

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 152-19(2): INCOME ASSISTANCE ISSUES

March 5, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment, who is also responsible for Income Security programs. I spoke in my statement of a number of issues. I see from the Education, Culture and Employment website that there is an updated Income Assistance policy manual dated October 2019. Although the Social Assistance Appeals Regulations require that an officer inform clients in writing of their entitlement appeal, I see no reference to this in the manual or in the correspondence that has been provided to me. Can the Minister tell us whether the department routinely informs clients in writing of their rights when it comes to Income Security programs? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Education, Culture and Employment.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier, the Member referenced the ATIPP legislation that requires a notice of appeal and appeal rights. The Social Assistance Act Income Assistance Appeals Regulations also contain a provision. It's Section 4(1), I believe, so that is mandated that that has to be done. That is done. I have a copy here of the notice of refusal, which clearly indicates that there are appeal rights. The handbook the Member references, I believe there is an updated policy manual. It's February 2020, and I checked that today, and that does make that reference, although the plain-language handbook might not be as clear, but I will look into that.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. I can assure him, though, that, from the correspondence I have seen from my constituents, the appeal rights are not mentioned, so I would ask that the Minister investigate some of the actual correspondence Income Assistance recipients receive when they are refused, and so on. I want to move on. I have repeatedly mentioned the need to index our Income Security programs. That includes Income Assistance, student financial assistance, seniors and other benefits, and those should be indexed, Mr. Speaker, to the cost of living. Forced growth is the norm elsewhere, so I do not believe that our most disadvantaged people should be left behind. Can the Minister commit to indexing of Income Security payments through changes to regulations and/or legislation to help the most vulnerable members of our society?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: First, I just want to address the Member's comments. If any Member is aware of incidents where we are not living up to our standards, please let me know. We have a system in place within the actual offices, but I want to work toward a territory-wide tracking system so that we can identify these types of concerns and move to improve them. In terms of indexing, Income Assistance does pay the actual cost of shelter, of utilities, and of heating fuel, so, in that sense, it is indexed. However, at this time, I can't commit to indexing all of the benefits. We look at our mandate, and ECE has a lot in that mandate, and so, over this next year, we are going to be looking at how we can achieve that. There are going to be some tough financial decisions that we have to make, and so I cannot stand up here and say that we are going to make the decisions that the Member is asking for.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. It was not quite a "yes," but, look, I am talking about the most disadvantaged people in our society. We need take care of them, as we can and should do. I mentioned in my earlier statement the problems when Income Assistance recipients find themselves in situations where they lose jobs or they maybe lose their housing. It's a vicious cycle. I would like to know if there is any consideration that is being given to repayment plans, like rental arrears plans, to reduce hardships of drastic benefit reductions?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: I have spoken about this at length in the House. Right now, there are repayment plans if you receive an overpayment. However, the Member is correct. If someone starts working, their benefits are cut off because they are over the threshold, and then, if they lose their job, that could create immediate financial hardship or the cut-off could result in them having to pay thousands of dollars in rent and utilities and fuel, if it's in the middle of winter, and they might not be able to afford that, so I have committed to looking into the possibility of phasing benefits out. That is a long-term discussion. It would take a lot of research. It would take legislative changes, but I have committed to this House that I am looking into that kind of stuff.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final supplementary, Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that, and I do want to commend him for taking on that big job. I think he is the right guy to do it. I supported the previous Minister when she conducted an administrator review of Income Security programs. They resulted in some important changes, but what we really need is a systematic approach to change. An example of that is guaranteed basic income, or at least a pilot project around guaranteed basic income. Has the Minister or his department considered a guaranteed basic income pilot project in the NWT, and when is he prepared to make that happen?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: I wish I could have more positive answers here for the Member, but the fact is we are not considering this. The work that it would take to actually look into this and do the research is not doable, given what we have been mandated to do by this Assembly. Successive governments over the past number of decades have gone through cuts. The people to get cut are the policy people. We are pretty thin on policy positions. It is tough to do a lot of the work that we want to do. I am not even sure how we are going to do the things that we are mandated to do and that this Assembly is asking of us. To take on a project of this magnitude, I just can't do it at this point. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.