

Just cause in cases of sexual harassment is very sensitive and is an important issue for us to discuss but one where unfounded fears have been propagated. The truth is that these changes will bring more sensitivity than ever before to the situation of people, usually women, who feel that they have been sexually harassed on the job.

We are outraged that persons are sexually harassed. Those persons who take the option of quitting will receive all the benefit of the doubt when they make a claim for UI.

The government recognizes that these new measures go further than any previous penalties imposed on volunteer quitters. The Canada Employment Centre staff members who deal with UI claimants are experienced professionals. They are sensitive to the circumstances of the situation. We know that we will have to administer these provisions with great care. I can assure my hon. colleagues that as well as drawing upon their years of experience CEC staff members will receive additional training and assistance to respond to and implement these new provisions.

To ensure that every claimant is treated fairly and equitably before the legislation becomes law all staff members will be trained in how to deal with the implementation process. The instructors will ensure that staff members understand the letter and the spirit of the legislation. Specific training will include how to process claims under the new legislation, how to zero in on the relevant facts of each situation, how to apply the principles and the practices of adjudication and how to evaluate the information when making a decision.

We know that it is not enough for staff members to simply understand the new law. It is equally important that they are aware of the sensitivities around these issues. For this reason all staff members who will work with claimants will be given awareness training in the area of human relations and to enhance understanding of claimants who fall under one of the five areas of just cause. This is particularly true in the area of sexual harassment.

• (1630)

I want to stress that the directive of the CEC staff is absolutely clear on the issue of sexual harassment as just cause. The guidelines for field officers state:

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In cases where all things are considered equal, the benefit of the doubt will be given to the claimant and, thus, tip the scale in his/her favour.

The directive could not possibly be clearer. This means that UI benefits will not be denied because of a dispute between an employer and an employee. When a woman goes to a UI office she will be assured of having a woman claims officer if she so wishes. It is worth noting that 75 per cent of UI claims agents are women, and that is very reassuring for the women who are making those claims.

It is also worth noting that since Bill C-21 was introduced in 1990 there has not been one written complaint about the department's administrative rulings regarding sexual harassment. In that time there has been only one appeal and that was from an employer who disagreed with approval of a sexual harassment claim. The employer lost the appeal.

Despite the impression created by the opposition's misleading claims the UI agent's role is to collect all the facts necessary to make a fair decision. The agent will first get all the information possible from the claimant and find out what steps the claimant took to remedy the situation before taking the final step of quitting his or her job. The agent will then endeavour to hear the employer's side of the story.

The evidence the agents collect will not always be clear-cut. Clearly, there will be occasions when the evidence from one side will contradict the evidence from the other and it may be impossible to tip the scales one way or the other. In such situations the agent must draw on experience, judgment and common sense to reach a conclusion. As I have already stated, the benefit of the doubt will go to the claimant. This policy applies not only to people who quit their jobs voluntarily but to those whose employers claim they were fired for misconduct.

This commitment to making a fair decision may come as a surprise to some of the opposition party members who drafted the motion before the House tonight. They would have the House believe that the UI agents accept at face value any apparent evidence which could result in a person being denied their rightful benefits. This is just not the case.