

## ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

### QUESTION 161-18(2): ANNUAL INCREASE TO INCOME ASSISTANCE BENEFITS

June 3, 2016

**MR. O'REILLY:** Mahsi. We've put one of the ministers at the end of the row to work today, and I'd like to work with the other minister opposite at the end of the row. Earlier today I did commend the Government for the changes that they've made to income assistance, but I'd like to ask the Minister of Education, Culture, and Employment whether income assistance payments were increased or not on April 1, 2016, and why.

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

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No, the income assistance was not increased on April 1, 2016. However, they were increased on April 1, 2015. And the reason we didn't look at the increase was, obviously, there was a federal announcement of the child benefits and we wanted to look at our regulations. And the Member stated it very well in his Member's Statement on why we were looking at delaying any type of increases. Currently the GNWT does have a Northern market basket measure. We worked with the governments of Yukon and Nunavut to create this. All other jurisdictions across Canada have a market basket measure that represents a modest basic standard of living in which they represent their income assistance. We've created one in 2014 for the Northern Territories, but that was the reason the federal government did make an announcement with the Federal Child Benefit and we're looking at how we can benefit from that, and we are currently going through our regulations and changes right now.

**MR. O'REILLY:** I thank the Minister for his response and the efforts that his Department is making, although I don't believe that an annual increase in income assistance necessarily should have been linked to things that were happening with other governments and sorting out things at our end. But I'd like to ask the Minister if he is prepared to look into the issue of indexing income assistance payments to cost of living.

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** Yes. The Department is always looking at reviewing our programs and services to make sure that they meet the basic needs of our clients in the Northwest Territories. Currently about 15 percent of our Department's budget is actually on income assistance. In 2014-15, we had over about 3,323 families on income assistance. With the low economic downturn throughout the Northwest Territories, it is increasing and on occasion we do bring supplementary appropriations before the House for approval to offset some of those costs.

As I mentioned to the Member, the Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut have created a Northern market basket measure which was finalized in 2014. We do base that on when we were reforming or changing the level of benefits available from the income assistance programs. Last time it was done was April 1, 2015. And as I said, the Department is always looking at reviewing our programs and services.

**MR. O'REILLY:** I want to thank the Minister for helping me make the case for indexing of income assistance payments. I'm wondering, though, if he could commit to looking at this issue within the next year and bringing that back to the appropriate committee.

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** The Member did bring up these questions during business plans. We did direct the Department to look at what other jurisdictions are doing from 2014. But the Member did mention that Yukon is doing something similar, so we will look into what Nunavut

and Yukon are doing in terms of indexing to the cost of living. I think our Northern market basket measure is effective when we are reviewing our programs, but we will see what Yukon and Nunavut are doing and if they are in fact indexing their income assistance and programs.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Masi. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Mahsi. I do appreciate the Minister's commitment on that and I look forward to sitting in on the committee work on that particular issue. I do note, though, that we have a number of other income support systems in place where payments are made to families and individuals. I'm wondering if the Minister could commit to review whether we should be incorporating indexing into all of those programs as well. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**HON. ALFRED MOSES:** Obviously as our Minister of Finance said, the best social program is a job, having job creation. One thing that our Department has done was create five positions, employment transition officers, and I think it's the first year that they've gone through it. We're trying to get people out of income assistance and relying on government and getting to the job workforce, and it's been very successful so far. We're hoping to continue to support people getting into employment. But in terms of bringing income assistance, we are going to be going through an income assistance review and how we work through those, and we will be obviously taking the information from Standing Committee and I look forward to our discussions moving forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.