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MEMBER'S STATEMENT ON HOMELESSNESS AND INADEQUATE HOUSING ISSUES

MS. BISARO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to continue my crusade for better services from this government for residents struggling with homelessness and inadequate housing. In September, during the election and the campaign, there was a lot of talk around the issue. Candidates expressed support for an Anti-Poverty Strategy, for more housing and better housing programs. Now that the rubber has hit the road, so to speak, now that this new Assembly is in place, the new Executive is up and running, I have to ask this question: What will the 17th Assembly do to live up to the comments and commitments around homelessness made a few months ago during the election? It is not like there are no options. Members of the 16th Assembly spoke many times about housing and homelessness. Those Members made suggestions and recommendations for change, for improvement of the situation in the NWT in their statements. As recently as last May, a report written by Nick Falvo was tabled in this House which made five specific recommendations to improve homelessness in Yellowknife and across the NWT, many of which echo previous recommendations and fit nicely into the government's own document called "Framework to Respond to Homelessness." In my four years here, I have seen little change, little response to any recommendations and certainly no focus on the issue of homelessness.

The Framework to Respond to Homelessness is dated January 2007, and badly needs review and updating, especially in light of the recommendations from the Falvo report. The framework is based on the principle of a continuum of housing, and that is great, it should be, but have we ensured that all parts of the continuum are funded and available to our residents? I don't think so. The framework has identified four next steps, but only one of those four has been accomplished in the last five years. Mr. Falvo's homelessness report has five recommendations, four of which are directed to the GNWT and none of those four have been acted on. I recognize and accept that an election and transition period from the 16th Assembly to the 17th has occurred and that does slow things down, but I have to repeat the question I asked earlier: What will this Assembly do to live up to, one, its commitments from 2007, two, the recommendations from Mr. Falvo's report, and three, all that election talk? How will homelessness be handled by this new government in 2012-13 and beyond?

Mr. Speaker, I seek unanimous consent to conclude my statement.

---Unanimous consent granted

MS. BISARO: We cannot continue with our current practice of dealing with homelessness off the corner of someone's desk. Change is essential and I and the residents of the NWT expect to see some action and improvement from this government on the homelessness front. It's a job that all of government must tackle together. Let's get on with this. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

QUESTION 33-17(1):
HOMELESSNESS REPORT BY MR. NICK FALVO

MS. BISARO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are addressed to the Premier and they relate to my statement about homelessness. I'm directing them to the Premier because the recommendations in the Falvo report reference more than one department and it is my belief that homelessness should be dealt with across many departments, not just one.

My first question to the Premier is: The Falvo report has five recommendations, four of them are to, well, not to the Executive, some are to Health and Social Services, there's one to Housing Corp, there is certainly one to the government as a whole. I'd like to know from the Premier what plans does he have, what plans does the government have to act on the recommendations in Nick Falvo's report from May of 2011? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Ms. Bisaro. Honourable Premier, Bob McLeod.

HON. BOB MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Homelessness is becoming an issue that is starting to be pervasive almost throughout the Northwest Territories. We just recently received the Falvo report. I believe it was only released about two weeks ago. This is an issue that we plan to address. It's not something that there's a silver bullet that we can resolve the problem overnight. As the Member stated, it involves a number of departments. We also have to involve the NGOs. The efforts that have been undertaken here in Yellowknife have resulted in Yellowknife becoming almost a leading player in how to deal with homelessness. I guess the way I see it is we would try to resolve these problems closer to the communities where the homeless people come from.

For the most part in looking at the five recommendations, we are supportive of the recommendations and we are going to move forward. We are looking at involving all the departments that are mentioned to work together to deal with this issue. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. BISARO: I am really pleased to hear him say that this is a pervasive problem, that there's no silver bullet, that he's going to involve NGOs. All of those things I agree with. I appreciate the commitment to taking some action. The report, I believe, was released in May of 2011 and maybe the Premier just got it, but it has been out for a little while and it was tabled in the House in August.

The first recommendation in the report is one that has been mentioned quite often by Members of this Assembly – by the previous Assembly, pardon me – and it will be mentioned many more times by this Assembly, I think. It urges the government to establish a homelessness secretariat. I would like to know from the Premier whether or not in their planning that they have done to date, whether the 17th Cabinet has considered consolidating homeless programs into one place and establishing a homelessness secretariat. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Ms. Bisaro. The honourable Premier, Mr. McLeod.

HON. BOB MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess I would like to express our appreciation for the work that has been done by Mr. Nick Falvo and the fact that his research is bringing attention to the issue.

As a government, we have been working on a Shelter Policy review. Our decision on whether to form a homelessness secretariat will be done in conjunction with the recommendations of the Shelter Policy review and our response to those recommendations. By all means, when we complete the Shelter Policy review and it recommends that we have a homelessness secretariat, we would certainly look at doing so. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Mr. Premier. Before we go on, colleagues, I would like to remind the Members on the sidebar chatter, to give the Minister and the Members respect in their questioning and their response. Moving on, the honourable Member for Frame Lake, Ms. Bisaro.

MS. BISARO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the Premier for his response. I do have to say, though, and I appreciate the work that is being done under the Shelter Policy review. I am eagerly anticipating their results, which I hope are forthcoming soon, but the Shelter Policy review really is only being done by the Housing Corporation, and homelessness, I think the Premier knows, cuts across other areas of our government and our programs and services. I would hope that we don't base our decision on a secretariat only, on the Shelter Policy review.

Another recommendation within the Falvo report was to develop shelter standards. Mr. Falvo specifically referenced the Salvation Army, who have men sleeping within five feet of each other and many of them with various and sundry health issues. I would like to know – and I realize this is perhaps better directed towards the Department of Health and Social Services – but, again, as the Premier and their Cabinet discussions, has there been consideration of developing standards for homelessness shelters across the Territories. Thank you.

HON. BOB MCLEOD: I guess I look at the territorial facilities that have been established here in Yellowknife, facilities such as the Bailey House and so on and also the Betty House that is in the planning stages, and our own homelessness policies that allow us to address the problem on a going forward basis.

As far as standards, I believe that all of those facilities meet those standards. I would be quite prepared to work to have our Health and Social Services and Housing Corporation look at the standards. I think the Salvation Army facility looks like a very fine facility. I guess they don't want to leave anybody out in the cold, so I guess if having standards would mean we would leave people out in the cold, I don't know if that is the intended purpose of having standards. But, certainly, we want to make sure that when we deal with addressing the homelessness situation, we don't cut any corners. If we need standards, then by all means we will deal with that.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Mr. Premier. Final, short supplementary, Ms. Bisaro.

MS. BISARO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thanks to the Premier. I think that Mr. Falvo's point was that there are no standards and that they need to be developed. He wasn't just referencing how close men sleep together; he was referencing the fact that there is a security issue. There is one person on duty throughout the night for some 50 men that are sleeping there. There is an issue of a human rights and safety in there as well. I was really pleased to hear the Premier mention that they are looking at these five recommendations. I would like to formally ask the Premier if the government will be providing a formal response to those five recommendations to both me and to the House, when might we see that. Thank you.

HON. BOB MCLEOD: Mr. Speaker, we will be working with my colleagues. I anticipate that we should be able to respond probably early in the new year. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.