

Proposed cuts to sport and recreation could hinder health of northern communities

Efforts to combat the northern battle of the bulge have been imperilled by a recently proposed 40% cut in sport and recreation programming aimed at promoting more physical activity at the community level, sport organizations say.

The government of the Northwest Territories' 2008/09 budget slashed \$2 million from the \$5 million budget of the NWT Sport and Recreation Partners organization, prompting notices of possible layoffs.

Organizers say the cut will have a crippling effect on the delivery of services, which will in turn affect their ability to build physically active communities. The sector already relies largely on volunteers to deliver programs, and further job cuts could exhaust already strained resources.

"To make that significant of a cut in sports and recreation doesn't seem to fit, given it has such a positive impact on the health and well-being of communities," says Todd Shafer, general manager of the NWT Sport and Recreation Partners organization.

Although there is no word on exactly where cuts will be made in the sport and recreation sector, the organization believes program delivery in the communities will suffer the most. Representatives plan to lobby members of legislative assembly about the detrimental impact of the proposal before the budget goes to vote in May.

It's also possible that some of the funding may be restored as a consequence of a Mar. 10, 2008 announcement that the federal government will contribute \$2.3 million to the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut under a bilateral agreement to increase aboriginal peoples' participation in sport over 3 years. NWT Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs Michael McLeod says the new federal monies will help territories beef up support to aboriginal sports organizations and programs that focus on community sport, traditional sports and youth and coaching development.



Natalie Dunleavy

NWT Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs Michael McLeod, left, and Secretary of State Helena Guergis announced \$2.3 million in funding for NWT, Yukon and Nunavut over 3 years for sport and recreation.

But whether any of the monies will be funnelled into the NWT Sport and Recreation Partners organization, or to any of its members, is unclear.

Organizers had hoped the initiative, along with other community-based ones like the Get Active program, would help reduce an obesity epidemic in the North that has emerged as a consequence of the transition from traditional aboriginal lifestyle to more contemporary living. Aboriginal people are 2.5 times more likely to be obese, according to a 2004 Statistics Canada survey, and northern health authorities say studies invariably confirm that physical activity levels among indigenous Canadians are at an all-time low.

"It's a big area of concern," said Andre Corriveau, chief medical officer for the Government of Northwest Territories. "We traditionally have a very active people and it seems there's been a downward trend." Territorial sport programming is a critical part of the solution, advocates add.

In its third year of continued funding, the Get Active program challenges NWT communities to log their physical activity hours and provide monthly progress reports. Last year, the winners for each category received \$5000 for physical activity equipment in their communities.

The program's purpose is to promote

the benefits of being physically active, such as reducing the risk of developing diseases and increasing a sense of well-being. Limited facilities and recruitment and retention of dedicated staff are the biggest challenges in keeping people active in smaller communities.

A large part of the program targets youth. According to Corriveau, instilling the value of healthy habits in children will help set them in a positive direction for life. "Often [bad habits] are picked up during childhood and adolescence and carried forward," he said. "It's harder to go back than to keep them going in a good habit."

NWT Sport and Recreation Partners member Sport North is working to create a long-term athlete development model to keep young athletes on a physically active path for life.

"We tend to develop and serve athletes until the ages of 20 to 23 and then send them on their way," said Doug Rentmeister, executive director of Sport North. "A lot of them still need our assistance and guidance."

Sport North hopes the program will address the age gap in program delivery by encouraging territorial sport organizations to serve older age groups and to add divisions to territorial sporting events such as the NWT Games. — Natalie Dunleavy, Yellowknife, NWT

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