

Minister
of Human Resources and
Skills Development



Ministre
des Ressources humaines et du
Développement des compétences

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0J9

Ms. Fiona Lewis
Ms. Wendy Smandych
Co-chairs
British Columbia Association of Social Workers
Health Practice Committee
402-1755 West Broadway
Vancouver, British Columbia
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JAN 18 2012

Dear Ms. Lewis and Ms. Smandych:

I am pleased to respond to your correspondence of September 20, 2011, concerning compassionate care and sickness benefits offered under the Employment Insurance (EI) program. I appreciate that you took the time to share the views of the Health Practice Committee of the British Columbia Association of Social Workers. I apologize for this delayed reply.

Allow me to begin by addressing your comments with respect to the EI program's two-week waiting period. This waiting period has been part of the EI program since its inception in 1940, and has been set at two weeks since 1971. The waiting period serves a number of purposes. It follows the same best practices of other insurance programs and is similar to the deductible portion of private insurance plans. This ensures that EI resources are focused on persons dealing with significant gaps in employment.

The Government is sensitive to the needs of persons with a disability or an illness. The EI program supports these Canadians by providing up to 15 weeks of income replacement through EI sickness benefits. These benefits are available to eligible claimants who are unable to work due to illness, injury or quarantine to allow them time to restore their health so that they can return to work.

The adequacy of the duration of EI sickness benefits is an important issue that warrants examination. Each year, the EI Commission's Monitoring and Assessment Report tracks the use of EI sickness benefits. This report indicates that, in general, 15 weeks is adequate for the majority of work absences for illness, injury, or quarantine. On average, claimants of sickness benefits collect 9.3 weeks of benefits, or 62 per cent of the maximum entitlement. It has also been noted that, each year, a certain percentage of claimants for EI sickness benefits use all of the 15 weeks available. At the present time, these benefits are designed as a short-term income replacement measure for temporary work absences.

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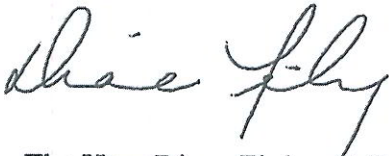
Canada

Canadians can opt into the EI program by registering with Service Canada. After opting in and paying EI premiums on an ongoing basis for at least 12 months, they need to have earned a minimum of \$6,000 in self-employed earnings during the preceding calendar year to have access to EI special benefits.

There also exists a range of longer-term supports for Canadians caring for a gravely ill family member. You may wish to visit the Canada Benefits Web site at www.canadabenefits.gc.ca, which provides Internet access to a listing of all federal, provincial and territorial benefits available to Canadians, as well as services and supports that are most relevant to an individual's situation.

I trust that the above information is helpful in explaining the rationale for the current EI program design. Thank you for writing.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diane Finley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Diane" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Finley".

The Hon. Diane Finley, P.C., M.P.

c.c. Ms. Jean Crowder, M.P.
Nanaimo-Cowichan