



Yukon Legislative Assembly

Box 2703, Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 2C6

April 29, 2024

Hon. Tracy-Anne McPhee
Minister of Health and Social Services
P.O. Box 2703
Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 2C6



Dear Minister McPhee,

Thank you for your letter dated March 19, 2024. Please find attached the open letter I submitted to the Whitehorse Star in response regarding the Health Authority Act.

It was published Friday, April 26, 2024 and clearly outlines the concerns we have regarding health care across the territory and specifically the handling of Bill No. 38, Health Authority Act.

I hope this statement provides some understanding of the many concerns we have.

Sincerely,

Currie Dixon
Leader of the Yukon Party Official Opposition

C Kate White, Leader of the Yukon NDP

There is a growing consensus that health care in Canada is in a state of crisis, and how governments should respond is the subject of serious debate across the country. In some ways, the problems we face in the Yukon are similar to challenges faced in other provinces or territories. While these challenges are familiar, one that sets us apart from the rest of the country is that our current health system is led by a Minister who is uniquely out of touch with the population she is meant to serve. In just the past year, Yukoners have seen case after case of unresponsiveness that has emerged as a clear pattern.

Take for example the community of Watson Lake's ongoing request to have long-term care beds available in their community. After years of advocacy led by MLA Patti McLeod, coordinated support from both the municipality and the local First Nation, and a petition signed by over 500 residents, the community had been clearly articulating the desire for a continuing care facility to be constructed to serve Watson Lakers that wish to stay in the community as they age to the point of needing long-term care. They asked politely for the Minister to visit the community and consult on plans for a new facility. What they got was the cancellation of two previously planned long-term care beds that would have been housed in the hospital. Even worse, the decision was made without communication other than the Minister's claim that the Town of Watson Lake didn't actually want the beds. The Mayor's frustration was evident during his interview on CBC Northbeat, where he expressed his confusion at the Minister's decision.

Watson Lake is hardly the only community to express disbelief at how out of touch the Minister has seemed. Throughout 2023, health centres or nursing stations in community after community faced closures or service reductions, as a result of staffing issues. Chiefs, Mayors, and community leaders from Ross River to Teslin spoke up about the negative impacts of these closures and reductions. The Association of Yukon Communities invited the Minister numerous times to come to the communities to discuss solutions and work together. Each and every time the Minister declined. So, it came as a shock to rural Yukoners when they learned that after stating she was too busy to come to Carmacks to meet with local leaders to discuss rural healthcare in Yukon, the Minister was touring around Scotland on a taxpayer-funded holiday the very same day. When asked about the purpose of the trip she stated it was to learn about the delivery of rural health care. She cannot be accused of lacking irony.

There are examples in Whitehorse too. After years of the opposition raising concerns that the Liberal government has been underfunding Yukon's hospitals, the government commissioned an independent financial review. That review found that in the four years it covered, the Yukon Hospital Corporation suffered from a "chronic cashflow and operational shortfall" and was at risk of not being able to meet payroll one year. Around the same time, Whitehorse General was forced to begin implementing reductions to imaging services and cutting operating room availability. CBC reported that these reductions would "double wait times for some MRIs and CT scans, exacerbate surgery waitlists and risk nurse burnout" according to internal emails amongst hospital staff and medical professionals. In response to questions about this report, the Minister of Health made the preposterous statement that "Yukoners are served by the best hospital system — perhaps in Canada." What made this comment seem even more out of touch, was that the following week, surgeons from the orthopedic surgery program announced that they would no longer be accepting referrals for elective consultations and instead encouraged those

needing such consultations to fly down south. The reason for this change was, at least in part, a lack of sufficient resources. Once again, the Minister seemed to be deeply out of touch with what was actually going on in our health care system.

That brings us to the Liberal government's current plans to create a Health Authority that would take over control of Yukon's hospitals, long-term care facilities, nursing stations, and potentially a raft of other health care services in the Yukon. The plan is based on some ideas that have merit. It offers the possibility of the integration of services that could improve responsiveness and connectivity of our currently disparate health care delivery arms. It also offers improved representation and involvement of First Nations in health care. We support working with First Nations to ensure the health care system meets the needs of all Yukoners.

However, in their haste to accelerate this massive overhaul of the health system, the Liberals forgot to involve some key players. Health professionals themselves have been sparsely involved so far. The unions that represent affected health care workers have been quick to raise red flags. The Yukon Federation of Labour President recently described the Liberal government's consultation as "horrendous" and raised concern about what the handling of this aspect would mean for the health authority's sustainability and success.

Concerns expressed by unions are understandable, given the sweeping changes that this legislation will bring for health care workers, their pay, pensions, and benefits, as well as the very nature of their work. The failure to consult on this legislation also drew the attention of Yukon's francophone community who hold constitutionally protected language rights and have since requested amendments to the legislation. Needless to say, the overall lack of consultation has raised some serious questions. What is perhaps most concerning though, is that ultimately this legislation gives sweeping powers to the current Minister of Health to make massive changes to our health system. When asked just about any specific question about how these powers will be used, the Minister almost invariably says that work is yet to happen and plans have yet to be made. In other words, she is asking for Yukoners to trust her. There are reasons to both support or oppose the creation of a Health Authority in Yukon, but we are ultimately being asked to leave the details to the Minister and to trust Minister Tracy-Anne McPhee. That is something we simply are not prepared to do.

Currie Dixon
Leader of the Yukon Party Official Opposition
Whitehorse, Yukon