

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

### QUESTION 598-18(3): INCOME SECURITY REVIEW

February 22, 2019

**MR. O'REILLY:** Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. I spoke in my statement earlier today about the ongoing administrative review of the income security programs. My understanding is that the review is to be completed and changes implemented for the end of the Assembly. Can the Minister give us an update on the work? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

**HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What we have done so far with the Income Support Program: I know that our department regularly reviews the Income Support Programs to make sure that they are updated regularly, but I have taken it a step further. I have actually met with all of the NGOs, as many as possible that I could, recognizing that time was not on my side in this endeavour. I met with the NGOs. Every NGO was invited to bring one person who is accessing income support at this time so that we can have a voice from them. "Nothing about us without us" is my philosophy.

Since we compiled that information, we have provided a "what we heard" report. We have sent out a request to MLAs and to Indigenous governments to ask them for feedback on our Income Support Program. As soon as we get that feedback and as soon as this session is finished, it is one of my major priorities to get tackling. Again, we don't have a lot of time left in this Assembly. We will be looking at short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals. I am going to start knocking off those short-term goals. People know me for doing that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks to the Minister. It is all good news. I do sincerely appreciate her work on this area. I have repeatedly mentioned the need to index our Income Security Programs. Of course, those include income assistance, student financial assistance, seniors, and benefits to people with disabilities. We need to index those to the cost of living. Is the indexing of income security payments an element of the current review, and will recommendations be made to introduce indexing?

**HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE:** At the current time, right now, we don't do the indexing, but we have made a number of enhancements to the programs just in the last few years. We have increased our senior citizen supplementary benefit. We have increased the NWT child benefit. We have improved our senior home heating subsidy. We have extended our rental allowances for single applicants. Then, of course, in our proposed mains for 2019-2020, we proposed an increase for disabled and age allowance for people. I am looking forward to the results of all of the MLAs and Indigenous governments. If that is a concern, then I am looking forward to seeing it in the surveys from the MLAs.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks to the Minister for that. I will certainly be recommending

indexing, and the Minister knows this. I have also mentioned problems where income assistance recipients find themselves where they don't actually have any money to live on because of windfalls or wages from previous benefit periods, recalculations, and so on. Is there any consideration being given to repayment plans, much like rental arrears plans, to reduce the hardship of drastic benefit reductions?

**HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE:** I am actually quite disappointed to actually hear that question, because it is a major concern for me. People cannot afford to just get penalized if they are on income support. They are some of our most marginalized populations. We need to work with them. It is not okay to just cut them off. I inquired with the department, and my understanding is that we try to work with them so that there is not a financial hardship. The minimum repayment is \$25 a month. One of the critiques that I did hear from the NGOs, and I am thinking that is part of our problem, is that we are not good at communicating, and I think that goes across a lot of departments. Right now, we are looking at our communication.

I want people in the public to know that, if you have to pay income support back, come to us. We want to support you and make a repayment plan. We will try to make it within your financial means. The lowest amount will be \$25 a month. I am hoping that that is affordable for people. We should not be penalizing the most marginalized in our population.

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

**MR. O'REILLY:** Merci, Monsieur le President. Thanks to the Minister for that. I have discussed with her constituent issues and raised this issue with her. We have clear cases that we have discussed together. I have constituents who get cut off, and they have nothing to live with. We have to fix this, and I hear the commitment from the Minister to work on this. I expect all of my colleagues to give her suggestions on how to improve the system, because we shouldn't be cutting people off.

I have supported the Minister in this administrative review, and I hope it includes indexing, but we need a more systematic approach, Mr. Speaker, one that is around a basic income guarantee. I am wondering: can the Minister tell us whether she has considered a basic income guarantee pilot project here in the Northwest Territories, and when is she prepared to see that happen? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

**HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE:** I think yesterday I talked a little bit about things I've been called, and not being called easy and not being called lazy. One thing I have been called is, and I don't even know where it comes from, but I have been called a little bit of a socialist, and within that system, the guaranteed basic income would fit very well.

I do adhere to it. I had asked the department about it, and my understanding from the department was that there wasn't a lot of research on it that showed it work. I am not accepting that answer, Mr. Speaker, so I have asked the department to go back and look at that research again and show it to me.

My worry is that I believe in it. I think it may be the right way to go, but I am also concerned about the time that we have left in this Assembly. I am doing the research now. If my findings prove that it is viable, then it will be in my recommendations for the

next Assembly. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.