

Motions COW — JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

Comments on Pandemic Committee Reports

June 11, 2020

COMMITTEE MOTION 22-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 3-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – PERMANENT POLICY CHANGES TO SUPPORT INCOME
ASSISTANCE CLIENTS, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. For more than 10 years in the time that I've been here and the time that I worked with the YWCA, there have been repeated calls to revamp the Income Assistance Program, which is well known to be onerous to comply with if you're a client and onerous to deliver if you're staff. One of the great things about COVID is that it jump-started the reform of the Income Assistance Program in ways that are very helpful to clients by giving them additional money and less paperwork to complete. This has been a change that's been very well received and is very important to me, personally, that these changes which have started us on the road to revamping Income Assistance continue in place and that we continue the conversation about how this program can be strengthened so that it not only keeps people in poverty, which it is well known to do, but it actually helps them get out of poverty. Thank you.

COMMITTEE MOTION 23-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 3-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – COVID-19 TESTING SUPPLIES AND PERSONAL PROTECTIVE
EQUIPMENT, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. This recommendation has taken on particular importance today now that the Minister of Health and Social Services has shared modelling numbers of the number of potential hospitalizations, the number of potential cases, the number of potential deaths. We obviously need to be on top of our testing and contact tracing game. I know there has been a lot of testing to date, but that's based on five cases. If we end up with a hundred cases, a thousand cases, we need to be ready. The purpose of this recommendation is really to encourage the Minister to continue working with the national partners to make sure that our stockpile is equal to the task of a second wave. Thank you.

COMMITTEE MOTION 24-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 3-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – POLICY CHANGES TO TRANSITIONAL RENT SUPPLEMENT
PROGRAM, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. I've heard very good things from my constituents about the revamp to the Transitional Rent Supplement Program. They've had positive interactions with Housing Corporation staff, and they're grateful for the support to make their housing more affordable. I think the biggest challenge here is finding some bridging that will go from the end of August, when the current program is expected to expire, until the end of March next year, when the Canadian Housing Benefit will be introduced. I want to commend the Housing Corporation for good work on this and ask them to look internally to find the resources necessary to continue this program until the Canada program kicks in at the beginning of the next fiscal year. Thank you very much.

COMMITTEE MOTION 25-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 3-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – ADVANCING UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. I think that most of us are aware that the best thing that we can do for our children is have them in licensed childcare. It promotes their personal development and their school readiness. It also allows, usually mothers, but in some cases, fathers, to return to the workforce and continue to support their families and have the personal fulfillment of work. This is really a critical service that we offer the population of the Northwest Territories. Every dollar that is spent on children under five is a savings for expenses further down the road because it gives them the best possible start in life. I commend the Minister of Education, Culture & Employment for finding ways to provide additional support for childcare in the Northwest Territories.

I would certainly like to see it continue through the foreseeable future. There isn't really a time that we're not going to need childcare. We have a growing population of children, a large birth rate by national standards. We have good programs in some places; no programs in other places. I feel that we've made a really good start here on trying to make childcare a priority, and I support this wholeheartedly for the future of our children. Thank you.

COMMITTEE MOTION 26-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 3-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – EDUCATION SUPPORTS, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. When we reviewed this work, we found that there were two issues for many families. One was that they didn't have the tools to participate in the technology which are things like pads and laptops and so on. The other end of the problem was having the infrastructure where they could have the bandwidth to participate in long-distance learnings, and that's an issue that has been addressed by my colleagues from the Standing Committee on Economic Development and the Environment. They have talked about the need to complete the infrastructure necessary to make broadband available everywhere.

The tools and the infrastructure are two very important ways to help students continue learning, not only during the COVID period, but through any period in which they are in small communities, and all the course offerings are not available, and they need to do more distance learning. This is, obviously, a key piece of this.

We also recognize that families, in some cases, are very keen and able to assist their children in taking advantage of technology and distance learning, while others really struggle with that. The second part of this motion acknowledges that disparity among families and asks ECE to think of ways, and I'm sure teachers have already been doing this, but to continue to focus on ways in which they can engage vulnerable families to keep their children engaged in school activity when classes are out. Thank you.

COMMITTEE MOTION 27-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 3-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – WAGE TOP-UP, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. I want to say how important this program is to low wage workers. Eighteen dollars an hour is not a living wage here in Yellowknife, so then, it's likely not to be a living wage anywhere else in the Northwest Territories. What this federal program enables the Government of the Northwest Territories to offer is wages that are closer to the living wage threshold, and thus, families and workers have a chance to live above the poverty line. I know from the questions that my colleague asked yesterday that there has been some uptake in this program. More uptake could be accommodated and the amount of money that is available. I believe it's important to continue this program so that people who are working full-time get paid a living wage. Thank you very much.

COMMITTEE MOTION 29-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 2-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT
OPERATIONS REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – EMERGENCY RESPONSE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just want to recap the rationale for this recommendation. From the report itself, it says: "The authority of the GNWT to declare a public health emergency pursuant to the Public Health Act and a territorial state of emergency under the Emergency Management Act underlined a potential legislative void in that it did not expressly provide the Premier with authority to coordinate and manage the overall response."

As the public is no doubt aware, the Public Health Act previously has been used for things like whooping cough and sexually transmitted disease, and the Emergency Management Act is more typically used for forest fires and floods. As we are all going through our very first pandemic, our legislative framework did not contemplate a territory-wide emergency of the kind that we are in at this time, and so what we would like to see, then, is a remedy to this legislative void by reviewing these two relevant acts and seeing whether a third is necessary, or there are changes to the other two, which support the Premier in having clear authority to manage the government's response to a public health emergency such as this COVID-19 emergency that we are now in.

The rationale here is to solidify the legal grounds for the response to the pandemic. Thank you, Madam Chair.

COMMITTEE MOTION 30-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 2-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT
OPERATIONS REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – EMERGENCY RESPONSE COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL,
CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. There have been some real challenges in communication during this pandemic. Of course, it is our very first pandemic and I'd like to think that there have been some learning along the way to how to communicate more effectively with people, not only in the ways that my colleagues have mentioned, but also by considering that not everybody is using social media or electronic means of gaining information. They were, to some extent, really left in the dark. I'm speaking here really of two groups of people. One is seniors who are not computer users. The other are vulnerable people who don't have computers at home and didn't have access to computers during the pandemic because the library in Yellowknife, for example, which is where people could access computers, was closed because of the pandemic. It's really important to take this time where we are not as swamped with cases to figure out these communications protocols and strengthen them for the second wave that's coming. Thank you.

COMMITTEE MOTION 31-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 2-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT
OPERATIONS REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – ENFORCEMENT OF ORDERS ISSUED DURING A PUBLIC HEALTH
OR TERRITORIAL EMERGENCY, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. This is arguably the most important recommendation in all of these reports. It's certainly the area that I've heard the most about. Members here have talked about encountering people who are visitors to the NWT who didn't seem to be self-isolated. We've heard from people who filed self-isolation plans and there was no follow-up. We've heard about communities putting up check stops in order to strengthen their own response to who is coming into their communities. This has been such a huge area of confusion and, to some extent, frustration. If we had a second wave right at this moment it would be a very frightening thing from an enforcement point of view. I do not see that the enforcement is now in place that will effectively follow up on complaints and concerns and the people who file the self-isolation plans and so on. This is an area that needs a significant amount of strengthening. I'm happy to hear today that the first ticket has been issued. That's a confidence building move for sure. I think there is so much more that needs to be done in this area. Once again, with a pause in cases here we really have an opportunity to get on top of how enforcement is going to work so that in the event of a second wave that we all feel confident that we are being adequately protected with the measures that are not only in place but are also enforced. Thank you.

COMMITTEE MOTION 33-19(2):
COMMITTEE REPORT 2-19(2) – STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT
OPERATIONS REPORT ON LONG-TERM RECOVERY: RECOMMENDATIONS TO
THE GNWT – DEVELOPMENT OF A "WORKING FROM HOME" POLICY, CARRIED

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Madam Chair. This was an issue that I certainly heard a lot about during the lockdown. As Members are aware, some GNWT staff have worked right through the pandemic. They have worked very hard to implement the different measures that keep us safe. Other people went home and there has been some uncertainty about how productive that time has been for them. In order to provide some accountability and consistency, this policy is a key piece of the puzzle. It will then tell not only the employees but also the public what is expected from someone who's working at home. I think there is a misunderstanding that people who are working at home are only "working," in quotation marks. I know that there are people who are working at home who are working as hard as they would if they work sitting in an office downtown. They are doing the same kind of work. I think there needs to be some confidence building with the public that working at home means working. I think this policy would go a long way toward answering questions about under what circumstances people will work at home and what is expected of them and what supports are provided to them. I certainly will support this recommendation. I just want to note that the timeline here is expedited over the usual 120 days. It's more like two and a half months. The reason for that is so that this policy is in place in the

event that there is a second wave, so that it's clear, as I say, what the expectations and supports are for this kind of a move. Thank you.