

MEMBER STATEMENT—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

INCOME SUPPORT CHANGES

May 27, 2019

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. At the end of the last sitting, the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment reported on the Income Security Forum she hosted last December. To recap briefly, service providers from non-government organizations and some of their current and former clients met to discuss about how the income assistance program could be improved. Mr. Speaker, as a former ECE minister yourself, you can imagine there was no shortage of suggestions.

First, the application and rules around staying in compliance are complex. They need to be simplified. Second, eligibility must be based on the need for housing, food, and other necessities first of all, before taking compliance with the productive choice program into account. Third, clients want to be treated with respect and be provided with simple information on dispute resolution. Fourth, the department must promote accountability by staff of mistakes.

Mr. Speaker, these are a few of the points that caught my attention. They resonated with anecdotes I heard while I worked at the YWCA, and with constituency issues I've been asked to help with in the last three years. Many of the issues arise start with a lack of understanding about what the rules are or with information that has been lost. This often results in late payments, which in turn creates additional expenses for loans and arrears, and ultimately ends up with the client having less money to spend on essentials. What is needed is a fundamental shift in promoting compliance where the program transitions from a highly regulated, punitive approach to one that is flexible and solutions-based. This change can't happen soon enough.

Mr. Speaker, there's another shift required that addresses the bigger picture; that's to figure out how to create incentives that will encourage clients to come off income assistance. Once again, this needs to be a solutions-based approach. Maybe it means people are able to keep more of their earned income by pro-rating assistance, for example. Maybe it means that, when clients are cut off, it's for less than 60 days so that they don't lose their housing or fall into arrears. We have to offer people on low income the tools to change their circumstances and those of their children.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister has a lot of work to do in this area. I know she is committed to program improvements, but we have just three months left in our term. I will have questions about her priorities. Mahsi.