

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 260-18(2): OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC GUARDIAN

June 23, 2016

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. What can the Minister do now with discretionary reserves and funds to hire more resources to clear the backlog of applications to the Public Guardian? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Health and Social Services.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Member has indicated, the current wait list for the Public Guardian is unacceptable in all ways, and I have already directed the Department of Health and Social Services to review the business processes to make sure that the business processes make sense and we're getting the most efficiencies and utilizing our money in the best way. As part of this business process review, I have asked them to analyze how applications flow, assessments, referrals, and also do some trend analysis on the increased demand that we're having on the Public Guardian Office. This review won't be done until the end of the calendar year and we do have a significant backlog at this point in time, so the department is actually looking to do some in-house training to train more assessors, whether they are in the Northwest Territories or outside the Northwest Territories, so that we can move on the number of assessments that need to be done so that we can start reducing that list while this review is taking place. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that answer. He referred to the assessor, and my question is whether that assessor training will happen in this fiscal year and whether there are intake resources at the regional health authority level for the Public Guardian.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Under the Act, any person assigned the responsibility to prepare such a report by the Public Guardian can become an assessor. This could be a nurse, it could be a psychiatrist, it could be medical practitioners, it could also be clinical social workers. So these are individuals that exist across the Northwest Territories, and we're looking at training people across the Northwest Territories to be assessors as one of our initial steps. But also we are looking at individuals outside the Northwest Territories, so it's both.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that answer. So if I'm one of the 50 people who is now waiting for the Public Guardian to adjudicate my application, how much longer should I expect to wait?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: It's 72 outstanding referrals, actually. The number continues to climb. There are a number of reasons that accessing the applications can take longer than would be desirable. Some of the challenges that we face are actually tracking down some of the individuals who have actually filed the applications. It's a transient territory; people are moving around. We've also have our challenge with the number of assessors, which we are addressing currently. There are individual situations where we have found members that are disputing who should actually be the public guardian or the private guardian. So there are multiple reasons why some of these applications take a long time. We are looking to expedite the process and clear off as much of this backlog as we can, but there are some additional challenges far outside just the number of assessors we have. I can't give a definitive time, because every application is unique and every application will take a different amount of time depending on the challenges faced.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral Questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. As I said in my Member's statement, clearing the backlog will also result in a greater case load for the current Public Guardian staff, which is, as I understand it, one person and one assistant, which is beyond the capacity of the resources currently allocated. So I would like to hear the Minister's plan to not only clear up the backlog but to better staff the Public Guardian's office. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: As the Member indicated, there are currently 68 individuals in the Northwest Territories under a public guardianship, and there are about 80 individuals that are under private guardianship that had to go through the full assessment process. The Member is right; the numbers are increasing, with the 72 referrals in front of us that will likely result in some additional individuals requiring either public or private guardianship.

The first step that we're taking, Mr. Speaker, is doing the review of the program to make sure that it's efficient, that it's meeting the needs, what changes we can make with existing resources. From there, we will be able to clearly assess future demand and ongoing demand, which may require some additional investment in this area, additional positions. I won't commit to adding positions at this point in time. We have to finish the assessment to determine what the true workload in that unit is, and whether or not additional positions are required. But, given the demand, it may be necessary to add some positions. We'll know by the end of the calendar year. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.