

**MINISTER'S STATEMENT 351-19(2):
ADDITIONAL FINANCIAL SUPPORT DURING EXTENDED EVACUATION**

HON. DIANE ARCHIE: Mr. Speaker, I rise today on behalf of the Premier to announce two new government policies on how the Government of the Northwest Territories supports resident who have been evacuated from their communities for extended periods of time and communities that support them. As of May 24th, nearly 2,000 people from Hay River and the K'atlodeeche First Nation Reserve have registered as evacuees in Yellowknife, with additional evacuees staying in other NWT communities including Enterprise, Fort Providence, Fort Simpson, and Fort Smith. Currently, residents who must evacuate their home community receive transportation, meals, and accommodation at the evacuation centres. Income assistance clients are also provided emergency funds of \$500 to \$1,000. However, we know that not everyone is eligible for support through income assistance and being away from home can result in unexpected expenses that are particularly challenging for those who experience an interruption to their income.

Today, the Government of the Northwest Territories is launching two new programs to support registered evacuees and community governments: The Evacuee Income Disruption Support Program and the Community Government Hosting Evacuees Grant.

The Evacuee Income Disruption Support Program assists individuals who have lost income due to recent community evacuations. This program aims to provide targeted financial relief during evacuations. The Evacuee Income Disruption Support program is available to all NWT residents who are subject to an evacuation order over seven days and have suffered a loss of income because their employment has been disrupted due to the evacuation order. Eligible individuals will receive a one-time payment of \$750.

With yesterday's announcement from the Town of Hay River, many evacuees are now planning to return home. Still, I assure those residents that if their income has been disrupted, they will still be eligible for this program even if they returned home. Information on how to apply is available on our website and on the GNWT Facebook page.

Mr. Speaker, it is also important to note that we support our community governments at this time; most notably, the Town of Hay River, the K'atlodeeche First Nation, and the communities that have welcomed residents since the evacuation orders were issued on May 14. We understand that some evacuees have chosen not to come to Yellowknife for a variety of reasons and were being supported by other communities in the South Slave and the Deh Cho. We commend these communities for taking in, feeding, and supporting evacuees during such a challenging period.

In order to assist communities who have been unable to secure funding from other sources, the GNWT is launching the Community Government Hosting Evacuees Grant, which is a grant designed to help eligible community governments cover costs associated with supporting registered evacuees, including staffing, lodging, meals, and the provision of essential services. Municipal and Community Affairs Minister Shane Thompson has already sent letters to relevant communities advising them of this funding, which is separate from what is provided to communities operating official evacuee centres. Communities seeking the Community Government Hosting Evacuees Grant will have up to 30 days from the date the evacuation order is lifted and/or community residents are able to return home to apply for a grant through this program.

We announce both programs today, and more information is available for residents and community governments on the GNWT website or our GNWT Facebook page. We know this wildfire season is going to be challenging. The evacuation event for Hay River and K'atlodeeche

First Nation serves as a reminder to all of us to do everything we can to be ready for emergencies. This includes being prepared for evacuation on short notice and, wherever possible, having plans in place to safeguard personal health and safety as well as economic well-being, and your family members and pets as well, Mr. Speaker. This is an exceptionally challenging period for many NWT residents, and we must continue to lean on each other in the days and weeks ahead. NWT residents and communities have this government's full support.

The GNWT is incredibly grateful to the community and the residents of Yellowknife, who have welcomed so many evacuees with open arms and open hearts. I also want to thank everyone involved in supporting evacuees at the multiplex here in Yellowknife and in Enterprise, Fort Providence, Fort Simpson, and Fort Smith, as well as any other communities that have welcomed evacuees. Your compassion and time have not gone unnoticed.

Further, on May 18, the GNWT announced its commitment to supporting fire evacuees from Hay River and K'atlodeeche First Nation through a donation matching program through the United Way NWT. The GNWT is matching donations up to \$150,000 providing critical assistance to those affected by the ongoing community evacuations. One hundred percent of donations raised through United Way NWT's 2023 wildfire response fundraising campaign will go towards supporting evacuees. The community and corporate support we've seen for this campaign has been truly inspiring, and I want to thank the donors for their generosity.

On behalf of the Government of the Northwest Territories, I want to give our heartfelt thanks to the crews on the ground, the pilots, the air attack officers, and tanker base teams for their incredible support to combat these wildfires. Quyananni, Mr. Speaker.

**MEMBER'S STATEMENT 1512-19(2):
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES EMERGENCIES AND PREPAREDNESS**

MS. NOKLEBY: Thank you. Good afternoon, Mr. Speaker. I welcome you and my colleagues back for another productive session. I rise today to give thanks to all the hardworking and dedicated people who have spent the last few weeks fighting fires in the South Slave, dealing with the flooding in the Beaufort Delta, and supporting evacuees barely one year after they coped with the devastating floods.

My heart breaks for the people of the K'atlodeeche First Nation. Not only did they suffer from the flooding last year, with some of them still not in their homes, but now they've also lost significant infrastructure in their community, the extent of which is not yet fully known. Thankfully, I hear several historical and cultural artifacts were spared, items that are irreplaceable, however, people have lost their homes. We can never replace the mementos and the photos, the family heirlooms passed down from generation to generation, and for that I am truly sorry.

This has been a hugely stressful time for all residents across the territory. We are a small community. We all have loved ones, friends and family, that have been impacted by the recent emergencies; emergencies that are only increasing in frequency as the earth's climate continues to change. Storms that once only occurred every hundred years are now coming more regularly, and we must figure out how to adapt if we hope to survive. One thing about Northerners is that we are resilient, and we are strong.

Do I like that we're constantly challenged by the environment around us? No. But what it has done is given us the ability to persevere when the going gets tough. And it is that perseverance that will help us to adapt to the change around us.

Mr. Speaker, we must stop being reactive to disasters and start to plan more accordingly. The GNWT has a dismal track record in this area, choosing to wait until it is too late and the emergency has begun. The Minister of MACA has told me that his department doesn't have the capacity to deal with emergency situations or project management as it's a very small department. That it is the responsibility of the underfunded communities to prepare and deal with a climate change driven disaster. A scary thought, Mr. Speaker, given the lack of resources and money in most communities.

Mr. Speaker, when is this government going to get proactive and stop leaving our communities to pay out-of-pocket for situations created by lack of adequate funding or investment in our communities? I would have had questions for the ECC Minister, but he has chosen not to be here today. Thank you.

QUESTION 1516-19(2):

**EMERGENCY LEAVE FOR GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
EMPLOYEES AND INCOME SUPPORT FOR RESIDENTS IMPACTED BY EVACUATION
ORDERS**

MS. CLEVELAND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions today are for the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, for the second year in a row, Hay River and K'atlodeeche First Nation residents have been hit with severe disasters and forced to evacuate as we have heard much of today. Residents who work for the GNWT, but can't work remotely, are being asked to use vacation leave, special leave, or even leave without pay during this time. This is unacceptable, Mr. Speaker. Mandatory evacuation should not be made to take away from people's family and medical needs, mental health breaks, or vacation leave. The GNWT must reinstate these banks to GNWT employees who evacuated from Hay River or K'atlodeeche First Nation. So I'm wondering if the Minister can make that commitment here today. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Kam Lake. Minister responsible for Finance.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, emergency leave is available to public servants during an evacuation. This is paid leave. It does not draw down from other leave banks. And if an employee is being asked to take some other form of leave, Mr. Speaker, they should be discussing that with their supervisor or raising it in appropriate ways. If necessary, it come through MLA, it can come to me, but they should be on emergency leave with pay. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. CLEVELAND: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. And, Mr. Speaker, I really appreciate the Minister stating that because I had the privilege of having dinner with people from Hay River last night, and this was not the information that they were receiving from their supervisors. So I think that was really important information from the Minister, and I appreciate that.

Mr. Speaker, I'm wondering if the emergency leave that is afforded to public servants is equal to the number of days that they were under mandatory evacuation. Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, yes, if you're on emergency leave, if you're subject to an evacuation order, you can remain on emergency leave and it won't draw down, again as I said, on your banks.

Mr. Speaker, I want to acknowledge there are public servants who are based within the community that's under evacuation who are working, who are working remotely, and I just want to acknowledge that we -- I'm conscious of the fact that they are doing so under great strain when things are more than disruptive in their lives. So wanting to also extend that while these emergency leave banks are available, I certainly want to extend my appreciation for those that have been called to continue to work under circumstances that are very difficult, whether remote or otherwise. But certainly to be very clear, again, there are different types of leave. And even when the evacuation order is lifted, it may well be that some people cannot yet return to their homes or to their communities. There are those who can't return right now maybe under health circumstances, back to Hay River in the circumstance. And, again, they can be looking at what types of leave are appropriate, whether emergency leave is still appropriate or whether special leave or an annual leave is appropriate. But, again, at that point, Mr. Speaker, once the evacuation order is fully lifted, that may change but right now, if they can't go back, they should be speaking to a supervisor to ensure that they're being appropriately accommodated. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. CLEVELAND: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to ask that the Minister also -- and, you know, the GNWT's very good at using Bear Net leave, and as MLAs get Bear Net over here, and I'd like to ask that this information be added to an upcoming Bear Net circulation as well.

Mr. Speaker, GNWT employees are not the only NWT workers impacted by severe disasters. People who are self-employed or work for small and medium business who do not have billable or hours worked are going weeks without pay sometimes during these mandatory evacuations that are happening. We heard here earlier today from the Deputy Premier that the GNWT will provide \$750 one-time payments to residents. When we look to the south and what's happening in Alberta, Alberta residents are receiving \$1,250 per adult and \$550 per dependent child when they go seven days of a mandatory evacuation.

One of the concerns that I have is that there is such a high cost of living in the Northwest Territories, and quite often people are evacuated for a week at a time. And to expect residents to be able to pay their bills at even one week is 25 percent of your monthly income. So I'm wondering if, first off, if the Minister is looking at raising that amount to something that is more reflective of the cost of living in the territory; and second, why they have that caveat of seven days of evacuation? Because missing even one or two days of pay is extreme for people in the Northwest Territories. Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I can't make everybody whole. The Government of the Northwest Territories can't make everybody whole. I think more -- several of my colleagues have already spoken about how heartbreaking this is, to hear on late Sunday night that this community was being evacuated yet again. Mr. Speaker, my first thoughts were to children who were being woken up in the middle of the night to have to leave their houses again. So, you know, it's not for lack of awareness of how tremendously difficult this must be to the extent that someone who is not experiencing it can even pretend to actually be able to say that we know someone feels when we're not in those shoes.

So, Mr. Speaker, no relief program that we ever come out with is likely going to be one that is completely satisfactory, that makes anyone whole and that totally fixes every single need that anyone has. I know that. I'm aware of it. If we're going to compare ourselves to Alberta, Alberta has some billion-dollar surplus; we do not have a surplus, we continue to run a deficit. We have an operating surplus that offsets some of the debt we take on for our capital plan. So that said, we're trying to find gaps. I know the United Way right now has over \$500,000. They've been trying to get that money out the door. We're looking at ways that we can better support them going

forward so that process can be made more easy, that that process could be more accessible. It's a nonprofit, I certainly don't want to put a burden on them but there's a lot of money there that we want to be able to support them going forward. So we're having that conversation. And now we're looking at what other gaps we can fill. Again, employees who are -- we've looked at the number of employees who are under income assistance, they received their income assistance emergency funds and continue to receive income assistance, looked at who -- what the employment demographics are, who are GNWT public servants, again emphasizing they are on emergency leave, they don't have to draw down their banks. So trying to make do with the resources that we have, with the public dollars that we have available to us to try to fill some gaps, and that's how we landed on the program that we have here to try to fill up for anyone that is seeing an income disruption that they can have a top-up, take a bit of the pressure off for them, and that has been the goal that we've tried to achieve. We landed on the \$750 looking at what the emergency funds that are provided to income assistance clients, so we're trying to be fair across the board to the different types of programs available. That's how we landed on that one, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final supplementary. Member for Kam Lake.

MS. CLEVELAND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I hear the empathy from the Minister and I also hear the acknowledgement from Ministers and Members on kind of the cumulative impacts of having to evacuate, as the MLA for Hay River North said earlier during their Member's statement, two, three, four consecutive years here, going on with disasters from -- really, from the impacts of climate change and so we're just going to continue to see more of them. But we also heard the MLA for Hay River North today during their Member's statement speaks about how the fire is only six kilometres away right now, and so people may very well return home for a few days and be evacuated again. So my next question, and my last question for the Minister, is if that is the case and they are re-evacuated to Yellowknife, will they, again, be eligible for that subsidy if the evacuation order lasts another seven plus days? Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the minute there's another evacuation, all of the things start to happen again. The GNWT provides, firstly obviously, the cost of fighting the fire and, again, accommodations to all those who have been doing so tirelessly, 24/7 now for over a week. Mr. Speaker, we also will be providing again emergency transportation, emergency sheltering, emergency relief in terms of food, toiletries, some basic necessities. And perhaps what we now observed is that a lot of people don't want to come to Yellowknife. I appreciate that. We do now have also the community back -- the community government hosting grant through MACA to try to support communities around the lake who have been stepping up and stepping in. So that support will be available again. And, Mr. Speaker, any community that is affected by a seven day or longer order will now be subject to this policy. That again is part of trying to get -- you know, it's a policy that was developed in the space of days by public servants who are also being asked to address some of the other needs and emergencies. We've done our best to try to make it clear, accessible and, Mr. Speaker, it'll be available going forward. Thank you.