

## Inuvik Obstetrics Emergency Services: Q&A

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### Background

On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority (NTHSSA) announced a temporary service reduction to emergency services only for birthing services at Inuvik Regional Hospital due to a nursing shortage, until September 8<sup>th</sup>. This suspension was temporarily lifted during the month of September and will now be reinstated as of October 1<sup>st</sup> and is anticipated to extend through at least November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

### Who is impacted?

- Any person who was set to give birth in Inuvik and who is 36 weeks pregnant or more during the service diversion.
- In most cases travel will be arranged for during or before the 37<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. For those impacted they will have their care transferred to Yellowknife as our main referral site for care and services.
- Birthing services at Stanton Territorial Hospital in Yellowknife are not impacted; if you are set to give birth in Yellowknife 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 Inuvik Regional Hospital on emergency only obstetrics services? What does that mean?

- This means that regular (planned) birthing services are suspended, and your care will be transferred to Stanton Territorial Hospital in Yellowknife.
- Unplanned situations that arise such as preterm births, urgent prenatal assessments, or other emergency situations will be managed through the emergency department by the locally available healthcare staff, however the regular capacity for services will not be available.
- This is being put in place because there are not enough labour and delivery trained obstetrical nurses in the community that would allow continuous safe staffing levels to support both regular (planned) and emergency birthing situations.
- We recognize that a change in birth plan can be difficult, especially when it involves travelling away from your home and the supports. However, this transfer of care is put in place to ensure the safety of all individuals giving birth and to protect limited resources to ensure we can continue to provide emergency birthing services.

### **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.
- Notifications are being prioritized based on due date to notify those closest to their due dates soonest.

### **What can impacted individuals expect?**

- Impacted individuals are being asked to travel to Yellowknife during or before their 37<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy.
- Duration of stay will differ depending on how pregnancy progresses, individuals can expect to be in Yellowknife for 3-5 weeks, but it may be longer or shorter.
- Individuals can expect direct outreach from NTHSSA staff to discuss their situation, timelines, needs, and to answer questions.

### **Where will people stay while in Yellowknife? Will travel and accommodation costs be covered?**

- Individuals may have benefits (accommodation and food) and other 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), private insurance, Jordan's Principle, Northern Birthwork Collective, etc. NTHSSA staff may be able to advise on what programs could be available.
- Details on benefits are best discussed with your benefit provider.
- For individuals that have access to the supports of the NWT Medical Travel program. Contact information is as follows:

**Beaufort Delta Region**

Phone: 867-678-8034

[Inuvik\\_medicaltravel@gov.nt.ca](mailto:Inuvik_medicaltravel@gov.nt.ca)

### **Why is this necessary? Why can't Inuvik Regional Hospital get additional staff?**

- The Inuvik Regional Hospital is required to provide 24/7 obstetrics services to residents from across the Beaufort Delta region and some Sahtu region communities. Inuvik Regional Hospital has two shifts each day and each shift must be staffed by one nurse 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 if required to deliver safe obstetrical services in periods of high demand.
- Capacity that does exist will be retained to ensure readiness to provide emergency and urgent obstetric care. The minimum standard of care that we can ensure during this period is equivalent to Emergency Department care (and may not include a specialized obstetrical nurse).

- There is a national nursing shortage and high demand for those with specialized skills, we continue to face challenges in recruiting, but we are working hard to find the skilled professionals we need to operate these services.

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

- Staff speciality trained in labor and delivery 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.
- NTHSSA has reached out to external parties including nursing agencies and other jurisdictions to see if we can secure support for staffing.
- Nursing recruitment remains a priority ongoing and is supported by a consolidated hiring project that aims to streamline and expedite the hiring process.
- Significant efforts have been made to recruit new staff; however the high demand nationally continues to make recruitment difficult.

#### **Can I travel somewhere other than Yellowknife for my delivery?**

- Patients are free to organize their ongoing care in an alternate location of their choice. NTHSSA is only able to coordinate transfer of care to Yellowknife as this is our established referral pathway. The exception would be those patients who have medical needs that cannot be safely managed in Yellowknife and who require specialized maternal or neonatal care (who would continue to be transferred to Edmonton as is our usual practice); these patients would not have been able to expect safe deliveries in Inuvik regardless of the closure.
- Please consult your benefit administrator to determine what benefits may be available if you elect to defer the nearest centre for care.

#### **Can Stanton Territorial Hospital in Yellowknife handle our volume of patients?**

- Yes, Stanton Territorial Hospital can provide the care and services needed for impacted patients from Inuvik or elsewhere in the Territory during this period. People regularly travel to Yellowknife to give birth, and processes are in place to support this.

#### **Will my family be able to come with me?**

- One non-medical escort may be approved for patients traveling for childbirth. A person wishing to bring other family members must do so at their own expense or by accessing alternative programs if available and if eligible.
- Details on benefits are best discussed with your benefit provider.

### **What if I choose not to travel?**

- This is not recommended; the decision to suspend planned birthing services at Inuvik Regional Hospital was made to ensure the safety of all individuals giving birth and to ensure care can be coordinated in emergency situations, should they arise. It is safer for individuals who have a planned birth during this period to travel to Yellowknife for care and services. It also protects limited resources locally should there be an emergency.
- By transferring care to Stanton Territorial Hospital in Yellowknife we are ensuring that all care is as medically safe as possible during this period of low nursing staffing for all birthing people.

### **Can I deliver in Fort Smith or Hay River?**

- Some patients may have the option to deliver in Fort Smith or Hay River supported by Midwifery Services. Considerations based on risk would be considered on a case-by-case basis, impacted individuals are encouraged to ask their healthcare provider if this service is right for them.
- Questions surrounding travel benefits in these situations should be discussed with your benefit provider.

### **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 may come as a shock and understand that individuals will likely have many questions.
- We expect this situation will evolve and that not all 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.
- For feedback, complaints, or compliments you can Contact the Office of Client Experience at: [HSS\\_Clientexperience@gov.nt.ca](mailto:HSS_Clientexperience@gov.nt.ca) or call our toll-free line at (1-855- 846- 9601). More info can be found at [www.nthssa.ca/oce](http://www.nthssa.ca/oce).
  - The office is open Monday to Friday- 09:00-1600hrs.
  - The office is closed from 12:00-1:00pm Monday to Friday, on weekends or statutory holidays.