



# **STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES**

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## STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Mr. Dan D'Autremont, Chair  
Cannington

Ms. Danielle Chartier, Deputy Chair  
Saskatoon Riversdale

Mr. Larry Doke  
Cut Knife-Turtleford

Mr. Muhammad Fiaz  
Regina Pasqua

Mr. Todd Goudy  
Melfort

Mr. Warren Steinley  
Regina Walsh Acres

Hon. Nadine Wilson  
Saskatchewan Rivers

[The committee met at 19:00.]

**The Chair:** — Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Human Services Committee. My name is Dan D'Autremont. I'm the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for Cannington and the Chair of the Human Services Committee.

With us this evening we have MLA Larry Doke, MLA Muhammad Fiaz, MLA Todd Goudy, MLA Warren Steinley, and MLA the Hon. Nadine Wilson. Substituting for MLA Danielle Chartier for the opposition is MLA Trent Wotherspoon.

**General Revenue Fund  
Social Services  
Vote 36**

**Subvote (SS01)**

**The Chair:** — Tonight we are considering the estimates for Ministry of Social Services. We now begin our consideration of vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01). Minister Merriman is here with his officials. Mr. Minister, please introduce your officials and start with your opening remarks.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and good evening to committee members. I'm pleased to be here tonight to talk about Social Services' 2018-2019 budget. I'll start off by introducing my senior officials. Beside me I have Deputy Minister Greg Miller. From child and family programs, I have Natalie Huber. I have Tobie Eberhardt, Joel Kilbride, and Janice Colquhoun. From our disability program, I have Bob Wihlidal and Bob Martinook, Bob and Bob. From finance and corporate services, I have Lynn Allan, Raymond Arscott, Winter Fedyk, and Beverly Smith. From housing, I have Raynelle Wilson and Tim Gross. And from income assistance, I have Tracey Smith, Elissa Aitken, and Jeff Redekop.

Since day one our government has been committed to supporting all vulnerable citizens of Saskatchewan, including our indigenous population. We have worked to strengthen our relationship with First Nations and Métis organizations and communities in many ways. For example, in child and family programs we're working with our indigenous partners to help parents safely care for their children, develop safe and secure homes for children who require out-of-home placement, and develop supports to transition children safely back to their families.

In disability programs, we've established a northern Elders group to ensure that our programs and services for those with intellectual disabilities are aligned with indigenous practices and are culturally appropriate. As well, the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation leads the northern working group that's focusing on promoting housing planning, increased community capacity, and creating home ownership opportunities for northern residents.

Our government has made significant investments to fulfill our commitment to supporting Saskatchewan's people in need. We

have increased funding to Social Services every year since we have tabled our first budget. This year's budget represents a 90 per cent increase over the pre-2007 ministry budget of \$622 million. This increase reflects a substantial investment that we have made in the last 10 years to improve the quality of life of citizens in our province.

Our ongoing commitment has benefited Saskatchewan people in many ways. In child and family programs, we've updated our legislation to modernize language and reflect current child welfare practices, improve information sharing to support integrated case management, and increase access to information for adoptees and birth parents. We've also continued our successful partnership with the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association to recruit new foster parents. Last year we approved 54 new homes with 81 spaces.

In disability programs, 440 people with intellectual disabilities were taken off of a wait-list and provided with the residential and day programs they needed with our government's commitment of \$57.1 million, the largest investment in Saskatchewan history, to support people with intellectual disabilities. We partnered with families and stakeholders to close Valley View Centre, one of the last institutions of its kind in Canada. So far 81 residents have moved into their new homes, and planning for the remaining 75 residents is at various stages.

In housing, more than 15,000 individuals and families have access to newly developed or repaired housing units thanks to the province's investment of more than \$787 million. Nearly 200 lower income families in need have become homeowners, thanks to Habitat for Humanity and the province's commitment of nearly \$11 million to support Habitat in 14 Saskatchewan communities.

And in income assistance, Saskatchewan seniors are receiving more support after the seniors' income plan benefits were tripled prior to what they were in 2007. More than 15,000 people with significant and enduring disabilities have access to Saskatchewan assured income for disability, or our SAID program. Our government has increased SAID benefits four times since the program was launched in 2009. We have increased shelter rates in our income assistance program nine times. We have also increased emergency shelter per diems by 21 per cent for individuals and up to 361 per cent for families, depending on the number of children.

These are only a few examples of our government's commitment to making life better for those in need in our province. I'm very proud that we are continuing our record of investment for supports for vulnerable citizens in the '18-19 budget despite the province's financial challenges. This year's Social Services budget will increase by \$54.4 million, or almost 5 per cent over last year, to a record \$1.18 billion.

Even in challenging financial times, our government has prioritized the most vulnerable with a \$125 million increase in funding to Social Services in the last two fiscal years. This funding will give our front-line workers the resources they need to help more people overcome their barriers to employment, meet their basic living needs, protect at-risk children, and

reunite families. I am confident that this increase will keep Saskatchewan on track by helping people in need.

I'd like to spend the next few minutes talking about the budget and the ministry's key priorities for this fiscal year.

Increase to CBOs [community-based organization] and caregivers. I'll start with one highlight of this year's budget, the \$10.4 million increase for community-based organizations and caregivers who provide direct daily care to adults with intellectual disabilities and children in need of protection. Of the \$10.4 million, 8.2 will be targeted to those caring for adults with intellectual disabilities and/or mental health challenges. That includes CBOs delivering day programs and residential services. It also includes approved private service homes providing care to adults with intellectual disabilities and/or mental health challenges.

The remaining 2.2 is for those providing daily care to children in need of protection, as well as families needing intensive supports. This increase targets family-based caregivers, including foster parents and extended family caregivers caring for children who cannot remain safely in their homes. It also applies to CBOs delivering intensive in-home services to families. These critical services help to keep at-risk children safely at home with their families rather than coming into care. These same services also support successful family reunification when the children leave care. The increase will also benefit CBOs providing essential residential services to children and youth.

Deb Davies, the executive director of the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, and Iris Miller Dennis, executive director of the Saskatchewan approved private service homes, have both expressed their appreciation for this investment. SARC [Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres] board President Dawn Desautels and Executive Director Amy McNeil wrote to sincerely thank our government for this additional funding.

CBOs deliver critical, crucial services on behalf of the ministry across the province, and we are committed to working with the CBO sector to ensure their sustainability.

The child and family programs. The ministry of child and family programs division will see a budget increase of 5.5 per cent to a total of more than \$270 million to continue their vital work of protecting children and supporting families. These increases include an additional \$4.5 million for extended family members caring for at-risk children and youth, keeping them connected to family, community, and culture. It also includes \$2.3 million for private treatment costs, including costs for medically fragile children. Another \$3.1 million will assist with the service delivery and operation costs.

The number of children needing protection in families, needing support is increasing for a number of reasons. Overall population growth is one. Increased public awareness and the duty to report children protection concerns has resulted in more reports to our intake line, more investigations, and more children being brought into care for their safety and their well-being. As well, children and families today are dealing with complex, often multiple issues that include mental health

challenges, substance abuse, crime, and interpersonal violence.

The ministry is working on a number of initiatives to address the needs of these children and families. We have partnered with the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association on a campaign to recruit more foster parents. Since the campaign began in the fall of 2016, we have recruited nearly 100 new foster homes. We've increased the number of children placed with extended family members so they can keep their connection to family, culture, and community. More than half the children in care today, 57 per cent, are with family members.

We are developing more wraparound, community-based services for children and families to contribute to a more successful family reunification. We work with CBOs to provide intensive in-home supports and family supports so children can stay safely in their homes rather than coming into care.

We also continue to work with 17 First Nations child and family service agencies throughout the province to provide prevention and protection services to children and families on reserve. We also have contracts with three of these First Nation agencies to deliver service off reserve, and we continue to explore opportunities with the First Nation and Métis partners to strengthen the delivery of child protection services across our province. The safety and well-being of all our children in this province will continue to be the high priority for this ministry.

Disability services. Another of our government's priorities is to support people with intellectual disabilities. The disability service budget will increase by more than 17 per cent this year to \$209.1 million. With an increase of nearly \$10 million, we will continue to move people from Valley View Centre in Moose Jaw to new community-based homes around the province. To date, 81 residents have successfully transitioned from the centre with another 49 scheduled to move this year. We are well positioned to meet our anticipated closure date of December 2019.

I have personally heard of many stories from former residents who are thriving in their new homes and participating in many community activities and events, as I have attended several ribbon-cutting ceremonies. We've also heard from many families who are enjoying spending more time with their loved ones near or around their own communities.

The budget also contains \$9 million to support children with intellectual disabilities who will require support from the disability programs once they turn 18. This funding will help to support existing clients whose needs have changed and require urgent support. I'm also very pleased that the 2018-19 budget includes \$250,000 to operate a group home in La Ronge for northern residents with intellectual disabilities.

To fulfill another of our government's commitments, Social Services, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Education, will administrate the autism spectrum disorder individualized funding program, beginning in July. Children under the age of six with autism spectrum disorder will receive a benefit of \$4,000 this year. This new program will help families gain access to early interventions and support for their children with ASD [autism spectrum disorder]. These

investments and initiatives will contribute to our goal of making Saskatchewan the best place to live in Canada for a person with an intellectual disability.

**Housing.** On the housing side, the budget will be reduced by less than 2 per cent from \$7.7 million to 7.5 to reflect overall efficiencies that have been achieved. Through our cost-sharing agreement with the federal government, we expect to invest \$13 million in the '18-19 through the rental development program to develop housing units for vulnerable people who are considered hard to house. Through an RFP [request for proposal] issued this fall, we received 27 proposals from 14 communities across the province. This investment supports recommendations from the poverty reduction strategy, mental health and addictions action plan, disability strategy, and the Saskatchewan plan for growth. We're also investing a further \$1 million in our partnership with Habitat for Humanity to continue developing home ownership options for families in housing need around the province.

Over the next year we will continue to work closely with the federal government on the national housing strategy. We want to ensure that we're able to capture every opportunity to address Saskatchewan housing priorities and support people in housing need.

[19:15]

On budget day we officially launched the seniors' education property tax deferral program. This program will allow eligible senior homeowners to defer their education portion of their property taxes through a repayable loan. Low- to moderate-income seniors will gain greater financial flexibility and be able to maintain in their homes for a longer time.

**Income assistance.** Lastly, the budget of income assistance programs will increase by 2 per cent to a total of \$575.6 million for '18-19. The budget for the Saskatchewan assistance plan, one of our core programs, will increase by \$14.2 million to more than 178 million to address growing caseloads. Through the SAP [Saskatchewan assistance program] benefits, our government will support more than 15,000 households per month with their basic living needs.

On budget day we announced that we would suspend the intake of the new applications of Saskatchewan rental housing supplement on July 1st. None of the roughly 14,000 households currently on the program will lose their benefits as long as they remain eligible for the program. The eligibility requirements that are in place today will remain for those who are on the program as of July 30th.

Saskatchewan rental market has changed significantly since 2005 when the rental supplement was first introduced. At that time, the provincial vacancy rent was 4.5 per cent and dropped to a record low of 1.2 per cent in 2007. According to the Canadian mortgage and housing corporation, in 2017 Saskatchewan had the lowest average rent for a two-bedroom apartment among the Western provinces and the highest vacancy rate in Canada, at 8.8 percent.

As part of our work with the federal government on the national housing strategy, we will be co-designing a new Canada

housing benefit for low-income renters. As well, income assistance and housing will be working together to ensure that people are informed of the available social housing units as the vacancy rate in government-owned housing units is 15 per cent in Regina and 12 per cent in Saskatoon. That means that over 740 units are sitting vacant in our two major cities.

**Our income assistance redesign.** During the '18-19, the ministry will continue to work on income assistance redesign. We continue to review a very complicated suite of programs that has evolved over the last 50 years to look at ways that it would be more user-friendly and effective for our clients. This budget includes an additional \$9.2 million for the development of a new IT [information technology] platform to support income assistance programs and payments. This funding will support enhancements to service deliveries and update our current and old and outdated system.

To wrap up, I'd like to say once again I'm very proud of our government's continued commitment to supporting our most vulnerable: children in need of protection, at-risk families, people with disabilities, seniors, and those with low income.

I want to thank the many indigenous partners, CBO workers, approved private sector service home operators, foster parents, and other caregivers who are as committed as our government to making life better for all Saskatchewan people. I also want to acknowledge my officials here and all of the staff in the Ministry of Social Services who work hard on behalf of those that are in greatest need in our province.

The staff within the ministry are true professionals, even during the most difficult times. Emergency Social Services responded to the Humboldt tragedy and provided support to those who were in need, and supported our community-based organizations in the area. You are making a difference and I do thank you.

With that, Mr. Chair, I'd be open to any questions from the committee.

**The Chair:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. We will now move on to vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01). Are there any questions? I recognize Mr. Wotherspoon.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Well thank you very much. Thanks, Minister, for being here tonight. Certainly most importantly, thank you to all the officials that are here on behalf of the Ministry of Social Services, and certainly want to thank all those that work in the ministry across the province, all of the organizations, all of the partners, all the agencies that are connected to the important work out of Social Services. So thank you very much.

I'd like to get a sense of what's happening by way of FTEs [full-time equivalent] in this budget.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thank you for the question. The short answer to the question is we are up 21 FTEs in Social Services overall, and 20 of those are allocated to child and family services.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks for that information. Can you describe the nature of their work?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — The additional ones in child and family?

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Yes.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks again for the question. The answer is, we're receiving increased calls on the front end and we've allocated staff to that.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — In the phone bank?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — It would be on the intake side.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — What's the nature of those calls? Within the intake, what's the nature of the calls that are increasing?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — As I had mentioned in my opening remarks, we've seen increased public awareness and duty to report, child protection concerns, as well as children are coming in with more complex needs. Their needs are evolving and we want to be able to make sure that we have the right staff there to be able to meet those calls.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks for that information. As far as staff being seconded to Executive Council, do you have folks seconded to Executive Council in the coming year?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — No, we don't have anybody seconded to Executive Council.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — How many out-of-country trips did the minister take this past year in his role or in his period in his role, and what are the plans for the year ahead?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Since being minister, I haven't had any travel other than within the province. I've travelled to many community-based organizations, met with a lot of stakeholders, First Nations communities, but nothing outside. And the only trip that I have outside the province would have been to Ottawa for a child and family meeting with FPTs [federal-provincial-territorial] and First Nations leaders, and there are some tentatively scheduled FPTs coming up further in this year, all in-country.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Is there a growing utilization of private contractors in the past year or into the year ahead?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I'm just wondering if I can get clarification on the question, because we do have multiple contracts with community-based organizations. We have in addition to 800 contracts with 200 community-based organizations, as well as First Nations. So I'm wondering if I could get a little clarification on your question if I could, Mr. Wotherspoon.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — If there's change in practice, so if there's expansion to different contractors or greater utilization of contractors.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — We do have two. We have one

contract for motivational interview training which is part of our redesign, and a second one to support evaluation and procurement processes for IT for income assistance redesign.

[19:30]

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — The motivational interview processes, could you explain what's the value of that contract? Who's the contractor? What services are they providing?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I guess I'll describe a little bit what the motivational interviewing is first and then get into who we've contracted with.

The ministry has adopted motivational interviewing as a service delivery approach to improve services and outcomes for our clients. It's a positive communication approach rooted in empathy that works with the client's own motivation to make changes and to commit to developing, achieving goals. In essence what it is, it's a conversation back and forth to be able to understand our clients a little bit better.

Initial implementation is under way in Saskatoon and will be expanded later this year, in '18-19 fiscal year. Motivational interviewing is evidence based and supported by three decades of international research and field study. Manitoba and New Brunswick, who have implemented motivational interviewing in their income assistance program in the past two to three years, have reported positive outcomes for their clients and for their staff.

The company that'll be providing this service is Empowering Change Inc. and the contract amount is \$294,350.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks. And Empowering Change Inc., where are they incorporated and who are their owners?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Empowering Change Inc. is wholly owned by its own company. It is its own company. There are no other owners of that company and they are located out of British Columbia.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks for the information. So there's still an owner of . . . So it might be a private company but there's a beneficial interest. There's an owner so . . . I'm just getting a sense of who the proprietor or who the owner would be of that company.

My other question would be, do they do the same kind of work for other jurisdictions, for other provinces, for other governments?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — As I've been told, they were involved in New Brunswick, in the motivational interviewing in New Brunswick. The owner is the operator of the business, and we can get you that information. I don't have it at my fingertips.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Sure. Thank you for undertaking to get that information back to the committee and I appreciate that. Reasonable to have that back within sort of a 30-day period?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Yes.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thank you. The other contract there around the redesign of assistance programs, and it was an IT component. Who are you dealing with there? What's the amount for? Who's the owner?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Just to update the committee, Dr. Google was able to help me out here. Empowering Change is . . . George Sawatzky is the co-owner and operations manager at Empowering Change Inc. The other contract was with Solvera Solutions out of Regina, and the contract was for \$10,000.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks so much. Are there any plans to sell assets in the year ahead?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks for the question. The only thing that we have that's coming up is a continuation of our better use policy of some of Sask Housing Corp's stock. As you're probably aware, the program was started back in 2002. It started under the previous government and has continued under our government.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — What about some of the rural public housing utilized by seniors as well? I know there was a question that certain communities had. I think there'd been a letter that had gone out to 30-some communities, and there was a fair amount of uncertainty in many communities on this front.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thank you. The only housing that we're looking at are the ones that are chronically vacant, that there will be no tenant impact on this. We're also going to be working with the municipalities, the towns, First Nations communities. We've had conversations with them to see if there is a better use for these units in the municipalities than for the assets of the Government of Saskatchewan to be sitting there and depreciating.

[19:45]

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Can you name the communities then, or the housing projects that are chronically vacant?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Starting alphabetically we have Abbey, Saskatchewan; Alameda; Allan, Saskatchewan; Arborfield; Arcola; Assiniboia; Battleford. The list is fairly lengthy and I could get you a copy of that, if you would prefer that. Otherwise I could name . . . But we do have over 3,000 units . . .

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — If you have a list in front of you, that'd be great just to leave it with the committee here tonight, and it could be photocopied and supplied as information. That'd be great.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I will endeavour to get the committee a list of all of them that are chronically vacant.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Minister, if you wish to table that tonight, you may do so, or you can forward it to the committee. We would prefer eight copies, if you can.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I will forward it to the committee and provide eight copies, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — When can we expect it being forwarded?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — We'll endeavour to get that to you by the end of the week.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — How do you describe chronically? What was the description of chronically . . .

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Chronically vacant.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Chronically vacant. What's that definition?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Anything that's been vacant for more than six months.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — And so if we're talking about a unit that has multiple units in some of these communities — pick Assiniboia, for example — you're talking about an individual unit or you're talking about a complex, the entire complex has been chronically vacant?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — It's the individual units, not the building, that we're speaking of.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So you're looking at selling off individual units within buildings?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Nobody that are in these units will be affected. Again the policy hasn't changed since 2002; this is the same policy. We would be looking at individual units, detached units specifically. If there is a duplex or a multi-unit facility that is chronically vacant, then we would consider that as well.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — We'll follow up. I know that we have an additional critic, the member for Fairview, that will get engaged on this, you know, on the housing file as well. So maybe I won't go too far down the path here tonight. But I know that communities really value those assets as well and wherever possible I know they'd also be looking for constructive policy and flexibility that would allow those units to be utilized for the maximum benefit of the respective communities. So that's sort of sell-off of assets that are being considered. What about privatization of services?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I'm just wondering if I can get a clarification on what you mean by privatization because we do have contracts with service providers. So I'm just wondering if I can get a clarification from you on that.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Right, so again looking for changes on this front if you're going in a new direction and putting into contract something that's currently being done publicly or if there's changes, if you're engaging new contractors. We touched on another question earlier that might have already captured this information, but if there's services that are currently being delivered that there's going to be an adjustment, and that are going to be delivered through a private contractor.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — The answer to your question is there will be no change.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — As far as any lawsuits that the ministry is facing, do you have lawsuits that the ministry is facing? And can you describe what you're dealing with?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — And thanks for the question. The answer is, as of December 31, 2017 there were 93. And I can't get into the nature of the lawsuits as they're in litigation.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks for the answer on the 93. Without pressing for more information at this table here, what would be appropriate by way of information that you could share back with the committee to give a greater understanding of those 93 lawsuits and where they're at?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Due to the nature of the cases that are extremely sensitive, I'm going to consult with Justice on this and I will seek their advice on what I am and am not allowed to provide. And what I am allowed to provide, with Justice's advice, I will table with the committee.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thank you. And then just for consistency, so tabling it here or an undertaking to make sure that that's provided back to this committee within 30 days, is that reasonable?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I have to touch base with Justice to see what their timelines are. I'm not sure what their timelines are but I will endeavour to get it back to the committee as soon as possible.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Fair enough. I know we're dealing with a bit of frustration over the number of . . . through various ministries over a number of years with, you know, undertakings that are made by various ministers — not suggesting by you. And so we're trying to make sure that we improve our process of when we're going to get the information because otherwise it gets difficult to track some of that back down. So anyways, thank you for your co-operation on that front.

As it relates to the recommendations of the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission], can you identify the ones that pertain to your ministry and where you're at on those actions towards implementation?

[20:00]

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — As you are aware, there were 94 Calls to Action, the first five were directly related to child and family, and the fifth one was more of an FPT that we're working on federal legislation with the provincial and territorial counterparts. But I'll get Natalie Huber from child and family services to go through in detail what the first four recommendations are and what we've done on those recommendations.

**Ms. Huber:** — Natalie Huber, assistant deputy minister, child and family programs. So with respect to the actions, I'll just go in order here. The first one was to call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and all Aboriginal governments to commit to reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care. So in our province, just in terms of a status update on that action where children have to be removed from their parents, in Saskatchewan efforts are made to keep children with their

extended family and within their community. So we have a number of contracts with our First Nations agencies, named Family Finders, to engage with the First Nations agencies in their communities to seek family to match children that might be apprehended off-reserve, on-reserve with those families. So we have those contracts throughout the province.

Another area that we've been working very closely with the First Nations, Métis partners on is ensuring that we recruit more of those indigenous foster families, as well as extended family caregivers. So close to 60 per cent of the children in care are placed with the extended families. So we're actually leading, nationally, in terms of the placement of children with indigenous caregivers. So that's an area of great accomplishment, as well, for us.

Also in terms of reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care, we've implemented our structured decision-making model, which is a risk-assessment tool to assist our staff in making better decisions around safety and risk when it comes to child protection matters, and kind of removing that bias that might have occurred prior. So it's more of a consistent way of decision-making as it relates to child protection matters.

We also have introduced counsel for children program. This was implemented in December 2014, and this provides legal counsel and support to children and youth involved in child protection matters and ensures that children have a voice in court and decisions as it pertains to their care.

In addition, we've also adopted the child rights impact assessment tool, which is a tool that we use in development of our policy and legislation to ensure that children's rights are front and centre when we're making decisions with respect to children, their placement, their care plan, and their future planning around transition out of care as well.

We've also implemented a core practice model throughout the province that is more family-focused, engaging with families in a different way to ensure that we can provide services the best we can to keep children safely at home. And that just really focuses on putting the family at the centre and strengthening families.

And we also participate in the federal-provincial-territorial working group around reducing the number of indigenous children in care and continue to participate in regular phone calls and conference calls around the work to be developed in that area.

In terms of the second call to action, are you good with this approach, to go through all of them?

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — You know, just . . . You know what I think would be most useful on this front? I suspect you have some sort of framework or rubric with, you know, information that's tracking progress towards each of these recommendations. I think if you're able to table that, Mr. Minister, that would be most helpful because then that will allow us to, you know, best utilize the time in the committee and able to then focus energy on, you know, if there's gaps but also to recognize where there's been good efforts as well.



**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — We'll get a version that we can table because this has some of Natalie's notes on that. And we'd be more than happy to table that because we're very proud of the work that we've done on this.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks, and it is important. Is there an ability to get that tabled here tonight yet?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I'll have it tabled by the end of the week.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Though we have another period of time for estimates yet, I think this is our . . . I think we have two different . . . We're here tonight and we'll have another time. So as long as we have some of that information before we gather next, I'd appreciate that.

So you're talking a little bit about the redesign of assistance. At the same time right now many . . . Thank you very much for your report. And thank you as well where there has been actions taken that have allowed for progress. I want to say thank you to everyone involved on that front. I believe there's also, you know, gaps that are there that we need to work on.

But as far as the rate redesign, of course these are people's lives that we're talking about and the dollars they depend on. So I'm interested in getting into a discussion of the redesign. But I think first and foremost, right now we have people all across Saskatchewan who are depending on assistance to provide for the basics.

And I guess my question would be more on the rates in general. They've been static for so long. I have all the rate cards here — SAP, SAID, TEA [transitional employment allowance]. We can go into the rental housing supplement afterwards. But are you anticipating some change on this front? I mean the rates simply . . . There hasn't been any, you know, meaningful increases here and folks are in a really hard way on the margins across the province. Is there going to be some important movement on rates upward?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Again thanks for the question. And I am very proud of the increments and the investment that our government has made in income assistance in very good fiscal times and also in some very challenging times. But just to go through a few of them here.

Since '07-08, we have had nine increases to the shelter rate in income support programs. The seniors' income benefits have gone from 90 to \$270 — they've been tripled. The creation of the personal home care benefit. And what I'm personally most proud of is our government . . . is on our Saskatchewan assured income for disability program, which was created and has been increased a couple of times.

So I'm very proud of the record that we do have in income assistance and working with those most vulnerable in our communities.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — But as far as SAP and TEA and rates that folks are dealing with, I mean, the dollars are super tight and certainly not reflective of cost-of-living increases. Do you have plans that . . . I mean the rates need to be hiked to provide

a level of peace of mind and security for people across the province. Do you have intentions to increase support on this front?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks again for the question. As I touched on in my opening remarks, specifically within income assistance, I mentioned that the Saskatchewan seniors are receiving more supports in the seniors' income plan. More than 15,000 people with significant and enduring disabilities have access to the SAID, which has also been increased. And we've increased shelter rates in our income assistance program nine times since 2007. We've also increased shelter per diems by 21 per cent for individuals, and as I mentioned, 361 per cent increase for families, depending on the number of children that they have.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — There's a reduction in the seniors' income plan in the budget. What's driving that?

[20:15]

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — There has been no reduction in the dollar amount that's going to seniors. Again we've increased, since 2007, the SIP [seniors' income plan] benefits from 90 to \$270. And the reason that the dollar amount that is going out is because we have less seniors are on the program. Seniors are more financially sound these days and less people are applying for the program.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — As far as shelter benefits, has there been a change in who's eligible, specifically around joint custody?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — There has been no policy change for any joint custody. And just backtracking to your other question, there was no policy change in the SIP either.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So we're hearing from some folks that are suggesting that they're having shelter benefits pulled away that they were receiving in joint-custody environments. Would you have more information on this? Would there . . . Are you saying there's not a policy change? Would there be a practice that's occurring on this front?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks again for the question. If there is some specific cases, please, if you could make my office aware and we will look into it. But I would encourage any individuals that have any concerns to go back through their caseworker and be able to discuss that, and if that doesn't end up to their satisfaction there is an appeal process and their worker can describe how to go about that process.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks for your answer. I'm glad to hear that there hasn't been a policy change on this front. What's been described, you know, certainly wouldn't be fair to those that need to provide housing and support for children. And so I'll reach back out to folks that have indicated some issues, some changes on this front, and deal back with your office, deal with you again.

As far as the push, like there's a solid call and a very practical call for an increase to asset exemptions and also income exemptions for those on assistance. I think it's just a matter of fairness and common sense on this front. Where are you at as a

minister and are you ready to act on this front?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks again. On the asset exemption and the income exemption, there has been no changes in anything. But I can tell you that I have talked to stakeholders and people have brought this to my attention, and I'm certainly open to continuing to have the conversation with the individuals and the stakeholders on a go-forward basis.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — If I could urge your attention on this matter, it's, you know, really a non-budgetary matter for the ministry, but it really is something that would provide some improvements for many across the province. We're far behind many other provinces on this front, and so I would really implore you to put this top of desk if you're able to, and follow up. I think you've probably received correspondence — I know I have as well — from Peter Gilmer, for example, out of the Anti-Poverty Ministry. I thought his submission was thoughtful and practical, so I'd urge follow-up on both those fronts with Peter and other stakeholders as well.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I will continue to have that conversation with stakeholders.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — As far as the changes to the special-needs diet, of course this is something that has impacted many people on very tight budgets. And I think it's just so wrong to have dollars, and not big dollars but meaningful dollars in the lives of those people, pulled away from them. My question is, since you've brought forward the changes to the special-needs diet, what's the utilization of that program? How many dollars has the ministry saved? What sort of data does the ministry have on this front?

[20:30]

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — To answer your question, we had 1,400 clients on the 3,000-plus calorie diet, but we have several special diet programs. We have . . . I'll give you the special diet programs and the dollar amount. We have calories with all age groups for diabetes, weight reduction, and modified fats, low cholesterol.

From 1,900 to 2,499 calories, it's \$27; 2,500 and above, it's \$42. The other special diet is people on dialysis is \$35. The next one is food supplements which is an actual cost. We have high-protein diet for acute conditions where the treatment is intensive and for specific time periods is \$53. We have pregnancy or lactation at \$48. And we have HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] or AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome] at \$140.

The actual cost one that I mentioned previous, established by a registered dietician, may be provided with the above diets or those not listed below. So we will pay actual cost if it's done by a registered dietician.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — What's the change on the . . . You had 1,400 on the . . . That was 70-some dollars for that provision, I believe. What's the change on that front?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — To answer the question, 620 clients or 44 per cent have moved on to a different special diet.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So 44 per cent out of that category. You know, this is an area that really is frustrating to see a government make a choice on this front because we're not talking about big dollars here. And we're talking again about people in really tough positions. And you've read those numbers into the record, you know — \$27, \$53, \$42, \$48, \$35 — and to make sure anyone that's watching this at home, to make sure that's clear, that's not per day as someone might be assuming. That's per month. And so I just find it, you know, a really damaging choice to pull away that \$70 budget, that monthly, and peel those dollars away. And it all adds on when you have all the cost of living increases.

And I would just urge the minister's reconsideration on this front. I believe this change was made before he was the minister. I don't think this was a decent choice. I don't think it's fair to people. I think for any of us as MLAs with meal allowances and knowing what we get on a daily basis, I think we're . . . It's just not defensible to pull those dollars away from someone on a monthly basis who really, really needs that support.

So I guess to the minister: do you have openness to look at that again? Like those numbers are pretty dramatic when you see over 40 per cent of the people who are utilizing that program no longer utilizing that program, and I would assume that those folks are all in one of those lesser benefit categories.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I guess to answer the question is . . . The dollar amounts that I did read into the record is in addition to the food supplement that is already built into their benefit program, so this is above their normal food supplement that they are receiving. And I stand by the decision of the previous minister.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Well I just think it's so callous, and if you look at the cost of, you know, beef or anything else at the grocery store right now, we know what we're dealing with. And to have those that are on an insufficient fixed income, insufficient dollars, having dollars for food peeled away is just really wrong, and of course has greater, has consequences as well when we're talking about basic health of people and having a public universal health care system like ours.

I'll move along to the changes that have been made. I've heard a lot of concerns from folks that are impacted with changes to the repayment system when there's been an overpayment. I understand that about two-thirds of clients at some point will have . . . People will have gone through, received an overpayment. And I respect a system to make sure that those dollars are received back to the ministry.

But what I am hearing, although I believe it's a modest amount, that the repayment program has been increased, that it's had a dramatic impact on those across the province who again are dealing with insufficient support, insufficient rates as it is, and also having things like the food budget being peeled back.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks again for the question. In answer, there was a couple of questions in there. The overpayment recovery rates was increased by \$10 a month. The overpayment recovery provisions in SAP have not been updated since 1989. The changes to this policy help ensure the programs

are sustainable and the ministry is a strong steward of public funds. And we would encourage anybody that has any concerns about this to work with their specific caseworker and we can do it on a case-by-case basis, but within the existing policy of the guidelines that we have set out right now.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So just to clarify here, it's actually — and I know it sounds like a small amount to probably everyone in this room, certainly those around the table — \$10 a month, and I know that's what the increase has been on the collection. But I'm hearing that that's a real hardship for folks out there. And I think that again really paints the picture of the dire straits that so many are in across the province.

So I think I heard from the minister that if that \$10 increase that folks are dealing with, am I hearing that there's flexibility to that? I guess in the end it would be probably better than having one-off dealing as to whether it's going to be 10 or 5 or 6 or 4. I think that that would become very laborious for your ministry. I think it would be wise just to scrap that \$10 increase and adhere to the policy that was in place in the past.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Again I'll go back to my third point, is we want to be strong stewards of public funds and we want to make sure that the public funds are being managed in the best possible way. And anything that's happening within policy, within the existing policy, we will ensure that our caseworkers and the individuals will find the best way to recover those funds.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Okay. I'm not meaning to be obtuse here. I'm not sure that I heard an answer. Folks are being subjected to a repayment of \$10 more than what they would have been in place in the past. This is a hardship for folks. Are you suggesting that they'd work with their individual caseworkers to figure out some sort of repayment plan that doesn't include that \$10 increase?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Again if there is any concerns from an individual that you know of or that you have heard or spoken to, I would encourage them to go through the appeal process. If there is something that they have a concern with, with their caseworker, they can always go to the regional appeal committee. And then there is the provincial appeal committee as well that will have a look at the case-by-case basis.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — I guess I would just say, so you're stating that you want to be prudent with the public dollar, and of course we all do. We definitely can speak to big, sizable sums of projects that have gone sideways where certainly, in other ministries at other times here, where there hasn't been the collection of dollars. We're talking millions and millions of dollars in certain projects. Here we're talking about \$10. That's a hardship for people across the province and an overpayment that wasn't done through fraud or something malicious on their end, but that was done in many cases by error of these sorts of systems that are being operated.

[20:45]

So there's no question as to whether the dollars should be collected. That's fair. But the \$10 increase is a hardship for folks. And as far as the public resources, I think to suggest to

people to go and have appeals on those \$10 increases or to engage their caseworkers, I think this is incredibly laborious and incredibly inefficient and expensive for the ministry and the public resources that are allocated there.

And we know that your ministry is under a lot of strain by way of the number of workers to meet the demands that exist already. And I think this is just a really cumbersome process that's wasteful of public resources as opposed to simply saying the \$10 increase, we're not going to increase it \$10. We'll deal with collections in the way we have in the past. But I'll leave it there.

I've had concerns raised with what appears to be a new policy or practice possibly around those that are entering into income assistance. And it pertains to home visits that I believe are now being suggested as sort of the standard within this practice or this process. So I guess my question to the minister: is there a change in policy or practice on this front?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — To answer the question, there has been no new policy. This eligibility review unit — as you touched on, kind of the home visits which we call the eligibility review unit — has been in place since '93. So it's been around for a very long time, crossing governments. And I'll get Jeff Redekop to go into some specific details on the policy, on the program.

**Mr. Redekop:** — Thank you. Jeff Redekop, executive director, income assistance service delivery. So again this eligibility review unit has been in place since the early '90s, and the primary function is to ensure that the ministry's providing accurate benefits to individuals. So the staff in that unit provide a variety of functions, from validating data on individuals to providing home visits for individuals. Each year new targets for what activities the staff may do are developed. And again, the unit's been in place for decades.

And I guess the purpose is to not only ensure that benefits are accurate, that the ministry is providing accurate benefits, but to ensure that clients are receiving all the benefits to which they're entitled. So an individual might meet with a client; we would not only talk about validating information they've told the ministry, but we may identify other benefits that they may be eligible for. And one of the nice things is to make sure that people aren't ending up with benefits that are not appropriate for them, so that they're starting off with the most accurate and appropriate benefits.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So you mentioned that this team or this program is . . . that there's different guidance to it year to year as far as how it's going to be utilized, or the volume, I guess, of visits, or what those visits are going to be focused on. Is there an increased utilization over the last year and into next year of that home-visit team?

**Mr. Redekop:** — Can you clarify what you mean by utilization?

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Are you doing more home visits? Do you have more staff being allocated to this unit? Are you changing practice on this front?

**Mr. Redekop:** — So continuing on, in the previous year we brought the unit back up to full staffing strength, back to what it was in approximately the year 2015.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So where was it? How many FTEs do you have deployed there now? And have you changed practice as well? There seems to be a feeling by those that are out there that this team's being utilized much more than it had been in the past.

**Mr. Redekop:** — First I can say that the team has always worked to its fullest capacity based on the team we have. And the obligation hasn't changed in terms of ensuring that benefits are provided within the regulations of the programs that they're responsible to check on eligibility for.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — And the FTEs?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Just to answer your question, there are 30 FTEs provincially, which are the same levels that they were approximately in 2015.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — To hear a little bit about the call centre or how the ministry's dealing with calls that it's receiving, we're hearing some real concerns across the province with waits that are far, far too long and putting people in a really difficult spot. So I'd be interested in hearing about what information the ministry has or tracks around wait times, dropped calls as well. Because I hear from so many that are in often tough spots within life as well and trying to organize things for their family and work or otherwise, and that just simply aren't able to wait on the line.

So I'd like to hear statistics and what the reality is that folks are facing on this front, and what actions the ministry's taking to address this unacceptable wait time issue that folks are facing.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Just to give the committee a bit of an update, as of the end of April we're seeing significant improvements in our income assistance client service centre wait times. The month of April, the average call wait time was 13 minutes. This is about half what it was in February of 2018, and two minutes lower than the average over the past year.

The ministry has added additional staff during peak call times. We have cross-trained staff in multiple programs and invested in technology to handle their calling. To avoid remaining on hold, we have a callback option which preserves their position in the queue. And typically the person who answers the phone can actually address the client's issues versus bouncing them to a different individual.

So we are moving in the right direction in our call centre, and I'm very happy that our staff has worked diligently to be able to address our clients' needs.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — It's good to hear that there's progress on this front. Would it be fair to say that many people would have been waiting for well over an hour at some point through this previous year?

[21:00]

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I think there are times where we see peak volumes. And even though that we have allocated extra staff and cross-trained staff to be able to meet those peak times, as well as our callback option, the staff is certainly working to their best ability. If there is somebody on hold for that length of time at a peak period, it could happen, but it would be not the norm.

We're continuing to work to make sure that our clients are serviced in the best possible way. And if there are other options for a client to call during non-peak times, early in the morning or some other time which would be non-peak hours, that would certainly help them get their call processed in a more efficient way.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — We hear from many that are facing sometimes two-, three-, and even four-hour waits is what we've heard. And it's a common issue that's raised by people across the province. So I'd urge the minister to . . . or ask the minister to provide information to the committee by way of . . . Whatever information he has, whatever statistics or analysis he has on wait times — also the calls that would be abandoned — and provide that back to the committee.

I believe there was also some sort of platform, an online platform. Not to suggest that this would meet the needs of all clients, but for certain verifications, that would alleviate some stress I believe on this line. I'm just wondering where that platform is at. Is it operational? I don't believe it is yet, but I know there was some work that had gone into it.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I could touch on a couple of the things. What you're talking about is call times. I can tell you from March 2015 to February 2016, it was at 21 minutes. March of 2016 to February 2017, it was down to 17 minutes. March 2017 to February 2018, it was down to 15 minutes. And as I just reported, it's continually improving, down to 13 minutes as of last month. So I think we're moving in the right direction. There's always some more work to be done.

As far as our online platform, it is something that we are working on very diligently. Again, it's going to be client focused. It's going to be looking at it from the client's perspective. It is being piloted right now and we will get the results from that pilot program that we have going right now. And then we'll look at how we can expand it and what the time frame is on that to make sure that it's done in a proper way.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks. And again I would urge if you have some information you can provide on the calls, I'd be interested in knowing kind of what peak times are and what the waits are during those peak times, what those hours are. But you can, if you're able to, bring that to the committee. That would be appreciated.

I'm interested in knowing how the ministry goes through a reassessment of clients, how they go . . . I don't know if the reassessment is the right term, or a review. We know that there's been certain changes to programs. I'll use for example in the SAID program, with some of the shelter benefits that then were suggested that they were grandfathered, but we know that there are circumstances where the ministry was then reviewing those individuals. I'd like to hear what kind of policy change

has occurred on this front or what kind of change in practice is occurring.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I'm wondering if I can get a little clarification. You mentioned the SAID shelter that were grandfathered. I'm just wondering if I can get a little clarification of a timeline or more specific information.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So I understand that there's some excess shelter benefits that folks with SAID, that some clients of SAID would have been receiving. And my understanding is that the ministry was engaging in a review or a reassessment of some of those people. That may have been triggered by a move as well, a change in location or some other change within their life. So I'm just trying to get an understanding of what triggers a reassessment or a review of clients.

I'm using the example of SAID and the shelter benefit but, you know, maybe it's the same for the rental housing supplement or other programs out there.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks again for the question. Our regulations within Social Services dictate that all clients have a regular review. On the SAP program, it's done annually. On our SAID program, it's done every three years.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Is it triggered by anything else, like a move or change in other circumstances as well? I know that had been a concern identified by many folks in the SAID program.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — The answer would be yes. And it would be based on a discussion of their circumstances, which could be an income change, family circumstances, or basically a variety of life circumstances that would change things. And the purpose for that is to make sure that they are getting the right benefits that they are entitled to.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — The concern has been that people are losing the benefit of, say, excess shelter if they're on SAID when they're going through a reassessment that may be triggered by a move. And that's concerning because I know that a lot of those that are on assistance and receiving these, you know, very nominal, very modest supports, they count every dollar. And if they're looking at moves, often the move, you know, they're leaving an unfit circumstance. They might be leaving a situation of interpersonal violence. They might be leaving a dwelling that, you know, just isn't good for them.

So it worries me that there is such a common feeling right now across many throughout the province, through SAID or through other programs, that are feeling really kept hostage, and really that they don't have the mobility and freedom that they should deserve. So I don't know what, whether there's a change in policy that's needed on this front or whether it's a change in practice, but it's not leaving people with the kind of peace of mind that they deserve.

[21:15]

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks for the question. And I guess to comment on that, if anybody, certainly any client or any person in Saskatchewan that has a domestic violence or any type of that situation, I'd encourage them to get out of that

immediately, find a safe shelter and contact their caseworker immediately.

We've got 19 different ways to access our access shelter. And it would be a little detailed to get into it right now, but I would encourage them to go through their caseworker. And we will do our best to get the benefits that they are entitled to on a short-term and a long-term basis.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Thanks. Just a concerning trend that it seems that supports are being peeled back from people. And it leaves them in a very vulnerable position, a very precarious position.

I want to get to the rental housing supplement and the \$5 million cut this year. How many clients, how many people are receiving the rental housing supplement right now? Where's the \$5 million going to be saved? Of course the position's well known to the minister that I'm disappointed, very disappointed that this program is being discontinued, ended before a new program, a better program is able to be established. It leaves people without the support they need.

So my call is the same that I've put in question period. I wish this cut would be reversed, and that's my number one position. But I want to know where the ministry's planning on saving \$5 million once this program is no longer offered.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks again for the question. Again I want to clarify that nobody currently on these programs is going to be affected by that. And the ministry has budgeted 46.2 million for the Saskatchewan rental housing supplement in the '18-19 budget. As far as the \$5 million that you reference, that's a forecast. We have no idea how many people are going to be coming on our system as of July 1st. There's a lot of variables that are built into that, but again we are spending \$46.2 million.

And this decision was not a budgetary decision. This was a policy decision based on the rental rates that are out there that have dropped in Western Canada. We have the lowest rental rates in Western Canada. The vacancy rate is at its high and that, combined with our Sask housing inventory that is in our two major cities at 740-plus units, that again fluctuates. Those are the decisions, or those are the factors that we made the policy decision on this. And again, I don't know what is going to happen in the rest of 2018, but that's our forecast for that.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — I'll deal with the question of the matter of rental rates and, you know, I think some pretty flawed assumptions on this front. Those that we're talking about are accessing the most entry level accommodation across our province. So if you're referencing different averages, I don't think they're going to be reflective of the reality facing many of those clients, many of the people across the province that are working to rent with insufficient dollars to do so. But I'd like to come back to that.

Just the point around a \$5 million reduction, I'd like to get a sense of how many clients, how many people, that represents because we're talking about a benefit that's 200 bucks, thereabouts I think. Maybe you can expand on what that range of, what that benefit is for people. But it seems to me that this is going impact thousands and thousands and thousands of people

who wouldn't be able to enter into this program, or there's people that are in the program right now that are going to be tossed out of the program. I know the minister suggested that folks are going to be grandfathered, but I'd like to hear better numbers around that 5 million.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — It's tough to answer your specific question about the range because it's based on an individual case. It could be the rental housing supplement is based on city, individuals' specific needs, their family needs, any other requirements that they might have. So there's a lot of variables that go into that calculation on the rental housing supplement.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Okay, but I asked for a range. You've got officials, a team of officials here tonight. There's a range of supports, maybe from two bucks through to 230 or . . . I don't know. Your officials will know. I'd like to know what that range of support is monthly.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Okay. In answer to your question, the '16-17 average would have been \$256.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So then taking that average and monthly average, we're talking about \$5 million of a cut over a year, 250 a month on average, so 3,000 bucks a year. How many clients are we talking about here? I don't have my calculator in front of me. I could pull out, open my phone I guess.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Again it's hard to project what's coming forward on a go-forward basis. I guess the easy answer is we're hoping that nobody comes on to our programs, that we have a very low amount of uptake on social services. We always want to plan that we have the proper . . . that we have everything in place for people coming on to social assistance. But I'm not encouraging anybody to do that.

I guess the number that you're looking for, the best would be we're projecting in and around 400 or above a unit, people per month.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — 400. Just what are you describing here again?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — 400 rental housing supplement allocations.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — A reduction of 400.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — There's no reduction. The people that are existing on the program . . . There will be no reduction because these are new clients coming on to the program, so they will not see any reduction. It'll be just a new dollar amount.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Right. So the program is discontinued, July. Is that right? So there'll be no new entrants into the program after that?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Yes. There'll be no new intakes.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Okay. So last year your ministry spent \$51 million for this program with an average cost of \$250 a month. This year you're planning to spend \$5 million less, but you're suggesting that you're not going to be kicking anyone

out of the program that's currently within that program. So speak again to the \$5 million cut this year.

[21:30]

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — There isn't a \$5 million cut.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — From the budget year over year. So last year your budget was \$51 million. That's what was spent in this ministry for this amount. This year it's \$46 million. It's \$5 million less. So can you explain or justify that reduction?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — To answer your question on the math side of things, in March of 2018 there was 13,304 households receiving the Saskatchewan rental housing supplement. We anticipate the utilization will increase to about 15,800 households by July 1st, again a projection. New applicants, as I've said, will no longer be accepted after July 1st. From July 1st to March 31st, we anticipate that we will result in about 400-plus households leaving the program each month.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — From July until March, so you're talking about nine months or so. So nine times 400 each month is what you're . . . Four hundred, so a total of . . . What's your caseload at the end of the year that you're projecting?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Again it's very difficult to project what our caseload is going to be at the end of this year. There's a whole bunch of factors that could be involved in that. But again, we have over 13,000 receiving it right now. We're expecting that to increase before July 1st. And we don't really have an anticipated amount that we're going to be looking at at the year-end. We're assuming that it'll peak at 15,800 and it could go as low as 11,700. But again we don't know.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So that's a lot of people that are utilizing the program that are going to be leaving, exiting the program, and I'm not sure what will be causing that change. But you know, the minister has been clear that folks are going to be grandfathered and that circumstances aren't going to, that they're not going to be reviewed and, you know, sort of a change to policy to have them depart the program.

Are there any other changes to who can utilize that program? Seasonal workers in the North or, you know, parents in joint-custody environments, any sort of circumstances that will affect the eligibility for the program right now?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks again for the question. And I have said to yourself and I've said it in the House and I've said it publicly to the media that there will be no change, as the people that are currently on the program will stay on the program as long as their eligibility remains the same. I'm going to have Elissa Aitken kind of get into some specific details on the changes.

**Ms. Aitken:** — Thank you, Minister. Elissa Aitken, income assistance program and service design. So just speaking specifically to the rental housing supplement eligibility, to be eligible for the rental housing supplement, there's really three components to that. You must pay a rental, a monthly rental amount for your accommodations. You must have children under the age of 18 in the sense of a family housing supplement

or have a recognized disability support in your home. And you must live in a home that meets certain minimum health and safety criteria.

So some examples of the recognized disability-related housing supports would include things like accessibility supports such as ramps or elevators, those kinds of things; location supports such as your home being located close to services and supports that you use on a regular basis; or other physical supports like audio or visual alarms, grab bars, bath lifts, those kinds of things.

People remain eligible for the program if their income briefly exceeds the income threshold, so for not 60 days or more; if clients are unable to report due to circumstances out of their control, so for example if they're in the hospital and they fail to report. If they submit the report a month late, they remain eligible for the program. If they do move, as long as they continue to meet the other eligibility requirements, they remain eligible for the program. And if children . . . if clients have children taken into the care of the ministry temporarily, they remain eligible for the program.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — I appreciate the information here. I just would really push the minister on this one again. This is really short-sighted and lacks a level of common sense and compassion, to eliminate a support before a newly touted program is there to be utilized for the people of the province. And I think, you know, this program should be maintained. The idea of ending eligibility for those that need to enter into this support is just wrong, before there is a federal program in place. I'm interested certainly in what the timelines are on the federal-provincial work on this front, but it shouldn't be scrapped. It shouldn't be ended until there is a better program put in its place.

And to potentially have 4,000 people also fall out of this program through the course of the next year, of course never able to enter back into that program, that makes things difficult. And of course they can exit the program because possibly they take on some additional work and they're doing their best to enter into employment, which then makes them not eligible anymore for this program potentially. And then their ability to ever enter back into that program is negated.

And what we know about so many people that are coming out of assistance, that are entering into employment, is that that can be a challenge at times. And many times they're entering into the most precarious jobs, often the first to be laid off in whatever sort of workplace that they're going into because so often they're entering in kind of at the very starting positions.

So I know we're going to take more time on housing in another estimates period, but I'm concerned by what I'm hearing tonight, more concerned when I'm hearing about the thousands of others. And the suggestion that rental rates are coming down is just not on for the clients that we're talking about here. An average rental rate may . . . there might be a statistic to show that it's come down because of vacancy that's larger than it once was, but the reality for those that are entering at the most entry level, it's simply not coming down in a tangible way.

And if rental rates are coming down, I would expect that

members of the Assembly will be coming forward as well to address the rental allowances that members receive in this Assembly as well to support their accommodations here in Regina. So I guess that's another conversation if, in fact, that's the assertion of the minister.

I'd like to move along to an area that I know the minister has care and passion about but an area that certainly needs more support within our province. And that's support for residential care and services for people with intellectual disabilities. I'm aware of a wait-list, for example, in Regina for residential care that's in excess of 200 people, and a wait that can be many, many years, in some cases over 10 years for someone to enter into that care that they need and that they deserve.

I'd be interested in hearing what the minister has for wait times across the province . . . Or not wait times, sorry, wait-lists across the province. So what's the Regina number? What's the Saskatoon number? What are we province wide for those that are living with intellectual disabilities that are in need of and on wait-lists for residential care?

[21:45]

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thanks for the question and you certainly are correct, this is near and dear to my heart. There is no wait-list. I've been informed that there is no wait-list. We have an emerging needs list which is where we track a child from the age of zero. If they're in our child and family services program or with other community-based organizations and stakeholders, we track that child up until the age of 18. So when they do hit that age, we are prepared for them. We're ready for them to be able to transition into whatever their specific needs are. But we don't have a wait-list that you spoke of and if you have heard anything or you do have a list that you have, I would appreciate it if you could table it with me and then I could have my officials look at it.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — So just to clarify, of course there's different organizations that do very important work on this front. In Regina, Chip and Dale housing plays a very important role, you know, ensuring high quality of life for residents — for “family,” I think is the language they'd use. And right now I know they would have a wait-list of over 200 people in Regina alone. So I guess my question is, it's that wait-list directly and what sort of wait-lists are we dealing with in other communities across the province?

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Again — and I appreciate what you're saying in regards to one organization in Regina — they're part of, from what I've been told, the residential services co-management committee, which is maintaining and tracking the children that I specifically talked about. This is not a wait-list for them to enter in the facility. They are tracking these children as they are coming from the age of zero up to . . . So we are continuously assessing their needs.

Now when somebody does get assessed, the ministry's job is to do an overall assessment of those needs and prioritize which ones are coming into our homes, and which ones are coming into our services, and which ones can wait. We constantly are prioritizing the individuals.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Okay, so I would ask for more clarity and I know we're short on time here tonight. I do have a lot of other questions in other areas as well. But this is just one organization that has a wait-list of over 200 people living with disabilities here in Regina alone. And so these are people that are adults within the community who are needing care, and that's just in Regina. So I'd be interested in getting some clarity on what other organizations, what other wait-lists exist. I see officials in the back shaking their head, no, I think.

But you know, in the case of Chip and Dale housing, you know, I just met with that organization as I meet with organizations across the province, and they were very clear about the 200-person wait-list. If I've erred in my understanding, that's certainly something I'll accept. But this is an area that I'd like a little more clarity.

And so maybe we can follow up. I guess if your ministry can take a look, I can follow up certainly with some stakeholders on this front, but it's my understanding that that's the wait-list for that organization in Regina alone and that there's wait-lists not dissimilar in communities across the province.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — So just for clarification, are you telling me that if there's a five-year-old with an intellectual disability, you're considering them to be on a wait-list right now?

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Adults may be my understanding in this case.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — I can confirm for the committee that there is no wait-list. And I will endeavour to meet with Chip and Dale and have a conversation with them about what they are communicating to yourself or to the general public on what they are considering is a list that they have. Because I'm being told there is no wait-list.

If we want, we can go backwards and talk about a 440 wait-list really quickly, and talk about the intellectual disabilities and the people that were languishing on that list for a very long time. We can talk about the shutdown of the intake at Valley View in 2002 which left a lot of people with intellectual disabilities languishing again with no place to go. My preference is not to go there.

I will clarify with Chip and Dale, specifically with them and endeavour to have a meeting with them within the next couple of weeks so we can clarify exactly what they're talking about.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Yes. Fair enough. And you can cool your jets a bit as well because I'm not entering in this in an inflammatory way at all. What I'm sharing with you is a concern from a valued stakeholder within our community. So let's get clarity on that front, Mr. Minister, and let's endeavour to do that together so that if my understanding is incorrect, that that's clarified for me. If in fact that wait-list exists and other organizations have those wait-lists as well, then let's deal with that circumstance as well.

I'd like to shift gears just a little bit. We see certainly more and more children going into care of government. This is a concern. We did have some comments about this at the front end of our

discussions around the TRC. But you know, we continue to hear incredible challenges for foster parents that are out there doing very, very important work with what would be insufficient supports for that important work. Of course we also recognize that there's insufficient supports for families working to stay together and around family supports and mental health supports and addiction supports. And we also see a massive growth, I believe, in emergency receiving-home utilization.

So I'd be interested in hearing and also receiving statistics with updated numbers on children in care, children in foster care, children in emergency receiving homes. And I'd be interested in the minister's comments just around a commitment to improve supports for those in foster care, but then also to speak to some of the drivers that he recognizes that are the force behind the growth in the emergency receiving-home utilization.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thank you for the question. And again I just want to put on the record, it's always the last resort when the ministry takes a child into care. But we do have approximately 3,200 children that are in care of the ministry right now and in the minister's care, and an additional 2,000 children that are with a PSI, a person of sufficient interest.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — This is an area that certainly I think merits a lot more time through committee. I'm disappointed that we're running tight on time here tonight, but I thank all those that are working in these areas.

I am concerned with the growth in the emergency receiving homes. Of course we need to do all we can as well to provide those supports to people and families, the mental health and addictions supports and family supports that are needed. And in the foster care environment, it just seems that the supports that are in place are woefully inadequate to support the incredible care and love that is provided by so many throughout the province.

Shifting gears just a little bit, I'm interested in hearing what the ministry is hearing or what stakeholders of the ministry are hearing by way of the impacts of the elimination of STC [Saskatchewan Transportation Company], the public transportation system for the province, particularly as it relates to people living with disabilities and also people living with, you know, on the margins in poverty with low and insufficient incomes.

[22:00]

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thank you for the question. So I've been told the wind down of STC has had no impact on our child and family services, our income assistance, or our CLSD [community living service delivery] clients.

**The Chair:** — Okay, we are now after 10 o'clock which was the agreed-to time of adjournment — three hours. And so I would allow Mr. Wotherspoon to give his closing thank yous and the minister as well.

**Mr. Wotherspoon:** — Well thanks. I know we'll be gathering again as a committee, so I look forward to that. There's lots of other areas to canvass. Thank you to the minister for being here tonight. Most importantly, thank you to all the officials that



took the time to be with us here this evening. And again, thank you to all those that work throughout the ministry and in partner organizations and agencies all across the province. Thanks for your work.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Minister.

**Hon. Mr. Merriman:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank my officials. Thank you very much for coming in and providing all the information to the committee. We will endeavour to get the information back to the committee that we said we would. I'd like to thank all of the committee for coming out this evening and listening to the Social Services, especially a couple of specific people. But I really do want to thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank Mr. Wotherspoon for the questions and again thank my officials. And that's all I have, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** — Okay. Thank you very much. Just to remind the ministry that we would request eight copies of every item that you're submitting. If one of the members would now make a motion of adjournment. Mr. Steinley. All in favour?

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

**The Chair:** — Carried. This committee now stands adjourned to the call of the Chair. I believe it's Monday night next week at 7 o'clock.

[The committee adjourned at 22:04.]