



Backgrounder: Regulated midwifery services in Yukon

Why regulate midwifery?

Midwives are health professionals who provide care during pregnancy, labour, birth, and after pregnancy. They typically work in collaboration with general practitioner physicians and/or obstetrics and gynecology specialists, as well as social workers and other allied health professionals.

Yukon is the second to last jurisdiction in Canada to regulate midwives. The Government of Yukon has committed to regulate midwives and to introduce standards that will support a high-quality midwifery practice. Regulation will provide the public with assurance that a midwife has met recognized Canadian standards to obtain a licence and practice. Standards could identify such things as minimum education requirements and what services they can offer in the territory. Regulation will also introduce an investigation and discipline process for dealing with concerns.

The Government has also committed to funding regulated midwifery and integrating it into the territory's healthcare system. This will enhance the health and wellness of Yukon families, provide Yukoners additional pre-natal, birthing and post-natal options and support our collaborative approach to healthcare in the territory.

Yukon context

There are unique factors that need to be taken into account in Yukon that increase the complexity of providing midwifery services.

Challenge – Low number of births

Yukon only has approximately 400 births a year – the lowest number of annual births of any Canadian jurisdiction. For example, Northwest Territories has an average of 670 births per year, and Nunavut averages 880 births per year. Approximately 80 of the births in Yukon every year involve residents of Yukon communities travelling to Whitehorse to give birth. In 2017, figures identified 18 from Dawson City and 15 from Watson Lake.

This poses several challenges – particularly when it comes to ensuring both physicians and midwives working in Yukon can meet their minimum practice requirements.

Challenge – Centralized obstetrical services in Whitehorse

Our territory's current healthcare system is set up for Yukoners to deliver in Whitehorse. The only obstetrics unit is at Whitehorse General Hospital. While Dawson City and Watson Lake each have hospitals, they are not currently equipped for labour and delivery, including operating room facilities and anesthesia.

There are 13 doctors who specialize in obstetrics, plus two OB/Gyns. All but one of these physicians are based in Whitehorse. This effectively means that Yukon's healthcare system currently does not have the capacity to deal with obstetric emergencies in communities.

Challenge – Emergency services

The staff at Whitehorse General Hospital that would be required in a birthing emergency are not on duty

24/7. As such, additional time needs to get built into emergency planning for on-call medical staff to respond to an emergency situation. As a result, higher levels of caution are typically used in Yukon compared to larger centres.

Challenge – Remote communities and winter weather

The distance and uncertainties of weather add time and risk in the event of evacuation needs, also increasing the level of caution that is typically employed in Yukon.

Proposed initial approach

The Government of Yukon has committed to regulating, funding and implementing midwifery, with a current target of Fall 2019 for initial implementation. Given Yukon's unique context, we are considering a gradual approach to incorporating midwifery into the healthcare system.

Our current plan is to initially introduce regulated midwifery – pre- and post-natal services and midwife-attended births – as an option in Whitehorse, where processes and emergency services that support pregnancies and birth are already in place. We are also considering introducing some regulated pre- and post-natal midwifery services in other communities. Over the next several months, we will also be exploring ways to support similar services in Dawson City and Watson Lake.

Stakeholder input to date

The Government of Yukon has consulted on midwifery in the past. Input we have received included comments on the funding of midwives, establishing standards for midwives, the care options available, and how midwives will work with other health professionals and within Yukon's healthcare system.

The Midwifery Advisory Committee was formed in October 2017 to gather input from Yukon's health professionals on bringing regulated midwifery into Yukon's healthcare system. The committee has met over 25 times on a range of mostly technical topics. A summary of the topics that were discussed can be accessed here: <https://yukon.ca/en/midwifery-advisory-committee-executive-summary-of-discussions>.