

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 810-18(2): GNWT EMPLOYEE VACANCIES AND OVERTIME

JUNE 2, 2017

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. Earlier today, I offered some observations on statistics for employees as provided by the Minister of Human Resources, now the Minister of Finance. There appear to be about 100 vacant, undetermined departmental positions at any given time. Can the Minister explain whether this is comparable to other jurisdictions, and what efforts we are making to improve our recruitment efficiency? Merci, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Finance.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the GNWT is a very large organization. Staff turnover and vacancies are a reality. Our vacancies do change from day to day. As of March 31 of this year, our vacancy rate was 3.4 per cent. I don't have comparisons with other governments, but we would assume that our rate would be similar to the national average across the economy.

We put various efforts towards recruitment and filling vacancies, including the use of competitive process, transfer assignments, development opportunities, direct appointments, and regional recruitment programs. Also, the intern program that we have is very successful. As I was saying in the House earlier this session, the summer student would also be another excellent recruitment tool.

We have 272 plus, I believe, another 46 or 50 offers that were still out there, so those are the different types of recruitment strategies that we are using. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I thank the Minister for his response. Our government is spending a lot of money, more than \$11 million between April 2016 and mid-February 2017, on overtime. Can the Minister explain what efforts we are making to reduce overtime, and whether that includes hiring more full-time staff at a reduced cost?

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: We haven't hired more full-time staff, but we have introduced full-time relief positions to provide coverage where needed. Relief employees say they are an important part of the GNWT, and their use is a very important part of ensuring that vital programs and services are provided to the residents of the Northwest Territories without interruption.

As of December 31, 2016, the GNWT has had 374 relief employees, and overtime is authorized for operations required as necessary to support our programs, services, and delivery. In the Member's statement, he quoted the number of departments that do have a lot of overtime, and it is a lot of the departments where they are fairly stressful jobs, so there are times when folks need to be called in to relieve the employees who are there.

MR. O'REILLY: I thank the Minister again for that information. I am glad that he recognizes that overtime is stressful on our employees, and that the idea of relief

workers is a good one. I will be tracking this during the rest of my term, certainly. As I mentioned earlier today, though, a great deal of the overtime is concentrated in Health and Social Services authorities, and Stanton Hospital alone accounted for 18 per cent of the overtime costs. This may not come as a surprise to our healthcare and social workers, but I believe this is causing a lot of stress and burnout. What is our government doing to reduce overtime particularly in the Health and Social Services Authorities and at Stanton Hospital, which is actually in my riding? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned before, there are a lot of relief positions that we have and there is some overtime that does happen within the health authorities. Part of that can be attributable to the fact that it is a highly stressful job and there are times when the regular workers can't make it in so they have to call a relief person in. There was a study, in my understanding, done a few years ago, I think, by Health and Social Service on the amount of overtime that was being used across the health authorities in the Northwest Territories. My understanding was there was no particular recommendations that came out of that, but I will follow up with the Minister of Health and Social Services to see if I can obtain a copy of the study that was done and I will share the information with the Member.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I truly do appreciate the commitment of the Minister to look into that and provide further information to us on this side. Sick leave hours for employers are concentrated in the health and social services authorities and in the Department of Justice. While I can understand how health and social workers are often overworked and need to take sick leaves, it's not clear what is happening in Justice. Can the Minister explain these patterns of sick leave and what are we doing to improve employee wellness? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we can do some analysis. However, in 24/7 continued operations where shift work is required, if you notice a pattern, there does seem to be some sick leave but that's working 24/7. The health and wellness in the workplace are a key initiative of the NWT, and this includes raising awareness about the GNWT employee and family assistance program as well as providing a variety of education sessions on health and wellness related topics. There was also a suggestion earlier in this Assembly about the concept of having Shane Days as well.