

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

N.W.T. alcohol strategy won't work without community support, says

MLA

By: Amy Tucker

CBC News – March 10, 2020

Link: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/northwest-territories-government-alcohol-strategy-changes-1.5491754>

'We may need different approaches in different places,' says Julie Green

As the government of Northwest Territories sets off researching ways it can revamp its liquor policies, the MLA for Yellowknife Centre says the changes will likely require community "buy-in."

Julie Green referenced approaches to alcohol policy in other jurisdictions during a statement in the Legislative Assembly last month. She said the common thread is they're community-driven.

"The only way they're going to work is if people in communities agree to some different approach to the distribution of alcohol," Green told CBC.

"Whether that means the cost of alcohol or the number of hours that it's for sale or graduated driver's licences — there has to be some community buy-in to the idea that this is a useful approach to try."

Green said she thought it was a good time to resurface the conversation about the territory's alcohol strategy after hearing that a preliminary research and discussion paper toward the development of a N.W.T. alcohol strategy was recently tendered.

In her speech Feb. 27, Green highlighted the Canadian Alcohol Policy Evaluation review by the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research from the University of Victoria, published about a year ago. It showed the Northwest Territories' alcohol policies were rated among the worst in the country by researchers.

Pricing and taxation, alcohol availability, impaired driving countermeasures and liquor law enforcement were among the categories the territory lagged behind in compared to the rest of Canada.

While the researchers noted the territory has some promising practices, including strong policies in place for on-premise establishments, it made recommendations in 11 categories for areas of improvement.

Public needs have to be considered

But Green said in the past, when the territorial government has discussed changes to its alcohol policies — like pricing or accessibility — it's been met by public pushback.

Green questioned how Health Minister Diane Thom plans to create public support for new policies.

In an emailed statement, Thom said the findings of the recently tendered discussion paper will be used to facilitate feedback to "inform community engagement," which will occur during the 2020-21 fiscal year.

"Substance use, especially alcohol in the N.W.T., impacts not only on health-care costs, but also social services and criminal justice costs, and economic productivity," Thom wrote.

"A whole of government approach is needed to make progress on this issue."

Thom also wrote that addictions programming is a priority.

Joey Amos, who used to head the John Wayne Kiktorak Warming Centre in Inuvik, says beyond policy changes, he'd like to see aftercare programs implemented into communities to help support people after leaving a treatment facility.

He says it's especially important as most people must leave the territory to access treatment.

"They want to stay sober and clean. But it's really hard for them to see it happen unless they have a vision or goal or something that they can return back to that is positive," he said.

"When I look at the ... vulnerable people that are homeless, they really don't have a whole lot for them to go back to."

Amos said policies need to "reflect the needs of the people" in smaller communities.

"What are the red tapes that limit people from totally accessing services, and after care, and housing?" he asked. "Let's have a round table discussion as to what people need to ensure that they are going to have recovery."

Not a 'one size fits all'

Green added she thinks an overhaul of policies is a shared responsibility. She pointed out that the Northwest Territories Association of Communities recently passed a motion in favour of an alcohol strategy.

"It feels like the next step in the progression toward addressing the root cause of many expensive and troubling issues that face the N.W.T.," she said.

Green said doing the work jointly might also help establish a sense of the nuances in communities with and without alcohol bans.

"What's it like in a community that doesn't have liquor stores as well as what's it like in Yellowknife where we have two liquor stores?" she said, adding she doesn't think there should be a "one size fits all approach."

"I think we need to come up with this engagement where people will tell us what they think and to be open to the idea that we may need different approaches in different places."

The results of the preliminary research paper will be presented in a full-day workshop Thursday in Dettah.