

JULIE GREEN—MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE
Mental Health and Addictions Recovery Plan
Committee of the Whole—2019-2020 Operating Budget Review
Dept. of Health and Social Services—February 26, 2019

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Standing Committee on Social Development is eagerly awaiting the mental health and addictions recovery plan. Where do we find the money in this budget that will implement the actions that are recommended in that plan when we see it? Thank you.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Some of it is what we just talked about, but, for the most part at this point in time, we are planning to use existing and our own resources to fund some of the activities that we want to undertake in this particular area. From there, we will be able to determine what additional asks and what additional business cases are going to be necessary to seek additional funding, if appropriate. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It is hard to overstate how disappointed I am with that answer. We have been waiting since 2016 for this addictions and recovery plan to come our way, and now it doesn't come with a funding ask. All of the required actions are being funded from repurposed money. Do I understand that correctly? Thank you.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Well, Mr. Chair, there is \$400,000 in here. We believe that, initially, we can use some of our own internal dollars to start implementing these types of things, but we need to finish the action plan and then, from there, test some of the hypotheses and theories, and then we need to figure out whether or not a business case is necessary to seek additional funds. I am not going to say that additional funds aren't necessary. I am saying that we need to do the business case and be able to have a defensible business case to compete against all initiatives that the GNWT is taking forward. Right now, we believe we have enough money to get started in the upcoming fiscal year.

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

MS. GREEN: Mr. Chair, the wait to have this action plan completed and the compounding wait of seeing which initiatives are going to work, I found incredibly frustrating. This is not an area that we should be playing wait-and-see with. This is an area which I would like to see treated like Child and Family Services, where there was a leaping over of all the government slowdown processes to actually make things work immediately. Why is that not the case for mental health and addictions recovery? Thank you.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We take this seriously. This is a priority. This is something that we have been working on for some time. I mean it isn't without its investment. We have invested significant new dollars in the day shelter sobering centre to help individuals who are struggling, to make sure that they have a safe place. We have also added programming there that never existed before, which is available to help people find a path to wellness and take advantage of some of the programs and services that we have in place. The 2018-2019 budget for mental health and addictions was \$17 million. There is significant money going into this, this particular situation. We need to make sure that we are getting maximum benefit for those dollars being spent, and that will help us demonstrate and build a business case that is solid and will help us seek additional funds in the future.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. When the standing committee submitted its report on the addictions tour that we did with the Minister about 15 or 16 months ago, it was clear to all of us that there needed to be money for after-care. The day shelter is not an after-care program, and, on-the-land, it may be an after-care program, but people talked about needing ongoing support to maintain their sobriety. They talked about the need to have somewhere to be discharged to, somewhere to live, to be discharged to, so how are these priorities captured in this budget? Thank you.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As an initial starting point, some of the on-the-land money that we have talked about today is actually intended to be used through Indigenous governments, for on-the-land care, after-care, those types of things. I acknowledge that, obviously, we need to continue to do work in this area. I hear the Member loud and clear. I do note that the draft action plan went to committee last week. We are hoping to have a sit-down with committee to go through that and get their feedback and input on that action plan to help us strengthen it and help us build the business case that is necessary in order to make arguments for funding where appropriate.

I think everybody recognizes that we have tight fiscal situations. We have to make sure that our money is being spent well, being spent wisely, and that we are actually getting benefit from dollars. Once we can confirm that, we will be in a far better position to demonstrate a need for additional money, if that is indeed the case.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. This job is making me very cynical. The fact that we have to do the budget today, but we don't get to talk about the Mental Health and Addictions Recovery Action Plan until next week means that we are not able to discuss the details today that are relevant to this budget. I find that the timing of this is unfortunate, if not directly purposeful.

I want to point out to the Minister that money that isn't paid upfront to support people on whom we have spent thousands of dollars to achieve their sobriety doesn't make any sense. We are talking about value for money and supporting people in their health and

well-being. If we don't do that, then they continue to cycle through the system, and they require more service at the hospital, more service in addictions treatment, and so on.

What am I missing here? Why is this not a priority for funding right now? Thank you.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am proud of this government. I am proud of the work that everybody in this building does. I think we all do an incredible amount of work in order to improve the lives and well-being of people in our House. I got to tell you; I take great offence to the Member's insults in suggesting that we don't care. I think that the Member's comments are deeply disturbing, deeply frustrating, and I think, frankly, she is insulting every Member of this House, not just myself, but the Members on that side and the Members on that side and, frankly, Mr. Chair, all of the hard-working staff who are investing time in their lives to try to make these things a reality and a priority.

This department cares deeply about the work that we are doing. We have made significant investments. We are making significant strides in improving mental health and addictions services here in the Northwest Territories. I am as frustrated as the Member that things move at the speed that they move, but they do move at the speed that they do, and we are trying to make improvements on a day-to-day basis.

We have made significant investments in this area, significant dollars have been spent in this area, and I think we owe due diligence to our residents to make sure that we are actually spending that money wisely and that we are spending it in the best way. To suggest that every dime that has been spent on mental health and addictions is spent in the right way and the only way to improve it is to spend more, I think is forgetting the fact that we have an obligation to ensure that those dollars are being spent wisely.

We will do that work, we will continue to make investments, and we will continue to take action to make improvements in these areas. I am sorry that it is not as fast as the Member wants, but we need to do things based on evidence and information as opposed to rhetoric and opinion. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am all about evidence-based decision-making. It has been a hallmark of my time here to talk about that. I stand by my remark that I am cynical about the timing of finally producing this action plan after the budget itself will have been considered, but I don't see that we are going to go any further on this today.

I would like to know if questions about Avens are in community health programs, or are they in another activity area? Thank you.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. They are.

Just in response to that last comment, I still take offence to the suggestion that we would hold back the draft action plan as some way to subvert the budget process. That is deeply insulting. We brought it forward to committee as soon as we had it done. It is a

draft. There is still room to move on that, and frankly, I find that incredibly insulting.
Back to the original question, yes, Avens falls under this area.