

JULIE GREEN—MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE
Income Assistance Funding
Committee of the Whole—2019-2020 Operating Budget Review
Dept. of Education, Culture and Employment—March 5, 2019

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I note on page 46 that the department is anticipating a \$2.674-million increase in income assistance in the forthcoming fiscal year. Can the Minister describe: is that because of program increases, or is it because of an increased number of cases? Could she give us some detail? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. \$1.676 million of that is additional funding for clients, the numbers of people accessing, increases in rent and utilities, so forced growth within that; \$3,000 is the 1-percent salary increase for non-unionized employees; and \$989,000 is for the CPI increase for disability and aged allowance, which moved that program from \$300 a month to \$405 a month for seniors and people with disabilities. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. What I understand from that answer as I was quickly taking notes is that the increase doesn't take into account that there will be a certain percentage of increase of the number of people collecting income assistance in the next fiscal year? Is that correct? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That is not correct. Actually, it does. The \$1.676 million actually increases for additional clientele accessing income support services. I will give examples. In 2015-2016, there was 20,007 people, and that year there was an increase of 1,592, so 2016-2017 it was adjusted to 21,599. Then, at the end of that year, there were an additional 3,283, which in 2017-2018 gave us 24,882. So, each year, we are keeping stats of the numbers, and each year we adjust it based on the actual people who are accessing services and then the forced growth for additional costs for the provision of the services. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am not sure I followed all of that, but I get the general impression there. My next question is: I know the Minister has looked at how income assistance can be reformed, and I think she has tabled, she has revealed anyway, a "what we heard" report. I am wondering whether any of the reforms that she is looking at will have financial costs that will be implemented in the next fiscal year. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. In honesty, I've read the initial report from the NGO and the income support people who we worked with. I had put out

a call to Aboriginal governments and to MLAs to provide their feedback for me. There was also a municipal government that wanted to have some input in that, as well, so I have allowed that. I have not, in all honesty, given it a lot of thought. I am desperate for this session to be over because my department knows that, as soon as this session is over, I am tackling that. The idea will be just like what I did with the housing program. I will be looking at short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals, recognizing that we only have a few months left, and so I want to knock off as many of the short-term goals as possible. Then, my hope is that the next Assembly, that MLAs who are here and listening, will actually bring that forward and continue that work. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the detail the Minister was able to provide. In the category of short-term goals, does she anticipate that there will be more spending required in income assistance as part of her reform initiative? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I cannot give a definitive answer because I have not really spent to time to look at it. I am assuming that probably not, being based that we just put in \$1.676 million in this budget for the additional forced growth that we are using. I am hoping that we are looking at different methods, really focusing on our productive choices, how people are using it, payment plans, things that are easier versus just increasing income support. I think personally that increasing income support is not the answer; it's actually working with people so that they are not independent, I know people like to use that, but semi-dependent, so that we can actually recognize their work and their productive choices. I think it's a combination of things, but I don't see it actually being extra monies at this time because we have the \$1.676 million already allocated. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Ms. Green.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the Minister. One of the things that I hear about income assistance is that healthcare is not covered for people who are using the productive choice option for treatment or counselling outside of the home, for those kinds of options. Can the Minister confirm that that's the case, and is there any thought to changing that? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have asked my staff, and, at this point, they do not know, but they both look bewildered. I can commit that, when we get that, childcare and the productive choices should be included. If a person only has a short appointment or the person is coming in, we need to look at that, but, if people are going to regular appointments, they need to be provided childcare supports for that. Yes, it is something I am definitely going to take heed of, and I would appreciate if the MLA could put that in her comments so that it can actually remind me. Thank you, Mr. Chair.