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Proposed Changes To Supplementary Health Benefits Program

MR. RAMSAY: Thank you. I would like to welcome everyone back to the House and also the visitors we have in the gallery. I would like to speak today about the proposed changes to supplementary health benefits in the Northwest Territories.

I would like to begin by thanking all of those who I have spoken to in person and those of you who have emailed, phoned and faxed your concerns to me over these proposed changes. I have received more and more calls and concerns over this issue than any other single issue in the five years that I have been a Member of this House. I am very thankful for all of the input that I have received. It takes a great deal of courage to speak out, and a special thank you to those of you who have shared your own unique personal situations with me and other MLAs.

A couple of days ago the Minister of Health issued a press release stating the implementation of the changes would be delayed from April 1st of this year until September 1st. This certainly shows that the Minister and government finally have woken up and realized that there are many legitimate concerns out there on the proposed changes to supplementary health benefits. However, I am very sceptical of the date of September 1st, which will come right on the heels of a summer recess where Members go back into their ridings and into their regions.

My belief is that between now and September 1st, I do not have the confidence that the work, analysis and meaningful consultation can take place on such a large issue. I believe that the delay is intended to take the heat off of the government and off of the Minister in this session and that the intent is to pursue it on September 1st with the changes, without a real chance for Members to ask questions and be involved in this process. What type of consultation can take place over the summer months when many are enjoying spending time with family or away from home?

The real answer is to send this back to the drawing board, get some real answers, consult and engage the public in a meaningful way and put all of the information on the table. The Minister has been quick to say that the proposed changes will be cost neutral, but she has never provided any evidence whatsoever to back this claim up. I understand and appreciate the gap that exists with lower income earners and families. I believe, as a government, we should address this gap. However, it should not be on the backs of seniors and families coping with chronic illness.

Mr. Speaker, the income thresholds proposed are miserably low. Means testing individuals or families dealing with chronic illness is something we certainly need to re-examine. As a government, we cannot continue to make half-baked policy decisions that detrimentally affect the psyche and feelings of our residents. We need to keep people here in the North, not keep looking for creative ways to drive people away. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.