

Guaranteed income supplement cuts for seniors reveal shortcomings in feds' compassion commitment

By [KATHLEEN FINLAY](#) NOVEMBER 17, 2021

Opposition parties should demand an emergency debate to help seniors who accepted the Canada emergency response benefit, but are now struggling.



Kamal Khera, pictured June 17, 2021, joined cabinet in October when she was named seniors minister. The new Liberal government seems tone deaf to the human calamity it has created by cutting the guaranteed income supplement for seniors who received the Canada emergency response benefit, writes Kathleen Finlay. *The Hill Times* photograph by Sam Garcia

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One of the telling lessons from the coronavirus pandemic is that what governments do, or don't do, carries far-reaching implications for the well-being of many in society.

The most vulnerable—the elderly in long-term care, victims of opioid addiction, people who rely on mental health services, and Indigenous and racialized communities—were especially hard hit as a consequence of government action or inaction. Lockdowns exposed women to higher risk of intimate partner violence and caused families to be separated from loved ones who needed their care. Essential workers still feel they were the last to be considered and the first to be forgotten. Governments have done little to change that impression. Registered nurses in Ontario, after being told how valuable they were during the height of the crisis, are now being held by the Ford Conservatives to a paltry one per cent pay increase as inflation runs rampant. These experiences have had a profound impact on the importance society places on compassion and kindness.

The challenge to any government seems clear. But instead of moving to modernize and upgrade Canada's compassion infrastructure, the re-elected Liberal government seems determined to leave a trail of disaster when it comes to thousands of vulnerable, low-income seniors.

As the pandemic panic began to spread into the financial lives of Canadians, many seniors who were receiving Old Age Security pensions and the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) also sought and received Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) benefits. But in 2021, the federal government ended GIS payments for those seniors because it says the money they received from CERB last year has made them ineligible for the GIS this year. Their CERB benefits are gone, and now their pension income has been cut by more than half. The consequences are staggering [for 90,000 low-income seniors](#). It's like everyone in the city of Pickering, Ont., or Saint John, N.B., having to get by on slightly more than \$700 a month.

I've been hearing troubling stories about what this means in real-life terms. Some seniors have told me about having to give up a beloved pet because they could no longer afford to feed it. Eviction is a constant worry. Many are just 24 hours away from

having their phone and internet cut off. An alarming number say they've had to choose between food and medication. Some have told me there is no point in struggling to survive each day if all they are going to do is slip further into an abyss of misery and despair. The signs are ominous.

Some will say these folks have only themselves to blame and should have realized the consequences of taking CERB benefits. Are they to be faulted, too, for their pleas that the government treat them fairly? Remember the daily early-pandemic message, usually delivered by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, that "we are with you" and "you are not alone." Tell that to the senior whose meagre pension income has been so drastically clawed back.

So pervasive are society's expectations for kindness and caring in our daily interactions that some universities and even private companies are moving to up their compassion policies. I've been encouraging organizations to appoint a chief compassion officer to fill this need. But the new Liberal government seems tone deaf to the human calamity it has created.

Some seniors tell me they've written to MPs and cabinet ministers in the hope of having their GIS benefits reinstated on the basis of financial hardship. Most never got a response. Those who did were told by some bureaucrat that nothing can be done for them because of government policy. Even before I got my first degree in political science, I knew that policy set by government can be changed by government.

Here's one thing that might bring about that change: an emergency debate as soon as the new Parliament meets, starting the week of Nov. 22, brought on by opposition parties. That would allow the horror stories of these seniors to be told and their pleas for compassion might, in a minority Parliament, actually be heeded.

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