

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 725-18(3): CHANGES TO INCOME ASSISTANCE

May 27, 2019

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. The Minister received valuable feedback at her forum on how to improve the Income Assistance Program. There were dozens of suggestions, and clearly there is not time to work on them all. My question is: what are the Minister's priorities to improve the Income Assistance Program in the short term? Thank you.

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

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The MLA is absolutely correct. There is not enough time to do them all. I would love to be able to do them all, and I cannot, so what we have done is, just as when I had the housing portfolio we had done the short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals, that is the process that we are in now. We will be sharing that with the MLAs and the standing committee within the next couple of weeks, and also the NGOs, because I do believe in "nothing about us without us." It was their meeting. We have been keeping them engaged right through.

The short-term goals that we are really focusing on right now, and we will be providing a full Minister's statement tomorrow, actually, are really around the communications. People are feeling that they did not know what their rights were, that the forms were too cumbersome, that they did not know their appeal, the programs, et cetera, things like that, so we are just doing up a new participant handbook. We actually hired an outside consultant to come in and help us streamline some of the forms, to make sure that they are appropriate, that we are only asking the information we need instead of things we do not need.

We are also really working on our relationship with the NGOs, too. It's important to note, Mr. Speaker, that the NGOs stated that this is the first time that some of them had ever been consulted on income support. My own experience in the NGOs, I cannot remember ever being invited to a meeting where NGOs were asked what their experiences were. We committed actually that, every six months, we would provide a forum that NGOs and clientele can actually provide input into the Minister, and I think that is a huge step.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that response. I am glad to hear that the paperwork is going to be more plain-language. Is there any thought to actually testing this new paperwork with a client group to ensure that it is meeting the goals that they are hoping?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Honestly, I had never thought about that, but consensus government is working together. I think that is a really valuable idea, and so I will implement that, because I think it's important. They are the ones who are actually be utilizing the form. They should be the ones stamping and saying, "This works for me."

MS. GREEN: I appreciate the Minister being open to that suggestion. One of the things that participants talked about was the need to address issues such as lost paperwork and late payments that come about as a result of that. Can the Minister tell us whether any progress has been made in this area?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you to the MLA for reminding me. Actually, that was one of the bigger concerns that I had. If people are getting, for example, their utility bills in and it's our fault that we are late and then we are not paying their late fees and they are getting late fees, that is a sin on our side, in my opinion. We are not giving a lot of money to people. We are not giving any money for late fees, so it's coming out of their food or their clothing allowance, and I am not okay with that. We have already implemented that, if the error is on our side, we will be paying late fees. If the error is on the clientele side because they have not got the paperwork in time to us, then the clientele will still be responsible. However, any time that it's our error because of paperwork or not being on time, we will be covering those late fees effective already, so I can say effective immediately, although it's already implemented.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the Minister's genuine efforts to reform this troubled system. I am wondering, in the area of the Income Assistance Steering Committee, this may be the one the Minister referenced earlier. People at the forum in December really wanted to see this committee be created to address ongoing issues. Is this the committee she referred to earlier in her answer?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker, that is the committee we are talking to. It will be the NGOs, and, of course, we will be bringing in clientele as well with that. Like I said, one of my strongest philosophies is "nothing about us without us," and so that was an easy commitment. It's an embarrassment on the behalf of Education, Culture and Employment that we have not done that in the past, so we learned from our history. We learned from our mistakes, and, moving forward, we will be engaging them on a regular basis, twice a year. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.