

**THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE COCHRANE
MINISTER OF EDUCATION, CULTURE
AND EMPLOYMENT**

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Income Security Program Improvements

Mr. Speaker, Income Security programs are a vital part of the social safety network that helps Northwest Territories residents by bridging gaps in their ability to support themselves and to pursue their personal, educational and career goals.

Residents who have accessed our Income Security programs and have lived experience are important partners in developing program improvements. Their voices are essential, and I have sought their feedback. I have also welcomed input over the last few months from non-government agencies, Members of the Legislative Assembly and Indigenous Governments. By taking the time to listen and hear suggestions from our partners, our work to meet the needs of our most vulnerable residents is better informed. Achieving change takes time, but building relationships and having solution-based discussions with those who understand the issues is a positive step.

Our partners identified 27 ways to improve our Income Assistance program. I heard very clearly that in order to build responsive Income Security programs, we must look at more than just benefits levels. Residents need to have the tools to access and understand the programs available to them, and right now, they don't have those tools. I've heard from all partners that clear communications products are immediately required to help fix this information gap.

As one of our first priorities, we are updating the Income Assistance Handbook, available to clients and their advocates. The new Handbook will be client-focused, user-friendly and written in plain language. We are engaging the Literacy Council to assist with this work. The revised Handbook will be completed and available by this summer. This tool will provide residents with a better understanding of the Income Assistance program.

We recognize that our programs can sometimes be complex, and the Department is looking at ways to streamline administration and simplify the public's interactions with the

program. New approaches include simpler reporting requirements, redesigned forms and client-focused service standards. In the coming weeks, I will be reporting our progress to the NGOs and residents that provided input on our programs.

We have retained the services of an outside consultant to help us redefine our business processes and achieve the outcomes that have been asked of us. We have also reviewed the Income Assistance payment process and implemented a clearer process to ensure clients are receiving timely payments.

The changes we are now making will build on past program enhancements, such as the recent increase of up to \$105 per month to the Income Assistance allowances for seniors and persons with disabilities. This increase came into effect on April 1st, 2019. It provides additional financial support to help with the costs of supplies and services required as a result of age or a disability. This is one of the ways we are meeting our commitment to help NWT seniors age in place.

Also on April 1st, we increased the maximum course reimbursement for part-time post-secondary students from \$500 to \$880 per course, with a maximum lifetime limit of up to \$8,800. This change will support residents in making choices that work for them to advance their education.

The Government of the Northwest Territories has an obligation to assist vulnerable residents and to help people across the NWT achieve as much education and economic security as they can. We are making changes and investments that will improve the quality of life and opportunities for everyone, in partnership with clients, non-governmental organizations, Members of this House and other levels of government. I am proud of the way we are working together to create positive change for people who need our help.

Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.