

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 95-18(3): 2017 LIVING WAGE

February 13, 2018

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. As I mentioned in my statement, the NWT Child Benefit is not helpful to the low-income family of four that we surveyed for our living wage calculation. Their income, which is for the two of them for the year, \$92,518, qualifies them for just \$14 a year from the NWT Child Benefit, but the intention of this benefit, the Minister told us, is to help working families with their expenses. My question is: will the Minister revisit and revise the income threshold for the NWT Child Benefit? Mahsi.

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

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and as the Member has mentioned, it is not only the NWT Child Benefit that we made improvements to and changes to with our income assistance benefits that exempted income intended to help with the costs of raising children, but we also looked at the child support payments. That was further to the work that we did with the Canada Child Benefit, and we made changes there.

I can assure the Member that any individuals and families in the Northwest Territories who are unable to meet their basic financial needs can also access assistance through GNWT social programming, and we offer those programs to the families. Seeing that this is still new, we are still going to have to look at doing the report and looking at monitoring this program moving forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I thank the Minister for his response, but I believe he has missed point of the living wage. The point of the living wage is that people work full-time to take care of themselves and their families out of their employment income. They don't need food banks. They don't need public housing. They need to earn a decent wage so that they can pay their way.

To that end, the NWT Child Benefit could be very helpful to working families. That is the reason that I am interested in knowing whether the Minister will look at revising the income threshold to make it more useful to low-income families.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: The Member mentioned the living wage. The living wage reflects what earners need to bring home to live an acceptable quality of life. I just want to inform Members and the public that there is no jurisdiction in Canada currently that has legislated a living wage as part of its minimum wage policy.

As a government, collectively with Housing, Health, my Department of Education, Culture and Employment, we do provide a lot of services to help low- to modest-income families, and we continue to look at doing those supports. As I mentioned, we are really in our first year of the NWT Child Benefit. I will go back to the department and have

those discussions in terms of how the evaluation of the NWT Child Benefit was in its first year, and we have not had a complete first year yet.

MS. GREEN: I appreciate the Minister's willingness to go back and look. For what it is worth, the income threshold is also too low for the Canada Child Benefit.

Mr. Speaker, the point of the living wage is not to ask government to legislate the living wage, but rather it is to encourage employers to see the benefits for themselves of paying a living wage in order to recruit and retain and encourage greater productivity from their work force. We are not looking for legislation of the living wage.

I want to talk about how the cost of living has been gone up in the last two years; 5 per cent each for shelter and childcare, 6 per cent for food. Is there any thought about indexing this benefit to inflation?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Setting minimum wage to increase with inflation could limit our ability to explore other options for adjusting the minimum wage rate. We do have a Minimum Wage Committee that does a lot of work on behalf of the government and brings back options. They do that every two years. As you know, NWT CTR rates are based on Yellowknife. If there were any links to that, it would adversely affect some of our more northern and more isolated communities that do even have a higher cost of living, if we looked at doing something with that as it is based on costs here in Yellowknife.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry, I didn't make my question more clear to the Minister. I am not asking him to index the minimum wage. The methodology for calculating minimum wage is something entirely different than calculating the living wage. What I'm asking him to do is index the NWT Child Benefit. Is that possible? Thank you.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Not at this time. As I said, we are in our first year of the NWT Child Benefit. We need to look at the evaluations, look how this has affected our families right across the Northwest Territories. As I mentioned, any families or individuals who do need that extra support for the basic needs, our government is always there to support and help and provide the most basic needs for our families across the NWT, and we will continue to do so. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.