limited transportation options for people to get to locations where they could collect essential items like toiletries, clothes, or snacks. There were no or limited counseling and social support check-ins to assist people in connecting to health care or other wellness supports. In Calgary, social worker check-ins began at least a week or more into the evacuation. Most critically, if people consumed drugs or alcohol in ways that broke hotel rules, they were evicted from their hotel rooms without the option to return and without safe alternatives.

In the housing-only model, several of our program participants wound up in Calgary and Edmonton area shelters or on the street in incredibly unsafe situations. Some program participants endured extraordinary trauma. Worst of all, some are still missing. We are working to support participants to share first-hand accounts of their experiences, where they are comfortable doing so.



3. The emergency for individuals experiencing homelessness in Yellowknife is ongoing

Most of us have now returned home. As the temperature drops, as we settle into our homes and recover from the experiences of the summer evacuations, and as we head into a period of territorial political change, we invite you to remember that some community members had no home to leave and no home to return to. While the wildfire emergency is over, is homelessness during a northern winter not its own emergency?

Our neighbours in Yellowknife who want supported housing with harm-reduction and wrap-around supports should have that option. Lack of program spaces is an unacceptable reason why it's not available. This is especially unacceptable given that the vast majority of community members experiencing homelessness are Indigenous peoples whose path to homelessness is the systemic injustices of land theft, racism, and trauma brought about by historic and current colonialism.

YKWS looks forward to the development of Aspen Apartments into supported, harm-reduction-focused housing with wrap-around services. But we estimate approximately 150-200 more of these spaces are needed immediately to address the continuing emergency of homelessness in our community.

Following the evacuation experience, we invite personal and organizational self-reflection on our collective role in ending homelessness in Yellowknife. We especially ask that all Yellowknife area non-profits involved in supporting community members experiencing homelessness, interested community members, the City of Yellowknife, and the Government of the Northwest Territories all consider their role in the following:

- Establish strong, open relationships and clear communication channels between all essential service providers within Yellowknife who interact with and support the population experiencing homelessness both during declared emergencies and the ongoing emergency of homelessness in Yellowknife.
- Develop at least 150 new supported living housing units that provide wrap-around supports and are founded on harm-reduction.

We believe these two achievable goals would eliminate homelessness in Yellowknife.

The YWKS board of directors thanks the organization's incredible and dedicated staff. Special thanks to Renee Sanderson, Executive Director, and Zoe Share, Deputy Director for their leadership. As a board, we commit to emergency management planning with staff and program participants to be better prepared for such events in the future. We further commit to helping our



staff and program participants heal from the events of the last few weeks, to holding ourselves accountable for our actions, and to advancing meaningful change for a more just community.

Sincerely,

The Yellowknife Women's Society Board of Directors