

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 176-18(2): INCREASES TO INCOME ASSISTANCE FOOD ALLOWANCE

June 7, 2016

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned in my statement, households that depend on government for income are at greater risk of being hungry than other households with low income. The Government has acknowledged this fact by raising the food allowance portion of income assistance. Can the Minister of Education, Culture, and Employment confirm his commitment to follow through with increases to the food allowance in the next two fiscal years? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Education, Culture, and Employment.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And the Member's correct in her Member's statement, the last time we increased the income assistance was on April 1st, 2015. We're always reviewing our programs and services that we offer to our most vulnerable people and the ones that really need some of the basic needs.

I did field questions on this topic last week. Just some extra information out there. On April 1st we did increase it by 20 per cent, 2015. We also mentioned that in the Yukon they're looking at indexing, so we've got the Department looking at what they're doing in the Yukon to see if there's any way we can reflect that. Obviously, there would be some changes that we would need to make within our regulations with the new announcement of the federal funding with the child tax, and we're trying to adjust those so that our low to moderate-income families will see a significant increase. And we have gone over those numbers yesterday during the business main estimates review in Committee of the Whole. So we're working with the Members and we're also looking at what other northern jurisdictions are doing. Thank you.

MS. GREEN: And I thank the Minister for that response. I just want to confirm with him that in fact there is a commitment to follow through with the increases scheduled earlier to the food allowance under income assistance?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: As we went through our business planning review, as well as our main estimates review, and with the regulations, when those go through we're going to see a significant increase to our low to moderate-families, which the member is bringing forward with the NWT Child Benefits and how we're going to be assessing those and addressing those now. So there will be an increase to our families that have low income to moderate income. It's just going to take time, as we have to go through the regulations. So we will see those increases as we move forward.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that answer. Mr. Speaker, what efforts is the Territorial Government making to ensure that Nutrition North becomes a more useful program in the north for providing nutritious and affordable food? Thank you.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: We're always working with other departments on how we can address some of the shortfalls in some of our communities, such as high cost of food. In 2014 we did develop a northern market basket measure. Every jurisdiction in the Northwest Territories does have a market basket measure, but it doesn't reflect what the costs are living in the Northwest Territories. We work with Yukon and we worked with Nunavut to create a northern market

basket measure. We're using those statistics to reflect how we fund our income assistance. But we're also working with our other departments and with adjusting some of the high costs of food prices in the Northwest Territories. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Thanks to the Minister for that answer. So what I'm wondering in particular with Nutrition North, which is a federal program, is whether the territorial government is taking a role in trying to make Nutrition North a more useful program? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: And of course Nutrition North has been a concern for all northerners in the last few years. We want to see how we can work with our federal partners to make the program more feasible here in the northern communities, so definitely working with our federal counterparts to address those issues.