

**Cost of Living: ECE Progress Statement**

Mr. Speaker, over the past year, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment has implemented new initiatives and improved existing programs and services to help meet our mandate commitments to address the cost of living for NWT residents.

We all understand the importance of reducing poverty and providing our residents with the tools necessary to achieve their goals and live healthy, productive lives. The work underway at the Department supports those goals.

Actions in early childhood development, in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Services, have been focused on developing and implementing meaningful programs and services for families with young children. We recently renewed our Right from the Start Action Plan which will continue to guide the work we do and help inform areas that we need to continue strengthening.

Fulfilling the commitments in the action plan, ECE reviewed the Early Childhood Program, which included engagements with various groups in the early childhood sector. As Members are aware, this is the program that provides funding and supports to licensed early childhood program providers.

The results of the review led to the changes we implemented in October 2016 to streamline processes and provide more strategic support to these small business operators.

Mr. Speaker, we have increased the operating subsidy model for licensed child care operators to reflect increases in the cost of living, and substantially increased the rate provided for the care of infants and children with identified special needs. Operators in government owned buildings now receive 75% of the daily rate, a significant increase from the previous 50%.

These changes are in addition to the ongoing staff grants we provide for upgrading early childhood development skills and the scholarships for students registered in early childhood education programs. All of these improvements are intended to increase and improve supports for childcare operators.

Mr. Speaker, the Junior Kindergarten program is planned to be incorporated into schools across the territory in the 2017-2018 school year. If parents choose to enroll their children, they will save up to \$12,000 per year in childcare costs. This is a free, optional program in a safe school environment. Not only is it a good choice for healthy child development, it puts money directly back into the pockets of Northern families.

Another significant change we have made to ensure families have as much in their pockets as possible is the new approach to funding families with children through the Income Assistance Program.

Following the federal government's introduction of the new Canada Child Benefit in July 2016, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment made changes to the way Income Assistance payments were calculated. This change resulted in more clients being eligible to receive Income Assistance and an increase in monthly household income. This is an investment in families.

Taking into consideration the new federal benefit and the rising cost of living in the NWT, we restructured the Income Assistance Program to ensure that income intended for children was no longer included in the calculation of Income Assistance payments.

As a part of the focus of raising NWT children out of poverty and providing more assistance to NWT families, ECE, in partnership with the Department of Finance, are proposing to increase benefits under the NWT Child Benefit to better support more low and modest income families with children.

We see this approach as helping families provide a better quality of life for their children, support their well-being, and give children opportunities to reach their potential.

We continue to work with the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation, to transfer Income Assistance clients from market rent accommodations into public housing. Efforts were focused on placing clients with high rental costs into public housing to more effectively transition these individuals into the labour force.

The Department has also initiated a program that provides intensive labour market supports to Income Assistance clients that helps them with employment.

Mr. Speaker, the Northwest Territories is a great place to live and raise our families. We will continue to work with all levels of government to improve our residents' quality of life through partnerships, policy changes, improvements to existing programs, and new initiatives. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment will continue improving programs and services to ensure northern residents have resources and opportunities to allow them to lead healthy, fulfilled lives and contribute to the growth of our territory.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.