

MEMBER STATEMENT—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

HOMELESSNESS AND THE HOUSING FIRST PROGRAM

February 18, 2016

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker when I was campaigning for the position I now hold, voters told me more about homelessness than any other issue. Their concern is for people who are visibly homeless. People who sleep in tents around this building, stairwells, bank foyers, and emergency shelters at night and who wander the streets by day. This is a group of people who need homes.

There is some debate about how many people are homeless in Yellowknife today. The last time the emergency shelters publicly reported on the number of unique visitors they had, the number was 936. That was in 2008. This number included men, women, youth, and families. Most stayed in shelters for less than a month, but some stayed year-round.

What has changed in the last eight years? There is a new emergency shelter for youth, and there is transitional housing for women. Yet I believe, and frontline staff tell me, that the number of homeless people in Yellowknife continues to increase. They are all ages. They come from communities around the NWT. Some of them are homeless because of relationships that broke up, poverty, and bad luck, while others may also have addictions and mental health issues that make them hard to house.

This population draws huge emergency response resources from government. Ambulances pick them up and take them to hospital with alarming frequency. The RCMP pick them up for criminal activity, and they end up in court and sometimes in jail. This group is small relative to the whole population of the downtown, but they are disproportionate users of government services. This is a lose-lose situation.

Homeless people remain without homes and stability. Government services are provided frequently and with no long-term benefit. It is a cycle that just repeats and repeats.

There is a better way. Cities across the country have implemented a solution called Housing First. All the players come to the table: government, business, front-line staff, advocates, and even the homeless people themselves. Together, they create an organization that finds and manages housing units and then invites homeless people to live in them. This is the important part. Front-line staff provide a range of supports to people who are newly housed, including administering medications, troubleshooting problems as they come up, and mentoring people who need some additional skills to be successful as tenants.

This explanation is simplistic, but the solution is simple because it provides a direct response to a well-documented problem. The good news is that the community advisory board on homelessness in Yellowknife is developing a plan to implement Housing First. There is a group of dedicated people who want to make this program work. The

challenge is that the money available for this program is inadequate for the number of clients who need it.

I will have questions today for the minister responsible for housing about how the territorial government can assist in setting up Housing First in Yellowknife. It is time for the government to make an investment in ending homelessness so that healing can begin.