



**Submission to the House of Commons Standing
Committee on Health
Study on Child Health**

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Introduction

What is Birthwork?

Birthworkers, more commonly known as Doulas, work with individuals to provide full-circle support throughout the reproductive journey. Birth workers are unlike nurses, obstetricians, or midwives as they do not offer medical or obstetrical care. Birthworkers practice holistically by providing physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and informational support for the pregnant person and their family.

There have always been people in the community who assisted with reproductive care. Specifically, Indigenous birthing people have traditionally delivered their babies at home surrounded by local birth attendants (birth keepers, grandmothers, aunties, and knowledge keepers) and family. Knowledge was transmitted intergenerationally and included logistics of birthing, as well as traditional medicines. Birthworkers extend the role of traditional birth attendants by connecting birthing people to social support, maintaining boundaries within the medical birthing experience, and supporting Indigenous birthing people to create a positive experience for themselves.

Birthworkers also advocate for the needs of the pregnant person and their family to ensure their voices are heard, and birth preferences are respected. Birthworkers are companions throughout the entire reproductive journey and provide continuous support during pregnancy, birth, infant or pregnancy loss and the postpartum transition. Birthworkers practice the foundational principles of respect, advocacy, and compassion to support pregnant people and their families to have empowering experiences, as they define.

About the Northern Birthwork Collective

The Northern Birthwork Collective (NBC) is a collaborative effort based in the Northwest Territories (NWT) to provide cost-supported programming and services for all stages of the reproductive journey, including conception, pregnancy, birth, postpartum, miscarriage, loss, abortion, and parenting. In addition, we work to provide continuous education to members of our



community and grow a territory-wide network of birthworkers who can provide collective care that is grounded in our values. We acknowledge that colonization has greatly impacted our bodies and traditions and believe that revitalizing traditional knowledge is a crucial step in our collective healing.

NBC primarily works with birthworkers in Yellowknife and a few providers in Fort Smith, Fort Macpherson, and Hay River. Most of our birthworkers work at a limited capacity and availability. However, these birthworkers are instrumental in helping those who are being evacuated from their home communities to deliver in Yellowknife. Additionally, NBC prioritizes providing cost-supported services to those who identify as Indigenous, Black, racialized, or immigrants.

We hope to normalize birthwork support so that anyone who needs or wants extra support navigating their reproductive care can access it. Furthermore, we are dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of birthwork as a vital component of wellbeing for pregnant and birthing persons, children, families, and communities.

Current Situation

Canada's Birth Evacuation Policy

The health and wellbeing of children are largely influenced by the circumstances and environments into which they are born. Unfortunately, for many in Canada's North, many births occur away from home in unfamiliar communities – away from family, cultural influence, and support networks. This is largely due to Canada's longstanding Birth Evacuation Policy.¹

Since 1892, birthing persons who live on reserve or in remote communities have been forced to give birth in urban medical centres. While Canada stated that this policy aimed to reduce infant mortality among Indigenous birthing persons, it has undermined longstanding Indigenous birthing practices and traditions.

¹ Parenteau, M. (2022, February 17). *Understanding Canada's evacuation for birth policy*. The Northern Birthwork Collective. Retrieved June 10, 2022, from <https://www.northernbirthwork.com/blog/birthevacuationpolicy>



According to the 2009 Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey,² 25 per cent of birthing persons travelled to another city to give birth. In addition, 2.5 per cent of all birthing persons travelled over 100 kilometers to give birth, the proportion of which is much higher among individuals from the territories than in the provinces. Hospitals in the Northwest Territories have experienced shutdowns of their obstetrics units due to insufficient staffing levels. As a result, many birthing people experiencing urgent delivery challenges are transported via air ambulance to nearby urban centres, such as Edmonton, to give birth. These experiences can be traumatizing for both the birthing person and the child.

The Birth Evacuation Policy remains a tool of ongoing colonization. Furthermore, birth evacuation leaves the birthing person at risk of birthing-related complications. During the weeks leading up to the onset of labour, the birthing person waits in a hotel room or boarding home where they often feel isolated, have trouble navigating the healthcare system, may have difficulty communicating due to language differences, may experience a lack of access to culturally appropriate foods or enough nutritious food to eat to maintain a healthy pregnancy. For Indigenous birthing persons, racism remains a pressing issue within the health system and has been shown to contribute to poor health outcomes. Removing social, emotional, spiritual, and physical support during this significant life event increases anxiety and stress but also increases adverse birth outcomes. Birth Evacuation increases the risks of preterm labour, impacts fetal neurodevelopment, decreases rates of breast/chestfeeding, and affects relationships and family bonding.

Access to Birthworkers in the North

Birthwork is not currently a regulated profession, nor is it well-known in the North. The lack of access to birthworkers leaves birthing persons with few options for giving birth in their home communities, which perpetuates birth evacuations and their associated harms. The Northern Birthwork Collective has a strategic priority to increase awareness around birthwork and its benefits, increase the number of birthworkers across the NWT, and provide cost-supported care to Northern pregnant and birthing people.

² Public Health Agency of Canada. (2009). *What Mothers Say: The Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey*. Ottawa, ON. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/migration/phac-aspc/rhs-ssg/pdf/survey-eng.pdf>



The Role of Birthworkers in Child Health and Wellbeing

As previously mentioned, birth evacuations put birthing persons at risk of labour-related complications. By facilitating birthing in or closer to one's home community, birthing persons will suffer far less distress and isolation, which dramatically reduces the risk of preterm labour and other associated complications. Birthworkers can also provide culturally relevant support to the birthing person to promote the health and wellbeing of the child. This may include the promotion of breast/chest feeding and perinatal nutrition. This is particularly important for northern communities, where food insecurity is a pressing issue. Unfortunately, birth evacuations often result in birthing persons delivering in urban centres, where these issues are not top of mind for healthcare providers and are thus not thoroughly considered during pre- and perinatal care for the birthing person.

Furthermore, birthworkers are critically important in promoting bonding between families. In Indigenous contexts, birthworkers often assume the role of the aunty, a critical component of many traditional Indigenous family structures and ways of birthing. Strengthening familial bonds is important in healing intergenerational traumas inflicted by colonial policies. This may have subsequent impacts on reducing the overrepresentation of Indigenous children apprehended by child and family services.³ This is particularly important in the NWT, where in 2019–20, 98 percent of children and youth in care were Indigenous, even though only 54 per cent of children in the NWT are Indigenous.

Culture is a social determinant of health,⁴ as recognized by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Indigenous birthwork is directly tied to cultural revitalization and decolonization. Cultural connection demonstrably improves health outcomes for parents, children, and entire family units. Cultural revitalization improves parents' confidence to provide for their children, particularly amongst those who have suffered intergenerational traumas inflicted by colonial

³ *Indigenous doulas help keep families together in Winnipeg*. McConnell Foundation. (2018, May 25). Retrieved June 10, 2022, from <https://mcconnellfoundation.ca/indigenous-doulas-help-keep-families-together-in-winnipeg/>

⁴ Public Health Agency of Canada. (n.d.). *Government of Canada*. Social determinants of health and health inequalities. Retrieved June 10, 2022, from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health.html>



policies such as Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and forced sterilization of Indigenous women and girls. This, in turn, leads to better long-term health outcomes for children.

Conclusion

Canada's ongoing policy of birth evacuations is a continuation of Canada's colonial legacy, particularly over the bodies of Indigenous birthing persons. Removing birthing persons from their home communities undermines important social and cultural fabrics, which can have lasting impacts on family structures. Furthermore, removing birthing persons from the comfort of their home communities to give birth in foreign, often hostile environments can increase the risk of pregnancy- and birth-related complications. This places the health of both the birthing person and the child at risk.

We call on Parliament to study Canada's birth evacuation policy and its impact on birthing persons, children, and communities. Furthermore, we urge the federal government to work with their provincial and territorial counterparts to bring birthing back to the community level by supporting the work of birthworkers, particularly in the North.

The Northern Birthwork Collective is grateful for the opportunity to participate and is happy to assist the Committee by providing additional information its members may need.