



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Cut Knife-Turtleford

Ms. Danielle Chartier, Deputy Chair
Saskatoon Riversdale

Mr. Herb Cox
The Battlefords

Mr. Muhammad Fiaz
Regina Pasqua

Hon. Todd Goudy
Melfort

Ms. Nicole Rancourt
Prince Albert Northcote

Ms. Nadine Wilson
Saskatchewan Rivers

[The committee met at 17:59.]

The Chair: — Good evening everyone and welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. My name is Larry Duke and I'm your Chair for tonight's committee meeting. With me here tonight is MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] Herb Cox, MLA Nadine Wilson, MLA Nicole Rancourt. And I've got some opening remarks here that I would like to make.

[18:00]

Due to physical distancing requirements in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, witnesses may speak at the stand-up microphone podium if they're required to answer any questions. I would ask that all witnesses please state their names for the record for speaking at the microphone. If the minister needs to confer with the officials in private, room 4, the media room, is available two doors down.

**General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvote (SS01)

The Chair: — Today we will be considering the estimates and supplementary estimates for the Ministry of Social Services, vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01). Minister Merriman is here with his officials. Minister, please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and committee members. I'm pleased to be here to talk about Social Services budgets and initiatives for 2020 and 2021. I can say this is an extraordinary time for all of us as we work our way through the impacts of COVID-19 on ourselves, our community, and our workplaces. I'm proud that our citizens have taken our public health measures very seriously and that we've come to a point in Saskatchewan in our third phase of reopening and close to phase 4. I'm also proud of the collaborative efforts that our community partners, our ministry staff, our clients, and our government as we work together to do all we can to keep each other and our province safe.

I'll begin by introducing my senior officials here tonight. To my left is Tammy Kirkland, my deputy minister. I have Natalie Huber, assistant deputy minister of child and family programs. From the disability programs and housing, I have Michael Lord. From finance and corporate services, I have Kimberly Kratzig, assistant deputy minister; and from income assistance, I have Devon Exner, acting assistant deputy minister. Executive directors who are in the media room and in the hall: from child and family programs I have Tobie Eberhardt, executive director; Joel Kilbride, executive director; from disability programs I have Shelley Reddekopp, executive director; from finance and corporate services I have Jason Pirlot, executive director; from housing I have Tim Gross, executive director; and from income assistance I have Doris Morrow, executive director.

Before I begin with some of the details of Social Services 2020-2021 financial plan, I'll let you know that I'll be including my discussion on COVID expenses at the end of my remarks on

the current budget.

The details of the provincial budget released on June 15th reports an increase of \$50.6 million or 4.1 per cent to our Social Services budget. This makes the ministry's budget for the current fiscal year \$1.286 billion, surpassing last year's as the largest Social Services budget ever.

That amount reflects the commitment that this government continues to have to families and individuals as they're supported in creating a full and productive life. Many of these individuals seek support from third-party providers, who are the face of the ministry in our communities. Our community partners provide a wide range of services to our most vulnerable citizens, including services for vulnerable children and their families, income assistance for individuals needing financial support, programs for adults and youth with physical and intellectual disabilities, and affordable housing for those who need it.

The short story is that we couldn't meet our mandate without them. That's why the government has provided \$10.9 million in additional funding to these community providers during this fiscal year. This funding includes a \$6.8 million increase for service providers that work with people with intellectual disabilities, plus an additional \$1 million increase for client transportation for day programs and other activities; \$2.5 million increase for the service providers that support at-risk children and youths; and an increase of 621,000 for approved private service homes that care for people with intellectual abilities and mental health issues.

In a world that becomes more and more complex and difficult to manage, we rely on the positive relationships that we have built with our third-party providers to help our clients alleviate some of the pressures so they can achieve a better quality of life.

I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about some of the highlights of this year's budget by my ministry division, beginning with disability programs and services. We have earmarked the following funding for disability programs and services: a \$10 million increase for the SAID [Saskatchewan assured income for disability] program to continue to support people with significant and enduring disabilities; a \$10.9 million increase to address the current and anticipated needs of people with intellectual disabilities. This target includes youth with intellectual disabilities transitioning into adult programs, and caregivers who need a break from their caregiving role.

Social Services is also providing \$1 million to SaskAbilities for the repair and improvements to Camp Easter Seal. Unfortunately summer camps were suspended this year because of COVID, but we are confident that the next year will take us back to normal with an upgraded and improved camp facility.

And \$350,000 in new funding will enhance communication services delivered by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind and the Saskatchewan Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Inc. The funding will provide support for roles including Deaf-blind intervenor, American Sign Language interpreters, and sign-support professionals.

I'd like to now talk about child and family programs. As I said

earlier, children, youth, and families face many challenges in today's society, and that has a direct impact on the ministry's programs and budget. Investment in services for children and families allow the ministry to provide support for families and caregivers while also mitigating the out-of-home care costs and caseload growth. For example, investments in prevention programs allows the ministry to support 3,495 children safely at home rather than coming into the ministry's care at a higher cost. Similarly, investments to new recruits and new foster families to increase the rate of family reunification allow the ministry to achieve the desired outcome of keeping children safe, while all contain the costs to the government.

The province is continuing to invest in child and family programs to ensure the safety and well-being of vulnerable children. Investments for 2020-2021 include an increase of \$3.2 million to support children and youth with developmental and complex behavioural needs through the private treatment of two new group homes; an increase of \$2.5 million for family supports, including outreach and in-home supports; a \$1.8 million increase to the supported family-living program that helps keep at-risk families together; an increase of \$1.4 million for foster families, who will continue to be eligible for additional monthly payments when they complete specific training; an additional \$356,000 to increase basic maintenance rates for foster families, extended family care, and assisted adoption, effective July 2020.

Now I'd like to talk about the highlights from our income-assistance program. Last year we launched the Saskatchewan income support, or SIS, program for new income-assistance clients. SIS guides clients to achieving such goals as making their own budgets and paying their own bills so that they can come to rely on their own skills and experience. Most people who have come to the ministry for help are no different than any of us. They have families, manage their affairs, and plan for their future. So through client-centred services, the SIS program provides the opportunity to support our clients to have a greater amount of choice and responsibility.

In '20-21 the SIS budget increased by \$84.6 million to reflect program caseloads and the wind-down of the Saskatchewan assistance program and the transitional employment allowance program. As of April 2020, 9,122 households were receiving benefits through SIS.

And now to housing. As part of the national housing strategy, the province has partnered 50/50 with the federal government to provide \$3.4 million to support the new Saskatchewan housing benefit. This benefit aligns with the national housing strategy principles of people, communities, and partnership. It also aligns with the province's focus on helping people in greatest housing need. The Saskatchewan housing benefit is a monthly benefit available to eligible households, including seniors, families, couples, and singles.

Now I want to describe the ministry's pandemic plan. It has been a foundational piece in helping us to ensure the services to our clients and our connections to third-party providers continue during this unprecedented time. It's a challenge for us to find new ways in supporting our clients, our staff, and our community service providers.

Most importantly, I think that we have kept our offices open for

our clients and that we have ensured services that have been provided. Our delivery of the ministry programs and services for supporting our most vulnerable citizens has been made more difficult by the spread of COVID-19. It has challenged us to find new ways of supporting our clients and our staff, our community, and our service providers. Our ministry has risen to that challenge and shifted many of our operations to telephone or email communication to minimize the in-person contact, dedicated the first hour of our offices for clients with disabilities or senior medical conditions to come in person if they need to, and temporary lessened reporting requirements for income assistance programs to ensure clients receive their benefits in a timely manner.

Social Services has introduced a number of pandemic-specific programs with an estimated cost of \$6.4 million. We will manage these costs within our overall 2020-2021 financial plan. These programs include \$1.1 million towards a supplementary respite payment of \$100 a month for four months to support caregivers with people with intellectual disabilities. This payment recognizes that during the lockdown period, many supports such as day programs are unavailable to caregivers. \$2 million for a one-time \$50 benefit distributed in addition to all regular benefits in April for clients receiving Saskatchewan income support, Saskatchewan assured income for disability, Saskatchewan assistance program, and the transitional employment allowance. This benefit helped cover any extra COVID-19-related costs.

One-time additional funding of \$171,000 to emergency shelters, to cover any additional costs associated with providing services in a manner required during the COVID-19 pandemic; \$1.3 million allocation towards an additional \$300 one-time payment to family-based care providers, aligning with the federal government's announcement of a one-time increase to the Canada child benefit; \$1.7 million for additional out-of-home care spaces for children and youth, to attempt to minimize the potential spread of COVID-19 virus.

An additional \$145,000 will go towards delaying transition for youth aging out of care. Child and family programs will continue to provide support to these youth to remain in their current placements while continuing to receive the financial support and all access to all services.

Although no one wishes for an issue of the magnitude of a worldwide pandemic, I believe that we have proven that we can be responsible, responsive, and innovative — effective programs over a short period of time to be able to help our clients, staff, and service providers.

In conclusion, I want to take this opportunity to thank all the Social Services staff, from front-line to senior officials, who have worked long hours over this challenging period to ensure our clients continue to receive quality services. Service providers and housing authority staff also need to be saluted for their commitment to ensuring client and tenant safety as the early days of the pandemic unfolded, and today as we move on in our reopening plans.

The highlights of the 2020-2021 minister's financial plan demonstrate the commitment to innovation and good management of this province's social programs while making a prudent financial decision even under the most trying of

circumstances. I'm confident that this solid direction will continue. Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members. I'd be happy to take your questions.

The Chair: — Before we get to questions, I would just also like to tell everyone that we'll have a short recess at 8:15 so we can change out some staff and do some cleaning. Okay, questions. Ms. Rancourt.

[18:15]

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thank you, Minister, for that outline of what was happening during the pandemic. And thank you to the officials for being here this evening. I know this might not have been possible because of all of the public health measures that we had to do to make sure that everyone was safe, but it was nice that the Legislative Assembly worked hard to make sure that we could be here this evening because we know that there's some really important questions to ask, especially in a time like this.

And when our province has an emergency, we oftentimes look at the Ministry of Social Services for help and support, and so your ministry is an important leader with providing services in a time like this. And I want to thank you for your leadership during this pandemic and all the front-line leaders that have been there. We know that the individuals in our province that could be most affected by COVID-19 are our most vulnerable citizens, and Social Services does a very good and important job of making sure that they're safe. And we see with the numbers that we have in our province that the decisions that you had to make helped make sure that they were safe during this time. And that's important to note, and I want to thank you for doing that work.

Nobody thought we would be where we are at today. Nobody could have predicted that, so there was a lot of tough and challenging decisions that needed to be made. We were talking about some of the challenges that we had from working from home and all of our staff are working from home as well. Well I'm sure your guys' office were flooded with questions and concerns. Ours was as well.

And I do want to point out that I have a binder here full of cases that our office receives, and I'm sure that's just a small portion of what my assistant in my office, Rose, deals with. And she wanted me to pass on a message that when she contacts your office, she gets incredible support, so I want to thank you for your staff's hard work and getting to those messages for us in a timely fashion because I know you had a lot on your plate. So thank you again for the work that you've done.

I have a lot of questions to ask, and a lot of them at the beginning here are going to start with the pandemic because I think that's on our minds right now. And so the outline of the 6.4 million that was spent on the pandemic-related expenses, I didn't see much of that benefit going towards a potential second wave of COVID. So how is your ministry prepared for another pandemic outbreak or a second wave in our province?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much for the question. We are working on a potential second wave. If there is something that comes, I'm confident that we will react very quickly, like we did in the first wave. I think the first wave caught the world off

guard and we reacted. I think now that we've been through this, we've worked with our community-based organizations on procedures. I've had weekly calls with shelters as well as community-based organizations, mostly based out of Regina and Saskatoon, to be able to hear what it is that's happening on that, and we were able to adapt our programs and our policies very quickly.

We were able to loosen up programs in our income assistance and our housing in a very short amount of time to be able to work with the organizations to do that. We're obviously working with Public Health, and we will keep our eye on that. But I feel that within the social services area, we're going to be well prepared for anything that comes our way as far as a second wave because we've been through this once, I think, as Social Services, as a community, and as a province, and we're ready for it. People are understanding.

I want to reiterate some of the things that you said in your opening comments about the great service that our front-line service providers and our senior staff were able to provide during this. There was no rule book. There was no playbook on this. We had to make things up kind of as we were going, as we were hearing things. And the front-line staff adapted amazingly to many changes, as well as my senior staff was able to do that and work with them because there were things changing moment to moment. And if and when there is a second pandemic, a second wave that comes along, I think that we will be better because we've laid a lot of the foundation with what we've learned between the first couple weeks of March and that we're still in it right now.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. Like we were saying that there were so many decisions that needed to be made so quickly. So is there something that if you had another chance that you would do differently, that you would manage the situation a bit differently? Is there something that comes to mind that you would make a different decision in a different time?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I don't think I would do anything differently. The only thing that I would, maybe if I could, is I would engage the community-based organizations. We would have had those weekly calls leading up to it earlier in March, just communicating with them on how they were managing things. I focused a lot of what we could do internally, and then we started reaching out on the community-based organizations and the shelters to be able to find out what they were doing. We set up calls with them.

I probably would have done that sooner for a couple of reasons: one, to gather the information, and also to make sure that they understood that we weren't just in a silo here in government and in Regina, that the far-reaching community-based organizations that were delivering the service, that they felt that they were heard because they were stressed as well. So I would have done that sooner.

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes, I think that's an important thing to remember that we were all scrambling, but it's the individuals in the community that were dealing with how to manage with services that people needed, that they didn't know how to go through this. So I think that's important to have that communication.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, and maybe just a point of clarification. That wouldn't be on what Social Services was communicating out to . . . I know that my senior staff was disseminating that information out from Public Health and from Health officials as soon as they got it. But for myself personally, I would have liked to have heard better and sooner what was going on out in the field directly from that.

And I think after we had a couple of weeks of those calls, there was some relief within the organizations that we were reacting very quickly to some of the things. We couldn't fix everything, but we were working on it with them to be able to try to manage through this.

Ms. Rancourt: — There was no increase to this budget from the March financial plan that was presented. Did Social Services see an increase of utilization rates due to the pandemic?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We did see some utilization increases in March in applications for a few reasons. There were some people that the federal government was still working on their programs, on what they were doing. A lot of our clients were reverting back to Social Services to see if there was anything that they could receive from that. But we attributed the increase mostly to that we had relaxed some of the requirements for reporting. We weren't asking people to report some specific information on that. But since that last two weeks in March, and maybe into the first week in April, the numbers have settled out to a normal number that we were seeing throughout consistently with our new program.

Ms. Rancourt: — Was there any repurposed funding? And if so, where and for what?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Because of COVID there was a few things that had happened that unfortunately we had to cancel. Some of the camps, Camp Easter Seal, they had cancelled theirs first, which we cancelled the two camps that Social Services runs. And we also had to cancel a contract for services that were potentially being provided by another organization that was specifically for the disability community. So we took that dollar amount of what we would have paid for Camp Easter Seal and the two other camps that we did as well, we took that money and repurposed that into our supplementary respite that we did for four months for \$100 for a total of \$1.1 million.

So because it was the same people that would have been accessing the camp, we turned that money around and gave them some extra dollars for respite because we were hearing from the communities that children with physical and cognitive disabilities were having a tough time being inside, just like the rest of us, but it was magnified by them and they would like the opportunity for the caregivers to be able to provide some extra respite dollars for them. So they were able to get out and get a breather themselves. So we thought that was a good repurposing of those dollars.

Ms. Rancourt: — The federal government also provided a \$300 increase to the child and family allowance, which I understand is what you provided to the foster and extended family members. I believe that was in June that you provided that extra funding. How many children and youth in the care of the Ministry of Social Services received that benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I was told that it's 4,445 children received that payment.

[18:30]

Ms. Rancourt: — And the children and youth that are in your care that are in other facilities, would the ministry have gotten that funding from the federal government? And if so, how much would that have been?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'm going to get Natalie to go through this because she explained it to me and I got about 95 per cent of it, but I want to make sure that it's on the record accurately.

Ms. Huber: — Okay. Natalie Huber. I'm the assistant deputy minister for child and family programs. So I believe your question . . . I'd just like to clarify, was the question around whether the ministry receives the funding initially? Is that . . .

Ms. Rancourt: — The \$300 additional benefit from the federal government. So the ministry would, I believe, receive that for all the youth that are in their care and the youth that are in the group homes. I don't think that was given to the group homes, so I was wondering how much the ministry had with regards to that additional funding.

Ms. Huber: — So I'll maybe just confirm that yes, we did receive the one-time payment that the federal government flowed to all family caregivers across the country that would have been receiving the Canada child benefit. And so we would have received that, like every other jurisdiction, for any child or youth in care. And so if they were in a foster home, placed with an extended family caregiver, or in a group home, we would have received that funding in keeping with the intent and purpose of the one-time payment that the federal government provided, which was to assist families who were experiencing financial hardship.

So that's the purpose and intent of why we flowed the money as well to our foster families. With our group home providers, we have a contract arrangement with them and we have had regular contact with them about any kind of financial hardships or issues they've had. And we've talked to them on an ongoing basis because they're in a staffed arrangement. It's a bit different than the family-based caregivers. And so we did not flow the funding directly to those group homes but have, through our contract arrangements, different financial supports that we can provide to those group home providers. So does that answer your question?

Ms. Rancourt: — Do you know how much that would have been, the total amount of the child tax that the ministry received that wasn't flowed out?

Ms. Huber: — We'd have to get that number for you. The majority of children would have been in our family-based care arrangements. We have fewer children in those group home living arrangements. But we'd have to get that number for you.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. Yes, if you could table that information, that would be wonderful.

Ms. Huber: — Absolutely.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Maybe if I could just add one thing into that. We also allowed them to dip into their reserves if it was required during COVID. We let a lot of our organizations . . . and gave them that latitude. We dealt with it on a case-by-case basis to be able to see what they needed on a short-term basis. So we made sure that they were kept whole.

Ms. Rancourt: — Since education was moved online, what extra support did Social Services provide for the kids in care to continue their education in their homes?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question. What we were able to do within Social Services to our kids that were in care is we were able to provide them with some surplus tablets that we had within the ministry and phones, as well as we went out and purchased them to be able to . . . first and foremost was to be able to have a connection with their family. So they were able to have some type of connection whether that was through text message or FaceTime, or whatever, because we felt it very important that they stay connected to their family and their community and their culture.

And we gave them full reign of that tablet to be able to use it for educational purposes. There are a lot of families that did engage in that and be able to go online, but we would leave that to the caregivers — just like the moms and dads at home — to be able to decide what they wanted to do as far as the online education. But we provided the raw material for them to be able to access that.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thanks. And I'm glad you mentioned the fact that they were quite isolated from family because my understanding is that because of the situation we were in, that there was some provisions made that visits were suspended or put on hold for the time being. When do you think that will be getting a bit back to normal? When could people be able to see their families, these kids that are in care?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again that's why we did it with the cell phones and the tablets to be able to make sure that they still had that initial connection. We would have to follow what Dr. Shahab and the public health orders would do. We know that they are starting to loosen up some of these restrictions on that within the senior homes, and we've asked them to make sure that they include our group homes in that because it is very important for everybody to maintain some personal contact with their close family members. But in the interim, until that is fully wide open and Public Health allows that, then we'll continue to support them with tablets and with some phones. But we would have to rely on Public Health to give us some direction on that.

Ms. Rancourt: — So just to be clear, at this time there is no specific timeline of when that will be happening. We've been kind of in this pandemic since March and that's a long period of time for people with kids to not see their family. How will families know when they'll be able to see each other face to face?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I was just informed that we are doing some visitations with physical distancing, obviously with that parameter to make sure that if masks or PPE [personal protective equipment] need to be worn, that those are happening

on kind of a case-by-case basis. And we're making sure that everybody is safe, not just the kids.

And you're absolutely right, this pandemic has been difficult and stretched all of us on our emotional side of life to be able to deal with not seeing family members, not attending funerals, not being able to go to celebrations, graduations, many things that I think . . . Well I know we all took for granted.

And connections with families are critically important and I know it was very difficult on everybody and especially kids that were in care. And that's why the staff reacted very quickly to be able to have some connection, that they could use these phones and tablets to be able to have some type of connection. Because a lot of people were doing that all around the province and pretty much all around the world — finding new ways to connect with their loved ones.

To add to that, I've just been handed information that we've done the in-person visits as of June 8th. We've started those, obviously with the physical distancing there.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you, because I know the ministry's goal is to have family reunification. So that's a really important part for that is to make sure that they can have those visits.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — And the connection while they're in our care, the constant connection that they can have and they are allowed with their family makes the reunification that much easier when it does come around to that point in time. That there's not such a large chasm between the family and the child. Those constant soft contacts in between are very important. And that's again why we wanted to make sure that they were still able to talk, text, or whatever their mechanism of communication is. It seems to be changing with every generation of kids. It used to be in person, then it was on the phone, now it's texting or Snapchatting or whatever it is they feel more comfortable in. So we wanted to make sure they had access to that.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay, thank you. And due to the pandemic the ministry extended support provided for youth aging out of services. Are those provisions still in place? And what's the plans to continue to support these youth through the pandemic?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — They are still in place until the end of this month. That was one of the first things that we wanted, to make sure that we weren't moving kids around during this pandemic. And we received very positive response. And I know the Leader of the Opposition was very supportive of this. And it was one of the first things that we did, that my team brought to me to say we should be doing this.

As far as ongoing, we're still assessing exactly how many kids are going to be aging out of the system. We're looking at that. But I would indicate that there's a pretty good possibility we're going to extend that out. We're just looking as to how long, how many kids, and basically the duration of that.

Ms. Rancourt: — And was there any staff that were laid off due to the pandemic?

[20:45]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — No, we were able, with the direction of my deputy minister and my senior staff, we were able to . . . nobody was laid off. And we provided a lot of opportunities for the staff of Ministry of Social Services to be able to work from home. We gave them that option. We also did the physical distancing within our office. But to my knowledge nobody was laid off, but a lot of people did work from home.

Ms. Rancourt: — The pandemic had a major impact on homeless shelters across the province, especially since when it started, in March, and we had some very cold winter days. In order to respect social distancing, shelters needed to reduce the capacity. Were people turned away from shelters during this time, and if so, how many?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — One of the things that we talked about with the shelters immediately was their request for implementing what we had previously called the cold weather strategy, which I know you're familiar with. And just for the committee, it is a strategy that if it hits a certain temperature — if people are even paid their rent for that month — Social Services will cover the cost for them staying in the shelters. So we basically rewrapped that as a pandemic strategy to make sure that if there was spaces available at the shelters, even if somebody is collecting their rent, we would make sure that their costs are covered by the shelter.

Now as far as how many people were turned away from the shelter, I don't know. We did have weekly conversations with the shelters on what they were doing. They did experience some limited capacity obviously because of social distancing. There was shelters, such as in Lloydminster, which rented out or basically were gifted the basement of a church to be able to provide extra shelter for there. The shelters became very innovative. But if there was somebody that came to the shelter and needed a place to stay for that night, whether they needed to self-isolate or whatever, we would provide them with a hotel to be able to stay at.

And we had those hotels throughout the province that were available that an individual could stay if they were overflow. Or if they were feeling symptomatic or if they were waiting for a test result, we would make sure that they were in there.

What I'm looking for here is . . . Since the inception of that program of making sure that everybody had a place to stay, we had over 1,100 hotel referrals throughout the province, that people could stay at a hotel if they needed to if they were presenting themselves at a shelter. So that was our overflow was in the hotels, and it worked very effectively across the province.

Ms. Rancourt: — Did you say that there was 1,100 hotel rooms that were rented out?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There was 1,100 referrals. Now if somebody presented the scenario, what the shelters would tell me is if somebody was presenting at a shelter and they said, okay we don't have the space here but we do over in this hotel, it's that individual's option to be able to go to that hotel or not. If they go to the hotel, there are certain rules at the hotel: of social distancing, maintaining in your room while you are waiting for a test result or you were symptomatic or you're waiting to get a test. There was some people that chose that they did not want to do that. They would rather go back to the place that they were

staying.

So I don't have the actual number of the hotel stays with me right now, and I can get that information, but again it was up to them if they wanted to stay in the hotel. We didn't force them, but it was an option for them. But we wanted to make sure that they had a safe place to stay that night. So it was their option whether they wanted to go into that hotel, but there were rules. And there were some people that didn't want to adhere to the rules, so they went back to where they were.

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes, if I can get that information of how many hotel rooms were paid for by the ministry in order to accommodate this, that would be helpful. You're right. Shelters were very creative on how to manage, still being able to provide a service for clients that needed that service and still allow for that social distancing, which meant that this was an increase in their costs and was a really good example of how core funding would be beneficial in managing situations such as this, instead of the per diem funding that the ministry provides.

Has there been any discussion about changing how shelters are funded in the province and moving towards a core funding approach?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We've had great discussions with all of the shelters on this. Now there was some of the bigger shelters in the province in Saskatoon, Regina, Prince Albert, North Battleford areas that do get a contract up front from the ministry. And what they do is they have a maximum of what they could do in that year and a minimum. And the minimum is to keep the lights on, pay for the overhead. That covers off their overhead.

So if it was, let's say, \$1 million a year for the contract, we would guarantee in and around half of that up front and then it would be done on a per diem basis. I know there was some shelters that were looking at block funding that were wanting that funding, and we were having some further discussions. But each shelter is dealt with on a different contract.

Now through this pandemic the shelters, in conversations with us on a weekly basis, they're going to go back and look at seeing what some of their options are. What is it that's going to work better for them in the future? But one of the shelters, one of the main shelters in the province that was considering block funding, their costs came in . . . what we actually guaranteed them versus their cost was a very small difference. They had, I think it was about an 85 per cent of their basic costs were covered in the original contract. So there wasn't a lot of room that they had extra on that. And that was all on a per diem basis.

So as I explained to the shelters, it's very difficult for me to pay for somebody in a shelter if there's not actually somebody in that shelter. We want to make sure that somebody's utilizing that. But we also want to make sure that we cover their basic costs so that they can function and keep the lights on and keep the staff there.

Ms. Rancourt: — For sure. They provide such an important service in our province. So it's important that they have the funding that they can provide that. My understanding is that the federal government provided each province funding to help support shelters during this pandemic. How much of that funding was provided to Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — What I've been told is actually that those dollars flowed directly to the shelters and did not come through the provincial government. I don't have the news announcement of what our percentage is of the overall federal, but those dollars went directly to a lot of the organizations.

Off the top of my head, I think SHIP [Saskatoon Housing Initiatives Partnership] in Saskatoon got some, Carmichael in Regina, but that's recalling off the news release of the federal government. But those are the ones that jump out at me. And they flowed directly to them, so we didn't know exactly what they got, or what or if any parameters were around those dollars.

Ms. Rancourt: — So the 171,000 that the province provided to the emergency shelters, can you give me a breakdown of how much money was provided to each of those shelters?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, absolutely. We don't have that exact, but I'll get that. And I'll table it to the Chair of the Committee and provide however many copies are required for that. But it was done on basically a formula that was depending on the size of the shelter and how many they were serving and what their capacity was and all of that. So there was a specific formula to that, and we'll get that to the committee.

Ms. Rancourt: — That would be wonderful. Thanks. There is a plan to transition clients staying in shelters to permanent housing. I read that in your plan. Is there more resources put into this to help them during this time?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We talked to the community-based organizations and the shelters. And as I've mentioned in estimates and in the House before, we have a surplus of Saskatchewan Housing Corporation stock within the two major centres and across the province. What we did is we had those units ready to go if somebody wanted to transition from a shelter and was ready for that step and that we could get them into those Sask Housing units. We had them at a turnkey, ready to go, that we could transition them in there. And we still have others.

So we would work with organizations like SHIP and Carmichael to be able to find housing for that. There is housing out there, and we want to make sure that the public has access to it because it was built with taxpayer's dollars, and we want to utilize that the best we can. So we are still working on that transition.

But there's not a lot of utilization of some of our Sask Housing units because like I said, I think we have just over 18,000 units in the province, and we have about 3,000 of them that are chronically vacant. And we want to get people utilizing them. So there is a plan to be able to transition them.

Yes, we had 10 units in Saskatoon, 10 units in Regina, 3 in Prince Albert, and 3 units in North Battleford that were ready to go to transition anybody during this pandemic. And if one was utilized, then we would bring another one online.

Ms. Rancourt: — My understanding is some of these units were unfurnished. How does the ministry help these individuals furnish these homes?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We were allowing them furnishing dollars to be able to make sure that when somebody gets set up,

we do have an account that they can access on a one-time basis with our new program that would be able to allow them to access dollars for the modest furnishings that they would need within their unit.

Yes, the 26 that we did have, they were ready to go. They were furnished and they were ready to go. They were turnkey, that somebody could walk through the door and be able to move right in.

Ms. Rancourt: — I think that's an important factor to think of because oftentimes individuals don't have anything. And we don't think about that often because a lot of us, well I think most of us in this room, are quite privileged. So we don't think about sitting there with absolutely nothing, and making sure that they have the bare minimum is so important to them.

I know a lot of individuals need to have roommates because of the limited funding that they have. So there's a lot of individuals who are on assistance that are in roommate situations. So during this pandemic, especially if one of them lost a roommate or the roommate moved for some reason, that really put them in a tough predicament. So did the ministry help out in those situations?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There was a few cases that I'd heard of, that I'd come across that that had happened, and it could've been a scenario of where somebody came in and presented themselves to the shelter and needed to go stay in the hotel. What we were asking is, if that was happening to any clients, that they come in and be able to work with us on what was their interim immediate needs, and then we would sit down and come up with a plan with them to be able to try to address those needs, as we do continuously with our motivational interviewing programs.

We have more contact with our clients to be able to, if any of their circumstances changes, no matter what it is, we ask them to come into our office, be able to sit down with us, so we can come up with a plan. It may be that plan might be instead of a two bedroom, we might need to relocate you into a one bedroom that's more affordable, and we've done that. We've also done that certainly if there's anything to do with if there's a domestic violence situation. We also have a stream for that that we can get the woman and any children out of that situation and obviously deal with that on a different basis. And we would set them up with some funding and some accommodations to make sure that we're meeting their needs.

Ms. Rancourt: — Right. I know during this whole pandemic, seeing so many people no longer working or not being able to find employment, not being able to have the financial resources to pay all the bills that they usually have, I think that's been really top of mind for a lot of folks, thinking about what's going to happen, what's the aftermath of this situation.

And the government did put a ban on evictions temporarily, and I know landlords were a bit concerned about that and what that situation will look like. And I have a statement from the *Prince Albert Daily Herald* and it says, "In April, the Saskatchewan Landlord Association reported that 27 per cent of all tenants hadn't paid their rent. Only three per cent do not pay their rent in a normal month."

[19:00]

So that's a substantial jump from what they normally would see. And the longer that this goes on and the more that people are struggling financially, I think that number is probably, potentially going to rise. So many housing experts and front-line workers are concerned about the increase of homelessness due to the eviction protections being lifted soon. Are there any provisions in place to prevent this from happening? Does the ministry have a contingency plan in place?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — During the pandemic, as you know, we didn't change any of our dollars that were going out. There was across the country and, I think, across North America, in March people were talking about a rent strike and not paying their rent anymore.

We had encouraged all of our clients to make sure that they did pay their rent, that they didn't get into a situation of arrears. First of all, for their own well-being, we didn't want them to have an impact on their credit rating. We didn't want them to have a negative mark against them with other landlords. We'd been speaking to the landlords' association before this, and we've been speaking with them after.

Since March, there was an uptick of people not paying rent. And not all of those were Social Services clients; those were just people deciding that it might be a free month's rent because of COVID. We had been encouraging all of our . . . and our money had still flowing out. We've been encouraging everybody to pay their rent. The landlords' association had asked us about this. We were saying that we're still issuing the money, and it's up to that individual to be able to . . . the responsibility of paying their rent.

Since then we've heard that the rent not being paid, that number has dropped and people are paying their rent and it's starting to come back to a more sense of normal. And we encourage everybody out there that is receiving either benefits from social assistance, benefits from the federal government, or their normal income, that they should be paying their rent as it's going to damage the short term and the long term on their credit rating.

And it's kind of a double-edged sword. We wanted make sure that the landlords were being kept whole but we also didn't want anybody to be evicted during the time of COVID, especially in March and April when the weather is not . . . and people were losing their employment. We wanted to make sure first and foremost that they had a place to stay that was safe and be able to keep in their own home. Because if they lost their position or they lost their job, by the time they lost their position and the federal benefits had kicked in, they missed a month's payment of rent. So we were encouraging them make sure that they had that opportunity to be able to pay their rent out.

Ms. Rancourt: — Is the ministry concerned about emergency benefits and individuals who have been out of work for a long period of time, the uptake of potential clients that will be coming to the ministry for support? Is the ministry concerned about that? And have you thought about what the plan will be if that comes about?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We've been working with our finance department on what are the length of the programs, and I know the federal government has talked about extending it for another eight weeks. I can tell you yes, we are concerned, or I am

concerned about this.

The longer people that are not employed, it's going to be a harder transitioning getting them back to some type of employment or part time or whatever it is. We haven't had this type of program ever in our history in this country. It was built very quickly by the federal government, and it's hard for us to predict what's going to happen on the tail end of this. But I'm very confident in our team as we reacted at the beginning of this, that we're planning for what happens at the end. And that's why we're talking to our partners and our stakeholders, community-based organizations, our service delivery providers to be able to see what is it that's going to be. What are we going to see at the end of this or what are we anticipating, because we don't know.

We've heard scenarios from some service providers that there's a lot of money flowing around from the federal government, and some people are receiving the CERB [Canada emergency response benefit] in error. And we're concerned about if they do come back to social assistance, what's going to be the concern at tax time? What's there going to be implication for them personally at tax time? What's going to be their . . . We can work on if they have any arrears to us as Social Services, we can plan for that and we can work with them on that. As far as any arrears or tax owing to the federal government, it's a bit of a concern because it's a few months out before tax time comes, and I don't want any of our clients to be impacted negatively by the benefits that they were entitled to from the federal government.

And we're also talking to our federal and provincial counterparts on this as well. There's some concerns on their part. But it's hard to predict the tail end of this when we've never been here before. And again we'll work with our federal counterparts and our Minister of Finance and the federal Minister of Finance to be able to find a path back to normal employment and making sure that the people that have been off for a long period of time are transitioned back into employment.

Ms. Rancourt: — Well I'm a social worker so I oftentimes think of the front-line workers. And their caseload is going to increase with regards to this when they're needing to provide more individualized supports to individuals who are coming for some support from the Ministry of Social Services, like you said, with regards to potentially getting another job, or if they are needing to owe money to the federal government, or balancing budgets or anything in that case. And so I'm wondering, is the ministry planning to hire more staff so that front-line workers can spend more individualized time with clients so that they can work through this crisis?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — And I think that's exactly tying into what we've done with our new program of our Saskatchewan income support program, is to have more contact with our clients, to have less people on each individual file when we tie into the motivational interviewing. And as I mentioned before, if there's any change in their circumstances, to come back and work with us; you know, try not to come back when you're in over your head and you're in a difficult situation. Come back with us so we can work together on this.

If somebody is concerned when the benefits run out, on that I would encourage them to touch base with their caseworker so we can start to come up with a plan of what it looks like in the next

... And again we're asking the individuals that are on our programs to be able to be proactive in that and not reactive in that, and be able to come in and see and talk with us on what is a plan. I don't want them to be worried about coming in if they're in arrears. I want them to come in so we can work with them on a plan on what we're going to be able to do.

As far as the front-line workers, they've done an amazing job on this. They really have. They were seeing anybody in that first hour that might have some, not symptomatic, but they were having some health concerns. We kept all of our offices open, maintaining social distance and that because we knew that that was important for our clients. And we didn't want them to not think that their payment was coming or not think that because the office was closed, their file might be closed.

I can specifically remember towards the end of March where we had to — with some staff that was working from home — we had to still get our cheques out. And that was our first priority, to make sure that the cheques got out to the individuals so they could maintain their needs out there. That was a very daunting task and the income assistance group did an amazing job. And as you'll know, a lot of our clients now are getting direct deposit, which is making it even easier for us to get the funds to them.

So the front-line workers have done an amazing job throughout this. I very much appreciate that. I'm sure that they're glad that they were there for their clients because they know them. As a social worker yourself, you know who your clients are and you want to make sure that they're doing well. So the credit goes to our front-line people but also the senior staff that's sitting with me here today, that they were provided the guidance for them to be able to make sure that their caseload was manageable and make sure that they were able to help out their clients in the best way.

Ms. Rancourt: — We have to be mindful that a lot of individuals who are receiving income support benefits are living well below the poverty line. And so when you hear of a benefit that could provide you \$2,000 a month cash, that's very tempting. And you can't fault them because they just want to provide for their families and have a decent income to live on — a living income.

And I know I've heard of a lot of stories of individuals who applied for the benefit program who might not have been what the federal government was looking for providing that emergency benefit to. And so when the federal government decides to look into the individuals who've been receiving these benefits — and I know if I've heard of these cases you've heard of them as well — there's a big concern out there in the public about individuals needing to repay that back. And that's a huge amount of money.

And I know you said that you would work with your federal counterparts and you'd work on a plan, but I think a lot of the people on the front line would like to know that the ministry does have a plan on how they're going to manage through this so that we don't have individuals that are stuck with nothing and have nowhere to go. And oftentimes a lot of these people have burned all of their bridges, you know, and that's just because they're trying to survive.

And so it would be nice to see that the ministry have a

contingency plan on how they're going to manage potentially a large amount of individuals coming back on to assistance, or needing assistance for the first time because they're in a situation that they've never been in before.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We have made the federal government aware of our concerns on people receiving it that may not ... And maybe they applied to it as an opportunity, like you said, to be able to get some more income for their family. And if there's any payments that were made in surplus from our ministry, we'll work with them on that. If there is a surplus of clients coming to social assistance when this pandemic is done, I feel that we're prepared to be able to deal with that. I couldn't pretend to give you any budgetary numbers on that because I would have no idea.

We've had some brief discussions with the federal government to be able to give them a heads-up that this might not be a problem now but it might be a problem in March when that money has dried up and the tax bill comes. That is a concern. My concern is they will not have the means to be able to pay that federal bill, and it will be a federal bill not a provincial bill.

Like I said, if there's arrears in our side of things, we will work it out. And you know that we have a very, I would say a very conservative amount of money that we collect, anywhere from \$5 a month up to ... I can't remember the specific amount at the top end, but it's not a lot that we ask to pay back. We're not going to try to keep our clients down because they're in arrears to us. We want to work with them and that's back to again where we have more contact with them.

[19:15]

On the federal side of things, if they have a federal bill they're going to have to figure out how they're going to pay that. I don't think it's the role of Social Services to step into somebody that owes money to the federal government. But we will be talking to our federal counterparts and our provincial and territorial counterparts because everybody's going to be experiencing the same thing. And I'm hopeful that the federal government has a plan on what they will do when this kind of comes home to roost. But that's their program, and they'll have to deal with that when the time comes.

And I was just informed that one of the things that we're doing on the front line is also when they do come in and tell us that they're going to apply for the federal program, any federal program, we advise them of some of the risks. And we tell them this could happen, you know, be prepared. And then at the end of the day the decision is up to them when we do that.

So again, that's part of the deeper dive that we're doing with our clients to be able to warn them of potential things that are coming up there. At the end of the day it's their decision. And we respect their decision, but we want to make sure that they're going into it with their eyes wide open.

Ms. Rancourt: — So if a person has arrears with regards to their rent or utility bills, how does the ministry help them with that so that they don't become homeless?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If they do have some dollars that are owing to us because of their housing situation or they didn't pay

the rent that month, this would be a normal course of business, that we would engage them and figure out a plan to be able to pay that money back over a certain amount of time. Or if there were some other options out there as far as maybe potentially getting some employment so that they could get some extra dollars to be able to help pay that arrears back.

But we want to make sure that we work with the client ongoing to see if there is anything that they do owe, that we again touch base with them. We do have payment plans that are monthly that we can allow them to access. We can take that right from their cheque but again we would want to work with them.

We also have implemented an online budgeting tool that will help them as well if they have anything that they owe, and not just maybe to us but to other . . . you know, if they have a credit card or if they have some other debt that they have to pay. We'll help them with that online budgeting tool. So again we want to engage them and try to help them become more independent and potentially leave social assistance to be able to maximize their potential and what they want to do in life. And I've told you this before, I said I never met anybody that wants to be on social assistance. So if we can help some of our clients be able to move forward, we want to be able to do that. And debt is a part of life, and sometimes you have to plan for it and sometimes you just have to react to it.

Ms. Rancourt: — So there was the one-time \$50 payment provided to adults receiving income assistance. How many individuals benefited from this payment?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Approximately 40,000 adults.

Ms. Rancourt: — And some individuals were given this payment in error and were informed that this was an overpayment. How many individuals are needing to repay this benefit because your ministry sent it in error?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just checking with my officials. We aren't aware of any errors because this was a pretty broad \$50 that went to anybody that was on SIS, SAID, TEA [transitional employment allowance], or SAP [Saskatchewan assistance program] program. So it was all of our clients. Unless there was a duplication of payment or something like that. If there is a specific one, we're not aware of any. But if there is one, please let our office know and we'll work with that individual if there was an error on our part.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay, because I have a couple of individuals who contacted my office and they have the letters from the ministry with regards to that. And I don't know if these were potentially individuals who are now on the CERB program that were on the SAID program. And so I don't know if that's why the ministry is now taking the \$50 away, but they were provided the \$50 because they were on the SAID program. But now that they're on the CERB program, they're being told they have to pay that \$50 back.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It had to be a timing . . . I understand now what you're saying is that they were on social assistance, they got the \$50 at that point. And then a few days later they applied to CERB, got that, and then the ministry recognizes they're on CERB. By the time the cheque comes they're already

on to the other program.

I'd have to check to see if there is . . . and if you have some specific casework, I'd be more than happy to take that back. We haven't heard of anything specifically, but if there was something like that we can certainly sit down with those individuals. But my officials are telling me that it's certainly not widespread and it might be just a couple of odd ones here and there, on the timing of it is what I'm kind of gathering from your question.

Yes, we'll just have to get the specific cases. If you do find any others as your responsibility as critic, please forward them off and we'll rectify that with the individuals and come up with a plan. And just look at this timing sequence because that's what it sounds like to me: it was a timing issue more than anything. And if there's some errors made, we'll look at that.

Ms. Rancourt: — What was the reasoning behind providing this small one-time benefit? And how did you come to determine that this would be an appropriate amount of money to provide individuals on assistance to help them in this time?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As far as the \$50, we saw that as a reasonable amount of money to be able to buy some immediate protection against COVID, which would be some PPE if they needed that again. And we also had kits that we were distributing through various community-based organizations. And I know the private sector was delivering a lot of PPE as well. And some additional costs, if there was any additional cleaning that was done, that was needed — soap, hand sanitizer, Lysol cleaning bleach product, or something like that — we had some rough numbers to be able to say that \$50 would be able to buy somebody an adequate supply for a few months to be able to make sure that they had the proper . . . Because it might not be something that we would normally have within our allocation for their income assistance, that this is something that was over and above. And we just had a calculation of what we thought was reasonable, what they needed to buy, and what a reasonable amount of dollar was for that purchase.

Ms. Rancourt: — Because I know I'm the person in my household that does a lot of the shopping, and during this pandemic there was a lot more restrictions with regards to accessing supplies for your home. And we were told by the medical health officer to go shopping one day a week; if you had any likelihood that you had health conditions or any reason that you were concerned about potentially contacting the virus, to stay home, get your groceries delivered; to go at certain times; maybe go to the same store on a regular basis so that when you had to do some tracking of where you were that it was easy to identify who you've been in contact with.

There was a lot of restrictions and a lot of, like you said, additional costs with regards to ensuring that when you did go out or when you were at home, you were protecting yourself and your family. And I could tell you that those costs were a lot more on my budget, and I could imagine a lot more on someone who has a lot less resources than I potentially have. I usually like to bargain shop. I look in the flyers and I might go shopping here, there, and everywhere to get the best deal. But when you know you have that limited time frame, you have that limited ability, and . . .

Everybody was really scared, you know, and should be. This virus is very dangerous and scary for certain individuals. And so I know other provinces provided much more support for individuals on income assistance and their most vulnerable. Was there any regard given to how other provinces supported their most vulnerable when you guys were considering this decision?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We were monitoring all the other provinces and the territories as to what they were doing on multiple programs, on our income assistance or disability or housing. We were having daily updates, sometimes hourly updates, on what was happening in other jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction had to deal with it a little differently. Some people were doing provincial top-up programs; some were not doing anything at all. There was kind of a different approach in every area depending on what they needed.

We looked at many things, but we also looked at our overall allocation of what we were giving for each individual versus other provinces. Every province has their own specific things that they need to hit for their individuals' income assistance needs. But some of the other things, we were also watching what the federal government was doing as well.

And we wanted to make sure that we weren't stacking programs on top of what the federal government . . . There was the child care benefit, the GST [goods and services tax], income assistance. There was lots of things that were coming out to be able to help people during COVID. And our contribution to that was the \$50. And I believe the total was just over 1.1 . . . I'll get that exact number for you. Hang on for just a second.

\$2 million. It was \$2 million that we had. So it wasn't a small amount of money. I mean when you have a lot of people on programs . . . I mean, \$50 sounds like a small amount of money but it was a \$2 million pressure on our budget to be able to supply that. So it adds up pretty quick along with all the other programs that we had, plus the federal programs that were coming in.

We felt that this \$50 was, again, a payment just to be able to help them out with their cleaning supplies and with some of the products that they might need to be able to keep safe. This wasn't for any additional groceries or anything like that. It was more specific to their cleaning supplies. But they were allowed to use it for whatever they specifically needed, but it was allocated because people needed to have extra cleaning supplies for COVID.

[19:30]

Ms. Rancourt: — Like you were discussing that individuals were receiving the federal one-time increase to the child benefit program and GST. Will Social Services allow these individuals to keep that benefit or will you be clawing that back from their assistance?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, I'd just clarify for the committee on some of what we have exempted. The enhanced child care benefit is exempt. The enhanced GST tax is exempt. The disability tax credit program, that's being considered right now. And the enhanced benefits for federal benefits to First Nations was not exempt income.

Ms. Rancourt: — When will you have a decision made on the disability tax credit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We're still awaiting some information from the federal government on that. They haven't provided us with everything on it. But as soon as they do provide that, we'll earmark it as a priority to go through the process through our committee and through our cabinet decision.

Ms. Rancourt: — I have copies of letters from the ministry indicating that individuals receiving income assistance that qualified for the Canada emergency response benefit or the Canada emergency student benefit should apply. But some clients felt the potential consequences of applying for the benefit program was concerning. And also the Prime Minister asked for only people that needed the extra support to apply. These programs were never intended to be a replacement for provincial assistance programs. Why did the minister decide to take advantage of this emergency benefit program and pressure clients to apply for them?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I don't feel that we pressured anybody to apply for it. But our income assistance program is meant as a last resort program. If somebody was eligible for more dollars from a federal program, we would encourage them to access that. As you'd mentioned before, it was beneficial. Some people were applying for it just to be able to increase their family income. And if they were eligible for this benefit, again we would say you're entitled to do this; you don't have to apply for it, but if you want to apply for it . . . And again back to what I have said a few minutes ago is we would kind of give you, here are some of the impacts that could happen when you do apply for that.

But some of the things that we did do is we made sure that their health benefit was still maintained, that we wouldn't close their file because we understood that this was a temporary benefit. But the federal government was also very specific that this was a federal income supplement, that this was coming from the federal government to be able to supplement peoples' incomes up to \$2,000 at a taxable benefit.

So we would always encourage our clients to be able to, if there's a better program out there, or if there's programs within Social Services that they're not accessing that they might be eligible for, whether that be our SIS program, the provincial training allowance. There are other programs that they might not have access to, and if they want to have access to that, they should be because they're eligible for it. And if somebody was eligible for the CERB benefit, then that was up to them. We wanted to inform them that they were eligible for it, but again the decision is theirs.

Ms. Rancourt: — Saskatchewan is the only province west of the Maritimes that is clawing back this emergency benefit program dollar for dollar. So why didn't Saskatchewan follow suit of other provinces that are allowing clients to keep all or at least some of the benefits to help them when the costs are rising?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If they applied for the benefit, they would be able to keep all of that benefit. At that point in time we would suspend or put on hold their income assistance benefits because they would be getting two benefits for very similar things.

So what we would do is make sure that, if they were eligible for that CERB, that they had access to it. Again it's up to them if they want to apply for it. It wasn't forced upon them. And if anybody felt pressure, that was not the intent. But if there was extra ways of getting dollars into their pockets and they wanted to do that, then we would do that.

But as far as the CERB benefit, we have a very specific . . . In our new program, that there was a certain amount of income that is allowed to be exempt each month based on their situation, whether it's a single individual or a family. The CERB benefit is income and it has been deemed income by the federal government. So we would treat that as any other income. Whether it was employment income or whether it was a benefit from the federal government, it's still income and we treated it as that.

And because we didn't want an individual to have the program stacking because this could create a bigger problem, as we were alluding to before. When the programs start to wind down, now they're in arrears because they had an income that they didn't report to us, plus they've been collecting our benefits. Now they're going to be in debt on both sides, on the federal government and on the provincial government. We didn't think that that was beneficial for our clients so we wanted to make sure that they had an option available to them. Whatever that option, whatever they chose, we would support them in that. But it was specific from the federal government as an income replacement, so we do have to treat it as income.

Ms. Rancourt: — And last year the ministry increased the income exemption allowed for individuals on income support programs. And so I'll give the example of an individual on SAID. I believe it's about \$600 a month or it's \$6,000 a year, I think, that they have a wage exemption.

So if an individual on SAID had a temporary or part-time, casual job, whatever, and were earning income, but that income is no longer available because of COVID and potentially their job is no longer there or it's not safe enough for them to go to work because some of these individuals have compromised immune systems, so then they are unable to earn that extra wage that they normally would have. Those are the types of individuals that were encouraged to apply for the CERB benefit. And if they get the CERB benefit, the CERB benefit is no longer allowed to be under the wage exemption, that it's clawed back dollar for dollar.

And other provinces are not doing that. Other provinces have either allowed them to have the complete CERB benefit on top of their income assistance or they treated the CERB benefit as an income, just like you said, Mr. Minister, and included it as a wage exemption. So they were allowed to have the complete CERB benefit, but they were allowed to exempt some of that when they were looking at their income assistance benefits. Does that make sense?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think I got it, the scenario, because I've heard of a case. On our SAID program it was \$6,000 a year that was exempt, and that was done for a couple of reasons. We had it on a monthly basis but we were also told by a lot of people that were using our SAID program that they worked seasonally. So we wanted to have that flexibility of moving that \$6,000 on an annual basis.

Now if somebody was earning let's say \$500 a month while they were on SAID, and they were kind of floating right under that line and they got all of that income exempted, then they went and applied for CERB, they might tip over that \$6,000 annually. That's when we would start clawing it back is after they've hit that maximum amount. We shouldn't be clawing anything back before they hit that 6,000 amount, and if there is then that's something that we can address with that individual.

But they are allocated \$6,000 a year on the SAID program to be able to move kind of throughout the year on how they utilize or how they burn through that income. They could do it all in January or they could do it at \$500 a month throughout the year. At the end of the day it's going to be the same. If they earned all that \$6,000 in January while they were on SAID, then any money after that would be clawed back because they've hit their limit. That would be the only scenario that I understand, but I'll just double-check with my officials.

Thanks. I just double-checked and the scenario I gave you, that was accurate — as long as they are within that \$6,000 annually. So if they were collecting CERB and they had no other income, they would be able to collect CERB plus their SAID benefits for three months, which would be \$2,000 for three months would get them up to that \$6,000 maximum. And then any income after that would be clawed back on any of their future SAID payments.

So that's why we had the \$6,000, and that's why we had the flexibility. And if they utilize it all in January versus throughout the year, that's their option. And if they applied for CERB, then that would be under that and up to the maximum of \$6,000. So if they did earn money in January and February, \$1,000 in those two months, and then March they applied for CERB, once they hit that 6,000 total on the calendar year, then the money would be clawed back after that. Again, SAID was set up as an income replacement program. So if you have an income of over \$6,000 a year plus an income replacement program, you've got dual incomes coming in, so that's why we set it at that.

And that \$6,000 might move in the future. It depends on the utilization and that. We've always said that to our stakeholders that we would consider, if we have a lot of uptake . . . [inaudible] . . . we would like people to be able to work as much as possible. And we don't want to claw it back, but we have to make it functional as well.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay, because I've been provided some letters from your ministry indicating that CERB is not a wage exemption allowed income, and that these individuals haven't capped at their \$6,000 and they're being told that their SAID benefits are temporarily suspended at this time, and that there will be no wage exemption for those benefits.

[19:45]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for the question. My problem was I got two different programs confused, and I'm going to get Devon Exner, my acting assistant deputy minister, to go through it on the technical side of things. So my apologies if I didn't get the exact . . . Because what I said wasn't entirely accurate. So I'll get them to clarify that just so the committee understands.

Mr. Exner: — Devon Exner with income assistance. So in regards to the CERB benefit and how it interplays with the Saskatchewan assured income for people with disability program. So when somebody applies and receives the CERB, it is non-exempt income. So it's not treated like earned income, so the income is deducted dollar for dollar. So clients are better off receiving the CERB rather than drawing down on their earnings exemption. So the CERB is a richer benefit. You access the CERB. It's a temporary benefit. We're not closing their files. When they return to us after the temporary benefit, CERB, is done, they still have their full earnings exemption when they return to the workforce.

Ms. Rancourt: — So for some people this might be a benefit to be able to save some of their earned exemptions. But other individuals that I've talked to, like the minister said, work seasonally. So summertime is the time that they work, and they know that they'll be unemployed during this period of time. And so they will not be able to use their wage exemption because they won't have employment this year. So for these folks, they're going to fall through the cracks because they're not going to be able to have the wage exemption that they were counting on.

So I'll direct my question to the minister. Now that you're hearing that there's an issue, like you said, with this benefit that we've never seen before — this has been new to all of us and the federal government; this is new to the federal government as well — and the impact that it's having on people accessing income assistance programs and accessing this emergency benefit program. And since this is a policy, it's not legislation, would the minister consider making changes with this policy so that these individuals, during a pandemic like we're in right now, won't be impacted by losing their wage exemption?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — And again when we were drawing up all of this, when we did our original program, our SIS program, there obviously wasn't any CERB benefit; there was no pandemic. And what I will endeavour to do is I'll talk to my officials. I'll take this away and I'll review it and I'll report back to the committee with a letter of my decision on that. Because there's a few cases of this and when we develop our programs, we have to develop them for the majority of people that are on the program. But I'll endeavour to review it and take it under consideration, but I do appreciate you bringing it to my attention.

Ms. Rancourt: — And I know the many people that have contacted my office with regards to concerns would appreciate you looking at this again because, like I said, Saskatchewan is the only province west of the Maritimes that is clawing back dollar for dollar. And so some provinces are allowing them to have the entire benefits, but at least other provinces are allowing them to have their wage exemptions. So if the ministry can re-evaluate that, that would be good, and also I'll include the Canada emergency student benefit as well.

So in the letters provided from the minister, it talked about . . . Individuals who will be on the Canada emergency benefits that are temporarily suspended from their income assistance benefits will not lose their supplementary health coverage if they have high health needs. I was wondering if you could provide a definition for that.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If somebody is collecting CERB and

has made that choice to be able to collect the federal government payment, what we do is we put their file into kind of a hold pattern because we know this is going to end. The CERB benefit will eventually wind down, and they might be coming back on assistance. They might be going back to employment. We're not quite sure. So while we're in that hold, we make sure that their health benefits are still being paid out, so anybody that was on our program that is now collecting CERB should be entitled to their health benefits.

The only time that we extend it out — that you might be referring to — is if somebody is leaving our programs and has extremely high health needs transitioning back into the workforce or something like that. Then we would look at it on a case-by-case basis to be able to see if they still need some supplemental health benefits from ourselves or from the Ministry of Health. But if they are on CERB, their health benefits should be maintained by Social Services during this time because we know it is a temporary program.

Ms. Rancourt: — That's really good to hear because health benefits are so important for individuals and can be quite costly. So it's good to know that they don't have to worry about that. And I also want to point out we're happy to hear that the individuals that were on the SAID program won't have to go through the full application again because it's quite a lengthy process, you know. And so it's nice to hear that when they're temporarily on the emergency benefit that when they come back they won't have to go through that whole process.

But because a lot of these individuals, their income assistance is temporarily suspended or on hold, would you guys have a number of clients that are temporarily suspended at this time?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We don't have an accurate number of who's in that holding pattern right now, just because we've relaxed a lot of the requirements for our reporting for our income assistance and our housing and that. So once we're through this and kind of come to the other side and we've got all of those requirements that we've loosened up, then we would have a better idea of how many people are actually on the CERB program and have dropped off social assistance and coming back.

Because sometimes the clients don't inform us they're . . . But we do that automatically whether they inform us or not. We just put that into a holding pattern because of CERB, to make sure that if they do come back that they don't have to go through that reapplication process that you just alluded to earlier because it involves doctors' documentations and various other documentations. So we didn't want a client to have to reapply so to speak. So that's why we just put it on hold.

Ms. Rancourt: — So if a client or individual is receiving income assistance and is temporarily on the CERB benefit but was also receiving the rental supplement from the ministry as an income assistance program, would they continue to receive their rental supplement if they're now on the CERB benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — When they apply for the CERB benefit, then we put their file, including the rental housing supplement and anything, in that hold pattern as I had mentioned. When this is done, at the end of this, we don't consider that a change in circumstance for the rental housing supplement. So if they're on

CERB for three or four months and they come back, they will be entitled to the rental housing supplement. If they've been grandfathered from before, it would just be a continuation from where they were before they were collecting CERB. But they don't collect the rental housing supplement while they're on CERB, but they won't lose it when they come back, if that answers your question.

Ms. Rancourt: — Why was that decided? Because these individuals still have to pay rent, and that's what the rental supplement is intended for. So why would they not continue to receive that benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Because they're receiving \$2,000 from the federal government.

Ms. Rancourt: — Because some of these individuals have lost their wage exemption, now their rental supplement, the \$2,000 could be less than what they would normally get from income assistance.

[20:00]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I've been told by my officials, it would be very rare that that actually happens. And if it does happen, we would ask them to contact the office and we would deal with that on a case-by-case basis. If it's lower than the \$2,000 that the federal government is giving them, then we would certainly have an assessment done at that time. But what my officials are telling me is that that happens very rarely that it's over and above \$2,000 a month. Even if they had the rental housing supplement and an existing program, it would be pretty rare to get over \$2,000.

Ms. Rancourt: — So in order to have the rental supplement, it's based on your income is my understanding. And so is that why the rental supplement is no longer available for these individuals? Or is it because they're receiving a federal benefit that's a non-... I forget what the terminology was. A non-exemption benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — They would, on the federal government side of things ... I'm just thinking how to word this. They wouldn't be losing it because of anything other than they're just collecting their federal benefit. That would be the only reason that they're losing it. It's not going to be on income. It's going to be exactly what they got before. They're going to get exactly when ... after. And the CERB should have no impact on determining what their income is to be able to determine what their rental housing supplement is. They'll revert back to what they got before.

Ms. Rancourt: — So where would this be in the policy manual, that this is the procedure to stop a rental supplement if they're receiving a federal benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — This was a policy decision that they would also not just lose their rental supplement, that they would lose their income assistance on that as well. That's why it's a non-exempt benefit. They lose all of their income assistance that they're getting from us, to the best of my knowledge, because they are receiving that federal benefit. So that's why we put them on hold to keep their health benefits intact and keep their file open until that end because they are receiving that. So it's not

specific to the rental housing supplement. It's on their income assistance file. I'll just double-check that though.

So this would be treated as an income. It's very similar ... [inaudible] ... If it was employment insurance, it would also be very similar. So we would do the exact same thing. It's a federal program based on your income. So we wouldn't allow employment insurance to be stacked with our income assistance programs.

But again we do keep the benefits and we keep their file open, so there's no reapplication process. It's just in a holding pattern until that benefit runs out. Just like employment insurance, we know that at some point that runs out as well. So we make sure that while they're on CERB that everything stays intact and reverts back to where they were before.

Ms. Rancourt: — So the minister indicated that you will review the policy with regards to having CERB being considered a non-wage exemption income so that individuals could use the wage exemption with regards to that benefit. And you're supposed to provide us a letter back with regards to that.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, I'll provide a letter back on that specific which you talked about on those cases with the SAID where they ... I'll review that, yes absolutely. Not the overall benefit, not the overall CERB benefit as being exempt, we're not reviewing that. I'll review that specific one for the SAID program, yes.

Ms. Rancourt: — Could you consider reviewing the rental supplement as well?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The rental supplement would be still intact when they return. They would have been receiving the rental housing supplement before CERB, and they'll be receiving it when they come off of CERB, and they'll be back to their same amount. So the only change in policy is they wouldn't be receiving it while on CERB.

Ms. Rancourt: — So there is a lot of income assistance benefits that are being clawed back because of the federal benefits kicking in with this pandemic, with regards to the CERB benefits, and then the rental supplement now we're hearing, and some other benefits that individuals are getting that are going to be clawed back from their assistance. So how much money is the ministry expecting to save from the budgeted income assistance services due to the federal benefits being available and the clawback of benefits?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well as the federal benefit is still ongoing, I wouldn't have any calculations on that. We're not seeing it as a savings. As I noted in my opening comments, we're redirecting a lot of money around. We still kept all of our programs intact, in whole. Prior to our spending plan announcement in mid-March to now, nothing has changed on that. And we've actually added some dollars in on COVID. So yes, I'll just leave it at that.

Ms. Rancourt: — So is the plan to redirect these dollars into other services within the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Within Social Services we always

make sure that our overall allocation is meeting the needs of our clients. We have had some savings that have been noted in our financial statements of the rental housing supplement with our new program. Within Social Services right now as a whole — not necessarily with income assistance — we've been redirecting a lot of those savings that we have received in our income assistance programs indirectly into child and family services where there is some pressures for some finances. So if we do redirect any savings out of there, it goes right into just a different program. And we've allocated over last year that it would go into child and family because we are receiving some pressures.

Yes, and in addition, like I said in my opening comments, we also got an additional \$6.4 million that we're doing in the multiple programs that I laid out when I did my opening comments. So any money that we have . . . I wouldn't say saved but any money that hasn't been spent is a better way of putting it, we're redirecting it into other programs. And that's why we're still trying to manage the expenses with the pandemic within our existing dollars, and not trying to put more pressure on the general revenue. Because we wanted to make sure that there was opportunity and some latitude for Health to be able to spend any dollars they needed out of the general revenue. So that's why, if we did have any savings, we were redirecting it within house, within Social Services.

Ms. Rancourt: — The reporting requirements changed due to the pandemic. Are those provisions of easing the reporting still being implemented?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how long are you planning on keeping those provisions in place?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I would say that we would keep them in place . . . we don't have any plans to change them in the immediate future. We would have to look at a whole bunch of variables. We'd lessen those requirements because of the pressures that COVID could be putting on our clients and on our support workers. So as that lessens, we would have to reconsider that.

At some point in time we will revert back to what our programs were working on before COVID. But as we talked about earlier, we don't know if there's going to be a second wave, so I wouldn't want to revert a program and then have to start it back up again if there's a second wave. We don't know when the second wave or if it's going to hit.

But I would also look to Public Health to be able to see if they could advise us on this as to when they feel . . . Because we did consult them when we made these changes, so I would consult them on any sunset of this to make sure that they're comfortable, that the general public is at a place and our clients are at a place where they can feel comfortable, that we can start moving the requirements back to where they were originally before COVID. But for the time being, there's no plans on changing those requirements, lessening of the requirements on income assistance, and also within our housing authority.

Ms. Rancourt: — So was there any clients that had their assistance cut off during the pandemic due to a lack of reporting?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The only reason that their income assistance might be suspended would be a change in their life circumstance, not because of COVID that I'm aware of. If somebody got married, if somebody moved to another province, somebody gained employment, somebody came into an inheritance of money — those type of situations which are laid out in our guidelines — that would be something. But nobody was removed because of COVID. It would've been a change in their circumstances. There could be a hundred reasons why they might not be receiving that, but it wasn't because of COVID.

Ms. Rancourt: — And it wasn't because of the lack of reporting?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well we've loosened the reporting requirements quite a bit, but we still have to have a bare minimum. We can't have it be wide open for income assistance. Then anybody can go and apply. We have to have a bare minimum of reporting to make sure that we're protecting our clients and protecting the system and there's no fraudulent claims. And that's why we loosened them up; we didn't suspend them.

And I want to make that clarification that we again talked to our front line. We also talked to community-based organizations and our stakeholders to say, this is what we're going to consider loosening up. The requirements of physically coming in and providing documentation, to provide as much of it online as you can. And it's actually helped move a lot of our clients to the online model. When they have access to online, to be able to get that so they don't have to worry about physically getting a cheque that might have been handled five or six times. They can get a direct deposit now. That they don't have to physically come in and provide that documentation. They could take a picture of it if they have access to that and supply that, or they could supply it at a later time.

So we've loosened them up but we didn't want it to be wide open, because then I would be concerned that there might be some claims that were made in error. And then we get into the situation where we were talking about before where they would be in arrears to us and the federal government. And so we've loosened them but we still have to have a minimum standard there.

The Chair: — I think we'll take our short break here now for some cleaning and staff changeover. A very short break. Five minutes, seven minutes at the most, okay? Thank you.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

The Chair: — Okay. Welcome back, everyone. We'll resume consideration of estimates and supplementary estimates for the Ministry of Social Services. We've had a few changes in the room here. So we now have MLA Muhammad Fiaz and the Hon. Todd Goudy. So, Ms. Rancourt, you can continue.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So to carry on what we were discussing before, last year there was an income assistance advisory group that was established. Can you give me a bit of an update on what the group has been up to and any advice that they might have provided you in the last few months?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Absolutely. I'm just going to consult with my officials. But I ask permission of the opposition if I

could just say quick hello to my daughter at home who has been watching for the last two hours. And now I'll get the answer for you.

I just want to first off thank the members of the income advisory group. This was a group that was brought together to be able to make sure we had good advice coming from community-based organizations, community leaders, First Nations, leaders within the community-based organizations, that we had a diverse group of people to advise us because we never had that before with an income assistance. We had a specific group that was there to advise us on our SAID program that was there for the inception. SAID had kind of run its course on their advising, and we wanted to make sure with the launch of our new program that we had that income advisory group to be able to do a little check and balance on what we're doing.

[20:30]

They've been great on advising us on policy, but importantly also from the client's perspective to hear straight up what they're hearing on the doorstep, so to speak. We very much appreciate the feedback. They've been very instrumental in our new program with SIS and advising us on that. But also we're engaging them on what we had talked about earlier, on what is going to be post-COVID or when the federal programs start winding down, and what we need to be doing to make sure that we're meeting our clients' needs at that level.

So we're going to engage them. We haven't engaged them that much during the pandemic just because we've had to react very quickly. But they're a great group of men and women from across the province that have been advising us on this, and we want to get them involved on what we're going to do post-COVID and post the federal programs when they start to wind down.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how often have they met?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — They meet kind of when we put something out to them that we need some outside advice. The idea was for them to meet quarterly. And I think they've been pretty close to meeting quarterly. Unfortunately because of Christmas and then the first couple of months and then we got in . . . They haven't met for a while but that doesn't mean that we . . . We just recently sent some information their way, and I needed some advice on what direction we should be going on that.

But I've also for the last three months, I don't want to say that they've been replaced but we've been getting our advice strictly from the community-based organizations and the shelters on the front, front lines to be able to make sure that we're hearing from them. So now we will re-engage.

We still have those conversations ongoing with those groups, but they'll start to wind down, and then we'll need the income advisory group to start winding up and to be able to help us with the recovery plan and how we're going to work through that with our clients.

Ms. Rancourt: — So when was the income assistance advisory group established? Last time when we were in estimates here in the spring, it was going to be coming forward, I believe, in the

summertime. But I don't remember exactly when it was officially announced and they were officially established.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll get the exact time, but it was right in and around when we launched our SIS program. It was either just before or just after that, but I'll check on that.

The news release went out the middle of June. June 12th, I believe, is what I've been told. So it would have been about a month before we released our SIS program as we made the announcement of who was on that. And I believe all of the founding members are still there. I think we may have had one that have switched out.

But again, we've got people representing First Nations, the disability community. Because that was one of the concerns when DISC [Disability Income Support Coalition] was no longer . . . That was the disability advisory group. We wanted to make sure that they had representation, because they had been great in advising us on our disability programs. And we wanted to make sure that they had a large presence on this new income assistance advisory board.

We've got community leaders like Steve Compton, who was at the time with the Regina Food Bank and is now over at the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], and a wide variety of people to make sure that we've got a good cross-section who represent our clients very well.

Ms. Rancourt: — So if they were announced in June and you were saying since the pandemic they haven't really met because you've been getting your advice from community organisations, how often do you think they would have met in that six- to eight-month period of time?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll check.

Thank you. There were four meetings total. And my mistake, they actually did meet in February of this year, so it was just before the pandemic. So they did have that meeting. I wasn't aware of that last one.

Ms. Rancourt: — And so what kind of recommendations have you been receiving from them so far?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks. What the advisory group has been doing is we've been working with them on . . . [inaudible] . . . processes for a rollout of our SIS programs, on our online that we've been working on them with as recently as February, any of the technical stuff. They haven't been recommending on policy so to speak, but more on process improvements. While we are rolling things out, they're kind of our sounding board on when we're rolling stuff out, as well as we've also utilized them in some other areas specific to what is it that they're hearing from their organizations, from their clients.

So they can provide us with that information, so we can take that information directly from the clients and adapt it into some of our processes that we may not have thought out in the drawing-board side of things. But when the program gets rolled out, we want to make sure that if there is something that isn't working, that advisory group is our conduit back to our team to be able to make any modifications that would simplify the process, or some

process improvements.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how would a person access the minutes for those meetings?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We don't have the group keep any official minutes, because we want to make sure that they have a free area to be able to speak and an open, clean environment so they can speak freely about that, and it's not going to come back at them.

[20:45]

So we don't have an official . . . like it's not a board that would have official minutes and a secretary or something like that. It's more providing advice on programs of why I would have this, check this box, or this is too complicated, or this doesn't work. And it's more of a back-and-forth discussion versus like an official board meeting where they would have an official agenda, an adopted agenda, and minutes of the meeting.

Ms. Rancourt: — Individuals are going to start receiving their Sixties Scoop compensation. Will that be clawed back from assistance payments?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — When any compensation is paid to any organization — and we've had some land settlements; we've also had some what we would classify as pain and suffering settlements, which the Sixties Scoop would certainly fall under — when that comes through and the payments start to flow, we've worked with the organizations to be able to . . . If they provide us with a letter to be able to say we would like to have this excluded from anything, then we would take that under advisement. But we have been excluding various pain-and-suffering as long as I've been minister for the last couple of years and well before that.

As well as we're looking at any land claims that are also done. Now the land claims is a little different than the pain-and-suffering because there's different dollar amounts set on each one. For example, there could be a dollar amount of . . . one individual from one specific claim might get \$10,000 and the next person might get \$100,000.

On the pain-and-suffering side of things, there's no plans that I'm aware of to hold any money back from the Sixties Scoop, because I would consider it under the pain-and-suffering. But I'll just double-check. Yes, they would be fully exempt from this, but we would want to sit down and just have a discussion with them just so they understand why we're doing it, why we're exempting them.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. There was a large number of files requested for individuals to be able to fill out their compensation forms. And I know it probably was quite cumbersome for the ministry to be able to dig out some of these files, especially as some of these files are really quite dated. So how has the ministry managed on that front? Are you caught up with getting all the files that were requested for the Sixties Scoop? Or is there still a backlog?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I just wanted to kind of state at the beginning of this that I was very honoured to work with the Sixties Scoop survivors. I was able to attend, I believe it was

three sharing circles and I believe with two of my colleagues that are sitting here at the table. And we were able to . . . Oh no, Herb's gone. Certainly there was a lot of shared stories and it was amazing to be part of it, to be able to sit there with them and hear the survivors' stories, some very tragic but some very uplifting.

And it was an honour to be able to participate and be invited to that. I'd never been to anything like that and it was a great spiritual experience for me. And it helped me understand what had happened. And it gave me a better direction as a minister to make sure that I keep that in mind, and I know my senior staff and the staff that were able to attend keep that in mind when we're developing policies on a go-forward basis. So I just wanted to state that at the beginning.

Since April of 2016 till March of this year, we received 2,661 requests for files from the Sixties Scoop survivors across the province, and 85 per cent of the records were located and given to those individuals. We also notified the individuals that if they were looking for a claim from the federal government, that they could start that process and we would provide as much documentation as we could to the federal government. We encouraged to make sure that they did have an open file, that if they were entitled to any compensation from the federal government that we would support them in any way possible in retaining their files.

But as you said, some of the files were very old, obviously 60 years as of right now that some of the first files would have been there. So 85 per cent is a good number but I'm sure for the 15 per cent, they would like to have their files. But we're still working with them and continuing that process to be able to try to locate anything in their files.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you for sharing your experience of being in that circle because it is very rewarding to be able to hear an individual's struggle like that. And I think it's important that individuals that are in our positions do that, so that we're mindful of that when we're making the decisions that we're making.

And I haven't talked about it this time in estimates, but I know I have in previous estimates, about the importance of having trauma-informed practice and having employees trained in trauma-informed practices. Because Social Services deals with our most vulnerable clients and they've come from histories that have had lots of trauma. And we need to make sure that we're not damaging them any further with their trauma and being able to help them recover. So thank you for sharing that.

I received the same letter that you have from the folks from the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry with a few calls for actions to the minister. And the first request was to increase all income assistance programs by \$300 per month. This increase would still leave people living below the poverty line but it is a start to help bring them up to the benefits of a liveable standard. Is this something that the minister will consider?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think what we've been working on with our clients and with our stakeholders and the income advisory group and a lot of consultations certainly since I've had the privilege of being minister, is when somebody comes on to social assistance, we want to find out how they got here. What is it that are their barriers to getting back to self-sufficiency? And I

know, I did see the letter from Peter and read it and actually had a conversation with him last week and discussed that, amongst some other specific case work that they had that Alexi in my office was working on. We wanted to make sure that we're balancing keeping the individuals at a level where they're safe and they've got enough dollars for them.

But we want to make sure that if we get more dollars, that we're focusing in those dollars that Social Services has into helping them break down some of the barriers they have, whether that's employment, whether that's housing, whether that's . . . We want to be able to make sure that we can help them achieve independence again. And that's where we've focused all of our energy is not increasing the amount of on social assistance, but decreasing the time they're on social assistance so they can become productive.

And as I said tonight before, we don't have anybody that wants to be on social assistance, so we want to work with them. We have lots of other programs. We have our poverty reduction strategy. We have our housing strategy. We have our new program where I've discussed tonight at some length about the contacts that we have with the individuals to be able to make sure that, if they are getting into any financial . . . or some places where they need some help, that we're there to be able to help them.

We have made increases in certain areas of social services. As I mentioned, we've got an increase of over \$50 million in this budget for programs. We based that on utilization, but that \$300 a month would not be something that I would be looking at right now.

Ms. Rancourt: — So you're right the ministry continuously adds more funding, but that's because of utilization increases. The amount of benefits that individuals receive from social assistance programs hasn't increased for many, many years. It's been pretty stagnant for a long time, and we see other individuals that are getting increases for cost of living and such, but these folks keep falling further, further below the standard of living and further, further in poverty.

And we see that Saskatchewan has some of the highest numbers of poverty, in our province. And maybe \$300 isn't something that you can do tomorrow, but I think having to start looking at addressing the fact that individuals on these assistance programs are well below the poverty line, and then we're expecting them to have such high standards of improving their lifestyle without them being able to even afford the cost of living. And if they were provided with potentially a little bit more financial resources, then they could focus on other things in their life such as improving their health or securing employment.

But at this time, what the people on the front lines are saying is that we're going to continue to see more and more people accessing these services and these assistance programs because it's not meeting what their needs are. And I'm not faulting only this government, but it's been previous governments as well that haven't really addressed that standard. But we can't always look at the past; we've got to look at the future and how we need to support our residents in the province moving forward.

And so I would encourage the minister to look at that potentially

in increasing assistance programs, and start somewhere so that we can start working on getting these benefits to, at the bare minimum — bare minimum — at the poverty level, which I would like to see a little bit higher than that, and let them at least be able to afford the cost of living.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for that. And I think it's important to look at everything that we've done since we've had the privilege of forming government. And it's not necessarily about more money. We've put 275 more million dollars into our income assistance since 2007, an 89 per cent increase. We've also, which we've said many times on the record here and in the House, that we took 112,000 people off so they're not paying taxes. We want to make sure what their net income is, is what they're receiving after everything, after they're paying taxes, what their actual take home is.

The poverty rate, according to Stats Canada, has gone, in 2006 from 14.6 per cent for low-income people down to 9.5, and the percentage of children in low-income households has gone from 21 per cent, a high of 21 per cent in 2006 down to 10.3. Now that's not saying that 10.3 is a good number; we still have to move more on that. And we have to make sure that we're looking at the holistic picture of what the individual is bringing in, and also what they're paying out in taxes. That's a big . . . because you can earn more money but if you pay more in taxes, the net might not be of benefit to you. So the 10.3 is a much better number than 21 per cent that was in 2006.

[21:00]

But we still have to make sure that we're moving that number down. I'm optimistic that that number is going to move down this year. And I don't know what the impact of COVID dollars or the CERB benefit is going to have on the Statistics Canada. I think it's going to be anyone's guess as to the impact of what that is on the poverty rates, on what we're doing.

But the other stat that I'm very proud of this government is the number of children living in low-income families has dropped by more than 44 per cent from 45,000 down to 25,000. And again, 25,000 isn't something to brag about, but we're moving in the right direction.

And I think we continue to move in that right direction with lots of our other programs. As I mentioned, our poverty reduction strategy, our hard-to-house, our housing strategy. We've got lots of other programs in there that we're trying to support, and not just necessarily always dollars into somebody's paycheque, but what are those wraparound supports that'll be able to help them be successful in their spot in life.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how many clients are currently receiving the rental housing supplement, and how does that compare to last year?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry, could I just get that question again? How many were . . .

Ms. Rancourt: — How many are receiving the rental housing supplement, and how does that compare to last year?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — In '19-20 year, we had roughly about

12,000 individuals receiving . . . or sorry, not individuals, households. And we're projecting this year that would be at about 8,300 households.

Ms. Rancourt: — And since the Saskatchewan housing benefit is available, is the ministry planning to phase out this benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — With the rental housing supplement, it is being grandfathered to anybody that's on that program. And as somebody drops off or there is a change in circumstances or there's a change in whatever, like we talked about before, they're married or that's a change in circumstances, then we would look at that. But the Saskatchewan housing benefit is a separate program. And that's more of a program to keep people from coming on to assistance. So that would be prior to them arriving on an income assistance program, on the SIS program, that is helping them. If their rent is at over 30 per cent, that that would be brought down.

So this is a program to try to keep them from coming on to full assistance. So if they're having some hard times with their rent, they can access this. This would help them supplement their rent a little bit so they don't have to come on full assistance.

So when we designed our SIS program, we bookended it with other programs. And that's the Saskatchewan housing benefit to help people to make sure that they don't come on, that they just don't kind of fall off a cliff and land on our front door and we go, what happened, how did you get here. We're trying to bridge them so they don't come on to the program, or we can engage them at a quicker time before they get in to the full program.

And then on the tail end of our program, we have extended health care benefits and child care to make sure that they're successful when they leave our program, that all of that doesn't stop immediately because it did before. So we're looking at it on a continuum. So when people are starting to come on assistance, we can help them maybe not come on full assistance, and divert them or keep them whole at that point. If they do come on full SIS program, that when they're leaving the program they become independent again, that we have some programs to make sure that that transition is smooth for them, and so we don't want them to get some undue hardships as soon as they come off the program like their child care and their health benefits just drop off.

So we really wanted to make sure that this is a smooth transition exiting. But it's also for coming in to the program and trying to keep people from coming on to the full program.

Ms. Rancourt: — So if you're receiving income assistance, can you apply for the Saskatchewan housing benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The short answer is no, they wouldn't be eligible because this is a program designed prior to them arriving on income assistance. This is when they engage us. If somebody has a rent that is in excess of 30 per cent of their take-home income, they can engage us and apply for this supplement to be able to help them maintain where they are. And if that can't maintain them where they are then we would look at, okay, is there an option of relocating because your rent's gone up? Is there options of budgeting that we would have with our online budgeting tool? Is there options of many things that we would try to engage them on before? But once they come on

income assistance, they would no longer be eligible for the Saskatchewan housing benefit.

Ms. Rancourt: — What if an individual's receiving the Saskatchewan housing benefit and while they're receiving this benefit program they apply for an income assistance program due to changes in their circumstances? Will they lose this benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Once they apply and are accepted on income assistance, they would no longer be eligible for the Saskatchewan housing benefit.

Ms. Rancourt: — And how many people have applied for this benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As of June 5th, which is our latest numbers, we've had 448 applications.

Ms. Rancourt: — And so my understanding is that this is a program that's offered with federal funding as well, so the federal government puts in 3.4 million and the province matches that with 3.4 million. So there's \$6.8 million available for the benefit. So is there a possibility that you will have to cap the number of people eligible for this program because of the funding available?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We're a little early in the program to find out if we have to cap it, but I have had some preliminary discussions with our federal minister, our federal counterpart, Minister Hussen, to see if there's any options on that because of what has happened with COVID, if there's any manoeuvrability. He was going to talk to his officials and have them chat with my deputy minister and see what there are as far as options.

But as of right now it's a little too early in the program to see if we're going to hit the ceiling or not. But I think the federal minister and the federal government was very open to being flexible on this, considering when this program was developed we weren't dealing with the situation that we have right now with our pandemic. So there might be some options there, and we would have to look at whether the federal government was going to inject some money into that to be able to top it up if we do hit the ceiling. But it's a little too early now to tell.

Ms. Rancourt: — And is there only a certain amount of time a person is eligible for this benefit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry, just for clarification, is it like a length of duration that they're on the benefit?

Ms. Rancourt: — That's right.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Okay, thank you. The program is designed that once they're on the program, they're on it for 12 months, and then it's reviewed at that time to see whether that needs to be extended for another year. But it would be a 12-month duration. Then we would sit down with them and do another assessment, not a full intake but just more of an update. If their financial situation has changed, we would ask them to notify us, but we would also catch that on an annual basis.

Ms. Rancourt: — So when the rental supplement program was, like, suspended or . . . I don't know what the proper language would be for that, but when you stopped taking intake for the

rental supplement program, one of the reasons that you presented to the public was that this was due to the fact that there was a new housing benefit coming forward, the Saskatchewan housing benefit.

It took some time before that benefit came forward, between suspending the rental supplement program and then having this housing benefit in place. But this housing benefit is nothing like what the rental supplement program was. It's very restrictive in the qualifications, and it doesn't provide the same amount of resources for families.

And it only is providing a benefit for a set amount of families because of the restrictions, whereas the rental supplement program was more inclusive and allowed families to have more flexibility with how they managed their family benefits. Whether they had to use income assistance for a period of time or whether they were working, it was flexible with whatever their situation was. So this is not a replacement for the rental supplement program, and it is so narrowly restricted.

[21:15]

I hope your ministry reconsiders the decision of suspending the rental supplement program because it was a really good program that helped many families, and we're seeing less families being supported with that program. And for the amount of families that are no longer receiving that support and the amount of families that are receiving the support from the Saskatchewan housing benefit, there's no parallel, and I think there's going to be more and more people falling through the cracks.

So if a person is receiving the rental housing supplement and they're receiving the SIS benefit, income assistance, are they able to continue to receive the rental housing supplement without any clawbacks?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'm going to deal with a couple of things on maybe the overall rental housing supplement, the decision on that, and then I'm going to get Devon Exner to get into the specifics because it's very specific on somebody that might be grandfathered from the rental housing supplement that might be on the SIS program. And it's kind of a rare scenario, but it does happen.

When the rental housing supplement was implemented, the vacancy rates in the major centres and certainly in some of the cities around the province was very, very low. It was at 1 per cent in some areas, and some it was zero. So the rent started increasing, and we all have experience in that. And I think it would have been about 2009, 2010 where the vacancy rates were very, very tight and it was hard to get. So that's why the rental housing supplement.

Since that point in time, the vacancy rates have changed. There's been housing that's built. There's been low-income housing. We've been involved in that with the federal government as far as building more housing units that are out there to be able to access that. So that's why we suspended intake, cancelled intake on the rental housing supplement, because the vacancy rates had changed and there was more available units out there, so we wanted to make sure that the market was correcting itself and the rent should be accordingly coming down.

I just saw a recent article in, I believe it was the *Leader-Post* or the *StarPhoenix*, that they had I think it was a 7.8 per cent vacancy rate in Regina, and it was the highest vacancy rate in the last 30 years, so that should drive the market. And I'm not an economist, but that should start bringing the rent down for people. And that means that our rents are still staying the same.

We also have our Saskatchewan housing benefit to be able to supplement. They are two different programs. You're absolutely right. One is before we get into social services and the other one, the previous rental housing supplement is while you are on social services.

The market has changed dramatically since that point in time. We've seen higher vacancy rates. We're hoping that the rent will start to come down because we didn't want to artificially inflate the rent or keep the rents higher with government dollars. If we were giving \$100 more for rent, I would guarantee that the rent would go up by \$100 and the individuals aren't necessarily better off. So that's why we wanted to create this program to be able to keep them from coming onto social assistance. But also the market has changed considerably since that rental housing supplement was created.

Ms. Rancourt: — So you didn't answer my question with regards to an individual on the SIS program.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll get Devon to answer that if that's okay.

Mr. Exner: — Devon Exner, acting ADM [assistant deputy minister], income assistance. If a person is receiving the Saskatchewan rental housing supplement and applies and is now in receipt of the Saskatchewan income support program, it is considered income.

Ms. Rancourt: — Okay. People who were receiving the rental supplement though were able to have an income and receive the rental supplement. And so I don't understand what the difference . . . Or are you trying to tell me that the rental supplement is considered income, therefore it's clawed back completely with the SIS program?

Mr. Exner: — Yes, so it would be clawed back. It's reported as income. You get to retain your rental housing supplement so when you leave the Saskatchewan income support program you still have that benefit available to you.

Ms. Rancourt: — That doesn't leave individuals on this program with a whole lot of extra money. We know that the SIS program doesn't provide a whole lot, and to have the rental supplement clawed back . . . It's good that they don't lose the benefit but it's really unfortunate. That means that they're even at a lower level of income and yes, that's very unfortunate.

I'm going to move on to child and family services. How many children and youth are currently under the care of the Ministry of Social Services? And can you break that down on the children and youth that are in foster homes, group homes, and stabilization units?

[21:30]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. I just had to get some specific numbers here. As I had mentioned in my opening remarks, we had 3,495 children that are in-home care with services provided. That means that they're allowed to stay in their home with some support for the children as well as for a mom and/or dad. And we also have 3,362 kids that are physically in the care of the ministry.

And as far as your breakdown that you had requested for foster group and the stabilization unit, we will get those broken down for you and get that information tabled for you.

Ms. Rancourt: — And so the ministry has a goal to have 60 per cent of the children in out-of-home care placed with extended family by March 31st, 2023. Whereabouts are you at with that percentage?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well my grade 12 teacher will tell you that I'm not the mathematician that I would like to be, but we've got, like I said, almost . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . We do have a mathematician in the house. It's at 59 per cent currently right now, which is a great number and it's been increasing over the last few years.

Again the idea for having children maintaining contact with their family and not physically . . . And you know this as a social worker. It's much better for them to have a connection to their family, their community, and the culture. If they happen to be Indigenous children, that cultural connection is huge. So that's why we're shifting our model, and we have been over the years, to make sure that we're providing in-home care for the parents and for the family and a safe plan, a work plan for them to be able to maintain those. Because the parents want to make sure that the kids are safe and in-home, be able to see them. And the kids need to be able to see their parents every day and we feel that that's very important.

Now in saying that, that's not always an option, and the reality is sometimes we do have to temporarily take children into care. But as I've said and you've mentioned before, that reunification is always the end goal. We know that sometimes it's not a reality but it doesn't mean that we don't strive towards that goal continuously. We are getting the numbers up in a better direction of children that are going to be in-home with mom and dad, but also make sure that that's done in a safe way for the children and for the rest of the family.

Ms. Rancourt: — Absolutely. I agree that we need to keep families together and it's better for parents if they have their kids with them to stay on track with whatever issues they may be managing and dealing with. And it's better for kids to be with their parents; they love their parents regardless. And it's cost effective, efficient. It costs a lot less than to have them in care. And then hopefully we could stop that cycle of having kids in care, and have healthy parents and healthy kids growing up with healthy parents. So I'm happy to hear that that is the plan, that's the goal.

So the goal is to have 53 per cent of children in families with ongoing child protection files to be safe at home with services by March 31st, 2023. What is the current percentage?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Our current percentage, as the last

numbers we have, is 54.5.

Ms. Rancourt: — So it looks like you already met that goal.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We have and we're proud of that. And I want to thank my team in child and family services under the direction of Natalie and all the care workers that are out there making sure that this works. Because it's not just a stat. It's families out there. It's cases. It's children, and we want to be able to . . . We know we're going to see the success from this in the years down the road and break that cycle of where children are absent from their homes. Or if they are, it's for the shortest amount of time.

Ms. Rancourt: — So how many calls to child protection intake did you have in 2019?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — People are accessing our child abuse line that . . . if somebody's calling in, it could be just a general question about something; it could be something that leads to a very serious investigation. But our first point of contact, we've had 18,439 calls into our child and family services line.

Ms. Rancourt: — I know the fact that some people and children, some families, aren't safe with being at home all the time and not having the services available. And I know I've talked to front-line workers who are concerned about potential abuse happening in homes and not being recognized, and educators who are concerned that they're not having contact with kids, that they worry about what the safety at home is.

And we've seen from other countries that domestic violence and child abuse increases after they've had the lockdown in the pandemic, so that's something that we need to be mindful of. And so that number potentially could also rise after we have the numbers after the pandemic, which is sad to say. But it's important that people, like you said, feel comfortable to phone the line and know that they can ask questions whenever is needed.

So do you have a breakdown from these calls, which ones were investigated and how many children were placed in temporary custody?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — So out of the 18,439 inquiries we had to our line, that led to 6,941 investigations. Those investigations led to 2,013 children temporarily coming into the care of the ministry.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. Both of our offices have received some troubling reports regarding the management of group homes. As well there was a troubling news article recently about a young boy that was in a group home funded by the ministry, that was found in the middle of the night, that wandered from the home. And in these news articles, they talk about how there was multiple concerns that were brought up by the staff at the facility on the care for this child. Can you explain to me what the ministry's procedure is to respond to concerns of kids in group homes?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. In going through, there's kind of multiple processes that engaged immediately in. I was genuinely concerned when I heard about this young child that

had got out of the house and had ended up at a local restaurant, which is very concerning.

So when that happens, obviously we launch an investigation immediately within Social Services. We would work with the service provider to be able to make sure that they were meeting all of the requirements that we had laid out in their contract. Anything that they needed to be able to provide or what they . . . anything in addition that they needed to provide, we would make sure that they were doing what they were saying that they were doing.

We would work with any local authorities. If they were involved in an investigation on this, we would assist them.

[21:45]

We also have our residence service team that would provide recommendations of any gaps that they see. They would go in and do a kind of an assessment on everything, on their procedures. They would provide recommendations and that and action plans that the service provider would have to meet to our specifications and our satisfaction to be able to continue service.

But it is very concerning on lots of levels, especially when it's a young child with some cognitive issues that was at . . . And that's, I think, the specific one that you were referencing. We want to make sure that those kids are safe because they are extremely vulnerable. And we want to make sure that the provider is doing exactly what our expectation is of them.

Ms. Rancourt: — Because the ministry has moved from having ministry-run group homes to many third party homes, group homes, how does the ministry ensure that staff working in these homes are fully trained to manage situations or have a background that is suited to work in these facilities?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well we have moved to that model of the third party homes over the years, and we have some great partnerships with a lot of organizations that are doing just tremendous work within this community. And we're very glad to be able to have them.

As far as any qualifications, we would have a standard that would be set out again in our contractual agreement with them that they have to have so many of, depending on who's residing in there, what they need to be having, whether it's a access to an OT, an occupational therapist, or a physio . . . We would make sure that all of those requirements for that individual are being met. First of all that the provider can meet those obligations because not all providers can provide different levels of service. So we want to make sure that they have the ability to meet that.

Once they've passed that threshold and they're approved by us, then we make sure that they're maintaining that standard. And if they're not, then we go in to support them. And if that doesn't work, then we have to look at others options in providing. Because at the end of the day we have to provide a safe environment for those kids, and they're ranging in what their abilities are and what their concerns are, what their physical and cognitive needs are. And we want to make sure that we balance that. But we want to make sure that that third party provider is able to do that and is doing that.

Ms. Rancourt: — So my understanding is that anyone who believes that a child or children, like a group of children or a child is at risk or at harm, they have a duty to report. And so if you were working in one of these homes and you were concerned about care of the youth . . . I know a lot of facilities, their procedure is to talk to a supervisor or a manager. But if a staff member felt that they were concerned that what they were seeing isn't going to be brought forward to the ministry, they would have a duty to phone the ministry and report that themselves, wouldn't they? Is that the right understanding?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I would think if anybody in our society sees a child that they feel is in distress or is not being treated in the proper way, that they would . . . anybody would have an obligation to report that. And that goes back to that 18,000 calls that we do receive on specific children that we need to investigate and go to that second- and third-level investigation.

But that's where we get those calls from. And whether they're working at an organization, they're walking by, they see this in the playground, they would have an obligation to report that information to some type of authority, whether that be Social Services, the police, a crisis nursery team. We would want them to report that because we want to make sure that that child has a safe environment. And we would hope that everybody would report that.

And that's why at the beginning of that 18,000, I wanted to quantify that, that this is . . . It's not necessarily a good thing that we have 18,000 contacts from people calling in, but on the other side, it is. If one of those calls is removing a child from a harmful situation, then it's a good call.

And I would request that if anybody is out there watching this at this late hour, that if they see anything, as a decent person, a human being, you would want to make sure that you report that and make sure that that kid's safe because it could be somebody's kid that you know or don't know. It doesn't really matter.

Ms. Rancourt: — Sure. So when the ministry does an investigation of a facility, is the outcome of that investigation available to the public?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The easy answer is no, we wouldn't share that because we need to protect the interest of the child and make sure that that's held confidential. I mean, this is the most serious thing that can happen to a young person, and we want to make sure that that is dealt with with the respect. So we don't give the information to the media. We don't give the information to anybody.

We would, depending on the situation, consult with the Children's Advocate or the Advocate for Children and Youth. We would disclose any information we were obliged to to police or . . . And the only thing that would be very extenuating circumstances would be if a parent of that child wanted the information. We would disclose the information specifically about the child, not necessarily about the larger investigation. But because they are the guardian or the caregiver for that child, we would disclose that information to them, but only on a case-by-case basis.

And again because this is very, very sensitive information and

we want to be able to make sure that we look at . . . that the child's interest is in the best. And that's not giving that information out lightly.

Ms. Rancourt: — I completely agree, if the investigation is on a child, for that information to be confidential. But the question was in investigation of a facility, if . . . And I know that when you talk about the Children's Advocate, I think of the situation when that young boy left the school and unfortunately drowned in the pool, and the Children's Advocate did a report and they talked about what the school's policies and procedures were and they provided some recommendations on changes of that. So if there was an investigation on a facility, would that report be available?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We would provide the information to . . . If it was about a specific facility, we would provide that information on a confidential basis to the board so they are aware of what went on. We would also work in conjunction with the Advocate for Children and Youth. If they wanted that report, we would provide that to them. Now if the advocate decides to do a report and publish a report, that would be within her purview to be able to do that, but we would want to make the board aware of what's going on in their specific organization so they have the opportunity to address it.

Ms. Rancourt: — So my understanding is that the ministry completes a quality-of-care review. Are those reports available to the public?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Those reports would be handled in the exact same process as I just previously outlined.

Ms. Rancourt: — So they're kept confidential?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Correct.

Ms. Rancourt: — So what if a family member is concerned about a particular home or the public is concerned about a home? How can they find out any information about if there's been concerns brought forward with regards to procedures in that home, if there's been reports on that home, and if they want to look into that?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — So like the scenario if somebody is looking at placing somebody in that — a family member — and they wanted to know if there was any previous issues with that particular home, would that be made available?

Ms. Rancourt: — Yes.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll just check. So as I've been informed, when a child is going into a specific home, we're the ones that are placing them in there. So we would know whether that home, obviously, if there's some issues, because at that point when we temporarily take a child into care, the ministry/the minister is the parent at that point in time. And we would know if there is something internal going on with that, and we would make a decision at that time whether that child would be a good fit in that home or if that home is meeting our requirements.

And the children that are being placed are usually being placed in there for protective purposes. So a lot of the times if a family

member was inquiring, they wouldn't necessarily know, depending on the situation, where that child is because it could become a safety issue. If we're removing that child from an abusive situation and that child is now placed into a home and we notify . . . If the parents were the ones that were abusing and we notify them where the child is, that could become another dangerous situation. So we wouldn't do that in that case.

[22:00]

Ms. Rancourt: — But there's many family members who know where their children are placed even if their children aren't in their home and it's still not safe for them to be in their home. But what if a family member is concerned there's maybe a conflict of interest, or they're concerned about someone who is staffed in that home and don't feel comfortable with their child being there, or heard of some troubling incidences in a home. Does the parent have any right to find out about some of those issues or have the ability to say, I don't feel comfortable with my child being placed in that home, regardless if they're not the legal parent? Because if they're in the care, the minister is.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, if they're in the care of the minister/ministry, then we would make that decision on where that child would be placed and we would place it in the safest environment that we possibly could. If we had some concerns with a specific home that was under investigation for something else, we would opt out and look at some other placements for that child to make sure that that child is in a very safe environment.

But again, when we take that child temporarily into our care, we become the parent at that point in time. And I know you're very well aware of this. Other committee members might not be. But at that point we're the parent. So we will make the decision that is in the best interest of that child until we can get to a point of reunification and we can help out mom and/or dad or the child to be able to get to that reunification. But once that child is in our care, we are the parent at that point in time.

[Inaudible interjection] . . . verbal confirmation of what I said.

Ms. Rancourt: — So I think the minister probably remembers the day in session when the co-op housing folks came to the legislature, and they were concerned because their bilateral agreement is ending soon, I believe. And so they've been advocating that the ministry reconsider continuing that agreement. And I know the minister has met with them multiple times or a few times anyway. And so we're wondering if there's been a reconsideration with regards to that. Will the co-op housing be seeing any of the 6.8 million allocated to them in the bilateral agreement?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As we discussed before, that 6.8 agreement was joint funding with the federal government for the housing benefit, which is a separate program. I have met with them several times, as recently, I want to say it's been . . . I don't know if it's been since the pandemic because we haven't met anybody face to face. But just before that, I had the opportunity to meet with a Saskatoon group that was proposing this.

They're working on their model. This is something that we've been working on with the co-operative for a few years. The program was set up to be able to make sure that they were getting

some subsidy on their mortgage. And now that their mortgages are coming due — because this program was set up about 25 to 30 years ago, so their mortgages are now being paid off and they own that asset completely — so there's nothing for us to subsidize for them right now because they don't have a mortgage payment to the bank. And that was why it was set up in that fashion that they would get assistance and subsidy for the life of the mortgage. Now once the life of the mortgage is over, that subsidy starts to dwindle off.

Now our housing authorities have been working with them for years to be able to make sure that they are ready for this transition. So this isn't something that just came upon them in the last few months. We've been working with a lot of the housing authorities over the year to be able to transition them from that point where they have more people that are within subsidizing . . . that are receiving subsidies. So that balance is to get to a good percentage where the co-op could be functional without the subsidy.

And a lot of the co-operatives have moved in that direction. They've been moving that so that they're getting their ratio at a better percentage to be able to function with the co-operative without that subsidy. And there were some that are still working on that, and we're continuing to work with them on it, I understand. I've met with them; I've visited them. One of them is in my constituency, so I'm very well aware of their needs on a local level but also on the ministerial level to make sure that we get through this as quick as possible.

Now they've asked about the Canada housing benefit and what can they access. And they saw, you know, that I had at the time signed an agreement with Minister Goodale on the larger portion of the housing program that we were doing, a 10-year program for 400-and-some million. I want to say 430 to 450 million — forgive me, it's late in the hour — that we had signed with that. And they said, well can we access those dollars? And that's not what the federal government parameters were that they could do that.

Now since I've met with them, I've talked to them and said we really need to make sure that this is functional on a long-term basis. But it's very challenging for me to go to my colleagues in cabinet and in treasury board and say, I need funding for a mortgage that is paid. And if I was receiving . . . Let's say you wanted to give me \$1,000 a month to help out with my mortgage until my mortgage was paid off. And then my mortgage was paid off and I said, I would still like you to give me money to help pay off my mortgage.

And I understand their concerns. It's a real concern. But we want to work with them on the transition. I believe the one in Regina has transitioned successfully, and the one in Saskatoon, their agreement doesn't run out, if my memory is correct, till July of next year. So we're continuing to work with them. So that subsidy is still in place until July of next year. So we're going to continue working with them to be able to make sure that they can meet their clients' needs on a better ratio of people that are actually paying in than are drawing out. So we have worked with them. They're a great organization. They've done some great work, and we're trying to work through this with them continuously.

The Chair: — We've now reached our allotted time, so we will adjourn consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates of the Ministry of Social Services. Thank you, Minister, and the officials. Are there any closing comments? Ms. Rancourt.

Ms. Rancourt: — Thank you. Once again I want to thank all the officials for being here tonight and answering some of these tough questions. But I know answering tough questions is not new to you folks because that's what you do on a daily basis. And you guys are always faced with really tough decisions to make, and some of them are life-and-death decisions. So again, thank you for all the work you do, and we really appreciate the relationship that our office has built with your staff as well. And I hope you can pass along that message, that they're doing a great job as well.

I want to thank the colleagues that are here today and being very attentive. And thank you for that. And I also want to thank Hansard for being here. And I know that we had to do a lot of adjustments so that we can accommodate for this with cleaning the facility and such, and I'd like to thank the Legislative Assembly staff and making sure that these committee rooms are well prepared for us as well.

I also want to give a shout-out to the video tech guys. They're always around. And I think some of them are retiring this year. I think I read something about that. So we might not see you next time. But we might all change next time; we don't know. Election's coming, so things may be changing.

I just also want to thank the minister for answering these questions and having some good, thoughtful dialogue here this evening. And I want to say to all the fathers that are around here and that are watching us right now, have a happy Father's Day this weekend. So thank you.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I want to echo my colleague and my friend's comments, certainly on the Father's Day, but I want to thank the staff here at the Legislative Assembly. Thank you for accommodating us. It's very important that we go through this process, that we have our allotted time. We have the questions. I want to thank my colleagues for sitting in, and Hansard. Obviously my team, led under the direction of Tammy, and all of the people that are here but also out in the hallway and also back in the office, for their time. I want to thank my chief of staff, Morgan, and my team that's upstairs in my office.

And I also want to thank you, Ms. Rancourt. We always have a great dialogue. I very much appreciate the respectful conversations and the questions that you have. This is not an easy file. It's very challenging on myself and my staff. And I know you take this very personally from your work and I very, very much appreciate the respectful conversations that we always have. And we're always in the same spot as we're looking out for the kids, and we're looking out for the most vulnerable, so I do appreciate that. Thank you very much. And thank you, Mr. Chair, for your time.

The Chair: — Thank you very much, Minister, and Ms. Rancourt. It's always nice when everybody plays nice. And so it's been a good evening. I would now ask a member to move a

motion of adjournment. Mr. Goudy has moved. Agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. This committee stands adjourned until June 24th, 2020 at 7 p.m. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 22:10.]