

**Income Security Programs Update**

Mr. Speaker, the Government of the Northwest Territories is responsible for ensuring that Income Security programs respond to the needs and realities of residents. I am proud of how this government has increased its financial support to those in greatest need.

Income Security programs help residents bridge gaps in their ability to support themselves and pursue their personal, educational and career goals. They are a vital part of our social safety network. During the life of this Assembly, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment has implemented numerous enhancements to its suite of Income Security programs.

In 2016, the Department changed the way Income Assistance payments were calculated and restructured the program to ensure that income intended for children was no longer included. These changes resulted in more families with children being eligible to receive assistance and increase their monthly household income.

The high cost of living disproportionately affects our low to modest income residents. Our government increased the Northwest Territories Child Benefit to provide additional support to families. As well, we increased the Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit and the supports available through the Seniors Home Heating Subsidy to support low to modest income seniors.

The Department reviewed and increased the amount available through the Income Assistance program to cover rental costs. We also increased the funding available to emergency shelter operators. Together, these improvements help address homelessness. And all of these improvements, together, support this Assembly's mandate to reduce the cost of living, foster healthy families, reduce poverty, and help seniors age in place.

Mr. Speaker, I am accountable for ensuring that the programs and services offered by the Department of Education, Culture and Employment are helpful to the residents they are

intended to serve. I want to make sure that we improve quality of life and expand opportunities for our residents.

The best approach to achieving this is through working together. This past December we convened a meeting that included those who access our programs, non-governmental organizations and those who provide services to income support clientele. We also solicited input from Members of this House and other orders of government.

By working together, we have identified 27 priority actions to further improve the Income Assistance program. I am pleased to report that we have already started on actions to improve the timeliness of payments, communications materials and the client experience.

A new client-focused Income Assistance Handbook has been developed as a key resource for those accessing the program and their supporters. The Handbook provides a user-friendly, plain-language explanation of the program with helpful tips and resources. It is currently being finalized. Both online and paper copies will soon be available in all regional offices across the NWT to empower and equip clients with the information they need.

We recognize that knowledgeable and well-trained front-line staff are critical to delivering programs that respond to the needs of our clients. As a direct response to feedback from our partners, the Department will ensure that trauma-informed and disability-sensitivity training is added to the required training that staff currently receives. Through this required training, Client Services Officers will continue to build on their professional development and enhance their client-centered services.

We have also introduced Departmental Service Standards for the Income Security and Labour branch, which provide a benchmark for the quality of service that clients can expect of employees and senior managers. Materials to make this information readily available have been developed. They will be accessible online, in every regional office and will also be shared with all clients.

We heard from our partners that they want to be just that, partners — in supporting people that need it most and working towards solutions that provide better-integrated services. The Department is continuing to connect with non-governmental organizations. We will

establish regular meetings to share information, learn from each other and advance our collective goals.

Mr. Speaker, we are committed to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of internal administration, and significant work has been done to ensure Income Security programs meet the needs of residents. But we still have work to do. Change takes time. Through solution-based discussions with those who understand the issues, ongoing evaluations of our programs and building strong community partnerships, we are making positive steps to reach our goals.

Masi, Mr. Speaker.