

MEMBER STATEMENT—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

HOUSING SUPPORT FOR RELEASED INMATES

May 30, 2019

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to offer my thanks to the Minister of Justice for the detail that he provided yesterday on the programs offered to inmates at NWT correctional facilities. One highlight is that over 500 participants have completed programs that address substance abuse, violence, and other negative behaviours. Another is that the programs are offered in probation offices throughout the NWT to reinforce the new skills and coping mechanisms. The department staff is obviously doing good work in this area.

Yes, there is a "but," Mr. Speaker: but what about housing for inmates when they are released? There was no mention of it. My concern is that, without a plan for housing, some former inmates will be at loose ends. They may have been homeless before going to jail, and so they are likely to be homeless when they come out. They end up staying in shelters, couch-surfing, or sleeping rough.

How hard must it be for homeless people to maintain their resolve to stay sober in these situations? Once they go back to using drugs and alcohol, much of their learning about violence will go out the window; then they will be caught up in the justice system again, and the cycle will repeat itself.

Mr. Speaker, in his statement yesterday, the Minister responsible for the Housing Corporation said, "Research tells us that the chances of addressing the issues that lead to homelessness, mental health, addictions, and other social issues, are better when you have social housing." I concur, and I wonder if the Minister of Justice took note of this point.

When the Standing Committee on Social Development visited the Nanaimo Correctional Centre 18 months ago, we met with inmates who were taking part in a unique program. Guthrie House offered a peer-led 12-step program to help inmates conquer their addictions that had contributed to criminal behaviour. One feature of this program is that participants started looking for housing months before being released. They talked about how important housing was to their discharge plan. I also learned that some graduates of these programs stay in the south rather than coming back here, because they don't want to be homeless.

Mr. Speaker, the lesson for NWT corrections is that people who are released from jail need to have housing in place. Discharging people to a couch perpetuates the chaos that they have worked so hard to put behind them. If we truly want to benefit from the investment that we are working in programming and reduce the chances of people returning to jail, former inmates need a stable place to live. I will have questions for the Minister of Justice. Mahsi.