

MEMBER STATEMENT—KEVIN O'REILLY MLA FRAME LAKE

INCOME SECURITY REVIEW

February 22, 2019

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. Education, Culture and Employment offers a number of programs to support our residents in several ways. These programs include income support for post-secondary students and seniors and income assistance for low-income families and children, with additional amounts for people with disabilities. Many recipients of support programs say that accessing them can be difficult, discouraging, and demoralizing. The processes for income assistance, in particular, are very rigid and prescribed in regulations providing very little flexibility in response to client needs.

The Minister of ECE has committed to an administrative review of income security programs. Discussions with non-governmental organizations have begun. My understanding is that the review is to be completed and changes implemented before the end of this Assembly. To be clear, I support this approach.

One of the most significant issues with income support and income assistance programs is that the amounts offered to recipients do not keep up with the cost of living. Regular reviews of the amounts linked to the Consumer Price Index or some other method of automatic adjustments for the cost of living would be a far better approach.

A major issue that surfaces for me in my constituent work is the treadmill of debt that traps some recipients. In some instances, income assistance recipients work, then lose their jobs and are penalized with reductions in their rent, food, and other allowances. Recipients are left between benefit periods with nothing to live on and often fall behind in their rent. Structurally, the system fails these people and builds desperation and worse.

Some jurisdictions have tried a basic income guarantee approach. There are various ways to structure basic income guarantee and different ideas on who should receive these sorts of payments. One of the major benefits pointed out in these initiatives is the elimination of the clients' endless application and reporting requirements and a reduction in the bureaucratic superstructure required to administer all of this monitoring.

We need to look at a pilot project on basic income guarantee in the context of our overall efforts to reduce and eliminate poverty consistent with the Anti-Poverty Strategy. I will have questions for the Minister responsible for Income Security later today. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.