



Because everybody counts, I hope we can count on you

Dear Yellowknifers and Concerned Northerners,

As you read this, there is a serious outbreak of COVID-19 in the capital. While we all had hoped by this point the pandemic would have faded from our daily lives, recent outbreaks across the territory have shown we need to continue to work together to keep everyone safe now, and through winter. This is a critical goal at a critical time. As your Minister of Health and Social Services, I'm asking for your support now for the government's plan to ensure Yellowknife has shelter and services available for those who need them most.

As challenging as the pandemic has been, imagine what it would be like to also try to weather each day without a roof over your head in the frigid cold. For over 300 street-involved people in Yellowknife, this will be their reality unless we act immediately to secure a temporary day shelter. My department is committed to creating a permanent Wellness and Recovery Centre in the downtown by 2024, but COVID-19 health restrictions have displaced people from the Sobering Centre and Day Use Centre on 50th Street who need help sooner. There's not enough room to physically distance at that facility, so the building's capacity has been reduced to 20 people at a time. As a result, the centre is forced to turn away dozens of the most vulnerable — people who need a place to shower, use the washroom, have a cup of coffee, grab a bite to eat, or simply get a fresh pair of socks and warm up during the day.

We have a solution.

Last month, the Department of Health and Social Services asked anyone interested in making their building available for a temporary shelter to come forward. Three potential sites were submitted and of those we believe the old Legion building at 4709 Franklin Avenue, most recently used by Aurora Village, is the only one that will work.

Here's why it's the right choice.

It's downtown. People need to be able to move from their overnight shelters in the city's core — which require people to vacate between 7 a.m.



to 7 p.m. — into safe places they can reach easily. In other words, walking distance. If they can't get to the day shelter by foot, they'll be forced into stairwells, lobbies, restaurants, or other places to find respite from the cold. Day shelter staff help connect people with health care, mental health and other services, most all of which operate in the city centre. Access to these services is particularly important during the COVID-19 outbreak to help ensure that clients who may have symptoms get tested and are supported if they are required to self-isolate.

The building is also large enough to accommodate around 60 people and requires minimal renovations. That means once we receive the permits from the City of Yellowknife, we can welcome people in from the cold...into safety. That must happen by the end of October. I realize this is a stop-gap solution, but it's necessary to help the homeless population.

Starting this week, the territorial government will be talking to businesses and other neighbours in the area surrounding the proposed shelter. We know from experience there is likely to be resistance to having a day shelter nearby. Last November, the Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs declared an ongoing state of emergency to use the Mine Safety building on 49th Street (formerly the Side Door), as a temporary downtown shelter. This urgent, and drastic step was taken because of the critical and immediate need to shelter people from both the COVID-19 virus and the elements. In short, the government could not wait for all business concerns to be addressed and city council to grant its approval. Despite initial opposition from some, the shelter served its clients safely and without major incident. Once the warm weather returned and the state of emergency lifted, the building's lease ended and it reverted to a youth centre, also much valued and needed.

With that history in mind, here's what I am asking of you. Yellowknife is made up of caring individuals. Our sense of community is strong; it's why we live here. With your vocal support for a temporary shelter on Franklin Avenue, I know we can work through this together for the benefit of everyone. We do not wish to repeat the necessary, but admittedly heavy-handed measures the government needed to take last winter. We can advocate collectively as concerned citizens to create a truly kind and meaningful act of reconciliation.

Because that's what this is.

Almost everyone in need of this shelter has either attended residential schools or been impacted by inter-generational trauma from them. You may not feel personally responsible when you see the unmarked graves of children who died separated from their families and cultures at residential schools, but collectively, we have a responsibility to lighten the burdens of those who survived, and their families.

This past Canada Day, hundreds of Yellowknifers donned orange shirts and marched in solidarity with Indigenous northerners to reflect on the loss represented by those graves and the inconceivable harms that colonization has imposed on Dene, Metis and Inuit communities. Hosted by the City of Yellowknife and the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, a somber, downtown ceremony replaced parades and revelry — a gesture that recognized now is not the time to celebrate. Likewise, now is not the time to look away from the homeless, the grieving, the addicted. Now is the time for concrete acts of reconciliation. So let's act.

The department looked at dozens of locations downtown before the most recent request for landlords to come forward. There are no other options left to explore. Please, make your voice heard in support of this temporary day shelter. There are almost 500 members on Facebook's Concerned Yellowknife Residents for a Day Shelter Downtown. I know many more people want to actively contribute to reconciliation and a just and dignified life for all. Now is your chance. Because everybody counts, I hope I can count on you to support the temporary day shelter on Franklin Avenue. It's the right thing to do.

Sincerely,

Julie Green
Minister of Health and Social Services
(and concerned Yellowknifer)