

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

**QUESTION 394-19(2):  
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES WAGE TOP-UP PROGRAM**

**October 21, 2020**

**MR. O'REILLY:** Merci, Monsieur le President. My question's for the Minister of Finance, the NWT Wage Top-Up Program. I'm going to change it up here a bit. I was looking at the website before the House this afternoon, and I am pleased to announce that the wage top-up program has been extended to February 28, 2021. It's kind of unusual that a Regular Member is making this announcement, but I don't recall any kind of public announcement about this being extended. This is good news, Mr. Speaker. Can the Minister tell me what kind of publicity was done around the extension of the NWT Wage Top-up Program? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Finance.

**HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Department of Finance is continually evaluating this program, and as it's becoming apparent that there is going to be additional funding still within the funding that was approved, then we'll continue, whether or not the program can be approved and extended, much the same way that much of our COVID relief programs are being administered, as quickly as we're able to identify that. In fact, one of the programs that's coming on its end point has the ability, financial ability to continue. We're trying to turn those around quickly. That may arrive with a lack of timely media releases, but that's not for lack of the fact that the more important things, we want to make sure that those programs continue to be available to the people that are applying to them and that the information will go out in due course. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. O'REILLY:** It is good news that it's been extended now into 2020-2021. I think there is another issue with the program. This is a program that the employer has to apply on. Maybe an employer doesn't really want to apply for it, so is there some way in which an employee can access the funding through the wage top-up program if their employer refuses to enrol?

**HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK:** I am grateful for that question. The information that is posted regarding this program on the website does indicate that any employee whose employer is not a member or not participating in the program can call the Department of Finance. There are numbers and email contacts that are listed on the website as I understand, and the reason being that an employee can apply directly. They can provide their paystub, and the Department of Finance will ensure that they get that top-up.

However, what we have been doing is that, when an employee contacts the department, makes us aware that there is an employer who has not participated or is not participating, it's an opportunity for us to reach out. To date, that has been a way that, in fact, we are able to get more employers involved, which then benefits not only the employee who raises it but all of the employees who may be affected. I am happy to

give that information out. We are continuing to try to get that word out.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Again, I would like to thank the Minister for that good news, and I would like to get it out even further. The wage top-up program really, Mr. Speaker, is a clear sign that our minimum wage is way too low. I know we are going to be doing a review of the minimum wage. We have also got evidence about a living wage, conducted by an NGO, that says it needs to be a lot higher. Can the Minister agree to support a permanent increase to the NWT minimum wage to \$18 per hour or higher?

**HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK:** The minimum wage process and the committee does fall under the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, but I just want to speak to the genesis of this program. Where this program came from arose out of a need identified in COVID-19 by the federal government that low-wage earners were at risk of leaving the employment workforce, leaving the labour force, and so this program was really designed to ensure that folks who were often in front-line positions, such as the grocery stores, stayed employed. It was really targeting a very specific concern that arose in the course of COVID-19. To the extent that minimum wage is, in fact, too low in a general sense, that is a question for the committee that has been struck.