

JULIE GREEN—MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

MOTION 24-18(3): REVOCATION OF APPOINTMENT OF THE HONOURABLE MEMBER FOR GREAT SLAVE TO THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, when the Auditor General's report on Child and Family Services arrived last week, it ignited a fire that had been smouldering for years. With an average of a thousand—one thousand—children in care at any given time over the last 10 years, almost everyone in the NWT has a connection to the child welfare system, and that includes me. All of them have an opinion of how well it is working or, as the Auditor General told us last week, not working. I welcome the conversations that this report has forced us to have.

Mr. Speaker, it is always worth repeating that the Auditor General reports on whether a department is following its own legislation. It is not a report card; it is not a job evaluation. It is an assessment not of what is going right, but what is going wrong.

Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General concluded that there is a lot going wrong. As I said last week, Child and Family Services is failing children in care; not just failing them, but sometimes putting them at risk of even greater harm than the circumstances that brought them into care in the first place. Investigations into reports of children in unsafe situations are behind. Mandatory interviews with children and parents aren't happening. Homes for children are not screened. Children whose parents are unable to care for them are the most vulnerable people in our society, and too many times they are not getting the care that they need. For me, these findings are profoundly upsetting.

Mr. Speaker, the audit results came as a shock to me, but the Minister said that they weren't a shock to him. He said that they confirmed internal audit results that he received in May. These results were not shared with the Standing Committee on Social Development. Why not? The committee has been briefed by the Minister about previous audit results. We didn't ask, and he didn't tell. This is a serious oversight.

Once the Auditor General's report came out, the Minister didn't take responsibility for the findings or apologize, as he should have done, but rather, he said that his department has already started taking action to fix the issues identified by both audits. The details are sketchy, but two points stand out for me. The first is that asking social workers to do more paperwork by involving them in more reporting to the department is not what I want to see or what the Auditor General suggests. The Auditor found that social workers are already burdened by paperwork and reporting. More of the same will further diminish the limited time available to work with clients. The Auditor General made it clear that social workers need more time to work with children and their families, not less.

A second point that stands out for me is an issue that has been identified as a problem as far back as the year 2000. It was repeated by the standing committee reviewing the Child and Family Services Act in 2010 and repeated again by the Auditor General in 2014. The Department of Health and Social Services must perform a detailed

assessment of the financial and human resources to deliver the Child and Family Services mandated by the act.

The Minister, the very same Health and Social Services Minister, said the department would contract the Child Welfare League of Canada to conduct a workload study as the first step in assessing the human resource requirements of Child and Family Services. The report was supposed to be delivered in March 2015. I don't know whether the report was completed or what it said, but the Auditor General has again recommended that the Minister assess the financial and human resources to deliver Child and Family Services.

As I said in my statement last week, until this work is done, we won't know why the Tlicho Community Services Agency has half as many child protection workers as Yellowknife when the size of their caseload is similar.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister has said that he is going to step up the recruitment and retention of social workers, hire more workers in anticipation of the approval of the next operations and maintenance budget, double fill staff positions, and create eligibility lists. Presumably, this could have been started, and announced, when he received the undisclosed report back in May. All of this hiring and budgeting is great news, but where is the caseload study or research that shows how many positions are needed and how they should be focused? More importantly, why has it taken so long to get to this point?

Further on this point, where are the social workers going to come from? There are graduates of the Aurora College Social Work Diploma Program working in NWT communities now. More are needed, along with social workers who have degrees. The Minister has said little to nothing in support of retaining the Social Work Program and expanding it into a degree program. That must change. Replacing northern social workers with southern social workers is not likely to be helpful or result in better retention.

I have a sinking feeling that the answer has to do with this government's wrong-headed approach to budgeting, making cuts in the first two years of this assembly to fatten the surplus and thus increase the budget for building roads. The fact that needs of children and families have played second fiddle to constructing a road to a gravel pit galls me. I don't know how hard the Minister worked to change this focus, but the fact that he didn't win is now a ball and chain around his ankle, and a major reason that we are having this debate today. All of Cabinet must stand indicted in this motion.

Mr. Speaker, in spite of being short-changed of resources in this Assembly, the Minister and his staff have made headway on the goals set out in the Building Stronger Families action plan. Legislation has been amended to eliminate the gap in services for youth who are 16 to 19 years old. The new structured decision-making tool has been introduced and provides guidance on issues that relate to child abuse versus those that stem from neglect. The old information management system has been replaced. An effective tool is now in place for annual compliance audits.

Mr. Speaker, these are significant changes, and they needed to happen, but they have required social workers to spend extra time training, and even more training is needed, according to the Auditor General. As a friend of mine said recently, "There is no amount

of training that will help if you are overwhelmed." The remedy is more staff and smaller caseloads so that people are less likely to quit and can function more effectively.

In the rapidly changing and high stress environment of social work, and child protection in particular, there are times that social workers haven't had enough time to meet all of their clients' needs, or at least that is how I understand the Auditor General's findings. I have no doubt that they are as distressed by this situation as I am. Some people may say the Minister hasn't done enough, while others say that he has done too much in too short a time. As another friend of mine said, "The action plan has fixed the system, but it has not fixed the kids."

Mr. Speaker, I want to turn now to the big picture. The Child and Family Services Act represents an institutional, western perspective on caring for children when their parents are unable to do so. It represents a nuclear family, middle class ideal, where enforcing standards, limiting liability, and avoiding risk are fundamental principles. It does not adequately account for the population it serves, most often Indigenous children and families with large extended families, who are rooted in small communities with a strong sense of culture and identity.

Mr. Speaker, in her 2010 report on the NWT, child advocate Cindy Blackstock found that the overrepresentation of children in care is "fuelled by neglect, which, in turn, is driven by poverty, poor housing, and substance misuse, as well as domestic violence. Abuse reports do not account for the dramatic overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care in the NWT."

The Minister and his staff have tried to address this resourcing disparity with tools that support families to care for children within their homes. This is a tangible response to the neglect Ms. Blackstock addressed in her report, but we as a society have a long way to go before low incomes, overcrowded housing, and food insecurity aren't the background of most child protection issues.

Even better than these tools would be to create a preventative or proactive response to families that are struggling. Create an integrated case management approach to family well-being where community-based social workers join teachers, elders, and families in figuring out how to help them before their needs bring them to the attention of authorities.

The enormity of kids in care is the result of wrong-headed priorities. What Cabinet doesn't get, or doesn't care about, and what this Minister has apparently been unable to budge them on, is the need for resources to ease our social pain, as the precursor to successful engagement in the economy.

Mr. Speaker, there is no question that the priority needs to be keeping families together in their own communities if at all possible. Separating families, sending children to other homes and other communities isolates them, and diminishes their sense of culture and identity. The goal here is to prevent the child welfare system from inflicting the same harm that the residential schools did.

Senator Murray Sinclair, the chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, told a conference last week that if the child welfare system existed in its current form, he

would have been apprehended and cut off from his extended family and community. His grandparents' house didn't have running water or electricity, and both food and wood were sometimes in short supply. He looks back with gratitude for his grandparents' love despite the compromises on physical comfort they had to make. When I read his remarks, I thought about how few foster homes there are in some communities. Would they even pass a standard screening? Sometimes the department's approaches to help don't fit clients' needs, and this is a systemic rather than human resources failure.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the Minister of Health and Social Services talked about the new buzzword in health, cultural safety. While I don't care for the term, it is an important concept. Government has acknowledged that, as a result of colonization, residential schools, and cultural bias, the health system hasn't been a place of healing for Indigenous people. The Minister said, "Our commitment to cultural safety recognizes that Indigenous clients should not have to adapt to our system, but rather, it is the responsibility of the system to change and transform to meet the needs of clients." This system transformation needs to take place within Child and Family Services as well, and for the very same reasons.

Mr. Speaker, a lot of what I have been talking about here today goes to general issues, spanning ministries and showing the deprivation of budget resources that are instead being spent on roads and other infrastructure. These are not to be parked with one minister. I think the Minister of Health and Social Services understands the challenges that I have outlined. I think he has made a start on making necessary changes. I don't see any benefit to removing him at this point in our mandate. With the year remaining, I want him to make good on his promise to analyze caseloads and staff offices appropriately. I want him to focus on outcomes for children rather than inputs for management, and I want to see him create a two-year action plan to address the Auditor General's recommendations. I believe he is capable of doing this work, and so I will be voting against the motion to remove him from Cabinet. Mahsi.