

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 321-19(2): Border Restrictions

June 10, 2020

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. In her statement today, the Minister said the change in implementing travel restrictions took place on May 29th. My first question is: why did it take until today for Regular Members to get formal notice of this? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Yellowknife Centre. Minister of Health and Social Services.

HON. DIANE THOM: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Like I said in my statement, the Office of the Chief Public Health Officer has been working hard, looking at putting together the Emerging Wisely plans, looking at each of the different phases, while in the meantime looking at border restrictions and putting in place some of the measures that have happened. I mentioned on May 27th the border enforcement stood down on refusing entry into the NWT for non-residents, and then we had to take into consideration the Canadian Charter of Freedoms. There are a number of things that have taken place. The Office of the Chief Public Health Officer has been working to ensure that, as changes come into place, we communicate that.

MS. GREEN: That wasn't an answer to the timing and the communications. Communications have been a really huge challenge during this pandemic, and now there's this added challenge of the change at the border. The reason it matters is because people have made choices since May 29th to not have people come to visit them because they didn't think they were eligible to come, to make a number of adjustments in their lives that they would not have made if they knew that the border restrictions had changed. I'm going to repeat my question because it is important to my constituents. Why did it take until today to learn about this change?

HON. DIANE THOM: I do want to go back a little bit. While that order was written to restrict travel within the territories, which is the power granted by the Chief Public Health Officer under the Public Health Act, we came to realize that the communications and the actions at the border were not keeping with the Charter and the Order. That happened back in April, and then in May, we realized that we need to take into consideration the recommendations from the Canadian Charter of Rights. People took our communications to act, actions to mean that the borders were closed. Our Office of the Chief Public Health Officer took that into consideration. Yes, I agree it's taken some time for us to communicate that, but as soon as we did find out within our Cabinet, that's what we did.

MS. GREEN: Unfortunately, the effect of this Q and A session is to create more confusion. What I understand is that the borders never were closed, even though we were told they were closed, and that the Chief Public Health Officer made a change. For whatever reason, we weren't told until today about that change. There are real things at stake in telling people that

the border is closed. People who were looking forward to family visits and, in some cases, family reunification have been waiting for a relaxation of restrictions. I don't know if that exists now or not. I just know that whatever change was made wasn't communicated to us for almost two weeks. Can the Minister tell us again why it's taken this long to get here and whether there can be more efficient communication between the CPHO and her department?

HON. DIANE THOM: Absolutely. I recognize that there is room for improvement in communication, and that is something that our department is working with Chief Public Health Officer to ensure that the communication, when any of the actions that are being made out of the Chief Public Health Office, that we have a process to follow. Therefore, our Cabinet has come up with a communication plan. Going forward, there are steps that are in place so that we can ensure that there is a process before it gets out into the public. We recognize that.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the Minister for that answer. When constituents ask me questions about whether their mother can come to visit or whether they can have their partner relocate here, I usually say to them, "You should call 811 or email Protect NWT," but what I'm hearing is that it can take days, even weeks, to get an answer to their questions. They're looking for a more immediate response. My question to the Minister is whether Protect NWT needs more staff in order to provide a tighter turn-around to residents of the NWT for their questions about who is and isn't allowed in. Thank you.

HON. DIANE THOM: The Member is correct. Our Chief Public Health Office and our enforcement and our compliance enforcement are quite busy. Just to put this in perspective, on average, we get 1,106 new calls per week, average follow-up calls on a weekly basis, about 228 calls. Average new emails are about 353, follow-up emails 321. Average self-isolation plans that we have processed and closed is about 337 plans a week. I'm just saying our office is quite busy. We recognize that because some of our enforcement staff are having to be repatriated back into their government jobs. Fire crews are going back to fight the fires soon. We recognize that, but there has never been a gap in our system. We continue to work hard to make sure that we have enough people in place. We're actively recruiting. There are a number of things that our department is doing in collaboration with all the other departments. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.