

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

Yellowknife renter says Protect NWT took nearly 2 weeks to respond after put 'at risk' in own home

By: Danielle d'Entremont, Katie Toth

CBC NEWS – JUNE 2 – 2020

Link: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/covid-19-task-force-mla-811-tenants-covid-19-1.5594378>

Nancy Vail says roommate had people over when indoor gatherings were banned

Moving is a difficult task at the best of times, but during a pandemic and under public health orders it can be particularly painful.

That was the case for Nancy Vail — who normally house sits in Yellowknife, but had to find a place to live at the beginning of April.

Vail found shared accommodations in a house, with her landlord living in one of the rooms, another roommate, and shared common spaces.

Shortly after moving in, on April 10, the territory's chief public health officer [banned visitors in any home](#).

Vail says she was put in several uncomfortable situations, when her landlord had people into the house, defying public health orders. She said she was particularly worried about contracting the illness, as her age group and health conditions put her at higher risk.

"I was not happy about it because ... I'm in a vulnerable segment," she said. "We just can't have people put people at risk."

She says she called the 811 line — a [hotline people can phone](#) with questions about COVID-19 — and was encouraged to send an email to the Protect NWT email address. After sending a detailed note to them with her concerns, she says it took them almost two weeks to respond with an email that asked 10 questions, many of them she says were answered in her initial email.

As of June 1, Vail says she has not been informed of any action being taken, and has now moved to a new residence.

Public health officers MIA, says MLA

Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green says Vail's experience is a good example of how it seems to be difficult to get action from public health when you are a renter.

- [Despite complaints, N.W.T. enforcement chief plans to stay the course](#)
- [Here's what the new COVID-19 task force can do in the N.W.T.](#)

Green says she has spoken to about a dozen people in her riding, some of them renters, who expressed concerns and complaints about the territorial government's enforcement of COVID-19 regulations.

"It just seems to be a gap in their service where they don't know what to do with people inside a residence, whether that's a house or an apartment. I haven't heard of any enforcement happening in those circumstances."

Speaking in the legislature on Wednesday, Green argued that this is a particularly big problem in apartments.

Green said those appear to be an enforcement no-man's-land — where bylaw officers, police and the territorial government's enforcement task force seem to think the issue is for someone else to handle.

Some of the complaints about apartment buildings, she told CBC, never saw any action to her knowledge.

"It just seems to be no one's problem to put an end to this," said Green in the legislature.

Green told the floor on Wednesday that she has heard from multiple apartment-dwellers scared that a COVID-19 outbreak could happen in their building due to others not following public health orders. She referred to one tenant who said they called 811 about multiple people coming in and out of another unit in their apartment building, but said they did not see any action taken for at least four days.

"Landlords, including public housing, seem reluctant to stop the parties," said Green. She said bylaw officers won't go into buildings to respond to noise complaints without bylaw approval; meanwhile, the RCMP doesn't respond to complaints about public health orders.

"That leaves the public health task force. On this front, they've been missing in action."

Adelle Guigon, a rental officer at the territory's rental office, told CBC in an email that if a tenant is being put at risk of COVID-19 by fellow tenants who are violating public health orders they should contact the 811 line or email Protect NWT.

No one in the territory has received more than a written warning from the public health enforcement task force. Small indoor gatherings have been allowed since May 15, but no more

than five indoor visitors are allowed over at a time, and no more than 10 people can be inside any household.

Premier promises closer look at apartments and COVID-19

Premier Caroline Cochrane responded to Green's concerns and says cabinet's COVID-19 committee will talk about how to deal with gatherings in apartments — but she also kicked the can over to the police.

"I think there might be confusion. If people call into the RCMP and say, 'I want you to enforce an order,' absolutely, that's not the RCMP's job. If people phone in and say, 'There's a big party going on and they're yelling and screaming and drinking and it's after 11 o'clock,' that is the RCMP's job.

"We're trying to deal with an issue that has been long-standing: it's the partiers, it's the drug dealers, it's the people who aren't being good neighbours in apartment buildings," she said.

Conrad Baetz, the head of the COVID-19 enforcement task force, told reporters Wednesday that if large gatherings do happen, public health officers need to think about their own safety first.

He said that might mean waiting until the day after a party to tell tenants to stop gathering. Baetz also reiterated his call for people to contact Protect NWT if they have public health concerns.

Mike Westwick, a spokesperson for the territory's Department of Health and Social Services, said in an email to CBC that ultimately in situations of immediate risk "everyone's first best defense is themselves," saying that people should remove themselves from the situation if possible.

Westwick added that in situations related to public health orders, people should let Protect NWT know immediately with as much detail as possible.

"It is very rare that there is a significant delay in responding on enforcement issues, and it's disappointing when folks don't wind up getting the service they expect — because we want to provide it.

"And when it happens, all we can really do is apologize, and promise to do better next time," said Westwick, adding that the government had completed nearly 700 investigations in under two months.

Vail says her initial anger about the situation is related to fearing this could happen to others.

"If this is happening here in Yellowknife then I think ... what if something is happening in a community where there's even less resources and less people to get back there ... what are they doing there to respond to phone calls or emails?"

Vail says she hopes the territorial government learns from this and improves the system, especially if a second wave comes to the territory.