

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 445-18(3): CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

October 25, 2018

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. When he was a member of the Social Programs Standing Committee, he and his colleagues made 70 recommendations on the Child and Family Services Act. The committee report says: "We also recognize that some of our most important recommendations will require investment. The committee believes very strongly that the future of the NWT children and families warrants this investment." That was nine years ago. What happened to those recommendations? Mahsi.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'm actually quite proud of the work that we did on the 16th Assembly on that report. Tom Beaulieu, the Member for Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh was the chair of that committee.

When I became the Minister of Health and Social Services five years ago, not seven as the Member has indicated, one of the first questions I asked is: where are we in implementing the recommendations from the standing committee? I was deeply saddened to realize that no progress had been made on any of the recommendations.

At that time, I made it a priority for the department to begin moving on those recommendations, moving forward on all those recommendations, which is where we came up with Building Stronger Families, which in retrospect is consistent with all the recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation respecting children in care. It is a prevention-based system as opposed to an apprehension-based system.

Over the last number of years, the last three-and-a-half, four years, we have made significant changes to legislation as per the recommendations in both the Auditor General's report, as well as the report from standing committee. We have set up changes on the information systems that we heard clearly from our staff that our CFI system was garbage and was not functional and not useful. We have brought in the Matrix system. We made significant legislative changes to include the ability for youth beyond the age of 18 to receive services. We have resources. We have put money into the systems that we've put in place.

I anticipate the Member's question is going to the fact that we haven't increased our staffing complement, and the Member is 100 per cent right. The audit was clear. In my opinion, we have done the right things with respect to the system we put in place, but we have failed to adequately resource. There's no question. To that end, I will be proposing an increase in positions in the next business-planning cycle to address the most underserved areas. The Member has identified some of them in her statement. In addition, we are going to do more analysis on whether or not we have the right types of positions in there for a longer term ask, which will be necessary in order to meet the needs of children and families in the Northwest Territories.

The findings of the audit were incredibly disappointing and of significant concern to me and to others. We are committed to making the improvement, utilizing Building Stronger Families, working with our staff, and properly resourcing these services.

MS. GREEN: The Minister can't have it both ways. He can't say that he's doing everything possible to help Child and Family Services, and then at the same time acknowledge that the Auditor General has again come up with another 11 recommendations that address children in jeopardy. These are not lightweight issues. They are the most, as my colleague from Hay River North said, "the most vulnerable people in our society." Many of these recommendations have been repeated. Why are we waiting another four years for the Minister to do what he already said he would do, to the Auditor General, in 2014?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: I'm not arguing with the Member. I've acknowledged that we need to do better. We need to do more. I do encourage the Member to read the Auditor General's previous report. It was a far broader audit and actually included significant recommendations to actually improve accountability and to improve the system. They didn't audit those portions of the system this time, and I can say that we have done those foundational pieces. That's where a lot of our attention was put. We did those while at the same time expecting our employees at the front line to evolve but also continue to providing services. Clearly, we spread them too thin. There's no question.

Nowhere have I said we're planning to make these changes in four years. That's the Member's statement. We're planning in the next two years to bring about profound changes in the delivery of Building Stronger Families that will meet the needs of our residents. There will always be risk. Our job is to mitigate and reduce risk as much as possible, and we are committed to doing that, and we have already started. Our internal audit has shown many of the same things as the Auditor General's report. We've been working on making these improvements over the last number of months. We can actually show some of those improvements now, and there will be things rolling out in the next couple of months, as well over the next two years, to bring about those changes that the Member and all Members and residents of the Northwest Territories want. We're committed to getting it right.

MS. GREEN: I think there's a misunderstanding here. The Minister knew about these problems in 2009. He knew about them in 2014. He's been reminded about them this week. My question is: when is the Minister going to show leadership on this issue? It is he who fights for the budget and argues over the spending priorities. Why, over all these years, has he been unable to make the business case to adequately finance Child and Family Services?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: The system that existed before was purely an apprehension-based system that did not actually focus on building families or supporting the residents of the Northwest Territories. If a child was at risk, they were taken. That is not what the residents of the Northwest Territories told us they wanted. They wanted a system that supported families and help build families. That's what we put in place.

Again, we acknowledge that we did not necessarily get it right as far as roll-out. We spread our staff too thin. We have invested millions of dollars in this change initiative to

bring in the tools that our employees told us they must and need to have in order to do the work of Child and Family Services, which includes bringing in the system. The Member's assertion that nothing was invested in here is completely unfounded. Where we did not nail it, where we did not get it right, was providing our staff with the available resources. We are struggling in two ways. We have massive turnover, which is incredibly frustrating. This is a very high-burnout profession, and our employees are feeling the pressure of being spread too thin. We are working with them to address that.

I've already indicated we are intending to increase the number of positions through the next budget cycle. We have put in a proposal to do that, which is going to come to this House for all Members to see. They can see the actions in front of them. They know what's coming, and we are prepared to invest more. We are prepared to get it right.

MR. SPEAKER: Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I don't have a firm grip on the timeline in which these changes are going to take place. What we've heard, in 2014 we heard it, in 2009 we heard it, in the year 2000, from the Child Welfare League is that these changes need to be made urgently. Children's lives are impacted by the decisions that are being made by the Minister and his officials. Given the urgency that is repeated yet again, how is the Minister going to ensure that, this time, the needs of children are going to be met? Mahsi.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: The Member is going to have an opportunity, as will all Members, to sit down with the department staff and go through the action plan that we are proposing.

Many of the actions have already begun. When I saw the results of our own internal audit, one of my directions to the department was to begin anticipatory hiring and put in a more aggressive recruitment campaign to get out and get as many people into the pipe as possible, start getting these people in and trained up, so that they can provide these services, to the point where we are prepared to double-fill some positions until such a time as new positions can be established. We know there is going to be turnover. We want to mitigate the harm caused by the revolving door of professionals.

Having said that, these professionals are amazing. They are doing important work. They are doing it in a very difficult time of change. I have talked to many of the social workers, and I haven't felt opposition to Building Stronger Families, but I have felt frustration and lack of resources.

I agree with the Member. We are doing it. We are taking action. On December 12th, when the committee meets with the deputy, as well as the auditors, they are going to see the plan. I am looking for their input as well, Mr. Speaker. This is a territorial issue. This is an Assembly issue. We are going to get it right. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.