

MEMBER STATEMENT—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC GUARDIAN

June 23, 2016

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, an application to the Office of the Public Guardian is the last resort for people who don't have the capacity to make decisions about their own health and wellbeing because of disability or disease. The Public Guardian provides this vital service of monitoring the care and wellbeing of its wards. Most of us will never have to call on the Public Guardian, but young adults who have aged out of permanent foster care, people with mental illness or intellectual disabilities, and older adults with Alzheimer's or dementia are potential candidates for guardianship.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the NWT Public Guardian's office is swamped. There are 50 applications pending, and the waiting time is a year. To make an order of guardianship, an assessment by a psychologist or psychiatrist is needed to establish the applicant's capacity. Once complete, the applicant goes to court for a guardianship order. The Public Guardian contracts out the assessment, but there is a shortage of health professionals to complete them.

The first thing we must do is better resource the Office of the Public Guardian. They need to be able to contract psychologists who can clear up the backlog. The people waiting are vulnerable. A year is too long to wait for someone who has no one to help them make life-changing decisions. A second problem after wait lists is the size of the case load. The Public Guardian and her assistant now have 68 people on their case load, and that number will become bigger once the 50 pending applications have been sorted out.

The Public Guardian's job is to monitor the care and wellbeing of her clients. How much monitoring can she do with such a large case load? And how long does it take to get a response when one of her clients has a health crisis: an accident or a new diagnosis? This is not motor vehicle licensing, Mr. Speaker, where people can take a number.

In the meantime, there's an ounce of prevention any of us can take to assist those who might care for us when we are unable to do so, ourselves, and that is to create a power of attorney and have it signed and ready to go. It will set out who your decision maker is so that you don't need to go through the Public Guardian's office. This document can then be updated as needed.

Taking care of vulnerable people is at the core of government services to residents. These services need to be delivered in a professional, timely manner. It's time for GNWT to better resource the Office of the Public Guardian so they are part of the solution rather than the problem. I'll have questions for the Minister of Health and Social Services.