

Unused drug plan money a 'crime,' Liberal leader says

'Shameful' situation means people are going without medication: Jones

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Yvonne Jones

Leader Yvonne Jones says the Department of Health's handling of a low-income drug program is a "crime," with some residents failing to qualify for coverage while tens of millions of dollars went unused.

"What I find an absolute crime in all of this is that, here you have money for drug subsidy programs, yet you have people out there today in Newfoundland and Labrador that are going without medication or putting themselves in tremendous financial hardship just to get the medicine they need to stay alive," Jones said in an interview.

"Millions and millions of dollars in the last couple of years have sat in the Newfoundland and Labrador treasury without being used that was originally designated for this — that's what I find

absolutely shameful, and I find it to be a crime."

In 2007, the province spent \$34 million less than it budgeted for drug coverage in government-run plans. In 2008, the number was \$28 million less than expected.

Jones said her office has dealt with dozens of people who failed to qualify for help because their income was just hundreds of dollars over the threshold for benefits.

Those limits have not changed since the low-income drug program was introduced three years ago.

According to briefing notes prepared for Health Minister Jerome Kennedy last fall, far fewer people than anticipated drew benefits from the program.

The Telegram obtained those documents under the province's access-to-information laws.

Kennedy said in a recent interview that a number of options for the drug program are under review, including bumping up the limit.

When the low-income plan, called Access, was announced, the government expected 97,000 people to benefit.

But that number is actually now closer to 20,000, according to Department of Health officials.

Recent hikes in the minimum wage mean that a single, full-time worker now makes too much money to qualify for low-income prescription drug benefits.

Those income limits should change, Jones said.

"You just can't design a program, set a threshold and leave it forever."

The Liberal leader suggested low-income thresholds should be streamlined across the system, with regular increases to reflect changes in the province's standard of living.

Jones also criticized the province for "misleading" people about the scope of the program.

"I'm surprised that government could be so far off in their projections. We're seeing time and time again that the Department of Health is not doing due diligence on files."

She cited the cancelled review of

laboratory and X-ray services as a similar example.