

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 702-18(3): INVESTMENT IN CHILDCARE

March 14, 2019

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. Mr. Speaker, we are at a crossroads where we have to take serious action on childcare in the NWT. Childcare can no longer be part of the market. It needs to be treated like education and healthcare. The benefits of early childhood education are undeniable, as the Minister knows from the work that she has done. Is the Minister prepared to take this step with childcare and bring it wholly within government? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Education, Culture and Employment.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would love to be able to say, yes, it's going to be a government responsibility, we'll provide the infrastructure, we'll provide the staffing, we'll provide the raises, and everything. I do know that there is a province, Quebec, that has done universal childcare, and I may be wrong, but my understanding is that they are now struggling because the government is taking so much ownership over that.

So if -- when we do this; it's not an if, it needs to happen eventually -- when we do this, we need to be strategic, Mr. Speaker. We need to make sure that we've done our research. We need to make sure that it's sustainable. One of the Members asked me before if I believed in universal basic income, and I thought, "Great idea." Then I did the research and realized basic income went for every person, and I went, "\$30,000 times 44,000 people, that's \$1.3 billion. Our whole budget is only \$1.9 billion." So I think we have to be strategic. I think we need to support childcare, early childhood development, but we also need to make sure that it's sustainable and that we can afford it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I will just say briefly: I am not sure the Minister fully understands basic income. What I want to talk about is childcare. What we know is that the cost of finding and renovating space or building space from scratch for the non-profits who currently provide childcare is not affordable, even with the \$35,000 that the department offers. My question is: what more funding can the government offer childcare providers in order to provide this essential service?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: The Member is probably right. My assumption of what guaranteed basic income was based on my own thinking. The research that I have done has mostly been on TED Talks. One of the Members actually shared with me some information on it. I was a little bit startled on it. I am more than interested in meeting with the Member if she wants to sit with me and educate me further on what basic guaranteed income is, because I think it is something we need to look at, as well.

What more support: there is more than just the start-up money, the safety money, and the expanding. There are the daily rates. Right now, I can only speak about Yellowknife.

I don't know the rates for all over the Territories. In Yellowknife alone, daycare is ranging around \$800 to \$1,000 a month. Just our operating monies that we provide to daycares from the Government of the Northwest Territories for a full-time infant is \$700 a month. That doesn't include the staff grants that we give. That figure, I don't have on hand. If I just took this \$700 and averaged it on the \$1,000, parents would be paying \$1,700 a month. We are supporting it. It is not only about the start-up grants. It is all the things we do to support on the side, as well. I agree that we need to do more, that we need to do better, but we need to be strategic in doing that. One of the mandate commitments is to develop a plan. I have made my commitment in the House here many times that we will be developing a plan before the end of this Assembly.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for her response. The fact is that, without infrastructure money, we can't create more daycare spaces. It costs tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of dollars to build or renovate spaces so that they meet the exacting code required by childcare. A plan without any money for infrastructure is not going to move the bar on the need for licensed childcare in Yellowknife and in the communities without childcare. Is the Minister going to produce a plan that has money attached to it?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: I am absolutely going to develop a plan that has money attached to it. We will have what we are currently paying, what we project that it would cost, and the feasibility of that. Accessible daycare is not only about money that we provide to the daycares. I also want to say that, in partnership with the federal government, we are also providing scholarships. It used to be 10. Now, we provide 30 scholarships for the residents from the Territories to go in and take the early childhood development programming. We have expanded our programming at Aurora College to offer a two-year diploma in early childhood development. Accessibility is not just about the fees that parents pay. It is also about having quality staff to do that. Within the plan that I will bring forward, having accessibility will be not only about money, but it will be also be about having the staff that we need to provide it.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to try to refocus the Minister. The department provides a modest amount of start-up money. It provides subsidies for operators. It provides money for staff. We do not have the space to put the children in. We don't have the space. My question for the Minister is: how is she going to improve the supply of spaces, physical spaces, for children who need childcare? Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: I do have to give credit to this Assembly, all of our Members. The implementation of junior kindergarten has provided free childcare spaces, free early childhood development programming to all four-year-olds throughout the Northwest Territories. Over 500 children are taking advantage of this currently. That is only a start. I know we still have zero to three to do. It is not only about spaces. Every community is different. That is what is really important to notice. Smaller communities, when they only have three or four kids who might need daycare, does it make sense to have a full centre? Does it make more sense to have a family day home, jobs in communities? Those are things we need to look at with that.

I also have to put it back on the Members in some ways and myself included. When we came into this Assembly three and half years ago, we defined mandates, we prioritized, and we said what we wanted. For the last three and a half years, we have been saying what we need, where are we going with this. It is only within these last few months that I have actually heard about the drastic need in this community, in Yellowknife, for infrastructure to do that. It is almost too late. We have already passed our final capital budget months ago.

I want to think out of the box, as well. That is what I am doing. Do these have to be licensed daycare centres that are standalone as the normal model, or, if you think within an Indigenous spirit -- granted that I am Metis and represent both cultures. Within Aboriginal people, we always say education was the downside of us. They took our children away, and they stole our culture. Yet, Indigenous people are saying education is the key to regaining that culture.

I have already been talking with schools. I have already been talking with my department, saying, "Can we make schools the hubs of communities?" If our people are afraid of education, afraid of school systems, they are not going to bring their children there. Can we make a hub? We are trying to work with Health and Social Services. Together, can we bring the services so that children can go to the school? There is a daycare centre there. They can come for speech pathology. I haven't even talked to the Health Minister, so I am throwing things out there. Can it become a hub? Is the only model a standalone daycare, or is another model we need to look at making it a hub of communities. Those are questions we need to ask. I haven't got the answers yet, but it is part of the strategic plan that I will be bringing forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.