

**MEMBER'S STATEMENT 1525-19(2):
PAID EMERGENCY LEAVE**

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. For the second year running, Hay River residents have been driven from their homes and jobs by mandatory natural disaster evacuation orders. A recent letter from the Union of Northern Workers sent to all Members details these hardships and points out that many workers can't work remotely or don't have access to emergency leave. Workers are burning up their vacation leave to keep receiving a paycheque and likely don't have any sick leave credits coming out of COVID. Once evacuated, people face extraordinary costs of buying meals, gas, and travel expenses, and even hotel costs. The UNW's calling for the GNWT to establish an evacuation relief fund to cover lost wages, including lost banked leave, transportation, accommodations, food, and other necessities. Payments would be a dollar amount per adult and child.

This government has announced wage replacement support for individuals evacuated more than seven days of \$750, and that's a good start. And some community funding as well to help cover the costs of hosting evacuees. But the \$750 support is not nearly enough, and community government support doesn't put money in evacuees' pockets. The fact that appeals for support are being made also reflects the deficiency of our Employment Standards Act when it comes to paid emergency and paid sick leave.

Make no mistake, climate change has made these needs business as usual or what should be part of a reasonable response to the climate emergency. Consultations to improve the Employment Standards Act are now underway, and these issues need to be addressed in updating that legislation. Improved worker protection should include discussion and contributions from employees and employers in both the public and in a private sectors as mandated under the Employment Standards Act. These protections will become all the more necessary as the climate emergency progresses.

The Yukon has enacted legislation providing up to 40 hours of paid sick leave per year at no cost to the employer. Ontario has introduced declared emergency leave providing support to those prohibited from working by public orders. But this is new ground, and we need to take the opportunity of opening up our employment law to address these needs. I'll have questions for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment responsible for the Employment Standards Act later today. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

**QUESTION 1520-19(2):
PAID EMERGENCY LEAVE**

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment.

The Evacuee Income Disruption Program that was announced yesterday meets some of the issues raised by the Union of Northern Workers in its letter regarding the creation of an evacuation relief fund. And, Mr. Speaker, I'll be tabling that letter later today. But I would like to know, can the Minister say how the government will provide wage loss relief beyond the \$750 announced today possibly through permanent changes to the Employment Standards Act? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister responsible for Education, Culture and Employment.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Member said, yesterday this government announced the first ever Evacuee Financial Support Program, and so I think that's a big step forward. I get that the Member wants to build on that momentum and ask what's next. So I can say that in the Employment Standards Act, there are emergency leave provisions but that's emergency leave without pay, and so I think the Member is looking for something beyond that. But as of right now, there is no other emergency relief program. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that and, yes, so I think he's confirmed that, you know, unpaid emergency leave is within the scope of the Employment Standards Act. But is the issue of paid emergency leave within the scope of the current public engagement on the Employment Standards Act and how does the Minister propose to ensure amendments deal with future evacuations and similar emergencies? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pretty wide-ranging review of the Employment Standards Act so I wouldn't say that anything is out of scope. The questions that have been put to residents and businesses haven't specifically spoken to paid emergency leave. But residents are free to give their opinion on anything related to the Employment Standards Act. The online engagement survey is available until, I believe, June 18th, so there's a few more weeks, and so we'd love to hear feedback on this very timely issue. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. You know, looking across the number of other Canadian provincial and territorial jurisdictions, it looks like there's a patchwork of disaster and emergency relief supports that are available. So as part of the Employment Standards Act review, can the Minister commitment to carrying out a jurisdictional scan, including lessons learned and sharing that publicly? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Yes, Mr. Speaker, absolutely we can, and we will report that publicly in the "what we heard" report that we develop based on this engagement. Thank you.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. I'm hoping that maybe the jurisdictional scan can be completed to enable a better discussion during the public engagement, but I'll leave that with the Minister.

As I said yesterday, the climate emergency is going to increase disasters and evacuations in the NWT. How is the Minister working with his Cabinet colleagues to ensure a comprehensive climate emergency action plan? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And I will say I'm not the lead on this file but of course it takes a whole-of-government approach. So GNWT departments are working together to implement actions in goal 3 of the climate change action plan, which is focused on building resilience and adapting to a changing climate.

In preparation for the next climate change action plan, the GNWT is leading a territorial risk and opportunities assessment to help focus actions to address key risks like flooding. The GNWT is working to ensure the national adaptation strategy and its implementation provides resources to better address the NWT's adaptation priorities. And I can say that, you know, based on my experience as MLA I also have a number of recommendations that I will be making directly to the Ministers in my role as MLA. So we're all working on this, and I appreciate the Member bringing attention to it. Thank you.

**QUESTION 1523-19(2):
PAID EMERGENCY LEAVE**

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I do have a couple of questions for the Minister of Finance to follow up on my colleague's questions, the Member for Kam Lake yesterday on the issue of emergency paid leave as the Minister announced in the House yesterday.

I just want to make sure that that position has been communicated to staff within GNWT who are in a supervisory position so that they can work with the employees to make sure that they know that they could access -- those that need it could access emergency paid leave if they had to leave Hay River or K'atlodeeche. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I think we've mentioned Bear Facts here before. It is the primary tool for communication for all staff within the public service. And on May the 15th, we did put out a fairly detailed note here stating that employees required to evacuate, both Hay River, K'atlodeeche, may use emergency leave pursuant to the conditions in the collective agreement. So I certainly would hope that there's been no misunderstanding or lack of awareness of it, but I'm happy to have the chance to raise it again here in the House. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. And I did have a look at the language in the collective agreement. The collective agreement allows for both paid or unpaid leave, but I think I heard clearly in the House yesterday that we're, as a government, going to allow members of the public service that were evacuated to use paid emergency leave. So can I just confirm that with the Minister and ensure that that's the message that's going to go out to the supervisory staff as well as to all GNWT employees. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, that is correct, that it would be paid leave for those who are subject to the evacuation order. Thank you.