

SUPPLEMENTARY HEALTH BENEFITS PROGRAM

Thank you Mr. Speaker,

Mr. Speaker, It's been an interesting couple of months since we last met in this House. A lot has happened. My big issue and one which has become a major concern to many of my constituents and residents of the NWT, is the announcement made by the Minister responsible for Health and Social Services two weeks before Christmas that the Department of Health and Social would be eliminating their four, very popular Supplemental Health Benefits Programs, programs which are currently available for all residents of the NWT. Specifically the Extended Health Benefits for Seniors Program; the Specified Medical Conditions Program; the Additional Drug Assistance Program; and the Indigent Program

The Minister mentioned that these programs would be consolidated into a single, income tested program that would provide assistance to low income families and residents who do not have medical coverage through their employers. On the face of it, providing support to these low income families is the right thing to do and a good idea. The problem is that Cabinet, in their infinite wisdom, decided that the cost of the changes must be on the backs of NWT seniors, who live on fixed incomes and families with individuals who have chronic conditions. This is a bad decision. The proposed program is a bad program four-fold and will create more problems than it fixes. Ultimately, I believe it will cost more than it saves..

Clearly, the Cabinet did not do the research or cost analysis to identify the ramifications of implementing such a thoughtless program. I know this because I, and other Members, have continually asked for research and cost analysis information that Cabinet should have used to make an informed decision. To date they have been unable to provide anything. Personally, I don't believe that any research or analysis exists.

Fortunately, we have a slight reprieve. The Minister has announced that she is deferring the implementation date. She has indicated that some elements of the proposed program might create undue hardship for some Northerners. Mr. Speaker, the Minister has indicated that the program design will be reviewed before the program is implemented on September 1, 2009.

There are several problems with this. First, the right thing to do, in light of the hundreds of concerns raised by resident of the NWT and the lack of evidence that Cabinet used any real analysis or financial information to make responsible decision, would be to eliminate the proposed program altogether. To go back to the beginning and design a program to support low income families without adversely affecting those receiving support through the existing programs. It's the right thing to do for Seniors and those with chronic medical conditions.

Second, the timeline proposed by the Minister is ridiculous. There is no way that comprehensive research and effective consultation followed by program design, final review and implementation can adequately be done by September 1, 2009. This is clearly nothing more than a delay tactic. If the timeline is upheld, the Regular

Members won't have an opportunity to debate the program until after implementation.

This is inappropriate.

Mr. Speaker, I will have questions on this topic for the Minister Responsible for the Department of Health and Social Services at the appropriate time.