

October 6, 2021

RE: Temporary Day Shelter in Downtown Yellowknife (Legion)

As a strong advocate for the business community, both in the Thebacha region and across the Northwest Territories; as a former Chief of Salt River First Nation; and as a Dene woman born and raised in Akaitcho Territory, it is disturbing to me that business owners would take a stand like this against impoverished people. I have always advocated for the needs of the vulnerable and for all those who would never make it through the front door for change.

As a concerned elected leader in the NWT, I have been closely watching this situation, and frankly I am shocked and disgusted with the amount of systemic racism from both residents and businesses who are against the proposed temporary day shelter at the old Legion building on Franklin Avenue. For people to compare a temporary day shelter to that of a crack dealer living next door, or for elected leaders to compare the pain of 60's scoop survivors with the pain that businesses feel from the pandemic, is not OK. To speak like this about our most vulnerable population is deeply misguided and inappropriate. In fact, it is attitudes like these which only functions to reinforce and amplify racist stereotypes and stigmatization of the homeless population. Is this what reconciliation is all about? Is this what it looks like?

For the City Council of Yellowknife to vote against this motion, especially at this time of year on the brink of winter, is very unfortunate and sad, to say the least. Notably, this is the second time within a year that Yellowknife's City Council has voted against a proposed temporary day shelter in the downtown area. In both cases the city rejected each proposal based solely on the interests of businesses. In my view, voting against this motion is voting in favour of the status quo, which in the end helps nobody.

Furthermore, the letter written from the Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce, dated September 23, 2021, directed to Minister Julie Green, is not acceptable. That letter was written with near complete disregard, perhaps even disdain, for the homeless population altogether. Their letter asserts that placement of the temporary day shelter at the location in question, will, "place the short-term burden disproportionately on downtown business owners...". Well, how about the burden and stress that the homeless carry daily without having a warm place to go? How about the collective burden that all residents carry, as leaders and governments try to address and alleviate the broader issue of homelessness within our communities?

