What We Heard Report | Rapport sur ce que nous avons entendu

Income Assistance Program Review – Engagement | Examen du Programme d'aide au revenu — Échanges avec le public

December 2022 | Décembre 2022

Government of Northwest Territories
Gouvernement des Territoires du Nord-Ouest

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French

Kīspin ki nitawihtīn ē nīhīyawihk ōma ācimōwin, tipwāsinān.
Cree

Tłı̨chǫ yatı k'ę̀ę̀. Dı wegodı newǫ dè, gots'o gonede.
Tłı̨chǫ

ʔerıhtł'ís Dëne Sųłıné yatı t'a huts'elkër xa beyáyatı theɂą ɂat'e, nuwe ts'ën yółtı.
Chipewyan

Edı gondı dehgáh got'ı̨e zhatıé k'ę́ę́ edatł'éh enahddhę nıde naxets'é edahłí.
South Slavey

K'áhshó got'ı̨ne xǝdǝ k'é hederı ɂedı̨htl'é yerınıwę nídé dúle.
North Slavey

Jii gwandak izhii ginjìk vat'atr'ijąhch'uu zhit yinohthan jì', diits'àt ginohkhìi.
Gwich'in

Uvanittuaq ilitchurisukupku Inuvialuktun, ququaqluta.
Inuvialuktun

ᑖᒃᑯᐊ ᑎᑎᕋᖅᑲᐃᑦ ᐱᔪᒪᒍᕕᒋᑦ ᐃᓄᒃᑎᑐᓕᖅᓯᒪᓗᑎᒃ, ᐅᕙᑦᑎᓐᓄᑦ ᐅᖄᓚᔪᓐᓇᖅᑐᑎᑦ.
Inuktitut

Hapkua titiqqat pijumagupkit Inuinnaqtun, uvaptinnut hivajarlutit.
Inuinnaqtun

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Introduction

As part of its 2019-2023 Mandate, the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) is committed to creating a separate Income Assistance (IA) program tailored to seniors and persons with disabilities, and the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) committed in its 2020-2024 Business Plan to initiate a review of the IA program to ensure its objectives, benefits and delivery support the social and economic aspirations of the people of the NWT.

Engagement Approach

This What We Heard report summarizes the feedback ECE received during public engagements on the IA program that were held from February 11, 2022 to March 11, 2022. Stakeholder engagement activities, including virtual focus group discussion sessions, client interviews and an online survey, were carried out with the aim of gathering information to help inform:

1) The development of a new Income Assistance program for seniors and persons with disabilities; and
2) Improvements to the existing IA program.

A total of 363 people participated, representing:

- Indigenous Governments and Organizations (IGOs)
- Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)
- Vendors (utility providers and landlords)
- GNWT employees
- Current and past IA clients
- General public

What We Heard: Main Themes

Current perceptions of the IA program

- There is a high level of dissatisfaction with the current program, which primarily reflects participants' beliefs that IA benefit levels are not aligned with the cost of living and as such are not sufficient to meet client needs. The dissatisfaction also reflects other program barriers/challenges, including: a high administrative burden placed on clients and program delivery staff; belief that the program traps clients in a cycle of poverty; a lack of strong and trusting relationships between clients and Client Services Officers (CSOs); a lack of employment opportunities in small communities; silos between GNWT departments/agencies serving the same clients; and a lack of IA program policy and procedural knowledge and understanding.

Revisions to the Current Income Assistance Program – Potential Changes/Improvements

- **Changing Benefits**
  - Benefit levels need to increase, especially in the area of food allowances, to more accurately reflect the current cost of living.
  - Northern Market Basket Measure (MBM-N) should be adopted by the GNWT to help better address the financial needs of clients.
  - ECE should consider funding new benefits, such as home internet (required for school, online programs for seniors and persons with disabilities), cell phone and cell phone packages (required for safety reasons), and local transportation.

- **Increasing Income Exemptions**
  - Earned income exemptions should be increased, and consideration should be given to excluding honorariums received by Elders, and money earned selling traditional arts and crafts, in order to support continued sharing of Indigenous knowledge/wisdom and creation of traditional goods.
  - Unearned income exemptions should be increased, and consideration given to excluding unearned income such as Goods and Services Tax (GST) rebates, income tax returns, monetary gifts from family and friends, and money received through treaty/land claim payments, Impact Benefit Agreements, and Per Capita Distributions.

- **Streamlining Administration**
  - IA program administrative processes need to be simplified and streamlined to decrease the burden on clients and program delivery staff.
  - To help address a lack of program knowledge and awareness, more promotion is needed in a variety of formats (e.g., written materials left in offices, radio and television announcements, social media advertisements, links to web pages of related departments/agencies).

- **Suspending Benefits**
  - Refusal periods of 60 and 90 days are too long and result in significant hardships for clients and their dependents (no money for food or rent, increase stress and anxiety).
  - Refusal periods should align with the seriousness of the rule broken (i.e., the more serious the event, the more serious the response)
  - It is imperative that CSOs understand the reason(s) why clients may have provided false information, held back information or quit their job (i.e., client lacks capacity to follow rules, client sexually harassed at work).
    - CSOs should work with Government Services Officers (GSOs), NGOs and other GNWT departments to better understand client circumstances and to work with clients to resolve their issues.
  - Continue the successful best practice of providing a warning letter to clients who have not followed the rules.
  - Helping clients follow the rules and be more forthcoming with information may be supported through activities such as: ensuring that clients actually understand the requirements of the program, and reminding them of these rules once in a while; building trusting and respectful relationships between clients and CSOs; simplifying program processes; reducing rules; and having the program use more positive, less punitive, language.

- **Integrating Trauma-Informed Practice**
  - Ensure ECE introduces and maintains mandatory Trauma-Informed Practice training for program delivery staff that is specific to their roles.

- **Integrating Service Delivery**
  - Ensure ECE continues to work collaboratively with other GNWT departments/agencies and NGOs to more holistically meet the needs of clients.

- **Identifying Indigenous Values**
  - Identifying Indigenous values needs to be done with guidance from Indigenous leaders, knowledge keepers, and communities.
  - To reflect Indigenous values, the program needs to be person-centred/family-centred, trauma-informed, non-punitive, respect self-determination, and involve Elders and traditional counsellors.
  - Continue to hire Indigenous people to fill the role of CSO.
  - CSOs engage in regular and meaningful communications with clients.

- **Determining a New Income Assistance Program Goal**
    - For some clients, the program creates dependency and results in a cycle of poverty, and for others it leads to improved self-reliance.
    - Clients' self-reliance and independence could be enhanced if: the program focused more on education and training opportunities; CSOs were continually encouraging and supporting clients in achieving their goals; and clients were offered regular assessments to evaluate what they achieved and want they want to accomplish.
    - New program goals could include: clients being able to support themselves and no longer needing the program; providing benefit levels and exemptions that allow for clients to transition off of IA into employment; healthy and happy clients; increasing client confidence and self-motivation.

- **Revisiting Productive Choices**
    - ECE should review Productive Choices. Participants are divided on whether Productive Choices should be a requirement of the program; some feel it builds self-esteem while others feel it is an outdated concept
    - Regional ECE staff need to work collaboratively with NGOs and IGOs to develop opportunities, such as on-the-land programs, foundational skills training (e.g., work readiness, life skills training), wellness programs and youth-Elder programs.

- **Seeking Employment**
    - CSOs need to provide more support and encouragement to clients looking for work by helping them identify and overcome barriers to employment, advertising employment opportunities, connecting them with Career Development Officers (CDOs), working with employers to identify opportunities, and linking clients to employers.
    - Employment opportunities are not readily available in many of the small communities and not everyone is capable of looking for work or maintaining employment (e.g., due to lack of education/training, individuals dealing with trauma).

Creation of a New Income Assistance Program for Elders/Seniors and Persons with Disabilities

- **Application Process**
    - Eliminate the requirement to apply monthly and to base eligibility on an annual application.
    - Processes should be simplified.

  - Plain language forms should be created and available in Indigenous languages.
  - Ensure clients are aware that translation services are available.

- **Outreach**
  - More direct and meaningful contact is needed with seniors and persons with disabilities to better understand their personal circumstances.
    - Work with GSOs to assist with community outreach.

- **Disability Definition**
  - GNWT needs to adopt a standard definition of disability across all departments/agencies to allow for a better continuity of client support.
  - Disability eligibility should include those with serious mental health problems, and those with long-term disabilities.

- **Amalgamating Senior Programs into IA**
  - ECE should consider amalgamating its senior programs (IA, Senior's Home Heating Subsidy (SHHS) and Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit (SCSB)) or have all senior's programs under one umbrella but still separate from one another.

- **Benefits**
  - Benefit levels for seniors and persons with disabilities need to be increased.
  - Additional financial supports mentioned include internet, health costs not covered/fully covered through other benefits (e.g., specialized diets, over-the-counter medications, visual and hearing aids that are lost or broken), transportation, and snow removal.
  - Fuel for seniors should be provided in litres rather than based on a monetary amount so it is not affected by fluctuations in fuel prices.

Next Steps

Based on the results presented in this What We Heard report, along with other activities conducted in support of the new and reprofiled Income Assistance programs, ECE will advance the work of the Mandate and Business Plan by creating a new program and reprofiling the current and existing IA program.

Sommaire

Présentation

Dans le cadre de son mandat 2019-2023, le gouvernement des Territoires du Nord-Ouest (GTNO) s'est engagé à mettre en place un programme d'aide au revenu distinct adapté aux personnes âgées et aux personnes handicapées. Le ministère de l'Éducation, de la Culture et de la Formation (MÉCF) s'est lui engagé, dans son plan d'activités 2020-2024, à entreprendre un examen du Programme d'aide au revenu afin de s'assurer que ses objectifs, ses prestations et ses modalités correspondent aux aspirations sociales et économiques des Ténois.

Approche d'échange avec les intervenants

Ce Rapport sur ce que nous avons entendu résume les commentaires que le MÉCF a reçus lors des échanges avec le public sur le Programme d'aide au revenu (le « Programme ») qui ont eu lieu du 11 février au 11 mars 2022. Des échanges avec les intervenants ont été menés, dont des tables rondes virtuelles, des entrevues avec les clients et un sondage en ligne, et ce, dans le but d'obtenir des informations pour aider à :

1. la mise en place d'un programme d'aide au revenu distinct adapté aux personnes âgées et aux personnes handicapées;
2. l'amélioration du Programme d'aide au revenu déjà en place.

Au total, 363 personnes y ont participé, dont :

- des membres des gouvernements et organisations autochtones;
- des membres d'organisations non gouvernementales (ONG);
- des fournisseurs (fournisseurs de services publics et propriétaires);
- des employés du GTNO;
- des anciens clients du Programme d'aide au revenu et des clients actuels;
- des membres du grand public.

Ce que nous avons entendu : thèmes principaux

Perceptions actuelles sur le programme d'aide au revenu

Dans l'ensemble, le programme actuel ne satisfait pas les attentes des participants qui pensent essentiellement que le niveau des prestations offertes par le Programme ne correspond pas au coût de la vie et n'est donc pas suffisant pour répondre à leurs besoins. Cette insatisfaction est également liée à d'autres facteurs, dont : le lourd fardeau administratif imposé aux clients et au personnel chargé de la prestation du programme; la conviction que le programme enferme les clients dans le cycle de la pauvreté; l'absence d'une relation de confiance solide entre les clients et les agents des services à la clientèle; l'absence de possibilités d'emploi dans les petites collectivités; l'absence de partage d'informations ou de connaissance entre les différents ministères et organismes du GTNO qui sont au service des mêmes clients; et le manque de compréhension et de connaissance au sujet des procédures et des politiques du Programme d'aide au revenu.

Modifications à apporter au Programme d'aide au revenu actuel — Améliorations et changements potentiels

- **Modifications des prestations**
  - Le niveau des prestations doit être augmenté, et tout particulièrement celui des allocations alimentaires, afin de mieux refléter le coût de la vie actuel;
  - Une mesure du panier de consommation nordique devrait être adoptée par le GTNO pour mieux répondre aux besoins financiers des clients;
  - Le MÉCF devrait envisager de mettre en place un financement pour de nouvelles prestations, telles que l'Internet à domicile (nécessaire pour les élèves et pour les personnes âgées et les personnes handicapées qui participent à des programmes en ligne), le cellulaire et le forfait téléphonique (nécessaire pour des raisons de sécurité) ainsi que les transports en commun.
- **Augmentation des exemptions de revenu**
  - Le nombre d'exemptions du revenu gagné devrait être augmenté, et il faudrait envisager d'exclure les honoraires perçus par les aînés et l'argent perçu en vendant des objets d'art et d'artisanat traditionnels, afin de soutenir le partage continu des connaissances autochtones et la création de biens traditionnels;
  - Le nombre d'exemptions de revenus non gagnés devrait être augmenté et il faudrait envisager d'exclure les revenus non gagnés tels que les remboursements de la taxe sur les produits et services (TPS), les déclarations d'impôt sur le revenu, les sommes d'argent reçues de la part des proches, et les sommes reçues dans le cadre de paiements au titre de traités, de revendications territoriales ou d'ententes sur les répercussions et les avantages ainsi que les paiements de distribution par habitant.
- **Rationalisation de l'administration**
  - Les processus administratifs relatifs au Programme doivent être simplifiés et rationalisés afin de réduire la charge de travail imposée aux clients et au personnel chargé de la prestation du programme;
  - Pour aider à pallier le manque de connaissance du programme, il faut faire davantage de promotion, et ce, sous diverses formes (p. ex. documents écrits laissés dans les bureaux, annonces à la radio et à la télévision, publicités dans les médias sociaux ou encore liens vers les pages Web des ministères et organismes connexes).
- **Suspension des prestations**
  - Les périodes de refus de 60 et 90 jours sont trop longues et entraînent des difficultés importantes pour les clients et les personnes à leur charge (pas d'argent pour la nourriture ou le loyer, augmentation du stress et de l'anxiété);
  - Les périodes de refus devraient prendre en compte la gravité de la règle enfreinte (c'est-à-dire que plus l'infraction est grave, plus la réponse devrait être sérieuse);

  - Il est impératif que les agents des services à la clientèle comprennent la ou les raisons pour lesquelles les clients peuvent avoir fourni de fausses informations, caché des informations ou quitté leur emploi (p. ex., le client n'est pas capable de suivre des règles, le client est harcelé sexuellement au travail);
  - Les agents des services à la clientèle devraient travailler avec les agents des services gouvernementaux, les ONG et les autres ministères du GTNO pour mieux comprendre la situation des clients et travailler avec eux pour résoudre leurs problèmes;
  - Il faut continuer à envoyer une lettre d'avertissement aux clients qui n'ont pas respecté les règles (pratique exemplaire);
  - Il est important d'aider les clients à respecter les règles et à être plus disposés à fournir des informations, par exemple en s'assurant que les clients comprennent réellement les exigences du programme, et en leur rappelant les règles de temps en temps; en établissant des relations de confiance et de respect entre les clients et les agents des services à la clientèle; en simplifiant les processus du programme; en assouplissant les règles; et en faisant en sorte que le programme utilise un langage plus positif et moins punitif.
- **Intégration de pratiques tenant compte des traumatismes**
  - Il faut veiller à ce que le MÉCF introduise une formation sur les pratiques tenant compte des traumatismes pour les employés chargés de la prestation des programmes, mais aussi garantir que cette formation soit obligatoire et adaptée à leurs tâches.
- **Intégration de la prestation de services**
  - Il faut veiller à ce que le MÉCF continue de travailler en collaboration avec les autres ministères et organismes du GTNO ainsi qu'avec les ONG dans le but de répondre plus globalement aux besoins des clients.
- **Identification des valeurs autochtones**
  - La détermination des valeurs autochtones doit se faire avec l'aide des dirigeants autochtones, des gardiens du savoir traditionnel et des collectivités.
  - Afin de refléter les valeurs autochtones, le programme doit : être axé sur la personne et sur la famille; tenir compte des traumatismes; être non punitif; respecter l'autodétermination; et impliquer les aînés et les conseillers autochtones.
  - Il est important de continuer à embaucher des personnes autochtones pour occuper les postes d'agents des services à la clientèle.
  - Les agents des services à la clientèle doivent communiquer régulièrement et de façon constructive avec les clients.
- **Détermination du nouvel objectif du programme d'aide au revenu**
  - Pour certains clients, le programme crée une dépendance et entraîne un cycle de pauvreté, tandis que pour d'autres, il permet d'améliorer leur autonomie.
  - L'autonomie des clients pourrait être améliorée si le programme se concentrait davantage sur les possibilités d'éducation et de formation; si les agents des services à la clientèle encourageaient et soutenaient constamment les clients dans la réalisation de leurs objectifs; et si les clients se voyaient proposer des évaluations régulières visant à évaluer ce qu'ils ont réalisé et ce qu'ils veulent accomplir.

- Le nouveau programme pourrait viser à ce que les clients soient capables de subvenir à leurs besoins et n'aient plus besoin du programme; à établir des niveaux de prestations et des exemptions qui permettraient aux clients de trouver un emploi et de ne plus avoir besoin du programme; à assurer la satisfaction et la bonne santé des clients ; à augmenter la confiance et la motivation des clients.

- **Révision des choix productifs**
  - Le MÉCF devrait revoir les choix productifs. Les participants aux échanges avec le public sont divisés sur la question de savoir si les choix productifs devraient être une exigence du programme. Certains pensent qu'ils renforcent l'estime de soi tandis que d'autres estiment qu'il s'agit d'un concept dépassé.
  - Le personnel régional du MÉCF doit travailler en collaboration avec les ONG et les organismes gouvernementaux autochtones pour développer de nouvelles possibilités, telles que les programmes sur les terres ancestrales, la formation aux compétences essentielles (p. ex. la préparation au milieu du travail ou à la vie quotidienne), les programmes de mieux-être et les programmes pour les jeunes et les aînés.
- **Recherche d'un emploi**
  - Les agents des services à la clientèle doivent apporter davantage de soutien et d'encouragement aux clients à la recherche d'un emploi en les aidant à déterminer les obstacles à l'emploi et à les surmonter; en mettant en avant les possibilités d'emploi; en les mettant en contact avec des agents de perfectionnement professionnel; en collaborant avec les employeurs pour déterminer les possibilités d'emploi; et en mettant les clients en relation avec les employeurs.
  - Dans beaucoup de petites collectivités, les possibilités d'emploi sont limitées et tout le monde n'est pas capable de chercher un emploi ou de le conserver (p. ex. en raison d'un manque de formation ou d'éducation, personnes souffrant de traumatismes, etc.).

Création d'un nouveau programme d'aide au revenu pour les personnes âgées et les personnes handicapées

- **Processus de demande**
  - L'obligation de présenter une demande mensuelle et de fonder l'admissibilité sur une demande annuelle devrait être supprimée.
  - Les processus devraient être simplifiés.
  - Des formulaires en langage clair devraient être créés et être disponibles dans les langues autochtones.
  - Il faudrait s'assurer que les clients savent que des services de traduction sont disponibles.
- **Intervention directe**
  - Il est nécessaire d'établir des contacts plus directs et plus significatifs avec les personnes âgées et les personnes handicapées afin de mieux comprendre leur situation personnelle.
  - Collaboration avec les agents des services à la clientèle pour aider à la sensibilisation communautaire.

- **Définition de l'incapacité**
  - Le GTNO doit adopter une définition standard de l'incapacité dans tous les ministères et organismes afin de permettre une meilleure continuité du soutien aux clients.
  - L'admissibilité aux prestations d'incapacité devrait inclure les personnes souffrant de graves problèmes de santé mentale et les personnes souffrant d'incapacité à long terme.
- **Fusion des programmes pour personnes âgées à l'aide au revenu**
  - Le MÉCF devrait envisager de fusionner ses programmes pour les personnes âgées (programme d'aide au revenu, subvention au chauffage résidentiel pour les personnes âgées et prestation de retraite supplémentaire pour les personnes âgées) ou de regrouper tous les programmes pour les personnes âgées sous une même enseigne, mais en les gardant séparés les uns des autres.
- **Prestations**
  - Les niveaux de prestations pour les personnes âgées et les personnes handicapées doivent être augmentés.
  - Les soutiens financiers supplémentaires mentionnés comprennent l'Internet, les frais de santé non couverts ou entièrement couverts par d'autres prestations (p. ex. les régimes alimentaires particuliers, les médicaments en vente libre, les aides visuelles et auditives perdues ou brisées), le transport et le déneigement.
  - Le carburant pour les personnes âgées devrait être fourni en litres plutôt que sur la base d'un montant monétaire afin qu'il ne soit pas affecté par les fluctuations du prix du carburant.

Prochaines étapes

Conformément à son mandat et aux objectifs fixés par son plan d'activités, le MÉCF mettra en place un nouveau programme d'aide au revenu et restructurera le programme existant sur base des résultats présentés dans ce Rapport sur ce que nous avons entendu ainsi que sur les autres activités menées à ces fins.

Introduction

The Income Assistance (IA) program is designed to help people when they do not have enough income each month to pay for basic and enhanced needs. The amount of support that is available is based on overall needs, where the person lives, and the person's ability to provide their own financial resources. All clients must demonstrate a financial need to qualify for benefits to ensure accountability for public funds and to ensure all clients are being treated fairly and consistently.

In its 2019-2023 Mandate, the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) committed to create a separate IA program tailored to seniors and persons with disabilities. Additionally, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) committed in its 2020-2024 Business Plan to initiate a review of the IA program to ensure its objectives, benefits and delivery support the social and economic aspirations of the people of the NWT. The review will provide meaningful information about IA programs to support improvement, development and redesign.

The IA program review will lead to the achievement of the following objectives:

1. Developing a new income assistance program for seniors and persons with disabilities;
2. Improving the existing IA program to ensure the types and levels of benefits, as well as income exemptions, are meeting the basic needs of NWT residents, and to re-profile the program to target those clients who do not qualify as seniors or persons with disabilities; and
3. Developing a performance measurement plan for new and re-profiled IA programs.

To support ECE achieving its objectives, the department worked with a third-party contractor, who engaged virtually with past and present IA clients, Indigenous Governments and Organizations (IGOs), Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), GNWT departmental and agency staff, vendors (e.g., utility, landlords), and the general public to hear how they think the IA program could be improved to better assist Northerners in financial need, while ensuring program delivery is sustainable and accessible over time. This information will help inform the new and redesigned IA programs.

Background

The IA program is one of five programs offered by the Income Security Programs Division (ISP) in ECE. IA is aimed at providing NWT residents with support to meet their needs, to become self-reliant, to the extent their individual capacity allows, and to fully participate in community life.

IA benefits are divided into two categories: (1) basic benefits, which assist with food, shelter, and utilities; and (2) enhanced benefits, which include support for clothing, education expenses for dependents, emergencies, child care, criminal record suspension and assistance with security deposits. To be eligible for IA benefits, clients must be considered a “person in need,” that is, they must have needs that exceed their income.

To access enhanced benefits, IA clients are required to participate in a Productive Choice, unless exempt by reason of disability or age. Productive Choices are programs that encourage and assist people to become self-reliant by providing them with skills development, training, education, employment or other productive opportunities.

IA clients who are considered employable, must seek employment and accept any employment they are offered that would allow them to provide for themselves and their dependents.

IA also provides additional financial supports for seniors (those 60 years of age and older) and persons with disabilities, in the form of allowances and incidentals to assist with extra costs related to age or disability.

Engagement Approach

The engagement's overall approach was guided by the GNWT's Public Engagement Employee Guide and the Open Government Policy, which outlines the government's commitment to providing its residents with meaningful opportunities to take part in engagement activities and to inform decisions affecting their lives. The principles guiding this policy reflect the expectation that all GNWT employees approach public engagement in a way that promotes departmental consistency, strengthens relationships, demonstrates respect, builds trust, and models the principles of openness, transparency and accountability.[1]

The engagement focused on the following set of guiding questions

- What currently works well with the IA program?
- What are common barriers of the IA program?
- Are the current types and levels of assistance targeting the basic needs of IA clients?
- Are the current exemptions for unearned income adequate?
- Are the current exemptions for earned income adequate?
- Are the refusal periods for non-compliance adequate or too harsh?
- Does the IA program encourage and support greater self-reliance to improve the quality of lives?
- How can Indigenous values be reflected in program design and perspective regarding IA outcomes?
- How should the new IA program differ from the current program to better meet the needs of Elders/seniors and persons with disabilities?
- Should the IA program require clients to participate in a Productive Choice in order to qualify for benefits?
- How can the IA program encourage or assist clients in seeking employment?
- How can the existing IA program be reprofiled to better serve those clients who do not qualify for the program for Elders/seniors or persons with disabilities?

Engagement Methods

Two primary methods of engagement were undertaken to support the collection of meaningful information about current and future IA programs: virtual focus groups and

[1] GNWT. (March 2019). Public Engagement Employee Guide. https://www.eia.gov.nt.ca/sites/eia/files/gnwt-public_engagement_guide.pdf

online surveys. These methods allowed participants from across the NWT to take part. Telephone interviews with a small number of current clients were also carried out.

In total, **363** individuals took part in the engagement activities:

- **80** in virtual focus groups
- **280** in online surveys
- **3** in telephone interviews

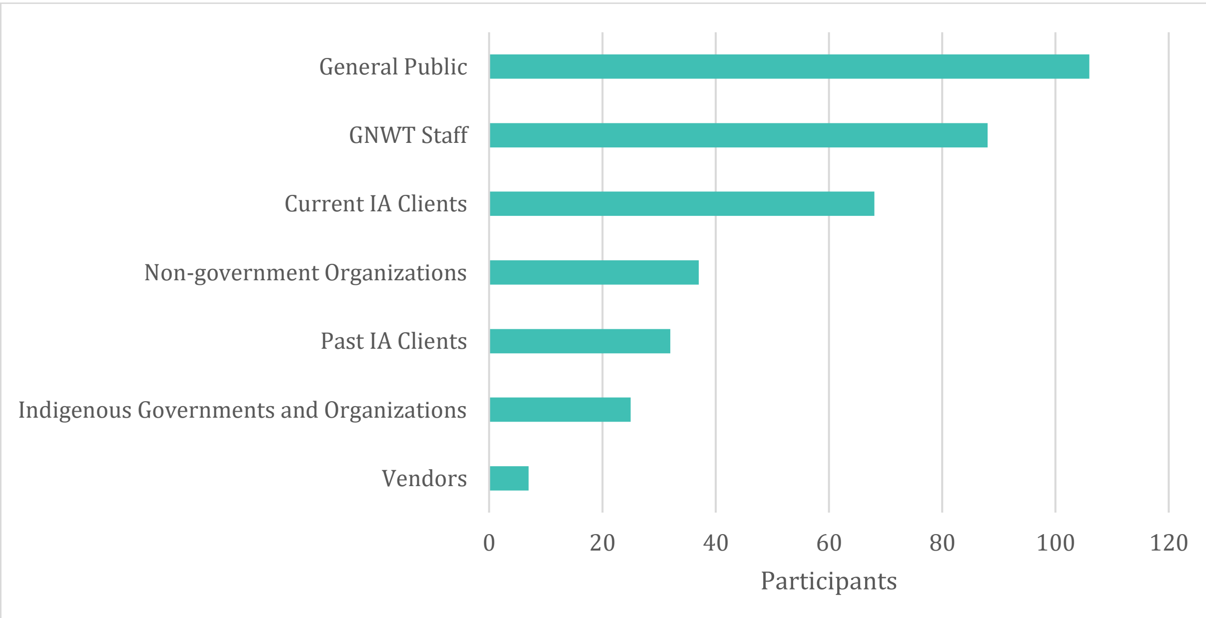


Figure 1: Participant Groups

Virtual Focus Groups

Virtual focus groups were held from February 9, 2022 to March 2, 2022 with individuals invited to take part in these sessions. In total, 14 sessions took place with a total of **80** participants. For their review, focus group participants were sent a copy of the *Income Assistance Program Review Discussion Paper for Public Engagement,* and questions tailored for each group, prior to the session. The focus groups were carried out using Zoom and lasted from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours. The sessions were facilitated by DPRA Canada, and notes were taken during each session. Each session was attended by two or three ECE staff. Focus group participants were also invited to send along any additional comments in written format. **Two** NGOs took advantage of this opportunity. Refer to the list above for the questions asked during the focus group sessions.

Online Survey

A public survey was launched on February 11, 2022 and closed on March 11, 2022. A total of **278** individuals participated in the survey. The survey was available on Survey Monkey in English and French. The survey was promoted during each of the focus group sessions, on the ECE website, on the radio, and information about the survey was emailed to clients. Survey questions were tailored for each of the sectors and included both closed and open-ended questions. With the help of local ECE Service Centres, hard copies of the surveys were given to current IA clients for completion and were also available online. Hard copy responses (19) were entered into Survey Monkey for analysis. Not all individuals provided responses to each of the questions. Refer to **Appendix A** for the online question matrix.

Current Client Interviews

ECE reached out to its Regional Managers and NGO partners to identify current clients who might be interested in taking part in a virtual interview. Three (3) clients participated. The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes in length and the current client survey tool was used to elicit information from each individual. Clients were asked the same questions as those who took part in the online survey (refer to **Appendix A**).

Considerations

- Due to COVID-19 public health restrictions, it was not possible to host in-person focus group sessions. Virtual sessions were held instead, which allowed participants from across the NWT to take part.
- Participants who were unable to attend a virtual session had the opportunity to participate by responding to the online survey, sending in written comments, or sending someone to the discussion session in their place.
- There were instances in which participants shared concerns about perceived gaps in the IA program, that in reality are not gaps. In other words, the IA program does provide those services and/or includes those options. This speaks to the fact that engagement participants are not aware of all aspects of the IA program. Examples of program clarifications included:
    - Counselling, child care and traditional activities are available as a Productive Choice
    - Translation services are available
    - A broader range of health care professionals (e.g., physiotherapists, psychologists, nurse practitioners) can complete the disability assessment form
    - Child care/daycare is a current benefit under enhanced benefits
    - Money for reparations is not counted as income
    - Rent is paid directly to landlords, and in cases where the client provides confirmation they paid their rent, the benefit is paid to the client

- Refusals are made in accordance with the regulations and, where permitted, on a case-by-case basis
- The majority of Client Services Officers (CSOs) are Indigenous (more than 85%)

What We Heard

This section of the report highlights what we heard, and is organized, to the extent possible, using the same headings and subheadings as those used in *the Income Assistance Program Review: Discussion Paper for Public Engagement*. Quantitative (numerical) data from the surveys is integrated throughout this section, along with the qualitative (narrative) information gathered from focus groups, interviews and surveys.

This section is structured as follows:

- Current perceptions of the Income Assistance program
- Revisions to the current Income Assistance program – potential changes and improvements
- Creation of a new Income Assistance program for seniors/Elders and persons with disabilities

Current Perceptions of the Income Assistance Program

This sub-section incudes what we heard about the current state of the IA program:

- Level of satisfaction
- Barriers/challenges

Level of Satisfaction

While many participants are grateful that the IA program exists and recognize the necessity of such a program to meet the basic needs of vulnerable members of society, there is a relatively high level of dissatisfaction with the program as it currently exists. This dissatisfaction primarily reflects participants' beliefs that IA benefit levels are not aligned with the current cost of living and as such are not sufficient to meet client needs. Challenges and barriers that lead to program dissatisfaction are provided below.

Figure 2: How satisfied are you/were you with the IA program?

Barriers/Challenges

Overall, current and former clients indicated that when applying for the IA program, the problems they experience most often include: too much paperwork; having to wait too long to receive their money; and the forms are/were too hard to fill out.

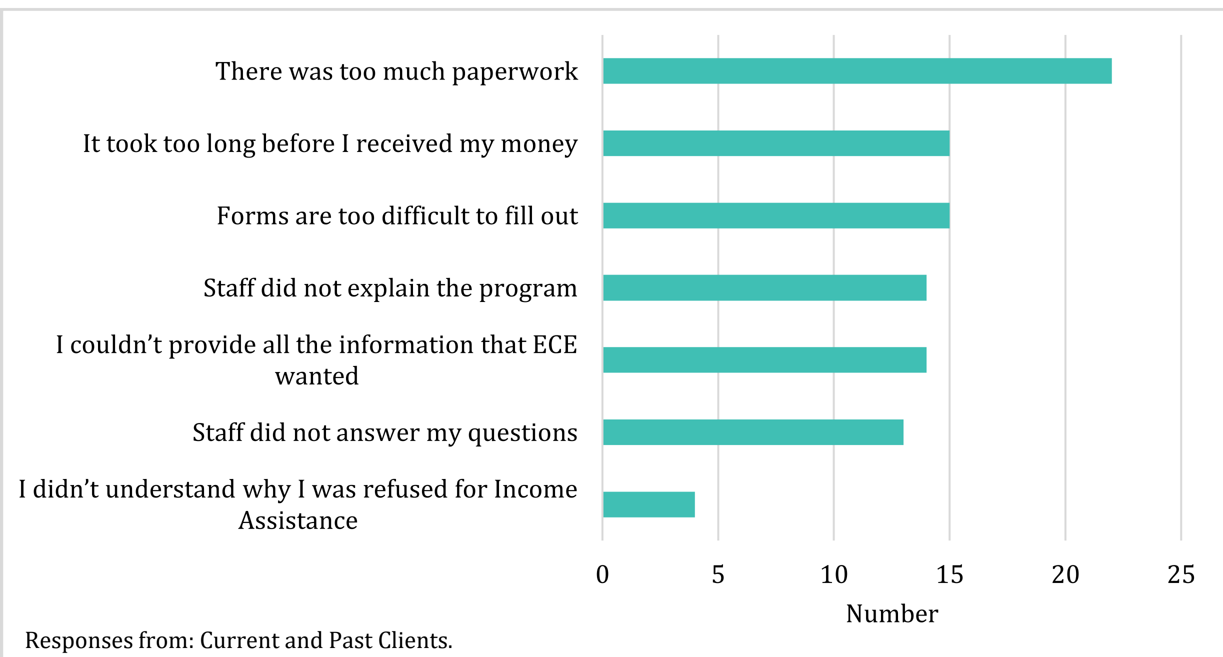


Figure 3: What problems did you experience when applying for income assistance?

Other barriers/challenges to participation in the IA program identified by participants include:

- IA program traps clients in a cycle of poverty
- High administrative burden
    - Application process too complicated, especially for people experiencing mental health and/or substance use issues, individuals with cognitive disabilities, English is not their first language, or who have low literacy levels
    - Lack of online system to apply for Income Assistance program
    - Lack of computers in some ECE Service Centres to print off necessary monthly documents
    - Challenges accessing bank statements for those:
        - Living in small communities without a bank
        - Without access to computers and printers
        - Without knowledge of how to use technology

> *"Program is complicated, and nobody helps me understand. I have low literacy and a friend has helped me fill out this survey."* - Current client

- Challenges in small communities getting medical forms signed by a medical professional
- Having to be on the public housing list in order to qualify for the IA program
- Not all CSOs understand, and/or have training in, Indigenous culture and history
- Not all CSOs understand community social issues that may affect clients' situations
- Lack of strong and trusting client and CSO relationships
- Lack of community outreach
- Lack of communication when offices are closed
    - Phone calls not being returned in a timely manner

> *"You have to look at the history of our people who are proud and begging for help is against their principles. Once they start the process, they feel like they are jumping hurdles to reach their assistance, and this is demoralizing to their being."*
> - Current client

- Insufficient number of CSOs to process monthly applications effectively and efficiently
- Lack of employment opportunities in small communities
- Silos between GNWT departments/agencies
    - Lack of ability for GNWT department/agencies to easily share client information

    - Lack of bi-directional/multi-directional information, sharing protocols, and client consents
- Lack of IA program understanding
    - By clients, which effects their ability to follow the program's rules
    - By GNWT employees from other departments/agencies, which leads to misinformation and unrealistic client expectations about the services and supports provided by the IA program
    - Limited access to program information in a variety of formats (primarily in written form)
- Lack of acknowledgement of, and flexibility to address, the diverse needs of clients (e.g., single moms, Indigenous people)
- Lack of transportation to:
    - Complete monthly forms in-person at local ECE Service Centres
    - Participate in a Productive Choice or employment

Vendors identified a range of challenges specific to their interactions with program staff and clients. These include:

- Misunderstandings regarding automatic payments
    - Clients may not understand that they are required to provide copies of their invoices or statements, so that payments can be issued on their behalf
    - In cases when a client does not qualify for benefits, they are required to pay their own rent and/or utilities and that eligibility is month to month
- Lack of client understanding of their responsibilities regarding paying utilities, which leads to a lot of back and forth – high degree of inefficiency
- Clients not understanding that utility bills are divided between the number of adults in the household
- Poor information sharing and consent processes
    - Consent from the clients only allows information to be shared in one direction
    - Lack of client understanding of consent forms and that they need to be signed annually
- Electronic payments are very helpful but there is a lack of standard information being provided
    - Sometimes there is uncertainty regarding who the client is (e.g., lack of account number, lack of meter number) and that makes it difficult to apply the funds to the correct account
- Lack of timely feedback from CSOs to resolve client issues results in delayed payment of fees that the client pays, not the IA program

Revision of the Current Income Assistance Program – Potential Changes/Improvements

ECE is revising the current IA program to ensure that the types of benefits, as well as income exemptions, are meeting the basic needs of Northerners, and to reduce the barriers that are currently impacting accessibility. It is also important that the IA program is compliant with the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) calls to justice report, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC's) calls to action.

> *"Meet people where they are at and when they are ready."*
> - NGO

Participants were asked a number of questions intended to identify areas requiring change. These requested improvements/changes are applicable to the revised IA program and to the new seniors and persons with disabilities IA program.

This sub-section incudes what we heard about potential changes and improvements to the existing IA program:

- Changing Benefits
- Increasing Exemption Amounts
- Streamlining Administration
- Suspending Benefits
- Integrating Trauma-Informed Practice
- Integrating Service Delivery
- Integrating Indigenous Values
- Determining a New Goal of Income Assistance Program
- Revisiting Productive Choices
- Seeking Employment
- Additional Income Assistance Program Suggestions

> *"Working with complex humans requires a model that is flexible enough to meet everyone's needs."*
> - NGO

Changing Benefits

Basic benefits are shelter, food and utilities. The IA program currently pays for actual shelter and utility costs, while the food benefit is dependent on the community and the number of adults or mature children living in the household. A community cost adjustment is also available depending on the community and the number of children in the household. Enhanced benefits provide clients with longer-term supports and include: clothing; disability and aged allowances; education expenses for dependents; furnishing; security deposits; child care; record suspension application fees; and emergency allowances.

Expenses not included when assessing needs are: credit card debt, cable, internet and phone charges, vehicle payments, and other debts a person has.

Benefit Levels

There was overwhelming agreement from engagement participants that current benefit levels are inadequate to meet the basic needs of clients. Current and former clients indicated that the main area they are having/had trouble covering is/was food costs.

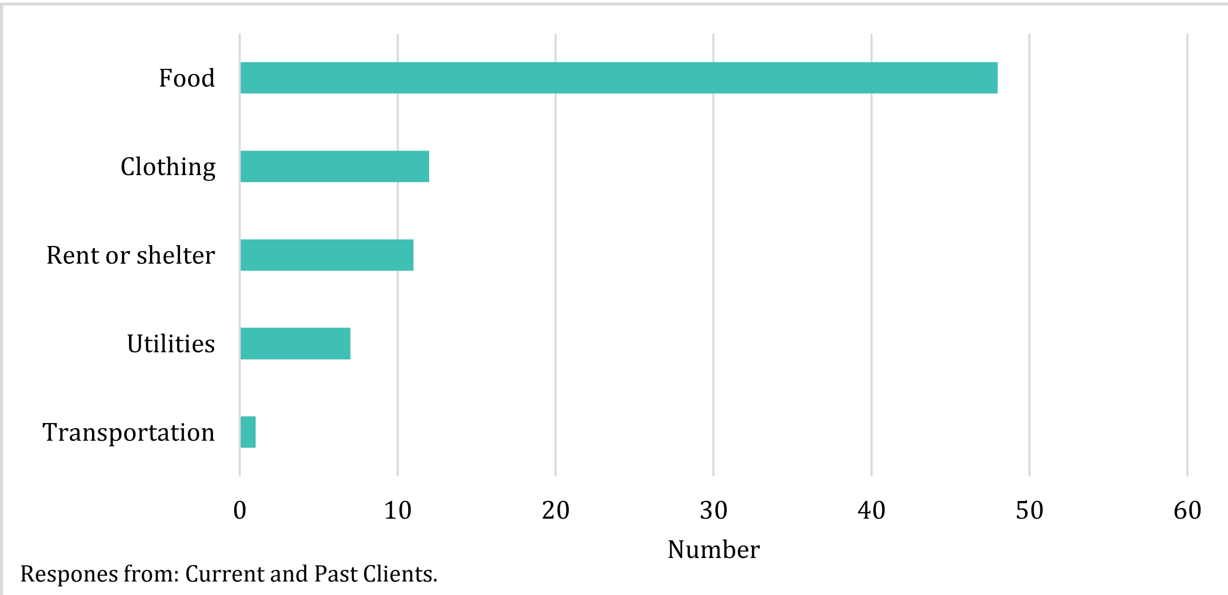
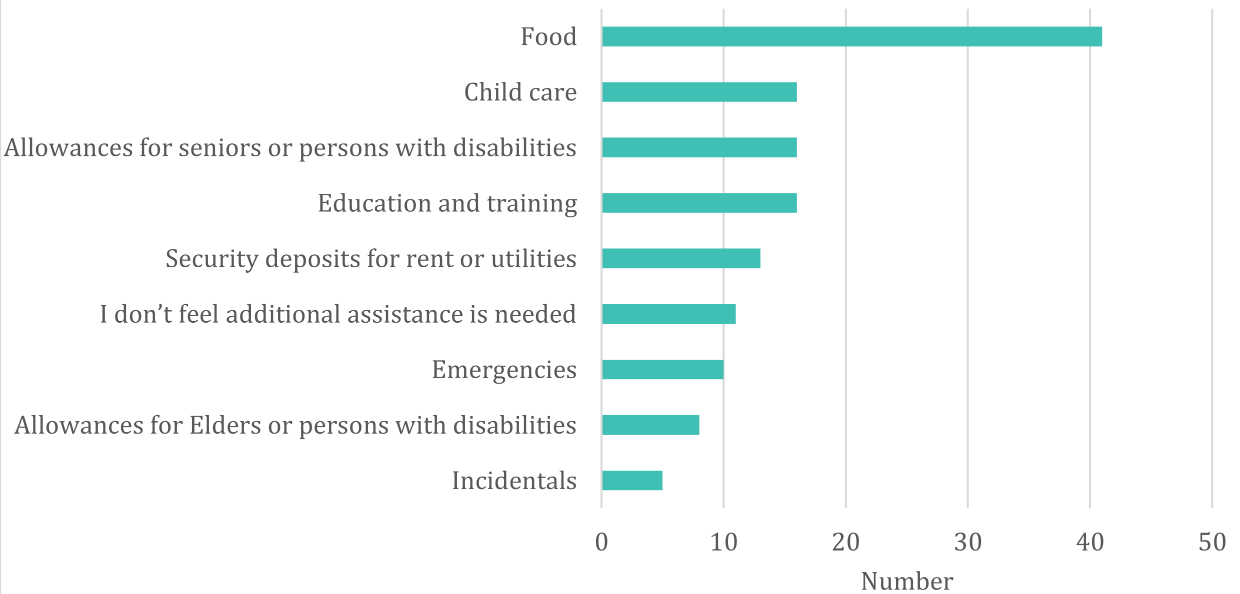


Figure 4: Thinking about how you spend/spent your money, what is the main area you are having/had trouble covering costs?

Other participants (not current or former clients) also identified food as a key area requiring additional funding. They noted that clients are going to local governments and NGOs for food vouchers and food hampers to help them get through the month and that some clients are having to travel to other communities in search of more affordable food (e.g., Tuktoyaktuk to Inuvik).

"Listen to your clients. See their life when they're struggling to help their families. Put yourself in their shoes." - Past client



Responses include those from: IGOs, NGOs, and the General Public.

Figure 5: If IA was able to provide more assistance in one area, what do you think that should be?

Many participants recommended that benefit amounts be reviewed annually to ensure they reflect the current cost of living.

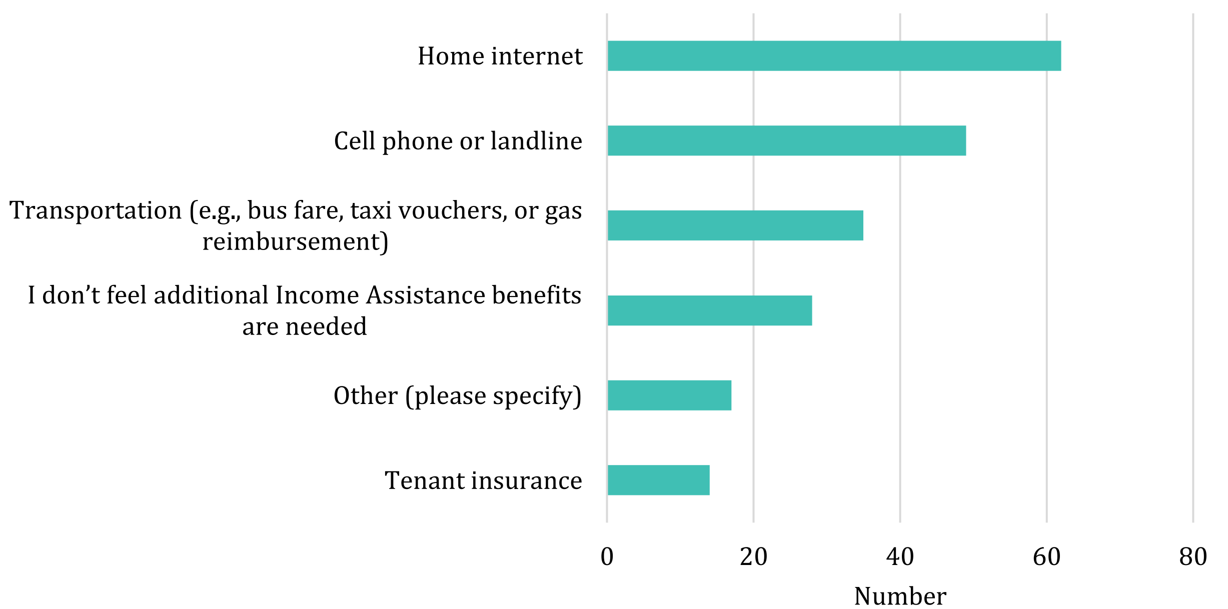
> *"Everyone's situation is different so it [the amount of IA received] should be based on what they need to get through the month, and extra because in most cases, especially here in the North, something always comes up and [you] have such little funding you can't afford whatever came up."*
> - Past client

It was suggested that the Northern Market Basket Measure (MBM-N) be used to help determine benefit amounts. Participants commented that using the MBM-N would help level the playing field by providing a more holistic approach to assistance. If adopted, the MBM-N, developed by Statistics Canada in November 2021, which is based on the cost of a basket of goods that represent a modest, basic standard of living, would be the official measure of poverty for the NWT. The MBM-N includes items that are not identified as basic or enhanced needs under the current IA program, such as transportation costs. However, it also excludes some benefits that the current IA program provides, such as child care costs, security deposits, emergency allowance and aged and disability allowances. Also, unlike the MBM-N, the current IA program pays actual shelter and utility costs. Currently, the NWT's IA program provides benefits equal to approximately 76% of the value of the MBM-N.

Benefit Types

If the IA program was able to provide funding for one **new** benefit, most individuals thought that it should be:

- Home internet
    - Children require it for school
    - Programs and information for seniors and persons with disabilities are accessible to them online
- Cell phone and cell phone package
    - Required for safety, especially for seniors, persons with disabilities, and transient individuals experiencing substance use problems
- Local transportation



Responses from: IGOs, NGOs, the General Public, Current and Past Clients.

Figure 6: If IA was able to provide funding for one new benefit, what do you think that should be?

Other new benefits identified by participants include:

- Costs not covered/fully covered through health benefits
    - Medications
    - Visual and hearing aids (if lost)
    - Mobility devices for seniors
- Food required for special diets (e.g., diabetes)
- Gas for skidoos so clients can take part in traditional activities

- Entertainment so that clients can take part in community activities and enhance their quality of life (e.g., joining a gym, movies, shopping, sports)

Some participants also discussed the need for increased benefits for certain vulnerable groups, including single parents, families, and women experiencing domestic violence. They also spoke about the need for more flexibility regarding benefit levels to allow for a client's individual/personal situation to be taken into consideration.

"It takes a lot of courage just to ask for help even if you are not vulnerable/homeless. Respect has to be shown to the client, and ECE has to clearly explain to the client what it has to offer to help them out, like a short workshop on the program." - Current client

Increasing Income Exemptions

The current IA program offers income exemptions to allow for clients to contribute to their household income and have more disposable income available to them. There are two types of exemptions:

1. Earned Income Exemptions
2. Unearned Income Exemptions

Earned Income Exemptions

The Earned Income Exemption allows clients to keep additional income and not have it counted against their IA benefits. This exemption is to encourage clients to continue working so they have an opportunity to build job skills and experience, and take advantage of part-time or temporary work without it having a full impact on their IA benefits. The Earned Income Exemptions are:

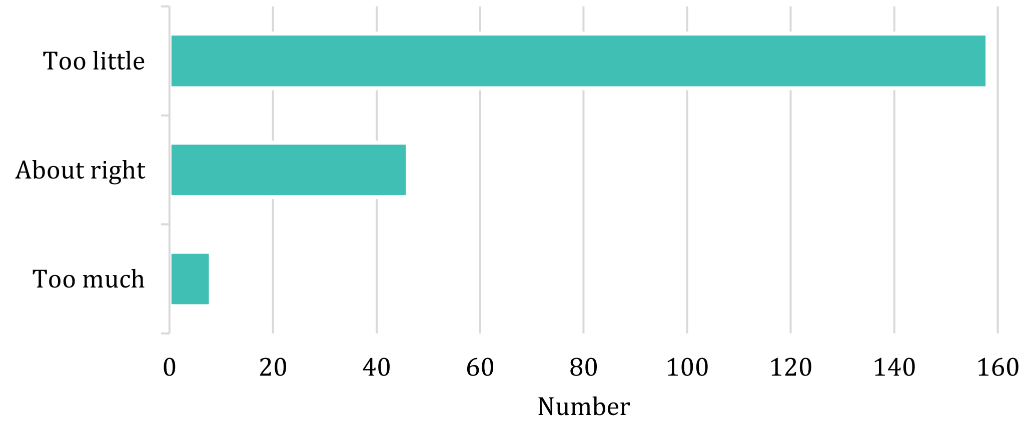
- If a client is single with no dependents, they can receive an exemption of up to $200 plus 15% of the amount over $200 each month without their benefits being reduced.
- If a client has one or more dependents, they can receive an exemption of up to $400 plus 15% of the amount over $400 each month without their benefits being reduced.

Examples of earned income include: wages, selling arts and crafts, honorariums or scholarships, self-employment, babysitting, and income received through hunting, trapping, and fishing.

The majority of people feel that the earned income exemption for both individuals with and without dependents is insufficient. When asked to identify what the exemptions should be, the totals ranged from:

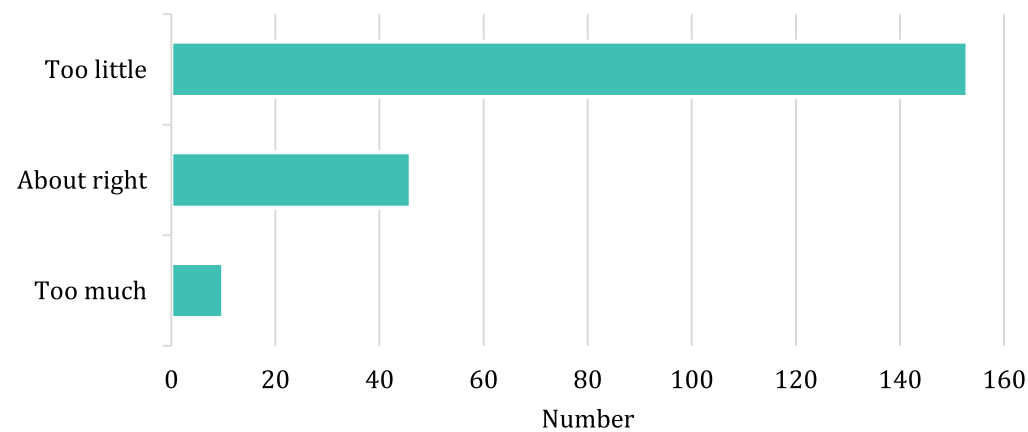
- Person without dependents
    - $400/month ($6,000/year) to $1,000/month ($12,000/year)

- Person with dependents
    - $500/month ($6,000/year) to $2,000/month ($24,000/year)



Responses include: IGOs, NGOs, the General Public, Current and Past Clients.

Figure 7: Do you think $200 plus 15% in earned income each month for a single person with no dependents is too little, about right or too much?



Responses include: IGOs, NGOs, the General Public, Former and Past Clients.

Figure 8: Do you think $400 plus 15% in earned income each month for a person with dependents is too little, about right or too much?

> *"Honorariums received by Elders should be exempt. Elders are knowledge keepers and [we] want them to share their knowledge. We don't want to discourage sharing."*
> - IGO

A number of people spoke about the need to fully exempt honorariums received by Elders. There was concern that Elders may be discouraged from participating on Boards or in community events for fear their benefits will be decreased. Additionally, participants suggested that income earned from traditional arts and crafts be exempt because they do not want clients to stop creating items because it takes away from their monthly benefits. It was also suggested that whatever the exemption, that it be assessed and revised as required each year to reflect changes in the cost of living.

There was also discussion about the monthly loans that clients are getting in order to pay their bills. There was agreement that these loans should not be counted as income as they have to be paid back with interest.

NOTE: The IA program does not count income received from the Government of Canada or the NWT Child Benefit, Canada Pension Plan, Child Disability Benefit, foster parent payments, child support (maintenance enforcement), Jordan's Principle, Inuit Child First Initiative, NWT Cost of Living Offset, Registered Disability Savings Plan, or funds received as compensation for pain and suffering, as unearned income.

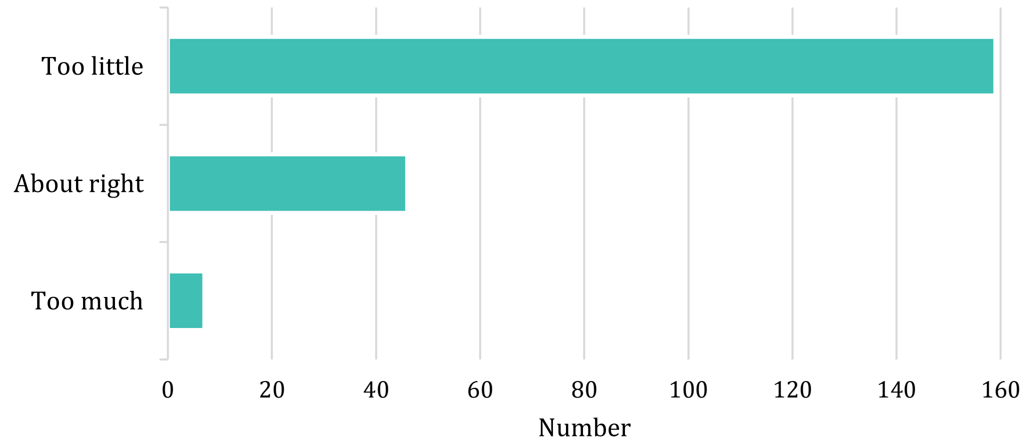
Unearned Income Exemptions

The Unearned Income Exemption allows clients to keep additional income and not have it count against their IA benefits if they need additional assistance that month. Up to $1,200 of unearned income per year is exempt and does not reduce a client's benefits. Clients can choose the amount to exempt each month, up to a maximum of $1,200 per year.

Examples of unearned income include: GST and income tax refunds, pensions and Old Age Security, Employment Insurance and Worker's Compensation, investments, gifts, and gambling winnings.

"One hundred per cent of the land treaty payments should be excluded. This is Indigenous money, not GNWT money."
- IGO

The majority of engagement participants felt that an unearned income exemption of $1,200 per year is insufficient. When asked to identify what the exemption should be, the total ranged from $1,500 to $43,200/year ($3,600/month). Some indicated the exemption should be based on household size (e.g., a client with four children would have higher exemptions than a client with no dependents) and others felt that the exemption should be the equivalent of one month's rent and all costs associated with bills and living expenses for a month.



Responses include those from: IGOs, NGOs, the General Public, Current and Past Clients.

Figure 9: Do you think that $1,200 in unearned income each year is too little, about right or too much?

Engagement participants believe that the following types of unearned income should be fully or partially exempt:

- GST rebates
- Income tax returns
- Monetary gifts from family and friends (up to a certain amount)
    - Especially around Christmas
    - To help pay rent, bills and arrears
        - **Challenge**: When it comes through electronic transfers, it's difficult to differentiate monetary gifts from something like online gambling winnings
- Treaty/land claim payments/Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs)/Per Capita Distribution (PCD)
- Donations to cover medical expenses (e.g., Kindness in Motion)
- (Percentage of) Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and Old Age Security (OAS)
- Inheritances
- Bingo and lottery winnings up to a certain amount
    - Leads to people hiding their winnings
- All unearned income, so clients have an opportunity to get ahead

"By removing [exempting] all unearned income, we could allow people to get ahead."
- GNWT employee

Streamlining Administration

With respect to IA program administration, participants were in agreement that program processes are overly bureaucratic (for clients and program staff) and require clients, some of whom have limited capacity, to unnecessarily jump through hoops. They suggested processes be streamlined and simplified so they are more user-friendly.

Some participants also proposed that the timelines be extended so that clients are not penalized if they are waiting for paperwork to be submitted by a third-party. For example, if a grandmother gives $200 to her grandchildren for birthday gifts, the client has to provide proof from the grandmother to have the money excluded from the income calculation. If the grandmother lives in a different community and is difficult to reach, there will be a delay in processing the application.

> *"…you need to make things easier for the disenfranchised to get the assistance they require; more user-friendly. People are afraid of you and the system. They do not have the education to know their rights and they are abused because they don't know their rights. Most of the clients are too afraid or too embarrassed or made to feel unworthy of help. I have seen it happen, experiences it happen*." - Past client

Participants, especially those working in the area of public housing, spoke about the need to remove the requirement for IA clients to be on the GNWT's public housing waitlist to get market rent paid. They noted that some clients (e.g., clients experiencing substance use problems) are not prepared to move into housing when it becomes available, so the system is setting them up for failure. Participants spoke about the importance of the IA program being able to pay rent directly to landlords to ensure that it gets paid. This service helps those clients who often spend their money on other items (e.g., those with substance use issues) and those who are not able to properly budget their monthly benefit money.

To address challenges identified by vendors, they specifically recommended:

- More frequent follow-up with clients to ensure they are aware of their monthly bills and budget for them effectively
- Providing consistent information when paying bills electronically payments (e.g., account number, client name)
- More timely responses from Client Services Officers (CSOs) to address utility issues
- Identifying a process to deal with clients who are in arrears

Participants also spoke about the need to guarantee that the IA program is being implemented consistently and fairly (i.e., all decisions reflect program policy and procedures). There were concerns that this is not always happening. This may reflect not a full understanding of the program.

To help address a lack of knowledge and awareness of the IA program, participants suggested that ECE increase program promotion and that they use a variety of forums, including: advertising on radio, television and social media (e.g., Facebook); placing materials in Band and Métis offices; and including links on the web pages of related NWT department/agency offices (e.g., utilities companies) as well as leaving written materials in local offices. As part of the enhanced promotion, it was proposed that ECE address the issue of stigma so that residents who need financial support to meet their basic needs are not discouraged from applying to the program.

> *"If people are to participate in society, holding back support is not the right way."*
> - GNWT employee

Suspending Benefits

The IA program currently suspends access to benefits for certain periods of time in instances where clients have provided false or misleading information or not complied with program requirements. More specifically, reasons for refusal include:

- Withholding information about their income or relationship status;
- Quitting or refusing employment; and
- Getting fired from a job with just cause.

When this happens, a client must wait 60 or 90 days, before they can re-apply for IA.

Suspension Time Period

While some participants agree that the program should have refusal periods, there was definite consensus that refusal periods of 60 and 90 days are too long. Participants spoke about the overly punitive nature of the program and noted that when a client is suspended from receiving benefits, that means there is no money to buy food or pay rent. The suspension may inadvertently impact children. It also has the potential to lead to evictions/homelessness and increased stress and anxiety, which may in turn result in someone relapsing if they are struggling with substance use issues.

> *"Low-income earners also face the risk of precarious employment and losing your income for three months because they were fired. It is a terrible thing to put families through."*
> - NGO

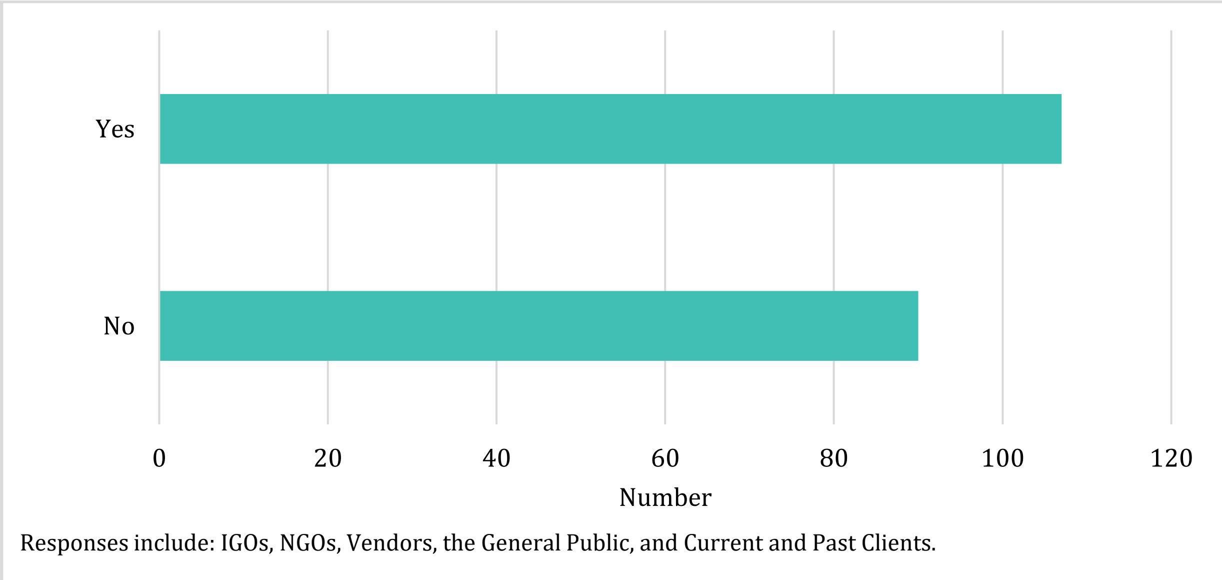


Figure 10: Do you think clients should be refused IA for a period of time if they do not follow the rules?

Participants who feel that a penalty is necessary to hold clients accountable, also believe that the penalty should be proportional to the circumstance and discretion should be used. In order for this to occur, it is important that CSOs take the time to build trusting relationships with their clients so they can understand their lived experiences.

> *"Currently it feels like GNWT is offloading responsibility onto the IGOs. Our First Nation is picking up where GNWT is not paying. Someone always ends up paying if it's not the GNWT."* - IGO

Some participants also spoke about the fact that when a client has their benefits suspended, for whatever reason, someone (e.g., grandparents, IGOs, NGOs, and/or another organization) always ends up paying (i.e., providing money/resources to them). In other words, "*someone always has to pay.*" This results in situations where more than one family now has insufficient funds to cover monthly costs and/or IGOs and NGOs have to use their limited funds to help out individuals. Some feel that this is an example of the GNWT passing on its responsibility to provide basic necessities to its residents, to others.

Suspension Requirement

Engagement participants were asked to consider whether clients should have their benefits suspended for the reasons outlined in the IA program policy (see list above). Some feel there is no situation in which a client should be refused since they need IA to meet their basic needs. Many participants spoke about the importance of refusals being assessed on a case-by-case basis (as is the current practice) because, while a small number of clients may deliberately provide false information or hold back information, it is unintentional for the majority of clients. They noted that one of the main reasons for not providing information/correct information may be a lack of understanding of the program requirements due to: English not being the client's first language (e.g., Elders); low literacy levels; and cognitive disabilities (e.g., clients with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder). Additionally, clients may not tell the truth because they are scared, or because they feel they have to tell the CSO what they think the CSO wants to hear.

> *"We may not know the whole story. It could be they quit or were fired because of mental health and addictions issues or harassment in the workplace. We need to understand the reasons for the clients' decision."*
> - GNWT employee

Participants also commented on the relationship between the CSO and the client. At times, the inability of the program to meet a client's need is perceived as the CSO demonstrating bias toward the client. Additionally, the inability of the program to address specific situations is viewed as the CSO not understanding the social context of the community (e.g., the fluid nature of many relationships).

> *"…if people are lying, they are not lying because they're bad people; they're lying because the system isn't set up in a way that helps them."* - NGO

If suspensions are going to remain, participants commented that the current one-time exemption warning letter given to a client before they are refused IA, is a good best practice that should be continued. Some also suggested that a grace period be instituted so clients have the opportunity to update their information, and/or provide the needed information.

To help understand why clients are not following the rules of the program, it was recommended that CSOs continue to have a collaborative relationship with local Government Services Officers (GSOs) so:

- If a client gets suspended from the IA program, they can be referred to another organization for assistance.
- If clients are not comfortable sharing information with CSOs about why they did not follow the rules (e.g., quit their job or lost their job because of valid reasons such as sexual assault, trauma, substance use, etc.), they might feel more comfortable speaking with a GSO.

> *"Rather than punishing, maybe they could be brought into a support or counselling program to help them work through the issue they were refused for."* - IGO

It was also suggested that IGOs be involved in these decisions because *"they affect our people."*

Helping Clients Follow the IA Program Rules

Participants came up with a variety of ways to encourage and support clients to follow the program rules and be more forthcoming with their information. These include:

- Ensuring that clients fully understand the requirements of the program and what will happen if there are mistakes, by:
    - Not setting clients up to fail
    - Making sure that translators are available so that information can be provided in a client's first language
    - Encouraging clients bring an advocate to meetings to help explain the IA process in their language of choice
    - Realizing that sometimes clients will just agree to everything because they do not understand or because they are scared
    - Continuously reminding clients about the documents/information they are required to submit and about the consequences of not submitting that information
- Building strong relationships with clients by:
    - Helping clients feel safe and trusted, so they feel okay going to the CSOs for help
    - Helping clients overcome any barriers they may have
    - Making the local ECE Service Centres welcoming places so that clients are not afraid to come into the office (there are clients who are afraid to go in the office)
    - Employ an open-door policy
- Simplifying and streamlining the application process by:
    - Simplifying the forms and information requests
    - Providing forms in official languages
    - Reducing the number of documents that have to be submitted
- Reducing the rules by:
    - Approaching the program using a more supportive model rather than a punishment model
    - Shifting to guaranteed/universal basic income program so there are no rules

> *"In a situation in which they're not sure if they have enough money, this leads to increased stress, fear and anxiety. If provided with enough money to meet basic needs, this would increase trust and their willingness to be forthcoming."*
> - NGO

> *"Building trust and safe places for clients to be honest, remove the judgement and stigma."*
> - Past client

- Changing the language by:
    - Making it less intimidating, less fear-provoking – when people are afraid, they make bad decisions
    - Using more positive language
    - Ensuring information is plain language and have CSOs use plain language when they are explaining the program and the rules
- Allowing for higher earned and unearned exemptions so clients will not feel the need to hide income
- Taking a more proactive approach with clients – do not wait until there is problem – check in with them regularly
- Rewarding clients for being forthcoming with their information
    - Provide incentives or have monthly gift card draws for those who correctly submit their information

Integrating Trauma-Informed Practice

Many participants spoke about the need for the IA program to be person-centred and trauma-informed. The key principles of trauma-informed practice include:

- Trauma awareness;
- Emphasis on safety and trustworthiness;
- Opportunity for choice, collaboration and connection; and
- Empowerment and strength building.

> *"Problem is that when clients go to Income Assistance, they don't expect to be treated compassionately by people who understand, but rather by people working from a rule book. If frontline workers were more trauma-informed, they could work more compassionately with the people."* - NGO

They feel this approach to service delivery will help ease client's fear and hesitation about providing information. To support this approach, it was suggested that:

- ECE provides mandatory Trauma-Informed Practice training for program delivery staff that is specific to their roles
- Income Assistance, which used to be part of the Department of Health and Social Services (HSS), should be returned to HSS because the workers had a better understanding of the clients, their families and their health and social situation and as such, could make more informed decisions.

Integrating Service Delivery

It was clear throughout the engagement that participants believe the IA program needs to continue to work collaboratively with other NWT departments/agencies and including NGOs to meet the needs of clients more holistically. In order to build stronger, more cooperative relationships, it was suggested that program staff stop working in silos and begin to participate in cross-departmental/agency meetings, community-based interagency meetings and IGO meetings. These regular interactions would improve communications and help ensure that organizations supporting shared clients are aware of the types of programs and services being offered by other groups.

> *"Show up at cross-departmental meetings and understand its relationship to programs...There is a lot of crossover between mental health, child and family services, justice, housing, etc. that needs to be examined to ensure that vulnerable folks do not slip through the cracks due to administrative red tape. There has been a lot of work done through Department of Justice's Integrated Service Delivery to identify policy gaps, including Income Assistance."* - General Public

To further support an integrated service delivery approach, with strong case management, participants recommended that the IA program:

- Create standardized, multi-directional protocols for information sharing and client consents that would be adopted by all partners
- Create a system navigator position to support effective interactions for clients across different departments/agencies and to act as an advocate on the client's behalf
- Provide hand offs so clients do not get lost in the system
- Employ a wraparound approach to client care

Integrating Indigenous Values

To help ensure the IA program is compliant with the UNDRIP, the MMIWG calls to justice report, and the TRC's calls to action, the revised IA program will integrate Indigenous values.

Identifying Indigenous Values

To identify Indigenous values that might be used to guide the design and delivery of the IA program, participants recommended that ECE ask for guidance from Indigenous leaders, knowledge keepers and communities. They also suggested that ECE develop and maintain relationships with IGOs regarding the IA program and its Indigenous clients. By working closely with IGOs, ECE can better understand community needs and employment opportunities, and can identify Productive Choices that are appropriate for communities and their Indigenous members.

> *"If the Income Assistance program wants to be successful, it needs integration with other programs."*
> - GNWT employee

Indigenous Values

Participants stated that reconciliation (meaningful relationships) should be foundational to the program. They also indicated that the program should reflect the following values: respect, empathy, humility, truth, honesty, and authenticity. Participants also recommended that aspects of health and wellness be central to the program.

> *"When we create programs, we ask how we can put the Tłı̨chǫ way of life into the program."* - IGO

For the program to reflect Indigenous values, participants also commented that it should:

- Be person-centred/family-centred
- Be trauma-informed
- Be non-punitive
- Be flexible to account for diversity
- Involve Elders and traditional counsellors in program delivery
- Respect self-determination
- Encourage careers and goals that integrate the values, practices and traditions of Indigenous people
- Provide forms in Indigenous languages
- Provide translators – especially for Elders
- Include more Productive Choices (IGOs would support delivery) that reflect Indigenous traditions, cultures, and languages and supports wellness and the development of self-esteem:
  - Counselling support
  - Wellness programs
  - On-the-land programming
  - Traditional life skills training
  - Cultural activities (e.g., hunting, fishing, sewing)
  - Workshops offered by Elders and other Indigenous people
  - Youth-Elder programming
  - Family-based programming
  - Mentorship programming
- Provide monetary supports for Indigenous students for schooling (those not covered through Student Financial Assistance)

> *"Instead of including a list of Indigenous values, learn how to live those values. Go out on the land and share with people traditional lifestyles, language and culture."* - IGO

Practicing Indigenous Values

To help ensure that Indigenous values are properly reflected in day-to-day service delivery, participants recommended:

- Continuing the practice of hiring Indigenous people to fill the role of CSO
- Giving the IA program funding to IGOs so they can operate the program themselves with no strings attached
- Creating a new Indigenous liaison position within the program
- CSOs engaging in regular and meaningful communication with clients
- Hanging Indigenous art in local ECE Service Centres
- Renaming:
  - CSOs so that the word 'officer' is removed
  - Productive Choices to something that reflects values

> *"The focus on self-reliance undermines the program because the minute a client comes into the office to apply, they are failing. So by removing that stigma, we would remove the idea that by applying to this, I have failed."* - NGO

Determining a New Goal of Income Assistance Program

The goal of the IA program is to encourage and support greater self-reliance. Being self-reliant means different things for different people. Some may want to work on education or training, others on job skills. It may mean doing volunteer or part-time work. Self-reliance is about finding what is right for you at this time. It is based on an individual's family, future career or employment goals and the resources available in their community.

Supporting Self-Reliance

When asked if the IA program supports self-reliance, participants were divided in their responses. A number of participants stated that the program fosters dependency, not self-reliance. They spoke about the fact that there is limited incentive or support to 'get off' Income Assistance and that the program keeps people trapped. Some commented on the colonial and paternalistic nature of the term and expressed concern about the implied assumption that people on IA are not self reliant. Participants noted that:

- People living in small communities are already very self-reliant
- Employment should not be linked to self-reliance given that not everyone is able to work, i.e.:
  - Individuals with chronic mental health and substance use issues
  - Women experiencing domestic violence who cannot leave their homes to participate in Productive Choices or employment opportunities
- This is not an appropriate goal for Elders/seniors

> *"The idea that people on income assistance are not self-reliant, is flawed."* - IGO

It was suggested that self-reliance not be considered the measure of success for the revised program. It was also stated that if self-reliance requires that a person's basic needs are being met, then the program is not doing a good job at meeting its goal since for many clients, this is not the case.

On the other hand, some individuals feel that the program is leading to increased self-reliance. That being said, they also feel the program could be doing a lot more to enhance clients' self-reliance. They suggested:

- Focusing more on education and training
    - Offer more and different types of programming
        - Financial literacy training/budgeting so clients can learn to manage their money
        - Life skills course
    - Connect clients with Career Development Officers (CDOs) so they can take part in career counselling, attend job fairs and get support with resume writing
    - Have school counsellors work with students and encourage them not to apply for IA (like their parents) – help break the cycle
        - Work with them to build their skills (including life skills) and abilities through education and training opportunities
    - Work with Aurora College to offer basic computer skills courses in the community learning centres; clients could also access needed bank statements more easily
- Offering regular client assessments to review what they have done, what they have learned and what new goals they want to accomplish
- CSOs continually encouraging and supporting clients in achieving their goals
    - Regular CSO-client meetings so they can build a trusting relationship that is trauma-informed and non-judgmental
    - CSOs connecting with local employers so they know about job opportunities
    - CSOs supporting client access to opportunities
    - CSOs connecting clients with service providers from other GNWT departments/agencies (e.g., HSS, and NWT Housing Corporation (NWTHC))
- Increasing the income threshold so clients can save some money and 'get off' income assistance
- Providing clients with transitional support so they can stabilize their income (amass some savings) before Income Assistance is withdrawn
    - Allow clients to have a full-time job for a determined amount of time (e.g., six months) and save some money while still accessing benefits
- Increasing the number and type of Productive Choices

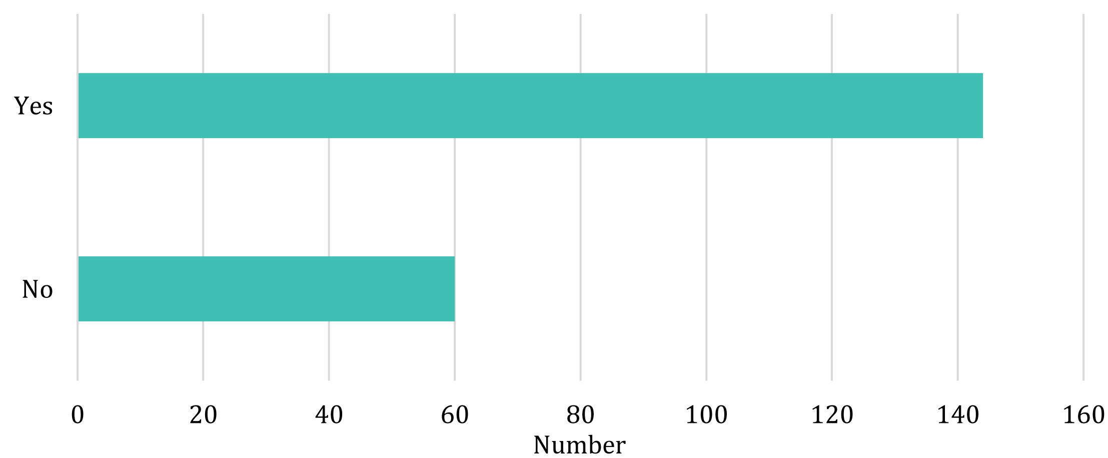
New Goals

Many people feel that the goal of encouraging and supporting self-reliance is appropriate for the program. There were, however, a number of participants who identified a range of new goals for the program, including:

- To leave the program/to 'get off' Income Assistance
  - Clients being able to support themselves and no longer needing the program
  - Benefit levels and exemptions that allow for clients to transition off IA into employment
- To meet basic needs required for healthy and happy lives
  - Wellness/well-being (including safety and child nutrition)
  - Acknowledge the interconnectedness between all the social determinants of health
- To increase confidence and motivate people to get employment and become involved in community activities
- To create a level playing field to buffer disadvantage

> *"Making me feel good about my self-esteem and feeling worthy."*
> - Current client

A number of participants feel that clients should have the opportunity to identify their own goal(s) with respect to the program. They suggested that CSOs work with clients to identify their goals rather than having a goal imposed on them, and that CSOs support clients where they are at and where they want to go.



Responses include: IGOs, NGOs, Vendors, the General Public, and Current and Past Clients.

Figure 11: Do you think the IA program goal of encouraging and supporting self-reliance is appropriate?

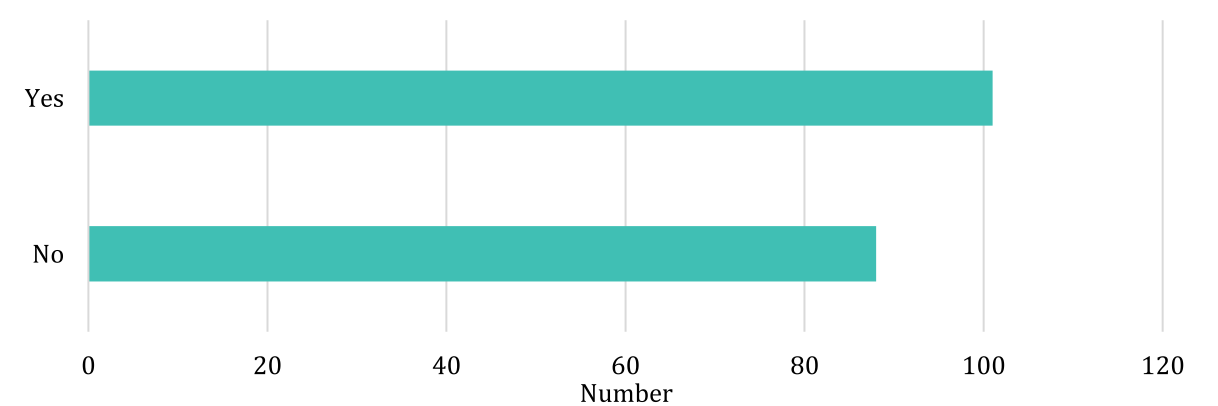
Revisiting Productive Choices

The IA program requires clients to take part in a Productive Choice (unless they are exempt). Productive Choices were created to help clients with educational and social support initiatives to assist them in becoming self-reliant. Productive Choices provide opportunities, points of contact and connections for clients in pursuing personal growth. There are several Productive Choices clients can choose to participate in, including:

- Employment that generates wages or salary;
- Traditional activities including hunting, trapping, and fishing;
- Education and training;
- Career planning in consultation with a Career Development Officer (CDO) or Employment Transition Officer;
- Parenting;
- Caring for an adult family member who requires homecare services;
- Unpaid community work or volunteering;
- Wellness; and
- Others, as approved by the Director, Income Security Programs.

<u>Productive Choices Requirement</u>

When participants were asked if the program should require clients (who are not exempt) to take part in a Productive Choice, they were split in their responses.



Responses from: IGOs, NGOs, the General Public, Current and Past Clients.

Figure 12: Do you think the IA program should require clients to participate in a Productive Choice in order to receive/qualify for benefits?

Many feel that Productive Choices are an important component of the program and should be required, especially in communities with limited employment opportunities and for clients who are unable to get a job due to limited education and low literacy levels. Participants commented that Productive Choices build self-esteem, help clients identify life goals, get people out of the house and interacting with others, and provide clients with an opportunity to give something back to the community. It was noted that Productive Choices need to be meaningful to clients in order to be beneficial; forcing clients to take part in activities they do not connect with may not be useful.

> *"People don't realize it's a support program; it's not 100% dependence program. You are expected to move forward and eventually get of Income Assistance. Income Assistance is not intended to be a program for people who can help themselves, allow them to coast along."* - IGO

It was suggested that for youth (19-30 years), they be strongly encouraged and supported to take part in education and training opportunities as their Productive Choice and that they be linked to a CDO who can help them go back to school or look for work. Participants also commented that participating in a Productive Choice or looking for work prevents clients from becoming dependent on the program.

Moving forward, it was suggested that CSOs be more involved in the Productive Choice process, encouraging client participation and helping them find a good match to their interests, skills and abilities.

Others feel that Productive Choices do not achieve their intended goal, and that the requirement should be removed. Some participants think that Productive Choices are an outdated concept, that the requirement to take part actually takes people's choice away from them by requiring them to take part in an activity (i.e., taking part is not their decision), and that for some it represents more of a 'checkbox exercise' than meaningful participation in an activity. It was noted that as clients become more stable, as their basic needs are met and as they get the support they need, they start to take part in productive activities or employment on their own, so they should not be required to take part before they are ready. It was suggested that setting goals replace Productive Choices; that CSOs help clients figure out what they want to do and help them get there.

> *"People want to do things for themselves. Have we asked people what they want to do for themselves?"* - NGO

New Productive Choices

Participants spoke about the need for ECE to work collaboratively with NGOs and IGOs to help develop Productive Choice opportunities such as:

- On-the-land programming
- Foundational skills training
    - Work readiness

> *"Look at who is on your client list, then look at the jobs being advertised. Work with those employers to build supportive programs where people can learn the foundations of work ethic, earning a paycheque, etc. Let people have six months of supportive work experience."* - Past client

- Life skills training
  - Budgeting (financial literacy), scheduling, organization
- Wellness programming (e.g., counselling/traditional counselling)
- Youth-Elder programming

A number of participants highlighted the importance of Productive Choices that focus on traditional and cultural activities (sewing, hunting, fishing, trapping), and education and training, indicating these are key for self-esteem and/or employment readiness.

Participants also commented on the importance of the IA program recognizing there are limited Productive Choice activities and employment opportunities in the smaller communities, and taking this into consideration when people are required to take part.

Seeking Employment

When asked how clients could be encouraged or supported to look for work, participants commented on the importance of ensuring that supports are in place to help clients succeed. They spoke about the need for CSOs to:

> *"What supports are we giving to people looking for work?"* - NGO

- Work with clients to identify barriers to employment and then work to remove them
- Create newsletters/job banks/bulletin boards that advertise employment opportunities
- Link clients with CDOs to create resumes, conduct job searches and mock interviews, and support their applications for employment (or education and training)
  - Connect clients to life skills and job readiness training and courses that will help them get a job
- Work with employers to identify employment opportunities and ask companies to email them when they have jobs available
- Connect clients to employers

> *"It's not about encouragement, it's about understanding each individual situation as unique. Some people may have young children and have limited access to flexible scheduling, others may need a lot of support, education and training to find employment, some may require medical treatment and support for addictions and trauma. Know who you serve. It's not a huge population, we should be able to build an inclusive and flexible program for our citizens."* - NGO

It was also suggested that the IA program provide clients with the tools they need for their job (gloves, equipment, clothing) and that it offer incentives to clients to encourage job searching.

Many participants spoke of the need for ECE to recognize the limited employment opportunities in smaller communities and that not everyone is capable of looking for work, or obtaining and maintaining a job (e.g., dealing with trauma and/or substance use, lacking education or the necessary literacy level), when they require people to look for work.

Participants also spoke about the burden placed on employers in small communities who are constantly required to fill out paperwork demonstrating that clients have come to them looking for work, knowing that either they have no work to offer clients or that clients are not suited to work.

Additional Program Suggestions

Additional IA program ideas engagement participants suggested to help inform the re-profiled program include:

- Review best practices in other jurisdictions (national and international) to see what they are doing to take care of their vulnerable populations
- Allow clients to travel while on assistance

Creation of a New Income Assistance Program for Seniors/Elders and Persons with Disabilities

The mandate of the GNWT includes a commitment to create a separate Income Assistance program for seniors/Elders and persons with disabilities. The goal of this is to establish a less burdensome process for seniors and persons with disabilities to access programs to help them meet their financial needs.

Under the current IA program, seniors and persons with disabilities are exempt from participating in Productive Choices, which makes them automatically eligible to receive the enhanced benefits. They also receive an aged or disabled benefit to assist with their daily living needs, as well as an incidental allowance to assist with the costs of personal care products and household supplies.

Engagement participants were asked to comment on what they thought a new program for seniors/Elders and persons with disabilities should look like so that it better meets the needs of those two groups.

> *"There is value in involving IGOs in this [new] program."*
> - GNWT employee

Application Process

There was overwhelming agreement that there should be either an annual application or a multi-year application (e.g., every three years) to decrease the amount of paperwork.

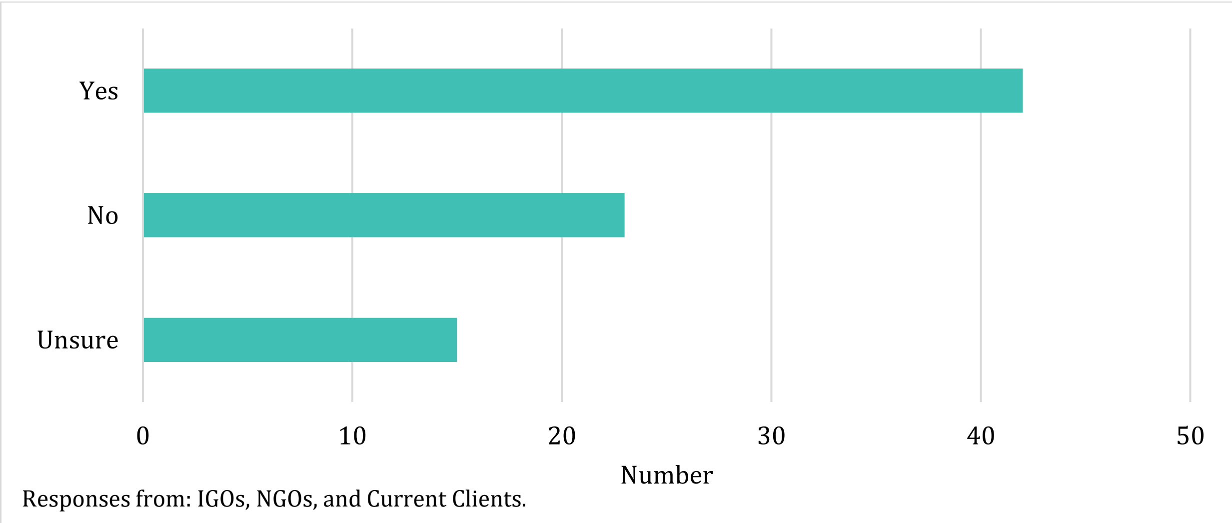


Figure 13: Do you think there should be an annual application for Elders/seniors and persons with disabilities?

Participants noted that the status of these two groups does not change over the year(s) and if it does, then the client can contact the CSO and update their file. Additionally, it was noted that asking a person with disabilities to continuously prove their disability is undignified.

Engagement participants also spoke about the need to simplify and streamline the process, create more plain language forms that are available in Indigenous languages, and ensure clients are aware that translation services are available. They recommended more flexible timeframes for submitting documents regarding GST and income tax since it is sometimes difficult to contact clients' guardians, who are responsible for the submission of these files, and it is unfair for seniors and persons with disabilities to be penalized because of someone else's delays.

Seniors/Elders and Persons with Disabilities Outreach

Many participants spoke about the need for more direct and meaningful contact with seniors and persons with disabilities in order to better understand their individual circumstances. In support of this deeper engagement, they suggested:

- Require CSOs interacting with seniors/Elders and persons with disabilities to receive training on how to work with/better support these two groups
- Allow CSOs to visit clients so they can better understand the circumstances in which clients live, especially seniors/Elders (i.e., who is living with them and who they are supporting with their Income Assistance)
    - CSOs should ensure that seniors and persons with disabilities are aware of and accessing all the services and supports they are entitled to (beyond just ECE)

- Ask GSOs to help with community outreach and follow-up for seniors/Elders and persons with disabilities when additional client supports are needed
- Don't require that seniors and persons with disabilities have to come to the local ECE Service Centre for meetings

Disability Definition

There was a high level of agreement that the GNWT needs to adopt a standard definition of disability across all departments. Participants noted that for the purposes of the IA program, the definition should include:

- People experiencing chronic mental health problems
- Persons with long-term disabilities
- Persons with short term disabilities that impair their ability to work
  - When the person gets better, they can shift to the regular Income Assistance program

It was recommended that persons with disabilities help determine the IA program definition.

Disability Assessment

Participants also discussed the challenges of trying to get a disability assessment form completed, especially in small communities where there is often no full-time physician and where locums are often not comfortable making a diagnosis. They spoke about the importance of a broader range of health-care professionals (e.g., physiotherapist, occupational therapist, psychologist) being allowed to complete the assessment form; a practice that is currently in place. It was also suggested that the disability assessment form include a space in which clients can provide information on their disability. Additionally, it was suggested that the CPP disability benefits receipt continue to be used as proof of disability.

Amalgamating Senior Programs into IA

While there was a high level of agreement that all senior's programs - IA, Senior's Home Heating Subsidy (SHHS) and Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit (SCSB) – should be merged into one program, there are some who feel that senior's programs should be under one umbrella but still separate from one another. They noted that not all seniors require Income Assistance, but they do need access to SHHS. They also commented on the stigma associated with Income Assistance and their concerns that seniors may not want to apply for SHHS if they are considered part of an IA program. In other words, they do not want to make being part of the IA program contingent on getting access to other senior's programs.

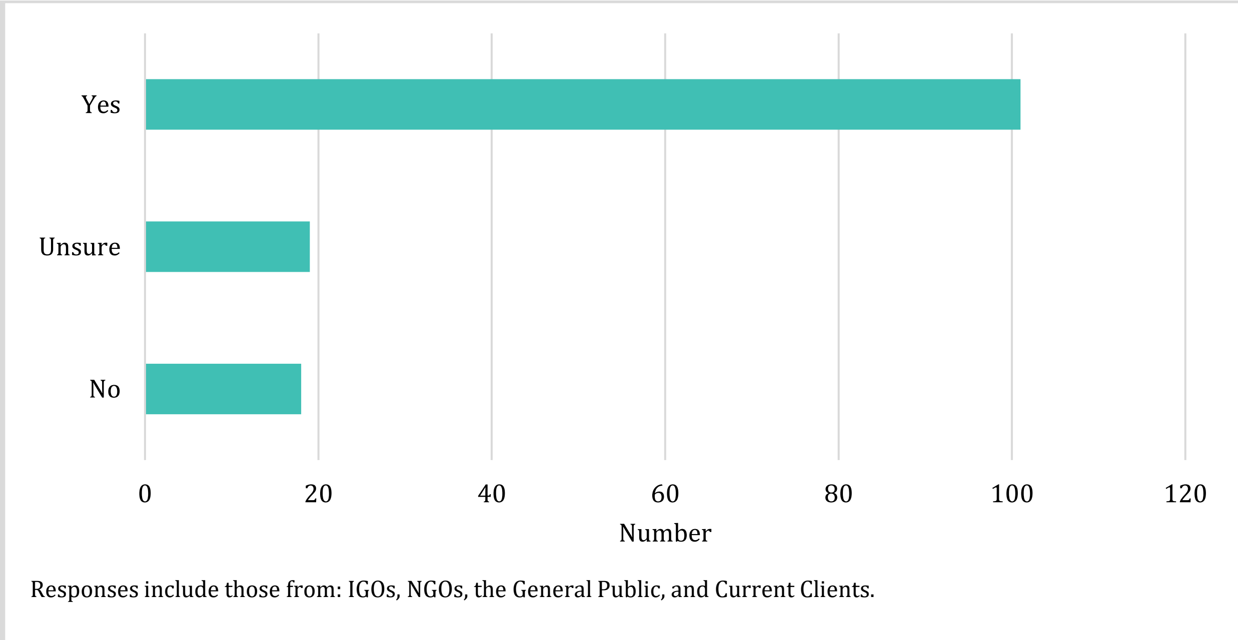


Figure 14: Do you think there should be one application for all seniors/Elders programs?

Many participants also spoke about the need to have a 'one-stop shop' for all senior's programs across the GNWT, so seniors do not have to go to different places and websites for information and applications. Moreover, they discussed the need for one form for all senior's programs and that CSOs should be responsible for letting seniors know about all the GNWT programs that are available to them.

It was recommended that the SHHS and SCSB programs be expanded to include persons with disabilities.

Benefits

There was overwhelming agreement that the benefit levels allotted to seniors and persons with disabilities need to be increased to at least reflect the current cost of living.

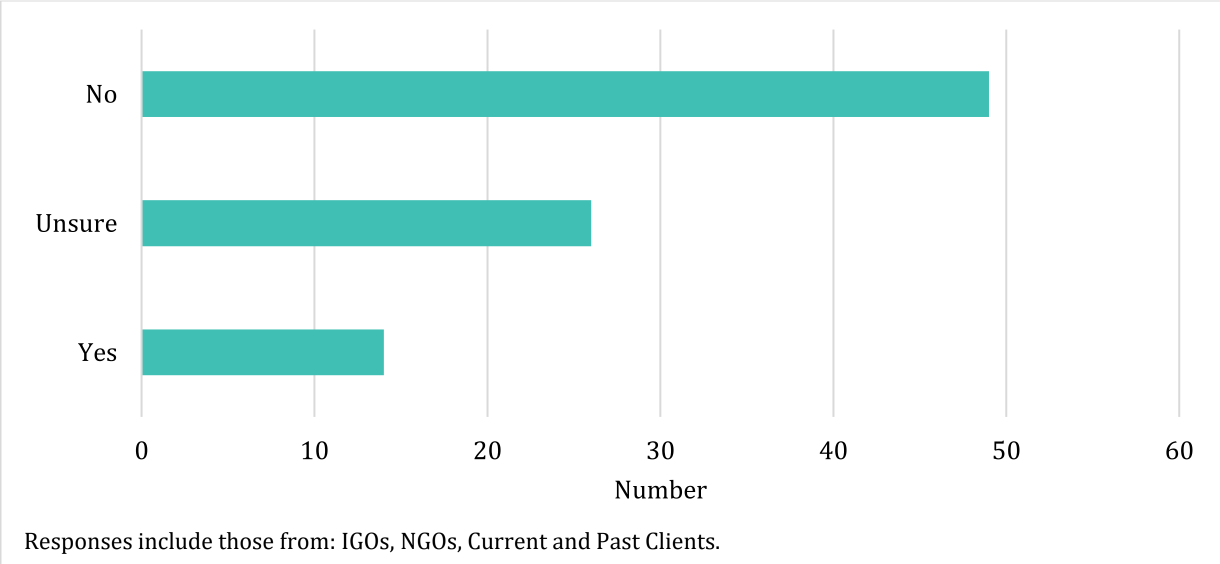


Figure 15: Are the current aged/disability and incidental allowances sufficient to meet the needs of Elders/seniors and persons with disabilities?

"Internet allows for participation and an increased sense of community, especially over the past couple of years because of the pandemic. All of our resources, for persons unable to come into the office, are online, so internet should be included." - NGO

A number of participants discussed the need for seniors and persons with disabilities to receive a guaranteed/universal basic income to help ensure their level of support is sufficient to meet their needs. Others noted that the program should offer benefits that bring clients up to the MBM-N recommended level.

Participants identified a number of areas in which they feel new or additional financial supports are required. These areas include:

- Internet
- Health (costs not covered through other benefits or not covered if items are lost or broken):
    - Dental
    - Specialized diets
    - Medications
    - Visual and hearing aids
    - Mobility devices (wheelchairs, canes)
    - Over-the-counter medications
- Housing
    - Home renovations/repairs
    - Home repairs
    - Home cleaning services
    - Rental and ownership costs

"Most of the Alzheimer Society programs are virtual and we do exercises and a cognitive program online, as well as our introduction to education. A lot of our follow-up is done online, so internet is important." - NGO

- Local transportation
- Snow removal
- Clothing
- Meals on Wheels
- Utilities (especially due to oxygen needs)
- Caregivers
- Entertainment for cultural and social activities
- Travel to see family

It was also suggested by a number of participants that fuel for seniors be provided in litres rather than based on a monetary amount, so that the amount provided is not affected by fluctuating fuel costs. Currently, many seniors are running out of their fuel subsidy by January or February because of the increasing cost of fuel. A suggestion was also made that ECE partner with the GNWT Department of Municipal and Community Affairs (MACA) to create a hot water heater on-demand program so seniors could save money in the summer and use it in the winter when it is needed.

It was noted that there is a need to recognize some clients intersect the two groups – they are seniors living with disabilities. These clients are more vulnerable and likely need additional benefits to ensure their needs are adequately met. Additionally, it was recommended that extra costs for seniors and persons with disabilities be determined on a case-by-case basis given their unique situations and needs.

Additional Program Suggestions

Participants identified a variety of additional program components they would like to see integrated into the new IA program for seniors and persons with disabilities:

- Ensure the program equally addresses the needs of seniors/Elders and persons with disabilities
- Have local ECE Service Centres be wheelchair friendly
- Work with IGOs on the delivery of the new program so that it can be integrated with community programming already in place for Elders and persons with disabilities
- Ensure the new program aligns with the strategies and plans of other GNWT programs
    - Look for intersections across programs since seniors and persons with disabilities often require help from more than one department and more than one program (e.g., ECE, HSS and NWTHC) - allow for more holistic care
        - Support an integrated service delivery model
    - GNWT departments work collaboratively to create an inventory of programs for seniors and persons with disabilities that can be shared with the CSOs

- Address the issue of stigma so that seniors are not ashamed to receive Income Assistance

Next Steps

The public engagement process confirmed that people across the NWT are concerned about the wellbeing of vulnerable individuals who are unable to financially support themselves or their dependents. While engagement participants identified a number of barriers and challenges that currently affect client's ability to access IA program services and supports, they also identified possible changes and improvements for the re-profiled IA program and the new seniors and persons with disabilities program, that will help meet clients' basic needs and are accessible and sustainable over time.

Based on the results from all activities conducted and products prepared, ECE will advance the work of the Mandate and Business Plan by creating a new program and reprofiling the current and existing IA program.

Acronyms

CDO - Career Development Officer

CPP – Canada Pension Plan

CSO – Client Services Officer

GNWT – Government of the Northwest Territories

ECE – Department of Education, Culture and Employment

EIA – Department of Executive and Indigenous Affairs

GSO – Government Services Officer

GST – Goods and Services Tax

HSS – Department of Health and Social Services

IA – Income Assistance

IBA – Impact Benefit Agreement

IGO – Indigenous Governments and Organizations

ISP – Income Security Programs Division

MACA – Department of Municipal and Community Affairs

MBM-N – Northern Market Basket Measure

MMIWG - Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

NGO – Non-Government Organization

NWTHC – NWT Housing Corporation

OAS – Old Age Security

PCD – Per Capita Distribution

SCSB – Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit

SHHS – Senior Home Heating Subsidy

TRC - Truth and Reconciliation Commission

UNDRIP - United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Appendix A – Online Survey Question Matrix

NOTES:

- Legend: Seniors (S), Persons with Disabilities (PD), All others (AO)
- Where a question is addressed to multiple survey participant groups, the final survey questions referred to seniors or Elders according to the participant group; only one is shown below.

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Guiding Questions / Program Participants</th><th rowspan="2">Indigenous Governments and Organizations; Government of the Northwest Territories employees (I)</th><th colspan="3">Non-Government Organizations (N)</th><th rowspan="2">Vendors (V) (landlords, fuel suppliers, utility companies, etc.)</th><th rowspan="2">General Public (P)</th><th rowspan="2">Former IA Clients (C-F)</th><th rowspan="2">Current IA Client (C-C)</th></tr>
<tr><th>S</th><th>PD</th><th>AO</th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="8">Please select the statement that best represents your interaction with the Income Assistance program.
○ I represent an Indigenous Governments and Organizations with members who receive support from the Income Assistance program
○ I work for a Non-Government Organization that provides services and supports to seniors who receive support from the Income Assistance program
○ I work for a Non-Government Organization that provides services and supports to persons with disabilities who receive support from the Income Assistance program
○ I work for a Non-Government Organization that provides services and supports to Income Assistance clients (not seniors or persons with disabilities)
○ I work for the Government of the Northwest Territories that provides services and support to Income Assistance clients
○ I am a Vendor who has Income Assistance customers
○ I am a current Income Assistance program client
○ I am a past/former Income Assistance program client
○ I am a member of the General Public interested in the Income Assistance program</td></tr>
<tr><td>What currently works well with the Income Assistance program?</td><td colspan="5">Do you work with people who use the Income Assistance program?
○ Yes
○ No

How satisfied are you with the current Income Assistance program?
○ Very satisfied
○ Somewhat satisfied
○ Somewhat dissatisfied
○ Very dissatisfied</td><td>Are you familiar with the Income Assistance program?
○ Yes
○ No

How did you find out about the program?</td><td>How satisfied were you with the Income Assistance program?
○ Very satisfied
○ Somewhat satisfied
○ Somewhat dissatisfied
○ Very dissatisfied

What did you like most about the Income Assistance program?</td><td>How satisfied are you with the Income Assistance program?
○ Very satisfied
○ Somewhat satisfied
○ Somewhat dissatisfied
○ Very dissatisfied</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Guiding Questions / Program Participants</th><th rowspan="2">Indigenous Governments and Organizations; Government of the Northwest Territories employees (I)</th><th colspan="3">Non-Government Organizations (N)</th><th rowspan="2">Vendors (V) (landlords, fuel suppliers, utility companies, etc.)</th><th rowspan="2">General Public (P)</th><th rowspan="2">Former IA Clients (C-F)</th><th rowspan="2">Current IA Client (C-C)</th></tr>
<tr><th>S</th><th>PD</th><th>AO</th></tr>
<tr><td>What are common barriers of the Income Assistance program?

How can those barriers be removed and/or reduced (while still ensuring the program receives the information required)?</td><td colspan="6">Are you aware of any barriers that people encounter with the Income Assistance program?
○ Yes
○ No

What are the common barriers?
○ Forms are too complicated
○ There are too many documents required to prove eligibility
○ Eligibility criteria is not clear
○ Takes too long for assessments to be completed
○ Clients have to apply to frequently (every month)
○ Not enough income exemptions
○ Too many penalties for non-compliance
○ Other (please specify)
[this is a select all question]</td><td>Did you have any problems applying for Income Assistance?
○ Yes
○ No

What problems did you have when applying for Income Assistance? (select all that apply)
○ Forms are too difficult to fill out
○ I couldn’t provide all the information that ECE wanted
○ There was too much paperwork
○ It took too long before I received my money
○ Staff did not explain the program
○ Staff did not answer my questions
○ Other (please specify)</td><td>Do you understand how eligibility for the Income Assistance program works?
○ Yes
○ No
○ Not sure

Have you ever used the Income Assistance Handbook to help you understand the program?
○ Yes
○ No

Did you find the Income Assistance Handbook helpful?
○ Yes
○ No

Did you find it difficult to apply for Income Assistance?
○ Yes
○ No

What difficulties did you experience when applying for Income Assistance? (Select all that apply)
○ Forms are too difficult to fill out
○ I couldn’t provide all the information that ECE wanted
○ There was too much paperwork</td></tr>
</table>

Guiding Questions / Program Participants	Indigenous Governments and Organizations; Government of the Northwest Territories employees (I)	Non-Government Organizations (N)			Vendors (V) (landlords, fuel suppliers, utility companies, etc.)	General Public (P)	Former IA Clients (C-F)	Current IA Client (C-C)
		S	PD	AO				
								○ It took too long before I received my money ○ Staff did not explain the program ○ Staff did not answer my questions ○ I didn't understand why I was refused for Income Assistance ○ Other (please specify)
Are the current types and levels of assistance targeting the basic needs of Income Assistance recipients? (Example, the IA program assists with actual costs associated with shelter and utilities, while there are set amounts for food and clothing.)	The Income Assistance program assists with the actual costs associated with shelter and utilities, while there are set amounts for food and clothing. If Income Assistance was able to provide more assistance in <u>one</u> area, what do you think that should be? ○ Food ○ Clothing ○ Education and training ○ Emergencies ○ Incidentals ○ Furniture ○ Security deposits for rent or utilities ○ Child care ○ Fees to suspend criminal records ○ Allowances for seniors or persons with disabilities ○ I don't feel additional assistance is needed If Income Assistance was able to provide funding for <u>one</u> new benefit what do think that should be? ○ Home internet ○ Transportation (e.g., bus fare, taxi vouchers, or gas reimbursement) ○ Cell phone or landline ○ Tenant insurance ○ I don't feel additional Income Assistance benefits are needed				The Income Assistance program assists with the actual costs associated with shelter and utilities. How can the program better work with service providers? What difficulties have you had with the Income Assistance program? ○ Don't understand eligibility criteria ○ Payments are not timely ○ Too much paperwork was required ○ Other (please specify) *[this is a select all question]*	The Income Assistance program assists with the actual costs associated with shelter and utilities, while there are set amounts for food and clothing. If Income Assistance was able to provide more assistance in <u>one</u> area, what do you think that should be? ○ Food ○ Clothing ○ Education and training ○ Emergencies ○ Incidentals ○ Furniture ○ Security deposits for rent or utilities ○ Child care ○ Fees to suspend	Would you say the amount of money you received from Income Assistance was: ○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much Thinking about how you spent your money, what was the <u>main</u> area that you were having trouble covering costs? ○ Food ○ Rent or shelter ○ Clothing ○ Utilities ○ Transportation ○ Other (please specify) If Income Assistance was able to provide funding for <u>one</u> additional benefit what would have been your first choice?	Would you say the amount of money you receive from Income Assistance is too little, about right or too much? ○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much Thinking about how you spend your money, what is the <u>main</u> area that you are having trouble covering costs? ○ Food ○ Rent or shelter ○ Clothing ○ Utilities ○ Transportation ○ Other (please specify) ___________

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	○ Other (please specify)					criminal records ○ Allowances for seniors or persons with disabilities ○ I don't feel additional assistance is needed If Income Assistance was able to provide funding for <u>one</u> new benefit what do think that should be? ○ Home internet ○ Transportation (e.g., bus fare, taxi vouchers, or gas reimbursement) ○ Cell phone or landline ○ Tenant insurance ○ I don't feel additional Income Assistance benefits are needed ○ Other (please specify)	○ Home internet ○ Transportation (e.g., bus fare, taxi vouchers, or gas reimbursement) ○ Cell phone or landline ○ Tenant insurance ○ I don't feel additional Income Assistance benefits are needed ○ Other (please specify)	________ If Income Assistance was able to provide funding for <u>one</u> additional benefit what would be your first choice? ○ Home internet ○ Transportation (e.g., bus fare, taxi vouchers, or gas reimbursement) ○ Cell phone or landline ○ Tenant insurance ○ I don't feel additional Income Assistance benefits are needed ○ Other (please specify)
Are the current <u>exemptions for unearned income adequate</u>? If not, what is a reasonable amount for the Unearned Income	Unearned income is money that a client gets from other places such as: GST and income tax refunds, Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security, Employment Insurance and Worker's Compensation, investments, gifts, and gambling winnings. The Income Assistance program allows clients up to $1,200 of unearned income per year before their benefits are reduced. Do you think that $1,200 in unearned income each year is too little, about right or too much? ○ Too little ○ About right					Unearned income is money that a client gets from other places such as: GST and income tax refunds, Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security, Employment Insurance and Worker's Compensation, investments, gifts, and gambling winnings. The Income Assistance program allows clients up to $1,200 of unearned income per year before their benefits are reduced. Do you think that $1,200 in unearned income each year is too little, about right or too much?		Unearned income is money that a client gets from other places such as: GST and income tax refunds, Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security, Employment Insurance and Worker's Compensation, investments, monetary gifts from family and friends, and gambling

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		S	PD	AO				
Exemption? Should this be a phased approach?	○ Too much *[If too little]* What amount do you believe is adequate? Should there be a monthly unearned income exemption rather than annual? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Unsure					○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much *[If too little]* What amount do you believe is adequate?		winnings. The Income Assistance program allows clients up to $1,200 of unearned income per year before their benefits are reduced. Do you understand how the unearned income exemption works? ○ Yes ○ No Do you think that $1,200 in unearned income each year is too little, about right, or too much? ○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much
Are the current exemptions for earned income adequate? If not, what is a reasonable amount for the Earned Income Exemption? Should this be a phased approach?	Earned income is the money a client receives from wages, selling arts and crafts, honorariums or scholarships, self-employment, babysitting and income received through hunting, trapping, and fishing. The Income Assistance program allows a client to keep additional income over their monthly Income Assistance payment when they work. If you are single with no dependents, you receive an exemption of $200 plus 15% of remaining employment income each month without your benefits being reduced. If you have one or more dependents, you receive an exemption of $400 plus 15% of remaining employment income each month without your benefits being reduced. Do you think that $200 plus 15% in earned income each month for a single person with no dependents is too little, about right or too much? ○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much					Earned income is the money a client receives from wages, selling arts and crafts, honorariums or scholarships, self-employment, babysitting and income received through hunting, trapping, and fishing. The Income Assistance program allows a client to keep additional income over their monthly Income Assistance payment when they work. If you are single with no dependents, you receive an exemption of $200 plus 15% of remaining employment income each month without your benefits being reduced. If you have one or more dependents, you to receive an exemption of $400 plus 15% of remaining employment income each month without your benefits being reduced. Do you think that $200 plus 15% in earned income each month for a single person with no dependents is too little, about right or too much?		Earned income is the money a client receives from wages, selling arts and crafts, honorariums or scholarships, self-employment, babysitting and income received through hunting, trapping, and fishing. The Income Assistance program allows a client to keep additional income over their monthly Income Assistance payment when they work. If you are single with no dependents, you receive an exemption of $200 plus 15% of remaining

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	[If too little] What amount do you believe is adequate? Do you think that $400 plus 15% in earned income each month for a person with dependents is too little, about right or too much? ○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much *[If too little]* What amount do you believe is adequate?					○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much Do you think that $400 plus 15% in earned income each month for a person with dependents is too little, about right or too much? ○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much		employment income each month without your benefits being reduced. If you have one or more dependents, you receive an exemption of $400 plus 15% of remaining employment income each month without your benefits being reduced. Do you understand how the earned income exemption works? ○ Yes ○ No Do you think that $200 plus 15% in earned income each month for a single person with no dependents is too little, about right or too much? ○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much Do you think that $400 plus 15% in earned income each month for a person with dependents is too little, about right or too much? ○ Too little ○ About right ○ Too much
	The current Income Assistance program						The current Income Assistance program does not	The current Income Assistance program currently

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		S	PD	AO				
	does not count other incomes, including money intended for children (such as child support and fostering), money from residential school settlements, and up to $500/per person/per year for land treaty payments. Are these income exemptions sufficient? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Unsure How can this be improved?						count other incomes, including money intended for children (such as child support and fostering), money from residential school settlements, and up to $500/per person/per year for land treaty payments. Are these income exemptions sufficient? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Unsure How can this be improved?	does not count other incomes, including money intended for children (such as child support and fostering), money from residential school settlements, and up to $500/per person/per year for land treaty payments. Are you aware of these additional income exemptions? ○ Yes ○ No Are these income exemptions sufficient? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Unsure How can this be improved?
							Have you ever stopped receiving Income Assistance? ○ Yes ○ No For what reason(s)? (Select all that apply) ○ Had enough income to meet my financial needs ○ Did not take part in or complete a Productive Choice ○ Did not look for work ○ Refused to work or did not use resources that could help you get work ○ Held back information about my income or relationship status	

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Guiding Questions / Program Participants</th><th rowspan="2">Indigenous Governments and Organizations; Government of the Northwest Territories employees (I)</th><th colspan="3">Non-Government Organizations (N)</th><th rowspan="2">Vendors (V) (landlords, fuel suppliers, utility companies, etc.)</th><th rowspan="2">General Public (P)</th><th rowspan="2">Former IA Clients (C-F)</th><th rowspan="2">Current IA Client (C-C)</th></tr>
<tr><th>S</th><th>PD</th><th>AO</th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td colspan="3"></td><td></td><td></td><td colspan="2">○ Made false or misleading statements
○ Left a job without cause
○ Got fired
○ Other (please specify):</td></tr>
<tr><td>Are the refusal periods for non-compliance adequate or too harsh? What if there is fraud?</td><td colspan="8">A client may be refused Income Assistance for a variety of different reasons such as: making false or misleading statements; holding back information about their income or relationship status; not looking for a job; and getting fired from their job with just cause. When this happens, a client must wait 60-90 days, depending on the reason, before they can re-apply.

Do you think clients should be refused Income Assistance for a period of time if they do not follow the rules of the program?
○ Yes
○ No

Do you think having to wait 60-90 days is too little, about right, or too much?
○ Too little
○ About right
○ Too much

What is another way the Income Assistance program can encourage clients to follow the rules?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Do the benefits align with other territorial social support programs (e.g., public housing, integrated case management, NWT housing repairs, homelessness assistance fund/Canada-NWT Housing Benefit)?</td><td colspan="6">How can the Income Assistance program better support clients working with other NWT agencies and departments??</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Does the IA program</td><td colspan="8">The Income Assistance program is intended to encourage and support greater self-reliance. Being self-reliant means different things for different people. Some may want to work on education or training, others on job skills. It may mean doing volunteer or part-time work. Self-reliance is about finding what is right for you at this time. It is based on your family, future career or employment goals and the</td></tr>
</table>

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<tr><th>S</th><th>PD</th><th>AO</th></tr>
<tr><td>encourage and support greater self-reliance to improve the quality of lives?</td><td colspan="8">resources available in your community.

Do you think that the Income Assistance program helps clients become more self-reliant?
○ Yes
○ No

Do you think the Income Assistance program goal of encouraging and supporting self-reliance is appropriate?
○ Yes
○ No

How could the Income Assistance program better assist clients with becoming self-reliant?</td></tr>
<tr><td>How can Indigenous values be reflected in program design and perspective regarding Income Assistance outcomes?</td><td colspan="4">How do you think Indigenous values can be integrated in the Income Assistance program?</td><td></td><td colspan="2">How do you think Indigenous values can be integrated in the Income Assistance program?</td><td>How do you think Indigenous values can be integrated in the Income Assistance program?</td></tr>
<tr><td>How should the new Income Assistance program differentiate from the current program to better meet the needs of seniors and persons with disabilities?</td><td colspan="3">ECE is creating a new Income Assistance program for Elders and persons with disabilities.

Do you think there should be an annual application for Elders and persons with disabilities?
○ Yes
○ No
○ Not sure

Are the current aged/disability and incidental allowances sufficient to meet the needs of Elders and persons with disabilities?
○ Yes
○ No</td><td></td><td>ECE is creating a new Income Assistance program for seniors and persons with disabilities.

How can the Income Assistance program be improved to support seniors and persons with disabilities with rent, shelter, and utilities?</td><td>ECE is creating a new Income Assistance program for seniors and persons with disabilities.

Do you think that seniors and persons with disabilities have more needs that need to be met by the Income Assistance program?
○ Yes
○ No
○ Not sure</td><td>When you were receiving Income Assistance were you a senior or a person with a disability?
○ Yes
○ No

ECE is creating a new Income Assistance program for seniors and persons with disabilities.

Did you find the aged/disability and incidental</td><td>ECE is creating a new Income Assistance program just for seniors and persons with disabilities. Are you currently a senior or a person with a disability?
○ Yes
○ No

What do you think the new seniors and persons with disabilities program should look like so that it better meets your needs?</td></tr>
</table>

Guiding Questions / Program Participants	Indigenous Governments and Organizations; Government of the Northwest Territories employees (I)	Non-Government Organizations (N)			Vendors (V) (landlords, fuel suppliers, utility companies, etc.)	General Public (P)	Former IA Clients (C-F)	Current IA Client (C-C)
		S	PD	AO				
For example: What are additional costs that seniors and persons with disabilities have? How can we account for them in the new program? Should ECE consider amalgamating all senior programs under the new IA program or is it better to offer each program separately? (e.g., IA, Senior Home Heating Subsidy (SHHS), and Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit (SCSB))	○ Not sure What are some additional needs that Elders and person with disabilities face that could be addressed through Income Assistance? Do you think there should be one application for all Elder programs (Income Assistance, Seniors Home Heating Subsidy)? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Not sure ○ Not applicable d. Do you think the number of documents required by Elders and person with disabilities should be reduced? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Not sure What are other suggestions to ensure this new program meets the needs of Elders and persons with disabilities?					Please specify what these needs are. Do you think there should be one application for all seniors programs (Income Assistance, Seniors Home Heating Subsidy)? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Not sure What other suggestions do you have to ensure this new program meets the needs of seniors and persons with disabilities?	allowances were sufficient to meet your additional needs? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Unsure If you are a person with a disability, did you find the documentation required to prove your disability was too complicated, just right or too vague? ○ Too complicated ○ Just right ○ Too vague ○ Not applicable What do you think the new program should look like so that it can better meet the needs of seniors and persons with disabilities?	Do you think there should be an annual application for seniors and persons with disabilities? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Not sure Did you find the aged/disability and incidental allowances were sufficient to meet your additional needs? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Unsure Do you think there are additional costs that seniors and persons with disabilities have that should be incorporated into the new program? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Not sure Do you think there should be one application for all seniors programs (Income Assistance, Seniors Home Heating Subsidy, Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit)? ○ Yes ○ No

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								○ Not sure ○ Not applicable Do you think the number of documents required by seniors and person with disabilities should be reduced? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Not sure If you are a person with a disability, did you find the documentation required to prove your disability was too complicated, just right or too vague? ○ Too complicated ○ Just right ○ Too vague ○ Not applicable
		Is the documentation required to prove a person's disability too complicated, just right or too vague? ○ Too complicated ○ Just right ○ Too vague What should the Income Assistance program require from clients to support their disability for purposes of Income Assistance?						
Should the IA	The Income Assistance			The Income Assistance		The Income Assistance	Did you participate in a	The Income Assistance

Guiding Questions / Program Participants	Indigenous Governments and Organizations; Government of the Northwest Territories employees (I)	Non-Government Organizations (N)			Vendors (V) (landlords, fuel suppliers, utility companies, etc.)	General Public (P)	Former IA Clients (C-F)	Current IA Client (C-C)
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program require applicants to participate in a Productive Choice in order to qualify for benefits?	program requires clients to take part in a productive choice (unless they are exempt). A productive choice is a program or activity such as: wage employment; career planning; education and training; volunteer community work; traditional activities; parenting; caring for an adult family member; or wellness activities. Do you think that the Income Assistance program should require applicants to participate in a productive choice in order to qualify for benefits? ○ Yes ○ No			program requires clients to take part in a productive choice (unless they are exempt). A productive choice is a program or activity such as: wage employment; career planning; education and training; volunteer community work; traditional activities; parenting; caring for an adult family member; or wellness activities. Do you think that the Income Assistance program should require applicants to participate in a productive choice in order to qualify for benefits? ○ Yes ○ No		program requires clients to take part in a productive choice (unless they are exempt). A productive choice is a program or activity such as: wage employment; career planning; education and training; volunteer community work; traditional activities; parenting; caring for an adult family member; or wellness activities. Do you think that the Income Assistance program should require applicants to participate in a productive choice in order to qualify for benefits? ○ Yes ○ No	productive choice activity? ○ Yes ○ No Do you think the Income Assistance program should require applicants to participate in a productive choice in order to receive benefits? ○ Yes ○ No	program requires clients to take part in a productive choice (unless they are exempt – seniors and persons with disabilities). A productive choice is a program or activity such as: wage employment; career planning; education and training; volunteer community work; traditional activities; parenting; caring for an adult family member; or wellness activities. Have you participated in a productive choice activity? ○ Yes ○ No Do you think the Income Assistance program should require applicants to participate in a productive choice in order to receive benefits? ○ Yes ○ No

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		S	PD	AO				
How can the IA program encourage or assist applicants in seeking employment?	Do you think the Income Assistance program should require that applicants look for work? ○ Yes ○ No How can the Income Assistance program encourage clients to look for work?			Do you think the Income Assistance program should require that applicants look for work? ○ Yes ○ No How can the Income Assistance program encourage clients to look for work?		Do you think the Income Assistance program should require that applicants look for work? ○ Yes ○ No How can the Income Assistance program encourage clients to look for work?		
					Should the Income Assistance program continue to pay landlords and vendors directly? ○ Yes ○ No ○ Unsure			
How can the existing IA program be improved and re-profiled to better serve those clients who do not qualify for the new program for seniors or persons with disabilities?	Overall, how can the existing Income Assistance program be improved to better serve the needs of clients?							

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		S	PD	AO				
What are some initiatives/innovations that you are aware of that have been successful and could be applied to IA?								
Is there anything else you would like to share with us?	Is there anything else you would like to share with us?							