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Inuit Child First Initiative is extended, but barriers persist for northern communities

In a last-minute decision, the Inuit Child First Initiative (ICFI) has been renewed for another fiscal year, but Inuit communities in Nunavut still struggle to access its full potential.

The intent of the programme, which was previously set to expire on March 31, is to reduce barriers of access and gaps in services for children in Northern regions. Families can apply for the funding to support Inuit children's health, social and educational wellbeing.

ICFI funding can be used for hybrid speech language pathology models, so children don't have to leave their homes to access the service.

It can also finance the cost of a device that monitors diabetes and sends data directly to a paediatrician for continuous oversight, reducing the risk of missed insulin checks.

The initiative was based off [Jordan's Principle](#), a similar programme for First Nation's children in Canada. The expected use of money allocated to the ICFI was calculated using data from Jordan's Principle.

Indigenous communities "have a lot of similarities", said Taya Tootoo, executive director of the Arctic Children Youth Foundation. "What is different [in the North] is our high cost of living."

The Nunavut government [reports](#) that for a family of four in Nunavut to achieve a "modest but acceptable" living standard, they would need an income of \$67,418 a year. This is over 50% higher than for a family in Ontario to achieve the same level of living standard.

Families now more often use ICFI funding to collect \$500 a month in food vouchers that can be allocated to parents of any Inuk child under 18 years old. An additional \$250 can also be given to parents with children aged four and under to cover the costs of extra items like baby formula or diapers.

The ICFI "shouldn't be used for food, but the reality is the territory is struggling to meet their basic needs for their children", said Tootoo. "We can't even think of the existential things we might need."

"We're stuck worrying about the basic needs."

Campaign 2000's child poverty [report](#) on Nunavut indicates that the region has the highest child poverty rates in the country. Almost half of all children under the age of six are said to be living in poverty.

Inuit communities are "generally underfunded, historically underfunded too, so [they are] disproportionately disadvantaged," said Veldon Coburn, faculty chair of the Indigenous Relations Initiative and associate professor at McGill University.

"There's considerable cultural and linguistic barriers for their equal participation within a system that should ... have equal opportunity for benefit across Canada."

The ICFI was originally designed to last the six years from 2018 to 2024. Aid and Inuit organisations are working on a shared responsibility model to see what a long-term programme could look like, but they were not ready by the end of the 2023/2024 fiscal year.

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It remains unclear as to what the most recent ICFI extension will mean.

“No money has been allocated to it specifically so it’s still very up in the air as to how exactly it will look after March 31,” Tootoo said. “Even though we were told that it was approved, the staff aren’t able to approve any contracts towards programmes and initiatives.”

It is unlikely anymore clarity will be provided until the end of parliament’s prorogation on March 24.