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The Honorable Pauline Frost
Minister of Health & Social Services
Re: Current situation at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter

Dear Minister Frost:

Recently the Yukon Employees' Union met with some of the staff at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter (WES). Their reports of the situation facing the clients, guests and staff at the shelter are disturbing. It appears that the Yukon Government has simply thrown on-call auxiliary staff into the WES without providing the support needed to the front-line staff who must deliver this essential service. When the Yukon Government took over the shelter at the end of January 2019, much was made of the harm reduction service the WES was to provide. As the Director at the time said: "It means individuals who are intoxicated or may present difficult behaviors would definitely be welcome at the facility". However, in the 22 months since then, there has been no consistent effort to provide the training, support or staffing needed to enable the front-line staff to safely meet the needs of clients and guests in this type of facility. More recently, *the Putting People First* report was released, which calls for a Trauma Informed service approach. Without proper training and support, this approach cannot happen at the WES.

While the YEU acknowledges the Yukon Government is finally making some moves to regularize the staffing situation at the WES, much more remains to be done. It is unacceptable that many front-line staff, working through the pandemic with the most vulnerable population in the Yukon are still without paid sick leave or other medical benefits. Unacceptable, and a recipe for a potential tragedy. Two dollars an hour does not make up for this shortcoming. The health challenges facing staff at WES are spelled out in the current job description:

"The incumbent will be exposed to undesirable or unpredictable resident or guest behaviors and other hazards, such as: pest infestations, infectious diseases, bodily fluids, exposure to secondhand smoke (cigarettes and cannabis), and dangerous substances."

The current process of moving staff to term employment from Auxiliary On-Call is a baby step forward but term employment does not adequately acknowledge the crucial role these staff have in helping Yukon's most vulnerable population. Staff reported a lack of much needed training, limited or no communication about policy on crucial matters, non-existent Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), ongoing Health and Safety problems, an overall shortage of staff, and a general lack of support for the crucial front-line work they do with the most vulnerable population in the Yukon. Specifically:

Insufficient Training

- **Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST):** Staff have reported that many front-line support staff have not been provided this training. Given that these staff are dealing with suicidal ideation every day, this lack of training puts the clients, guests, and the staff at risk.
- **Non-Violent Crisis Intervention** training: Many front-line staff lack this training, even though there are violent episodes occurring daily. As the then Director said: "It means individuals who are intoxicated or may present with some difficult behaviors would definitely be welcome at the facility." Staff support the low barrier model but need the proper on-going training to handle the situations that come with that model.
- **First Nations 101:** Given the demographic of the clients and guests of the Shelter, it is unfortunate that all staff have not been given the advantages to take this course offered at Yukon University.
- **First Aid Certification:** Unlike the situation in the Continuing Care facilities, at the WES staff are not given an email reminder and are not channeled into government paid first aid courses. Many staff are left with expired First Aid Certifications. While there is now a paramedic based at the WES, this support is only there on day shift: from 8:30 a.m. to 6:45 p.m. Incidents requiring first aid happen on every shift.
- **Mental Health First Aid:** In other jurisdictions, front-line shelter staff are provided this training, however no training is provided at WES. This training would not only improve the support for the clients and guests at the WES but would also allow the front-line staff to better handle the stress they themselves face at work.
- **Basic Health & Safety Training:** Perhaps the clearest example of this lack is that new staff are not being trained on how to efficiently evacuate themselves and the clients and guests in the case of a fire or other emergency. And for those staff who did receive the original training, there has been little or no refresher training. GAM 3.48 is a minimum and should not be sufficient for a residential facility with a vulnerable population as is the case at the WES. Yet even this GAM has not been complied with. The Government of Canada document "Planning for Safety" identifies the procedures and training required to deal with people who would need assistance in an emergency.
- **Training regarding COVID-19:** A handbook on COVID-19 is kept under the front desk at the WES, but, at the time of writing, much of the original COVID-19 related signage has not been updated or has been ripped or torn down. While staff have been given a

questionnaire to ask over-night guests regarding COVID-19 symptoms, drop-in guests are not questioned. The staff have received no training on the proper use of masks and other personal protective equipment. Other jurisdictions have shown that if community spread happens in the Yukon, shelter clients and guests would be among the hardest hit. The staff at the WES need to be properly prepared for this eventuality.

Missing SOP's, Policies, and Supervision

Specific policy or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) 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. The result is that there is no consistent or institutional practice. It varies from shift to shift.

One specific policy included physically lifting clients and guests. Often clients and guests of the shelter fall or pass out on the floor or ground. For the most part, Health and Social Services (HSS) department has a NO LIFT policy; however, at the WES this rule is broken frequently. WES does not have a lifting device (or any training to go with it) so staff frequently put themselves at risk, manually lifting people from the ground. Police are reluctant to come by just to haul someone inside, and so are the EMS. Both have pushed back against this type of calls. Police and EMT often push back about coming to the shelter when a guest are either too intoxicated or too fragile to be properly cared for by shelter staff. Clear SOPs, understood by all staff, and communicated to Police and EMTs could help alleviate this problem.

Staff also need SOPs to guide their decision-making about checking on and handling clients in precarious health situations. It has been reported that on several occasions serious health concerns were only caught "by chance" rather than due to any informed SOP. Some of these clients were in such poor health that they required long term hospitalization. The level of medicalized care needed by many clients and guests is far beyond the mandate or the training level of the WES staff. Additionally, the complete lack of SOPs means staff without proper medical knowledge are making unsupported life or death decisions. Staff are required to take on immense personal accountability for decisions which can have serious consequences for the well-being of clients, guests, and other staff.

Supervision roles were also a subject of discussion. Simply telling staff to contact the supervisory staff if there is a problem is not sufficient, especially when there is currently only one supervisor for the front-line staff. The impact of having only one supervisor for front-line staff in a 24/7 facility means that there is no-one on site for serious questions for most of the day. This is compounded by the overall lack of SOP and/or firm operating policies for front-line staff to use when making decisions.

Shortage of Staff, and General Lack of Support

There is a detrimental shortage of staff at the shelter, and a higher rate of staff "churn" than in other parts of HSS. This can be attributed both to the general lack of support the workers face, and to the fact that 22 months after the Shelter came into the Yukon Government's hands, these staff are still not regular indeterminate employees. The staff shortage results in too much overtime; leads to staff burn-out; and results in reduced support for the clients and guests at WES. There are only two shift leads, but there are five shifts. Staff are unaware as to how shift

leads would be selected. Furthermore, there has not been a front-line staff meeting in the past 4 months. Staff who have been at WES for 21 months have not had a PPP. In October 2019, more than a year ago, Minister Frost, you were quoted saying “...a psychiatric nurse and a mental health counsellor will be working at the shelter...” This has not happened.

Front-line staff regularly face traumatic incidents without meaningful follow-up support. For example, support workers attempted to resuscitate a guest who died in a car in the parking lot on the midnight shift. They continued CPR until the EMS arrived and took over. Understandably they were very traumatized. The only support they received was to be directed to phone EFAP and be invited to meet with a social worker from MWSUS, on their own time, for 1 hour, two days later. This is not meaningful support. The WES is on their fifth manager of front-line staff in eight months. This churn in management makes it very difficult to develop the training, policy and SOP support the front-line staff require to properly serve the clients and guests. This is not the route to “harm reduction”.

As was mentioned above, the Yukon Employees’ Union is pleased that the Yukon Government is finally talking some steps to regularize the staffing at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter. And while the staff are frustrated by the institutional lack of support they are given, they have positive words for the hard work and commitment of their supervisor and manager. But as you can see, much more remains to be done.

We are formally requesting that the deficiencies identified by staff are addressed. To be clear, we are requesting:

1. that all staff are given the appropriate training outlined in this document within 1 month,
2. that the concerns raised regarding COVID-19 are addressed immediately and,
3. that missing or non-existent policies and Standard Operating Procedures are developed, readily available and clearly communicated to all staff in a timely matter.

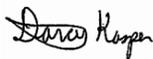
This situation is critical. We welcome the opportunity to talk with you further about the urgent action these matters demand.

Your sincerely,



Steve Geick

President, Yukon Employees’ Union



Darcy Kasper,

President, Local Y017, Yukon Employees Union