

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 57-19(2): CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCATE

February 12, 2020

MS. GREEN: Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. In my statement today, I talked about the need for a child and youth advocate in the NWT. Given the two reports from the Office of the Auditor General, which both feature concerns about children not being heard and not being in regular contact with authorities, I'm wondering if the Minister is ready to discuss having an independent, arm's-length agency that is an advocate for children and youth. Mahsi.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Yellowknife Centre. Minister of Health and Social Services.

HON. DIANE THOM: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our department is working with Executive and Indigenous Affairs to look at some options. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: Thanks to the Minister for that concise answer. Could she talk about some of the options that are on the table, just to give us an idea of what might be considered?

HON. DIANE THOM: Again, this is a broader government issue, rather than I alone as the Minister can have a position on. However, as Minister, I would like to share some observations. We need to ensure that any steps we take to protect and support the rights of children do not come at the costs of taking away existing resources for children, especially preventative services. Another observation is, given that 99 percent of our children in care are Indigenous, we need to ensure that the advocacy, as the Member is stating, model is not colonial and works with Indigenous governments. Communities are in the best position to know what issues affect them and identify the proper solutions. Another observation is, now that we have federal legislation, it creates a mechanism for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis governments to enact laws that determine what's best for their children, including accountability and advocacy measures.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that. I would certainly agree that nothing should be established at the expense of any of the current funding. It would have to be in addition. I see that other jurisdictions with even more significant Indigenous populations than ours, such as Nunavut, have made this work, so I wonder if the Minister sees a model elsewhere in Canada that might be useful in the Northwest Territories.

HON. DIANE THOM: Again, I mention to the Member that I am working with the Department of Executive and Indigenous Affairs on this issue, as it has been brought to our attention in the previous government that it's something we need to look at, so we will be working with the EIA.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the Minister for that. Let me state clearly to the Minister that I expect her to be an advocate for this role within government because of the importance of the rights of children, especially with so many children in care in the NWT. I also am prepared to be an advocate for this position, and so I would be interested to know how I can help you, as a member of the Standing Committee on Social Development, explore options and bring this idea to fruition. Thank you.

HON. DIANE THOM: That is great to hear, that the Member is willing to participate in this important subject of child and family services, and as we sit in front of standing committee, we will bring that attention forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.