

Perpetuating poverty?

Frontline workers say new income assistance rules keep families poor; GNWT says it only changed how recipients are assessed

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NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Changes to the territorial Income Assistance (IA) program are nothing more than clawbacks, says the former chief of the Salt River First Nation.

"It's just the opposite of Robin Hood," said David Poitras. "Robin Hood robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, but this way here, they're robbing from the poor and giving it to the government, I guess."

In August, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) eliminated the IA program's food and clothing allowance for children under the age of 18, said Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green.

The change was the result of increases to the federal Canada Child Benefit (CCB) program, according to the department.

The CCB program changes came into effect in July and replaced the former Canada child tax benefit (CCTB), the national child benefit supplement (NCBS) and the universal child care benefit (UCCB).

"In reviewing the implications of the new Canada Child Benefit on our programs, it was determined that the best way to support families with children was to no longer count income intended to help with the costs of raising children in the calculation of Income Assistance," an e-mail from ECE stated. "Examples include income received under the new Canada Child Benefit, child support payments and land claim payments for children."

But Green said while the new CCB payments do increase overall household incomes, that doesn't mean low income families no longer need the IA food and clothing allowance.

"The rationale for the government to provide Canada Child Benefit was to alleviate poverty among children," she said. "So what has happened here is that those same children who live in poverty are not getting the full benefit of the federal money because the territorial government has reduced its funding to them. So the federal government gave with one hand and the GNWT took away with the other."

If ECE hadn't eliminated those payments, families could have received all three benefits, Green said.

"While the family in general does have more money because of the Canada Child Benefit, they don't have as much as they could have if ECE had not reduced those allowances," she said.

Green, the former director of community relations for YWCA Yellowknife and a volunteer co-ordinator for the No Place for Poverty Coalition, raised her concerns in the legislative assembly the week of Oct. 17.

In the house, ECE Minister Alfred Moses countered Green's claims, stating the NWT hasn't reduced funding to families.

"When we restructured the program, the Federal Child Tax Benefit was included in the assessments. We took those assessments out ... the NWT's contribution, hasn't changed," Moses said according to Hansard.

"It does look like the funding went down for food and clothing, which, in fact, it hasn't. Actually, more families are getting more money."

More than 20 per cent of NWT households were considered food insecure in 2012, according to Statistics Canada.

More than 15 per cent of NWT families lived on less than \$30,000 that same year.

Poitras said he has had discussions with worried community members who are afraid to voice their complaints.

"One of my biggest concerns is that anyone receiving income support would be vulnerable, they wouldn't want to speak out," he said. "As for me, I'm a pensioner and they can't cut my pension so I can speak out, because it bugs me that they can make what I call a blatant clawback."

Eliminating the IA food and clothing allowance for children is already having a devastating impact on NWT families, said Karen Wilson, housing director for the YWCA.

"Poverty is really a big thing here," she said. "Food insecurity is really big here."

Because the CCB program is based on a family's income from the previous year, some families qualify for smaller amounts.

For women and children escaping violent homes, that makes circumstances especially difficult, Wilson said.

"People who step away from relationships, fleeing from violence, they did their income tax the previous year with their spouses and might not have qualified for any child tax benefit," she said.

"They're separated right now and there is no food money for the children and they don't get any child tax and they don't have any money for food."

In a situation where parents are separated, the children's legal guardian receives their CCB payments.

Changing guardianship can be a lengthy process and without the IA food and clothing allowance, single parents could face months without any financial help.

"We've got a dad living with us right now. He has three kids and he's getting no child tax and no food money for these three kids," said YWCA family support worker Sharon Pearce.

For mothers with newborns, it can also take months to start receiving CCB payments once a baby is registered.

"We've also seen moms who have brand new babies that don't have their child tax money yet because it takes a while for the child tax money to come," Wilson said. "So what do they do in between that time?"

Wilson and Pearce have seen first hand how far money has to stretch for the territory's most vulnerable.

Families were already struggling to make their IA food and clothing allowance last.

In Yellowknife, families received the food and clothing allowance payment at the beginning of the month, but were still visiting the Yellowknife Food Rescue the week before their CCB payments were expected.

In order for families to truly benefit from the CCB increase, the food and clothing allowance for children under 18 must be reinstated, Wilson said.

"If the federal government deemed it fit to give extra to children for children's well being, why is the territorial government taking the food money out?" Wilson said.

Pearce agreed.

"It looks good on paper, practically it doesn't work so well," she said.