

'We should all be ashamed'

MLA Julie Green leads charge on Social Services Minister Glen Abernethy

by Avery Zingel

Northern News Services

In the legislative assembly yesterday, MLA Julie Green said she "wept" when she read the latest auditor general report.

MLA R.J. Simpson is "terrified" for what the future holds, based on the lack of progress since 2014.

"We should all be ashamed for being a part of a system that treats our most vulnerable this way," said Simpson, who highlighted that 98 per cent of children in care are Indigenous.

"Is this what reconciliation looks like to this government? We need to act, or move aside for those who will," said Simpson.

The NWT's Department of Child and Family Services

is struggling to hire and retain staff, with a vacancy rate that consistently hovers around 25 per cent, officials said following the release of a damning report from the Office of the Auditor General (OAG).

It's the second audit showing systemic failures in the territory's child and family services system, and the report states services have only worsened since the 2014 report.

"After the last audit we lost people. Are we going to lose people after this audit? I sure hope not," said Health and Social Services Minister Glen Abernethy in an Oct. 24 news conference.

The department continues to fill positions, but "people keep leaving," he said.

The department will head up an aggressive hiring approach and look to hire local administrative staff to lift the burden of paperwork from its social workers, said Abernethy.

Following the 2014 audit, the HSSAs "didn't pay enough

attention" to the resources behind complex changes within its department, Abernethy told media Wednesday.

The GNWT's efforts to introduce "complex" changes into an "overburdened system" continue to leave children vulnerable, the report states.

Asked if staff are leaving because the mandate is not being met, Director of Child and Family Services Nathalie Nadeau said there are "a lot of different reasons why people leave."

"Generally in health and social services, there is a higher retention and recruitment issue," said Nadeau, adding this challenge is amplified in small centres.

Workers require good supervision and clinical expertise to directly improve retention, she said.

"It's high stress, very adversarial at times and it links to a lot of stress within their personal life. It's not one reason, it's a series of issues," said Nadeau.

MLA Kieron Testart chairs the standing committee that will review the report and said his committee will pursue "real answers" on the current state of the system, he said.

"At this point, given who the minister is, we're very disappointed to see that the provision of child and family services is worse off now than four years ago when the first audit was done," said Testart.

"We don't have a different minister. It's the same minister who was involved with the original file, [and] as a member of the standing committee on social programs at the time looked into this issue."

"I don't think the progress that the minister is reporting ... is really sufficient," he said.

"It's high stress, very adversarial at times."

Nathalie Nadeau



Avery Zingel/NNSL photo

GNWT directors and the minister responsible at a news conference Oct. 24. From left to right, they are Sue Cullen, chief executive officer of Northwest Territories Health and Social Services, Bruce Cooper, deputy minister of the Department of Health and Social Services Minister Glen Abernethy and Les Harrison, assistant deputy minister of HSS.

"(The minister) can say we're doing something well, but when the auditor general, who spent 7,000 hours on this report, says there are major problems here, I'm always going to rely on the recommendations of the auditor general," said Testart. "[Auditors] have no skin in the game. They're not running for political office."

Asked if he has faith this can be rectified, Testart said shaping up family services is a matter of political will.

'Start investing resources'

"Ministers are fond of saying the best social program is a job. Well, I would say – you look at the failings of the NWT on child and family services – perhaps the best social program is a social program that works. We need to start investing resources," he said.

The 2018 OAG audit shows the department is not keeping in regular required contact with at least 90 per cent of children in care.

Last week, the department tabled its annual director's report, which shows 98 per

cent of children in care are Indigenous, up from 95 per cent in 2008.

"While (the OAG) findings align with what we've seen in our own internal audit work, they are difficult and serve as another reminder that we are not where we need or want or must be," said Abernethy.

The minister has directed the department to take a more "aggressive" approach to recruitment, he said.

In the GNWT it can take months to fill positions. Many new hires come in from jurisdictions that favour apprehension over the GNWT's family-first approach and need to be trained to work in the territory, he said.

"This is a very difficult for individuals and certainly a high stress, high burnout profession ... dealing with individuals who are often seen as taking away children," said Abernethy.

The department needs to determine its staffing needs, he said.

The GNWT doesn't get to change salary rates, but could reach out more to schools

and have constantly live ads and anticipatory hiring, said Abernethy.

"There are shortages across this country of the type of people who can do this work," he said.

Morale and outcomes

There is also a direct relationship between morale and outcomes for children, said Bruce Cooper, deputy minister of the Department of Health and Social Services.

Organizations that ignore their operating culture risk not meeting their mandates, and not all of the authorities staff are trained on their systems and processes, he said.

The department currently has approximately 90 staff at various levels, with 70 staff

appointed as child protection workers, said Nadeau.

The department looks at "extended foster families first in the interest of preserving a family unit," said Nadeau.

Authorities have implemented permanent guardianship agreements – sometimes without criminal background checks and requisite studies, the audit found.

However, guardianship agreements are "recognized before the courts as appropriate solutions for families," said Les Harrison, assistant deputy minister of families and communities in the Department of Health and Social Services.

"People need to be able to trust that things will be different," he said.

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