

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 313-19(2): Providing GNWT Staff Who Leave the Territories with Two Weeks Special Leave

June 9, 2020

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After listening to the Premier talk about the beauty of the NWT, which is indisputable, and how everyone should come here and see it for themselves, I learned that the GNWT will be offering two weeks of special leave to staff if they leave the territory. Can the Minister of Finance confirm that that is, in fact, the case? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Yellowknife Centre. Minister of Finance.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Mr. Speaker, I know that we have been working on a number of initiatives in order to support staff who might be leaving the territory, and I am not going to misstate exactly what those provisions are. I will get that answer for the Member. I am half-expecting it to show up in my inbox as I am standing here. I do know that there has been a lot of discussion about it, but at the moment, Mr. Speaker, I am not going to misstate exactly who is getting what leave, and when, and for what purpose. We want to support the employees, but we also want to be fair and ensure that everybody is being treated equally. I simply need to get back to the Member on it. I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I am, of course, disappointed that the Minister is not able to provide the details at this point. I wonder if the Minister is also developing a communications plan to share with the private sector, most of whom are not going to be able to offer this kind of a benefit and who may not receive this news very well. Do you have a communications plan to explain how this is going to work and why it is necessary?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Any major policy changes would certainly be accompanied by a communications plan, and it has been our practice, of course, to share it with Members first before handing it out to the media. At this point, I don't see why we would do anything differently.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that answer. I realize that the Minister is not going to give us the details of this plan today, but maybe she can answer why this special leave is being considered.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: There have been a lot of conversations happening at the Department of Finance around how to support workers who are either on leave or having to return, depending on the nature of the travel, if they have to take 14 days. I am certainly not suggesting that this is a definite program that is, in fact, in play, only that we have had to consider what we are going to do if staff are suddenly told, "No, you can't take leave," or "If you take leave, you still have to self-isolate," without getting some sense of when such a change

would take place. Certainly, up to this point, a lot of generous leave provisions have been utilized when this crisis broke, when people weren't expecting to be suddenly having to self-isolate, who may have already had travel plans or were returning, and who were being accommodated so that they could self-isolate afterwards.

To the extent that there have been those discussions, it has been out of the fact that, at this point, a lot of employees have been granted various forms of leave in order to accommodate their return. We need to be fair. We need to be cognizant that we have been under this pandemic and emergency for some months. At this point, that has evolved, and we can't keep pretending that there is always the same level of crisis. We need to adapt, and we need to be ready to move on back to more normal stages of work.

Those are the kinds of discussions that we are having: how do we keep employees safe; how do we treat them fairly; how do we ensure that they can travel if they have to travel, if there is an essential reason for them to do so; and then ensure that they can come back, go back to work, and be treated fairly against somebody else who might have had to travel enough to come back and go back to work. I am quite cognizant that the private sector won't necessarily be able to be as generous with some of those provisions as a large employer such as the GNWT.

Those are all some of the considerations that have been swirling around at the division of human resources, and Mr. Speaker, I, certainly, as I have said, will commit to getting a very much clearer picture back to the Member as to exactly what the plan is.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister is right. The private sector is not able to be as generous. Our business has been open throughout the pandemic, and people who want to take holidays have to self-isolate for two weeks on their own time. That is not paid time by the employer. That's the reality of small business, the backbone of the economy.

What I am interested in hearing, finally, is when the GNWT staff are going to go back to work. I realize that it is a phased approach, but when is it going to start, and what is it going to look like as a general idea? Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: The return to work site work plan was put out by the human resources division about, I want to say, a week ago, perhaps two weeks ago. It was circulated in the House. I believe it is actually posted on the website. I will double-check that the link is available and will certainly circulate that again. It is a phased approach. It is a phased approach that looks at ensuring those who are already back at work can continue to be at work, that the increase in the number of people who are able to return to work in a more formal capacity, and that, as the Emerging Wisely plan unfolds, that the GNWT is, in turn, responding to the Emerging Wisely plan and maximizing what workers can be on site, utilizing a fairly careful approach in terms of making sure that programs and services are being delivered, and then also making sure that employees are kept safe.

There is a very detailed phased approach. As I say, I believe it is available online. Workers are already back at work; programs and services are already being delivered; and we are going to continue to increase the number in ways that we can provide those programs and services over time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.