

**\*Page 7, Kate White on WES Letter from YEU\***

<https://yukonassembly.ca/sites/default/files/hansard/34-3-71.pdf>

## **Question re: Whitehorse Emergency Shelter services**

**Ms. White:** The low-barrier approach to the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter has been an important step forward. It means that folks who require the services offered by the shelter can access them without fear of being turned away. But as the shelter nears two years of government operation, glaring issues continue to face both staff and the residents of the shelter. Yesterday, the Yukon Employees' Union wrote a letter to the minister. The letter shows that the government isn't giving front-line workers at the shelter the tools that they need to support the shelter's residents and users. It lists critical gaps in training, such as mental health first aid, non-violent crisis intervention, and suicide intervention, to name a few. 2130 HANSARD December 1, 2020 Can the minister explain why, nearly two years after taking over the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter, front-line workers still don't have access to this essential training?

**Hon. Ms. Frost:** Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the incredible work of the front-line staff at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter. They are providing compassionate support for vulnerable Yukoners, and for this I cannot thank them enough. The hiring practices and what we do at the shelter is a priority. Like everywhere else in our system, we want to ensure that we find the right competency of skills. Where people fall short of those skills, we bring into place practices, and we do that in collaboration with our partners in the Public Service Commission. With regard to the letter from the union, we would be happy to work with the union on some of these concerns that have been brought to our attention. I do know that, just a few short weeks ago, we announced our approaches with the Public Service Commission around transparency and equity, as well as around indigenous supports, indigenous training, and awareness. There are certainly opportunities for us to make improvements and I want to acknowledge that here and now. We have had a short time and a short window in the pandemic to work with the services that we have, and I want to just acknowledge the exceptional support that the staff are giving at the moment.

**Ms. White:** Mr. Speaker, it has been two years since the government took over operations, and I think that, more than thanks, the shelter employees would really like essential training. The gaps in training at the shelter also have an effect on shelter residents. The services offered by the shelter rely entirely on staff being able to deliver them. If the staff aren't sure how to respond to a specific situation at the shelter, then what assurances are there that residents are receiving the help that they need? The YEU letter also states — and I quote: "Specific policy ... on how to handle the many difficult situations that front-line staff face daily either do not exist or have not been communicated to the staff." Putting People First calls for a move toward trauma-informed care, but without proper training and policies, this approach can't be put in place. Does the minister acknowledge that these important gaps in training are undermining a trauma-informed approach at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter?

**Hon. Ms. Frost:** Mr. Speaker, what I would like to speak about is the services that we do offer at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter, acknowledging that we deal with vulnerable populations. It is critical that we look at trauma, at what causes trauma, at how we support the individuals, and that we ensure that we have services at the shelter, recognizing that we have limitations at the moment in terms of how and what we provide for the clients in utilizing virtual supports. We have supports throughout the

community. We have staff on site who are skilled to provide the connections. If there are specific concerns that the letter the Member for Takhini-Kopper King is just referencing that just came in last night from the union, certainly I want to acknowledge that we are working with our staff. We are working with the department to address some of the concerns that have been brought to our attention. Is it perfect? No, it isn't. Of course, one day, we would like to have a shelter that meets the needs of everyone. At the moment, we have the Third Party wanting us to do one thing one day and something else the next day — shut it down, protect the businesses, do all kinds of things. Right now, what we are doing is ensuring that the critical needs of the clients who frequent the shelter are there and supported.

**Ms. White:** Just a reminder to the minister that the Yukon government — her Yukon government — took over the shelter in January 2019 — nearly two years ago. For the precariously housed, practising the “safe six” can be difficult or even impossible at times, and this is part of the challenge faced by the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter staff in working with folks who need help during the pandemic. Yet we are told that the COVID-19 staff information document that front-line workers rely on was last updated on May 22; that's six months ago. Another issue is the lack of sick leave. Whitehorse Emergency Shelter has, until recently, relied entirely on auxiliary on-call positions. This means that they don't have access to sick leave and it puts both staff and shelter users at risk. This needs to change. Will the minister commit to ensuring that all Whitehorse Emergency Shelter staff can access sick leave as a measure to protect the shelter staff, the Yukoners who use the shelter services, and the general public?

**Hon. Ms. Frost:** We are working with our staff at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter. We continue to train the staff. We are looking at all of our policies. It is evolving — the policies evolve. As we are in the middle of COVID, we recognized that we needed to bring in supports, so we have. We've evolved since we've taken over. When Health and Social Services took the shelter over, we had 13 people in there. Right now, we are providing services in the middle of the pandemic and we are evolving. We are providing protocols to ensure that safe protocols and practices are in place. We are looking at hiring further positions. At the moment, we have created permanent positions in the shelter to provide supports — I'm happy to say that — but we are looking at some alternatives. We are doing that with the good work of the managers and, of course, the staff at Health and Social Services. We will do that in collaboration with our Public Service Commission staff as well as we look at stabilizing our staff there so that we can ensure an appropriate complement of supports for the clientele. Great services out into the community — to our NGO partners, I want to just emphasize the great work there and that we will continue to do our best to ensure that our clients at the shelter are well-supported.