

EVENING SITTING

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36

The Deputy Chair: — The Department of Social Services were last, or pardon me, were before this committee two previous occasions, April 3 and May 9, and then again this evening. I invite the minister to introduce his officials before we open up the questioning.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We'll be assisted tonight by Mr. Neil Yeates, who is the associate deputy of Social Services; behind Neil, Mr. Vic Taylor, assistant deputy of the Department of Social Services; directly behind me, Mr. Phil Walsh, who is the executive director of income security; and to my left Mr. Richard Hazel, our executive director, family and youth services.

Item 1

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome to the minister and his officials this evening.

Mr. Minister, we left off the other day talking about some of the income security and support totals and the variance in what has been supplied in the past and what is supplied in this budget. I was I believe, speaking to you about the SAP (Saskatchewan Assistance Plan) and FIP (Family Income Plan) and SIP (Saskatchewan Income Plan), and I would like to particularly zero in a bit on the Saskatchewan Income Plan for seniors at this moment if we could.

When I look at the budget, and I recognize that I guess we would qualify them as poor seniors and the benefits going to them, the total amount for that as I read it is \$14 million. And I'm kind of wondering, Mr. Minister, with increased drug costs and living costs, etc., seniors seem to be — or a good portion of them that I've talked to — seem to be having difficulty. A number of them are talking to me about not having the money for the drugs that they need in order to ensure that their health remains stable.

In particular, I've heard a couple of stories from my constituency about seniors not being able to afford the drug costs, and they have actually entered the hospital or come to the hospital stating that they needed some care, and obviously they did, because diabetes and high blood pressure, etc., were plaguing them. And when asked how come they weren't taking their medication, they did mention that they did not have the money for the medication.

And so I am really quite concerned about those great number of seniors out there who don't have the proper drugs that they need to ensure their health is intact. And I'm wondering, you know, if in fact the funding for poor seniors has remained the same at 14 million — if you could verify that, and if you could explain to me how you think that seniors will survive increased

drug costs and costs of living.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, to the member's first question, yes the amount is the same in this budget as last, around the \$14 million figure for the Saskatchewan Income Plan. The member will know that the Saskatchewan Income Plan is directed to seniors with very, very low income and it triggers automatically through a combination of federal benefits and so on.

The question about drug coverage, I can inform the member that if a senior qualifies for the Saskatchewan Income Plan in our province, there is some special drug coverage for those seniors. Under the plan, they are required to provide a semi-annual deductible of \$100 and then a consumer co-payment of \$35. So there is that extra level of protection for those very low income seniors.

I think we all recognize that drug costs are a significant cost of providing health care today in our province for everyone. Tomorrow I'll be meeting with a relatively large group of seniors out in Fort Qu'Appelle, and I know one of the issues that they have asked me to address has to do with patent protection for prescription drugs. And I think we know that that has caused significant increases in drug costs. And so that's an important issue as we discuss the costs of drugs for seniors and for everybody.

But I can report to the member that any senior who is eligible for the Saskatchewan Income Plan benefits, does receive the supplemental health coverage for drugs.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, on the same note, I notice that there is going to be a combination of the payments for seniors under OAS (Old Age Security), and GIS (guaranteed income supplement), and SIP and I also recognize that OAS, I believe, and GIS were taxable incomes, whereas SIP was not.

Now in this combination that's happening — if I understand correctly — one, these are combined into one total payment. I am wondering whether or not our seniors will become taxable for the SIP with this arrangement?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, our understanding is that the OAS and GIS in fact are tax exempt. But we can assure the member that, with the combination of the payments into one cheque, there will be no change in the taxation level of the SIP benefit.

What we've tried to achieve here is: one, some administrative saving and some reduction of duplication and ease for the senior by putting these benefits into one monthly cheque because they all are based on the same application. We, in cooperation with the federal government, believe this is a much simpler method by which to deliver the benefit. And it does save some administrative cost.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I'm a little bit concerned about the problems associated with health reform as they affect our seniors.

Again in my constituency, I've had a senior that was in the University Hospital for four months. And she was discharged about a month ago and has since spent one week in the Humboldt hospital. She's now at home and she is going to see her doctor, you know, I guess occasionally. The problem is that she can't be home alone and she needs someone there with her.

Now home care does provide six hours a day for her two days a week. And the fact is that she needs more home care than that. So when she talked to the home care co-ordinator — or her family did — about this, they suggested that she go to the nursing home. We have one in Humboldt and we also have one close by in Meadow Lake. And so the point is that she can't afford it. She can't afford to go there. It's going to cost the family or her quite a lot of money. And she believes that home care . . . and she knows that home care will also cost her a certain amount of money, but she believes she can afford this.

Now this question I have revolves around some, I think, pretty grave problems regarding home care for the seniors and for disabled in our health district. And I have mentioned this to the Minister of Health — and I know that it's under his auspices — but I also ask you to comment on this, and to see if maybe you can talk to the Minister of Health, to please do check into the home care situation and home-based services in the Central Plains Health District to ensure that home care to our seniors is readily available, especially when they're in serious condition as this woman is.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, I'll be glad to pass the member's concern on to the Minister of Health. I know that she has raised the concern before in the House. I heard some of her comment — I think it was yesterday — addressing this same issue. And I will be . . . I'm happy to pass that concern along to the Minister of Health.

We have as a government, as the member will know, focused much of our effort over the last number of years in trying to build that base of community-based services, including home care as well as institutional care. There are some miles yet to go; there's no doubt about that.

And I know that a number of the seniors' organizations in our province are looking at some other options that might serve the needs of individuals who perhaps do not require the institutional care but might require a greater level of care in their own home, personal or otherwise.

I do want to remind the member though, in terms of the institutional care, in terms of the nursing home care, the resident rates are based on pension income. And so there should be no circumstance where one is unable to afford, if it's required, that higher level of care in the institution.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I would like to just go now, if I can, to child care. And I note that there is to be a one-time \$1 million increase in child care capital grants for facility upgrade. How many child care facilities are there that will be eligible for those grants?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, I just want to inform

members that we've also been joined by Mr. Bob Wihlidal from the department, whose entry was perfect because he was able to provide the exact number for us. And the exact number of centres which will be eligible for the facility upgrade money will be 130.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you. What will be the criteria for dividing up that money?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, we're still yet in sort of the finishing touches of developing all the criteria to share with the centres, but essentially it will follow this kind of priority. We have some centres in the province where the current physical plant has been in some ways grandfathered in light of new and changing regulations. And so the first call on the money would be any major upgrades or any renovations that would address any issues that are outstanding in regard to meeting code regulations and day care regulations around window size, floor space, and that sort of thing.

We then would be looking at the kind of perhaps more creative options that centres may come forward with — creation of new play areas, that sort of thing. We would also be looking at a willingness to provide for equipment — equipment needs within the centres. And then in some circumstances it may be a major upgrade of the centre — expansion. So it's that sort of continuum. But we'll put first on the list, I think, those who have some upgrading needs to meet regulation.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. When will the facilities actually be notified by you about the criteria that they must meet? How soon will that happen?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, we hope to have all the information out to the centres within the next few weeks — a month at the latest, the officials tell me.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'd like to know, Mr. Minister, will in-home child care centres be eligible?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — No, Mr. Chair, the answer is no. It'll be the centres only.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I recognize or took note of the fact that Social Services participates on an interdisciplinary committee, co-chaired by the Children's Advocate and provincial coroner, which was recently established to explore the development of a common database and to examine the full scope of child deaths in Saskatchewan. And in regard to that, I was wondering when was the interdisciplinary committee given the mandate to explore the scope of child deaths in Saskatchewan?

(2045)

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, in February of this year, earlier this year. We think it was February — late January, February.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you. I was wondering about that, because I'm also wondering if you can tell me why there wasn't a news release issued from the department on this topic.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Because, Mr. Chair, essentially this has been an internal process — the department working with many other departments of government or other officials, in this case the coroner and the child advocate. They were involved in many, many processes, this being one. It's not something we would typically, or I think traditionally, announce by way of a news conference. This is not to diminish the importance of what's being undertaken here, and I know the member's interest in the area. But at this point it has been internal with these very significant players — the Children's Advocate, the coroner, the department, and other agencies of government or other departments.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I wonder if you could qualify for me, or clarify for me I guess I'd say, how many people, besides the Children's Advocate and the provincial coroner, sit on this interdisciplinary committee and who are they exactly?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, we do not have the actual names here with us tonight. Participating, as we've identified, would be the Children's Advocate, the provincial coroner, representatives of a variety of government departments — Justice; likely Health; the Department of Social Services. We can provide the member a list of the actual names and their relationships, their areas of responsibility, very quickly.

Ms. Julé: — Yes, I would appreciate that, Minister, and I thank you. I'm curious to know, how soon after a child dies does the coroner notify Social Services?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Just to be . . . just to clarify, the notification process to the department will only occur when the coroner is aware that there is a connection between the child or his or her family and the department, or where he thinks there should have been or should be a connection. And so the time line is almost entirely dependent on the coroner's decision. It may be relatively immediate, or it may be somewhat delayed if there's a matter of an autopsy and that sort of thing. But the decision is the coroner's, and it will only occur when the coroner believes that there is a connection between the child involved and the department.

The Deputy Chair: — Order, order, order. I wish to remind members that laptop computers are allowed in the Legislative Chamber but subject to the following restrictions: (a) they're permitted for use in the Committee of the Whole and Committee of Finance only, so they're properly used now; (b) they must be programed to operate silently.

Such is not the case with a laptop in the Chamber at this moment. The owner of the offending laptop will know who I'm speaking of, and I just wish to draw their attention to (b) they must be operated silently. And I ask that owner, that hon. owner of the laptop, to program said laptop to operate silently or to not bring that laptop into the Chamber. And I thank the member for following that particular rule.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, once the coroner does determine all of his findings from the autopsy and so on, is there a time period — I would think there would be a reasonable time period — within which he must notify the

minister if in fact there is some connection with Social Services? And I'm just wondering what is the usual time frame that you get reports from him?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, our officials report that in . . . and these are not a large number of cases, but in the cases where we've had this experience, that the notification from the coroner has been relatively immediate. In almost all of the cases, if there has been an involvement with the department, the department will already be aware of the death or of some of the circumstance. But in our experience, the notification has come from the coroner on an almost immediate basis.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, can you explain what the procedure is from that point on, from the time that you are notified? What is the procedure that follows?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, depending on of course the location in the province, the first thing that would happen is that once notification was received — and again I repeat, it's often that the department or the region is aware of the circumstance — the first thing that would happen is that the regional office would conduct a review of the circumstances as they know them, of their involvement with the family or the child, and then that would be forwarded then to our central office, with recommendations perhaps.

The central office would then again review the information and make a decision from that point, whether in their judgement an independent review should be conducted. So that would be the point of decision on the independent review.

If the coroner has ordered an inquest, that may be considered as the independent review — the coroner-ordered inquest. Then what we do is make report of all of this to the child advocate, Children's Advocate, and to the provincial coroner. So that's the process.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I would just like to refer to child protection services for a moment or two. Can the minister tell me if there ever has been an extensive review of child protection services in Saskatchewan? And if so, when was it?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, the last extensive review of child protection services in our province — although I must say we're always in sort of a process of review — but the last major, extensive review was in the mid to late 1980s, which resulted in the redrafted and renewed Child and Family Services Act, which came into effect in December, 1990. So that followed quite an extensive period of review, consultation with the community, leading up to the Act in 1990.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, according to information received from your department, I note that the average case-load per child protection worker in Saskatchewan in 1996-97 is approximately 26 families. Now that's down slightly from 1995-96. Can you explain why there is a decrease? Are there more caseworkers employed by Social Services or are there fewer children receiving care?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — The answer, Mr. Chair, to the question is

both. Yes, we have increased the number of staff doing child protection over the last number of years and have adopted some new case management models; so that the actual number of children receiving services of the child protection workers has fallen somewhat. Essentially what is happening, cases are being closed when we believe it's appropriate that the case be closed. So the answer is both — we've increased the number of staff and there has been some decline in the actual numbers of cases.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I would like some clarification again too in the correspondence I got from your department or that we requested in regard to this. It states here that in 1996-97, there were 26, and then the word "families" is behind that, per caseworker. So I'm wondering, I guess the question I would ask you is how many . . . are there a specific number of children each child protection worker has? Is it looked at as a . . . a case-load, is that looked at as one child? Or how many children in need of protection does a caseworker have, or what is their case-load?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, because we believe that the core here is the family and the household, we tend, in our reporting mechanisms, to count families not children. And so the number of cases per worker is the number of families that each worker is dealing with. And in some families there may be one child. In some families there may be two or three children. But we don't isolate the child from the family in trying to deal with their circumstance.

I can tell the member that currently, as of March 1997, there are 2,746 families being cared for with the protection workers.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, can you tell me if your department offers any special training or education courses to Saskatchewan medical professionals or teachers on identifying child abuse victims?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, while we do not actually provide training — literally we don't go out and conduct seminars — we do on many occasions provide resource people to those who are providing training, whether it be for teachers or for medical people. We have resource people who assist in this regard, and we have some developed printed materials that we offer. And we'd be very happy to provide some of those to the member if she'd be interested in looking at them.

(2100)

Ms. Julé: — Yes, I would appreciate that. If you could forward that to me, it would be of interest to me.

Mr. Minister, I would just like to ask a couple of questions surrounding foster homes. I'm wondering if Saskatchewan's social workers I guess, use or . . . do they visit foster homes unannounced?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Yes, both announced and unannounced; both planned and unplanned.

Ms. Julé: — So that . . . you know I was referring to foster homes, so I'm wondering if there are any other circumstances where unannounced visits would be carried out by a

caseworker?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Yes, Mr. Chair, both in child protection and in foster homes, yes. The answer is yes.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you. Again in reference to foster parents and foster homes, I note that the foster parents association as of April 1 were under the understanding that they really are in need of respite care. They say they have no respite care at all and many of them are under a great deal of stress because of having teenagers from the streets and many of them I guess are dealing with teen moms, especially those who are going back to school, etc.

And what I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, is, is your government beginning to have a look at the need for respite care in foster homes and possibly I would say . . . I guess you'd call it a paid break, maybe two weeks a year or something like that, for respite care. That would certainly be of help to them.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, since becoming minister I've had the opportunity on a number of occasions now to meet with the foster families association or their representatives, and have had the opportunity to discuss some of these issues with them. As the member will know, in the most recent provincial budget we addressed at least partially some of the issue around the rates for the foster homes. And this was seen I know by the association as a very significant issue for them. So I was pleased in this budget we were able to provide an 8.7 per cent increase in the basic maintenance rates.

We are now working with the association on a number of issues. And one of them is the respite policy. And so we are endeavouring with them to develop a strategy that could be workable for all around the respite issue. Because I've heard from them, and I know you recognize the same concern, that the fostering of children is not an easy task and can be very demanding, particularly giving some of the youth that we are required to place in fostering homes.

And so we felt this year that the most significant issue was around the basic rates, and we're now working towards a respite policy along with some other initiatives.

If I can just say, Mr. Chair, I've had some experience to visit some of our foster homes around the province. And one cannot visit a foster home and leave without being duly impressed by the level of commitment and generosity of these individuals who take young people — very often troubled youth — into their homes, and give them a home; give them love. They're just doing I think a tremendous, tremendous piece of work for us.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Yes, I would agree that they are. However — I must admit that at this point I don't like to go by hearsay — but I've heard some stories surrounding the fact that foster parents are in such need of respite that they often hire younger children or younger teenagers in fact to try to deal with the troubled teens in their home, and oftentimes even with babies. And I don't believe that they're really that well qualified for that kind of care.

And this apparently is happening because people do not have respite, and it is putting individuals in those homes in a certain amount of danger. And so I would really ask that you look at that, and providing some respite for them as soon as possible.

Mr. Minister, I'd like to talk about high-risk youth a little. I noticed that Manitoba has recently done a comprehensive study, as you well know, on high risk youth in that province. The Education, Justice, Social Services, and Health departments worked together to identify children who have chemical dependencies, mental health problems, are in trouble with the law, are in the care of family services.

Can the minister tell me if his department officials are working along with the Justice department in order to identify high-risk youth in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — We are not, Mr. Chair, at this time involved in a specific or a structured review, as some others have undertaken. But if I may say, in the context of our inter-departmental committee that brings together the child action plan, much discussion and much sharing is done between our various departments, particularly around high risk children and youth and in the context of their families. We equally are . . . the officials of the department are equally and regularly in contact with our many community-based agencies that are involved with high-risk youth and families at risk.

And so we have not, at this point at least, felt the need to create a formalized, structural investigation of youth at risk. We believe that under the interdisciplinary committee of the action plan and in our relationships with community-based organizations, we're able to get a pretty fair sense of what's happening to our youth in the province of Saskatchewan.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I know that you recognized earlier in this session that I did bring up the desire for an all-party committee to be formed so that the Children's Advocate could be commissioned by the entire legislature to look at some of the issues that all parties bring forward, and to be able to identify and to investigate all those areas where we believe investigation needs to take place, and then she could report back to the legislature. It seems to me that the child advocate's office is willing to do a great deal of leg work for the ministers and the government.

And once again, I know that these areas of high-risk youth and child prostitution and many others are in need of full investigation so that we know where we are in this province and really where to target some of our funding in a way where priorities, I would say, are met in a more expedient manner. I know that Manitoba estimates that high-risk youth cost the province about \$7.9 million per year. Are there any comparable stats in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, I just want to observe to the House tonight that the Children's Advocate in our province, which is in some ways yet a young office in our province, but even in its short existence, the Children's Advocate has done a great service to this legislature and to the people of Saskatchewan and is regularly bringing to our attention the needs of children and youth, particularly children and youth at risk in our province. And I know that the member will have

seen her most recent, her most recent report, which documents in a very helpful way, some of the issues that face youth and children in our province.

And because we believe that the Office of the Children's Advocate is doing some very, very good work for us, we've, in this budget year, provided more resources to the child advocate, knowing that she is doing I think, exactly what both you and I know must be done, and can be done, and is being done now.

Ms. Julé: — I thank you. I'd like to add a comment in this regard. And I would like to say that some other provinces are considering programs for early identification of families at risk. And so that families with high risk factors such as unemployment, low level of education, and lack of extended family would be identified before the birth of a child, so that early childhood intervention could begin.

And in view of the many, many problems that we see out there, and in view of the fact that I know we all would like to see some of these problems alleviated, and in view of the fact that I know we both agree that early childhood intervention is in fact one of the most beneficial programs that we have, I would certainly recommend and encourage that possibly we do form an all-party committee of the legislature, to involve the Children's Advocate more fully, and to ensure that our children have the best possible start in life they can and that we nip a lot of the problems that we're now experiencing in the bud.

I would just like to move on a bit to northern funding that Social Services has pledged. And I notice in the budget that the government pledges \$200,000 for a one-time northern community development fund to support the development of community process in northern communities, which increase community ownership of social issues. So my question is, who will be getting those funds?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — The resources, Mr. Chair, will be spent right in the North in northern communities. This is in some ways a small piece of quite a large picture. Only yesterday the Premier and a number of my other colleagues met with northern leaders in a dialogue process to look at many, many of the issues facing the North.

These specific monies that have been targeted in our budget will go to those northern communities, to the community leaderships. We've not yet determined all of the criteria and how that will exactly happen, because we want to engage in the kind of process that was happening yesterday, which was the dialogue with the northern leaders, to see where these monies might be best put to use. The goal here of course, is to do as you described — to build a community development, reaching out to try and strengthen the independence of communities in our North.

The Department of Social Services spends millions of dollars in our northern communities, particularly through social assistance payments. And we know that if we can build those communities, build some of that independence in the communities, this will have real long-term, beneficial change.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, in view of

the great amount of revenue, and I don't say this lightly, I believe that the province does have a great amount of money coming in to their general revenue, and we need not go through the reason that I'm saying that. But the government pledged \$200,000 for this northern community development fund. And it . . . I guess in one glance it would seem like a lot of money, but it doesn't go very far when you consider the needs of the North.

We have some really intense problems happening in the North, especially with our young women. There's a great deal of . . . a great number, rather, of young women between the ages of 15 and 19 that are attempting suicide. It's phenomenal, and it seems to me that we would need a lot of intervention here. And certainly a lot of prevention and all kinds of counselling services, as well as recreation services, and treatment centres, etc., to help.

So why such a minimal amount, Mr. Minister, when the need is so great in the North?

(2115)

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, if \$200,000 represented our total investment in trying to deal with some of the societal and social issues facing the people of the North, if \$200,000 were all we were doing, I'd resign tomorrow. The fact of the matter is, as I said, this is but one small piece in quite a larger picture. Even within my own department, we have exceptional payments for social assistance in the North; we have prevention and support grants that are dedicated specifically to the North.

If we look across government, we see special initiatives in Health, under drug and rehab, going to the North. We have the whole housing efforts which are happening in the North; infrastructure happening in the North. The 200,000 is a very . . . it's not a small piece, I don't want to minimize the piece, but it's very targeted money for a very specific purpose. And that's to look at trying to do some real community development right on the ground, in the North.

But it's just one small piece of a . . . Indeed we have an entire ministry now in this government that is given the challenge and the task of dealing specifically with issues that face the northern residents of our province.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, if I could for just a minute, I'd like to revert to the question I previously asked you before this last one, and it's regarding who will be getting the funds. And you did indicate to me that northern communities and leaders of those communities, as such, would be getting that in one way or the other. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Yes, Mr. Chair, that's correct.

Ms. Julé: — I'd like to know what guidelines are in place then for them to apply for this funding? I'm sure they're going to have to apply for it.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — We, Mr. Chair, very purposely did not write the guidelines before we began this more intensive dialogue with the northern leaders. And so we want to be working with them to establish the dialogue, to establish the

guidelines. Best, I think, to get their very considered opinion on how this could be best utilized in the North rather than some of us sitting at the south end of the province and deciding on their behalf. So we've made those resources available, we've targeted them for that purpose, but now we want to sit down and are sitting down . . . as I said only yesterday, the Premier and my colleagues met with a large group of northern representatives to set some specific guidelines.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you. So those guidelines obviously are not in place even though you said you sat down to specifically put the guidelines in place. When do you expect full dialogue and consultation to be done with these northern communities so this money can be applied?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — We're looking forward, because of the initiations of the discussions yesterday . . . It'll take some time we know, for some of the northern communities and leaders to come to some of their own conclusions, but we're expecting that we can have decisions by summertime, fall at the latest, so that monies can get into those communities.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I want to ask you just one question and I'm not sure if it can stay at one question. But I'd like to ask you a question regarding the need for home care again, and it crosses over into Sask Housing. So I'm having some difficulty getting some accountability for the question of, if clients, if seniors, go into nursing homes — particularly I guess I'm specifically talking about a rural area here — if clients go into nursing homes there and they don't have anyone basically to clean up their unit and that kind of thing, if they're in need of help with that, who assesses these people? First of all before they go into the nursing homes, to determine what their needs are. And . . . well I'll just leave the question there for a moment and then we'll go on with another one.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, because this is not in the responsibility of the Department of Social Services in any way, I'm here speaking from some general knowledge that I have. And that would be that in terms of assessment of level of care required, I believe each health district will now have its assessment process and people who will assess the individual and their circumstances and therefore determine the level of care required — whether it be community-based care, home care, or institutional care.

But that responsibility now clearly falls within the district health board. It has for as long as, I think, the assessment process has been around, fallen under the purview of Health. It used to be in the old home care districts that would do some of that assessment or in the acute care districts; but now each district will have its own process for assessing the need.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you. There apparently again is some problems surrounding this, because we have an instance where people are in obvious need of more assistance in a nursing home and they're deliberating there to determine whether Sask Housing should have some responsibility to determine that people go into this nursing home in the first place, if they can't quite take care of themselves and clean up after themselves. Because that's obviously the case, and still they're there. So

they're asking for home care to come in, and home care says that they don't have the responsibility for that.

So this is why I mentioned that and I know that as Minister of Health that you must have dealt with some of those problems earlier. So I just wanted to make that comment.

And I'd like to just go to a bit right now to child prostitution. And can the minister confirm that the \$250,000 announced the other day in regards to the child prostitution problem is actually the \$250,000 announced for youth outreach initiatives in the budget two months ago? Is it the same money?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Yes, there has never been any misunderstanding about that. The money was announced in the budget, and it is \$250,000 for outreach, specifically to address the issues of children on our streets which, as the member well knows, involves many in the prostitution trade.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you. Will that money be designated to the existing outreach programs or will there have to be an application and a set of criteria again to be met before the existing places can get it? Are there new outreach programs out there in the province that are being formed and becoming available to the public maybe in different cities than there have been?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — We're sincerely hoping and believe it will happen, that in the three communities where we know that the child prostitution problem exists, which would be Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert, we're sincerely hoping that we can find a consensus among the players in those communities as to where the money will be best provided.

It may well be that an existing community-based organization is the best vehicle. Or if in the . . . within the discussion, and there is consensus that something new needs to be done, then we would certainly look at that. But we hope we can find — and we're relatively confident we will — find consensus in the community on what should be best done with the funds.

Ms. Julé: — Well thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, are there any cities, to your knowledge, other than Saskatoon, Regina, and Prince Albert, that are dealing with the problem of child prostitution?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — We of course, I don't think, could be absolutely definitive to say that there is no example outside of the three cities which I've identified, being Saskatoon, Regina, and Prince Albert. But from our people, from our department people in those communities and from law enforcement agencies and other community organizations, these three communities have been identified as having the problem of children on our streets engaging in sex for money or drugs.

We will also have in our province other communities, and here I might identify both North Battleford and La Ronge, where we may have children on the streets, not engaged in the sex trade but yet finding themselves on the streets. And so that too is a concern. But the reporting mechanisms that we have and the understandings we have is that the problem tends to be centred in Regina, Saskatoon, and to a lesser extent in Prince Albert.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, do you have some statistics on teenage pregnancies in the province and how many teen pregnancies we're dealing with, I guess within the last year in the province, and how that compares to other years and possibly how it might compare to other jurisdictions across the country?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, I don't have those statistics here. I recall that when I served in the ministry of Health, those statistics are available and were readily . . . are kept and could be made readily available. If the member wishes, we can get from the Department of Health, the numbers of teen pregnancies in our province. We know that over the last number of years, we've seen increase in that area. A number of initiatives have begun.

Where my department will find itself involved is primarily in trying to assist the teen moms, usually, in continuing their education, in building a life after the child is born. So we participate, for instance are involved with some teen-infant day care centres now and have put some more resources there; so that we can endeavour hopefully to help the young moms, the teen moms, continue in their own education to look forward to a stronger life both for themselves and for their children.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I'd like to just go now to adoption services for a moment. And I notice that your government put out a news release of March 27, 1997, entitled "Saskatchewan expands post adoption services". And I think we talked to some extent about adoption in estimates at the last session. And so I'm fairly happy that there is some good work happening in this area.

I notice in your news release of March 27 that there is . . . about the third paragraph in that release, the statement:

The final expansion means that for adoptions that occur after April 1, 1997, Social Services will be able to release a certified copy of an adopted person's original birth registration. This will be available to be released to either the birth parent or the adopted person as an adult, without the consent of the other party.

And then the following line says, "However veto provisions are available to both parties."

Is this not the case now? How have things really changed here? It seems like those two sentences, the last two sentences, are contradictory.

The Deputy Chair: — Order. Earlier this evening I had the opportunity to raise the issue of laptop computers and that they be programed to operate silently. Now I have just heard a laptop computer, and I ask the member who owns that laptop computer to remove it from the Assembly immediately.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, just to be very clear about this, the changes which occurred April 1 of this year — so they're only about six weeks old — only apply — only apply, they're not retroactive — to adoptions that have occurred before April 1 of 1997. So the changes only occur to adoptions which

have taken place in the last six weeks and in the future.

And what will happen now is that unless there is a veto registered on the information at the time of adoption or at some future time, the information can be released to either party. So it does require mutual consent, but it does not . . . it would require now that a veto be placed on the records. And again I repeat that's only for adoptions that have occurred since April 1, 1997, and in the future.

(2130)

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Minister. I just need to talk about this a little more. I still look at the line stating:

This will be available to be released to either the birth parent or the adopted person as an adult, without the consent of the other party.

So without the consent means that if I were a parent looking for my . . . the birth child, I would be able to have the birth registration and be able to find that child without the consent of the child as such. So why would you make the statement rather than just putting in, veto provisions are available to both parties under certain circumstances?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — I think the member points out that our news release might have been . . . the wording might have been clearer. It's confused even the minister. This is my understanding of the circumstance. For all adoptions prior to April 1, 1997 is a different mechanism. After April 1, 1997, six weeks ago, unless there is a veto placed on by one of the parties, then the adopted person or the parent can request and receive the information without the consent of the other, unless there's veto there.

Now if there is mutual consent, then we would release the documentation for adoptions prior to 1997, April 1. So mutual consent would get those documents prior to April 1, 1997. Under the new system either party can request and receive the information unless there's been a veto put on.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I'd like to skip over a bit to, I guess policy of Social Services regarding the placement or the homes that social service recipients stay in. I was wondering if Social Services ever does any investigation into the lodging that does house social service recipients on a regular basis, or if they do have any . . . if they do investigate into that at all.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Generally, Mr. Chair, the answer would be no. We consider the arrangement between a social services recipient and landlord to be a private arrangement between the two. So generally we would not go out and inspect on behalf of our clients. Now there may be circumstances which arise where in fact a worker is involved in a home situation and is involved in some of those accommodation circumstances. But generally we consider that to be one of the responsibilities of the client, and that's to establish and arrange their own accommodation. And we would not generally have people out inspecting.

Ms. Julé: — Are there certain standards that you require of the

homes that social service recipients move into?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — No, Mr. Chair; I want to differentiate. Those homes which we utilize as approved homes and so on have rigorous, rigorous standards. But for our social assistance recipients we do not have standards other than the common building standards, building codes of every municipality. We would not want to see, would hope it would never happen, that a landlord would provide accommodation that didn't meet the codes of the municipality.

But again I repeat, we believe, just as in your case or my case, we are responsible for our accommodation. And we do not have specific standards nor do we send out inspectors, other than in those circumstances where there is a demonstrated, real problem.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, are you planning to do any kind of investigation for . . . I guess it would almost be on behalf of the landlords who are having some difficulty with social service recipients leaving their homes or their rental properties in disarray and really damaged? We have a number of complaints surrounding that, and I was just wondering whether or not it's possible.

I think the Liberal opposition did mention earlier on again in this session that it might be one avenue that Social Services could take — to have the properties inspected before the recipients move in and at the time that they would be moving out, to ensure that the place is in fact intact and is in as good a shape as when they moved in. Is there any plan on your department's part for doing this?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, the member puts her finger I think, on a problem. It's this. The vast majority of those who receive social assistance are good tenants. The vast majority of landlords are good landlords. We have a few social assistance recipients who will abuse the property, the rented property, and there are a few landlords in our province who rent to social assistance recipients properties that they should not be renting.

So we've got both sides of this equation, and the challenge is how to deal with it without sort of painting the vast majority in the centre, with some brush that's not appropriate. As the member knows, we've made some changes very recently, or announced some changes that are upcoming, to the damage deposit and the structures around the damage deposit, which we think will make both landlord and tenant more accountable, particularly on those extremes — the small numbers on both side of the extreme.

I think as we work through the changes, we'll want to be working with the Rentalsman. And there may well be some process of standardized assessment of properties that people are renting so that at the end of the tenancy it's easier to judge — it's easier for the Rentalsman office to judge, whether in fact the deposit should be paid or not paid, and so on.

I want to emphasize that we have this problem, but I think it shouldn't . . . we shouldn't colour all landlords, or all recipients, with the same brush, because the majority are responsible.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Before I turn the questioning over to some of my colleagues, I would like to ask you for a complete breakdown in the department's revenues, expenses, and in particular, in regards to the staff and their wages.

And I would also be interested in getting any statistics on travel expenses that you may have. And further to that, employment equity stats — if I could get some of that for this current . . . or the past year rather, I would appreciate that.

I think that's all that I would like to ask for the moment, and my colleague from Melville would like to ask you a few questions at this time.

Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, just going back to the housing situation, are there situations where Social Services pays the rental for accommodation directly to the landlord?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, the answer to the question is yes. There may be circumstances where we will pay directly to the landlord if it's been demonstrated that there's been a real problem. Many of our rental cheques now are made out in joint, in joint name, both in the tenant's name and the landlord's name, so it has to be for both. And there are circumstances where we've paid cheques to recipients, in their name.

So there is a variety but the answer to the question is yes, in some circumstances — it wouldn't be many, I guess — but in some circumstance we pay directly to the landlord.

Mr. Osika: — Thank you for that, Mr. Minister. In those cases would your department from time to time examine the accommodation to ensure that you're getting value for your money?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Not as policy, Mr. Chair, not as policy. We wouldn't do it as sort of a regular policy thing, because we see it as a private arrangement between the recipient and the landlord. Now if an issue is raised, if the client raises an issue or the landlord raises some issues, there may be call for a worker to actually go and do the, sort of the home visit, that sort of thing. But it's not something we do as policy.

Mr. Osika: — I guess and I believe my colleague, hon. colleague from Humboldt, perhaps was alluding to the fact that under those circumstances . . . and again there have been from time to time concerns raised about the types of accommodation that Social Services was in fact paying for, which was less than adequate in their standards.

And I wonder, Mr. Minister, if it would not be prudent on the part of your department to perhaps in those specific cases, as you suggest earlier . . . from time to time visiting foster parents, announced and unannounced. Perhaps you might consider or would your department consider reviewing some of these accommodations, because in some areas they may need to be examined and perhaps the payments renegotiated for the type of facilities that unfortunately in some cases people who are less fortunate have to find themselves living in.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, there's nothing that — well, I shouldn't say this — but there are few things that disturb me as much, as I'm travelling around the province, when I find myself visiting individuals or families who are receiving social assistance and living in accommodation that, as you and I might describe, is just not fit. It's just not fit.

And as I said earlier, there are that small group of landlords who will try this. And if there are some mechanisms maybe we don't have today that we should have, to root those kind of landlords out, I'd be more than willing to look at them. Now I know that given some news coverage and events that happened in the city of Saskatoon for instance, I think our municipalities are looking more closely at some of these properties too. And there are a number of, a number of agencies who visit property. There might be the meter reader for the water department or the power meter reader. Others who enter property and I think now are . . . we're becoming more sensitive to report very unsatisfactory living conditions to our municipal authorities, who have the power to go and placard and shut it down.

And where it involves one of our clients, I think very often that there's some damages awarded from that landlord to the client who'll be forced then to move and find other accommodation. But I'm with you on this one. If there are landlords who are taking public dollars to house individuals and they're not providing fit . . . Nobody's asking for a palace, but the accommodation should meet the codes and they should be decent. If there are mechanisms that we haven't found yet to try and root those out, I'd be willing to find them or try and find them.

Mr. Osika: — Thank you. I appreciate that, and I feel the same as you do. I guess that's why I asked the question about paying rent on facilities that you may not even have any idea of what the conditions are. So I take it that at least you've taken note and perhaps might initiate at least those facilities that you pay directly for, that perhaps your department could take a look at once in awhile to ensure that you're getting value for your dollar.

Mr. Minister, I just want to ask another question, and it may very well not be within the purview of your department. But it deals with the Saskatchewan Association of Boards of Addiction Services. Would that be totally separate from your department? You would not have any input into the addiction facilities provided by non-government organizations, whether it be through referrals or anything to deal with those organizations? And if the answer is no, I would appreciate that because I expect that that's probably more under the Minister of Health's purview.

(2145)

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — The member is correct, and it does fall under the purview of the Minister of Health. And I know that this minister and all former ministers have had good relationships with the provincial organization representing many of the addiction facilities. So it's something that I'm sure the Minister of Health will be very happy, and his officials, will be very happy to discuss with you.

Mr. Osika: — Thank you very much, Mr. Minister. I would now defer to my hon. colleague from Kelvington-Wadena.

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Minister, our welcome to the officials as well. I have a couple of specific questions dealing with autism. I know that it's under your purview that the children that are . . . individuals that have autism are often on social services or their families may be. And I'm wondering if there's any specific department policy you have targeted to deal with the needs of children that have autism?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, our relationship with the individuals and the families who suffer from autism . . . And if I understand the disease of autism, there's quite a range of disability associated with autism, from some lesser disabilities to some very severe disability. Most of the children in the province with autism will likely be still with their families. But as they grow older into their teen years and into their adult years, very often they require much more intensive care. And so where our department would relate is through the provision of the group home setting, and many of the group homes that we have across the province will house autistic young people, teenagers, and adults.

Now this is a cross too between of course the Department of Health and the whole health field that deal there. Where we're involved is sort of that accommodation and care level at the group home.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chairman. I would like to thank the member from Kelvington-Wadena for just giving me an opportunity to ask a few questions and before she continues on.

First of all though, I would like to introduce to you and to the members of the Assembly a couple of individuals who have joined us this evening, Mr. Lance Connel and his wife Darlene, and I'd like the Assembly to welcome them in the normal process.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, I want to come back to a question that the member from Humboldt was raising and the member from Melville raised and just raise a couple concerns and questions in regards to housing. And the question relates to a matter . . . and I believe we've touched base with individuals . . . in welfare, my office has. But the question is based on a situation that arose in one of the communities of my constituency where an individual was renting a house, a social services recipient, renting a house. The house has now been put up for sale by the owner. It happens to be in a community where there is very little housing available, and as a result, housing prices have certainly risen.

In fact in this case, this individual was actually paying a little more, taking some of the money that was allotted for living expenses and putting it towards rent. And I'm wondering what the department's policy is in regards to helping people where they find themselves trying to rent in situations when the housing . . . because of a market trend that is certainly booming,

and the prices have gone up. How do you address that? And what kind of reassurances I can give or we can give to this individual that they will certainly have their needs looked into.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, our shelter allowances do vary community by community, trying to match our shelter allowance with the value of rental accommodation in the community. And we know that in some communities it's a little lower; in other communities it's higher. So as we are, we are always reviewing our shelter allowance and that sort of thing. We try and be in tune with local realities — not to argue that our shelter allowances are overly generous in any of our communities.

With that said though, if the member, if there is a specific circumstance that the member would want the department to look at, my officials assured me that we'd have a look at any particular individual circumstance to see if there could be something done.

Mr. Toth: — Well I thank you, Mr. Minister, and if you haven't received this concern already we'll certainly make sure we get it to you. It seems to me contact should have been made with your office, but in case that wasn't followed up we'll get that to you.

Another concern that was just raised today, so I haven't had a chance to really bring it to your attention, is an individual called who had been on or is receiving some EI (Employment Insurance) . . . or had been on employment income benefits or UI (Unemployment Insurance) benefits and back in . . . and also was receiving social assistance, applied for social assistance because the UI just did not cover costs. It was fairly low and she was taking some ABE (adult basic education) classes, upgrading her education.

And she just informed me today that even though she'd been sending copies of her Employment Insurance income in with all the statements . . . you send your cards and you're supposed to notify the department of the fact if you've got additional income and then they look at it and they determine . . . subtract some income if it's over and above what's the agreed limit.

The unfortunate part is while those cards, while those notifications were going in since February, just the other day apparently the department picked up on it and now wants an overpayment made back or certainly paid back, to her.

Now it would seem to me that there should be some avenue whereby the department could certainly address a problem that arises such as this, especially if a person has been following the rules and guidelines and been informing the department about other, additional income. And I just would like to know what the response is.

I guess I've basically indicated that in the past I've been told there's nothing we can do. But I think if there was a mistake made at the department level, I'm not sure that an individual should be left to carry the bag, and all of a sudden out of a low income, end up having to pay back the set amount of overpayment. So I wonder if I could get a response to that.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, the director of income

security, who is with us here tonight, indicates that again if there are some information that the member could provide us about the specifics, that we'd have . . . the department would look at the circumstance. And so if you could do that we'd appreciate it.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I'm going to bring up an area that I have a grave concern about, an area that I've sent a letter to your office . . . an issue that I've had a chance to chat with you about. And it's regards to the way Social Services works and deals with employees in cases of situations where there might be allegations arising . . . I think you indicated earlier on that social workers on many occasions . . . it's very difficult when you're dealing with clients.

I've chatted with the former minister as well; the fact that there are certain circumstances where clients may become somewhat angry with the way their worker is dealing with them or giving them . . . responding to certain requests, and sometimes their clients may feel that the worker isn't representing them fairly.

And a case has just arisen where some allegations were made, and unfortunately I believe those allegations have turned into a criminal case. And the concern I have, Mr. Minister, is that if . . . I understand your department has released this individual, put this individual basically on the street without pay. And as I've said to you before, it seems to me that when an . . . if an allegation is made, or even if a criminal charge may be laid, there should be due process followed. And in our country, I believe that a person in our democratic country we live in . . . individuals are innocent until proven guilty. Now if your department is releasing people . . .

We just see the . . . I'm not sure if it was the Regina city police or Saskatoon in the last little while, where there were investigations ongoing in the case of certain individuals, and at the time the headlines were: officer with leave, on paid leave, as a result of certain allegations, until the situation was certainly rectified and cleared up even if it went through court. At the end of the court process, officers are reinstated. In the meantime the person didn't lose his job or didn't lose his finances. And I'm concerned that if the Department of Social Services is releasing people who are working for them, you are basically saying that an individual is guilty until proven innocent. And I think that certainly is not what we should be saying. And I would like to know what you do when individuals . . . when a situation like this arises, and why you wouldn't allow a person to work or even be on paid leave until a situation is addressed and how your department deals with this, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — I think, Mr. Chair, I want to make one thing one very, very, very, very clear. The decisions about hiring, the decisions about employment in the Department of Social Services or in any department of government, are not decisions made by the minister or the minister's office, other than in the circumstance of the staff that surrounds the minister. I say that, not wearing my Social Services hat, but wearing my Public Service Commission hat. So that any decision about someone's status of employment with government is not made by this room, by the legislature, or by politicians. And I think we should all be agreed about that.

So there would not be a circumstance where this minister, or I hope any other minister, would order matters of employment to be done or not done or changed or not changed.

Therefore we try and work on the basis of policy — policy for government, but policy which is also consistent I think, in the general employment sector of our community. By policy, my understanding is that within government if there are allegations, that this wouldn't be within the Department of Social Services; if certain allegations are made against an employee that there will be a suspension, in some cases with pay and in some cases without pay. If there are criminal charges, the policy would be suspension without pay.

Now the decision, the decision around whether there will be suspension with pay or without pay is made by the management of the department, and each and every one of these circumstances will be reviewed very carefully by that management and they will make that decision.

I know the member and I have had some discussion about this. It is the decision of officials within government to hire and it's appropriately their decision when it is the time to suspend or to terminate with or without pay.

Now each employee of government — in-scope employee, of course — has the provisions of contracts and the protection of their unions and so on, but these are decisions made by the management. And in the case of allegations or charges, each case is reviewed very carefully and the decision is made by management.

Mr. Toth: — Well, Mr. Minister, I think you will have to admit I wasn't asking you what you were doing. I was asking what the policy is for the department. It seems to me there's public service agreements out there and understandings.

I'm very concerned that . . . well you're the minister, and I'm not expecting you to overturn but I'm very concerned. As minister you should be setting some directions because there's issues that we've had differences of opinion, the way some social workers have dealt with situations in the past, and there's a couple more that we'll certainly be raising as we get into debate here.

I guess as I said, Mr. Minister, I am concerned when . . . and you talked about the fact that there are situations where a person will . . . a choice is made as to whether they're on paid leave or whether they're just given leave without pay.

Now when a choice is made to put a person on leave without pay and that person's trying to live and all of a sudden finds himself without a salary, Mr. Minister, it puts an individual in a very difficult situation, especially when individuals out there working with society find themselves on many occasions working in difficult situations that they know could . . . an individual that they're working with could certainly create an uncomfortable situation or circumstance.

And I think the wrong messages are sent because someone may not be pleased with the working of a worker, if all of a sudden a worker finds himself in a position where they're dismissed. And

the individual I'm talking of certainly can appreciate and understands the process of not being allowed to work in certain cases as a result of certain allegations — understands that that's the normal process. But it's difficult when all of the sudden you find yourself without employment.

And the concern, as I said before, is in those circumstances, Mr. Minister; it's like departments — whether it's Social Services, whether it's Justice, or any other department, or whether it's an employer — it's almost like you're putting an individual in a position of being guilty before they even have a chance for a proper review of a circumstance.

(2200)

And I would think that the appropriate actions would be that you would certainly sit down with any worker, and that if an accusation is made, it doesn't matter who the person is, that that person then is acknowledged that there are certain problems and we're going to have to ask you to refrain from working, but will certainly continue to pay you until we get to the bottom of this. I would think that would be the normal process, Mr. Minister.

And so I guess I do have a concern when people are put in situations and especially when an individual may be forced at the end of the day, because of a cloud hanging over their heads, to then come to welfare to seek assistance just to exist.

And so I still don't know how a dismissal can come in before you've really come and looked at . . . reviewed a situation fully.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, I want to just . . . I think the member knows, but just to put it on the record, that in these very difficult circumstances, and they're not easy decisions for those who are responsible to make those decisions — they're not easy decisions to make by any means — and in these kind of circumstances, whether it be in the Department of Social Services or the Department of Justice, Department of Agriculture, in any wing of the public sector, in these circumstances the decisions would not be taken by an immediate manager acting alone or anything like that. And in fact it will be done in these circumstances in consultation with the Public Service Commission. So it's a broader decision-making body that happens here.

After that decision has been made, whether it's suspension with pay or suspension without pay, there are appeal processes. There will be, as I said, if it's an in-scope position, there may well be some appeal process through the union. Or any member may appeal directly to the commissioners of the Public Service Commission — that appeal is open. And the decision can therefore be reviewed.

As minister of the department, as minister responsible for the Public Service Commission, I must trust and I do trust that the people who are charged with this responsibility take these decisions very seriously, and at the end of the day will make what in their judgement is the best decision. And I do not have either the desire or the means to overrule their decision. It's not automatic; it's decided in each individual case on the basis of what these decision makers know.

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, when those decision makers look at a situation, do they take the time to sit down and meet the individual and go through the circumstances with the . . . do they listen to the individual's case as well? Do they take the time to review it, or do they just take someone's accusation and run with it? Is there a review so a person has a chance to at least sit down and offer their side or their view of a circumstance before a final decision is made, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Yes, Mr. Chair, there would be a review. Now if there's a police investigation, of course that would take precedence. If there's a criminal charge, there's a police investigation — of course that does take precedence.

But there would be a review that goes beyond simply having someone make an accusation or an allegation and then someone is immediately suspended. I mean I don't know if a week goes by in my office that I don't receive some concern from a client of the department somewhere across the province who may on that given day be very unhappy about their worker or a decision that's been made in their circumstance, and may make some allegations about the worker.

We try and follow up, but certainly no one is immediately suspended just on the basis of a simple allegation.

Mr. Toth: — Well, Mr. Minister, unfortunately I haven't heard you acknowledge the fact that any individual is consulted and has a meeting with the board or whatever to have an understanding of the circumstances that the board might be dealing with. It sounds to me like decisions are made based on what somebody else would say about the circumstances, rather than sitting down with the individual that may be facing the allegations and all of a sudden is left on the sidelines without any input, any involvement, and then finding themselves without employment.

I don't think there's anyone in this room would like to be in a situation where someone may turn around and make an accusation against them and find themselves all of a sudden having their employment cut, simply because they didn't have the opportunity to speak.

We should be able to . . . there should be an ability to consult and to talk to individuals and to make sure that your department or the Public Service Commission has reviewed all the evidence, or taken an in-depth look into such accusations that may cause the department to look at an employment situation, before a final decision is made. And to sit down with the individual and to do some follow-up and to check and see whether there's any reason to believe that anyone who would accuse an individual, such as yourself . . . or just the Minister of Justice this past couple of weeks ago, with the affair that took place in the hallway, Mr. Minister.

Those circumstances you and I run into on a daily basis, where we try, I think, to make sure that we're not leaving ourselves open for someone to take advantage and make some kind of false accusation. We would want to — I would want to — have the ability to have . . . sit down with someone, at least chat about circumstances, before decisions are made. Mr. Minister, wouldn't that be appropriate? Wouldn't that be proper, to

follow up and at least check with the individuals involved rather than just jumping to conclusions?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Well it depends entirely on the allegation. If it's an allegation of a criminal matter, then we believe that is the purview of the policing authorities to do that kind of investigation and that we should not be involved in trying to determine guilt or innocence in the situation of a criminal allegation.

If it's an allegation of some other kind of inappropriate conduct, that's a different matter. But if there's a criminal allegation it would be, I think, inappropriate for us to try and intervene in that circumstance. That is the role of the police. They will investigate and they will determine then, with prosecutors, whether charges should be laid. And that's how it works.

Mr. Toth: — It still comes back . . . Okay, that's fair, Mr. Minister, that's fair. But at the same time, while there's an investigation, a paid leave would be certainly appropriate — that's acknowledging there's an investigation going on. But to . . . for a total dismissal before any, any accusation is brought forward or any opportunity to have a public review or hearing, is basically an acknowledgement, if you will . . . or putting an individual in a position where all of a sudden they find themselves . . . well you've basically declared that person guilty and you've taken away their method of employment that they've worked so hard to attain over the years.

And so, Mr. Minister, I don't dispute the fact that if there's investigation that certainly your department would allow that to take place. But I think it would be . . . it's certainly inappropriate to dismiss someone because an accusation . . . There's individuals in the room, if someone made an accusation against any one of . . . would they face the same circumstances, Mr. Minister? Be dismissed without pay?

Or do you acknowledge that yes, there are circumstances here and we acknowledge that, but certainly there will be . . . until this is resolved there would be a period where there is leave with pay until these circumstances — whether it's through the department or whether it's through the Justice department — are addressed.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Just to review. Where there are allegations and there's an investigation happening within the department, there may be a suspension with pay. But when formal criminal charges are laid, the policy has been and is that in the vast majority — I don't know if I can be absolutely exclusive — but in the vast, vast majority of cases, if there are criminal charges laid, then a suspension is without pay. This is not dismissal. This is not dismissal. This is suspension without pay. So the member shouldn't confuse the matter of being suspended without pay with dismissal.

Now the fact of the matter is this is the policy, and I am comfortable with the decision-making process that goes on before that decision is made and with the circumstance where criminal charges are laid.

Look at . . . when criminal charges are laid, each of us will — in our various and separate bodies, whether it be a community

organization, a caucus, or a department of government — will have processes to be followed. In the circumstances of criminal charges in our department, the general rule is it will be suspension without pay.

Mr. Toth: — Well, Mr. Minister, it's like there's two tiers. Look at the Martensville case. There was a police officer in Saskatoon was charged in that case. His case was eventually thrown out of court. That police officer was on leave with pay. He didn't have to go without pay while his case was coming forward. I find it absolutely astounding that the department would find then it's . . . while they dismiss . . . because there's an investigation going on, that there is no pay.

And certainly it's an issue of concern, Mr. Minister, that that would be . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . well the House Leader is talking about the fact it's a Justice issue. It will be addressed with the Justice minister as well. But I'm talking about Social Services policy right now, Mr. Minister. I'm talking about Social Services policy right now. If you want to be on leave without pay, then have to follow the same rule that everybody else does.

Mr. Minister, sorry about that, got sidetracked here as a result of the Minister of Agriculture. But I just want to bring this forward on the basis, Mr. Minister . . . and right, there is a Justice issue here, and it certainly will be raised with the Justice minister as well, as to how we treat circumstances in this case. The unfortunate part is the Justice minister has no control over the Department of Social Services that chooses to dismiss, as a result of a judicial process, an employee without pay, and that's the concern I have.

Mr. Minister, we'll move on to some other issues, but I think it's something that certainly needs to be reviewed and needs to be looked at, and we'll certainly address it further with the Minister of Justice. And I hope there's, in the case of your department, there are a number of areas, a number of concerns, and I've addressed them with . . . at least I can say for the member from Saskatoon Haultain has been . . . when he was minister was quite straightforward and was quite easy to work with as well. And I hope that at the end of the day we find that you take your responsibility for the department as seriously as the minister from Haultain. And I think you do. I think you do. But this is certainly a very serious issue.

Mr. Minister, another concern that was just raised, and I believe I brought this one to your attention as well. It's in regards to a circumstance just recently with regards to a young couple who just had a little baby and ended up having the baby removed from their care. And I would have to say, Mr. Minister — just to refresh your memory a little bit — we talked about it. There seemed to be certainly a lack of communication between the hospital staff when this baby was born and some complications that arose.

And also, Mr. Minister, there was a circumstance where the couple were then allowed to go home and were asked to take their child back to their pediatrician. The pediatrician mentioned that this child doesn't seem to be gaining weight as quickly as other children do, and you should maybe feed it a bit more, which they proceeded to do.

But all of sudden they find themselves with a social worker at the door, and this lady happens to be not . . . happens to struggle a little bit in some cases and found herself really in a fearful state — her husband wasn't around — didn't want to let the social worker in. The social worker called three policemen, who said we'll break the door down if you don't let us in. Then they removed the baby from the home.

And I raised this question with you. I think in some cases, Mr. Minister, the Department of Social Services of . . . workers tend to take their authority almost a little too far without reviewing the whole case. And I think just talking to brother-in-law . . . or the brother of this young lady who had this baby tonight — I just followed up on it just to see how things were going — well things aren't quite smoothed out, Mr. Minister. I think that some steps have been taken, and in this case I believe a worker has been transferred. And the couple are finding . . . actually the new worker is better, more understanding. The unfortunate part is the husband's in the hospital as well with a nervous breakdown as a result of this.

(2215)

And so I guess what I would ask, Mr. Minister, what does your department do, or how does it address certain circumstances such as this that really bring circumstances like this . . . or with all circumstances like this to happen that put people under such duress?

I'm not sure if the worker was feeling that they had to move her. I'm not sure what information the worker had, but it seems to me there wasn't any consultation with the pediatrician. It just seemed that there was a lot of lack of communication, and it's left a couple somewhat devastated, especially when they should be really happy over the arrival of a new child.

And I'm just wondering, Mr. Minister, how your department looks at and tries to alleviate circumstances that arise, such as this one, that creates such horrendous circumstances for a couple looking forward to the arrival of a new child.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Here, Mr. Chair, I believe is one of the most — if not the most — difficult responsibilities of the Department of Social Services, and that's the occasions when the department is called upon to intervene for the protection of a child. And I guess at the end of the day, there is always an element of a judgement call being made.

Now if there are circumstances with, as the member suggests may have happened in this particular instance, where the communication has not been good, hopefully we can try and address that in that individual circumstance. But I know this is one of the most difficult responsibilities of the department.

And my view is if there is an error to be made, we should always err on the side of caution. Always err on the side of the child.

I think we talked earlier . . . I spoke earlier with the member from Humboldt about the number of family circumstances where there are protection workers involved. I think we were

talking about 2,700 families involved. So it's a large number. I think the vast, vast majority are appropriately handled by our workers in some very, very difficult circumstances. And I give just full credit to those workers who are called upon to do that kind of thing.

But if the circumstance comes along where we missed on the communication or there is some inappropriate kind of approach, we'll always try to . . . we'll always try and deal with that.

So I thank the member for his concern here. And again, if there is some individual circumstances that we should be doing a little more about, please let us know.

Mr. Toth: — Well I thank you, Mr. Minister, because we did chat about this one and I know you're aware of it. It just seemed that there certainly was some lack of communication. A lack to at least . . . I mean the failure to consult the pediatrician that the couple were certainly working with. And I guess, Mr. Minister, while we say well, there is so many cases where maybe you haven't done enough, and a child is hurt or whatever . . . And I know those are tragic situations. And you're trying your best to deal with them.

But even for a situation where it's gone the other way and someone's really been hurt as a result of actions of a worker who thought they were working in the best interest of the child or a particular individual, even one person or one couple that's hurt, that's a sad experience in their lives as well. And so it's a . . . I know it's a balancing act, but I think in this case there are a couple hoops that could have been followed, and if a little bit more communication would have taken place with some of the other individuals involved, we may not have put the couple in this circumstance.

And I guess I raise it so that there's some due processes taken; so that the other couples don't face the same circumstances, Mr. Minister.

Thank you. I'll now allow the member from Kelvington-Wadena to put some more questions.

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Minister, thank you. I have a few more questions on autism. I appreciated your response saying that there was a group home for people that have autism. Can you tell me what . . . is there an age restriction or what for the children or the people that are in the homes for autistic children? What circumstances allow them to come into this home?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, there wouldn't . . . there is not an age restriction. We try and work with the families and determine what the best supports for the child will be. So there's not a specific circumstance of age, but it's a circumstance of all the factors that will surround that particular family or that child that determines if it's appropriate that the child should be in a home dedicated . . . a group home dedicated for the autistic.

Ms. Draude: — How many group homes are there in Saskatchewan that are dedicated for autistic people?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, we're not sure we have the exact number. We'll have to get it from those who will know the exact number. And I'm not sure . . . there will be those dedicated for autism, but there may be other group homes where an autistic person may be part of a number of other individuals in that home. There are some that are specifically dedicated. We'll get you the exact locations and number as soon as we can.

Ms. Draude: — Does your department work with the Department of Education to provide extra teaching assistance within an ordinary classroom to help children with autism?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Chair, our community living caseworkers will in fact work with teachers, with educators, in kind of a case management model. We also . . . I should put this on the floor of the House too for discussion, is that I'm very pleased with some of the things that are happening in early childhood intervention programs around the province. And we've been able to increase the number of spaces in this year's budget. And some of the children involved in the early childhood intervention will be children who are suffering from autism.

I had a very happy visit just the other day with some of the leadership, the provincial leadership of the early child development. They brought me a lovely photo to hang in the office, some pictures involving children. And this too is a valuable tool for families with children with autism.

But in specific answer to your question, yes, our community living workers will in case management of individuals be working with teachers and with other professionals in the community to try and build that well-rounded base of support.

Ms. Draude: — In rural Saskatchewan there are of course limited opportunity to have teachers or teachers' aides with any specific training to work with children with autism in their schools. I'm wondering if there's going to be any emphasis placed on providing more trained personnel, or ability to have people with extra training to help children with these needs.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — I think, Mr. Chair, that is more a discussion that the member may want to have with the Minister of Education if we're talking about direct support to the schools. I know our community living division and our group homes, we are trying to build a network in communities across the province. And I know that network does exist and we're always looking for opportunities to try and build on that network to provide supports for people as close to home as possible. And so I know I've travelled to group homes in many, many small and large communities across the province, but in terms of what resources can be put more specifically into classrooms, I think that's a discussion better held with the Minister of Education.

Ms. Draude: — I'm not sure if the number of people with autism is . . . if that's a number that you have available to you? Can you tell me how many people in the province do have it?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — We, Mr. Chair, don't have the numbers. The community health nurses, the Department of Health I think,

would have better statistics. I know it's a condition that more of us I think, are growing more aware of. And I think as our information and education increase about autism, we may be able to recognize it earlier or identify it where perhaps it has not been diagnosed.

I recall some months ago a David Suzuki program on television that talked about autism and reminded us that the earlier that we can intervene in a child's life to begin what is sometimes a very intensive process of treatment to try and remedy autism, the earlier that we can begin, the better — hopefully preschool.

That particular program indicated that if you can do some of that intensive work early on in life, you would see some real progress. But if left, it can mean a very debilitating disability for a lifetime.

Ms. Draude: — I can't appreciate what a person with autism has to go through but I understand that it's just about as equally as hard on the family. And I'm wondering if there's been any thought put to helping the parents go through any type of training or help that would help them deal . . . to keep the child in the family. And just one last question you can answer at the same time: Ontario has a summer camp for children with autism to allow the child to deal, to interact, with people — all children who have autism. Is Saskatchewan considering something like that?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Some of the areas where we have been trying to concentrate, Mr. Chair, have been in the area of respite programs to offer parents particularly, respite care. I was part of a happy announcement here in Regina not too long ago where we're teaming Department of Social Services and Regina Health District and teaming with some community agencies to provide a respite registry, because there are respite resources but oftentimes parents are not aware of those resources. And so this respite registry will try and bring together the resources that are available with those who need those resources, as a kind of a coordinating office, a coordinating function.

And I know in speaking to some of the people since that project began — it's only . . . if it's two months old, it's about that much — already they're having some real, some real success in matching people who need the respite assistance and those who are willing to provide it.

We have had a tradition in Saskatchewan of supporting summer camping programs, that kind of thing. I'm not well acquainted with what's happening in Ontario but I know for instance in our province for many years we've seen the good work of Camp Easter Seal and other like opportunities.

We're always struggling, I think, always struggling to find better and more appropriate ways, always of course restricted somewhat by budgets in what we can do.

The committee reported progress.

The Assembly adjourned at 10:30 p.m.

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