

NEWS

# EXCLUSIVE: 'The government is forcing us to die in poverty'

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SAINT JOHN • The clock had struck midnight in the emergency room of the Saint John Regional Hospital, and Lois Merritt reverted back to a lifetime advocating for women, children and the homeless.

Placed on a doctor's waiting list of what the New Brunswick Medical Society estimates at 44,000 people, Merritt had been in and out of the hospital for a year and a half. It was time for answers. Sitting in a bed with a swollen breast, she looked at the doctor's wedding ring and asked, "Would you like your wife to be sitting in this position?"

She was transferred, examined and diagnosed with stage four Triple Negative Inflammatory Breast Cancer. That was in May 2017.

In the months that followed, she went through chemotherapy and 25 days of intense radiation to shrink the tumour enough to operate, electing to continue working through the ordeal.

She had a successful mastectomy in March, and started on her 15 weeks of Employment Insurance (EI) sick benefits. In May came headaches. And just when the 15 weeks were up, doctors told Merritt her cancer had spread to her brain.

Now, as she continues in the fight for her life, the longtime advocate is taking on a new cause – a sick benefits program that hasn't been updated in 47 years.

"The government is forcing us to die in poverty," she said.

### **Current system**

In 2017, sickness benefits cost the EI system \$1.7 billion, with 378,700 claimants. Of that number, 142,000 used the full 15 weeks, about an eight per cent increase from 2016.

Once recipients use up their 15 weeks, they have different options they can pursue. First, they can choose to live off their savings, if they are fortunate enough to have any. For Merritt, that is where she finds herself for now.

In New Brunswick, a person can sign up for financial assistance through the Department of Social Development. Erin Issley, spokesperson for the department, said it is offered when there is "no other income to meet their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter." Household income is taken into consideration, and the rate is based on the number of people in the household and whether or not they can work.

Melanie Vautour is the director of development with the YWCA in Saint John, and said the most a New Brunswicker is eligible for is \$537 a month. And in situations where a person can't afford to pay their rent, she said they are no longer eligible for the payments without a permanent address.

Many people who cannot work run out of options. Vautour said she's had clients fighting breast cancer living in their cars. Others have been living in homeless shelters. One woman with multiple sclerosis was couch surfing for a place to sleep.

The lucky ones can find a cheap room for rent that can allow them to cover food costs for the month.

"Imagine a woman moving into a rooming house, having to drag herself up a flight of stairs after she's had chemo all day," said Merritt. "That's what I think about – laying on the floor, hoping to have a bed."

### **CPP disability benefits**

The other option, which Employment and Social Development Canada spokesperson Josh Bueckert points to, is the Canadian Pension Plan disability benefits.

In general, Bueckert said "regular applications are processed within about four months.

Applications from people with a terminal or grave condition receive priority handling."

Auditor General Michael Ferguson's 2016 report found an average processing delay of 884 days per case – more than two years.

Bueckert said that applicants with life expectancies less than six months will be processed within five business days of successful receipt.

Vautour, who helped Merritt fill her application out in early August, was told it would take six to eight months for Merritt's application – and that was with a priority.

"We're asking these people to jump through all of these hoops and they're sick. And after all that, you could have filled something in wrong and they send it back," said Merritt. "And then what do you do?"

### **Caregivers given more time than the sick**

As part of the federal government's changes to EI benefits, the family caregiver benefit comes with 15 weeks of EI payments and an additional 26 weeks through compassionate care benefits, if needed.

So while the person dying from illness is only eligible for 15 weeks, a caregiver can receive 41 weeks.

To illustrate how it works, the government provides the example of Paul, whose partner, David, is dying of cancer. Paul makes \$60,000 a year before taking time off to look after David.

Paul is eligible for 15 weeks at the maximum of \$547 a week, which works out to \$8,205. He then continues to earn the maximum \$547 for the next 26 weeks through compassionate care benefits.

"Altogether, Paul receives \$22,427."

Merritt was given \$736 bi-weekly. She received \$5,520 before being cut off at 15 weeks.

### **Starting the discussion**

Valérie Glazer, spokesperson for the Office of the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, said the federal Liberal government promised concrete changes to the EI system, and is working to deliver.

"All Canadians deserve to live in dignity, and our government will continue to work on improving our EI system to ensure it is responsive to the needs of Canadians."

As Saint John-Rothesay MP Wayne Long points out, change first comes in the form of awareness. He said it's not the first time constituents have come forward with this problem.

"It's heartbreaking to see a situation like this where, unfortunately, the rules are the rules," he said. "I'm certainly advocating for a review."

Long said that as a Member of Parliament, he has the ability to inquire on behalf of constituents to look into their cases, but he can't change legislation. That comes with time and due process.

"I know this regulation isn't right. I know this regulation isn't fair. And we're advocating for change for that rule."