



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

CONFEDERATION BUILDING, SUITE 318
229 WELLINGTON AVE
OTTAWA, ON
K1A 0A6

December 5, 2020

The Honourable Diane Lebouthillier

Minister of National Revenue

cc

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau

Prime Minister

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance

House of Commons

Ottawa, Ontario

Canada

K1A 0A6

Re: A compassionate approach for Canadians in crisis

Dear Minister Lebouthillier,

It is with a sense of urgency that we bring to you today news from our constituency offices of those who relied on the Canada Emergency Response Benefit who are now being asked to pay it all back.

On October 14th you circulated information to all parliamentary and constituency offices of members of parliament, informing us that certain divisions within the CRA were coming back online in November. We received this email with trepidation as the priority seemed to have been given to reactivating the branches that cause the most trauma to individuals: appeals, audits, collections, and compliance, with an emphasis on 'delinquent' Canadians.

In the last two weeks we have heard from more and more constituents that they are receiving bills for the full repayment of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, due by December 31, 2020.

Though the individual details differ constituent by constituent, the story is the same: they faced personal financial crisis at the onset of the pandemic, they applied in good faith to the program they were assured was meant for them, and they were approved. They are now being told they owe repayment of the entire benefit. In many cases this is a bill up to \$14,000.

On April 2nd you said, "We understand that Canadians are facing financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we recognize the importance of getting funds into the hands of Canadians quickly and efficiently. **Canadians can count on the Canada Revenue Agency to deliver these critical benefit payments to Canadians during this difficult time.**"



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On April 6th you reassured Canadians that workers from the CRA were being re-assigned to ensure that money would be in the hands of those who needed it. You reminded us that **“Canadians can count on the CRA to deliver these critical benefit payments during this unprecedented and challenging time.”**

Canada remains in an unprecedented and challenging time. At this juncture, we see that there are two ways to proceed: with cruelty or with compassion.

Unfortunately, surprising Canadians, who have spent much of this year facing extreme financial anxiety, with bills up to \$14,000 is cruel, particularly at the onset of the second wave of the pandemic, entering winter months, as many Canadians are facing a lonely holiday season.

The Canadian Mental Health Association recently reported alarming statistics about declining mental health among Canadians due to the pandemic. Especially alarming is that one in ten Canadians is now reporting having suicidal thoughts, up from 1 in 40 Canadians as reported in pre-pandemic statistics from 2016.

We invite you to rethink this approach. There are of course Canadians that received benefits this year that were not intended to. In the vast majority of cases, these recipients applied for benefits in good faith. The rules for these benefits were changing day by day. Those with low literacy, mental health challenges, or limited digital access were not always working with the most up to date information. Your own staff were operating under extreme conditions to get money into the hands of Canadians, unable to take the time to ensure a thorough analysis of each case.

A more compassionate approach is required. We leave it to you and your team to identify the right path forward that respects the ongoing challenges facing Canadians and the impact your actions will have in our communities this holiday season and into the new year.

Sincerely,

Jenica Atwin
MP Fredericton

Elizabeth May
MP Saanich-Gulf Islands

Paul Manly
MP Nanaimo-Ladysmith