

## ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

### QUESTION 426-18(2): INCOME ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

October 31, 2016

**MS. GREEN:** Mahsi, My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture, and Employment. Is the Minister prepared to continue to stick to the promise made by the previous finance Minister and continue catching up food allowances for income assistance recipients so that they are up to 2014 levels? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We'll have to look at the promise that was made by the previous finance Minister. We are in a new government in the 18<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly, so we'll have to take a look at that, but the benefits and the increases in the changes that we've made to our Income Assistance program is actually benefiting families a lot more than what was in the previous year and even in the previous government. As I mentioned last week in the House, families are going to receive up to about \$740,000 to \$750,000 this fiscal year, in the fiscal year since we've made these improvements, but we'll have to take a look at the promise made by the previous Finance Minister. We do have a new Finance Minister now, and I will commit to sitting down and chatting with the Finance Minister to see what those previous promises were. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MS. GREEN:** While the Minister is chatting with the Finance Minister about whether to uphold that promise from last year, I would just urge him to consider that every other per diem and allowance that any of us receive who are associated with the government rises over time, and that the price of food isn't going down. So I wonder if he could give me a rationale for not continuing to raise the level of income assistance for food?

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** I believe in 2015-2016 we had about just over \$18 million on income assistance that this government provided. In 2016-2017, it went over \$20 million, and the odd time we come back to this House asking for a supplementary appropriation. As everybody knows, the economy is in a downturn, so we are seeing more families on income assistance in some of the regions, and from time to time we will come back to the House to seek a supplementary appropriation to provide income assistance to those that are in need.

There are a lot of things that we take into consideration; how big the family is, the net income for that family in the house, as well as the age of the children. I think we're doing a great job in providing those services to residents of the Northwest Territories, and we will continue to do so as we continue to make further income assistance changes. As well, this whole government, all departments, provide a lot of good programs for low income families, and we'll continue to do that job.

**MS. GREEN:** Of course, the Minister knows that income assistance is a last resort. The criteria for receiving income assistance is that you have used every one of your resources, including your savings, selling your house, selling your car, that you have nothing left. That's the premise for applying for income assistance. So I want to ask, again, whether the Minister will ensure that this promise to increase food levels will, in fact, be part of this government's agenda as well?

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** I believe in 2015 this government did put an increase on food allowances. The Northern Food Basket was what we looked at in terms of how we provided an income for food in the Northwest Territories. Obviously, there's one federally, and we wanted to make one for the North so we developed our own Northern Food Basket. As a result, we did put an increase in 2015. There is no index for income assistance. We don't index it to anything. So we feel that what we offer in income assistance is sufficient for families and individuals that need income assistance in the Northwest Territories.

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

**MS. GREEN:** Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the Minister's answer. But if the funds were sufficient, why would we have food banks? Why would we have soup kitchens? Why would we have all these organizations, not only here in Yellowknife but in Hay River and Inuvik, and even in smaller places like Tuktoyaktuk that give food to people every single day? Food security is a huge issue in the Northwest Territories, and I would like the Minister's commitment that he's going to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Thank you.

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** First of all, I just want to thank all the organizations that do set up food banks and provide services in our communities, even our smallest communities. As the Member has said, without their help, we wouldn't be able to get some of these other families that might fall off income assistance based on some of the, I guess, regulations that we impose for people that want to take down income assistance.

But we are doing our job, Mr. Speaker. The changes that we just made to the income assistance and the Canada Child Benefit, as I mentioned earlier, families are going to get an increase of up to \$750,000 annually. Once we make the changes to the NWT Income Tax Act, families are going to get even more money. We just have to go through the process to get that done, and in 2017, August, we're going to see those changes come into effect and we're going to see more families getting more money so that they can put more food on the table, more clothes on their backs. I do believe our department and our government are doing a good job in addressing those issues.

QUESTION 435-18(2):  
INCOME ASSISTANCE FOOD AND CLOTHING ALLOWANCE

**MS. GREEN:** Mahsi. Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. YWCA Yellowknife reports that eliminating the income assistance food and clothing allowance for children is already having a devastating impact on NWT families. For example, when women and children flee violent homes, it can take some time to have the Child Tax Benefit migrated to the person who left with the children. So for the Minister, if the income assistance applicant is not receiving the Canada Child Benefit because they're waiting for changes in taxation filing to go through, how will ECE ensure the family does not suffer even more as a result of the elimination of the food and clothing allowances for children under 18? Mahsi.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Masi. Minister for Education, Culture and Employment.

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In any cases as such that the Member brought forward, I'd encourage the Member to set up a meeting with our CSO at the office. Any families that find themselves in that situation obviously want to provide the best overall supports to the families so that they do see this benefit, but in any cases as the Member has stated, I'd like to encourage the Member to talk to the families or even have the YWCA to explain to their

families, come talk to us at the department, speak with the CSO on how this can be addressed, and I'm sure we can find a solution. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MS. GREEN:** I'm wondering if the Minister can tell us if this issue can be addressed by paying food and clothing allowances until the Canada Child Benefit is available.

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** We have a lot of clients that are on the Income Assistance Program. Obviously it's by a case-by-case basis. I've mentioned about the net income of the whole family, how many children are in the house and the ages of those children when we do the assessments. In this case, like I said, it seems very unique and in that case any families that do find themselves in that situation, I encourage them to come talk to the CSOs to find a solution.

**MS. GREEN:** Thank you to the Minister for that answer. Another situation that's like this that I'll bring to his attention is mothers with newborns. They often will take months of waiting to get the money paid, to get on with the support of the Canada Child Benefit. The other problem I want to bring to his attention is timing. So food and clothing allowances used to be paid at the beginning of the month. The Canada Child Benefit is paid in the last half of the month and people end up at food banks and other food security places earlier because they run out of money. Can the Minister say how people should be budgeting the lesser funds to make them stretch further?

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** From my understanding, the amount of the cheque that the families get at the beginning of the month includes everything in it and there has been an increase. In terms of tail end, of families getting cheques at the end of the month from our office, I'll have to confirm that, but my understanding is families receive an increase in their payments and an increase in cheques at the beginning of each month. I'll have to confirm with our department, but I'm pretty sure that all families get the full payment at the beginning of the month. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**MS. GREEN:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll look for to that confirmation from the Minister. Finally, I'm going to repeat the question that commentators and frontline service providers as well as I have been asking: will the Minister recognize that taking away the food and clothing allowance for children under 18 was the wrong thing to do and to reinstate that allowance immediately? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When we were moving ahead with the Income Assistance changes, we got recommendations from clients, we got recommendations from our partners in the NGO community. Moving forward, a lot of those included that we no longer claw back income that's intended to help parents with the costs of raising their children.

In order to understand the improvements, I think, to the Income Assistance Program, Members must look at the overall benefit package and not at each item in isolation from one another. As a government, we give a whole suite of programs and services to help families in need, low-income families. All departments, most of our departments, do that. We've made those changes within Education, Culture and Employment.

When you put the community cost adjustments and that we're no longer clawing back income for children, are families are receiving more money, Mr. Speaker. Any other concerns can be brought forward to the department, but I thank the Member for bringing the concerns that she's been hearing to the House. I feel they're being addressed with the work that we've done with our changes in Income Assistance. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.