

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE
QUESTION 67-19(2): ACCOMMODATING WOMEN AT NORTH SLAVE
CORRECTIONAL COMPLEX

February 12, 2020

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Justice. Media is reporting that a woman was held on remand in RCMP cells for 11 days because of a number of reasons. Can the Minister say why this choice was the best one available at the time? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Yellowknife Centre. Minister of Justice.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the last few years, there has been an awareness that women need to have alternatives available to them if they can't be transported to Fort Smith. In the last few years, part of the facility at the North Slave was designated to have four spots for women, specifically. Indeed, in December of this past 2019, those four spots were full, and, therefore, a woman was not able to stay there. Usually, she would then be transported to Fort Smith during remand. Unfortunately, on this occasion, despite efforts between the RCMP and corrections, that wasn't possible. There were four different appearances that this individual had back in court. As such, they weren't able to coordinate the flights. What I have done right now is to look at the reasons for that, to look at the nature of the appearances, to look at what was said, and to try to figure out if there are, in the future, going to be better ways that we can accommodate someone within the justice system so that they don't need to spend that kind of extended time in the facilities at the RCMP. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I appreciate the Minister's proactive approach to this. Could she say how conditions in the cells compare to those available for women at either NSCC or in Fort Smith?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: RCMP's detachment cells are simply not designed for any sort of a stay past a very short day, two days at most, nor is it the role of the RCMP to act as a custodian for someone who is on remand. They are not corrections officers. That is not their primary function. Cells in the RCMP detachment don't often come with the kinds of frankly still fairly limited amenities that one would see within a corrections facility. They have the ability to turn down the lights, but the lights are on. There are no windows. My understanding is that, when faced with a situation like this, the RCMP do their best to try to accommodate the individual and make them more comfortable. At the end of the day, it is not a place that is suitable for an extended period of time. I am

certainly very well aware of that, and I trust the Member is likely aware, as well, that there won't be the mattresses, there won't be blankets, there won't be any kind of entertainment. Again, notwithstanding that, the RCMP do their best to accommodate and to help and to make someone comfortable. It is not the same level of care as what one would get at a correctional facility.

MS. GREEN: This is obviously a last resort. I think one of the disturbing points of this particular case is that it went on for 11 days, not just for a day or an overnight, but for 11 days. Can the Minister give us any insight into why that length of time?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: That is the same question that I had asked when this came to light, to my attention. As I have said, I have looked into the nature of the four appearances. There were four appearances, and my understanding is that it was challenging to coordinate a flight down to Fort Smith because this individual had to appear back in court. Now, there are, no doubt, ways to avoid that. I think there are going to be, hopefully, ways to avoid that in the future, whether it is through encouraging and improving video appearances and access to video appearances, whether it is by encouraging the various parties involved to find alternative ways of securing that appearance, working with partners in the prosecution service around being conscious and aware that, when someone is in these circumstances, that we all, as partners in the delivery of justice, need to be doing our part to make sure we are aware when something like this is happening and that we are all looking for ways to try to support someone and to support the justice system so that an individual doesn't wind up exactly in this situation of having to spend more time than necessary in facilities that really aren't designed for an 11-day stay.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final supplementary, Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the Minister for that response. Certainly, it is my hope that, with a brand new jail in Fort Smith for women, video appearances would be facilitated there right now. When I toured North Slave Correctional Centre last year, I noticed that there was excess capacity in the youth wing of the facility, which is no longer as full as it was when it opened. Can the Minister investigate whether more remand cells for women can be created in that space or another space at NSCC? Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: It is a good-news story that there is excess capacity at the youth facility following changes under the Youth Criminal Justice Act. There indeed is extra capacity there. Hopefully, it stays that way. It can't be repurposed for adults,

though. The Youth Criminal Justice Act has limitations on who can be present and limitations that prevent youth from intermingling with adults, individuals who might be on remand or in any form of custody. That makes it challenging to potentially have a youth person at the facility with any sort of adult. If there is a consistent way or consistent availability of space over a time, whether that could be renovated, that is a much longer-term issue. Really, what I would like to make sure is that this isn't a consistent issue for women who are not able to be transported to Fort Smith. I have no evidence to suggest that it is a consistent problem now since there are the four spots in the North Slave correctional facility going forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.