

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

**QUESTION 841-18(3):
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

August 21, 2019

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. In my statement today I spoke about the quality improvement plan for Child and Family Services that was tabled earlier this week. As I mentioned, the plan has many strengths, but I do have some concerns. The Minister has often said that too many priorities result in no priorities at all. Can the Minister say why he then endorsed 70 priorities in this plan? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Health and Social Services.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In coming up with the quality improvement plan, we did actually have more actions that we would like to have pursued, but we did reach out to our staff. We did reach out to stakeholders who indicated that some of them would be very difficult, given that it is a two-year plan. As a result, we did reduce the number of actions. We modified some timelines. We stretched this out over two years. Many of these actions are policy-based. We are modifying our policies to be consistent and current, and we feel at this time that the plan we have is doable within the two-year time limit.

I want to point out that we do see this as a living document, and as we move forward with those actions in that action plan, we recognize that we may find that we may have overreached, or we may not have the capacity to do that within the timeline. We have left the ability to be flexible, to modify our timelines. We also recognize that, at the end of this plan in two years, we will have to reassess where we are and set a new plan forward to bring in the rest of the changes that are needed to make our Child and Family Services system a truly prevention-based system as opposed to the traditional apprehension-based system. There are a lot of things happening. I agree with the Member. I do recognize there is pressure on the staff, but we have also increased the number of positions, 21 new positions as a result of this quality improvement plan, and a third of those positions are focused on design and training to make sure that our frontline staff have the resources they need and have the supports they need to transition their practice from apprehension to prevention. So there are a lot of things happening. We get it. We have got great people. We have listened to them. We removed some actions, and we stretched out timelines on others. It is a living document. We are optimistic we can get this done.

MS. GREEN: Thanks to the Minister for his response. A second concern I have is about the staff time, the time that is that staff will be spending on compliance processes versus time they will spend with their eyes on their clients. I can understand that this approach is somewhat a reaction to the report from the Office of the Auditor General and to step up compliance, but can the Minister assure us that, despite the focus on process, time with clients will actually improve?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: When we came forward with Building Stronger Families, we were hoping to change from an apprehension-based system to a prevention-based system. Building Stronger Families is still the right way to go, but what we realized and what we heard from the Auditor General is we did not have enough feet on the street to make this a reality, and we were overburdening a number of our people, and, as a result, they were not doing the record-keeping that was necessary to ensure that we were monitoring its success and/or failures. We have increased the number of positions in the last budget by 21.

As I said, a third of those will be focused on training and policy development and making sure the program is right, but the rest are front-line delivery. There is a second ask for future years, Mr. Speaker, that we invest in more positions, with a greater focus on things like family advocates or family support workers. We believe that this is an important step and it's a necessary step to provide those families with the supports they need so that they can keep their children with them, so we are no longer taking children from families. That will be a decision of the next government. I think it is an incredibly important decision, and I hope the next government continues to maintain a focus on child and family services and that that does occur.

MS. GREEN: That sounds like an interesting initiative. A final concern I have which the Minister has touched on is about the systemic changes needed to prevent children from going into care because of issues such as a lack of food and inadequate housing. The anti-poverty commitments, which the Minister has also represented, include a continuum of service and maybe should include a continuum of support. Can the Minister say what kind of prevention is taking place around this issue of neglect driving children into care?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: The premise of Building Stronger Families is finding ways to support families so that children do not have to be apprehended. This could be as simple as providing diapers or food to an individual family who might be in crisis at a particular point. We have done a pilot in Behchoko where we actually covered individuals' rent for a couple of weeks when they were in crisis, because we believe that, if those individuals had been taken out of their homes, it would have also resulted in a direct apprehension. We are looking at spreading these concepts and these ideas out across the Northwest Territories to help families. We have also been able to send families' parents out for treatment and to provide short-term placement for kids with family so that they maintain that family relationship.

There are many more things we could do. Many of them will be one-offs because every situation is different, and we need to be flexible enough to do that. Our social workers are receiving more and more voluntary applications, more people coming in on a voluntary basis. I think this is a good thing because, when they come in on a voluntary basis, we can develop a case plan that works for them and is individualized to their needs and allows those children to stay in those families and in those homes. Our caseload is up, Mr. Speaker, but the number of people going into permanent care is down, and I think that is indicative that the concepts work. We failed at reporting. We failed at some of the things that we were trying to do. We have taken from this committee, from this Auditor General, the lessons that we needed, and we are making

improvements today.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the Minister for the passion that he brings to this issue. Lastly, I want to follow up the statement that I made in the winter about the need for a child and youth advocate. The Minister indicated that his staff could update research on the idea, and I am wondering what progress he can report on this commitment.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: As the Member for Yellowknife Centre has already pointed out, we do have a significantly large action plan with 70 items, and our staff have been quite busy. As a result, we have not done that additional research on a child advocate at this point. However, I would like to note that I was a member of the committee that did a review of the implementation of child and family services in the 16th Assembly, and, at that time, I and my colleagues had an opportunity to go and meet with child advocates from other jurisdictions and learn about the roles that they provide. A child advocate tends to be an officer of the Legislature in most of the other jurisdictions. That is not unlike an ombud that we have recently created here in the Northwest Territories. They are usually not singularly focused on child and family services, but instead focus on children's issues that may be through education or justice or other government functions, questions pertaining to the machinery of government offices such as an ombud or Legislature.

If a child advocate were to be created, it would likely be an office of the Legislature. We are all part of that, but it just is not a Health and Social Services pursuit. I would also note that the mandate of child advocates, if you look at what's happening in other jurisdictions and granted this information might be a little dated because it's based on the review we did in the 16th Assembly, but a lot of those services are done by positions we have already created here in the Northwest Territories, like a children's lawyer, the territorial director, the ombud that we have recently created, so some of these positions can do some that work. However, I am also optimistic that, as we get more involved in Building Stronger Families and with a better focus on prevention, some of the reasons that people want a child advocate ombud today might not be as strong if we are more successful with the work that we intend to do. We already know that an ombud is very expensive, and I think that money may be better spent on front-line delivery of services to families. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.