

Questions and Responses for Election 2023

MLA candidates – Shauna Morgan

Questions were sent on behalf of the NWT Association of Communities to all Member of Legislative Assembly Candidates about issues important to communities in the Northwest Territories. We will follow up with the elected members throughout the term of the 20th Assembly.

1. NWT communities have faced a persistent funding shortfall, which became more apparent with the 2023 review. Despite commitments by the Legislative Assembly, this underfunding issue has persisted for years. Will you commit to the funding to address this persistent funding gap of nearly \$40 million/year for community governments in the NWT and provide them with the permanent resources they require?

Response: If elected, I will work to increase funding for community governments. This is not simply a Yellowknife issue—a diverse range of NWT communities are being chronically underfunded according to the GNWT’s own calculations. For many years, the NWT Association of Communities has sent resolutions to the GNWT calling for the gap to be closed, so this is an area of common ground amongst communities in various regions. I will emphasize that unified interest, rather than allowing this issue to be perceived as a question of “Yellowknife vs. the communities.” The GNWT must create an implementation plan to close the funding gap that ensures no community will lose funding—rather, those being underfunded will have their funding levels increased more quickly, through a phased approach.

2. What steps will you take to ensure that these communities can continue to afford to deliver these services?

Response: See response above.

3. The 37% budget shortfall makes climate change in the NWT even more difficult for communities to address. How will you help communities in the NWT become more resilient in the face of climate change, and what funding priorities will you establish to address these challenges, including disaster mitigation?

Response: We need to further integrate a climate change lens into all decisions, including planning and design for transportation, facilities and communications infrastructure. We also need to integrate a harm reduction lens into decision-making that doesn’t pretend to eliminate all risk but begins by trying to understand people’s actual situations and the supports they need to stay safer.

The independent third-party investigation for the territory into this year’s emergency response needs to be completed in time for changes to be implemented before next spring, including detailed emergency plans for all facilities and areas of government responsibility. Expert recommendations must be followed—with implementation plans and resources attached—unfortunately, the conclusions of previous reviews such as for the 2014 fires went largely unheeded. The territorial review must be integrated with the City’s review

and include input from members of the public as well as partner organizations such as the non-profits running critical social services like shelters.

I would commit to ensuring any community that requests it receives assistance in updating its emergency plans—ideally with input from third party experts who have experience dealing with emergencies in other parts of Canada.

4. Are you committed to investing in municipal infrastructure and initiatives to address and prevent the effects of climate change and making it a top priority for the territorial government, particularly considering catastrophic wildfires that threaten entire communities? How will you ensure communities battling inadequate funding and legislative restrictions have the necessary resources?

Response: See responses above.

5. The education system in the NWT has faced criticism for failing to provide students with fundamental abilities. The purpose of the recently passed Bill 81 is to recognize the duties of Indigenous peoples and governments, clarify responsibilities, and increase parental involvement in education. Considering these amendments, do the modifications adequately address the deficiencies in the NWT education system, or is an Auditor General Review of the education system still required?

Response: The *Education Act* is in the midst of a much-needed modernization process. My understanding is that Bill 81 was meant to address only the most urgent and undisputed improvements identified in phase 1 of the process, and that more work is planned to address the more fundamental changes needed.

I read through the entire *What We Heard* report published by ECE in December 2021 around Education Act modernization, summarizing the results of the initial round of public consultation. Many promising suggestions are being brought forward to try to further decolonize our education system and empower local and Indigenous governments to take more responsibility for supporting our youth to become whole, capable people who can successfully navigate the different cultures and contexts they will face.

6. How do you intend to ensure educational facilities in the NWT implement the new legislative changes proposed in Bill 81 to enhance education, emphasizing addressing deficiencies and ensuring students graduate with the required skills?

Response: I am not clear what this question is really asking in terms of my role. As an MLA I would want to ensure that adequate funding and resources are available to educational authorities to implement the changes. More changes to the Education Act will be required in order to achieve the broader vision of enhancing and decolonizing the education system.

7. The issues of homelessness, mental health, and addiction are complex and interconnected. How do you propose to resolve the homelessness crisis in Northern communities and improve access to affordable housing?

Response: The GNWT's Homelessness Strategy cannot become another glossy piece of paper (or pdf) that sits on a shelf. There must be a detailed implementation plan with timelines, adequate resourcing, measurable targets and regular public check-ins to ensure government leaders and staff are held accountable for what progress they are making.

Homelessness is a complex issue that cuts across many GNWT departments (including Housing, HSS, ECE, Justice, etc) and initiatives to address it often get stuck in the famous government "silos". Already many committees have been struck and the Integrated Service Delivery unit established—so it's not that staff from various departments don't talk to one another—rather, it's the siloing at the very top that stymies us, and this is what I would propose to address head-on. I would make homelessness a strategic priority that does not fall under any one department's mandate, but one that all of Cabinet and all Deputy Ministers are held accountable for making progress on.

8. How will you ensure that mental health and addiction services are accessible and adequately funded to enhance the well-being of all Northwest Territories residents?

Response: If we want to make breakthroughs in improving access to mental and physical healthcare for our youth, we should implement a “Health in All Policies” approach, which has been successful in other parts of Canada and the world. The idea is that health care and health promotion should not just be offered at hospitals and clinics; it should be accessible in lots of contexts and places where people go regularly to access programs and services. It can lead to earlier interventions, more consistent care, and it makes health care delivery more efficient too. It is consistent with the World Health Organization’s “[Health promoting schools](#)” movement.

Such an approach could, for example, lead to primary health care, counselling, and mental health support services being available to youth at schools and youth centres, taking away the onus on families to make appointments and navigate bureaucratic and logistical hurdles.

According to the NWT Alcohol Strategy, “in 2014, the NWT had the second highest per-person costs attributable to substance use in Canada, including health care, justice, and lost productivity related costs. In 2014-2015, the number of hospitalizations that were caused by alcohol in the NWT were six times the Canadian average.” A 2022 report by the NWT Chief Coroner’s Office noted that suicides in the territory, especially amongst males in their 20s, are often related to alcohol or drug use.

In the past, interventions were focused on pushing those with addictions towards getting sober, and sobriety was often required before people could access basic services such as emergency shelter, meals or housing. The problem is that alcohol or substance dependency is not simply a day-to-day choice. For many it has become a serious medical condition (where sudden withdrawal can be life-threatening) and it can be a tool of self-medication to manage complex trauma and life instability, complicated by poverty, food insecurity, housing insecurity, systemic discrimination, disabilities, and family violence.

A harm reduction approach meets people where they are at, and supports them to find a path forward—rather than expecting an immediate transformation, it supports people to address some of their challenges while coping with others in safer ways.

Housing First uses some harm reduction principles. Funded and endorsed by the feds, the GNWT and the City of Yellowknife, it offers transitional housing as a starting point, with varying degrees of wrap-around supports. However, the GNWT’s own recently released Homelessness Strategy recommends that a more successful person-centred, harm reduction approach would require service delivery to be more integrated, and more supportive group living facilities to be established.

When the pandemic started, a Managed Alcohol Program (MAP) was established by the YK Women’s Society at the Spruce Bough supported living facility in partnership with GNWT-HSS, with support from physicians. Managed Alcohol Programs provide medical and social supports alongside regularly administered sources of beverage alcohol to help stabilize people, reduce binge drinking and replace use of non-beverage alcohol. However, the GNWT has since moved away from supporting the MAP concept, asserting that dispensing alcohol without medical supervision is good enough, leaving the program under-resourced and unable to provide pathways to recovery through reduced alcohol use over time.

The NWT Alcohol Strategy—also released this year—offers a holistic vision for dealing with alcohol, beyond acute addictions (including prevention, communications, policy, community safety, and treatment). One of its valuable recommendations is to hire staff to support clinicians and to support patients trying to navigate the health and mental health systems.

However, I believe we need to go further and establish a comprehensive withdrawal management and addictions unit based out of Stanton Hospital, similar to best-practice models in Sudbury or Edmonton (Addiction Recovery and Community Health), which have been celebrated for their results and cost-effectiveness.

In summary, my priorities as MLA would be to implement recommendations of the NWT Homelessness Strategy (including establishing more supportive group living facilities and better integrating services), support and expand proper Managed Alcohol Programs with medical supervision, establish a best-practice model such as ARCH at Stanton Hospital, and overall to integrate a harm reduction approach throughout all health and social programs.