



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 54 — May 6, 2019



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-Eighth Legislature

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 15:00.]

The Chair: — I'd like to welcome everyone today to the meeting of the Human Services Committee for May 6th, 2019. My name is Dan D'Autremont. I am the Chair of the Human Services Committee and the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for Cannington. With us today we have MLA Muhammad Fiaz, MLA Todd Goudy, MLA Warren Steinley, the Hon. Nadine Wilson. And substituting for MLA Danielle Chartier is MLA Nicole Rancourt.

**General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvote (SS01)

The Chair: — Today we will be considering the estimates for the Ministry of Social Services, and later on tonight we will consider Bill No. 145, *The Residential Services Act, 2018*. We will begin with vote 36, Social Services, subvote (SS01), central management and services. Minister Merriman is here with his officials. I would ask that officials please introduce themselves before speaking into the microphone. Minister, please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and committee members. I am pleased to be here today to talk about the Social Services budget initiatives of 2019-2020. I'll begin by introducing my officials. I have Tammy Kirkland, my deputy minister; Natasha, if she's here, way in the back. Also from our child and family services program, I have Natalie Huber, Tobie Eberhardt, Joel Kilbride, and Janice Colquhoun. From the disability programs, I have Raynelle Wilson, Bob Martinook, and Shelley Reddekopp. From finance, I have Lynn Allan and Ray Arcscott. From housing, I have Raynelle Wilson and Tim Gross. And from income assistance, I have Tracey Smith, Doris Morrow, and Jeff Redekop.

On budget day, our government announced an increase of \$55.5 million or 4.7 per cent to Social Services' budget. The ministry's budget for this fiscal year is \$1.23 billion, the largest ever.

Today people are dealing with complex, unprecedented issues and inter-generational issues such as abuse, crime, gang activity, domestic violence, mental health challenges, and substance abuse. They include children, youth and families, people with low income, those with disabilities, seniors, and citizens in housing need. Our government is committed to supporting these vulnerable citizens and working with them to achieve a better quality of life. That's what our 2019 budget will help us do.

I'd like to take the next several minutes to talk about some of the highlights of this year's budget by ministry division, beginning with child and family programs. As I said earlier, children and youth and families face many challenges in today's society, and that's a direct impact on the ministry's program and budget.

From talking to other colleagues in Corrections and Policing, and Health, we know that rates of domestic violence are a shared concern. The prevalence of drug abuse, specifically methamphetamines, is a growing concern. Drug abuse is now the

most common reason for children coming into care.

Many children stay in care longer due to the complexity of their issues that their families are facing, resulting in increased costs for a greater need for access to service. That's why in our 2019-20 budget, funding for supports at at-risk children and families increased by \$29.9 million or 11 per cent. The majority of this funding will enhance the range of services we provide to help keep children safe. The ministry is investing time, effort, and dollars into programming and services that help keep children safely at home with their families instead of coming into care.

Community-based partners such as 601 Outreach in Saskatoon, Foxvalley in Regina, the Society for the Involvement of Good Neighbors in Yorkton, and the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] Kindred Spirit in Prince Albert provide intensive services to parents right in their family home.

This year we'll expand the supportive family living program through a new investment of \$1.2 million, and we'll be looking for Indigenous providers to partner with this. Through this program, at-risk families are provided with housing as well as 24-7 supports to strengthen parents' caregiving skills and keep families safely together.

Unfortunately, in some circumstances there still are children who are unable to stay safely with their parents and need to come into care. Whenever possible, we look at other family members who are able to provide care to keep children connected to their families, community, and culture. Saskatchewan is recognized nationally for efforts to keep children with their extended family. In fact, close to 60 per cent of the children in home care are living with family members; however we need a wide variety of services in order to respond to the different needs of children and families around the province.

On budget day, we announced a new monthly payment structure to recognize foster families who complete specific training sessions. This will give us a large pool of caregivers with specialized training in critical areas such as trauma and FASD [fetal alcohol spectrum disorder]. We are continuing to work with the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association to recruit new foster families and enhance support for existing caregivers. Thanks to the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association's Foster New Beginnings campaign that launched in 2016, 167 new foster homes are available to care for children who aren't able to stay with family members.

Despite the success of this campaign, Saskatchewan, like other jurisdictions across North America, continues to see an overall decline in the number of foster families. That's why we are continuing to invest in a wide range of care options to ensure children coming into care have access to immediate, safe, and appropriate placements.

Some children and youth require specialized treatment to address cognitive disabilities and challenging behaviours. We are increasing our budget for private treatment for these high-needs children and youth by \$4.1 million this year.

Child and family programs partners with more than a hundred

community agencies that deliver programs and services to children and their families on our behalf. To help community-based agencies recruit and retain qualified staff, we have increased salary funding to these agencies by \$889,000 this year, for a total increase of nearly \$20 million since we've had the privilege of forming government.

On this very important issue of better supporting Indigenous children and families, we continue to work closely with the 18 First Nation Child and Family Services agencies throughout our province. We invest \$45 million annually with the agencies and other Indigenous partners to deliver supports and services to vulnerable children and families, both on- and off-reserve.

Through the Family Finders program, agencies identify Indigenous families who can care for their children off-reserve. We work with some agencies to deliver positive parenting programs, or Triple-P, to strengthen partnering and caregiver skills and to keep families together.

We are partnering with the Prince Albert Grand Council on a new initiative to recruit, train, and support Indigenous foster families. In March, I was very proud to stand with Tribal Chief Mark Arcand and the seven supporting First Nations of the Saskatoon Tribal Council as we announced a new Delegation Agreement, child and families reconciliation partner agreement, and the first contact protocol. Our government and our First Nation and Métis partners remain strongly committed to better serving Saskatchewan's Indigenous children, youth, and families.

Supporting Saskatchewan residents with disabilities continues to be a key priority for our government. This reflects in our disability programs' budget for '19-20, which has increased by \$11.1 million over the last year. This increase will allow youth with intellectual disabilities who are transitioning from child and family programs' caseload to adult disability services. It will provide access to residential and day programming to adults with disabilities who urgently require services.

New funding of \$500,000 will support the development of a provincial comprehensive respite response. This initiative will increase the respite options for family members and others who care for people with intellectual disabilities, one of the priorities identified in our disability strategy.

Following through on our government's commitment, the budget for the autism spectrum disorder individualized funding program has increased this year. Now in its second year, this program offers \$6,000 annually, up from \$4,000 last year, so parents and caregivers of children under six with autism spectrum disorder can get the services their child needs.

This year the last remaining residents will leave Valley View Centre for their new community-based organization. The 133 transitions that have already taken place have been extremely successful, thanks to the person-centred planning process that involved residents, their families, and communities from start to finish. The Canadian Association for Community Living has recognized the province for our thoughtfulness, planned, and unique-to-Saskatchewan approach to transition residents from Valley View communities to around the province and beyond.

Social Services' '19-20 budget also includes an increase for third

party agencies that support people with intellectual disabilities, including approved private service homes. It also includes funding for training for people in community organizations who deliver service to people with intellectual disabilities on behalf of our province.

Funding for the housing division has increased slightly in the '19-20 budget to support our work on our national housing strategy. In April Saskatchewan officially signed a bilateral agreement with the federal government that will bring nearly \$450 million to our province over the next 10 years. Our priorities are to ensure that this agreement reflects Saskatchewan's unique housing priorities, that it supports vulnerable populations, and it preserves our existing housing stock for future generations.

Lastly I'd like to talk about the ministry's income assistance program division budget for '19-20 and some of the significant initiatives we'll be launching this year. Overall the ministry budget for income assistance has increased by \$10 million over last year. This includes an increase of \$6.3 million for the Saskatchewan assured income for disability program, or SAID program. On budget day we announced a significant increase in the SAID income exemptions, so beneficiaries who are able to work could keep more of what they earn. Currently exemptions are calculated monthly. Beginning in the summer of 2019, maximum earned income exemptions will be annualized with an increase from \$3,900 to \$6,000 for individuals, \$5,100 to \$7,200 for couples, and from \$2,400 to \$8,500 for families.

Enhancing the SAID program is one of the ways our government is working to make Saskatchewan the best place in Canada for people with disabilities to live. The ministry's '19-20 income assistance budget also include funding for the seniors' income plan, personal home care benefit, Saskatchewan assistance program, transitional employment allowance, Saskatchewan employment supplement, child care subsidy, and Saskatchewan rental housing supplement. Rental housing supplement is still maintaining a current caseload of nearly 13,000 clients.

Also on budget day, we announced that we will launch a new income assistance program this summer called the Saskatchewan income support, or SIS program. The ministry has been reviewing its income assistance programs. We launched the review because the status quo is not an option. Since 2007-08, government funding for income assistance programs has increased by \$275 million, or 89 per cent. I want to stress that these numbers include several rate benefit increases, including tripling the seniors' income program benefits, introducing the SAID program, increasing the SAID rate four times, increasing shelter rates multiple times, and introducing the seniors' personal care home benefit.

However, the increase in income assistance costs also reflects the increase in the number of households receiving support. Since 2007 and '08, our number of households receiving income assistance has increased by 10,000 or 37 per cent, from 27,000 in 2008 to 37,000 households today. If we don't do anything different, both costs and caseloads will continue to grow to an unsustainable level. Income assistance is meant to be the last resort for people who are unable to meet their basic needs and is meant to provide temporary support until people are able to regain their self-sufficiency.

Too many of our clients aren't making the transition back to independence, and they're not achieving the outcomes that they want. Sadly, there are families in Saskatchewan who have been involved with income assistance for more than one generation. We must do better for the people of Saskatchewan. The Saskatchewan income support program will focus on helping people overcome their barriers and move to employment and independence to the best of their abilities as soon as possible. It will include increased monthly earning income exemptions so people can keep more of what they are earning in their employment. The exemption will be similar to the current structure that was discussed during meetings of the stakeholders that were held following the commitment made in the fall of 2018 Throne Speech.

[15:15]

Because SIS will be simpler than our current programs, our workers will have the time that they need to work closely with their clients and to help them make positive change and move to employment or participation in their communities to the best of their ability. People will be our focus, not paperwork.

Our workers will be using a new approach to working with their clients called motivational interviewing. This approach encourages clients to make positive changes in their life, including developing their own educational and employment goals. The feedback we've heard on motivational interviewing from both workers and clients is very encouraging. For example, one worker said that motivational interviewing is going to be an important tool to help clients build a better future. One client told his worker that he feels like a new person and has a new sense of accomplishment. Another worker commented that in motivational interview training, that they have chosen to sit beside their clients rather than across from the desk when possible. I think this shows a level of partnership with our clients and a plan to make positive changes in their lives.

As we announce last year's budget, we have also been working on a new IT [information technology] system that will support this program. The system that currently supports the ministry income assistance program is outdated and inflexible and requires a lot of manual effort by our workers. That time could be better spent working with our clients directly. The new system will support additions to the change with our programs, improve financial controls, and interface with other partners such as the Ministry of Health. Most importantly, it will allow us to offer client-friendly options such as online application. People will be able to apply for income assistance from anywhere at any time at their convenience. They'll only have to fill out the application form once rather than having tell their story multiple times.

For the past several months, we've been meeting with other human services ministries to tell them about this program. We have also talked to them about how their programs and services will complement the new program and our new service delivery approach. We are currently working with front-line staff to finalize the details of the SIS program and that will ensure trained on the new IT system and the new SIS program.

We will also be talking to members of the new income assistance advisory group about the new program. We are currently reviewing the applications we have received from those

interested in being part of the group, and I hope to announce this membership shortly. Having a group of citizens and stakeholders provide feedback and guidance to us on income assistance programs, including the launch of SIS program, will be invaluable.

Before we launch the SIS program this summer, I will be holding a news conference to discuss the details of the program. Clients receiving benefits through our current program will not be immediately affected by the introduction of SIS. Our focus this year will be on launching the new program and enrolling new clients. We also want to work closely to monitor the supports and services we're providing to ensure clients are achieving successful outcomes.

I began my remarks by talking about our government's continued investment in the Ministry of Social Services, an investment that enables us to continue to respond to the needs of Saskatchewan people. We will make no apologies for investing in programs and services to help our province's most vulnerable.

At this time we are continuously looking at ways that we can improve our programs and services, be more effective and efficient, and make the best use of public funds. Over the last several years, the ministry has made changes to many of its policies and programs in an effort to control cost while still giving people the support they need. With the \$1.24 million investment towards expanding the supportive family living program, we will be better positioned to offer families a safe and supportive alternative to maintain their children safely at home and avoiding placement in care.

Once the new Saskatchewan income support program is fully implemented, we will expect it'll save the province money in the long term by reducing the number of people who rely on income assistance as . . . were counting on income assistance in the time that they are on our caseload. But most importantly we will be seeing the success of our clients.

In closing, I want to thank my officials for their diligence preparing the budget that respects both the financial capacity of the province and the needs of our clients. I also want to thank everybody in the ministry for the hard work they do every single day to help improve the lives of thousands of Saskatchewan people. You won't see it in the news stories, however reuniting families, providing housing for people that are considered hard to house, helping those with intellectual disabilities be included in their communities, supporting people with low income until they become self-sufficient again — these are the true measures of our success. I am confident that the social services 2019 budget will allow us to continue to deliver programs and services that make a real and lasting difference for those we serve.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the committee members. And I'd be happy to answer any questions.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. We will now proceed with vote 36, Social Services, subvote (SS01), central management and services. Are there any questions? I recognize Ms. Rancourt.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. First of all I want to thank all the officials for being here today. I know it's a challenge to schedule

something like this, and it's going to be a long day of having all the estimates scheduled in one day. So hopefully we can manage through this, and I appreciate you being here because it's so important to be able to get some of the answers with regards to the different levels of ministry.

I know Social Services is very complex, and I appreciate all the work that you guys do. And we have the utmost respect for especially all the front-line workers who are working in our agencies and working with oftentimes the most vulnerable people in our province. So this is a challenging ministry to work under, but it's a very important ministry, and so I'm happy to be back in this chair. I have an interest with regards to Social Services because of my professional background. And so I hope you realize that sometimes I'll be asking some really difficult questions, but it's important to have that lens and be able to come up with some ideas together. So I'll be asking many questions, and so bear with me, please.

So can you break down the full-time equivalents for each department? And has there been any department that has seen any changes with the number of staffing?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for the question. Our overall FTEs [full-time equivalent] have gone up by 7 to 1,852.5 projected in 2019 from 1,845.5 that was in 2018-19 budget.

Ms. Rancourt: — Do you happen to have a breakdown on the departments for those full-time equivalents?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The changes in each area, I'll just go through them. With our central management and services is up 17.3. Our income assistant services, our base FTE adjustment is up by 20.3. Income assistance redesign, temporary staff, service delivery positions is 7. And to address historical FTE pressures is up 16. Child and family services, our base FTE adjustment is up 51.1. And within child and family services as well, to address ongoing FTE pressures and workload, 25.7 increase. Our base FTE adjustment for client support is up 9.9. Housing, our base FTE adjustment is down by 9.2. Our disability program and services, our base FTE adjustment is up by 29.4. And under disability programs and services, decrease in utilization by Valley View Centre is down by 41.7.

Ms. Rancourt: — And are there any staff being seconded to Executive Council?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Not to my knowledge. No.

Ms. Rancourt: — And how many of the full-time equivalents that are projected for 2019-20 in management?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We'll endeavour to get that, but what I can say is that within the deputy minister's office, there's 17 positions, and our central services '18-19 budget subvote, there was 132.2 positions. But I'll get you the exact number.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. Has there been any efficiency initiatives taking place such as a hiring freeze or vacancy management or any out-of-province travel limitations?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There's always travel and there's process improvements, the efficiencies each department is

continuously . . . myself and the deputy minister have always asked each department to maintain the efficiencies within each area. As far as travel, we have done some minor travelling to attend conferences for best practices. That's where we were able to get our information on motivational interviewing, was by attending one of these conferences. That is pointing out to be extremely valuable for us.

Ms. Rancourt: — So was there any other efficiency initiatives that took place, especially with regarding a hiring freeze or any vacancy management?

[15:30]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We're continuously evaluating all positions to make sure that they're relevant and they're up to our needs because, as you're well aware, our clients are continuously, their needs are continuously evolving, so we want to make sure that our staff is up to speed on exactly what their needs are. But there has been no hiring freeze or anything like that in Social Services. What we have been doing is being able to move, as I just listed before, some of the positions that were currently or were historically at Valley View into areas where we see the most need.

Ms. Rancourt: — Is there any work that was formerly done internally that's been outsourced to private contractors in the past year?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The only one that is coming to mind is Valley View where we did have that internally within the Government of Saskatchewan and now we are having community-based organizations across the province — some within Moose Jaw back where Valley View is, and across the province — performing those services. So I wouldn't say that it is outsourcing. We've just adapted what our clients' needs are and trying to meet their needs on a local level.

Ms. Rancourt: — So has there been any additional funding within this budget that's been put aside for those increased contracts?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. Within the disability program and services subvote, we have had an increase of \$11.1 million, the increase of 6.1 to support youth transitioning into the adult disability program. We have pressures coming from various areas so we're able to reallocate the funds to be able to meet those needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — So in the auditor's report, she indicated that the ministry does not have "an effective process to identify and disclose contractual obligations . . ." and recommended that the ministry "implement a process to appropriately identify and disclose contractual obligations" in its financial reports. So what has been done by the ministry to improve this process?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — First of all, I just want to thank the auditor for the report that was provided to us. What I've been told is we're documenting the process. We've instructed the staff to follow the process from the auditor. We're following up with them and we're monitoring the success of that, and we're also coordinating with other ministries to make sure this process is followed.

In saying that, we have the largest contract with community-based organizations out of all of government. We have various community-based organizations performing various services on behalf of the people of Saskatchewan, so it's quite a larger process for us to be able to go through. But we are working with the auditor on this.

Ms. Rancourt: — Has there been some specific changes that the ministry has done that the auditor has recommended, that has already been put into place?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks again for the question. As I said before, we've documented the process. We're working with our staff to make sure that they're following that. As far as specific, we have policy within place to be able to make sure that this is followed through and adhered to by our staff. We've also discussed with Finance to make sure that it is meeting their needs, and continuing to monitor the process.

Ms. Rancourt: — Also another concern that was brought forward by the auditor was the fact that the ministry does not receive or review all the required reports from CBOs [community-based organization] in a timely manner. So how is this being addressed by the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess going back to my point earlier, is just the sheer volume of this. We want to work with our community-based organizations to make sure that they're providing all of the timely audited processes that they have to go through. We understand that there's an expense that they have to go through and the sheer volume of getting all of these in on a timely manner. We continue to work with our community-based organizations to make sure that they are following that process, that it can come in in a timely manner. And then we do our analysis on that to make sure that it's meeting our needs.

But again, we have some large community-based organizations but we also have some smaller ones. So we want to be able to try to get them to get it in in a timely manner, and we continue to work with them on that.

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes, it seems to be a very important process that needs to be done to ensure that the CBOs are receiving the funding that they need. And so has there been additional staff hired to manage this, if this is becoming a more cumbersome task for the ministry? Or what is the plan going forward so that you can meet the goals and objectives that the auditor believes that the ministry can?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess the general answer on that is, again we want to continue to work with our community-based organizations to make sure that they're successful and they're meeting our needs, and that they're meeting the policies and procedures that we have in place.

But in saying that, again, some of them are very large community-based organizations that have access to auditors and that process, and some of them are smaller. So we want to make sure that the financial reporting that they do have to do isn't cumbersome and extremely time consuming for them, so we want to be able to assist that.

In saying that, we also recognize that the auditor has flagged this

and that we'll continue to work with some of the community-based organizations to make sure that they're meeting our needs on an ongoing basis.

Ms. Rancourt: — Is this more so a responsibility on the community-based organizations with submitting their information to the ministry, or is this some of the ministry's responsibility of ensuring that the reports are done in a timely fashion?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think it would be a shared responsibility on both our behalves. We have the fiduciary responsibility to the province and certainly to answer to that, to you and to other organizations. In saying that, it is a partnership that we have with these community-based organizations. They are performing a great service on our behalf, so it's not one or the other. It's both of us working together to make sure that they can meet our needs, but also perform the services and not pull away from their front lines.

Ms. Rancourt: — And it's also important to have that level of accountability as well. So it's an important procedure that's going to need to be addressed.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the motivational interviewing. How many staff are currently trained for motivational interviewing?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As far as staff on the introductory training, we've had all 245 staff have completed that training. As far as our advanced training, we have 180 people that have completed that training.

Ms. Rancourt: — And with regards to these staff members, are they all working under the income support programs, or are they working in different areas of the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It would be mainly in the income assistance side of Social Services.

Ms. Rancourt: — And when did this training start?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It started within the ministry in February, early of 2018.

Ms. Rancourt: — Have you seen any results to the new interviewing process at this point?

[15:45]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, we absolutely have. As I touched on in my opening remarks, feedback we've heard on motivational interviewing from both workers and clients is very encouraging. Example, one worker said that motivational interviewing is going to be an important tool to help clients build a better future. And a couple other comments was one client told his worker that he feels like a person and has a sense of accomplishment.

Another worker commented on, after the motivational interview training, that they chose to sit beside the client rather than across from the desk when possible. And this shows a level of partnership in working with their clients to improve their life.

Ms. Rancourt: — Are the staff encouraged to use the motivational interviewing for all clients who are applying for income support? Or is it just in certain programs?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess the easy answer is motivational interviewing is an umbrella to lots of different tools. There are some clients that are, upon intake, that we do a very good motivational interviewing process and sitting down and talk to them. And if need be, there are other tools within the motivational interviewing tool box, so to speak, that we can dig a little deeper and get some more information. So it's not a one-size-fits-all. We're able to customize that motivational interviewing to the client's needs. And we don't really know that until we actually have that sit-down conversation as to what their needs are to be able to see where we need to go within the motivational interviewing process.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. So I'm going to go back to the minister's remarks, and you made some reference to the IT system that the ministry is using and how there's going to be some changes with regards to that. I was wondering if you were making reference to the Linkin system or if it was a different system.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — No, that's not in reference to the Linkin system. This is a new system.

Ms. Rancourt: — And what does this outdated system that you were talking about, what does it currently manage and what areas is it used in?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It's used within our income assistance. It's part of our processing of everything from the intake of clients, the documenting of their file, to the process where the client gets their cheque at the end. So it's an all . . . And it's a very dated system, and we've built system on top of system. And we felt in order to make sure that our clients, the security of getting them their cheque in a prompt, timely manner, that we had to invest in some IT system because there were concerns that the dated system could pose problems in the near future.

Ms. Rancourt: — And so what IT companies are you using to create this new system, and what are the system names?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The company that was awarded the contract was Meyers Norris Penny, and the program name is Microsoft Dynamics 365.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how much is the cost for the contract and the program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for the question. This is a multi-year contract that we have with Meyers Norris Penny. So we can't disclose that, but it will be available in public accounts once the contract is come to its fruition. But we did budget \$10.9 million this year.

Ms. Rancourt: — And in your remarks, you indicated that the system will be working with the Ministry of Health as well. Would there be a sharing of client information, or what would be the relationship with the Ministry of Health with regards to this new program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — No, there was no shared cost with Health. The communication that goes back and forth with Health would be notifying them of who would be eligible for supplementary health benefits.

Ms. Rancourt: — So the information that would be shared with Health? Or what kind of client information would be shared between the two agencies?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — They wouldn't communicate directly. It would be more of advising, as I said, who would be eligible for supplementary health benefits. We have to advise Health as to their eligibility for those programs to make sure that Health has that information, which opens our clients up to potential cost savings on any of their health costs.

Ms. Rancourt: — And how do you currently provide that information? What's the process at this point?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We do do it now. Obviously we have to advise Health of any of our clients that are eligible for supplementary health benefits. This would just do it in a more efficient way, to be able to provide that information to Health in a more timely manner.

Ms. Rancourt: — Going back to the auditor's report, she indicated that updating the Linkin system to protect it from known security vulnerabilities, that that was being problematic and that it's not up to date. So what is being done to correct this?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The auditor's recommendation was to provide a plan on the process on a go-forward basis, and I can report that the upgrade is currently happening right now. So the auditor did do a recommendation just to be able to provide a plan. We have that plan in place and the upgrade is taking place.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. So I'm going to go back to more HR [human resources] stuff. So how many positions are currently vacant from region to region?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We don't currently track. As I'm sure you're well aware, as a former social worker, that there was positions that come vacant, and we continuously work with the local management to be able to fill those positions as soon as possible to make sure that there are no gaps in services. People are moving within Social Services, either geographically or within Social Services, there is an advancement of position. We are continually working with post-secondary to make sure that we're recruiting social workers and that they're able to meet our criteria of our ever-evolving clients. And with, you know, 1,800-plus positions within Social Services, there are continuing vacancies, and we don't have an accurate number of exactly how many there are at this point in time. But I can say that any vacancy, other than the ones that I listed earlier of the plus and minus of positions within each, we strive to fill those as soon as possible.

Ms. Rancourt: — So at previous estimates I've gotten numbers with regards to vacancies. I think they were primarily related to the child and family services portfolio, so potentially you might have those numbers of the vacancies per region, with regards to child and family services.

[16:00]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again as I said, there's always within any organization or government agency, there is a lot of movement. We have maternity leave, paternity leave, vacation. There is always a backfill for somebody that if there is a sudden illness or something that is planned, we make sure that our human resource strategy includes all aspects of what is coming.

Again, it's a floating number. As of February we had 34 staffing actions, which means that they're in various positions of either moving into another position. It could be a vacation. It could be, like I said, a maternity or a paternity leave. So we do have that number that is floating. But again we make sure that all positions are backfilled, part of our human resource strategy, as well as on our succession plan as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — So it can get quite costly to backfill these positions. So how much money is being spent on travel expenses for individuals backfilling these vacant positions?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I'm sure you can understand, there are some travel costs that are incurred as we are a geographically spread-out province, especially up in the North. And there are some areas that we would consider, where we have to infill some staff in there to make sure that we are meeting the current clients' needs. And if there was something that occurs within that area, we want to be able to relocate staff into that for a temporary period of time to make sure that we're meeting the needs. And it's mostly again within child and family services.

But I can report that — now this is just general travel up in the North — from October of 2016 to October of 2018, the total travel cost for employees was just over 290,000 for child and family services.

Ms. Rancourt: — We know there's been a challenge to have proper staffing, specifically in the northern area of the province, and there's been chronic understaffing and a difficulty of recruiting individuals to some positions. So what has the ministry been doing to help with that issue, with ensuring that we have appropriate staff in the northern part of the province?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll just go over a few points here. Our provincial staffing model has been adopted for all child and family protection hiring to ensure that staff have been recruited consistently. First Nations University, for a more specific answer, First Nations University of Canada and the University of Regina have been regularly engaged to strengthen attraction of their students and their summer employment practicum placements as well as the recruitment of new graduates for entry-level positions.

Child and family protection recruitment consultants and worker panels have been initiated to attend social work classes and discuss the benefits. We have 44 practicum students that completed in 2018 within child and family protection, resulting in most students accepting work within child and family protection following their final practicum. The Ministry of Social Services, community living, and PSC [Public Service Commission] talent acquisition has started a collaborative group to new recruitment strategy for the ministry to promote to the community, universities, high schools across the province.

So as you can see, we're taking this on multi-levels to be able to make sure that what is happening in the North, that we're able to meet those needs. Again we're trying to recruit within the communities if possible to make sure that there's a connection to culture and certainly to community. But we're looking at it at all levels to make sure. Recruitment in the North is a challenge for all ministries and all organizations. But as I just touched on, we're trying to deal with this not just on an immediate, but more on a long-term strategy.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. The auditor had some concerns with the rate of absenteeism within the ministry. In 2018 what was the average sick leave usage per full-time employee?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry. Just to clarify for us, for all of Social Services, or within child and family?

Ms. Rancourt: — It would be across all Social Services.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just under 10 days a year.

Ms. Rancourt: — So as the auditor indicated, it's challenging when you have a high level of absenteeism, especially in a ministry like Social Services because you're delivering services to the most vulnerable. And with regards to sick time, short-term sick time, you're not replacing those individuals so it puts a lot more pressure within other staff in those agencies. So what is being done to address the high rates?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Certainly I do recognize that there's lots of pressures on our front-line workers, and I have the utmost respect for the work that they are doing out in the field and in our office. We're continually monitoring to make sure if there is anything that we can do as a ministry to be able to support them in a very challenging job. We continue to work with them if they are absent for a short or extended period of time, trying to work with them to make sure that their health and their well-being is much of a priority for this ministry, to make sure that they are able to go out and perform their duties in an effective way.

But we're always striving to have that work-life balance, which is challenging within Social Services, but it's also challenging within any profession to have that balance. We're continuing to work with them to make sure that they're in the best mental and physical shape to be able to help out our clients. Because if our staff is not healthy, it presents a challenge for the clients. For them to be able to perform their duties, I know they want to do in the best way possible.

Ms. Rancourt: — Has there been a lot of overtime or banked time because staff are working extra hours in order to manage the caseloads?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just to kind of give a general answer, depending on what our caseload is, and there is a lot . . . overtime is certainly required. As again you're aware, a social worker in Social Services is not an 8 to 5. A lot of the time there is some type of issue or crisis that has to be dealt with after hours, and you have to have that specialized training to be able to go in and deal with that, and you have the call-outs. So overtime is a reality, but we make sure that that is countered with programs, again with that work-life balance.

[16:15]

But we also have piloted a program within our community living which is called Not Myself Today, which is a support program for staff to be able for them to talk in a comfortable space, to be able to talk about what's going on between their work-life balance to make sure again we're taking care of them. And we're working on rolling this out to the rest of Social Services to be able to . . . As it has been successful, we want to roll it out to other areas of Social Services for them to be able to, if there are some concerns on either a mental health issue or some physical safety issues, which is also reality, the overtime, any of the banked time, we want to make sure that we're trying to meet our staff needs which allows them the ability to meet our clients' needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — That sounds like a really interesting program. So with regards to that program, who would the staff person talk to, to talk about the issues that they are facing? Would it be an assistance program, a family assistance program, or would it be other staff members? Would it be a supervisor? Who is managing the support within that program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess an overarching statement was, I guess it's everybody's responsibility to make sure that they're watching out for their co-worker, if there is any signs of stress or trauma, or if there's anything that they could be able to offer their access to the employee family assistance program as well as other programs that will be doing that. We don't do counselling internally within Social Services for staff. We allow them the privacy and the dignity to be able to go through the employee family assistance program to make sure that they're meeting their needs. And while that process is ongoing, we make sure that we backfill with the complement of staff to backfill any of the time that they may needed away from the office.

Ms. Rancourt: — So what is the current workplace injury rate?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll just give you an update on the overtime — we do have a more accurate number — while we're trying to find any of the workplace injury numbers.

The non-FTE placements or people is 1,799.4. Out of that we have 22.9 positions on an annual basis that are overtime, so it comes down to about 1.2 per cent of the total FTEs is considered overtime. And we'll get the information on the workplace injuries.

Overall we want to make sure that all of our employees . . . We're going to endeavour to get you the number of any of that. Any workplace injuries obviously, as we've stated many times — and I think we're consistent on both sides of the House — that is unacceptable, and we want to make sure that all of our staff are safe. In saying that also, our staff are going into some very challenging situations where we might need assistance from either local police or some type of safety and security to make sure that our staff is protected while we're trying to go in and perform the services that we are.

We'll get you the number on that, but again we want to make sure that our staff . . . If there's any workplace injuries that are caused by going into a specific location, we want to make sure that that number is as low as possible on an ongoing basis. But as you're

aware, there are some challenging situations that our staff are going into, and we want to make sure that they're safe.

Ms. Rancourt: — When you calculate what your ministry's workplace injury rate is — because my understanding, every ministry does that — within that calculation, are trauma-related injuries also included in that number?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The process is pretty consistent throughout government, that if there is a workplace injury, that the proper paperwork is filled out and it is sent off to Workers' Compensation for them to be able to provide their assessment on exactly what it is, or what they see as the cause of the workplace injury. And then we continue to work with them to be able to provide a safe environment for our employees.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. So in regards to the ministry's annual report for 2017 and '18, it indicates here that your total injury rate for 2017 was 4.74 per cent. So I believe that has been decreasing, which is good to see because we want to ensure that staff are safe. And it does indicate here that it looks like it also includes the exposure to violent incidences when dealing with clients and the public. And so I know, I talk to individuals who work with the ministry often and, like you said, they deal with some pretty traumatic events at times. And so we have to really take note that that has an impact on their mental health, and it's important that we have those discussions and talk about that.

And so what has been . . . You indicated that there was this program within a portion of the ministry that helps deal with that. But has there been any other programs that the ministry has been putting forward to help ensure that the mental health of front-line workers is being managed?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess there's two aspects to it. We want to make sure that, as you indicated, that there's a physical safety. And that's everything from driving to a location to going in, certainly within our child and family services if there's a potential volatile circumstance, that the physical safety is there.

But in following that up, we also want to make sure that the mental health safety is there as well. And that's again why we piloted the Not Myself Today, so a staff member could have that opportunity to feel that they can communicate to their supervisor or to a colleague and be able to talk about some of the circumstances that they are dealing with. And again, the backfill for that is our employee family assistance program. And there's also, you know, if somebody needs to be able to attend one of those counselling sessions, that we would make sure that that's available to them throughout this process.

But again we want to make sure that their physical safety and their mental health is first and foremost because, again, if they're not in a physical spot where they can perform their duties or the mental health is challenging for them, we want to make sure that they're in the best possible way so they can serve our clients' needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — I think that's an important discussion to continually have, and be mindful of the difficult work that they do.

So I'm going to move on to a different topic right now. When we

were in supplementary estimates, there was a bit of a discussion of how the government is moving from utilizing government-owned vehicles and using more rental cars. And so how has this transition been?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As you're aware, there was a government-wide initiative to be able to move from using personal vehicles or, sorry, the central vehicle agency to rental cars. We have had that contract with Enterprise. It's been very successful in cutting costs. The Ministry of Central Services, Minister Cheveldayoff, administrates that program. But from what I'm being told that where there is a rental agency, we are utilizing that to the best of our ability to make sure that we're reducing costs.

Ms. Rancourt: — So if there's been a reduction in costs, you must have a breakdown of how much it was costing, say perhaps in the past five years with regards to using rental cars and government cars, just to get a good idea of that cost savings.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll endeavour to touch base with the Minister of Central Services to see if they track all of that information on the cost savings on a ministry-by-ministry basis and overall for government. And I'll see if we can get that information and bring it to the committee.

Just jumping back, the question was on our injury rate. And 4.08 is the most accurate numbers that we have right now.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. Yes, that would be really good information to have with regards to the changes with vehicles. I know there's been some discussion of how it's been a challenge. Maybe other ministries don't utilize vehicles as much as the Ministry of Social Services does, but oftentimes employees are . . . At the beginning of the day, they have to hunt down what vehicle that they can use. I believe it's a centralized service that they phone, and those individuals working in those centralized services sometimes don't understand the geographic area that they're servicing and the vehicles that are needed for those locations. So I've been hearing that there's been some challenges with regards to that.

And so I understand that this was a government-wide decision, not necessarily one made by this ministry itself. But I can see how it would particularly have some challenges with regards to the Ministry of Social Services due to the fact of the complexity of the areas that you service and the amount of usage that you would need to utilize vehicles. So I don't know if you've been hearing some of these similar concerns or issues or how you've been addressing that, or if there's been some changes in the process of how individuals are receiving vehicles to perform their daily duties.

[16:30]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — What I've been told is it's kind of a twofold process, that we do have dedicated CVAs [central vehicle agency] on location scattered throughout the province for child and family services, that if they need that vehicle that that is dedicated to them. The renting cars are more for planned trips that are further out that would . . . You know, you're going into a certain area and you might need a specific vehicle to get there, whether it be an all-wheel drive or a four-wheel drive to be able

get out to specific locations. But we also still have our current CVAs dedicated to child and family services, as we feel that that's important. But again, if there's a planned trip we try to utilize Enterprise as the cost savings are significant. And I've asked my chief of staff to contact the chief of staff of Central Services to be able to provide that information either to the committee or to yourself directly.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. I appreciate that. Can you provide me the total received in federal transfers and explain the breakdown?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As per Public Accounts, the transfer from the federal government for Social Services, total 45.168 million.

Ms. Rancourt: — You don't have a breakdown with regards to the different reasons why you have those federal transfers?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The breakdown that I do have here, and again these are '17-18 numbers, is 26.5 million for special allowances for children in care; and was at the time called Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada or AANDC, was \$8.8 million.

Ms. Rancourt: — So information provided from previous estimates that I was reviewing indicated that the total received under the children's special allowance went back into the General Revenue Fund. Is this a regular practice?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes. Yes, it is.

Ms. Rancourt: — And in previous estimates that I've read, it indicated that you get some federal funding from the young offenders agreement and from the Indigenous and Northern Affairs. So where does the money from those two agreements, where are they distributed?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Any revenue that we receive from any source, including the federal government, goes into the General Revenue Fund. And then the General Revenue Fund allocates money to Social Services and then we administrate the programs.

Ms. Rancourt: — So what were the ministry's top capital priorities going into this budget cycle?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The top ones would be, certainly as I touched on in my opening comments, about income assistance redesign. Also we've renovated three offices. And our major one would be certainly the Valley View transition where we're also . . . And it's kind of two-pronged. We transition clients out, which part of that comes under Sask Housing but also comes out of that Valley View allocation, and the other side is the staff. We've had to reallocate staff within offices now where they were staffed out at Valley View and that's one of the reasons that we're doing one of the renos in Moose Jaw to be able to meet our staffing needs. In saying that, there's also, as I stated earlier, there was a reduction of overall staff within Valley View. I think just over, I want to say 41.7 is the number that's jumping out at me that we talked about a little bit earlier.

Ms. Rancourt: — So what assets of the ministry will be or could be sold this year?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The only assets that the ministry is working with community members is within our Sask Housing where we have our better use policy, that those assets within Sask Housing portfolio, that we have worked with communities, with towns, cities, rural municipalities as well as First Nations to see if there's a better use of some of those housing stock that are currently vacant and that have been chronically vacant. Other than that I'm not aware of any assets that we are disposing of other than the normal assets that we would have within the business operations such as outdated computers, furniture, that . . . none that I'm aware of.

Ms. Rancourt: — And what is the plan for the Valley View facility once it's empty?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As you may be aware, Valley View is something that we pay a lease, so to speak, with Central Services. We have been leasing this obviously for quite a few years. Central Services is the property management side of the Government of Saskatchewan. We are continuing to lease that to the Minister of Central Services who would probably have a better idea of what they're doing because we don't actually have control over the property or the building. That would be done through Minister Cheveldayoff's office. But in saying it in general, the transition of both the people, the staff have gone extremely well, and we're assuming that the Minister of Central Services will deal with the asset of the land and the building itself.

Ms. Rancourt: — How many lawsuits and litigation is ongoing with the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The total number of lawsuits currently is 93.

Ms. Rancourt: — That was the same number at December of 2017. Are those all the same cases? Has there been no new cases?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The number is always fluctuating but there are new ones that are coming on and ones that have been settled. So the number does have an ebb and flow to it.

Ms. Rancourt: — And I know that these cases are sensitive and you're unable to discuss them, but is there the ability to be able to indicate which areas of Social Services these lawsuits are involving, so for example, child and family services, income support, housing?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The vast majority of them are within child and family — 92 out of the 93 were within child and family — and one where there's a class action with Valley View, but it's not certified yet.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. So the allocation to the child and family program maintenance and support is 240,000 less than the previous estimates. Can you tell me what this amount was intended for? We know that child and family services programs are always in need of funding to run properly. Is this funding going to be reallocated elsewhere?

[16:45]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It's captured in the Estimates book on

page 116 that the child and family program has stayed relatively flat year over year. The allocation, and as you have identified and as I have identified many times either in this Chamber or in media that our needs are more complex, but there has been an increase from \$99,000 up to 127,000 . . . sorry, million — I was like, that was relatively low — \$99 million up to \$127 million in community-based organizations where we're getting them to perform the service. So it isn't that the money has gone down; it's just gone to a different line item in the budget. And on page 116 towards the bottom, you can see that the number has actually increased overall from, it looks like 270 million to \$300 million. So it has reflected the needs of our clients.

Ms. Rancourt: — So the additional money being just distributed to the community-based organizations, which organizations are going to be receiving this money? And yes, if you could provide me a list of some of the organizations that we could expect to see an increase. Or will there be new CBOs that will be receiving some funding?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Currently our top ones would be Ranch Ehrlo, as you're aware. And I was able to just recently tour their facility. And as you are also very well aware, that those are our most complex cases that we have. Eagle's Nest, Four Directions, those are the ones that are taking our most complex needs. So we're making sure that they're funded in the appropriate way.

Ms. Rancourt: — So is this additional funding going to be an increase in the funding that they get per youth? Or will this be for additional services that they'll be providing?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As you're aware that these are community-based organizations, private entities such as the ranch, their costs have gone up on their caseload as they're seeing, as we are seeing a more complex case and that is a flow-through to us. But we also did just under a 900,000 increase to front-line wages and growth for compensation within the CBO sector.

So we are trying to meet that need. We understand that they have some real costs, and we're always working with them to make sure that we're spending the dollars that are allocated to us in the best possible way. In saying that, they have some real costs on staffing, as well as overhead, that they be able to make sure that their organization is successful as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — I'm trying to just understand how these organizations are allocated this money. I know in previous opportunities to speak with ministers, they have provided the cost of housing children in the group homes. That was my understanding, is that Social Services provided them funding based on the actual youth that are living in those homes.

Maybe my understanding is wrong, but how does Social Services determine how much they provide to group homes? Is it based on, like what you would do with foster parents, paying based on how many foster children they have in the home? Or are you giving them a base, a total amount, and then they've got to manage that based on whatever numbers they have?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess to be able to say that, depending on what each child's circumstance dictates, we want to be able to again make sure that their needs are being met. Also the younger

the child, the more supervision that that child would need. Obviously a two-year-old that's temporarily coming into care with very complex needs could — and what we've seen, does actually — require more intensive supervision versus a 15- or 16-year-old which could be fairly independent, and we could just be monitoring behavioural issues.

But it very much depends. Some of it is on a fee-for-service, but it all depends on that individual. And that's why we do that individualized assessment, to make sure that we're trying to meet their needs. And each child that is temporarily coming into care of the ministry has unique needs, and we want to recognize that and try our best to be able to meet their needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — My understanding, and I have more experience with knowing what Ranch Ehrlo and Eagle's Nest provides for communities because in Prince Albert that's our two biggest group homes that we have there. But my understanding is that some of the emergency placement has been provided from Ranch Ehrlo, more so recently. I don't know exactly when that started. So before, they used to just take primarily youth, not necessarily children, but now they do take babies and children. And so the services that they're providing has been changing. And so I could see where that funding would be a bit more difficult, because I would think the ratio to youth/care worker would change based on the age of the children and so that would increase their costs.

Do you have a breakdown of children that are in care, that are in foster care homes, group homes, or stabilization units?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The breakdown would be within the extended family, which are as you are aware PSIs [person of sufficient interest]. There's 2,835 children, foster families there are 875, and community-based short-term homes there are 318 children.

Ms. Rancourt: — And does that include any youth that are in the stabilization unit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — In the private treatment or the stabilization there would be 154 children.

Ms. Rancourt: — And how many youth that are currently under the care of Social Services is currently incarcerated?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We'll have to touch base with Corrections and we'll provide copies for the committee. We'll provide eight copies, I believe.

Ms. Rancourt: — But that information would be really helpful. I know when I used to work with young offenders, some of those youth would be under the care of Social Services so I'd have to keep in touch with their worker because their worker would need to obviously know where they are at all times. So it would be good information to have.

How many youth are in the 16 to 17 program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The most current numbers that we have as of December 31st for the 16- and 17-year-olds is 161.

Ms. Rancourt: — There has been a lot of discussion about social

impact bonds, and so can you give me an update on how this has been having an impact on services?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'm very happy to talk about the social impact bonds, as we were the first ones in Canada to be able to provide a social impact bond.

The social impact bond that we had with a partnership with Egadz, with the Mah family as well as Conexus, has been extremely successful for multiple reasons. More than anything, I think it would be the partners that were involved with this. We're all looking at this as a way of bettering their community on the social side of things and not necessarily on the financial side of things. The financial side of things is important, but I think the main focus in talking to all of the people involved was always the social side of things, to be able to improve the community.

We had a target, which was a challenging target, to be able to keep 22 children out of care for six months or more. And that was what we considered at the time a very aggressive target. It was a real target, accepted by most in the industry. And the good news is we — and I say that as in partners with Egadz, Conexus, and the Mahs — we've been able to keep 30 kids out of care. So not only did we set an aggressive goal, but we surpassed that goal. And we're very proud of what Sweet Dreams has done.

Now that's the only social impact bond that we have within the Ministry of Social Services. And last week we just saw the success of a couple of people that were from Egadz up in the gallery, that were clients of Egadz and now they have come full circle and they're contributing back to their community not only with employment but, as we touched on, with Project Runaway. They're also developing apps to be able to help, because nobody would better know what their needs are than the children that have been through that.

So we want to be able to support Sweet Dreams as much as we possibly can. In saying that, we also understand that there are other avenues to fund. Social impact bond fits very nicely in some circumstances but sometimes it doesn't. So that's when we go to more of a traditional funding or an outcomes-based contract, where we can make sure that whoever we are contracting is meeting our current needs and meeting the needs of our clients.

But the social impact bond is something that this government is very proud of and it's been modelled. And I know Don Meikle from Egadz has spoken to many organizations across the country and down in the US [United States] on how to set up a social impact bond and make sure you have the right people at the table to make sure that it's successful, again on the social side of things first and foremost and on the financial side of things, to make sure that the investors are getting their money back. But this has been a very successful program and we're very proud of it.

[17:00]

Ms. Rancourt: — So Sweet Dreams is the only social impact bond that the Ministry of Social Services has completed. Is there any plans of any further programs? Or anything on the horizon this coming year?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We've had lots of organizations,

funders, community-based organizations, as well as people come in and talk to us about social impact bonds and the benefits of it. And we have sat down with the Mah family as well as Egadz to be able to talk to them because some people hear, well social impact bonds and there is private money and government money, and you can make some money off of this. But when you actually sit down, it's a very trying process for everybody involved because it's pushing everybody a little bit outside of their comfort zone to make sure that they're meeting the needs of a contract base. Because a lot of the community-based organizations aren't used to that and they think it's new money and it's not really new money. It's just repurposing that money into a more focused way.

So we have had organizations approach us, but nothing firm as of right now of what we are doing. But we're always opening to hear if there's new organizations or funders or community-based organizations that would be interested in going down this path. But we want to make sure that they're going into it with their eyes wide open, and we want to be able to support them in any way we can for them to be successful.

Ms. Rancourt: — So I wanted to talk a little bit about newborn apprehensions. Do you have a breakdown of region rates?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We're working on getting those numbers, and I think they were part of a written submission on written questions. We're compiling all of the information as we can and trying to pull all that data together. And we'll table that document in the House when we have all of that collected, before the end of session for sure.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you for that. There's been a lot of concern because we've been seeing a rise with regards to newborn apprehension. So what I was wondering was what is the ministry doing to identify mothers who might need some extra supports prior to them having the babies to avoid having apprehensions done.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Some of the supportive family living includes programs right here in Regina — Foxvalley, Gloria Jean's. We've got the SWAP [street workers' advocacy project] program, Raising Hope. We've got CUMFI [Central Urban Métis Federation Inc.]. And we also just recently announced with Sanctum and Sanctum 1.5 up in Saskatoon where we are working to make sure that the mother and the child, that they are supported in place, either at Sanctum or Sanctum 1.5. It has been very successful. I don't have the exact numbers on the avoidance of apprehension, but I'll endeavour to get that to you.

But we're very proud of this organization that has been able to do this as well as some of the other organizations to make sure that, you know, we're providing all the support to the mother up front. We want to make sure that she has all of the support, and if the father is there, that we provide that support to the whole family to make sure that we don't see that child touch social services in the short term or in the long term. So we want to be able to make sure that we do that on an ongoing basis to the mothers to be able to support them. But we'll get some of those more accurate . . . We don't have it broken down by region, but we'll get you that number certainly with the written questions.

Ms. Rancourt: — I don't know how closely the Ministry of Social Services and the Ministry of Health work together, but I

see a potential opportunity with working with family physicians that are maybe working with families. And if they're identifying some challenging issues that parents are already having or displaying before the baby's born, being able to feel comfortable with approaching the ministry and having some programs available for them so that apprehension is the very last option.

And so especially seeing that the rates are increasing, and I know the rates are increasing altogether with regards to child and family services, so it's an obvious sign that we need to be looking at some different avenues and potentially being creative with regards to that.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, I can comment on that. We absolutely want to do that. We want to make sure that if there is any contact, that if we are notified by Health or by a physician that there is some extenuating circumstances with that mother, that we work with them prior to birth. We want to be able to work with the family to make sure that if for any reason whatever that the mother is not able to take care of that child immediately, that we work with family members. But we do work very closely with Health on this to make sure.

In saying that, we also respect the patient's privacy. But if the patient is forthcoming with that information to either Social Services and/or Health, that we work very much together to make sure that the process of them going from expecting mothers to being a new mom or a mom once again, that we make sure that we have that support in place for them in conjunction with Health.

Ms. Rancourt: — Because another issue that we see more and more, and you alluded to that in your ministry remarks, is the fact that addictions is becoming a big issue within our communities. And I was having a discussion with some nurses who work in the maternity ward, and they've been seeing more and more cases of mothers having addiction issues and that being a problem. And so it's a very complex issue and there's no easy answer to that, but it's going to really involve all the ministries working together collaboratively.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We certainly do. Internally within the government we have our human services ministry where Education, Corrections, Social Services, as well as Health all get together on a regular basis and make sure that we're discussing this and putting the client in the middle to be able to meet their needs. But in saying that, we also want to be respectful of the client's privacy, but we want to make sure that mother and newborn have every opportunity to lead a successful life.

And addictions is certainly an issue, and it's not just within Social Services' clients; it's across the board. I would say there's not too many people in Saskatchewan that haven't been touched in a negative way by addictions, and this is something that we're trying to deal with overall as a government. We see it sometimes in the extreme form within Social Services and again we deal with that.

And that's why we're investing in opportunities like Sanctum, like Foxvalley, to be able to have that earliest possible intervention with the client and with the potential child that's coming into Saskatchewan, that we're trying to deal with that as quickly as possible in the best interests of the mother.

In saying that, we also have to have willing participant from the mother to make sure that they're involved. And I know every mother wants to have the best opportunity for their child, and we want to be able to provide the circumstances so they can have that opportunity.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thanks. And so with the human services ministries, you indicated that you meet often. How often do you meet, and when was the last time you guys had a meeting?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I would say in session, we meet on a weekly basis to discuss everything from changes in policy, procedures, to pending legislation. We talk about budget process; we talk about efficiencies. And that's just not done at the ministers' level; it's also done at the deputy ministers, at their level as well to make sure that from their perspective, they're doing that.

I'm not sure how often the deputy ministers . . . but I would say during session that the human services ministries meet at least weekly to be able to discuss any process improvements, policy, procedures, legislation. We meet on a weekly basis because it's that important that we're working efficiently together.

Ms. Rancourt: — And in past times when we've had estimates, we've had some discussion with regards to the provinces working together to ensure that, when clients move from province to province, that the other provinces are aware of their history or if they had some involvement with regards to social services. I know in the past that hasn't been very fluid, but I know that there has been some discussion with making a better process with regards to that. So where is that at, at this point?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — In general with income assistance, if somebody is leaving our jurisdiction going into another jurisdiction in another province, if they're notifying us that they're leaving, we would ask them to contact the income assistance within that provincial department and we would provide any information that they need as far as a phone number and that. But if people are just moving from province to province, we would hope that they would contact income assistance upon their arrival and start that process up.

We don't transfer files on income assistance interprovincially. But we also have an interprovincial protocol within child and family services where we do notify them, and they notify us, if a child and a mother or a family is moving into our jurisdiction, and that is with the majority of provinces. And I was just told that recently Quebec has signed on to this interprovincial protocol, which is great because again we want to make sure that all the provinces are focused on the child's needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — The Children's Advocate has indicated that he was concerned about the increase of deaths of kids in care, especially the dramatic increase of youth dying of suicide. So how is the ministry planning to reduce this number?

[17:15]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As the opposition has brought up many times, within mental health and addictions, certainly within the youth, the Children's Advocate did identify that there was some concerns with suicide, especially in the North. We've seen that.

And it's always a tragedy when any child makes that decision. It hurts the community. It hurts the family. It's very sad to see that somebody makes that final decision. And we want to try to provide as much upfront support within the education system, and I know the Minister of Education . . . certainly within Health to make sure that there are services available. And that's why we meet on an ongoing basis to be able to determine what are the needs of the clients.

In Social Services in 2018, unfortunately, there were three children that died while in the care of the ministry. One of those was due to suicide. But we want to again try to provide as much support as we can for any child that is even thinking about this, that we can try to help out as much as we can. In saying that, we have to work with community-based organizations and the community leaders in all communities — rural, urban, on- or off-reserve — to make sure that we're providing adequate supports, that if there is any youth or child out there that is contemplating that, that we intervene as quickly as possible. And the number zero is the only one that's acceptable.

Ms. Rancourt: — We know that mental health services have long wait periods, and youth that are in care at times are higher risk for mental health issues. So as the care provider for these youth, how are you dealing with ensuring that they get the services that they need on a timely basis?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — What I've been told is that we make sure that if there is any trauma training for our service providers, that we are able to provide that for them so they can deal with it immediately, whether that be a community-based organization or some of the organizations that we just touched on — the Ranch, Four Directions, Eagle's Nest.

And we also can work with Health, and we do this on an ongoing basis if there is a child that is having some difficulties, that we can prioritize that with Health and be able to work with them to be able to identify that this person has some emergent needs, and that we can work with Health to be able to do that. In saying that, if all else fails, that there is an option of working with whoever is in the community to be able to provide any counselling or anything that we can do to be able to meet that child's needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — Do you have the amount that the Ministry of Social Services pays for private services for youth that require counselling or psychology services that they can't access through the Ministry of Health?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We don't track that specifically. It's kind of on an ongoing basis if we do need something in a specific area that we will allocate the dollars to that. And again trying to balance what is within the health care system, that's our first and foremost. We don't have a dollar breakdown just because it's very challenging to track because they might be going to a private . . . [inaudible] . . . for something else other than mental health.

So we want to make sure. We'll try to get the information, but it's going to be very hard to separate out as far as a private dollar. But we do utilize the health care system first and foremost. And again we are able to sit down with the health system and be able to prioritize some of the kids that are going in there that need some intervention or some help right away.

And so I'd just add into that that we also contract with a number of private community-based organizations to be able to provide service for us as well, ranging from family services in Saskatoon, Catholic Family Services, Prince Albert Indian Métis Friendship Centre, Sandy Bay, Saskatoon Friendship Inn. A lot of these organizations also provide some counselling for us as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — So currently how many children that are under the care of Social Services is currently admitted in an in-patient mental health unit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — After consulting with multiple people, we don't currently track that within our system.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. I think that would be really good information to have. And I know that workers, social services workers have to be informed if one of their youth is within a mental health in-patient unit because they're the guardian and they have to consent to it.

So also with regards to accessing that information, I would be interested to know how many children that are currently in care are accessing addictions treatment because that might give a good number of . . . for you as the minister to understand what the youth are, the issues that they're dealing with and the services that they're accessing. It would be interesting to see the numbers of them.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, if there's any way. And we would have to manually. And the number does change, like, daily. So if there's any information we can provide to the committee, we will on either the mental health or on the addictions side of things. But it does fluctuate quite a bit. It would be hard to pin it down to a number because it would change. It could change by 5 to 10 per cent over a week just depending on what's happening and where they are in the treatment cycle. That is also part of the process. Is it that they're at the beginning? Is it a short-term thing? Or is it a long, like if they're battling a bipolar or if they're, you know, if there's more complex issues versus some that can be treated with general counselling or with addictions or in the mental health versus a more of a disorder type thing. So we want to make sure that we are trying to track that the best we possibly can, but the number moves quite a bit.

Ms. Rancourt: — For sure. And I'd like to point out that in-patient treatment is far different than accessing out-patient treatment. Individuals who receive in-patient treatment have much higher needs and require a lot more medical support. And I know with my previous background in mental health and addictions, there was a high number of kids who received those in-patient treatment services that the ministry responsible, youth. And so I know that was the situation in Prince Albert, and I would think that that was pretty reflective of the province.

So I think when the Children's Advocate is indicating that we need to do a better job with addressing the mental health concerns of youth in care, accessing those numbers. And since you meet with the Minister of Health on a regular basis, hopefully that would be something that you would be able to receive. And yes, that would fluctuate daily but a lot of numbers fluctuate regularly, and so it would give you a good roundabout number of how many kids are needing those services.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll get my deputy minister to touch base with the deputy minister of Health and continue to work on that.

Ms. Rancourt: — And I know also with talking to some of the front-line workers in the in-patient units, they said one of the issues that they had — this was both mental health and addictions in-patient — is connecting with the youth's care worker, the Social Services member, worker. Because when, if these youth came into the in-patient unit without their hygiene products or without clothing, then they would have to make . . . They would access whatever was left in the lost and found, because the youth worker would have to provide them the funding to be able to get them some clothes or hygiene materials.

So if we know that this isn't something that's a situation, and there's a lot of youth that are accessing these services, maybe there would be an easier process for workers in the in-patient units to be able to have access to the funding from the Ministry of Social Services to provide these youth with their private necessities.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — So I would just say in general that if there is a need from the worker to be able to do that, that they either can do that by a requisition, if there's an immediate need. We would want to make sure that we take care of them, as I alluded to before, not just their mental health side of things, but on the physical side of things. And if it's a hygiene product or something that they specifically need, I would hope, and I'm sure that the case worker would be able to access that. I would be disappointed if they were going through the lost and found to try to find some clothing or any of their personal needs. That's a dignity issue on my side of things.

I would not want that to happen, as I wouldn't want to be, if I was in a circumstance, I would not want to have to pick through and find clothing from the lost and found as that would diminish the dignity of the client. So I would hope that the caseworkers, and I'm sure that they are able to find appropriate clothing or personal hygiene items that that individual might need on a short-term or a long-term basis, and be able to meet their needs on, like I said, not just on the physical side of things, but also on the mental health side of things as well. And I'm sure the good social workers that are out there are endeavouring to do that.

The Chair: — It now being 5:30, it's the time to recess and we will reconvene exactly at 6:30. Thank you.

[The committee recessed from 17:30 until 18:30.]

The Chair: — I would like to welcome everyone back to the recommencement of the Human Services Committee and vote on Social Services estimates. Questions? I recognize Ms. Rancourt.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. That was a good little short break but it was nice to have a little bit of a break and recollect some of my thoughts with regards to some of the questions here. I want to talk a little bit about child protection again. So how many calls to child protection intake did you have in 2018?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — In 2017-2018 there was approximately 17,000 intakes.

Ms. Rancourt: — And how many of those calls translated into reports of child abuse?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Of the 17,000, and again in 2017-18, 6,700 were investigated and approximately 2,000 children entered into care temporarily.

Ms. Rancourt: — So again with the Provincial Auditor's recommendations, she discussed a little bit about improving the process to investigate reports of child abuse and neglect and felt that the ministry needed to improve their time frames with regards to investigating child abuse and neglect reports.

So how has the ministry been working on improving those timelines?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As per the auditor's report on the timeline, what we've done is we've begun to provide monthly reports to the internal supervisors regarding any outstanding cases. And then we leave it up to the supervisors to go back to the front-line workers and be able to work out how they're going to deal with that caseload.

Ms. Rancourt: — And what's determined as an outstanding case?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — What we're doing is making sure that the timelines are continuously improved, that when those supervisors go back that there are standards set out as to when a case should be investigated, how long that investigation should go on, and a timeline on when the appropriate action . . . In saying that, sometimes the investigation could be over a certain amount of time or it could be very quickly where we have to temporarily take that child into care, depending on the circumstance.

So it does vary, but we're continuously making sure that those supervisors are aware, if there is any outstanding cases and they're not on the current timelines, that there is either an explanation as to why this isn't done or immediate follow-up to make sure that the proper resources are there to be able to get that case moving forward.

Ms. Rancourt: — So with the increase of new Canadians in the province, has Social Services seen an increase in cases involving new Canadian families?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The quick answer is no, we don't track new Canadians as far as any child and family. We always look at the child in the circumstances that that child is in, no matter what their race, religion, or creed or whether they're newcomers to Canada, permanent residents, Canadian citizens, part of an Indigenous community. We don't break that out, as far as new Canadians anyways.

Ms. Rancourt: — Because I wasn't expecting to get a number of them involved, but the reason why I bring this up is because these cases can be quite complex. And they oftentimes have language and cultural barriers. And so I was wondering what Social Services has been doing to adjust to these complex situations and how they manage those cases.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think we would work with the cultural organization that that specific person is associated with and be

able to transcend any language issues that we have or cultural issues that we do have. We would also reach out to the multicultural society to see if there's any assistance, or some other community members that might be able to work with us to be able to help out that specific individual. But if there is language barriers from new Canadians, we would certainly work with any of the associations that would present themselves that would be able to help us bridge that barrier that our front-line workers might be seeing.

Ms. Rancourt: — So would the ministry contract people that could help with interpretation and providing those services to be able to have an interpreter?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If need be, we would, again trying to utilize any of the community associations, the cultural associations if that's appropriate. We would touch base with the Open Door Society and any of those other organizations, and if we do need to contract it on a longer term basis to be able to develop a plan for that family, we would certainly engage any of them to be able to do that.

Ms. Rancourt: — And have you sought some advice from potentially some other provincial partners because they might have some ways that they've managed through this? Or have you searched to get some information from a culture expert of some sort?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess we would look at any community leaders, no matter where they are within that specific . . . Whether they're newcomers to Canada, whether that be the head of a cultural organization or religious organization, we would try to engage them. Again I think that they would have the same focus as we would to make sure that the child's best interest and the family.

And if there are some cultural barriers that are between us and being able to provide the service . . . Because I'm sure as a newcomer to Canada it would be a barrier trying to navigate the system, let alone somebody that was born in Saskatchewan to navigate the system because it is fairly complex. So we would engage an interpreter or somebody or a community leader to be able to help us out, but more than anything help out the family.

Ms. Rancourt: — What is the average caseload for a child protection worker?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again it varies on kind of worker-to-worker basis. Depends on whether it's rural or urban, whether there's light contact or a more in-depth case file that the worker would be using.

Also it depends on whether that is a veteran worker or somebody that's new to the system. We would try to manage it to their specific caseload, what they were capable of doing. But I would say on average the caseload would probably be around 15 to 25, depending on again the circumstances of each individual file.

Ms. Rancourt: — And who would determine what is a manageable caseload for workers?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think it would be up to the supervisors for them to be able to work with the caseworker but also

recognize what the depth and breadth of each one of their files, the geographics and the demographics as to what it is that they're dealing with.

If there was five or six clients that we're in more heavy contact with — like Ranch or Four Directions or Eagle's Nest — versus a light contact which might be just in more of a light maintenance mode, that there's initial contact, it would all depend on that. But we would entrust that the front-line worker and the supervisor would be able to sit down and manage that to the best of that individual's needs and what is reasonable.

Ms. Rancourt: — Has there been any discussion to develop a casework regulations within Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess upon intake one of the processes that we would use is an assessment tool to find out exactly where that case is at — again if it's on the lighter side of the spectrum or if it's more direct in contact with that, looking again at where that specific individual needs to be, what is it that their immediate and long-term requirements are, whether we have to work with the parents as well to make sure that . . . You know, we want to assess, as I've said in the Chamber before, both sides of it, not just the child's side, but also making sure that the parents have all of the tools.

[18:45]

So each case is very specific and unique, and I would be reluctant to set a specific case number on each individual because some people can manage some very complex cases. And again it all depends on where that individual is within the social services and certainly within child and family services, as to what their specific needs are and what is it that we need to be able to help them be successful.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. I know there's workers that work with individuals, with youth that are in care, but I was primarily talking about child protection workers. So my understanding is that they don't necessarily follow that youth through their whole process. They're working on that protection claim. And so I don't know how long term those files are necessarily for them. And if there's a lot of child protection claims that are happening, there'd be an expectation that those investigations are done within those time frames.

So I think that's why I've been really wondering about: when does the ministry determine that there's been a number of protection calls that have been placed in certain agencies and that they need to potentially put more workers in place because casework is getting too high for those workers?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I would say it's accurate that if there is a specific area of the province, or within even an urban centre, that we're seeing an influx of caseworkers, we would flow more workers that way. We did that in Saskatoon last year. We had what, for lack of a better term, a hot spot there where we saw our intake numbers going up, so we did make sure that we allocated extra resources into that.

We've also been able to flow resources depending on if there's 1 of our 18 agencies that are out there performing service on behalf of us, our First Nations partners. If they're seeing an influx, we're

able to move some of the resources from some of the larger centres to be able to help them get through that and be able to manage those case files.

So the child protection workers are moving to where the location is and that's probably why . . . Earlier before supper, we talked about some of the travel costs in that. Because if there is a spot that might be having some more challenges — whether that be urban, rural, north, on- or off-reserve — we want to be able to flow those people in there very quickly so we can work with the community leaders to be able to deal with that as quick as possible.

So we want to be fairly nimble to be able to meet those needs. In saying that, the child protection workers are used to being mobile, as the cases aren't necessarily in their backyard.

Ms. Rancourt: — When was the last time there were changes made to the risk assessment tool used by staff to determine the levels of safety, risk to safety?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess from what I understand, the tool that we use is being continuously updated. We're making sure if there is a best practice out there, whether it be across our country or around the world, that if there's something that is a new and innovative way of assessing our clients and doing that, we would be open to looking at that.

But I'd confidently say that the system that we have in place right now is best practice. And we're continuously working with our provincial counterparts and our territorial counterparts to be able to find out if there's a better process out there, we will be looking at it and try to implement it for our clients' needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — In December 2014 counsel for children program was implemented. So since being implemented, how many children have accessed this service?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'd have to touch base with our Justice colleagues and be able to find out that information. And once we have it available, we'll table it for the committee.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. When was the child rights impact assessment tool developed and put into practice?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We're just going to check with somebody back at the office to find out exact timeline on that. Hopefully we'll get it within the next hour to be able to provide back to the committee.

Ms. Rancourt: — So can you tell me a bit more about the family-focused core practice model that you have alluded to in previous estimates? When was that implemented and which workers will be following this model?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'm just going to get clarification on what exact program that was.

Ms. Rancourt: — Family-focused core practice model.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'm just going to ask Janice Colquhoun to speak directly to that question.

Ms. Colquhoun: — Good evening. Janice Colquhoun, executive director of service delivery. So the core practice model we are referring to as the flexible response and in particular, integrated practice strategies approach. And we're pleased to be able to be implementing this. I would, I think, estimate that it started back in approximately 2017, got under way in November about that year, and we've been doing it in stage processes ever since.

So the development of a new practice model is informed by the guiding principles of Touchstones of Hope, Indigenous child welfare reconciliation, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. And the intended outcomes of this core model is to support the targets and measures of maintaining children safely at home, reducing the time of children in care, and certainly building on the strengths of families and putting more emphasis on cultural infusion into the services more than ever before.

So where we're at, we have been working on the front end in the child protection investigation approach, where we're doing more of a one-team approach. We have elders involved, and we are involving the family more when we can. Depending on, you know, how serious the child safety matter is, we can involve them sooner up front.

Also we have just recently implemented a new extended family care review team that's been introduced in the south service area. This involves First Nations Child and Family Services members, elders, Mobile Crisis Services, cross-program involvement, and the extended family applicant participate in information sharing and decisions. This whole extended family review team, the intended outcome is to bolster family exploration and related assessments for the purposes of cultural connections, placement with family, and utilization of the natural support system for the family.

I mean, I know that's a lot of words there, but overall this flexible response approach is to strengthen family involvement, increase participation, cultural infusion, and a one-team approach more than ever before. It's being well received across the province, and First Nations agencies have been involved.

Ms. Rancourt: — So have you been keeping any numbers about the outcomes with regards to this program? It sounds like it's pretty exceptional and probably has prevented a lot of kids from coming into care, so it would be interesting to see what the outcome has been.

Ms. Colquhoun: — You know, there wouldn't be a specific statistic that we could isolate on the application of integrated practice strategies approach. It would be a type of training in a range of training and a philosophical approach that would be with a number of things that we do. I think collectively, together with our Touchstones of Hope training program, our TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] emphasis, this emphasis, it collectively together strengthens our practice model. It would be difficult to highlight a particular stat to that.

Ms. Rancourt: — So staff within the ministry are being trained to provide some of this level of service. Are they working with agencies outside the community to also provide the service?

Ms. Colquhoun: — Certainly there has been collaboration with

the agencies, and there's been members from the agencies attend our training sessions and get involved in various discussions and approaches. I don't believe that there's been a coordinated, dedicated approach yet from the agencies to deliver it in the way that we have been implementing it, but I know that they have been encouraged by the material so far.

Ms. Rancourt: — And is there a plan going forward with this upcoming year to expand the program?

Ms. Colquhoun: — Yes, we certainly want to be expanding this across all our programs. We call it cross-business lines, so whether it be child protection, children's services, the youth program area, you know, foster home resource area, that would be a multi-program approach.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you for that information. How many foster homes do you currently have?

[19:00]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As of December 31st, 2018 we had 498. But I can also say in conversations with Deb Davies, executive director of Foster Families Association of Saskatchewan, that they've been on a very active recruitment and we've had some great successes. We have been recruiting in the North, which we continue to work with our northern partners as well as other groups to be able to make sure that we have a full complement of foster. But as I alluded in my opening remarks, there is a downward trend across the country of fostering.

And our main focus is always, first of all, to keep the child within the family unit, and then the next step is always a person of sufficient interest that we can move that child temporarily to a family member, and then if need be, a foster home. So we are trying to tilt the scales more towards keeping the children in home and also with a family member, again, to maintain that community, the family, the cultural component.

As well we've been able to recruit 167 individuals or families since the fall of 2016, so encouraging numbers, but again nationally this is a downward trend. But again, we're trying to make sure that the families don't have to go into foster care and that's why we're putting a lot of our time and our efforts into the prevention side of things.

And just backing up, I just got some information on the child rights impact assessment that was implemented in 2014.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay, so I'm going to go back to the child rights impact assessment tool. So it was developed and implemented in 2014. Is this assessment tool used at every point of intake?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — What I've been told is it's a tool for policy, not necessarily on the intake side of things. The tool is used to evaluate significant legislative and policy changes within Social Services as a UN [United Nations] Convention on the Rights of the Child, through their lens.

Ms. Rancourt: — And has it been involved in every policy decision that the ministry is undertaking?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Any policy or legislation that has an impact on a child, we would look at that tool.

Ms. Rancourt: — So with northern social services, particularly with child and family services in the North, has there been any changes with the service delivery?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Maybe if I could just get clarification. What did you mean by the service delivery? Are you talking about, like, positions or policy or . . .

Ms. Rancourt: — I'll give you a bit more context.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Okay.

Ms. Rancourt: — So we've been having some questions with regards to foster parents indicating that there's a bit of confusion whether some of the foster care services there are completed by ICFS [Indian Child and Family Services] or by the Ministry of Social Services, which is out of Prince Albert office.

So with regards to the services that are provided in the North, is both ICFS and the Ministry of Social Services still providing those services? And can you tell me a little bit . . . is there a bit of a jurisdictional change? Or what areas does the Ministry of Social Services cover in the northern part, which would be north of Prince Albert, Meadow Lake?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — No, there wouldn't be any jurisdictional issues. We work with our federal partners as well as our Indigenous partners and, of course, our 18 agencies that are providing the service on behalf of Social Services to make sure that we're providing that service. Again whether that's on- or off-reserve, we've got agencies that will do that and we have an understanding with the federal government.

And I guess in a more general area or general comment would be, we want to work with all the agencies that are going to support. We don't want to get into the jurisdictional side of things. We want to make sure that we're providing the right service at the right time for the right individual no matter where they are located physically within our province.

Ms. Rancourt: — So when you made the statement that the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association were working hard to recruit foster parents in the northern part of the province, in what area in particular were you talking about?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — That would be off-reserve. But if there is somebody that's on-reserve and that wanted to provide that, we would look at different options.

Ms. Rancourt: — Because we know that, especially in the La Ronge area and the more eastern part of the northern part of our province, that is being serviced by ICFS even if it's off-reserve communities. So would that also be a jurisdiction where the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association would be working with developing more foster families?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes.

Ms. Rancourt: — Is there any other agencies that are contracting out fostering services, that's looking for foster families, but it's

not through the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes. As I touched on in my opening comments, we do have a new partnering agreement with Prince Albert Grand Council and new initiatives to recruit, train, and support Indigenous foster families. So we're actively working with them. This is a new initiative that we're pretty excited about, partnering with the PAGC [Prince Albert Grand Council] on this.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay, but outside of them you're not aware of any partnership with community-based organizations that might be providing fostering services?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We also contract the Ranch to provide therapeutic fostering services as well, and that's a program that's been in place for a while now.

Ms. Rancourt: — And how is the ministry ensuring that those services are appropriate and would be among the guidelines that the ministry would uphold?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — All the homes would be assessed by us, just like a normal process. And they would go through the normal process of any other fostering home that would be out there. We would make sure that we have check-ins with them, just like we do of any other fostering facilities. That would be applicable to the Ranch or the P.A. [Prince Albert] Grand Council. They still have to meet our standards.

Ms. Rancourt: — And would they be providing the same level of payment that the Ministry of Social Services provides for fostering?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I've been told, the PAGC would be the same as any. The therapeutic ones would be a little bit different just because it's on a different level. Other than that they would all be the same.

Ms. Rancourt: — How much money was spent last year on foster care services?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The total dollars as of actuals on March 31st, 2018 was \$31,801,934. And as you may recall, in the budget we did have an increase for foster families once they complete the PRIDE [parenting resources for information, development, and education] level of training, which is a tiered training, that they can receive up to an additional \$500 a month per child. So that was an increase in this fiscal year.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. I was going to get to that as well. So the PRIDE level training, I know that foster families have always been expected to take some level of training and to increase their knowledge with regards to taking care of kids in care. So is this PRIDE level training anything different than what you guys offered prior, or is this new training? Is this new training or is this something that's been provided previously?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — So the increase that we have, it's continually evolving. We're adding modules into the PRIDE training as need be and as the modules are developed. We're making sure that we're keeping current with that. And again we want to make sure that all of our fostering parents out there that are doing an amazing job with the children that are in their care,

to be able to compensate them. And that's what it was.

[19:15]

When I was out talking to foster families — I've had the privilege of kicking off two Foster Family Weeks — I got to visit a family up in Saskatoon and that was one of the things that they had requested, is if we could get some compensation for the training to make sure that their skill set is as high as possibly can.

So that was a key focus for this budget. It was highlighted within the budget and we're very happy that we're able to meet that. We got some positive feedback from the Foster Families Association. We also got some feedback from a lot of the families saying thank you for this, that this was something that they had requested. And we were able to try to work with them to be able to make sure that there again they're implementing the best programs possible for the foster kids that are in their care.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how many families have completed the training?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I've been told, about half have gone through that training, and it depends on where they are in their spectrum of providing foster care. If they're at the beginning of that, we would ask that they take that training immediately upfront. If they're towards the end of their fostering time, we would graciously thank them for everything that they've done. We wouldn't make it mandatory for them to take that training if they're kind of sunsetting on their foster family's time.

But when we had the long-service awards up in Saskatoon — I believe it was last fall — we had some people that had fostered in excess of 200 children. And they were close to retirement so we would respect them and not . . . make sure that those invested dollars would go on somebody beginning or that is currently in the fostering care spectrum.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how long would it take to complete this training from start to finish?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The training would . . . They would have a year to be able to take that training, to be able to start and finish that. Depending on how fast that they work through it, how many hours they would have to put in would be kind of based on their schedule. Some of it would be done online; some of it would be done in more of a classroom-type setting.

So as far as the exact number of hours, we'll get you that exactly, depending on what module they're at and where they're at. But it is done over a kind of a two- to three-month period of a weekend here, online training, time to absorb and work on that, and then another weekend with more online training in between.

And it should be, it can be completed in three months, but we want to give them a little extra time because we understand that they're also . . . there's going to be a big change in their life. So we want to make sure that they have time to be able to absorb all the information.

Ms. Rancourt: — And they have to complete the course in order to get the increase in their allowances?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — That's correct.

Ms. Rancourt: — Is the training free?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It is to the fostering families, absolutely. There is a cost to Social Services for that training, but to the families there should be a zero cost to that.

Ms. Rancourt: — And so how much is a basic allowance on average? Because I know it all depends the level of the kids' needs. But on a basic allowance how much does a foster family get for a child before this training?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again as you indicated, it does have a range depending on the child's needs. The dollar amount would be anywhere from \$689 up to \$1,051 depending on what the needs are.

Ms. Rancourt: — So an extra \$500 a month after the training. That would be quite substantial. Did I get that right?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It would be up to \$500 a month would be the maximum per child per month.

Ms. Rancourt: — Is it ranged again as additional money based on the youth's needs?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, again it's on a case-by-case basis, but we wanted to set a limit on that. So get up to \$500 depending on what the training is that they've completed, and again on what the individual case needs are assessed as, what it is that Social Services needs to be able to do to provide the support for that individual child and for the greater family as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — So the services that are provided by Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, are they able to run the office and provide those services because of funding by the Ministry of Social Services? Where do they get the funding to operate their office?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Social Services does provide all of the funding for the Foster Families Association as I've been told. And the contract budgeted amount for '18-19 was \$4.53 million.

Ms. Rancourt: — And what expenses does that include? Staffing? Their office? Does that also include all the advertising that's been going on?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, it would include salaries, any overhead that the foster . . . as well as any travel expenses, as well as any of the needs that the child has.

Ms. Rancourt: — So is the Ministry of Social Services paying for advertising outside of what they provide to the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry, is the ministry providing extra dollars?

Ms. Rancourt: — There's been a lot of advertising happening with regards to recruiting foster parents. I was wondering if that was under the expenses of the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association or under the Ministry of Social Services' expenses.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — That would be under the Foster Families, so that would be part of their expenses and they have to have a very active advertising campaign for recruitment.

Recruitment is very challenging, and it's a long process to go from somebody saying I'm interested in being a foster parent to them actually being a foster parent, as we discussed some of the training that's involved. Also there has to be the due diligence done on Social Services and Foster Family Association to make sure that that potential foster parent is going to be able to meet the needs of some of the children that are coming into care. As we discussed before, some of their unique and challenging needs that they're facing.

And we want to be able to make sure that our foster families go into this process with eyes wide open, that they can understand what's to be expected of them, what the reporting is, the dollar amounts. But we want to make sure that they have all of that information.

So it is a very challenging part for them, and they are actively recruiting. I think they're doing a very good job online. As I said before, we've got 167 new foster homes open since 2016. That takes some advertising and some advocacy and some groundwork on behalf of the Foster Families, and I know the executive director puts on a lot of miles in partnership with the Ministry of Social Services to go to different communities to try to recruit this. And it is a slow process because we want to make sure it's done properly.

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes, for sure. It's a challenging, challenging job with the changes with regards to fostering. And I think there was a generation of foster parents that, rightfully so, decided to retire because it was time and they did what they need. And so ensuring that we could fill those roles is important.

So I wondered if you could give me an update on what's happening with the new child and family federal regulations that are potentially coming forward. Do you have an idea of what we might be looking at for some changes within the province and how that might go forward?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I think everybody is aware, the federal government did introduce new legislation in C-92 *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth, and families*, the Indigenous family Act of February 20th, 2019. We're committed to the principles of this. We have been from the beginning, with our partnership with respect to our First Nation agencies and our Indigenous governing bodies, dedicated to advancing the best interests of all Indigenous children. We are working jointly to analyze the legislation, make sure that that is going to, as I've said before, complement our existing 18 agreements that we have out there with First Nation and Indigenous agencies to be able to perform this service, and we're very supportive of this legislation if we can make sure that it complements our existing programs.

And understanding when you always have national legislation, we want to make sure that it is meeting our needs here in Saskatchewan. No different than any national legislation, we want to make sure that it complements our existing programs that we do have in place.

Ms. Rancourt: — And did you have an opportunity to discuss some of those concerns with the federal minister?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We did. We had a very good meeting with national chief of the AFN [Assembly of First Nations], Perry Bellegarde; Minister Duclos; Minister O'Regan. We also had representatives from all the provincial and territorial areas, and we did have a good discussion on some of what C-92 was. Minister O'Regan gave a speech on exactly what the details were, and we did have some conversations that were very good. And again I think all of the . . . What I heard was all of the provinces and territories were in support of the legislation and were optimistic that this was going to help out all of the children that social services across the country were working with.

Ms. Rancourt: — So is it expected that this piece of legislation is going to be potentially passed by the end of this spring?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I couldn't comment on that because it's a federal piece of legislation. I don't know what their schedule is, what their timeline is. I know when I talked to the minister, they were hopeful. And national Chief Bellegarde was hopeful that this would get passed before the next general election. So I think their timeline was June. I don't know if that was the beginning of June or end of June. But I'm not sure of their schedule, and I'm not sure exactly where it is within the legislative process in Ottawa and what their timeline is on that. I'm not currently tracking it.

[19:30]

Ms. Rancourt: — When the piece of legislation is put forward and passed through, it would have some, I would believe, some big impact on the way Social Services is run within the province. Do they have a plan? Like, would these changes come forward immediately as it's passed or would there be a process? What was your indication from the minister of how that would look like?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There wasn't a clear indication of what, after the potential passing of this, what the timelines were on the side of the federal government or the national Indigenous organizations as to what their timeline was as far as the bill being implemented. We didn't get any hard and fast timelines from the federal government. We were just . . . They were anticipating that it was going to get passed in June before the election. But we didn't really get any firm timelines after that process.

Ms. Rancourt: — And there was some discussion, what I've seen through the media anyway, that there could potentially be some amendments made with regards to the bill. Is that what you heard from the minister when you had the discussions with him?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We did hear that there was being amendments proposed. Not sure where that process . . . or who was proposing those amendments. We didn't submit any amendments to that legislation from the Government of Saskatchewan. I'm not sure if any of the Indigenous organizations did in Saskatchewan or across the country. But we certainly didn't submit any amendments from Social Services or from the Government of Saskatchewan that I'm aware of.

Ms. Rancourt: — What type of impact are you expecting once this legislation passes?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If there is anything that is identified, the federal government has indicated that they will work with the provinces on filling any of the regulatory gaps that are out there on that side of things. So if there is anything, we will do it at that officials' level because we have . . . I'm not an expert in this. We have experts with great experience in the room and I would ask my officials to provide that expertise to the federal government because we want to assist in this successful . . .

If this legislation goes through, we want to be a willing partner on this. And we're waiting. The timeline is getting tight as far as that. But if there is anything that our officials see that are gaps in the regulatory framework, they will work with officials in Ottawa to be able to fill in those gaps as needed.

Ms. Rancourt: — So what is the process for a previous client of Social Services to request their files?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Within Social Services we have an overall task force to look into any record retention. If there is a request from child and family program, they're instantly accessed to the information management unit.

When the request is received, whether that be in writing or in person, the search would occur for the records immediately. If there were no records located, the applicant would be notified in writing immediately. And if the records are available — and again this isn't just within child and family services; this is within Social Services income assistance — we would strive to get those records to them in a prompt . . .

Now in saying that we would also, in child and family, we would have to make sure that if there's any information there that needs to be redacted for specific reasons, we would do that to make sure that we're maintaining everybody's privacy. But if there is a process or if there is somebody out there that wants to be able to retain their records and their history, we would have this unit look into it immediately. And as I mentioned in the House a couple of weeks ago, any of the requests that have come in specifically for child and family, we're at about 80 to 85 per cent of them getting them their records in a timely manner.

Ms. Rancourt: — And what would you identify as being a timely manner?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess it would depend on the age of the records, how far back they are, if it's manual that we have to go through this process, geographically where are the records are being stored. We would endeavour to do that. I would hope we can do it as quick as possible but some of these records are . . . The records have deteriorated over time, so we want to make sure that we're getting the best records that we possibly can.

But in, and I think I mentioned this before, in the last two years since April of last year, we've received 1,503 requests from individuals asking for records that pertain to their specific case. And we provide a positive response nearly 85 per cent of the time that we're able to retain their records and forward on to them, again, making sure that if any information needs to be redacted we've done that as well.

But it really depends on the length, the time frame, how long ago it was. If it was a few years ago versus a few decades ago, that

would be a big difference. So we do make sure that this assessment unit gets it done in a very timely manner because if somebody has decided to step forward and want to be able to find out their personal records, we would like to be able to provide as much closure as we possibly can or for them to be able find the information as quickly as possible.

Ms. Rancourt: — And so with regards to the Sixties Scoop survivors, they have a limited time to be able to submit their papers to apply for the settlement. And I would assume that potentially you might be getting quite a few more requests. So what is the ministry's plan to ensure that applications are processed in a timely fashion?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If there is, and I think I mentioned this in the House, if there is somebody that has a federal claim that they're pending, I would encourage them to start that file immediately. The federal government doesn't need all of the historical information from the provinces immediately. They can open that file. Once the file is opened they will respect that we are trying to build a case history of them and the federal government acknowledges that.

So if there is somebody out there in the Sixties Scoop that is looking at making a claim of federal money, I'd encourage them to make that claim, start that process, contact Social Services. We'll go it. We'll get this investigation team to look into it immediately, especially if it's time sensitive. We will elevate that to make sure that we get that.

But they don't need to have this information, all of this information complete. It can come in as long as they have that case file opened. From what I've been told by my federal counterparts is that once that case file is open, then the information can flow in. They just need to start the process. So I would encourage anybody that's out there to start the process, contact us, and we will do our best to be able to fill in all of the gaps and any information that they don't have that are stored within Social Services case files.

Ms. Rancourt: — That's really good information to know. What is the average caseload for income support workers?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As far as income assistance, it would be very similar to child and family; it would be hard to put a hard and fast number on it. Again depending on rural, urban, depending if it's a new case that requires some deep contact with the individual or just a light contact. When it would be somebody, say, on our SAID program that's been on the SAID program for a while, might be very low contact, very low reporting versus somebody that's new that we have to help navigate through the system and be able to make sure that they have all their information.

And again it also depends on the individual caseworker, whether they're a veteran within income assistance, or if they're fairly new, we would want to make sure that the individual front-line worker is also working with their supervisor to make sure that their caseloads are manageable for the individual's capabilities but also trying to meet the income assistance clients' needs.

Again depending on the contact and the case file specific, it does vary and it does vary from urban to rural as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — Has there been any changes with the call centre?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again with the call centre, we've had some . . . With our SAP [Saskatchewan assistance program], TEA [transitional employment allowance], and SAID call line, the numbers have gone down as far as the wait time. From 2015 to 2016 it was at a 21-minute wait. Now it's down to 15.

Some of the processes that we've had to improve that time is making sure that our staff is cross-trained, that if there's an individual in a specific area that needs to be . . . there's some over high call volume rates, that we have enough people to be able to flow over there.

[19:45]

The other thing is we're encouraging our clients that if they do have to call, to call early in the morning. And we do have peak hours throughout the day and if their situation is something that they need to talk to, they need to call in immediately, call first thing in the morning as that seems to be a lower time of volume calls versus toward the mid to the end of the day where the call volume seems to get higher and higher. So if there is some peak times, they can try to manoeuvre around that and we would be able to provide the information in a quicker manner if they call on less peak times.

And it also depends. The peak times are not just on a daily occurrence; they're also on a monthly. We get more call volumes towards the end of the month than we would, say, in the first week of the month. There is an ebb and flow to it. So if there are clients out there that are experiencing long wait times, I would encourage them to call first thing in the morning or before lunch as that seems to be a lower volume time.

Ms. Rancourt: — Do a lot of them have to report by the end of the month? Is that why it's a bit of a more busier time at the end of the month?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I would say it's just, it's usually the end of the month when the bills are there and that there could be a concern, and they're calling in to be able to deal with that. But again we're continually working with our clients to make sure that they can get ahead of where their bills are coming in, to make sure that they're financially ahead of things versus at the end of the month when things pile up.

And I think we've all been in that situation. We're at the end of the month and the bills are there and the income is there. We want to make sure that our clients are being as proactive as possible on getting to that so they don't get to that 5 o'clock on Friday at the end of the month where they have an issue and they can't get through. We're encouraging them to be as proactive as possible.

And that also goes back to our motivational interviewing that we touched on earlier. We would sit down and be able to assess any of their specific needs. And if there is a certain time of the month that is more stressful than others, we would try to make sure that we're assisting them in planning for that.

Ms. Rancourt: — There was a pilot program created for an online platform. Can you provide me some of the outcome of that

program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry, I just had to get a little information. It was before my time.

The pilot program that you're referring to was an online application process that was run for a specific time in Social Services. And the purpose of that was to be able to gather information so we could see what worked, what didn't work, and get some feedback from our stakeholders as well as our staff as to how this process could roll out in future applications.

We've taken that information, and as I touched on earlier — or I guess it seemed earlier; a long time ago — in my opening comments, we do have an IT investment that we're working on to be able to see if this is a program that can be added into what are currently building in our IT that I touched on before.

Ultimately we want a client to be able to have the access to be able to get in and do all of their information online. We can accept emails if there's updates. We can work on that. It doesn't always have to be a face-to-face. We can work with our clients and make sure we set that up. But we want the overall system to be user friendly from their perspective.

We also want to make it very clean and easy, not just for the clients that are coming in but also for our workers which, I touched on again, frees up their time for things like motivational interviewing and working more with our clients to be able to set some goals as far as what are their financial goals, what are their employment goals. So we want to be able to get to that point where the online application is a tool that will help the clients but it will also help our staff as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — It would be really good to be able to have an online process for reporting. I know a lot of people wouldn't be able to access it, but a lot of people would and it would be a good option to have and could maybe ease up the call centre a bit more.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, absolutely if we could get to that point. We know just by having the interaction that a lot of our clients do have phones that they can use and that application process can go simpler for them. We want to make sure that it is. But we've also got to safeguard their information as well. So we want to make sure that the data that we're receiving is safe for the clients.

And this is something that, you know, as the technology continually evolves, we want to see what other jurisdictions are doing. I know some other jurisdictions have gone to complete online application. And right now we also feel that that's a tool that we could be using, but we still want to have that personal interaction with our client and not just be somebody on the other side of the computer screen. We want to be able to sit down and listen to what some of their barriers are and how we can work with them to be able to get them to a better spot in life.

Ms. Rancourt: — So I want to talk a little bit about the new program that is within the budget but is going to be announced — the Saskatchewan income support. And you talked a little bit in your ministry remarks with regards to this new income support program. And so first of all, there's a decrease within the Saskatchewan assistance program and the transitional

employment allowance. Does this mean that people who may apply for those programs, once the Saskatchewan income support program's developed, that they will be transferred into that program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I touched on in some of my opening comments, any client that is coming in need of social assistance after the start date — once we make the announcement, which will be this summer — they will come into the new program, the SIS program. In saying that, the only exception to that would be if there is a SAID client coming on to social assistance and needing things on the disability side of things. That would be done separately obviously, as it has been done in the past. We have a separate process for that.

Ms. Rancourt: — Do you know which date in the summer that this announcement will be made?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We haven't determined a date but we're looking at mid-summer.

Ms. Rancourt: — And so will there be a plan to transition eventually the SAP and TEA program out of the ministry's plans?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I said in my opening comments, the clients receiving benefits through our current programs will not be immediately impacted by anything that is on the new program.

Ms. Rancourt: — It will be strictly new clients that will be placed on the new program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — That's correct. The new intakes as of the start date, which we would have, would be just on the new program and that would be it.

Ms. Rancourt: — And you made reference to a group that will be providing feedback. Can you tell me a little bit more details about that?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sure. We put out a news release asking for people to come in to our new income assistance advisory group to be able to advise on this program. We've received multiple applications from all across the province and people with a wide variety of background. We've received applications or received interest from rural, urban, First Nations, Métis, disability. We've received a wide variety, and we're in the process of just making sure that we have a good matrix of who we think that should be on this team, and what some of the community members have told us that should make up this advisory group.

Ms. Rancourt: — When do you have planned to have this advisory group established?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I would hope probably within the next two weeks that we would have the announcement of who is on that advisory group because we want to get them working on this and being able to advise us on the program parameters and that.

Ms. Rancourt: — And how many members do you expect to be in the group?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I would say somewhere between 7 to 10 members representing a good cross-section of people that either have some experience with income assistance, on the disability, or community leaders.

Ms. Rancourt: — And will they be compensated to be part of this advisory group?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, we would pay them a per diem based on the frequency of their meetings.

Ms. Rancourt: — And do you have an idea of what their expectations will be?

[20:00]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — My expectations as minister would be that they advise myself and my deputy minister and my ADM [assistant deputy minister] on processes on a go-forward basis in the clients' best interest and what they need.

The initial term of the new advisory group is three years and tends to . . . We want to engage this group pretty heavily right at the beginning to be able to make sure that what we've been designing internally as far as our new program is how they want to be able to see their . . . Them as an advisory group, they are to advise myself and the ministry officials on what is going to be best interest for their client. If there's engagement that will help, from income assistance policy, services, and programs, we would want their input on that.

Ms. Rancourt: — So this group will be established in about two weeks, and a notice will be given out about who's part of the group. So that'll be at the end of May. And you're planning on making an announcement mid-summer with regards to this income program. So I would assume quite a bit of this income program is already established because that doesn't give you a whole lot of time for the group to work on that.

So is the group basically going to be told what your plans are with regards to the Saskatchewan income plan, and they will give you some advice on what they feel is the best direction for the ministry to go? Am I understanding this properly?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think it would be a process. Once the group is formed and announced, we would sit down with them and say, this is what we've come so far as far as our IT side of things, stuff that we've just discussed right here: what's the intake, what's on a go-forward basis, the difference between on the disability side than on the SIS side of things. Very similar to how PIAT [program implementation advisory team] had operated in the past when we had them advise on the disability side of things.

I would meet with them on a regular basis. They would meet, provide information to myself and officials. We actually had our ADM sit on that board to be able to get that input directly. So we would advise them on here's where we have come so far on this. Here's kind of the umbrella of what we see this program looking like, and what do you see as far as your role in this to be able to make this program suit the needs from each one of their specific areas that they might represent or the overall side of things.

So it won't be dictated as to this is the program — here it is. It will be a conversation back and forth on what it is we need to be able to do to make our clients successful. We want to talk to them about the motivational interviewing, some of the programs that we have in place that they might not be aware of so they can see that this is part of a bigger picture on trying to move our clients into a better spot, and how is it that they could advise myself and my officials to be able to make our clients successful.

Ms. Rancourt: — Again it seems like a really short time frame in order to do that. So this advisory group, they'll be signing on for a three-year term. So even once this program is implemented in mid-summer, they'll still be available if they're seeing some areas that aren't working efficiently or effectively. Then how much of an influence would they have to be able to make changes that need to be done?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well in the first few months of the program being rolled out, that's why we're wanting to make sure that it's a very controlled rollout. So this group will be very pivotal in giving myself feedback. I will meet with them on a regular basis or on a basis that they would like to be able to meet with myself, with officials, with people from our IT side of things to be able to make sure that this is flowing as smoothly as possible.

We want their input. That's why we formed this group. I want to be able hear directly from them, no different than I heard from PIAT. When we met with them, they met with my officials on a quarterly basis to advise. And if they need to be able to meet with me, I would make myself available to them and I would respect their opinion on how they see that this process is rolling out. The first little while it would be very critical for them to provide that input directly back.

But again this is not just on this one program, on the new program. This is for all programs within social assistance that they would be able to provide input on that. So we're not narrowing their scope for the new program. We're opening it up so that we can hear what's going from our SAID side of things as well as our other programs and our new program as well. So we want them to look at everything, not just specifically this new program, but also look back on some of the existing programs and to provide any feedback that they can on that as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how much is budgeted for the expenses for this advisory group?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We haven't budgeted anything specific for them. We pay them a per diem just like we did with PIAT. We had them meet on a quarterly basis. We haven't had anything specifically budgeted.

We have a rough estimate that we have it earmarked within our budget of over \$8,000. Then that would include travel, any expenses, hotel, that type, to be able to provide that. But we're hoping to be able to work with a lot of them. We don't want anybody travelling if they don't need to, if we can have conference calls and be able to have that discussion.

Like I said, I've met with PIAT. I've also met with several other organizations that advise. I wanted to receive as much input on this program to make it as successful as possible, and I'm open

to hearing input from them but also from our clients through the motivational interviewing and up through their workers that will come up to my briefing information, that we want to make sure that this program is successful for them.

Ms. Rancourt: — So I want to talk a little bit about the income exemption program that was introduced when the budget was announced. And so I know that there was some income exemption for some of the income support programs. Will the income exemption be available for everybody who's on the income assistance program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The current exemption that was announced in the budget was specifically for our SAID clients. And this is feedback that I heard certainly from the disability community as far as caregivers, family members, people that are actually on our program. We've received a lot of feedback on what it is that we can do to help out our clients and retain some of their earnings. We want to make sure that if there is an opportunity for one of our clients to go out and do that, that they have that opportunity.

Now in saying that, what we also heard was from our clients that a lot of their work that they were getting was seasonal, whether that be winter, summer, and they would hit the maximum allotment for the month very quickly, and then at that point we would deem it as income and we would "pull the money back."

But what we heard is, is if there was an opportunity to annualize this. So that's what we did to make sure that the programs were flexible for their schedule. And as I said, they can earn up to \$6,000, because we heard that was a reasonable number that the clients . . . And we want to encourage any of our clients on SAID to be able, if there is an opportunity for them to go earn some employment, whether that be at Christmastime or in the summer, we want to make sure that they have that opportunity to do that on the annual basis.

The current exemptions for SAP remain at the existing level. So there was no change in that. The only increased end was done on the SAID program, and that was annualized based on feedback that I myself had heard and that we were hearing up through associations like SARC [Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres] and Inclusion Saskatchewan. There was a lot of feedback from them saying, if we can annualize this it would help us out tremendously. And we've got some very positive feedback on that, to make sure that we're trying to meet our clients' needs and allowing them the opportunity to go out and earn some extra income if it's available to them.

Ms. Rancourt: — In your ministry remarks at the beginning of estimates here, you indicated that the ministry's going to be working on trying to move clients to be more employable and independent. It's not verbatim what you said, but it's what my notes say. So why was it not considered to increase the income exemptions for all income support programs? Would you not see that as being an opportunity to encourage people to be employable or produce a bit more of independence?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think this might jump back to your previous question, and this would be something that I would be hoping to get from this new income advisory group, if they could advise me on things like this. I don't want to dictate everything

that they're doing, but if there's an opportunity and they present something similar to this, we had heard a specific request from the disability side of things to be able to do that. We communicated that we would try to work it within our budget. We were able to do that and increase that.

But I'm hoping that this new advisory group would look at this new program that we just did with SAID and be able to advise us if they think that that is something that would work for the new program. I'd be very open to looking at that, but I don't want to predetermine what this group does. But I'm hopeful that they would look at some of the programs and the improvements that we've made on the SAID side of things and that could be applicable to the new program, the new SIS program.

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes, it will be really interesting to see what they say. Because I know talking to front-line workers, they indicate that income exemption increase for other income support programs would be very beneficial. And I know individuals on the TEA program, our goal is to get them to be employed and to be independent. But sometimes they have obstacles in their way, and so they may be employed but then have an obstacle. At this point they don't have an income exemption, my understanding is, and so any income they earn gets taken off of what their benefits are, and so even a simple part-time minimum wage job could potentially have them off of the TEA program. And then if something happens with that job, then they have to reapply.

And so it would be nice to have some type of transition to help these individuals even if they have a stumbling . . . Opportunity that they could come back without having to go through the bureaucracy of applying fresh and new, and have some type of process with regards to that.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, and two points on that. One would be hopefully we would catch that within our intake on the new program. Part of the motivational interviewing and other questions that we would talk about with our clients upfront is if this is something that is going to be a barrier to their employment, we would try to identify that with them upfront and be able to build a case plan around that, to be able to say that if there is some temporary employment, at least we know that upfront versus reacting to it.

So that's the whole point of this new program, is to be able to sit down and identify what are the barriers to long-term sustainable employment. We would like it if it was full-time employment, but we understand that there are also some barriers to that as well. If there's some part-time employment, we want to be able to find out what are their barriers to them earning an income, and how can we as Social Services help them transition to that point where they no longer need social services and they're in a comfortable spot.

And there could be some ebb and flow. If we identify that upfront, it makes it a lot easier for us and for the front-line workers to be able to work with the client versus reactionary if somebody gets a job for a couple of months and then is back on this unknowing. At least if we try to know as much information or more information about their specific needs upfront, it will help us to be able to get that client to a spot where they're successful.

[20:15]

Ms. Rancourt: — How many individuals are receiving benefits for special-needs diets?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll have to mark that down as something that we'll have to table with the committee as soon as possible.

Ms. Rancourt: — And do you happen to have a breakdown on the different diet programs? And if so, could you also table that information?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We'll table the breakdown of the different programs and of the uptake on those programs and we'll get that to you as soon as possible.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. Since introducing the seniors' education property tax deferral program, how many seniors applied for this program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As of December 31st, 2018, approximately \$136,752 has been committed to nine Saskatchewan senior households.

Ms. Rancourt: — So there was nine seniors households that applied for the seniors' education property tax deferral program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There were nine that were approved. I don't have the number of the applications, but nine went through to the approval process to make up the 136,000 and change.

Ms. Rancourt: — In the past year, how many funeral services have been paid for by the Ministry of Social Services? And can you break that down by the programs?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We're going to have to do phone a friend back to the office and get that information for you. And we should be able to get it by the time the night is done. By 9:30 I'll get that information to you, but we have to just check back at the office.

And I don't know if we have it broken down by each individual program or just a global amount, but I'll get you what I can right away.

Ms. Rancourt: — I appreciate that, thank you. So what is the process for families to apply for funeral benefits? What would be the average length of time a family would need to wait in order to get the financial arrangements?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If it's an existing client and there's a family around, we would work with the family immediately to be able to start that process. We would encourage them to contact the funeral home, start the process, and then we would work with family on the application process and make sure that that's done, being respectful of the family's loss. If there are extenuating circumstances and we're having trouble contacting family members or that, it could take a little bit longer.

In saying that, we want make sure that we maintain the decency of our client even after they have passed, to be able to work with any family members or anybody in the community that would be

able to help us through this process and make sure that it's done in a very timely manner. But again it depends on . . . There's no set case for this and we wouldn't have any hard timelines on that, but we would make sure that we do that very respectfully of the family.

Ms. Rancourt: — I know there's been concerns brought to my attention about the wait time for families to get an appointment to talk to a caseworker with regards to making arrangements for the finances. And oftentimes that could be a couple weeks. And then by that point the family, they might not be as motivated once the funeral has been done.

And so funeral homes have been sitting there looking for payment and it's caused some issues with regards to that. So I don't know if there would be a process that could make this a bit more smoother for funeral home directors because we definitely don't want to discourage them from providing these services for our most vulnerable. I don't know if you've heard of any issues.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I haven't heard of anything specific, but again we want to make sure that each case . . . And when a client does pass on that we make sure that we maintain that dignity that we have with the client while they were with us and while they were a client.

We make sure that if there is some concerns brought forward by the family or the funeral home, that we would sit down and be able to discuss that immediately with them to be able to make sure again that we maintain that decency for the individual that has passed.

In saying that, there's sometimes extenuating circumstances that might not be first and foremost to the family but that are more behind the scenes. And we would try to work with them to make sure that it's done in a very timely manner, being respectful of the family and of course of our client.

Ms. Rancourt: — So you make some reference to individuals who are currently receiving income support programs with the ministry, but there's individuals who receive these funeral benefits that aren't able to afford a funeral but aren't receiving services from the Ministry of Social Services. So in those cases, is that a much more timely process to get the financial arrangements arranged?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again, if there's a close family member then that would kind of expedite the process to be able to do that. But we do have to make sure that we have everything done properly, that if there is no family member, I mean, it might take some time to locate a family member. And if we can't locate a family member then it's ultimately up to my office to be able to make sure that that's done in a timely manner.

In my 18 months as minister, I haven't seen this come across my desk too often. But if there is any specific concerns and if somebody that you're aware of, either in your area, I would ask them to forward that information on to our office and we'll pursue it very quickly to make sure that that individual again has the decency when they pass that we've looked after their needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — So there's been some questions to me with regards to the carbon tax refund. Is this going to be an exempted

income for individuals on assistance programs?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As all things with the carbon tax — and I won't go on my carbon tax rant, I promise — everything is kind of evolving rapidly. So it's something that we're currently assessing. We're going to have a look at what the rebates are exactly for individuals and then we'll make a determination if this is deemed as an income or if it's not an income. We'll have to do that. But we want to make sure . . . There's lots of challenges going on with the carbon tax right now and we want to make sure that if we do make a decision that it's a solid decision on a long-term basis, not just on a short-term basis.

[20:30]

The Chair: — At this time we will take a five-minute recess and reconvene at 25 to 9.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

The Chair: — Welcome back to the Human Services Committee for the Social Services estimates. I recognize Ms. Rancourt.

Ms. Rancourt: — In your statement last spring during estimates and I believe in your ministry remarks as well, you made mention that you were working with the federal government to co-design a new Canada housing benefit for low-income renters. How is this process going?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We're still kind of working out the details with the federal government as to the exact details of what the new program is going to look like. But I just got handed some information on your question earlier about the special diets, if I can provide that information to the committee.

We have approximately 6,000 households within our SAP and SAID program. Some of the examples of special diet would be dialysis, high-protein, pregnancy, HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] or AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome] or food supplements.

Ms. Rancourt: — So when the rental housing supplement, there was no longer any new applicants allowed to apply for this program, the reason for the elimination of the program was because there was going to be something coming forward to help low-income families with the cost of rent. And I believe that this federal program was hopefully going to meet those needs. Is that still the plan going forward?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Some of the reasons for . . . And again I want to make sure that we're very clear on this, that we didn't cancel the rental housing supplement. This was on new intakes only. The main contributing factors were that when this program was brought into by the government, it was brought in on a temporary basis to be able to meet the needs of very high escalating rent costs over a short duration.

Since the program has started we've seen, both on the private and the public sector, we've seen high vacancy rates. Within Sask Housing we had in and around — and again this number floats — around a 13 per cent vacancy rate. We had 350-plus units in Regina and in Saskatoon. Now these aren't housing units. These are individual units that were not being utilized. We saw that the

vacancy rate within the private sector had also gone up from when it was very low in 2011 and 2012. We were seeing places where there was a zero vacancy rate in such places like Estevan. Since that point in time, we've also seen the rental market open up a bit.

So we decided to put a pause on new intakes on the Sask . . . But again anybody that was currently on the existing program was grandfathered forward. And we've also, since that point in time, we've seen a little bit of uptake into the Sask Housing and into the private sector, which we're glad that we're able to utilize the assets of the Government of Saskatchewan to their full potential. And just for the record, since 2007 we have increased the shelter rates nine times.

Ms. Rancourt: — So are individuals who are calling the Ministry of Social Services looking for extra support with regards to rent — maybe potentially looking at applying for the rental supplement or asking for more income — are they being referred to these vacancy units? How is the ministry ensuring that these vacant units are filled with individuals who can use that support?

[20:45]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Our role, if there was an individual that's coming in and had some housing issues, we would certainly work with that individual and make sure that they are aware. We would work with, share information with the other housing authorities so they know exactly what our client's needs are. But we want to make sure that we're finding a good match between the individual, what their needs are, obviously taking into consideration if they have any medical needs that we would try to locate them within a bus route or something that would make it convenient for them to be able to do that.

In saying that, we also want to make sure that the client is in housing that is suitable for them. We don't want one individual staying in a three-bedroom home. That doesn't make sense. We would want to utilize them now in saying that we would want a family in there, but we don't want to have anybody leave that facility. So we just want to make sure that we're suiting what we have as far as inventory, what's out there in the private market, with what our clients' needs are.

Ms. Rancourt: — So has your vacancy rates decreased?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Within Sask Housing?

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It would be a very minor amount that it has decreased, but not significant. Like I said, we still have, in and around globally in Saskatchewan, around 3,000 units. Saskatoon and Regina, I think Saskatoon last I saw was hovering in around 400; Regina was 350. And we do have housing units that are available. So again if there's somebody out there that is having some specific challenges, we would ask them to contact us and we would try to accommodate their needs as much as we possibly can with our existing units and make sure that they have a safe place to call home.

Ms. Rancourt: — How many units in our communities are

vacant and boarded up?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — How many are vacant? In and around 3,000, and the number does move. And they would be in various states. I wouldn't say boarded up. Some of them might be winterized, just due to a chronic vacancy. But again we try to make sure that we maintain the people's assets the best we possibly can. "Boarded up" might not be the term I would use; it would be chronically vacant. We would make sure that it is winterized and kept. But in saying that, we also want to make sure that it's being used if possible, because we don't want it to deteriorate just by sitting there.

Sorry, I just have one. We have — I just got handed some information — less than 1 per cent are considered non-rentable.

Ms. Rancourt: — And how many people have been evicted from the housing authority houses in the past year?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again the eviction would be kind of the last resort. We would continually work with our clients within the Sask Housing to be able to make sure that we're meeting their needs. We don't have the exact number of evictions, but we do have a lot of clients moving from sometimes unit to unit depending on their circumstances. If we have a family and somebody is fleeing domestic violence, we need to open up a unit for them. We wouldn't consider that an eviction of them; we would consider that just relocating. But also if their family is growing, we have to move them from one to another, based on their current needs. But I don't have the number of actual evictions. But again it's kind of a moving target throughout the province, depending on the location.

Ms. Rancourt: — I know our office has been getting some concerns from northern people who are having a hard time making ends meet with the cost of living, and they've gotten into arrears with their social housing, and so were evicted because they're unable to keep up with the bills. And so I don't know if you've noticed that, this being a trend, but I know our office has been getting calls with regards to that.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If there is somebody that has been evicted, you know, again we don't want to do that as a first resort. That's a last resort. We would sit down with that individual and be able to try to provide a repayment schedule that would work for them and for us. And only if it's very chronically — there's a lot of arrears — we would consider relocating that individual. But we also have a responsibility for those assets to be able to make sure that there is . . . that they are paying their rent to Saskatchewan Housing Corporation.

And again, this is why we want to be able to sit down . . . And I know I keep coming back to this on the motivational interviewing. This is why we want to deal with this. If somebody is going to be in a problem or foresee a problem coming, we would want them to come and sit down with us and be able to be proactive and plan with us and say, hey, there's some circumstances coming up; I'm getting behind. How can we work together as Social Services, Sask Housing, and the client to be able to get through this?

We're very hopeful that the client would be proactive in that, to be able to sit down with us to make sure that there isn't that

finality of an eviction, because we don't want to do that. But in saying that, we also want to make sure that they are paying that. And we want to get to a point where the client is thinking proactively about what the future is and not just the next month and the next few months, and how we can work with them to be able to get those arrears cleared off in a timely manner.

Ms. Rancourt: — So we know utility bills have been increasing, and individuals living in affordable housing have been finding that the homes are not very energy efficient, especially individuals in the North that simply rely on power to heat their homes. Is there anything happening to make these homes more energy efficient?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It depends on the community. I mean if there's options of heating, whether it be propane or natural gas, depending on where the community is, we would want to make sure that the client is using what is the most energy efficient, understanding a lot of these homes were built years ago. The insulation might be deteriorating. And we would want to be able to work with them to be able to make sure that that home is suitable for their needs.

It would really depend on where their location is, but energy efficiency is very important because the cost of utilities is going up. And I could pivot to the carbon tax very easily on this one. But we do see the costs going up and we want to be able to make sure that our homes and everybody's home — not just the Sask Housing where we have 18,000-plus units, but all the homes — are operating in the most energy-efficient manner, whether that be insulation, heating. It all depends on how that heat is going to be generated. But as we're all very well aware, in Saskatchewan we have some bitterly cold months. And we want to make sure that any payments that we are paying out to the Crown corporations or to private industry for propane or some other type of fuel, that we're getting the maximum amount of dollar for that fuel that is invested in heat for our clients, certainly during the coldest . . .

And we can also work with them in setting up, again being proactive, setting up equalized payment plans so we can distribute the cost of the heating throughout the year versus getting a \$600 bill in January, trying to space that out throughout the year and planning ahead. And we'd be more than happy to sit down and work with our clients to be able to be proactively concerned. Because I'm sure everybody's energy bill went up significantly this last February when we had a very long cold snap. And if we can work with our clients to space that out, we certainly will.

Ms. Rancourt: — Is propane still an option for Sask Housing in the North?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There would be some units out there that would still be, but we're moving our clients anywhere from fuel oil, that are on propane, that would be moving into electric. And we understand that the cost of electric is more but it's also more reliable. It's safer. It's better obviously for the environment. And if we convert somebody from fuel oil or propane to electric, realizing that the cost will be more, we do have a program that would be able to subsidize some of those electric costs for them. So if there is some individual that is using propane or fuel oil and wants to convert, I would get them to get in contact with their

local housing authority, and then we would work with them to be able to try to get that conversion done in a timely manner. In saying that, we also do recognize that it is more expensive, and we would work with them on subsidizing some of those costs.

Ms. Rancourt: — So like you made reference to, we had an exceptionally cold winter this year. And so I was wondering, do you have the numbers of the individuals that utilized the cold weather strategy beds in locations?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll look that up right away. But I did get some information on a previous question while we're looking that one up.

On average, we have about 100 clients per year that pass . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . Oh sorry, my mistake, 700. I'm looking at the wrong . . . 700 funerals a year where clients pass.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you for that information.

[21:00]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Certainly we had put out our cold weather strategy always before winter, and I had asked my officials during February to re-send out that news release to make sure that everybody is aware. We don't specifically track on the cold weather strategy. We track on shelter usage. We don't identify them as coming through the door, this is part of the cold weather strategy, because they might not be aware. They just need someplace.

So there are multiple options. Either we can get them into a shelter immediately, we can get them into a shelter that's maybe close by or across town. We can work with that specific client to be able to see if there is family or friends that can take the individual in for a short amount of time. And if need be, if we have to, if we exhaust all of those, we can put the individual into a hotel- or motel-type situation on a temporary basis just to make sure that they're safe.

I think the cold weather strategy has been very good. It's been well advertised. As soon as we put it out, the media picked up on it. Did some checks to see where the capacity was — certainly in Saskatoon and the major centres — to make sure that if they were at capacity or where they were at.

But I guess the short answer would be, if somebody needs in from in the cold, it's upon us to make sure that they find someplace to stay for one night or two nights, depending on what their circumstances are. But we would want to make sure that nobody has to endure, for a long period of time, the cold weather. We want to make sure that they're inside, they're safe, they're warm, and they get a good meal in their stomachs.

Ms. Rancourt: — How many deaths were there weather related? Do you have the five-year, like of how many?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The question might be better posed to Justice on the coroner side of things because we don't necessarily track what the coroner would. But again the Social Services' policy, if somebody needs shelter, in from the cold, we will provide that for them on an emergency basis or on a short-term basis to be able to make sure that their needs . . .

I mean the weather's changed now, but it would be up to the individual to notify Social Services or a shelter or a community-based organization — whether that be in Saskatoon like the Friendship Inn — and identify themselves as having problems for the night, and we would make sure that they found a spot to be able to sleep that night and be able to have a solid meal to help them through that night or on a short-term basis.

Ms. Rancourt: — Because with a news article in March, it indicated that there was 13 deaths across the province that have occurred since November of last year. And so that number is quite substantial, I believe. And so in the previous years there was numbers of like 16, 20, 23, and so in a short winter period to have that number of deaths I think is quite substantial. And I think it would be something that your ministry should look into, of potentially where some of those barriers could have been.

I know with regards to some of the toxicology reports that some of them were intoxicated, but not all of them. And they also indicate that a large percentage of them come from rural areas. And so if that's a barrier for accessing shelter, I think that would be something that's important for the ministry to look into.

But also within this report, it talks about the number of people who have visited the emergency rooms with regards to cold-weather injuries, and that's also a high number of individuals who are accessing those services in the emergency rooms. So getting those numbers from the Ministry of Health potentially would be a good information, and looking at what barriers are there and adjusting those.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, and as you mentioned, there were 13 that the coroner had identified in that. We don't know if those were Social Services' clients. We don't know what . . . And as far as the emergency room visits for frostbite or various other things, we don't know if they're even in contact with Social Services. If there is a contact with Social Services, again we don't turn anybody away. We will find them adequate sleeping arrangements, whether that be in a shelter, a hotel, with a family, with a friend. If they need cab fare to be able to get to that location, to be able to be safe that evening in the cold weather, we will try to accommodate them best we can.

In general our policy is very firm; we don't turn anybody away. We will make sure that they do find something. But I'm not familiar with the 13 that passed away due to cold weather and what their intoxication level . . . I wouldn't know if they were Social Services' clients. But again our policy is, we don't turn anybody away.

Ms. Rancourt: — Because a lot of people who are homeless don't necessarily have involvement with Social Services for many different reasons, but it's still an obligation for the Ministry of Social Services to ensure that all the vulnerable individuals within our communities have access to services. And it's good that those services are available, but maybe that needs to be extended a bit more to maybe there's areas that don't have the services that larger urban centres do. And that's something that needs to be looked into.

I know there was a lot of businesses that, when we had those really cold days, they allowed people to sit in their doorways and such, and they were more forgiving with regards to that and that

was nice to see. That's the Saskatchewan way. We tend to try to look out for everybody. But I think it's important, I think we have an obligation to all of these families that lost their loved ones that we ensure that we're mindful of that and ensure that there's services available.

I have a few more questions here that I want to ask before our time is over. So there's been some discussion with regards to cases that are in arrears. What is the ministry's policy with collecting arrears?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If there is any arrears by any of our clients, we would sit down and be able to work with them to be able to schedule the repayment program, and it can start as little as \$5 a month to be able to work out that plan again. We want to make sure that we're accommodating their income and trying to get a picture of what their circumstances are and what they can afford, but also understanding that we do have a financial responsibility to collect those arrears.

If we didn't collect the arrears it would kind of . . . Social Services would have a large debt that we'd have to write off every year. So we want to work with our clients on a short-term and long-term basis to make sure that they're in a position that they can pay back the arrears that is owing.

Ms. Rancourt: — How many cases are currently in arrears?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We would have to get that information. Again it's a floating number and it would change on a daily basis. But we'll endeavour to try to get a number of how many cases are, as of today or as of this month, that are currently in arrears. Now again in saying that, there's a spectrum. They could just be at the starting of a payment of their arrears or they could be finishing, so it will be a fluctuating number. But we'll try to get that to you as soon as possible.

Ms. Rancourt: — How far back would you go with regards to collecting arrears?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As far as the arrears and how far the arrears go back, I guess it would all depend on that client and how long their arrears are. But what we're trying to do is catch that, if there are any arrears, that we catch them as quickly as we possibly can and sit down and be able to work that out with our client to make sure that that arrears doesn't get to an unmanageable number for them or an unmanageable time frame for Social Services.

We want to be able to make sure that . . . Nobody wants to be in arrears. Certainly no clients that I've ever met want to be in arrears. It's stressful for them, and we want to make sure that if we have that opportunity to be able to work with them when it's a small arrears, we can get that payment plan done quickly so they can get that stress off of them. And then we can, if there is something that has come to a large amount, we can work out a payment plan that works both for them and for Social Services.

Ms. Rancourt: — I wanted to ask some questions with regards to the discounted bus passes. What is a requirement to receive a discounted bus pass?

[21:15]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It would be the individual or immediate family member that is on any of the programs such as SAP, SAID, TEA, the provincial training allowance, or the Saskatchewan employment supplement. Again we work with the municipalities in Saskatoon, Regina, Prince Albert, Moose Jaw, Swift Current, Yorkton, and North Battleford to help administrate this as the buses are a municipal responsibility. So we work with them to be able to make sure that our clients have access to transit in those major urban centres.

Ms. Rancourt: — Has there been any changes to the funding with regards to bus passes and your agreement with municipalities?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I've been told, the funding from our ministry has remained the same. It flows through the cities. Now in saying that, again as I identified before, the buses are a municipal responsibility. They may have modified their rates for whatever reason if they're trying to create more revenue off of their . . . so they might modify the rates. But the money that we're allocating out to the municipalities that I just went through has stayed the same.

Ms. Rancourt: — So if the municipalities have increased their bus rates, then that cost would be on the municipalities with these discounted bus passes? Or would the clients who are purchasing the bus passes have to pay a little bit more because Social Services is only providing a certain amount?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again as I said, we're providing the same amount. If the municipality decides to change their rates on transit, that's up to them. But we're consistent in providing the same funding to the municipalities to make sure that our clients have access to transit. Again in saying that, the municipality might decide to change their rates, but our program has maintained its consistency over the last few years.

Ms. Rancourt: — There was a report that was recently released that has some recommendations about child care in the province. One of the recommendations was to have all aspects of child care represented in one ministry. Has there been some discussion to implement this recommendation?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Could we get clarification on where that recommendation came from?

Ms. Rancourt: — It came from the university. I believe the University of Regina put forward, released a report.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Okay, and what was their specific recommendation?

Ms. Rancourt: — That there was oftentimes some confusion with regards to child care subsidies and child care spaces because the Ministry of Education is responsible for a portion of it and the Ministry of Social Service is. So their recommendation was to move all of that responsibility under one ministry.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — And I guess I would refer back to my earlier answer with our human services ministries, that we get together — the Minister of Education, Minister of Health, and myself — we talk about child care subsidies, amongst various other things, to make sure that our clients' needs are being met.

I understand the need of that, but there are different aspects to within the child care. There's child care within our 18 or 9 joint-use schools. There's child care that is provided by Social Services. So there's different aspects. To say child care is just one unit wouldn't be accurate. We want to be able to make sure that we're meeting each client's needs in each area.

The Chair: — Okay, thank you very much. Are there any other questions on Social Services, vote (SS01)? Seeing none, if the minister would like to do any wrap-up remarks before we start voting, that would let the officials leave. Please go ahead.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Very quick, brief thank you to the committee. Thank you to Mr. Chair. Thank you to the opposition for providing the questions. I very much appreciate the respectful manner in which they were brought forward. And I want to thank my officials. And it's been a long day, so I'll keep my remarks very brief, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you. Ms. Rancourt, do you have any closing remarks?

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. Again I want to thank all the officials for being here tonight. Like I said, I always have so many questions, but I find that this is such a great learning opportunity for myself. And it's such a complex ministry with all the different areas, and the work that you guys do is very interesting and very important for the province. And I hope you realize that we really appreciate everything you do day to day in ensuring that our most vulnerable are taken care of.

I want to thank my colleagues for being here tonight and paying attention. And thank you to the officials in Hansard and the individuals that are taping the session for people in the public to be able to have access to the information that's been provided today. So thank you for everything.

The Chair: — Okay, thank you. And thank you to the officials. If you wish to absent yourselves, you may do so now, providing you have the permission of the minister of course. Okay, we will carry on. Central management and services (SS01), amount to be voted, 57,459, is that agreed . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . 454, sorry. Poor glasses. Okay, we'll start this over again.

Okay, central management and services (SS01), amount to be voted, 57,554,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Okay. Child and family services (SS04) in the sum of 300,350,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Income assistance services (SS03) to be voted in the amount of 607,659,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Client support (SS05) to be voted, 12,519,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Housing to be voted, 8,061,000, is that agreed?

Education in the amount of 727,568,000.

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Would someone so move? Mr. Steinley. Is that agreed?

The Chair: — Disability programs and services (SS14) to be voted, 250,886,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

The Chair: — Carried. Non-appropriated expenses adjustment in the amount of 6,308,000. Non-appropriated expense adjustments are non-cash adjustments presented for information purposes only. No amount to be voted. Social Services, vote 36, in the sum of 1,236,929,000.

**General Revenue Fund
Education
Vote 5**

The Chair: — Vote 5, Education, page 43, central management and services, subvote (ED01) in the amount of 12,411,000, is that agreed?

I would ask a member to move the following resolution:

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for 12 months ending March 31st, 2020, the following sums for Social Services in the amount of 1,236,929,000.

The Chair: — Carried. K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12] education, subvote (ED03) in the amount of 1,944,490,000, is that agreed?

Would someone move that please? Ms. Wilson. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Early years, subvote (ED08) in the amount of 96,905,000, is that agreed?

The Chair: — Carried.

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

**General Revenue Fund
Advanced Education
Vote 37**

The Chair: — Carried. Literacy, subvote (ED17) in the amount of 1,359,000, is that agreed?

The Chair: — Okay, vote 37, Advanced Education on page 23. I'm not sure that we need the minister and staff here anymore . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . Oh, we've got the bill, yes. Okay, you have to stay.

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Vote 37, Advanced Education, page 23, central management and services (AE01) in the amount of 15,249,000, is that agreed?

The Chair: — Carried. Provincial library, subvote (ED15) in the amount of 12,899,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Post-secondary education (AE02) in the amount of 675,417,000, is that agreed?

The Chair: — Carried. Teachers' pensions and benefits, subvote (ED04) in the amount of 22,345,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Student supports, subvote (AE03) in the amount of 36,902,000, is that agreed?

The Chair: — Carried. Non-appropriated expense adjustment in the amount of 389,000. Non-appropriated expense adjustments are non-cash adjustments presented for information purposes only. No amount is to be voted.

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Education, vote 5: 2,090,409,000.

The Chair: — Carried. Non-appropriated expense adjustment in the amount of 167,000. Non-appropriated expense adjustments are non-cash adjustments presented for information purposes only. No amount to be voted.

I will now ask a member to move the following resolution:

[21:30]

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for 12 months ending March 31st, 2020, the following sum for Education in the amount of 2,090,409,000.

Advanced Education, vote 37: 727,568,000. I would now ask a member to move the following resolution:

Mr. Goudy. Is that agreed?

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for 12 months ending March 31st, 2020, the following sums for Advanced

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

**General Revenue Fund
Health
Vote 32**

The Chair: — Vote 32, Health, page 75, central management and services, subvote (HE01) in the amount of 9,619,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Provincial health services and support, subvote (HE04) in the amount of 228,513,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Saskatchewan health services, subvote (HE03) in the amount of 3,970,488,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Medical services and medical education programs, subvote (HE06) in the amount of 948,911,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Drug plan and extended benefits, subvote (HE08) in the amount of 396,461,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Non-appropriated expense adjustment in the amount of 179,000. Non-appropriated expense adjustments are non-cash adjustments presented for information purposes only. No amount to be voted.

Health, vote 32: 5,553,992,000. I will now ask a member to move the following resolution:

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31st, 2020, the following sum for Health in the amount of 5,553,992,000.

Monsieur Fiaz. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

**General Revenue Fund
Labour Relations and Workplace Safety
Vote 20**

The Chair: — Vote 20, Labour Relations and Workplace Safety, page 99, central management and services, subvote (LR01) in the amount of 4,668,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Occupational health and safety, subvote (LR02) in the amount of 9,127,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Employment standards, subvote (LR03) in the amount of 2,978,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Labour Relations Board, subvote (LR04) in the amount of \$1,000,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Carried.

The Chair: — Carried. Labour relations and mediation, subvote (LR05) in the amount of 689,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Workers' Advocate, subvote (LR06) in the amount of 1,068,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Non-appropriated expense adjustment in the amount of 130,000. Non-appropriated expense adjustments are non-cash adjustments presented for information purposes only. No amount to be voted.

Labour Relations and Workplace Safety, vote 20: 19,530,000. I will now ask a member to move the following resolution:

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31st, 2020, the following sum for Labour Relations and Workplace Safety, in the amount of 19,530,000.

Will someone move that? Mr. Steinley. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

**General Revenue Fund
Lending and Investing Activities
Advanced Education
Vote 169**

The Chair: — Okay. Vote 169, Advanced Education on page 154, loans to student aid fund, subvote (AE01) in the amount of 75,000,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Advanced Education, vote 169, 75,000,000. I would now ask a member to move the following resolution:

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31st, 2020, the following sums for Advanced Education in the amount of 75,000,000.

Would someone so move? Ms. Wilson. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

**General Revenue Fund
Supplementary Estimates — No. 2
Advanced Education
Vote 37**

The Chair: — Supplementary estimates — no. 2, 2018-19, vote 37, Advanced Education, page 9, student supports, subvote (AE03) in the amount of \$2,000,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Post-secondary education, subvote (AE02) in the amount of \$10,000,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Advanced Education, vote 37: \$12,000,000. I will now ask a member to move the following resolution:

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for 12 months ending March 31st, 2019, the following sums for Advanced Education in the amount of \$12,000,000.

Mr. Goudy. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

**General Revenue Fund
Supplementary Estimates — No. 2
Health
Vote 32**

The Chair: — Supplementary estimates — no. 2, 2018-19, vote 32, Health, page 10, Saskatchewan health services, subvote (HE03) in the amount of 45,000,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Health, vote 32: 45,000,000. I will now ask a member to move the following resolution:

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for 12 months ending March 31st, 2019, the following sums for Health in the amount of 45,000,000.

Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Okay. Health, vote 32: 45,000,000. I will now ask a member to move the following resolution:

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for 12 months ending March 31st, 2019, the following sums for Health in the amount of 45,000,000.

Will someone move that please? Ms. Wilson. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

[21:45]

Okay, we'll ask someone to move a report, the Standing Committee on Human Services eighth report. Committee members, you have before you a draft of the eighth report of the Standing Committee on Human Services. We require a member to move the following motion:

That the eighth report of the Standing Committee on Human Services be adopted and presented to the Assembly.

Hon. Ms. Wilson: — I move:

That the eighth report of the Standing Committee on Human Services be adopted and presented to the Assembly.

The Chair: — Okay. You have heard the motion. Will you take it as read?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

Bill No. 145 — *The Residential Services Act, 2018*

Clause 1

The Chair: — Okay, Mr. Minister, we are ready to move ahead. Okay, we will continue with the last item agenda, consideration of Bill No. 145, *The Residential Services Act, 2018*, clause 1, short title.

Minister Merriman, you are here with your officials. If you wish to introduce any officials and have any opening comments, please go ahead.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have very similar officials that were here since 3 o'clock this afternoon, so I don't think I'll do the reintroduction. I will talk a little bit about the bill. Then I would be pleased to take any questions from the committee.

The Residential Services Act has not had any significant changes since it was last reviewed in 1985. The needs of the people served under this Act have evolved since then and it's time for our legislation and regulations to do so as well. Bill No. 145 will repeal and replace *The Residential Services Act*. The ministries of Social Services, Health, Justice, Corrections and Policing are currently using this Act to license a number of facilities that provide residential services to some of Saskatchewan's most vulnerable people.

Licensed under this Act are group homes for people with intellectual disabilities, staff residential services for children in care, approved private service homes, women's shelters, and other residential facilities that provide care and supervision to persons who are vulnerable. Many of these people are not able to

independently care for themselves due to family circumstances, age, disability, or illness. Government has a growing need to provide more residential options for people with disabilities, children in need of protection, youth in specialized care, women and children fleeing interpersonal violence or abuse, and others who are in need of residential care.

A substantial change in this bill is expanding the definition of what is considered a care facility and moving it into regulations. The definitions of “residential service facility” and “private service home” in the current legislation are fairly strict and can sometimes limit the care that services may be provided in these settings. Moving the definition to the regulations will allow some flexibility when it comes to licensing new residential options under this Act, while allowing existing categories of the facilities to continue to provide services. As this new residential care model emerges, it is important that we have a legislative framework in place that will allow us to pursue new options if they become available.

This new Act also increases the penalties for those who breach this legislation. The maximum amount someone can be fined for violating the current Act is \$200 per incident. While imposing fines on an individual or an organization is rare, increasing the maximum penalty will encourage strict compliance to all requirements of the Act and regulations. In particular, increased penalties will act as a stronger deterrent to individuals who consider operating an unlicensed facility. Under the new legislation, a breach of any provision in the Act and regulations could result in a maximum fine of \$300 a day.

In addition to the provisions outlined above, we are also increasing the maximum length of time which a licence may be issued. The current Act only allows for licences to be issued to up to one year. The new Act will allow options for issuing licences for up to three years. Allowing the option of issuing an extended licence will provide some flexibility for the public servants who license these facilities and the service delivery sector, while not compromising residential care. An extended licence will only be considered where appropriate and where the agency has proven a history of compliance. This provision will only affect the frequency in which the ministry licences are issued. Facilities will continue to require annual fire inspections in order to meet their licensing requirements.

The rewrite of this Act will include new sections regarding the ability to obtain search warrants for the purpose of accessing a vulnerable person if there is any reason to believe their health and safety is at risk or the operator has denied access to the individual.

Clearly outlined requirements for information sharing and record keeping by the care facility operators, the ability for an applicant to request a review of a decision regarding licensing, clearly outlined provisions for the protection of residents, protection for persons who report abuse, and appointment of an administrator to act in place of the operator, if necessary. The new Act also includes updated language and conforms to its current legislation drafting standards.

I would be more than happy to answer any questions from the committee.

The Chair: — Thank you very much. We will now proceed with Bill No. 145, *The Residential Services Act, 2018*. Are there any questions? Ms. Rancourt.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you, and thanks again for the officials being here today with regards to *The Residential Services Act*. I’ve been looking forward to having this opportunity to discuss the changes within this Act. We know that because it completely repealed the previous Act, it’s important to have this discussion with regards to a lot of the changes in the language.

And one of the first questions I’m going to ask is, with regards to the changes in this piece of legislation, a lot of the language, instead of using “residential services,” it was changed to “care facility.” What was the reasoning behind the change of that language?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Care facility is more of an overarching concept. When we get into the regulations and that, we’ll drill down to exactly what each definition is on that. So this is just more of an umbrella term that we’re using.

Ms. Rancourt: — And when do you expect the regulations to be established?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — They’ll be completed by January of 2020, so by the end of this year.

Ms. Rancourt: — And in the minister’s remarks when presenting the bill in the legislature, he indicated that “Expanding the definition of a care facility will reduce unnecessary barriers to provide quality care to people in need.” Why did the previous Act provide these unnecessary barriers? And can you give me some examples of that?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — To answer your question, this would just provide us a little bit more flexibility. There’s other models that are emerging. As I said in my opening comments, this hasn’t been updated since the mid-’80s and we wanted to make sure that it’s reflective of today’s market. And some of the different needs that we are seeing, whether that be models that are being proposed across the country that are very effective, or if there’s other models that are currently existing that are providing that there is a ministerial order for an exemption on the specific organization, that they are for-profit, we want to make sure that they’re included in the Act as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — Has there been any agencies that are more a for-profit agency that has been asking for the ministries to make these changes?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I don’t think there was any specific organization that was asking for this. I think this is something that’s being updated across the country, and we wanted to make sure that we were in step to be able to meet our clients’ needs and their various needs. And we want to be able to provide various options to be able to meet their needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — So the previous legislation did not allow for any residential services to be for-profit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes that’s correct. The Act was very constrictive, as I said in my opening comments, and didn’t allow

for any flexibility in that, so that's why we're making sure that this new Act provides some flexibility for Social Services to be able to meet the changing needs of our clients.

Ms. Rancourt: — And so what kind of changes needed to be made in order to provide this service?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We wanted to make sure that the Act was reflective of some of the complex medical needs that we are seeing within our clients. As I touched on before in other areas, we're seeing some more complex needs, and we want to be able to make sure that our facilities and the operators are able to meet those needs. The other side of it is, is we were seeing some fatigue on the community-based-organization side that we wanted to make sure that we weren't overutilizing them, and we wanted to be able to come up with a variety of options.

Ms. Rancourt: — So with regards to issuing a licence, there was changes made with regards to the period of time that the licence could be for, from one year to not exceeding three. So it could be up to three years. Why was it decided to extend that period of time?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I touched on, it allows the option for extending the multi-year licence, gives a flexibility for public servants to license those facilities. And again we want to make sure that this isn't everybody. This is organizations that have a proven track record with Social Services, that they have been in compliance for a long period of time, and we're very comfortable with the relationship that we have, that those are the ones that we'd be looking at extending into a multi-year agreement.

Ms. Rancourt: — So what would qualify as a history of compliance?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It would be an organization that has consistently demonstrated compliance on multiple levels, not just only the care standard, but as I mentioned before, fire inspections, all of the appropriate regulations that they need. Somebody that has demonstrated that over a multiple of years and that Social Services has a very good working relationship with the owners, the individuals operating those facilities. Those would be the ones that we would focus in on.

Ms. Rancourt: — Who's going to make that determination of how long an agency has shown a history of compliance and that they would qualify for having a multi-year licence? Who will be deciding which agencies will qualify for that?

[22:00]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — That would be at the officials level. The director would be making those decisions based on their knowledge of the provider, as well as having access to all of the inspections and all of the compliance regulations that they have had since operating with Social Services.

Ms. Rancourt: — The nice thing about ensuring that there's yearly licensing requirements and review of agencies as it provides families oftentimes with assurance that the quality of care is set at a certain standard and individuals and people who are running the care facilities have to maintain that because there is that yearly visit. Is there not any concern that this could

potentially reduce the level of service when people realize that they won't be getting the yearly visit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just because it's a multi-year contract doesn't mean that the contact with the organization is any less. It's just more of less administrative on our side and less administrative on the organization side as well. We would still, as I touched on, we would make sure that they're meeting all of their compliance. If they're not, then we would make sure that they are coming into compliance and we would continue to work with them. The frequency of contact wouldn't change; it would just be the length of the contract that would change.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how often do care facilities have a frequency of contact with the ministries?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It would depend on the facility. Obviously if there's a new facility coming online, we would have more frequent contact. But again as I just alluded, if there's a longer relationship and a very long history of compliance, we would certainly look at that.

We will continue to visit with the homes and monitor any issues that are either brought up by any of the clients, the family, or that we've noticed upon inspection at the facility. We would make sure that that contact doesn't change. We would still do our due diligence. I'm sure that the staff would do their due diligence in making sure that the facility is up to our standards, whether it's a one-year contract or a three-year contract.

Ms. Rancourt: — How many care facilities would be included with this piece of legislation in the province?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There would be a total of 583 that would fall under this.

Ms. Rancourt: — Do you have a breakdown with regards to ministries?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — On the disability program, we would have 236 group homes; on the approved private sector, 205; group living homes, 14. On child and family programs, community-based homes, we would have 53; group homes, 75, for a grand total of 583.

Ms. Rancourt: — So the 583 are all units that are regulated by the Ministry of Social Services?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Correct.

Ms. Rancourt: — And in your remarks you indicated that the changes with regards to this piece of legislation is going to include the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Justice. Do you have an idea of how many of their units that will be included with regards to this legislation?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'd have to touch base with those direct ministries and be able to find that information out. I don't have it as all of our answers here are pertaining to Social Services, but we can endeavour to get that to the committee, the breakdown of any other within any of the other ministries that I mentioned.

Ms. Rancourt: — That information would be great because if

we're including these other ministries, and there's already 583 units that are with the Ministry of Social Services, this piece of legislation covers a lot of care facilities within the province.

I did have a question with regards to, under the part 3, "Enforcement." And you indicated it with regards to your remarks about ensuring that the minister or a person appointed by the minister "... shall not enter a private dwelling without a warrant issued ... unless the occupant of the dwelling consents to the entry." Can you tell me a little bit more about that piece?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — That would be mostly pertaining to the disability side of things, as on the child and family side of things, we would still retain the access to be able to go in at any point in time to make sure that that child's safe. It would be more on the disability, on the adult side of things that that ...

And as I said, that you alluded to, that the fines have increased from \$200 an incident to \$300 a day. And again this is not something that we want to be able to do with our organizations. We want to keep them in compliance. But we also need to have a strong deterrent, that if they do if step out of compliance that we have the ability to levy a fine on them that is impactful and that is direct. Versus \$200 for what could be a severe incident, versus \$300 a day, would have definitely an impact on these organizations. And again for the most part, all of these organizations are doing a very good job and we want to work with them. But in saying that, we also still got to protect our clients.

Ms. Rancourt: — Do you have an idea of how many of those \$200 fines that you've had to give to care facilities that haven't abided by the legislation?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just checking with my officials, we don't know of any in recent history.

Ms. Rancourt: — I'm sure the increase of the penalty will definitely be a deterrent for people, but hopefully that doesn't necessarily need to be something that has to be enforced.

So if you feel that there is a client that could be at risk, even if that client is an adult, would you not be able to access that facility?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If there was a complaint, we would certainly investigate it immediately and be on the premises as fast as possible. If that complaint came either from a family member or an individual or somebody else in that care home, we would investigate it immediately.

Ms. Rancourt: — Was the child rights impact assessment tool used to develop policies in this piece of legislation?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There's the child impact assessment tool. That would be more under the standards of care that are in that facility, not necessarily the ... more the envelope, the building side of things. This would be more on the building side of things. But we would, again we would make sure that anything that has to do with the care of a child does have that lens put on it. This is more on the operational side of things.

Ms. Rancourt: — So I know that there was some reference with

regards to women fleeing interpersonal violence and abuse, and those shelters being part of this piece of legislation. So I had a question with regards to, is there a plan to increase the secondary housing units for women leaving shelters?

That tends to be an issue that's brought up by women's shelters, saying it's a barrier for women leaving the shelter to go into these secondary housing units because they could use more of them, and then people ... That would leave room in the women's shelters. So is there a plan on developing more of these secondary housing units?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — That would be a discussion that we would have with other ministries of human services. Most of that would fall under the purview of Justice, but we did just have an opening in Melfort not too long ago about this step-down house, right beside NEOSS [North East Outreach and Support Services]. We toured the facility, got to meet some of the family members that were in there. And we're continuing to make sure that if there's anybody fleeing domestic violence, that there are options out there for them to be able to access. And I know the Minister of Education and the Minister of Justice have worked very diligently on this file, and at Social Services we want to continue to support them.

Ms. Rancourt: — So with some of the Housing First initiatives that have been happening across the province, would some of those residences be care facilities that would fall under this piece of legislation?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — What I'm being told by my officials is that it wouldn't meet the threshold for that type of facility, that these are more care with people with cognitive disabilities, or that would be a little bit more what this is dealing with versus those are ... They wouldn't fall under the purview of this Act.

Ms. Rancourt: — There's been increased concerns about the safety to patients and staff in some of these care facilities and there's been some issues of assaults or violence. So is there anything with regards to changes or revisions within this piece of legislation that will help with those situations?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well if there's any violent outbreaks, again we want to maintain the safety of our clients that are in these units as well as the people that are operating them. So we would do an investigation in any case, no matter where the facility is, whether it falls under this or if it falls under something else within Social Services. We would investigate the incident, interview people that are appropriate, that are witness to the event. And then we would come to a decision on how to make sure that we again maintain the safety of our clients but also the people operating the facilities.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. With that I have no further questions. And it was a good evening, so I think we could end the evening. And at this point I'm just going to say thank you again to all the officials for being here this evening and providing your comments and answering the questions that I have.

The Chair: — Okay, thank you. Does the minister have any closing remarks that he wishes?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — No, Mr. Chair, seeing the late hour.

Again I thank my officials. I thank the opposition, thank the committee members, you, Mr. Chair, and the people from Hansard. And I think everybody's ready to go home, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: — Thank you. Ms. Rancourt, any closing comments?

Ms. Rancourt: — I think I've concluded my remarks, yes. Thank you.

The Chair: — Okay. Thank you. Bill No. 145, *An Act respecting Facilities that Provide Certain Residential Services and to make Consequential Amendments to Other Acts*. Clause 1, short title, "This Act may be cited as *The Residential Services Act, 2018*," is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

[22:15]

The Chair: — Carried.

[Clause 1 agreed to.]

[Clauses 2 to 21 inclusive agreed to.]

Clause 22

The Chair: — Clause 22. I recognize Mr. Steinley.

Mr. Steinley: — Mr. Chair, I:

Amend Clause 22 of the printed Bill:

(a) in subsection (2) by adding "and duties" after "powers"; and

(b) in subsection (3) by adding "and duties" after "unless those powers".

The Chair: — Mr. Steinley has moved an amendment to clause 22. Do members agree with the amendments as read?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Is clause 22 as amended agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

[Clause 22 as amended agreed to.]

[Clauses 23 to 42 inclusive agreed to.]

The Chair: — I would ask a member to move that we report Bill No. 145, *The Residential Services Act, 2018* with amendment.

Mr. Steinley: — I so move.

The Chair: — Mr. Steinley. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Okay. I would ask a member to move a motion of adjournment. Mr. Steinley, for the sixth meeting in a row. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. This committee stands adjourned at 10:20 to the call of the Chair.

[The committee adjourned at 22:20.]