

JULIE GREEN—MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE
Supplementary Health Benefits Changes
Committee of the Whole—2018-2019 Operating Budget Review
Dept. of Health and Social Services—March 1, 2018

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, during the business plan process, we talked about how the department was negotiating with Health Canada around the new terms and conditions for the NIHB agreement, and I am wondering if the Minister could update us on the status of those negotiations? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you, Ms. Green. Minister.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Work continues in this area. I am not participating in negotiations, so I would like to go to the deputy minister for some detail. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Mr. Cooper.

MR. COOPER: Yes, we have been having ongoing discussions with the federal government around NIHB. We supported and co-hosted a round table before Christmas that looked at improvements, the administration of the program that we may have to undertake together, and I know that it was very well-received. We had leaders from all over the NWT come together and provide this feedback, and learn about how the program operates.

With the report out of that work which is going to help us improve the program delivery, we are moving to finalize some of our work on any changes that might be coming in NIHB, and we expect to be in a position very shortly to be able to announce what direction that's taking.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the answer from the deputy and look forward to the decision. Did these negotiations also include adjustments to the formulary? I note the deputy talked about service delivery, but are they also about the formulary? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Mr. Cooper.

MR. COOPER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We don't as much negotiate the formulary as provide input, sort of trend data that helps inform the NIHB in them developing the formulary, so it's not really a matter of negotiation. It is their formulary. We run the program on their behalf, or we administer the program on their behalf. Data that we gather in terms of both utilization and also demand for certain drugs and so on that are in demand can help the program determine what should go on the formulary next, but I think, if I'm not mistaken, I believe the NIHB are actually aligned with the Ontario formulary, so the real work on that list takes place out of Ottawa and in line with the Ontario approach.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister Abernethy.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It is more of an encouragement than a negotiation when it comes to the actual formulary. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, in the last few weeks I have had occasion to talk to the Health Minister about conditions that are not covered under extended health benefits. In one case, Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS; and in the other case, I addressed here in the House, which was the provision of family planning aides and medical pregnancy termination. The Minister has said that there is a review going on here, but I don't think we have very many specifics about the plan going forward with the review of the supplementary health benefits, so I would appreciate some detail on that now. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, there is no question that there is pressure on the extended health benefit and supplementary health benefit programs that we provide here in the Northwest Territories, and there is the gap that has been identified in the low-income families that do not have insurance. Currently, what we are doing with the first part of this work is we are out doing cross-jurisdictional analysis and research to see what other jurisdictions are doing and how they're working to cover some of those groups that may or may not be covered, trying to get a good sense of what's out there, doing a review of our programs, where the challenges are. From there, we intend to develop a discussion paper that we can make available to the public to begin the conversation here in the Northwest Territories on where we need to go, what needs to be done. We will be seeking recommendations, input from people across the Northwest Territories, and obviously MLAs and committee as well, to help inform the direction we need to take and how we need to get there, recognizing all the challenges that face us. From there, we will work together to determine next steps. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I note that some of this work like the cross-jurisdictional scan was, I think, under way during the business plan review in November. I am wondering if the Minister can be any more specific about when all that information is going to be fed into the discussion paper, and what the timing is for putting the discussion paper out? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you, Ms. Green. Minister.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, we are hoping to have a document prepared to have discussion with committee in the next three or four months; hopefully, three months. From there, we will have a discussion with committee on how to proceed. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, a number of years ago, the Health Minister of the day attempted to change the supplementary health benefit program

without very much success. How will the Minister do differently than was done at that time? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, when that occurred, that review occurred, I was sitting beside where the MLA for Yellowknife North is currently sitting, and it was my opinion of the day that one of the problems was, when that proposal was brought forward, it was brought forward as a solution without doing the upfront work. They didn't engage potentially affected stakeholders. They didn't go out and talk and have those discussions throughout the Northwest Territories, seeking ideas, input on how to resolve the problem. A couple of problems: it's very expensive, is one problem. The other problem is that we have a gap. There are low-income families without insurance that aren't covered. Recognizing our challenges, how do we address those problems, and we need to have that conversation. We don't need to go out and say: we are going to do X. That's the big difference of what we're doing this time, is we are going to pull together the data, identify the problems, go out and have conversations, talk to people, seek meaningful input on how to address those problems, and work together on solutions. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that response. At the end of the day, if and when a solution is found, does it require legislative change? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, honestly, I can't say. That would be presuming a solution. I don't think we have reached that conclusion. I think we need to do the work. Conceivably, yes, but let's do the work and figure out what we can do to address our challenges and develop a plan. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I will make this my last question. Given the timing of where we are vis-a-vis the 2019 election, does the Minister anticipate completing this work through to public engagement and identifying solutions prior to the next election? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister. Thirty seconds.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That is my plan. Thank you.