

MEMBER STATEMENT—KEVIN O'REILLY MLA FRAME LAKE

INCOME ASSISTANCE POLICIES

June 3, 2016

MEMBER'S STATEMENT ON ANNUAL INCREASE TO INCOME ASSISTANCE BENEFITS.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, [English translation not provided]. I will speak today about some of the least advantaged, and unfortunately, least politically influential people in our society: Those on Income Assistance.

First, I want to congratulate the Cabinet on its decision announced in the budget address that income from the Canada Child Benefit, and the Northwest Territories Child Benefit, and spousal support will be excluded in the calculation of Income Assistance payments. I also applaud the announcement of amendments to the NWT Income Tax Act to enhance the NWT Child Benefit, including different benefit amounts for children under and over the age of six.

Now, I'd like to see a similar approach to adopt an annual increase to income assistance payments. Benefits were increased in 2015. But before that, I believe benefits were last increased in 2009. There does not appear to be any mechanism for providing an annual increase in benefits to offset increases in the cost of living, or even a mechanism to regularly assess whether benefits are adequate.

This is counter to most other programs of financial assistance providing benefits that are adjusted to reflect the costs of living. At the federal level, payments of public service pensions, Old Age Security, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, Canada Pension Plan, and Canada Pension Plan disability benefits are all indexed to inflation. Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement benefit rates are adjusted four times annually for inflation.

Here in the Northwest Territories, Members have recently been informed that the monthly payment rate for Long Term Care Room and Board has been adjusted to offset the increased costs as calculated by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI. Not only that, if the CPI were to fall, I am told that rates would not be decreased. The NWT Senior Citizen Supplementary Income Benefit is likewise indexed to CPI, and there are annual indexing provisions in a number of other GNWT cost of living support programs. In Yukon, income assistance benefit rates are annually adjusted to offset the cost of living.

Certainly, there has been no decrease in the costs of living, according to CPI figures, which are only available for Yellowknife. Costs have increased on average by 1.6 per cent in the past year, and as much as four per cent in the area of food costs. Mr. Speaker, I seek and ask consent to conclude my statement.

All of the above makes me wonder why income assistance recipients are left out of annual increases to meet the valid need of paying higher costs to stay fed, clothed, and sheltered. In the absence of a guaranteed annual income, levels of support provided by Income Assistance cannot lift people out of poverty. I will have questions for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment.