



FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS FOR EVACUEES

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

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Government of
Northwest Territories



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Executive summary

Background

The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) launched two financial assistance programs, the Evacuee Travel Support Program (ETSP) and the Evacuee Income Disruption Support Program (EIDS), in response to the evacuations caused by wildfires in the spring and summer of 2023. These programs aimed to provide financial support to the affected residents of the Northwest Territories during their evacuation periods. The Department of Finance administered both programs and undertook a review to assess their effectiveness

and areas for improvement based on feedback from various stakeholders.

Program Overview

The ETSP offered financial assistance for evacuation-related travel expenses, while the EIDS provided one-time financial relief for those who experienced a loss of employment income due to the evacuation. Both programs had specific eligibility criteria aimed at addressing the immediate financial impacts of the evacuation on residents.

Feedback and Engagement

A comprehensive engagement strategy, including an online survey and an invitation for email submissions, was employed to gather feedback on the programs. The survey received 272 submissions, highlighting key areas of concern and satisfaction among participants. However, no email submissions were received.

Key Findings

The feedback identified several critical themes:

Clarity and Accessibility: Many respondents found the application process and program rules confusing, indicating a need for simplification and clearer communication.

Inclusive Coverage and Equitable Treatment: A significant number of responses pointed to the restrictive eligibility criteria, suggesting a preference for more inclusive financial support that accounts for the varied needs of all NWT residents.

Timeliness and Efficiency: While there was appreciation for the financial support provided, feedback highlighted the need for quicker processing and payment times, alongside improvements in the efficiency of application procedures.

Communication and Documentation: Criticisms were also levied at the GNWT's communication strategies and the cumbersome documentation requirements, with suggestions for more proactive and clear communication, as well as simplified documentation processes.

Introduction

The Evacuee Travel Support Program (ETSP) and the Evacuee Income Disruption Support Program (EIDS) provided financial assistance to residents of the Northwest Territories during multiple evacuation events in the spring and summer of 2023. Both programs were created as the need was identified and administered by the Department of Finance throughout the evacuation events.

While these programs were able to get much needed funds to residents during the evacuations, the GNWT committed to reviewing how we deliver future financial supports during evacuations so they are more responsive and meet the needs of all NWT residents.

Over time, the GNWT received feedback from residents, Indigenous governments and Indigenous organizations, other organizations, and Members of the Legislative Assembly. We heard that:

- the application process was hard;
- the program rules for the programs were confusing;
- there was uncertainty about eligibility; and
- payment wasn't as timely as it could have been.

About ETSP and EIDS

The **Evacuation Travel Support Program (ETSP)** was launched in August 2023. ETSP provided funding for NWT residents who, by order, evacuated their home community by vehicle because of the 2023 wildfires. It was available to all NWT residents who:

- were subject to an evacuation order;
- evacuated by vehicle; and
- had not received any other financial support intended to offset evacuation travel expenses from their employer, insurance company or any other source.

Eligible recipients received \$750 per vehicle evacuated outside of the Northwest Territories and \$400 per vehicle evacuated within the territory.

The **Evacuee Income Disruption Support Program (EIDS)** launched in May 2023. It provided one-time targeted financial relief to ease the financial burdens faced by evacuees who suffered a loss of employment income. It was available to all NWT residents 17+ who:

- were subject to an evacuation order of over seven days; and
- suffered any loss of employment income because their employment has been disrupted due to the evacuation order.

Eligible recipients received a one-time payment of \$750.

The application process

Electronic documents (pdf) in English and French were available at the Department of Finance website at the launch of each program. Printed copies of the documents were also made available at evacuation centres. Applicants were instructed to send their completed forms and supporting documents by email (a dedicated email address was created for each program).

The GNWT also created an online form for NWT residents to apply for both programs. The online form launched on August 29, 2023.

Engagement

Online survey

On February 28, 2024, the GNWT asked NWT residents to provide their feedback to determine how the GNWT could best support NWT residents during future evacuations. All residents were invited to complete a survey on the GNWT's Have Your Say Public Engagement portal. The deadline for feedback was March 22, 2024.

The survey included four questions, asking residents to provide feedback on the following:

Application process

- Eligibility
- Program rules
- Payment

In total, 272 submissions were received by deadline.

Email submissions

Communication to launch public engagement on financial assistance for evacuees also invited residents to participate by sending feedback to EIDS@gov.nt.ca. No email submissions were received before the March 22 deadline.

What we heard

Initial analysis of the survey responses showed that respondent feedback touched on all four main areas—how to apply, who can get help, the rules of the programs, and how payments are made—no matter which of the four questions participants responded to.

To simplify our analysis, we analyzed all the responses as a single data set, rather sticking to the four original questions. This way, we could look at everything together and better understand what people were saying. It helped us see the big picture and figure out what most people were happy or unhappy about. By doing this, we respected the detailed views of those who responded and made it easier to see how we can improve.

Clarity (153 responses)

24 positive, 126 negative

There were 126 negative mentions concerning Clarity. Respondents expressed concern over the complexity of the eligibility criteria, found the information provided to be confusing or challenging to navigate, particularly when different forms of assistance were involved or when specific family circumstances came into play. The feedback on Information Clarity underscores a need to simplify and clarify the information and processes related to evacuation financial assistance programs.

Inclusive Coverage (146)

0 positive, 144 negative

Many responses (144) across all survey questions indicated respondents' frustration with the eligibility criteria for the EIDS and ETSP programs. Noting that the strict eligibility criteria didn't account for the diverse needs of NWT residents. In almost all cases where this topic was addressed, respondents expressed a preference for financial assistance that supports all NWT residents who are required to evacuate.

Timeliness (123)

76 positive, 38 negative

In responses related to the timeliness of payment, there were twice as many positive mentions (76) as negative mentions. Positive responses expressed gratitude for the financial assistance and noted personal satisfaction with the amount of time it took to receive payment. However, positive responses often acknowledged that others may have more urgent needs and may need payment more quickly—aligning with the negative responses on this topic. Overall, the responses indicated that the GNWT should seek out ways to reduce the amount of time needed to process applications and issue payment to residents.

Efficiency (110)

65 positive, 21 negative

The significant amount of feedback related to this theme highlights its importance to stakeholders. Most responses expressed satisfaction with the efficiency of processes, suggesting that for many, the system works smoothly and expediently. However, negative responses indicated that there is still room for improvement in making procedures more streamlined and less time-consuming for all users.

Equitable Treatment (49)

3 positive, 45 negative

“Inclusive Coverage” and “Equitable Treatment” are closely related but distinct themes that appeared in responses across all four questions. Respondents felt that eligibility criteria for the financial assistance programs lead to inequitable treatment of residents. Some of the examples cited include:

- Providing funding for residents who drove out of the territory versus those who were evacuated by air;
- Providing funding per vehicle, rather than per person; and
- Income disruption funding only accounted for loss of employment income and did not consider that all evacuated residents faced extraordinary costs.

In addition to expanding eligibility criteria, responses indicated that residents want financial assistance programs that treat residents fairly and account for all situations.

Payment Amounts (31)

5 positive, 21 negative

Overall, these responses indicated that the amount of financial support provided was not adequate enough for residents to address their needs during the evacuation. Even in positive responses where respondents indicated that they were personally satisfied with the amount they received, they noted concern that it may not be enough to effectively support other, less fortunate residents.

Accessibility Concerns (29)

14 positive, 11 negative

Feedback addressing Accessibility Concerns was more balanced than other themes. Positive feedback often highlighted the program's efforts to reach a wider audience by accepting .pdf or scanned copies of printed application forms as well as through an online portal. Negative responses, on the other hand, mentioned challenges obtaining or submitting physical application forms, and noted that application accessibility largely

depended on internet access. The need for more language options was also mentioned.

Inconsistent Criteria (29)

0 positive, 29 negative

These responses referred to how criteria for the programs were changed throughout the evacuation period. While well intentioned, changing criteria for programs during evacuations frustrated respondents. Examples include confusion over qualification parameters that seemed to shift without notice, leading to uncertainty and doubt about the application's likelihood of success.

Communication (23)

1 positive, 19 negative

The feedback indicates that there is a gap in effective communication, whether in clarity, timeliness, or the appropriateness of the channels used. Critiques of communication in this category highlighted issues such as lack of timely updates on application status, difficulty in reaching support for questions, and the overall need for more proactive and clear communication from the administering bodies.

Advance Registration (19)

The idea of Advance Registration was raised 19 times in the survey feedback. Responses indicated that allowing residents to register for supports in advance would greatly improve the timeliness of delivering support to residents if they needed to evacuate.

Documentation Requirements (10)

1 positive, 8 negative

The criticism under this theme focused documentation requirements that the respondents viewed as cumbersome and excessive. In most cases, the responses noted that the problems with documentation requirements were made worse given the nature of the evacuation (Many people left their homes in a hurry without copies of required documents). Difficulties in acquiring the required documents for direct deposit were also specifically mentioned as a barrier in these responses.