

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

**ORAL QUESTION 788-19(2):
CLAWBACK OF NORTHWEST TERRITORIES SENIORS' ASSISTANCE**

November 23, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My question's for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment who is responsible for income support programs.

First of all, can the Minister confirm whether benefits under the NWT seniors supplement are being reduced for those who received payments under the Canada Emergency Response Benefit? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The NWT Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit is a fixed payment of \$196. For those who are eligible, either receive it, or they don't receive it. So the benefit itself would not be reduced other than being reduced to zero if the person is not eligible for Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement.

The eligibility criteria for the NWT Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit are the same as for the federal Guaranteed Income Supplement. And so if someone is not receiving the Guaranteed Income Supplement from the federal government, they are not receiving the NWT Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit. They may see a reduction in their GIS. I've heard of that. But they are still receiving that supplementary benefit from the NWT.

Every year we have around -- well, last year we had around 1500 people receive the benefit. The year before that, about 1400 people. The year before that, 1300. This year we're already at around 1500, and we're only partway through the fiscal year.

So for the most part, we aren't seeing a decline in those people who can -- who are eligible and who are receiving the benefit. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. Look, I'm confused at the best of times, and it's been a long day, but my understanding is that seniors are seeing the NWT senior supplement -- they see it being reduced if they took CERB payments. So last year during the global pandemic, this government declared an exemption period during which some forms of assistance would not be counted as unearned income in calculating benefits. These exemptions were in place April 1 to October 31st. In some cases, right up to December 31st.

Can the Minister tell us what the status is of those exemptions and how they impact any claw backs of the NWT seniors benefit? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are no claw backs of the NWT Senior Citizens Supplementary Benefit. There's no claw backs from what I understand of any federal benefits such as Old Age Security or Guaranteed Income Supplement.

What's happening is that seniors who received the Canada Emergency Response Benefit last year had incomes greater than the threshold to receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement. And so this year's Guaranteed Income Supplement eligibility is based on last year's income. And if the CERB program increased your income over that threshold, you no longer receive GIS or you've seen it reduced. The -- our benefit that we deliver has not been reduced. It's either you get it, or you don't get it. So I want to clear that up for the Member.

Last year, the Member's correct, the income assistance program exempted around \$10 million worth of benefits, so around \$7.8 million worth of CERB. The rest is gifts from family members, gifts from -- or supports from Indigenous governments or non-profits. And those have all ended.

There was a one-time GST payment, one-time Old Age Security payment. But that all happened in 2020, and they would all -- they would count against -- or count as income in 2020 when assessing this year's eligibility for GIS. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that very eloquent explanation that I couldn't get out very easily.

So claw backs might not be the best term, but that's what the seniors are calling them. What's happening, of course, is that they're getting dinged for taking the CERB payment.

So what steps can the Minister take to not link the NWT seniors supplement to GIS and allow seniors to access this benefit for the 2020 tax year. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And from what I understand, if people are seeing a reduction in their GIS because they received CERB, they would still receive more money overall; albeit it would have been in the last fiscal year and isn't necessarily much good to people in this fiscal year.

The NWT Senior Citizens Supplementary Benefit is a legislated program, and there is -- the only way to do what the Member's requesting is to change the legislation, and if we were to do that, that change wouldn't happen until late next year. So I don't think that is likely.

What we can do, though, what is -- those seniors who are suffering financial hardship and who are eligible, can apply for income assistance. And I know there are -- you know, people don't want to apply for income assistance. But it's a program to help people in those situations. I know there are negative connotations with it, but the fact is it is if you can't pay your rent, we want to help you pay your rent; if you can't pay your heat, we want to help you pay your heat. That's what the program is there for. So if people are suffering financial hardship, I encourage them to apply through the income assistance program. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. I think what he was saying to me there was almost code for a private Member's bill. But I did pretty good in the last Assembly. We'll see if it happens in this one.

So, but I'd understood that this government is doing some sort of review on income support systems for seniors. Can the Minister give us an update on that work and a timeline as well. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And the Member is correct. We are looking at the income assistance program, not just for seniors, but one of the key changes we want to make is tailoring a program for seniors and persons with disabilities, essentially people who have aged out of the workforce, we know aren't going to be in the workforce and shouldn't have to meet the same requirements as others. So that work is well underway.

As with everything, you know, things haven't gone as quickly as we would hope, but for the most part, it is on track. This year there was a lot of preliminary work done, looking at our programs, looking at programs in other jurisdictions, doing literature reviews. There has been surveys on productive choices. And that information is being put together. And I haven't even seen that yet, but I look forward to sharing this with the standing committee when the opportunity arises.

An RFP went out for the engagement piece of this. And so in the coming months in the new year, there will be a public engagement.

And I know we are in the time of COVID, but there are some things that we can do virtually that are easier to do virtually, and there's some types of engagement we want to do more in person. So I've asked the department to ensure that we are reaching the people we need to reach when we go to engage, because not everyone has a computer, not everyone's computer savvy.

So that part is beginning in the new year, and by April of 2023, we hope to have the program rolled out. And those who are eligible to be transitioned into the new program for seniors and persons with disabilities, we hope to have them transferred by that date. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.