

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

### **When you can't just stay at home – vulnerable YK residents and Covid-19**

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**In a territory where many struggle with addictions, access to food, and housing insecurity, social distancing and isolation make it even harder for vulnerable people to access services.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has many Northwest Territories residents following instructions to remain at home whenever possible. For some, that's not so easy. For others, it leaves a vacuum where social contact and services should be.

"We have a population struggling with a lot of different things," said Bree Denning, executive director of the Yellowknife Women's Society. "And they have all this going on, on top of the anxiety about this illness and the lack of a lot of resources."

Yellowknife services supplying people with food are shutting down as the novel coronavirus emergency hampers their ability to operate.

On Wednesday, the YK Food Bank stopped collecting and distributing food to protect both clients and volunteers.

Two days earlier, YK Food Rescue – a charity that "rescues" unsold food from businesses and gives it to non-profits, schools, and daycares – closed until further notice.

Jason Brinson, executive director of the Salvation Army in Yellowknife, said he's concerned by the drop in donations but the charity still has money to buy food. A food hamper program is being adapted to ensure it can continue while meeting new public health measures.

"Yellowknife is a community that steps up. We truly appreciate the generosity of everybody who has helped us in the past and who will help us in the future," Brinson said, adding staff have been "rock stars" during the pandemic.

Denning said the Yellowknife Women's Society is working to set up a food distribution program that maintains physical distancing of at least two metres.

“Who we’re really concerned about right now is the folks that are sort-of making it paycheque to paycheque, who are facing a lot of uncertainty at the moment,” she said.

Denning said people have been offering help through social media, including donations of hand sanitizer to the outreach van.

The YWCA’s NWT branch [posted a plea](#) to its Facebook page on Thursday, asking the public to donate grocery gift cards by mail. Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green [took to Facebook](#) asking residents to consider donating gift cards or money to organizations whose clients need food.

## Plan being developed

In Yellowknife’s shelters, it’s hard to maintain two-metres of distance and even harder to self-isolate, though operators are [promising to make that possible](#).

Denning’s society is working on a plan involving the Arnica Inn – a building subject to much scrutiny last month as its transformation into transitional housing [appeared to fall apart](#). The inn’s rooms will be used to separate people in at-risk groups and those who need to isolate, either because they are awaiting a test result or have tested positive for Covid-19.

“There’s no one answer,” Denning said. “We have to be coming at this from multiple angles.”

Brinson said people in the Salvation Army’s live-in program sometimes share rooms, but they have made sure people are spaced out.

Denise McKee is executive director of the NWT Disabilities Council, which runs Yellowknife’s day shelter and sobering centre. The council is working with the territorial government on a plan to support vulnerable people that she expects will be made public soon.

“There’s a lot of angst in the community,” McKee said. “They realize, because of a lot of their health issues, they’re at the highest risk.”

The council [previously said](#) Covid-19 measures at its 50 Street facility include screening on entry alongside helping clients learn how to protect themselves and others.

“We’re trying to, in the best way, keep that community safe and keep it so there are no positive cases entering into that population,” McKee said.

Being out in public feels unsafe to many NWT residents right now. But Denning noted home may feel that way for others who fear abuse.

“We’re all in this together, so be kind and patient with people,” she said. “We really don’t understand what kind of a situation someone is in and what they’re dealing with, when we only see them for a few moments on the street or somewhere in town.”

The territory’s housing corporation is allowing public housing tenants to delay paying rent. It’s also not evicting tenants unless a “significant matter” causes risk to other tenants or the building. Applications for the territory’s [Homelessness Assistance Fund](#), which gives one-time emergency funding to those at risk of losing housing, are still being processed.

## Addiction supports close or move online

For those struggling with addictions, there are limited services during the public health emergency.

The Tree of Peace Friendship Centre, which offers addiction and counselling services including a withdrawal program, is closed until further notice. Its answering machine says people in need of immediate assistance can leave a message and someone will respond.

The Salvation Army isn't allowing new sign-ups for its programs and has stopped delivering some services.

Despite those challenges, Brinson said the people he sees have shown resilience.

"Many of the people that we serve have been in tough situations before," he said. "They're strong-natured when they're in our programs, because they're trying to change their lives or manage their lives."

In-person Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in Yellowknife have been cancelled but many have moved online, alongside other meetings across the globe.

One northern meeting, targeted at people in remote communities, has already been taking place online for several years. The group, named Spirit of the North, meets each Sunday and Wednesday evening. People can still reach [Alcoholics Anonymous in Yellowknife](#) by phone.

As there is currently no addictions treatment facility in the NWT, people in the territory seeking help are sent to one of four facilities in the South. The territorial government says that has been suspended but those facilities are offering counselling by phone.

[Poundmaker's Lodge Treatment Centres](#) and [Aventa](#) are offering phone counselling for former clients and [Fresh Start Recovery Centre](#) is offering 24-hour phone counselling to former and non-clients. [Edgewood Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services](#) is offering online counselling through the Wagon app, which is designed to help track, monitor and support addictions recovery.

Poundmaker's Lodge in Alberta sent all out-of-province clients home last week. The three other treatment facilities have given clients the option to return home or stay at the facility until it's safe to travel, with many NWT clients opting for the latter.

On Monday, the NWT Liquor and Cannabis Commission announced all liquor stores in the territory would begin [reducing hours](#), among other changes, in response to Covid-19. Territorial health officials [have said](#) the stores are staying open so those dependent on alcohol don't experience withdrawal or turn to more dangerous products containing alcohol that aren't suitable to drink.

Denning said those reduced hours may be an issue for those who need alcohol early in the day to stave off withdrawal symptoms, but the important thing is that stores are still operating.

"I think they're doing the best they can with what they have," she said. "Their willingness to stay open in this time is really important to us."