

MEMBER'S STATEMENT — KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE
INCOME SECURITY ISSUES

March 5, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I wish I was going to Inuvik.

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.

In my time as an MLA, the majority of my constituents' issues have been related to various Income Security matters. Many recipients say that accessing the programs 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. In the last Assembly, the Minister of ECE conducted an administrative review of Income Security programs that included discussions with nongovernmental organizations. My understanding is that the review resulted in several changes, including a process to revise the manual used by GNWT staff. To be clear, I supported that work and commended the Minister at that time.

In the last Assembly, I raised the issue of the need for an automatic review of Income Security rates and, preferably, an increase tied to CPI, Consumer Price Index, annually. Where I have seen correspondence from the department with my constituents on Income Assistance, there has never been any reference to appeal rights. Under the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, there are mandatory provisions that applicants are to be advised of their appeal rights in writing. It's not clear why this same standard is not used for our residents who are clients of our Income Security programs.

A major issue that surfaces with me in my work for constituents is the treadmill of debt that traps some recipients. In instances where 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, often falling behind in their rent.

Some jurisdictions have tried a basic income guarantee approach, and I believe we need to look at pilot project with a basic income guarantee in the context of our overall strategy to reduce and eliminate poverty. I will have questions later today for the Minister responsible for Income Security. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.