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MLA urges health department to get online

Julie Green calls on government to engage youth via social media

John McFadden
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SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

A Yellowknife MLA has suggested the Department of Health and Social Services is missing the mark when it comes to dealing with young people who are suffering with mental-health issues.

Julie Green said the department should be finding ways to reach out to young people in crisis and provide information on where to get help through social media. Her comments came after the release of a draft of the territorial government's Child and Youth Mental Wellness Action Plan to the Standing Committee on Social Development late last month.

"There is not a lot in this report (on digital technology)," she said. "This generation is a generation that's grown up with smartphones. They obtain a lot of information through apps and through the internet."

Green suggested it should be made clear to young people which sites are credible and legitimate and which ones aren't. She also wants to know what initiatives the government is using to reach out to youth via social media.

Debbie DeLancey, deputy minister of Health and Social Services, agreed with Green in theory.

"Posters just don't cut it," she said. "(Social media and the internet) is something we've looked at."

DeLancey added the department has a relationship with Kids Help Phone, which offers telephone counselling and online chat services. As well, she said, Northwestel and Bell offered funding to the territorial government for youth mental-health initiatives.

"They approached us over a year ago. At that point we said we're developing an action plan. We don't want a one-off," she explained. "Staff are now in discussions with Bell."



Health and Social Services Minister Glen Abernethy listens as his deputy minister Debbie DeLancey addresses the Standing Committee on Social Development at the legislative Assembly on Aug. 30. On DeLancey's right is Patricia Kyle, assistant deputy minister for families and communities. - John McFadden/NNSL photo



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Perhaps they can join us in choosing one or two key actions and lever some funding here."

The new action plan lays out objectives which include improving mental-health literacy among young people and their families. According to Patricia Kyle, assistant deputy minister for families and communities, the plan was put together after a retreat this summer at Blachford Lake Lodge involving some 130 young people from across the territory. At the retreat, youth gave feedback on how they think the government can best tackle mental-health issues in the North. It was facilitated by Foxy, (Fostering Open eXpression Among Youth) and Smash, (Strength, Masculinities and Sexual Health).

The final five-year plan is to be tabled in the legislative assembly during the upcoming fall session.



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