

## **MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA**

### **Advocates await more from justice minister on 11-day cell stay**

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**Yellowknife women's advocates say they are placing faith in justice minister Caroline Wawzonek to identify why a woman was held for 11 days in an RCMP cell – and fix the system.**

The woman, whose identity is not being made public, remained in a holding cell over the Christmas holidays. Such lengthy stays in a police cell are extremely unusual.

Authorities [said there was no alternative](#) because of a lack of space elsewhere locally, the inability to arrange flights to a women's jail in Fort Smith, and a lack of staff over the festive season.

"I'm not happy that this woman spent 11 days in what is effectively solitary confinement," said Julie Green, the MLA for Yellowknife Centre.

"It's very clear that cells are not a place to keep a person over the long term. And the long term is basically anything more than overnight."

Wawzonek has promised to further investigate the case. Green said she takes the minister at her word that she will do so.

Bree Denning, executive director of the Yellowknife Women's Society, said extended cell stays have happened in the past – but are less common since the recent introduction of accommodation for women at the city's North Slave Correctional Complex.

"It really was a much worse situation then. I think they are taking steps to ensure that it doesn't happen, and when it does they try to make it as comfortable as possible," Denning said.

"It's absolutely not ideal, and I really hope it doesn't happen again."

The Native Women's Association of the NWT was not available for comment.

**Not in our community, says councillor**

On Monday, Insp Alex Laporte – commander of Yellowknife's RCMP detachment – appeared before city councillors to deliver his monthly report on police and crime statistics in the city.

"Just know there are many community members that are concerned," Yellowknife city councillor Shauna Morgan told Laporte.

"It's not an ideal situation. As you said, it's kind-of a last resort if needed to supplement [jail spaces], but it's not where we want to go as a community," she said.

In his first appearance at City Hall since CKLB first reported the incident on February 10, Laporte reiterated that RCMP cells are legally able to stand in as a makeshift correctional facility under the [NWT Corrections Act](#).

Laporte has maintained the RCMP are one part of a much larger system and had tried to do their best for the woman in circumstances where other options were not available.

"The stories that have come out in the media, some outlets have portrayed it as we forced people in our cells for 11 days," Laporte told councillors.

"We did not. We're part of various organizations and departments that have a role to play and, when we have someone in our cells in circumstances like this, it's to supplement the capacity of existing correctional facilities.

"I can assure you, that's not what the RCMP wants to be involved with."

### **Preventing incidents like this**

Wawzonek said in the legislature she hopes more court appearances via video link, and better partnerships between various agencies, can ensure extended stays in RCMP cells do not happen.

Green, however, wants the minister to find out more about this specific case first. "I would like to know more about that before we start looking at systemic issues," she told the minister.

In reply, Wawzonek said she is looking into the nature of the four court appearances that contributed to the woman's 11-day term in the cell; what was said by the agencies involved; and whether any better way to accommodate the woman, given the challenges, was overlooked.

Renovating parts of the North Slave Correctional Complex could be one option, Green suggested. There are currently four bedrooms at the complex for women, and all four were reported to be full on 69 days so far this fiscal year.

Denning, at the Yellowknife Women's Society said a contingency plan needs to exist for this set of circumstances – especially over the holidays – alongside an increase in options for women who come out of the corrections system and into Yellowknife.

At one point, Denning said, her society helped to house a pregnant woman awaiting a court appearance. She termed that a unique occurrence, but said the society was open to housing women who might otherwise be in cells awaiting court appearances.

"A lot of our women are involved in the criminal justice system for various reasons," she said. "It usually has a lot to do with poverty, with addictions, with other issues that women are facing, and that's what we're trying to help them address.

"That's something we're definitely open to, but we can't force [justice agencies] to work with us."

Whether the NWT justice system is biased against women, [as one NWT judge argued in 2016](#), is not completely clear to Green. She does argue, however, that a man would have experienced different treatment in this kind of case.

"Obviously, if this happened to a man, there would have been a different outcome because there's plenty of capacity in Yellowknife for male offenders," Green said.

"So the fact that she was a female offender and there wasn't enough capacity does represent discrimination."