



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Mr. Dan D'Autremont, Chair
Cannington

Ms. Nicole Rancourt, Deputy Chair
Prince Albert Northcote

Mr. David Buckingham
Saskatoon Westview

Mr. Mark Docherty
Regina Coronation Park

Mr. Muhammad Fiaz
Regina Pasqua

Mr. Hugh Nerlien
Kelvington-Wadena

Hon. Nadine Wilson
Saskatchewan Rivers

[The committee met at 19:00.]

The Chair: — Well thank you everyone for attending this evening to the Human Services Committee. Present today we have MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] Hugh Nerlien, MLA David Buckingham, MLA Mark Docherty, MLA Nadine Wilson, and for the opposition, we have MLA Nicole Rancourt.

**General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvote (SS01)

The Chair: — I'd like to welcome the minister and her officials here this evening for the review of Social Services. And we will be considering vote no. 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01). So Minister Beaudry-Mellor, you may commence your presentation and if you would please introduce your officials and when an official comes up to speak if they could introduce themselves please.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Well thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee. I'm pleased to be here this evening with my officials to discuss the Ministry of Social Services' budget for 2017-2018. With me I have Greg Miller, my deputy minister. I have Benjamin Orr, executive assistant to the deputy minister. From child and family programs, I have Natalie Huber, the assistant deputy minister; Brenda Yungwirth and Tobie Eberhardt, also with child and family programs. From our disability programs, I have Bob Wihlidal — wait, there he is — and Bob Martinook. There he is in the corner.

From housing programs and finance, I have Lynn Allan, back here; Dianne Baird, who is behind her at the very back; Patrick Cooper, who is on this side; Tim Gross, who is also on that side; and Leanne Forgie. Where's Leanne? There you are. And Leanne Forgie directly behind me. And then from income assistance and corporate planning, we have Constance, who is directly behind me; Elissa Aitken, who is behind her; and Jeff Redekop, in the corner over here.

While I have the opportunity, I really would like to thank each member of my team for sacrificing their evening tonight and also in advance for doing the same thing tomorrow night. People who are supported by the Ministry of Social Services are extremely well served by a very capable and dedicated team of professionals, and I feel very blessed to work with them.

I would also like to thank my staff here in the legislature. A couple of them are up and watching right now tonight. And I'm also served very well by my chief of staff, Stacey Ferguson, who is with us here tonight. And I would also like to thank the members of the Human Services Committee. I sat on this committee previously before becoming appointed, and I know you have very many long evenings. And so I appreciate you being here as well as the staff who serve you.

Despite a very challenging financial situation, our government has actually increased funding to Social Services by nearly 7 per cent or \$73 million this year. That brings the ministry's

budget for 2017-18 to \$1.125 billion, the largest budget in the ministry's history. In tough economic times the ministry's work takes on, I think, even greater importance to the people of our province especially those who are vulnerable. Our government has been and remains committed to supporting Saskatchewan people in greatest need. With this budget we will continue to help at-risk children and families, people who experience disabilities, seniors, and individuals and families with low income to meet their basic needs.

In my remarks, I'd like to provide you with an overview of the budget. Is that . . .

The Chair: — That will likely be your machine, your cellphone, or your tablet that's sitting there. Radio interference.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Okay. I'll just move everything over a bit. Sorry, everybody. So in my remarks, I'd like to provide you with an overview of the budget and key priorities in each of the ministry's program areas for the upcoming fiscal year.

I'll begin the ministry budget overview with child and family programs. So the budget for child and family programs for 2017-18 is \$256.3 million, up by 13.4 million over last year. This represents an increase of 5.5 per cent. Most of that increase will fund emergency receiving spaces for children who are coming into care. While the number of children and youth needing our services has increased, the number of foster homes available to care for them has dropped from 623 at the end of 2012 to 490 at the end of 2016. To be able to provide safe, supervised care for these children, we developed 74 new emergency receiving spaces in 2016-17.

We also partnered with the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association on a new campaign to recruit foster parents. The early results of that campaign are very encouraging. Inquiries from prospective foster parents to the SFFA [Saskatchewan Foster Families Association] and referrals to the ministry have increased, and by the end of last month, 41 new provincial foster parents have been approved. The new spaces these foster homes will provide will be a welcome addition to the resources our workers have available to them when children are brought into care.

Before I leave the topic of child and family programs, I'd like to talk briefly about staffing and in particular northern staffing. We acknowledge that staff recruitment in the northern part of our province, including Prince Albert, has been a challenge in recent months, primarily due to a higher than normal volume of parental leaves, resulting in a number of term openings. However, ministry officials have done some excellent work focusing on recruitment and retention efforts.

Through targeted outreach to post-secondary institutions, for example by attending the University of Regina's job fair in February, we have been successful in identifying prospective qualified candidates. I'm pleased to report that since January 1st of this year, child and family programs has successfully staffed 23 critical front-line positions to work in our nine northern offices which includes Prince Albert.

We appreciate that recruitment and retention of staff in all lines of business requires dedicated focus and attention, and so our focus going forward is to continue to develop our workforce with a particular focus on supporting those recent hires. My officials have also developed a 2017-18 workforce development plan that is specific to child and family programs. This includes reviews of best practices and child welfare staff recruitment, retention, and professional development. I'm confident that this plan will ensure that we hire and keep quality staff in our critical front-line positions.

Moving on then to disability programs. Disability programs have increased by over \$2 million in 2017-18 bringing the total budget to \$209.4 million. This represents an increase of 1.1 per cent. Most of that increase will support the transition of another 30 people with intellectual disabilities from Valley View Centre in Moose Jaw into new homes and communities throughout the province and elsewhere. Forty-seven people have moved to date including two out of province to be closer to their loved ones. We are very committed to the person-centred planning process, working with those who have intellectual disabilities, their families, and communities to ensure that their transitions from Valley View are successful.

We are also continuing to expand the safety net for people with intellectual disabilities through our crisis prevention and outreach supports. Two support homes staffed with outreach workers are operational and plans are on the way for a third home. Valley View is one of the very few remaining institutions of its kind in Canada. In 2012 when we announced the closure of the centre, we committed to working side by side with the Valley View family advisory group and the Saskatchewan Association for Community Living to make sure that the closure was done in a thoughtful, planned, and collaborative way.

After the release of the budget, June Avivi, the Co-Chair of the Valley View Centre family group said that she is so pleased that the province is once again providing funding to assist with the transition of those living in Valley View Centre. Kevin McTavish, the executive director of the Saskatchewan Association for Community Living said, and I quote:

Moving residents from this facility to regular homes in towns and cities across Saskatchewan aligns with SACL's vision for a society in which everyone is valued, supported and included. We thank government for their continued support and partnership.

I'm very happy that our partnership with the family group and SACL [Saskatchewan Association for Community Living] has continued because it is this relationship that will ensure the orderly closure of Valley View and the successful integration of the residents into their new homes. And as a side note to this, I've had the opportunity to attend some of the residents' moves into new homes in various communities in Saskatoon and here in Regina, and I've been overwhelmed with the positive responses from families and the individuals themselves.

Moving on then to housing. The 2017-18 budget for housing is \$7.7 million. This is a decrease of 11.05 million from last year. In a difficult budget, difficult choices had to be made. The first home plan for recent graduates has been suspended for this year

for a savings of \$8 million. Graduates already in the program will have 90 days to complete their purchase agreement. This was not an easy decision, but we believe it makes the most sense to direct our limited resources to those who are in the greatest need — people with low incomes, those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, people who experience disabilities, and those with mental health and addictions issues.

Our government has made significant investments in developing housing for Saskatchewan people. Since 2007 we have helped homebuyers in particular through a number of programs including the first-time homebuyers tax credit, the affordable home ownership program, Headstart on a Home, and Habitat for Humanity. At this time, we have also chosen to defer the introduction of the seniors education property tax deferral program. Again as previously mentioned, we decided to focus our resources where they can do the most good for the people who need them the most. That is not to say that there will be no housing activity or investment this year. Through the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation or SHC, we will continue to support affordable housing development within the province by our ongoing participation in the federal-provincial Investment in Affordable Housing Agreement and the social infrastructure fund agreement.

Initiatives under these agreements include some of the following: the emergency repair program, the rental development program which is focused particularly on people who are hard to house, the shelter enhancement program for victims of family violence, Habitat for Humanity, and the renovation and retrofit of existing social housing focused on improving energy efficiency and greenhouse gas emissions.

Through federal-provincial cost sharing total planned expenditures for these initiatives in 2017 equals approximately \$45 million. You will hear more about this work as it proceeds over the coming year.

Lastly, the 2017-18 budget includes an increase of \$67 million, or 12.9 per cent, for income assistance programs for a total budget of more than \$586 million. Increases for income assistance this year include: \$25 million for the transitional employment allowance, which brings it to \$61.5 million; \$10.5 million for the Saskatchewan assistance program to \$164 million; and \$14 million for the Saskatchewan rental housing supplement, which brings it to \$51.3 million.

The budgets for the Saskatchewan employment supplement, personal care home benefit, and seniors' income plan has also increased. The child care subsidy budget has been decreased by \$1.1 million to coincide with an anticipated decline in caseload. Funding for the Saskatchewan assured income for disability or SAID program increased by \$15.9 million for a total budget this year of 226 million.

Our government's ongoing support for the SAID program was well-received by our stakeholders. Merv Bender, who is the co-chair of the program implementation advisory team for SAID, noted that he is very pleased with the funding increase for this year. He said, and I quote, "It is especially meaningful in a challenging financial situation that the province chose to make this investment in support of people with significant and enduring disabilities."

[19:15]

We are proud to provide continuing support to more than 110,000 people every year, including some of the province's most vulnerable children and adults. While we continue to invest in programs that meet people's basic needs, we will also focus on controlling costs and ensuring that our programs will continue to be available for those in need now and into the future.

We will be making changes to some benefits as well as reviewing others in the Saskatchewan assistance program, the Saskatchewan assured income for disability program, and the transitional employment allowance. The following changes, as you know, will take effect on July the 1st. Each adult currently receiving TEA [transitional employment allowance] benefits will receive \$20 less per month. TEA clients are those clients who are fully employable and expected to return to work as soon as possible. This change will save an estimated \$954,000 in 2017-2018.

SAP [Saskatchewan assistance plan] and SAID beneficiaries living in residential care settings such as group homes and approved homes will no longer receive a \$20 monthly travel benefit, but we will continue to pay the actual travel costs for day programs and medical appointments. This will save approximately \$750,000.

We will continue to cover the cost of basic burials or cremation for SAP and SAID beneficiaries, but optional costs for viewings or funeral services will no longer be covered. We estimate this change will save approximately \$1 million this year and will bring Saskatchewan in line with what is provided in other provinces.

In addition we will be reviewing the following: the home repair benefit in TEA, SAP, and SAID; the overpayment recovery rates in TEA, SAP, and SAID; the asset and income exemptions for recipients of SAP and TEA funding; the school supply benefit in TEA, SAP, and SAID; and the benefit for SAP and SAID beneficiaries for diets of 3,000 or more calories per day. This work is well under way. Once it's complete and decisions have been made, we will communicate any changes.

Ongoing reviews of our ministry's programs and policies are part of our regular business and help to ensure that programs are sustainable and that we are meeting our clients' needs in an efficient and effective way. In May this year, clients whose benefits will change effective July 1 will receive letters from the ministry outlining the specific changes that apply to them. These changes will help us to meet the basic needs of a growing number of people while we focus on transforming income assistance to better support those in the greatest need.

I would like to move now to briefly talk about income assistance redesign. The ministry's budget for income assistance alone has grown by more than \$253 million or 83 per cent since 2007-2008. This represents a strong commitment by our government to the most vulnerable in our province. However, we recognize that this level of increase is not sustainable and that's why we are undertaking the work on income assistance redesign.

Redesigning the province's income assistance program will be one of the ministry's top priorities for 2017-18. Our current income assistance system is outdated and complex. Clients spend far too much time trying to figure out what are programs, and workers have to spend too much time on administration instead of working with their clients. Income assistance redesign gives us the opportunity to create a new program that will better support our clients in greatest need and that will be sustainable.

The Ministry of Social Services has this work well under way. Staff are exploring ideas for online applications and services that are simple and convenient for people to use, and meeting with other ministries to talk about how we can work better to serve people as one government and not as separate ministries. This represents a people over systems approach.

They are also working on concepts for the new benefit design that can be tested with clients, staff, and key stakeholders before any final decisions are made. Income assistance programs account for more than half of the ministry's total budget. Most importantly, these programs support more than 110,000 men, women, and children who rely on the ministry to provide income for their basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. We need a new program that is simpler for clients and our staff, that focuses on the basic needs of the most vulnerable citizens, and that is sustainable for the future. The work we are doing through income assistance redesign will transform our current programs and help us achieve these goals.

In conclusion, it is the role of our government to ensure that programs are accountable and sustainable and that they meet the needs of Saskatchewan people. That role involves making some difficult decisions. In this tough economic climate, the nearly 7 per cent increase to Social Services funding is significant and I think underscores our government's commitment to our most vulnerable citizens. Through this budget we will focus on supporting those with the greatest need and on working with individuals to help them become more self-sufficient.

Before I conclude my remarks, I want to once again recognize the excellent work of our front-line and management staff in the ministry. We've made great strides in the past several years through the launch of the SAID program, the elimination of the 440 wait-list, and the development of a new case management system for child and family programs, to name just a few of the ministry's accomplishments. Even in these challenging times we are committed to maintaining that progress, and where we can, to continue to improve the services we provide for the most vulnerable. With the combined commitment, energy, knowledge, and ideas of our front-line staff and management, government is able to deliver on its priorities, meet the current fiscal challenge, and provide Saskatchewan people with the vital social services that they need.

Thank you very much for your attention. I'd now be pleased to take your questions.

The Chair: — Thank you, Madam Minister. We will now proceed with the consideration of vote 36. Do we have any questions? Ms. Rancourt.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. First of all I want to thank all the

committee members for attending here today and the officials. I know having to make arrangements with your family to come this evening and tomorrow evening, it presents as a challenge at times. So I really appreciate you making that an effort and coming here because getting your first-hand knowledge of all the programs that you offer is very important. And most of you know that my background's social work, so this is an area of really particular interest of mine.

I do really respect all the work that you do. I know that working for the Ministry of Social Services presents as a challenge at times. And I will be asking some questions because I think it's really important to look at programs with a critical lens, but I hope you realize that I do value the work that you do.

I know you serve most of the vulnerable people in our province, and I have to say first-hand that whenever we get calls at my office with regards to any issues with regards to the ministry, your office has always handled them with great professionalism. And we really appreciate that. So I wanted to make sure I put that forward. So thank you.

So I'm going to get started with the questions because I do have quite a few. So I'm going to start with Hope's Home. I wanted to get a little bit more information with regards to the residential spaces that are available in the province and if you could give me a little bit of detail of where they're located.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So Hope's Home has 13 spaces for medically fragile children throughout the province. Four of those are in Prince Albert, five of them are in Saskatoon, and four of them are in Regina.

Ms. Rancourt: — Are they always at capacity?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Yes.

Ms. Rancourt: — Is there any plans on expanding the residential spaces?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So currently across the province, in addition to the spaces that are provided at Hope's Home, children with complex medical needs . . . There are, in addition to the Hope's Home spaces, there are another four for . . . The 13 are for medically, what we call medically fragile children, but there are an additional four spaces at Hope's Home in addition to that for what we call just complex needs. So they wouldn't be quite as intensive. There is another five at JCL Homes for complex needs in Saskatoon. There's another four at the Thomas' Circle of Care — again those are for the category of complex needs — and then another four at the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] of Regina for a total of 30 funded spaces.

Now the other things that we do is that we continue to have discussions with the Ministry of Health regarding the services and supports required to care for children with complex needs. So one of the things that we will do is that we will support children in their own homes with nursing staff or staff from . . . this must be me again, sorry . . . with staff from the Ministry of Health in order to meet those children's needs in their own home in a family-based environment.

And finally, there is some movement on those spaces depending on if, for example, we can move some of those children into foster care with the same kinds of supports in a home-based environment, we would do that as well. So the 30 spaces are generally full, but we do use those other options of in-home care as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — So is there a wait-list to get into the complex needs spaces or the medical fragile?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — We don't currently have a wait-list. So we provide, for what children who present themselves or families that present themselves, need on an ongoing basis.

Ms. Rancourt: — And in order for a child to be able to be placed in Hope's Home or in some of these other placements, do they have to be under the care of the Department of Social Services?

[19:30]

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — I'm going to ask Natalie Huber, the assistant deputy minister for child and family programs to provide you with a bit more insight.

Ms. Huber: — Natalie Huber, child and family programs. Would you mind just repeating the question again for me.

Ms. Rancourt: — In order for children to be placed in Hope's Home or some of these other agencies that provide that complex needs care, do they have to be under the care of the Department of Social Services to receive that service?

Ms. Huber: — So if I can respond to child and family programs, so for our children that we care for in the homes that the minister has spoken of, those children would have to be first found to be in need of protection. So the concerns that brought them to our attention would be related to a child welfare report around child abuse or neglect, and then it's the medical needs of the child that we're responding to in terms of providing a care option. So we provide care for a number of children and these are just one group of children that we provide care for.

For children that are outside of our system that might have more complex medical needs, that would be up to the Ministry of Health to respond to those concerns or requests for support for families.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. So I know in your remarks you discussed a little bit about the Valley View Centre and the process of moving the clients into homes. So you talked a little bit about where it's at at this point. I was wondering are most of the individuals being placed in homes that are local for them or their families.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — The choice is based on the family and the individuals. So as I think I indicated in my remarks, we do have an individual, two individuals who were out-of-province because that's where their families were. So it depends on what the family and the individual decides.

Ms. Rancourt: — So those individuals who have moved out of

province, they wouldn't be getting any more services from the Ministry of Social Services, would they?

Mr. Wihlidal: — Bob Wihlidal. Where the two individuals that did transition to out-of-province, there were some short term supports that we provided with the individual on their relocation to the new home. I think it was about three months worth of supports until the new province took over the services.

Ms. Rancourt: — And can you give me a little bit of an outline of where the new homes have been built? I realize they have been in different communities within the province. So if you could give me a little bit of an outline of that.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Yes. So I'll just run through the list. So these are categories by year, but if you just indulge me and just maybe make tick boxes on the . . . Just the way that they're categorized is not by location so much as by year.

So in 2014-2015 one was placed in Gravelbourg, one in Saskatoon, one in Kindersley. Sorry and another in Saskatoon, pardon me. So two in Saskatoon, one in Gravelbourg, and one in Kindersley. In 2015-16 one was in Wilkie, Saskatchewan; three were in Moose Jaw; pardon me, four were in Moose Jaw; one was in Regina. One of those was in British Columbia. One was in Esterhazy, one in Swift Current, and one in Prince Albert.

In 2016-17 two were placed in Wilkie, Saskatchewan; five were placed in Saskatoon; three were in Swift Current, sorry, four in Swift Current; one in Calgary; four in Regina, and I think that covers that one. Oh sorry, two more in Moose Jaw.

And then in 2017-18, so far one has been placed in Moose Jaw.

Ms. Rancourt: — So are these homes that have been built, or are these individuals that have been placed?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So there's a couple of different types of placements for these individuals. Long-term care health facilities are among those. Existing group homes are among those. Family home-share arrangements are some of those, and then some of them are new group homes.

Ms. Rancourt: — So can you give me a breakdown of the . . . My understanding is that there was new homes that were built and some homes that were purchased to place clients in. So can you give me a breakdown of what the ministry has paid for with regards to new homes or homes that they renovated?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the total SHC capital for both builds and renovations to existing properties to date has been \$17.8 million. There's still another \$19.7 million to go that has been allocated for a combined total of \$37.5 million.

Ms. Rancourt: — So \$37.5 million will be for all the homes that are needed to be built and purchased.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Built, purchased, or renovated to existing properties.

Ms. Rancourt: — And I'm not aware of what the projected cost was for the renovations of the Valley View Centre. What

were they projected for when you made this decision?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So back in 2012, the decision to wind down Valley View was really driven by an expression of the families to have Saskatchewan catch up to the rest of the world in terms of how we treated people with intellectual disabilities and really to move towards a model of a more inclusive approach to how we treat people with disabilities. There was also a \$37 million outstanding capital liability at Valley View Centre, and the cost of operating the centre on an annual basis was approximately \$30 million.

I would also say that there was a zero-admissions policy since about 2002, so by 2012 we had been not admitting people to Valley View Centre for approximately 10 years.

Ms. Rancourt: — And I have a question with regards to the \$19.7 million projected for costs for new builds, renovations, or purchases. With the increase of the PST [provincial sales tax], will that increase the amount that you'll need to purchase those homes, or will that mean that you're going to have to purchase less homes due to the budget?

[19:45]

Mr. Gross: — Good evening. My name is Tim Gross. I'm executive director of housing development, and these units are being constructed by Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. Many of them, they've already . . . They're in a place where they are already completed so those won't result in increased costs. Those that we still have to develop, there will be some increasing cost but we do have the . . . It won't result in a reduction in the number of units. We'll be able to still do all the units that we're planning with the budget that we have.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. How many residents are still at Valley View Centre?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — 114.

Ms. Rancourt: — And is the goal still to have all residents housed for 2018?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the target date, the target date for the closure of Valley View has been . . . The target date is March of 2018; however, what has been important to us throughout this process has been that it has been driven by a person-centred planning process. So that is our priority and so we will proceed on the basis of the families that are there and the appropriateness of places, where we have individuals . . . We have places for individuals to go. It has been quite successful to date so far and so I hope that we will continue and we will continue with that process.

Ms. Rancourt: — Has there been any issues with staffing with regards to not having an exact closure date to inform staff with? Has that presented any issues?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — I'm not sure I'm clear on your question. Do you mean staff at Valley View or staff in the facilities or homes where individuals are going?

Ms. Rancourt: — The staff at Valley View. If they're not sure

when their end date will be, has that presented any issues?

Mr. Miller: — Greg Miller, deputy minister. So as Valley View transition has proceeded over time, of course the balance is between balancing the needs of the staff and the needs of the clients ensuring that person-centred planning process takes place. There has not been a struggle at Valley View to date with maintaining staffing levels to provide the service that we need.

Ms. Rancourt: — How many community living division clients are currently in patient mental health settings?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So at the present time there are 11 of those individuals. Five of them are what we refer to as transition-ready, so they're ready to be moved into other programs or services, and six are not ready. And so I'm going to ask Bob to fill in some of the further details about how that process works.

Mr. Wihlidal: — Bob Wihlidal. I'll add just a little bit more background on this matter. Go back to about January of 2013 when we had 24 people in this kind of circumstances in places like Sask Hospital, North Battleford or the Dubé Centre. What's changed in the past couple years to reduce that number and keep the number low, in other words, we're having a better flow of people into these services and making sure they're there for only the time that they need to be there. It's a necessary psychiatric service that folks need.

And the changes that have happened is we're working better with the directors of mental health in the health regions. And we're being more responsive to the plans that these people need upon their transition away from these psychiatric services which requires, at times, changes to the location or the type of training that the staff may need in their former home, training around different medications or behaviour management issues.

So those are the kinds of things that can take time but need the response from the ministry around either funding or planning. So as the minister said, today there's 11. Five of those are transition-ready, and six actually are in there and need to be there for the time being to receive the services they require.

Ms. Rancourt: — So what would be a barrier for the five that are transition-ready to not be discharged at this point?

Mr. Wihlidal: — As I said, it would be issues of timing to develop the training in a group home where that person came from or is going to due to the changes in their behaviour or medications they're using. Perhaps a new home or location is needed and we're seeking a vacancy or developing a new program for that individual because it's a new service that they require.

Ms. Rancourt: — And can you provide a breakdown of which hospitals these 11 individuals are in?

[20:00]

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I'm happy to share the facilities with you, but I'm reluctant to share the number of clients who are in those facilities because in some cases the numbers are quite small and they may be identified as a result

of that. So I can tell you where the facilities, what facilities are being used, but not how many people are there.

So in Saskatoon, the Dubé Centre is being used; the North Battleford Union Hospital; Prince Albert Parkland; the Saskatchewan Hospital in North Battleford; Prairie North in North Battleford; the Athabasca Health Authority, Black Lake; Sunrise in Yorkton . . . Sorry, these are health regions. Sorry. Sunrise in Yorkton; Sun Country in Weyburn; Regina Qu'Appelle; Mamawetan Churchill River; Five Hills in Moose Jaw; Heartland in Rosetown; Kelsey Trail in Tisdale; the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon; Cypress in Swift Current; and Keewatin Yatthé in Buffalo Narrows.

Ms. Rancourt: — So what is the average length of time a client might be in a mental health setting?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — The average is six months.

Ms. Rancourt: — So that hasn't changed since last year when I asked the same question. Is there a plan to make any changes to the current process?

Mr. Wihlidal: — I don't think the . . . not certain that the length of stay is necessarily an indicator of failure or success. I think it's an indication of how long people need to be there to get the services they need. We do have five folks there currently that are transition-ready and we hope to move soon. An indication of success would be, we've had three discharges from those places in the past year, within this fiscal year already, so within the past six weeks — four weeks. It's April.

Ms. Rancourt: — I know with my mental health background, six months in a mental health setting is a long period of time to be there. So I was wondering, is there a wait-list for new referrals to access community living residential placements?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I'm going to start and then Bob is going to also jump in and add some further context. So we don't have a wait-list. We use an emerging needs process. So that process looks for sort of a constant intake and then matching individuals with available resources on a sort of constant and flowing basis. And maybe I'll ask Bob to jump in there.

Mr. Martinook: — Sure. Bob Martinook. I'm the executive director of community living service delivery. So our regional teams that are in the North, South, and centre regions, or service areas are constantly looking at the support needs of the individuals who are on the caseload, so people who present. An emerging need can represent, you know, a desire to have a placement in six months, a year, two years, three years, so it's a constantly evolving process. And so things such as emergencies and crisis come up in people's lives, and so circumstances change and so we have to constantly be monitoring these circumstances and situations and being able to respond.

So we'll make decisions at the beginning of a fiscal year around what our priorities will be, and then through the year we constantly are making adjustments to that approach and to those plans. Of course, it's all subject to availability of our resources and capacity of communities and our community partners who provide the service. I would characterize it as a constantly

evolving process and a review process.

Ms. Rancourt: — So if you don't have a wait-list, do you have some residential placements that are not filled, that are empty and available?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So we don't have vacancies sort of just sitting and waiting for individuals. So using of the person-centred planning process that I spoke of earlier, we really do two things. One, we do do residential placements but they're not always sort of the first thing that we do. Oftentimes, what we will also do is we will look for supplementary programs to serve individuals in their current living environment, so that will include things like day programs or individual supports to provide for that individual in their home. So it's a combination of those things.

So as I said before, we don't just have sort of vacancies sitting around waiting for us to fill them.

Ms. Rancourt: — So there is nobody currently waiting for a residential placement but receiving some of those services in their home in the meantime?

[20:15]

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So one of the approaches, or the approach that is taken, is that we don't look at individuals who present themselves to us from the framework that we need to provide a location out where they're not served. The response that we provide is that we will provide services to individuals who present themselves to us in whatever form those services take, rather than saying you know, we don't have a different physical location to go to, and therefore you don't access any services.

And so you know it is the belief of the ministry that this is one of the reasons why a wait-list occurred previously, was that that was driven by location and not necessarily by services that were provided for individuals in the circumstances that they were in. So that's been a primary driver for us. And those services have included things like day programs and respite for families or individualized supports in the homes where individuals are.

Ms. Rancourt: — Can you tell me how the process for the disability strategy is going?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Can you clarify the question, the process for the disability strategy?

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes. There are six key priority areas, so I'm wondering how that process has been going.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Oh the progress, the progress you mean?

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I'll begin by talking a little bit about the progress to date on a number of issues and then going back to the recommendations where work is under way, and then as you wish we can go in further detail on any of those areas.

So in terms of progress to date, since the release of the disability strategy in 2015, progress has been made on a number of recommendations. Those include the following. We have opened supportive housing initiatives in La Ronge and Prince Albert. I was lucky enough to get to go to the La Ronge one which was wonderful. Develop the self directed funding option, which was another one that I got to participate early in which was very well received by the community. The initiation of the text 911 for individuals with hearing and speech impairments and then creating accessible print formats for public library patrons experiencing vision impairments. We have also led a universal design workshop to create residential and community spaces that function well for all people regardless of age, ability, or disability. And we have been participating in the federal consultations on their accessibility legislation which is still being developed, but certainly we've been participating at those FPT [federal-provincial-territorial] tables and certainly at the deputy minister level.

The work that is under way to support this strategy, the six key areas that were identified were the accessible and safe transportation so people can participate in their communities, and we can give you further insight on that if you wish; respite to help families and caregivers of course get a break from their caregiving role; accessibility legislation, which I've already spoken to; residential services to help people live in their homes and communities, which we've had a bit of a conversation about already; service coordination and navigation, so people can find disability services when they need them; and finally awareness and understanding of the rights of people experiencing disabilities, so citizens have greater understanding of and respect for their rights.

So that's work that is still under way. In addition we're also undertaking the following recommended actions. There is a review of the cognitive disability strategy under way at the present time. The review is being conducted by the ministries of Health and Education. It's going to consider the original intent of the funding mechanism or pool and will develop responses to meet the current service needs of individuals with cognitive disabilities.

And the second one is again, effective April 1st of 2017, the self-directed funding option was added to the array of funding options offered through Social Services' community living service delivery. Implementing SDF [self-directed funding] aligns with the person-centred approach that we promote in a disability strategy by providing citizens with intellectual disabilities and their families greater choice and control over the supports and services they need.

Just briefly as an anecdote to this, I had the privilege of attending the announcement for this in Warman with a family, and the mother, you know, was quite tearful — it was very powerful — about what this meant for her son, to be able to choose who he had in his life providing support and services to him. So self-directed funding was very important.

And another one was the one health authority so that allocation wasn't a barrier to the — I can't read your writing, Greg — to the array of services that we provide.

Ms. Rancourt: — So that's all the questions I have for this

evening, and so I'm going to turn it over to my colleague here.

The Chair: — I recognize Mr. Meili who has joined us this evening.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the members of the committee, and good evening, Minister. I hope you had a good run around the lake this evening. That'll have my caucus colleagues concerned about the upcoming battle between you in the Regina Police Service marathon.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — I don't think a run three days before the race is really going to change much in terms of the outcome.

Mr. Meili: — It's not the kind of test you can cram for. No, I guess not.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — No, I don't think so.

Mr. Meili: — I also want to say good evening to everyone from Social Services, in particular Greg — it's good to see you again — and Constance. We got to spend lots of time with each other during the development of the poverty reduction strategy a couple of years ago. You might have been tired of seeing me at the end of it, but here I am again.

I actually want to talk about that a little bit off the bat. One of the things that was identified in that strategy was the reduction of the number of Saskatchewan people who experience poverty for two years or more by 50 per cent by the end of 2025. Now that was not quite the target that the advisory group had been looking for in terms of maintaining the rates of poverty reduction in the province, which had been the mandate of what we were suggested to present. Nonetheless, it is the target that was adopted, and I just wonder what progress we've made in reaching that particular target and also in the overall poverty rate in Saskatchewan. What's happened in the last two years in terms of poverty rates in this province?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I'll answer this really in three different sort of ways. Firstly in terms of the poverty rate in Saskatchewan, the 2015 Statistics Canada provincial comparisons of social assistance have Saskatchewan ranked third as the lowest incidence of poverty using the MBM [market basket measure]. If we use the LICO [low-income cut-off] measure, we will be ranked second. So that's in answer to your first question.

Mr. Meili: — Sorry but it's not actually an answer to the question because I was wanting to know the reduction, not where we are compared to other provinces. Thanks.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Can I proceed and then we'll pull that and we'll come back to it?

Mr. Meili: — Yes, of course.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So with respect to the strategy, we've made progress on three early actions that were identified by the strategy. The first one was the Saskatchewan early years plan, which was released in May of last year to enable children from birth to eight years to reach their full potential. The

second, the Ministry of Social Services is currently in the process of redesigning its income assistance programs to make sure they're simple, understandable, sustainable, and improve client outcomes. And the third is that the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation has prioritized funding for projects to develop housing units targeted to households that have difficulty accessing or maintaining secure housing due to disability, mental health, or addictions issues. Those who we would categorize as hard-to-house have been prioritized.

So with respect to what we're going to do going forward, that would be . . . You know, we are looking at income assistance redesign, and that work is well under way. And the goal of income assistance redesign is to address the reduction of poverty by 2050.

Mr. Meili: — Tell me more about this redesign and exactly what it looks like. If you're an individual on social assistance, what's the outcome of that going to be for you?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So we have been working quite a bit on this to date. I'm not prepared to release further details on it as we're still working up design options and so on at this time.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. I understand that you might not have the details ready or be ready to release it, but there are some key principles that are there, I think would be good to know. You're talking about streamlining. If I'm an individual on social assistance and this process happens, am I going to have more or less money coming in per month at the end of this process?

[20:30]

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I can't give you that level of detail right now. What I can say is this: we are looking for our systems to be a lot more citizen centred, simple, and transparent. I'm troubled by the comments that I receive when I'm out in the community, which are comments that I received when I worked at the Food Bank many years ago, which are that our systems are very complex and difficult to navigate. And that is a problem, so we want to simplify those systems. We would like to see our staff spend less time on administrative issues and more time on case management.

So I can share that with you as a principle. We're certainly interested . . . And as a principle for that, it is something that I believe you would recognize from some of the recommendations that that's a more person-versus-systems approach, which I'm also very interested in. So I can share that with you at this time. The rest are details that unfortunately I can't share until we have further details on what the benefit design will look like.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. Well maybe it would be just good to have a little bit of a look at the budget estimates for Social Services. I know I don't want to steal too much of my colleague's thunder but just a couple questions on that.

We see the assistance programming going up from a hundred and fifty-three and a half million to 164. We see SAID going up by 16 million and sorry . . . And we also see the increase in TEA, but you've also told us that TEA is going to be less per

person already in your initial comments. So we see more money in there but less per person. So I'm assuming that you're going to have more people on it, otherwise you can't get to that number.

Is the same true for SAP and SAID — that those increases are because you are expecting more people to be on those programs — or do those increases reflect an intention for those programs to be more generous to those who are currently on them?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So those numbers are driven by utilization pressure.

Mr. Meili: — That's a big jump. What do you think is driving that increase in utilization?

The Chair: — After this question, we'll take a break.

Mr. Meili: — And that might be a good time to bring back that year-over-year comparison if you were able to grab it.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So over the break we'll pull those other numbers for you because they're still not here. And Constance is going to join me up here and add some more fulsome detail to my response which is that the utilization pressure, I should have corrected myself, is really due to two factors. One is caseload pressure and the other is increasing costs per case in some areas. And so Constance is going to walk through the programs and what are the key drivers of the pressures in those areas.

Ms. Hourie: — So there are a number of them. So if you want to take the break before or after because it's going to take me a little while to go through all of the eight programs.

Mr. Meili: — Doesn't matter to me, Mr. Chair. Your decision.

The Chair: — Well why don't we take the break now. We'll take a five-minute break and then come back and whatever time we take, we'll add on to the end after 10 o'clock. This committee now stands recessed for five minutes.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

[20:45]

The Chair: — Okay, we will come back to order if the members would pay attention. Order. Okay, Madam Minister, if your officials would care to answer . . . Oh, before we proceed I'd like to inform the committee that MLA Ryan Meili is now substituting in for Ms. Rancourt.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I would like to . . . I don't think you've been up here yet, have you, Constance? Constance Hourie who is the assistant deputy minister of our income support programs area.

Ms. Hourie: — Thank you. So I think you'd asked about the SAID, TEA, and SAP programs.

Mr. Meili: — Yes, so the increases. Given that there is not any indication that people are getting more, why is there so much more?

Ms. Hourie: — Sorry. I'll start with the question you asked on the poverty and the reduction. So the poverty strategy was announced February 2016. You know that; you were part of the group. And we have recently ordered a customized table. A data table was purchased from Stats Canada in December of 2016, and it's planned to contract Stats Canada to update the data table annually. So we don't actually have a number yet. We will this December.

Mr. Meili: — So just a little aside comment. One of the things that was kind of missing from the strategy, from the recommendations, was a clear and transparent process for accountability and measurement, one of the reasons why probably by national definitions isn't actually a poverty reduction strategy. But that's probably more inside based. But we can continue on.

Ms. Hourie: — For sure. All right. So next to the SAID program first. So the SAID program was established in 2009 to provide income support for individuals with significant and enduring disabilities. The program funding changes: the 2017-18 increase of 15.9 million or 8 per cent from the 2016-17 budget is due to 18.8 million increase for caseload. That's an estimated 1,284 clients, and due to cost-per-case decrease.

The historical caseload, the caseload increased by 134 per cent in 2012 when the program was expanded to include people living independently. Since 2013-14 the caseload has grown on an average of 8 per cent per year.

With regard to TEA, the TEA program provides basic income assistance for fully employable individuals and families to meet their basic living requirements. The program funding changes: the 2017-18 increase of 25 million or 69 per cent from the 2016-17 budget is due to 28 million increase for caseload increases. That's an estimated 2,951 clients, and due to cost-per-case decrease.

The caseload factors: the increase in TEA in 2017-18 is due primarily to two factors, the continued streaming of all new, fully employable applicants to TEA which began in 2015. As well, in January 2017, 75 per cent of all fully employable clients are receiving TEA benefits and 25 per cent are receiving SAP benefits. In comparison, in January 2015, 57 per cent of fully employable clients were receiving SAP benefits. An increase in the number of fully employable clients — this correlates with the increase in the unemployment rate — the number of fully employable clients has increased by 51 per cent since 2014-15. However, the number of fully employable clients is still down 12 per cent from 2009-10, and down 65 per cent since the historic high in 1994 and '95.

With regard to SAP, SAP is a basic income support program for individuals and families to meet their basic living requirements. The program funding changes — the 2017-18 increase of 10.5 million or 7 per cent from the 2016-17 budget — is due to 15.2 million increase for a caseload estimated 700 clients and costs-per-case increases.

Other caseload and cost-per-case factors, factors affecting caseload and cost per case include: the not fully employable caseload has increased during 2016-17, partially offset by the decrease in the SAP fully employable caseload related to the

decision to enrol all new full employable cases in TEA as of August 2015.

Mr. Meili: — So why is the cost per case increasing in SAP?

Ms. Hourie: — The cost per case is based on the type of clientele that we get, so if you get a single mom or if you get singles or if you get families. So it's that we're getting more families or non-singles.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. So the transition of the change in the model for TEA . . . My understanding of this program was it was originally designed to help people who are either in training or early into employment as a transition. So these were people that had a path to employment. But you've changed that now so it's just anybody who could theoretically be employed but isn't necessarily on a path to employment is put on TEA. Is that a fair description?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the TEA program does three things really. The individuals on it are deemed to be fully employable. Those individuals are on the program for a short period of time. The average length of time is six months. And they do have a case plan that is required of them which includes things like actively looking for work and so on. So that is the nature of the TEA program, and so in fact they do have a plan to return to work.

Mr. Meili: — So should they be unsuccessful returning to work, if there isn't work available or if their training doesn't work out, do they remain on TEA or they move to SAP or are they just told to find money somewhere else?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — It's not time limited, so they stay on TEA until they do find . . . are successful in finding employment.

Mr. Meili: — Certainly something that I've witnessed among patients of mine when I was in practice was that this was a very significant drop for them already, and now you've dropped it further. How have people been responding to that information that the TEA is going to be providing less money per individual? That sounds to me like an increased hardship in a time when you're also increasing costs for people through PST and other means of the increasing costs.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the benefit reduction that you're speaking of in the TEA program is \$20. The average benefit is \$772. That represents a 2.6 per cent reduction. What was the second part of your question? I'm sorry. It just went and escaped me.

Mr. Meili: — Maybe I'll add to it and clarify a little bit. One of the other things that has happened in this budget is there have been some changes to taxation, including the increase of the PST. As lower income households spend more of their income on goods that are covered, on which you pay PST, that's a bigger increase for people who are lower income.

Even when you incorporate the increase in the low-income tax benefit, it means an increase of 2 per cent for, in overall taxation, for the bottom 10 per cent of earners in the province, whereas it's only 1 per cent increase for those in the middle,

and a zero per cent increase for those in the top 10 per cent of earners. So I'm wondering how, in the context of a plan to reduce poverty, it makes sense to introduce tax changes that actually make life more expensive for people in low-income circumstances.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I'm going to respond to your question within the scope of the Ministry of Social Services and leave your taxation questions for the Minister of Finance and the Ministry of Finance, but I would say a couple of things to your point. Firstly, that there is always more work to do here and we are mindful of it, and that is one of the reasons for the income assistance redesign.

But I would also say that, as we've just discussed, Saskatchewan has, according to the LICO measure, the second-lowest incidence of poverty in Canada and, according to MBM, the third-lowest incidence of poverty in Canada. And that is, I believe, a result of a consistent level of investment in my ministry for individuals who are at risk of being very vulnerable in our society. So for example, you know, when I got elected and became minister I was frankly startled by the levels of investment that have happened for individuals who are vulnerable. Those things have included, you know, removing 112,000 people off the low-income tax roll. One of the things that . . . Of course we created the SAID program. Across all the ministries, \$3.7 billion has been invested for people with disabilities. We've tripled the SIP [seniors' income plan] maximum benefit which is for individual seniors who have low incomes in Saskatchewan. We have seniors . . . are the second-highest standard of living in Canada.

So I think those are indicators of some of the successes that we've had to date. This is not to say that we're there yet, but it is to say that there has been significant and sustained investments. I could go on, on a number of initiatives that have happened to date to make those outcomes, that have made those outcomes possible.

[21:00]

Mr. Meili: — One of the things that was mentioned in the poverty reduction document was the plan to increase earned-income exemptions under SAP and SAID. Has there been any movement in terms of reducing the clawbacks?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — It is definitely a part of the income assistance redesign conversations that we're having.

Mr. Meili: — One other thing that we see in the estimates here is an increase in the rental housing supplements from 37.250 million to 51.285. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about that increase. Again in a similar vein, is that more individuals receiving that or individuals receiving more? How does that play out?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So in the last, in the '16-17 budget, there was no increase to the Saskatchewan rental housing supplement. It was flatlined, and so this is a catch-up year.

Mr. Meili: — It actually is increased per individual? Can you tell me what the actual increase is?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — I'm going to ask Constance to walk you through that, please.

Mr. Meili: — And actually if you wanted to just table it, that would be fine, if you would be able to give it to me as a document. Or you can read it out, sure.

Ms. Hourie: — Right. So the Sask rental housing supplement provides funding to low-income families with children and persons with disabilities to assist with the cost of quality rental housing. Sask rental housing supplement is a targeted program that is available to households in the labour market as well as those in income assistant programs: SAP, SAID, and TEA.

The funding changes, the 2017 increase of 14 million or 38 per cent from the 2016-17 budget, is due to caseload increase — an estimated 3,836 clients — and cost-per-case increases. The caseload and cost-per-case factors, since 2007-08 the caseload on average has increased by 12,115 cases or on average caseload has increased by 1,211 cases or 16 per cent per year.

The disability housing supplement, which has nearly doubled in size over the past four years, is expected to continue to grow in 2017-18 by 2,099 cases or 33.9 per cent from the 2016-17 budget. While I haven't seen as large a growth in the family housing supplement until recently, the caseload is expected to grow by 1,737 cases or 29.7 per cent in 2017-18 from the 2016-17 budget.

In the 2016-17 budget, the Sask rental housing supplement was not increased. Many factors were expected to result in change to that program, and I think the minister spoke to those in the beginning of her comments.

Mr. Meili: — One of the things that was recommended in the recommendations for the poverty strategy consensus, including the two folks on either side of you, was the introduction of a pilot of basic income. And it's just interesting because we had this come out yesterday. You might have seen the *#TransformSK* document as well, which was recommending that as well. Is that on your radar at all as you're doing this redesign, as you're looking at what's happening in Ontario? As a pilot, is this something you're thinking about?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I am aware of the conversations that have been happening in Ontario. We've been in contact with their ministers and we're watching what is happening there very closely.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. Next I'd like to ask you a little bit more about housing. In particular you've described in the ... or the document describes one of the actions or initiatives of the poverty reduction being supporting community Housing First initiatives. And you did mention earlier on some hard-to-house efforts. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and to what degree you're involved in Housing First?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So this is an area where I'm quite proud of the work that government has done with respect to homelessness and the hard to house. So I'll speak first about Housing First initiatives specifically. We participate in the homelessness partnering strategy community advisory boards or in the CABs [community advisory board] which were involved

in developing the RFPs [request for proposal] for projects and for selecting projects. So we participate there.

We don't fund Housing First initiatives directly. We focus on our investments on developing housing for people who are considered hard to house. We can talk about the nuances of that in a minute.

We also provide many of the services that are accessed by persons who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Hard-to-house. We define hard-to-house as people who are unable to access or maintain stable housing due to one or more of the characteristics that usually create barriers to housing, which you're very familiar with I know. They need supports and services in order to access or maintain stable housing. This is of course not limited to people who have physical disabilities, mental health issues, addictions issues, behavioural issues, or a number of those concurrently.

We work with non-profit organizations, co-operative groups in the private sector to expand housing opportunities for those who are deemed hard to house. And primarily this is done through our rental development program where we have prioritized projects for those individuals who are considered hard to house or projects that are dedicated towards those who are hard to house.

In 2016, \$10.7 million was provided for the completion of 120 units for those in the greatest needs. This included the development of housing for 100 individuals and families who are hard to house. And then of course, we work with other partners to provide services.

I would just like to actually also run down with some of the investments. You know, since 2007 we have invested \$60 million to develop 634 units for people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness. Four hundred and ninety-six of those are completed now with a funding of 51.3 million. One hundred and thirty-eight of those are under construction right now with funding of 8.3 million, and so there's an additional 36.2 ... pardon me, 352 new hard-to-house units.

So this is an area where I'm actually quite proud of the work that we've been doing to advance this. There are obviously still ongoing conversations about this, but it is something that we are taking very seriously. I have also had meetings with both mayors of the major cities to talk about this issue and talk about how we might work together.

Mr. Meili: — What has the impact been of the Housing First programs that have existed, understanding that those haven't been provincially funded but they have been happening in the province? What has their impact been in terms of savings?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — I don't know that I can answer that. So with respect to Housing First initiatives primarily delivered through HPS [Homelessness Partnering Strategy], they don't report to us, so we don't know what the savings have been for those particular projects. We have conversations with them, but they don't report to us.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. How are you tracking the problem of

homelessness and difficulty for those who are hard to house in the province? Are you using homelessness counts, shelter usage? What's your way that you're actually tracking who actually needs housing?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So I have seen the point-in-time accounts, but that isn't the primary driver for us in terms of tracking the need. The primary way in which we are tracking need is through our request for proposals where communities come to us and identify a need and also the types of needs that are out there. And so that grassroots process is where we're getting the bulk of our information about homelessness in the community and what types of needs are out there.

Mr. Meili: — So you don't actually have a metric by which you're measuring what's happening in terms of housing need in the province?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So we don't have one metric that we use. We use a variety of metrics. So we do look at the point-in-time counts, but they're not the only thing we look at. We look at the RFPs that we get from community organizations. We look at . . . CMHC [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation] does a core housing need evaluation, which we take into consideration, and we also look at our shelter rates and usage. So those factors combined inform what we perceive as the housing needs in our community.

Mr. Meili: — So speaking of shelter rates and usage, we're hearing that the different community-based organizations, many of which are shelters, places like the Lighthouse, the homeless shelter in La Ronge, are receiving an across-the-board 10 per cent cut by health region. So this isn't necessarily your funding mechanism, but it is a pretty key element of the work that you're responsible for in terms of housing.

So we're hearing from La Ronge that if they lose that 10 per cent to their shelter, the shelter will have to close. Hearing big concerns about a 10 per cent cut to Lighthouse and other shelter facilities as a result of payments that are coming through the health regions. I'm just wondering if, you know, if your shelter usage numbers indicate that that's something that can be managed or if this is posing any threat to our ability to actually respond to homelessness in our communities.

[21:15]

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So our funding, the funding that comes from the Ministry of Social Services for emergency shelters, has not changed. Those rates are the same. I can't answer for Health, but I can . . . I am going to ask my deputy minister to weigh in on the collaboration between ministries.

Mr. Miller: — Certainly. So the Ministry of Social Services has conversations with other human service ministries about the services that they're providing. So as changes occur in their budgets over the course of the year, we're in an ongoing dialogue. Just to reiterate again that our year-over-year funding for emergency shelters has not been, has not changed in this budget.

Mr. Meili: — Had it changed in recent years or has it been . . . How much do you actually provide to shelters and how many

shelters do you provide it to? And has there been any change in the last three years?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So there are currently 455 permanent emergency shelter beds in the province of Saskatchewan. These don't include temporary emergency shelter beds, domestic violence shelters, youth shelters, detox centres, and First Nations shelters. So that number is actually conservative in that sense. Most shelters also have overflow capacity. In terms of how much, since 2007 we have increased the emergency shelter per diem rate by 21 per cent for individuals and up to 367 per cent for families, depending on the number of kids that they have.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. And then over the last three years you've been stable in the amount that you've been giving shelters, increasing or decreasing in terms of the overall budget for it?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the minimums and maximums — we usually provide a per diem on the basis of a minimum and maximum — have remained the same for the past two years.

Mr. Meili: — There's been demand from housing advocates in Regina for the development of a permanent stabilization facility for the hard-to-house. Is there any ongoing discussions about that possibility?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Yes. That would be Health. That would be a question for the Minister of Health. It doesn't fall within Social Services. So a stabilization unit deals with addictions primarily and so that would fall within the Ministry of Health.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you. Okay, from Housing First to first homes. In your plan last year, 2016-2017 Ministry of Social Services plan, we had a strategy of affordable housing available and accessible for Saskatchewan citizens. The key actions there: some general talk of increasing efficiency and sustainability, and then implement the first home plan for graduate retention program recipients, and implement the seniors education property tax deferment program. I understand the last two are no longer in existence. Is that . . . Or are they suspended or are they no longer in existence?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — They have been deferred.

Mr. Meili: — Deferred. Is there an indication of when, if and when they'll return?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — No, we do not have a date set.

Mr. Meili: — One of the things that comes up often in the poverty reduction document is things you'll do when finances allow. I wonder if you could be a little bit more specific about what is meant by that. You know, is this when we have a year without a deficit? Is it when there's a surplus? It's really quite vague language. I wonder if there's any more clarity you could give me on that.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Well the first level of clarity, and then I am going to confer with my officials, but the first level of clarity would be that this, you know, this budget has a

record increase in the Ministry of Social Services. So that's certainly one part of it. So when . . . You know, we have demonstrated I think that we are prepared to continue to provide supports for vulnerable people during a very challenging economic environment. So that certainly has happened already.

I'll ask my officials for further clarification that I can add context to that answer.

Mr. Meili: — So there's a number of . . . Just to clarify a little bit, what I'm pointing at, there's a number of items within the poverty reduction document that say, "Future direction for when the Province's fiscal capacity allows."

The Chair: — Yes. I'd like to inform the committee that Mr. Fiaz has now joined us.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So when fiscal capacity allows, you know, means that when the budget is difficult and when the fiscal climate is difficult, we have a number of initiatives that will not proceed as quickly as we would like. Our focus in this particular budget, and especially with the fiscal environment that we are in, has been to make sure that the individuals that we currently support can keep the lights on, can keep food on the table, and can stay in a shelter. And so that has been our priority and it has been a very conscious priority. And so we are moving on a number of the recommendation areas and certainly the income assistance redesign is intended to, also in a big way, address some other recommendations and areas of the poverty reduction strategy. But that has been our priority right now.

Mr. Meili: — That was a bit of an aside. We'll come back to the first home stuff. One of the things that I notice in . . . One of the things that I notice in this plan, aside from those two initiatives being missing, is the performance measure, Saskatchewan Housing Corporation having a tenant satisfaction rating of 90 per cent by 2021. I guess it would be interesting to know where you're starting from. Do you have a starting point? But also, is that really your measure of success in housing in the province is? That seems like a pretty narrow and pretty soft target when you think of actually the measures of what would indicate housing need being reduced significantly.

[21:30]

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So we're going to answer this in two ways. Firstly, income assistance redesign will be focused on outcomes. So we are going to embed outcome measures into the income assistance redesign because I do want to see that we are able to achieve some outcomes with any of our programs and services. I'm also going to ask Patrick to speak to some of the more nuanced answer.

Mr. Cooper: — Thank you. Patrick Cooper, executive director, program and service design, housing division. It's true that the one measure we report publicly is on tenant satisfaction. The tenant satisfaction measure was really a measure to capture . . . re-survey the tenants in social housing to make sure that they are receiving affordable, adequate, safe housing. We use other measures internally such as vacancy rates, rental increases. So there's a variety of measures that we use internally. The one we report on externally is the tenant satisfaction.

Mr. Meili: — Yes, so that's in your plan. That's the whole of housing. You're talking about the Sask Housing itself. So it does seem like a pretty small line. Hopefully you will come up with some harder metrics coming up in the next phase. Go ahead.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — But to that I would say that if one of our objectives as a ministry is to be human centred, that individual's perception of the safety, adequacy of the place where they're residing is important to us. And so that it actually . . . While I understand your overall concern, I think it is probably a more important measure than perhaps we're giving it credit for.

Mr. Meili: — Certainly. And it's not unimportant, not to minimize that. It only, of course, applies to the people in those units, so it doesn't really capture the whole of the picture for housing. You don't know what the satisfaction of those who aren't living there or aren't living anywhere. Do we have the previous numbers in terms of what those satisfaction rates are like now? That was the other part of the earlier question.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So we know that the satisfaction rate has gone up. Currently it's at 85 per cent but we will bring the history on this for you tomorrow night and have it available for you, if that's okay.

Mr. Meili: — Yes. Okay. Keeping on with housing, I'd like to talk a little bit about the biggest change in the estimates, the change from 11.755 million to 755,000 in Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. That's a pretty big change in that line. Can you tell me what's that?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the \$11 million reduction in funding that you're talking about comes from: \$8 million from the suspension of the first home plan is captured there; 2.2 million of that is related to removing third-party capital funding for the now fully funded Investment in Affordable Housing Agreement or IAH; 800,000 of that is due to the removal of all funding for the rental construction incentive as that program has ended; and the final piece, the final \$50,000 comes from a reduction in salaries related to a reduction in vacation liability internal to the ministry.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. So that 800,000, was that a program that has been ended as a result of this budget or is that a program that had come to the end of its life?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Yes. It's the one that came to the end of its life.

Mr. Meili: — So with the IAH, the federal funding, that's the funding you're referring to?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So that was a five-year program to invest in rental developments and it is at the end of its five years.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. In terms of the first home program, your backgrounder said that last year nearly \$4 million in loans were provided to homeowners. 10.2 million was budgeted last year. Is that correct? So there's a difference there of about \$6 million. Why do you think that program provided such a small

percentage of what was budgeted?

Ms. Allan: — Lynn Allan, ADM [assistant deputy minister] of housing and finance. I just wanted to clarify when you were mentioning the 10.2, it is 8 million that was put in for the first home plan. Last year the 8 million and the 2.2 that related to the third party had been put together, and so it was talked about as 10.2, but it's 8 million.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. Then the question is the difference between 8 and 4 instead of 10.2 and 4.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the difference in the two numbers is that the 7.4, roughly, is what we have committed to, and the approximately 4 million is what has already gone out the door.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. So of that 8 million, 7.4 has been committed to and 4 has been already delivered. Okay.

In terms of this program, the first home program, so it sounds like then you were getting quite close to what was allocated in terms of demand. Are there people who are in the application process that are not going to complete that process because of its cancellation? How many people actually got that amount from the first home program? And how many people were waiting to receive it and won't be getting it as a result of this change?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So more than 400 new graduates took advantage of the program. The new applications to the first home plan were accepted until midnight of budget day. All applicants have three months notice from that date to sign a sale agreement for their home and receive the loan funds, so that would be in June. Some applicants have used the first home plan for the down payment on the construction of a new home, and many of those sales will not be finalized until June 22nd of 2017. And the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation will honour those commitments where a contract is in place prior to June 22nd of 2017.

Mr. Meili: — Of the remaining 755,000 in the Sask Housing Corporation, what is that going to? What are those expenditures?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — I'm not clear on the question.

Mr. Meili: — So what remained in the budget? There was 11,755; now it's 755. What is it spent on?

Ms. Allan: — I'm just going to correct. We have over 800 approved loans for the First Home program, okay. And with respect to the 755 that's in the estimates, it refers to the transfers for public services. That's our legal and audit for Sask Housing.

Mr. Meili: — The line just above it, program delivery — I don't know if that will still be you, if you should stay or go back — that's a very slight decrease from the year before. But in the prior year's budget, there was a significant reduction, 664,000. Can you tell me the reasons for those decreases over the last couple of years in the program delivery in housing?

Ms. Allan: — So the program delivery refers to our salaries for staff, and that is a small change. And that refers to our vacation liability, our portion within the ministry.

[21:45]

Mr. Meili: — Thanks very much. And the previous year's, the 664,000 drop, was that to do with salaries as well, or is that other programs?

Ms. Allan: — Okay, so last year, that change resulted in an internal transfer to the service centre client support for operating primarily in the area of transportation. So that was an internal transfer within the ministry. We also had a decrease of two FTEs [full-time equivalent] as well as there was an increase of an economic wage increase. So between the decreases and the increase, that's the change.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you. In terms of the affordable housing program, how many tenants are there now in the province in affordable housing?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So a point of clarification if you don't mind. We have both social and affordable housing, so which are you looking for?

Mr. Meili: — [Inaudible] . . . both.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Okay. So it's broken down by unit and not by people. So most units will have two to three people, so you'll have to do the calculations.

So in terms of social housing units, for rental units for families we have 6,715. For social housing targeted for seniors, we have 10,214. Social housing targeted at singles, 390, for a total of 17,319.

With respect to affordable housing, there are 618 family units and 32 senior units for a total of 650.

Mr. Meili: — I'm learning a little bit about this, but there's a transition away from affordable to social. Is that planned to continue? So will we see those 640 or 650 no longer existing as affordable? What's the plan for that transition?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the social housing numbers that I provided to you already contemplate the change. The affordable housing unit numbers that I have recited to you are from communities that are very small, so they would be communities that are under 300 people or 300 to 1,000 people. And so those won't be changed.

Mr. Meili: — So those are going to stay in the same model. What's the difference in rental costs between the affordable and the social?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So rents went down.

Mr. Meili: — Rents went down when it transitioned from affordable to social?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — That's correct.

Mr. Meili: — What's happening with rents in the year ahead in those units? Are they going to be stable, or are they rising?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So first a correction. The majority of rents went down from social to affordable. Did I get that right — social to affordable? Affordable to social. See, it's getting late. It's been a long day. I'm sorry, refresh my memory on the second part of the question. Now I lost my train of thought.

Mr. Meili: — So rents, what has happened? Like what's happened in the last year? What's happening in the year ahead in terms of rent?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So our rent is geared to income. So as income fluctuates, the rent will also fluctuate, but it will always be under 30 per cent of one's income.

Mr. Meili: — So we've talked about the number of units, and as you said, we could extrapolate to the approximate number of people in them, but we need to know how many are full. What's your vacancy rate in those units?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So the vacancy rates, these are reflective of the largest communities. So with respect to seniors social housing, the vacancy rate is approximately 8 per cent. With respect to family social housing, it's 10 per cent.

Mr. Meili: — When you made that change from affordable to social, that's when you had the income test applied, where it's no more than 30 and the rents fluctuate? Is that the timing of that change?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Yes.

Mr. Meili: — How has that impacted the vacancy rates? Have you seen vacancy rates increase or decrease as that happened?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So we can't really tease apart whether it was the program change or the market which drove those factors.

Mr. Meili: — So what was the actual difference in . . . You have told me an 8 per cent and a 10 per cent vacancy rate now, but I don't know what it was before. So what was it before?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — That information is not here tonight, but we will get that for you tomorrow.

Mr. Meili: — That would be helpful to see. Do you break down your vacancy rates in terms of urban, rural as well?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Yes.

Mr. Meili: — So what does the current difference look like, urban to rural?

[22:00]

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — I apologize, it appears it's not as readily available as I thought, and so this is something that we will return to you with tomorrow.

Mr. Meili: — Are you able to give me a rough indication? Are the vacancy rates higher in the rural, higher in the urban? Or you're not able to even give me that?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — You know what. I think I want to confirm that I have that data and I'm accurate about it before I respond.

Mr. Meili: — Well that's fair and thank you. The other thing I'm interested in, when that change took place, for those who saw their rents increase, what did that look like in terms of what was the average amount? What percentage of the people did see an increase in their rent? I'm hearing from some of my constituents in the seniors' building that they saw increases of hundreds of dollars in their rent per month. So I'm just wanting to know what is the magnitude. And, you know, do you have any way of describing the way that breaks down?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Okay. So in those minority of cases where they did not elect to go to rent-geared-toward-income model, \$100 was the increase.

Mr. Meili: — There were people who did not or were able to have that option of not going to rent geared to income. I'm thinking about the people who did go rent geared to income. What kind of increases did they see?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — So again, the individuals who transferred into rent geared toward income did so because there would be a reduction of their rents. And so the gross majority of those did that and those who would have seen an increase in their rent would likely have not chosen that option, and that's why the majority of people saw a reduction.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. So that option did remain for people if there was going to be an increase based on their income. You didn't see people leaving the units or seeing big increases based on it being tied to income?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — No.

Mr. Meili: — I had a follow-up question. It's getting late for me too.

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Good, it's your turn now.

Mr. Meili: — That's right. What about in the year ahead or years ahead, are there any rental increases planned on the horizon?

Ms. Allan: — So as the minister said, there was one increase, and tenants have been notified that there will be a second increase in June for those that are required to have another increase of \$100.

Mr. Meili: — So who will that apply to?

Ms. Allan: — So that will apply to the tenants that chose to stay in their rental suites with the move and their incomes are higher than the rent geared to income which is our social housing amount.

Mr. Meili: — So they're still in . . . When you give me the

numbers of social versus affordable, they're in the social housing pool, but they have a different . . . So within the social housing pool you have differential ways of determining their rates?

Ms. Allan: — So social housing is based on, geared to income, and we use 30 per cent of your income. And so some of the people that were in affordable housing, because the rents were higher when we made the transition, they stayed in there. And so our intent was that people with higher incomes would likely move out so that we would have more spaces. But we didn't want . . . We didn't displace people. So they got a \$100 increase a year ago, and they're getting another one on June 1st.

Mr. Meili: — So how many people will that affect?

The Chair: — This will be the last question and response.

Ms. Allan: — So as of March 1st there's 1,040 tenants that remain in the affordable housing program. So they have the option of transferring over to social housing which, as I said, was the percentage based on income or the increase will impact them.

The Chair: — Okay. Thank you very much. We have reached the agreed time of adjournment. Madam Minister, do you have any final comments before we adjourn?

Hon. Ms. Beaudry-Mellor: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. No. I would just like to once again thank the members of this committee and also my officials for their dedication and time here.

The Chair: — Okay. Thank you very much. Well thank you, Madam Minister, members, and staff that are with us this evening. Would someone move that the committee do now adjourn? Mr. Buckingham. All in favour? Everybody's got their hands up. Carried. This committee stands adjourned to 7 p.m. tomorrow.

[The committee adjourned at 22:12.]