

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 179-18(3): OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC GUARDIAN STAFFING CONCERNS

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. As I said in my statement, the caseload for the Public Guardian is completely unmanageable because of the number of public and private guardianship orders she needs to supervise. My question for the Minister is: when does the Minister plan to increase the number of staff who work directly with clients? Mahsi.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Member did bring this to my attention early in the life of this Assembly. As a result, I did order a review to be done. There were 16 recommendations that came out of that review. Many of them required us to do things like providing some additional training supports. It did talk about increasing the staff. One of the things we wanted to do before we actually moved forward with a request for additional financial resources is to make sure we are spending our money wisely.

We have developed new procedures manuals. We have developed different training available to our people. We have gone out and recruited some psychiatrists and psychologists who can help us with specialized capacity assessments. Those things are done. We are strengthening the office. We are building a business case so we can move forward through the next round of business planning to seek funds to provide the financial resources we need for that unit. I feel that, now that this work is done, we are in a good place to build that business case to seek support. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I did give the Minister credit for speeding up the assessment process, but we are talking now about another year-long delay before this 150-person caseload is going to be addressed by more staff. That is entirely unacceptable. This office needs to be re-staffed now. I would like to see this staffing adjustment made in a supplementary appropriation during this sitting. Can the Minister make that commitment?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: The Member is aware that we have processes that we utilize in this Assembly, including business planning, and that we have to have solid business cases if we are going to pursue or ask the Department of Finance and the FMB for additional resources. Currently, until we build that particular case, we are utilizing existing resources from the Department of Health and Social Services. We have identified staff to go and help the office meet their demand and provide work they are doing. All of this is helping us build a business case. We will be submitting the business case during the business planning process. Hopefully, we will see an expansion in that office.

MS. GREEN: It is my understanding that the additional staff relieve the Public Guardian when she is unavailable because of training or annual leave. It is not my understanding that there is any more than one social worker working in that office at any given time. Can the Minister please confirm that?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: We are providing additional resources by way of human resources to assist that staff person when they are away on training and other things so that we don't fall behind further. The number of active files has decreased over the years. We are making improvements. The assessments are done by different individuals, psychiatrists and psychologists who we have contracted with. That has really helped us bring down the number. Those relationships will continue.

We will continue to bring our case file down. We will continue to provide the services. We are building the business case. We are going to put forward a submission once we have all the evidence we need to justify that, recognizing that all business cases have to compete against everything else in the Government of the Northwest Territories, we need to make sure we do the work right so we have that solid case.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we are talking about the most vulnerable people in our society. They have intellectual disabilities. They have dementia. They have FAS and its effects. They need to have a relationship with the Public Guardian so that she can make effective decisions on their behalf. There are 77 public guardianship orders in place now. That means there is no family backup. There is nobody else to assist these people in making important decisions about their day-to-day life, and their health in particular. I can't understand why the Minister is not out in front of this and providing the additional staff immediately. My question is: will he reconsider? Mahsi.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: The Member did bring this to my attention, and I directed the department to do the work. They did the work. We are rewriting the policies and procedures manuals, fixing the unit itself so that it can get best value for money and so that the staff are adequately resourced to provide the services that they want. There are 79 public guardianships. There are 85 private guardianships. There is a caseload of new applications.

We are working on these, trying to reduce those numbers to provide the support we need to the residents. I am confident that we are building the case we need to seek additional resources. In the meantime, we will fund within and provide the support centre needed to make sure that work is getting done. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.