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Support for Low-Income Families

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I listened very carefully to the Finance minister's speech last week, and there wasn't one mention of poverty, even though this government is supposed to be developing an anti-poverty strategy. Instead the budget contained less funding for the rental housing supplement, less funding for the child care parent subsidies, less funding for the Saskatchewan employment supplement, and it decimated the budget for Sask Housing. To the Social Services minister: why are poor people in our province bearing the brunt of this government's financial mismanagement?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister for Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And last night, had the member been listening, I explained that the reduction in the Saskatchewan employment supplement was quite minimal and it won't affect the existing families that are on that supplement.

However because of this government, those very same families, Mr. Speaker, will benefit because this government has increased minimum wage by 28.3 per cent since we formed government, Mr. Speaker. It was this government, quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, that introduced the child drug program, and that will benefit these very same families. It is this government that introduced the active families benefit, and that will benefit these very same families.

It was this government that eliminated the PST [provincial sales tax] for children's clothes, and that will benefit these very same families. And it's this government that doubled the low-income tax credit. That will benefit these very same families, Mr. Speaker. It is this government that increased the rental supplement that also benefits these very same families, Mr. Speaker. And it is this government that made record-setting tax reduction, personal tax reduction, that also benefits these very same families. So, Mr. Speaker, there is a lot in this budget that will help these low-income families as they

transition out of the Saskatchewan employment supplement program.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre. **Mr. Forbes:** — You know, Mr. Speaker, the employment supplement is supposed to give a little extra money to low-income, working parents with children. But this government is cutting that supplement for parents whose children are over the age of 12. Peter Gilmer of the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry says, and I quote, “. . . at a time when we are now tied [tied] for the lowest minimum wage in the country, losing that support is going to have a significant impact.” He questions how committed this government is to the anti-poverty strategy, which the minister forgot to mention in that answer, because this kind of cut, and I quote, “doesn’t move us in that direction at all.”

To the minister: does the minister really think that teenagers are cheaper to raise? Why is she cutting this vital support for low-income, working people?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister for Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, the number one cost to raising children, quite frankly, is the child care cost, which a lot of parents have brought to my attention. That is a significant cost to parents, and that is the child age that will be covered, continued to be covered under the Saskatchewan employment supplement.

The Saskatchewan employment supplement, Mr. Speaker, is not a long-term program. It is a transitional type of program. The average time that any family is on that program is seven months, Mr. Speaker, so it isn’t a program that families get on and stay on for long periods of time. So it will be minimal effect.

It was a tough budget. There was choices to be made, Mr. Speaker. We felt that with all of the other programs that we have introduced that will aid those very same families, Mr. Speaker, if they had a choice of losing all of the rest of the programs — and that would be the choice of the NDP because the NDP didn’t implement any of those helps for those families, Mr. Speaker — then that is what we chose to do.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Well, Mr. Speaker, by slashing the employment supplement, this government says it will save about \$1 million. But this government has spent \$3 million on the Premier’s American lobbyist. It has spent \$4 million on travel and accommodations for its \$40 million American lean consultant. It’s handed \$5 million for research grants to the failed American smart meter manufacturer. Yet this government is cutting the employment supplement for low-income, working families, just to save a million bucks. That’s shameful, Mr. Speaker. That’s shameful. To the minister: how can she possibly justify such horribly misplaced priorities?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, again I can go through the whole list of programs that we have available that will help those very same families, Mr. Speaker. It is a fairly

minimal cut, as the member opposite said. It is a small amount that is being reduced and it will affect not all that many families, but it will affect some. We'll be grandfathering the existing families that are in the program so no one family that's in the program will see a reduction. It will however affect the new entrants, Mr. Speaker.

It's interesting that he mentions about the poverty strategy which our government has embarked on. Even though our poverty levels are not the lowest in the country, we have seen improvements in our poverty levels within this province which is very positive, but we think there's more work that needs to be done. But we didn't just talk about it, Mr. Speaker. We put together a very credible panel that is going to undergo consultations, to come forward with recommendations that we can form a strategy around. And do you know what the members opposite did when they had the chance to make those decisions? Nothing.