

Stanton Obstetrics Emergency Services: Q&A

On Monday, November 22nd the NTHSSA announced a temporary service reduction to emergency services only for the inpatient obstetrics unit at Stanton Territorial Hospital due to a nursing shortage.

Who is impacted?

- Any person who was set to give birth in Yellowknife and has a due date between December 10th, 2021 and February 21st, 2022 must expect to travel outside Yellowknife to give birth.
- In most cases travel will be arranged for during or before the 37th week of pregnancy. For those impacted they will have their care transferred to Edmonton as our main referral site for care and services.
- Inuvik birthing services are not impacted; if you are set to give birth in Inuvik you are not impacted this time.
- Fort Smith and Hay River midwifery services are not impacted; if you are set to give birth in Fort Smith or Hay River you are not impacted at this time.

Why is Stanton going on emergency only services? What does that mean?

- This means that regular (planned) birthing services will be suspended.
- Staffing levels will be adequate to deal with unplanned situations that arise such as preterm births, urgent prenatal assessments, or other emergency situations.
- This is being put in place because nursing staffing levels are not adequate to fully staff the obstetrics unit to a level that would allow continuous safe staffing levels to support both regular (planned) and emergency birthing situations.

How will patients be informed?

- Informing patients directly is a high priority. Everyone who is impacted is being called by a healthcare provider familiar with this issue to provide notice, further information and advice, and provide an opportunity for questions. This work started the day of the announcement and will continue until complete.
- Notifications are being prioritized based on due date, the goal being to notify those due on December 10th or closest afterward first.

What can impacted individuals expect?

- Impacted individuals must travel to Edmonton during or before their 37th week of pregnancy.
- Duration of stay will differ depending on how pregnancy progresses, individuals can expect to be in Edmonton for 3-5 weeks, but it may be longer or shorter.
- A support person or partner ('non-medical escort') is approved for all those traveling to give birth.
- Individuals can expect direct outreach from NTHSSA staff to discuss their situation, timelines, needs, and to answer questions.

- NTHSSA has dedicated a team to work directly with impacted individuals to determine what supports may be required and to add support to reduce the burden of this change where possible.

Where will people stay while in Alberta? Will travel and accommodation costs be covered?

- All individuals will have access to the supports of the NWT Medical Travel program.
- Some individuals may have additional supports through insurance plans or programs above and beyond the NWT Medical Travel program. Examples include employee benefit programs, specific federal programs (such as Non-Insured Health Benefits) or private insurance.
- Guidance will be provided by the Medical Travel Program for what options are available for each individual.

Why is this necessary? Why can't Stanton get additional staff?

- The Obstetrics unit is required to provide 24/7 services to residents across the NWT. For safe staffing levels Stanton would have two shifts each day with each shift staffed by three nurses with specialized training and skills in labour and delivery/obstetrics.
- The standard of care is one-to-one nurse to patient ratios during active labour and delivery. Current staffing levels are not adequate to guarantee these ratios can be met, they also are not at a level to support surge capacity that is required to operate a safe obstetrics unit in periods of high-demand.
- Capacity that does exist will be retained to ensure readiness to provide emergency and urgent obstetric care.
- There is a national nursing shortage and high demand for those with specialized skills.

What has been done to try to fix or avoid this situation?

- Staff within the obstetrics unit have agreed to cover shifts above and beyond usual levels.
- Staff within the NWT health and social services system that have obstetrics experience have been called on to redeploy to cover this service if possible.
- Nursing recruitment has been ongoing throughout the pandemic. Significant efforts have been made to recruit new staff, but with high-demand nationally attracting talent becomes increasingly difficult.
- NTHSSA has reached out to external parties including nursing agencies and other jurisdictions to see if we can secure support for staffing.

Can I travel somewhere other than Alberta for my delivery?

- Patients are free to organize their ongoing care in a location of their choice. NTHSSA is only able to coordinate transfer of care to Edmonton as this is our established referral pathway.

Can Edmonton handle our volume of patients?

- NTHSSA has been in touch with Alberta Health Services medical leadership and they are confident they will be able to provide the care and services needed for NWT patients during this period of time.

Can I choose where in Alberta I want to go?

- You may speak with your physician/healthcare provider but referrals will be made to the Edmonton zone.
- We cannot guarantee ability to choose an alternate location as this will be dependent on capacity and logistics within the Alberta system.

Will my family be able to come with me?

- One non-medical escort is approved for patients traveling for childbirth.
- A person wishing to bring other family members must do so at their own expense
- More details about what individuals specifically qualify for will be determined when they are connected with NTHSSA Medical Travel to determine what benefits they qualify for if they have insurances through their employer or privately.

What if I refuse to travel outside of the NWT?

- This is not recommended; this decision was made to ensure the safety of all individuals giving birth and to ensure emergency situations are able to be dealt with within the NWT if they should arise. It is safer for individuals who have a planned birth during this period to travel to Alberta for care and services.
- By transferring care to Edmonton we are ensuring that all care is as safe as possible during this period of low nursing staffing.

Can I deliver in Inuvik?

- Individuals who are scheduled to deliver in Inuvik will proceed as normal. Some Sahtu patients may have the option to deliver in Inuvik, specific details will be discussed with each impacted individual.

Who can people contact if they have questions or are concerned about their care?

- Impacted individuals will be contacted directly and provided with contact numbers/details for follow up if they have questions.
- We recognize this news will likely come as a shock and understand that individuals will likely have many questions.
- We encourage people to wait for their direct contact as opposed to contacting their primary care provider because the team dedicated to making the notification calls will have the latest information and be able to answer questions that your regular provider may not at this time.

- We expect this situation will evolve and that not all of the answers will be available immediately. NTHSSA is committed to continually following up and ensuring we can understand patient needs and required supports so we can determine what we may be able to do to make this transition as easy as possible within the supports we have available.

What about unvaccinated patients, will they be able to travel with new travel rules in place?

- Up to November 30th individuals who are unvaccinated can travel with proof of a negative COVID-19 test, these tests are provided at the airport.
- NTHSSA is working to determine what the process will be for anyone travelling after November 30th and will provide more information when this is clear.
- Pregnant individuals are encouraged to get vaccinated, please see our [notice on this matter here](#).