

MEMBER STATEMENT—KEVIN O'REILLY MLA FRAME LAKE

MINIMUM WAGE AND TOP-UP PROGRAM

February 9, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. The federal government introduced a wage top-up funding program on April 1, and that has been extended a few times, now to February 28, 2021. In most jurisdictions, the top-ups were restricted to the essential service sector. In the NWT, no such restrictions were applied and it is available to all employees who get less than \$18 per hour, even if their employer doesn't want to enroll. As of November 3, 2020, 83 businesses are participating; 1,943 individuals have benefited; and the total cost for the program is about \$1,700,000. That means the wage top-up program has been taken up by about 9 percent of the total NWT labour force, using numbers from the Bureau of Statistics.

The federal government is covering 75 percent of the cost of the wage top-up program. I support this program as it can support many of our service-sector workers who provide key programs and services, and it will assist with economic recovery. However, the need for this program is the clearest sign that our minimum wage is too low, far too low. \$13.46 per hour is not enough to get by on. That's no surprise to many Northerners. In March 2019, Alternatives North released research reports that calculated each parent in a family of four would have to earn \$23.95 hourly in Yellowknife, \$24.75 in Hay River, and \$23.78 in Inuvik for a basic standard of living.

In the NWT, the effective minimum wage has been \$18 an hour, even though the official minimum wage was set at \$13.46 an hour on April 1, 2018. Apparently, there is a mysterious Minimum Wage Committee that has been in place since 2013. It convenes every couple of years to review the minimum wage and make recommendations to the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. There is virtually no information on any GNWT website about this committee, who sits on it, and what they look at. Even the reports seem to be secret as they are not on the ECE website and have not been tabled in this House.

It would be unbelievable, if not completely unfair, if the effective minimum wage in the NWT is rolled back from anything less than \$18 an hour, which is what people have been getting for the last 10 months. COVID hasn't changed the cost of living either, Mr. Speaker. I will have questions later today for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment about where we are going with the NWT minimum wage and whether he intends to roll it back. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.