

*Status of Women Council  
of the N.W.T.*

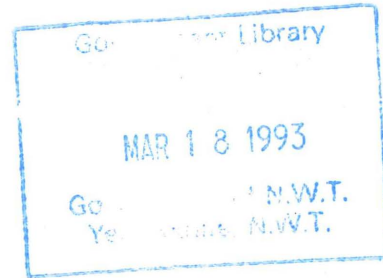
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30-21

March 15, 1993

Honorable Rebecca Mike  
Minister of Health and Social Services  
Govt. of the NWT  
Box 1320  
Yellowknife, NWT X1A 2L9



Dear Ms. Mike,

We wish to repond to and comment on your statement in the press Monday, March 8th, regarding Social Assistance food allowances. Your stand that there will be no increase in food allowances for the 93-94 fiscal year has caused a great deal of distress to the Council. As an organization serving women throughout the north, we are constantly made aware of the hardships suffered by women and children forced to rely on social assistance in order to live.

Children who are malnourished do not perform as well in school as children who are properly nourished. Pregnant women who are malnourished do not produce healthy babies. People are living longer in the NWT, especially aboriginal people, than they used to, but what quality of life can our elders expect? The infant mortality rate has been steadily dropping in the NWT for the last 20 years, but what quality of life can these children expect?

Nutritionists and health care providers tell us that they are seeing evidence of the fallout of malnutrition in our population - widespread tooth decay at an early age, obesity, lack of energy, increases in diabetes and other diseases formerly only prevalent in the south.

The Council is aware that consumer education and availability of food are factors in the poor nutrition of northerners. Transportation costs of perishable items is a major reason for the high cost of food. The entire

blame for the substandard diet of social assistance recipients cannot be laid at the feet of the Department of Social Services, but there are some things we would like the Minister to consider. There is evidence that the Northern Postal Service subsidies of perishable items has had some positive effect, although food is sometimes bumped by shippers in favor of other items such as building supplies, liquor and cigarettes. Would the Minister consider a concerted lobbying effort to 1. increase shipping subsidies and 2. encourage shippers to make food a priority? Many local community groups are trying to get school breakfast and lunch programs off the ground. Would the Minister work cooperatively with the Department of Education to assist and support these initiatives?

In many parts of the United States, Britain and Scandinavia, free milk and fruit programs exist for pregnant and nursing mothers. These programs have been proven to give children a good start in life and, in areas where they exist, problems of low birth weights, diabetic pregnancies and failure to thrive syndrome have greatly decreased. Will the Minister consider such a program for social assistance recipients and poor women in the NWT?

Many social assistance recipients, while they cannot obtain full-time employment in order to support their families, can make some extra money by the sale of arts and crafts, provision of child care, hunting, or other part-time and occasional employment. Why not allow social assistance recipients to keep money earned in this way as long as it does not exceed the amount required to meet an adequate food allowance? For instance, if a family of four in Repulse Bay can make \$564 a month which would bring them from the unacceptable level of \$818 a month for food to the acceptable \$1382, why not let that family keep that money instead of deducting it from their social assistance cheque? This would cost the government nothing.

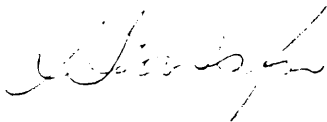
The present system not only condemns recipients to a lifestyle well below the poverty line, it effectively kills any incentive people may have to help themselves. There is no question in our minds that many of our social problems, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, crime, low literacy and educational levels are being exacerbated by the extremely low levels of social assistance in the NWT and the inflexibility of the program. The sense of hopelessness being expressed by many social assistance recipients is overwhelming.

There absolutely must be a coordinated approach to this problem. At this time, the nutrition section of the Department of Health is working on a comprehensive strategy to educate northern people about the necessity of proper nutrition. Health Promotions is cooperating with ourselves to promote women's self-advocacy regarding their own and their children's health. What good are these initiatives to people who simply cannot afford even the minimum amount of nutritious food? All the promotions in the world will not make up the \$564 reality gap in Repulse Bay. Has the Minister talked to her own staff about the critical nature of our northern malnutrition problem?

The Department of Education will be taking over responsibility for child care in April of this year. Will the Minister liaise with the Department of Education regarding the need to make child care affordable enough so that those who can get jobs will be able to take them? Will the Minister also discuss with the Department of Education the need to have child care providers funded properly so they can provide nutritious food to their charges? The providers we talk to are often forced to give children empty caloric foods because there is simply not enough money to provide a wholesome diet.

We realize you are new in the job, Ms. Mike, but your answer, "The government's existing social assistance programs are being reviewed and changes may be made in the future" is just not adequate in the face of widespread misery suffered by the social assistance recipients of the NWT.

Sincerely,



Rita Arey,  
President

cc Status of Women Council board members  
All MLA's, GNWT  
Native Women's Association of the NWT  
Pauktuutit

