

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 455-18(3): RESOURCES FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

October 25, 2018

MS. GREEN: Masi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. As I said in my statement yesterday on the Auditor General's report on Child and Family Services, the lack of staff and resources is a theme that runs through that report. This lack of resources is jeopardizing the safety of children and care. The Minister has committed to hiring more staff. Will he work with the Finance Minister to bring forward a supplementary appropriation before the end of this sitting? Mahsi.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we have gone through the business planning process. We are proposing the increase of positions in this area. In the meantime, I have directed the department to begin staffing in anticipation of the passage of those positions so that we can hit the ground running today to start filling those positions. We have tools and mechanisms available to us, double filling positions, anticipatory hiring, eligibility list. We are doing that work now. I will have a discussion with the Member, I'm happy to do that, about whether or not we can expedite that given the crisis that is in front of us.

As a note, in response to our internal audit that was completed in May, we have actually moved forward with re-profiling some positions and the establishment of positions within the authority. For instance, we have established seven foster-parent coordinator positions, and we have filled four of them already. We have already started taking action, based on our audit, and our audit was reconfirmed by the Auditor General. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that response. Mr. Speaker, it's hard to recruit and retain social workers because the work is so grueling. I'm not surprised that there are many vacant positions. What I would like to know from the Minister is what he is doing to strengthen the recruitment and retention of social workers.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Mr. Speaker, I have actually been having conversations with some of our front-line staff to try to get a determination as to some of the frustrations they feel. Part of the frustration they feel is that, with the implementation of Building Stronger Families, they were asked to do an awful lot, both provide their duties and services they did prior to implementation but also learn and test an entire new system. It has made them a little thin. They have said they want more training. They have said they want better contact and involvement in making decisions. They want to be able to know that their voices are heard.

We have actually actioned every one of the issues that they have raised, following up on our May 2017 audit, and we have already started to see some improvements. I had a conversation with a couple of them last week who said they haven't felt this supported

since pre-implementation of Building Stronger Families. They are excited by the direction we are going and excited by the direction we are taking.

MS. GREEN: Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General found, as the Minister has said, that staff is overburdened with administrative work. The Minister's decision to engage in a system-wide accreditation exercise next year is going to increase that burden substantially at a time when the focus needs to be on building relationships with children and families. Will the Minister consider deferring this audit for at least a year?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: This audit isn't an audit of Social Services or Child and Family Services. This is an audit of the entire Health and Social Services system. It is an accreditation, rather, of the entire Health and Social Services system. It needs to be done. We will certainly work closely with the CFS division to make sure that the burden placed on them is as low as possible. We will bring in extra staff if we need to, to help them through this time.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, there was a time when Social Services was a stand-alone department within the GNWT. It is my impression that since the current department was created many years ago, that Child and Family Services has played second fiddle to the health side of the department. I would say that this approach to the accreditation reveals that, as well. Is it time to divide the department so that each segment gets the attention it deserves? Thank you.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: That question has been asked and debated many times in this House. What we have learned over the years is that in order to provide holistic care, we need to make sure that our social services side is working closely and cooperatively with the health and social services side. Moving to a single authority and moving forward with our Cultural Competency Action Plan has given us the opportunity to move in a more client-focused delivery model here in the Northwest Territories, which brings social services staff as well as health practitioners together to do holistic healing.

If we start breaking them up, we will start creating silos, more so than exist today. In the last number of months since May, we have been working incredibly hard to break down the silos that exist within our authority in this particular area. We are already seeing some progress in that area, in the collaboration of working together of both sides of the system. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.