

Eva Aariak stresses early childhood education, addictions treatment, mental health ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Although outgoing Nunavut premier Eva Aariak will not seek another term as head of the Nunavut government, she's setting her sights on becoming the first MLA to represent the new riding of Iqaluit-Tasiluk.

Aariak, 58, swept to victory in the October 2008 election as a newcomer to territorial politics, taking more 60 per cent of the vote in Iqaluit East.

She now she says her five years of subsequent experience will come into play during this election.

"When I first got in, I was very new. Although I knew very well the functioning of the government and I was a new MLA, I was learning my role," Aariak told Nunatsiaq News.

"This time around, if I am elected I will go in with more background in the field that I wanted to be elected in," Aariak said.

Aariak said Nunavut "still has many challenges" but lists education, health and infrastructure as the main issues in her campaign platform.

She said early childhood education and development is one issue that is constantly brought up by her constituents.

"More and more I realize that there's so much investment to be made with our children," Aariak said.

And investments in early childhood development pay off in the future as people gain "better opportunities to be contributing members of society," she said.

"There's more opportunities for their employment, [and] less jail time. You know, all these things are very important to have to make sure the child has a great start in life."

Reducing licencing barriers for home child care as well as including training opportunities for childcare advisors are ideas that need to be addressed, Aariak said.

And, as the last education minister, Aariak "absolutely" wants a review of the education act in the next assembly.

Aariak said she "was a placeholder per se" in the education portfolio because she received it as part of a cabinet shuffle in 2011.

But Aariak "really learned the issues around education" and is calling for more assessments in the education department.

Mental health is another issue that she says constituents have brought up with her.

"Establishing an addictions treatment centre is important. And on top of that I hear so much about after care - follow up care, after care programs," Aariak said.

"We've had people that have attended treatment centres. And then when they go back to their home communities there is really no system in place to ensure that the support that they need is continuous.

"A lot of the times they will just go back to where they started," she said.

Aariak is calling for more trained mental health workers within the territory, as well as mobile outreach teams who can help people in their communities, which she hopes becomes "another very good community initiative."

Aariak said she will advocate for a deep water port at Iqaluit as well as a protected small craft harbour, saying "some harvesters have to wait an hour to offload their catch" and that the breakwater alone is "not enough now."

And a Nunavut heritage centre needs to be built in Iqaluit to offset costs paid to Yellowknife and Ottawa to preserve important artifacts.

"I find our young people are just hungry for our culture. And support for performing arts centre is something I'm hearing," Aariak said.

Aariak said she is not ruling out a position in the cabinet minister, but said she wants to focus on getting elected in Tasiluk first.

The other candidates in Tasiluk are: Travis Cooper, George Hickes, Gideonie Joamie and Patterk Netser.

Aariak has lived in Iqaluit for 27 years. During that time she worked as a reporter at CBC, served as Nunavut's first languages commissioner and chaired the Baffin Regional Chamber of Commerce.

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Region: Nunavut ^[2]

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