



THE HILL TIMES

GIS clawback scandal another reason to demand an inquiry into Canada's most vulnerable

By [KATHLEEN FINLAY](#) APRIL 1, 2022

At every step along this tortuous journey, public officials and legislators who could have prevented these months of gruelling harm to seniors dropped the ball.



Seniors Minister Kamal Khera told a Senate committee in late February that seniors experiencing dire financial hardship would see a lump-sum repayment of their lost GIS benefits in March—but there was no communication that affected seniors would have to contact their MPs' offices before Feb. 28 to get it, writes Kathleen Finlay. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Nothing has lifted the curtain on the most vulnerable in Canada like the pandemic. First Nations populations, racialized communities, victims of opioid dependence, women facing intimate partner abuse, people living with emotional and

physical disabilities and low-income seniors are among those who had a very hard time getting the support they needed before the arrival of COVID-19. But the fallout from the virus added so much more to the hardship many faced, and because of that, we now have a high-definition portrait of the lives of the powerless that had not been seen before. The picture is unrelenting in its demand for action to ensure that those who have been neglected for too long are not forgotten again.

I have been calling for a national discussion on that subject for the past two years. Canada's Senate, for example, has a history of holding this kind of investigation into pressing issues of the day. Former senator Keith Davey headed a landmark probe into the mass media in 1970 and, before that, then-senator David Croll conducted Canada's first big look into poverty and the need for a guaranteed annual income.

I made the pitch for this kind of inquiry to the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology while it was considering Bill C-12, the government's response to the fiasco it created when it clawed back the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) benefits of tens of thousands of Canadians who had previously received emergency pandemic relief payments. Apparently, the federal government had no problem forcing the lowest-income seniors to live on little more than \$700 a month.

When I reached out to the committee, I was painfully aware of the cumulative misery the clawback had caused since it took effect last August. Dozens of seniors have been contacting my advocacy clinic with their harrowing stories. Many have been left homeless. Others have found themselves suddenly hospitalized because of malnutrition. As I have sadly reported elsewhere and told the Senators, some have died or have taken their own lives.

I didn't know it was about to get even worse for the most at-risk among this already vulnerable group.

During her Feb. 25 appearance before the committee, Seniors Minister Kamal Khara promised help was finally on the way. She said seniors experiencing dire financial hardship would see a lump-sum repayment of their lost GIS benefits in March. Others would receive their payment in April. The lack of detail in that announcement sent up a big red flag and prompted me to urge the committee to seek clarification on who would get the earlier payment and what they needed to do to receive it. Regrettably, the Senators never asked those questions. Now the consequences of that oversight are coming to light.

As it turns out, getting that March payment was based on a secret, unwritten deal. Service Canada has been telling seniors who called in March to find out when they would receive their payment that they would have had to apply through their MP's office prior to Feb. 28 in order to receive it in March.

You won't find these requirements posted on Khara's website or social media accounts, or those of my own MP and cabinet minister, Carolyn Bennett, both of whom have not responded to my further requests for clarification. Likewise, details about the Feb. 28 deadline are nowhere to be found on Service Canada's site or on the social media platforms I visited of dozens of MPs. Canada's biggest seniors' advocacy, CARP, had no knowledge of any requirement to go through an MP in order to receive the March payment. In fact, the whole contact-your-MP-by-Feb. 28 route appears to have been strictly by stealth and word of mouth. Hello, auditor general?

What's worse, a senior bureaucrat who did not wish to be identified, confirmed to me that Service Canada could process only 1,000 payments in March, which is another detail Khara omitted from her presentations to both the House of Commons and Senate. Bottom line: a very small, select group of seniors received the March payment. Everybody else was left behind—among them thousands in desperate financial circumstances who were supposed to have received the help the Minister promised in March. They were holding on by a thread weeks ago. Waiting another

month will seem like an eternity to folks whose fridges are empty, are paying 60 per cent interest on payday loans and still can't afford life-sustaining medication, much less basic dental care.

At every step along this tortuous journey, public officials and legislators who could have prevented these months of gruelling harm to seniors dropped the ball. With this latest fiasco, it's obvious they haven't learned anything. It's hard to imagine a better case for why we need a national inquiry that will throw a bright spotlight on the future of Canada's most vulnerable—to ensure they actually *have* a future.

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The Hill Times

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