



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Regina Wascana Plains

April ChiefCalf
Saskatoon Westview

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Barret Kropf
Dakota-Arm River

Hon. Colleen Young
Lloydminster

[The committee met at 17:00.]

Chair Weger: — Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. My name is Michael Weger. I'll be the Chair. To my left we have committee members Leroy Laliberte chitting in for Noor Burki, Mr. Brent Blakley, and Ms. April ChiefCalf. And to my right we have Mr. Barret Kropf, Mr. Kim Gartner, and Mr. Kevin Kasun.

**General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvote (SS01)

Chair Weger: — Today the committee will be considering the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Social Services. We will now begin with the consideration of vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01). Minister Jenson is here with officials from the ministry. I would like to ask the officials please state their name before speaking and please don't touch the microphones. The Hansard operator will turn on your microphone when you are speaking to the committee. Minister, please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Good afternoon and thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to be here to speak to the Ministry of Social Services 2025-26 budget and priorities. I'm going to begin by introducing officials from the ministry who are joining me today.

First of all, to my right I have Deputy Minister Richelle Bourgoin. I also have with me this afternoon, Tobie Eberhardt, the assistant deputy minister of child and family programs. I have the assistant deputy minister of income assistance programs, Devon Exner; assistant deputy minister of finance and corporate services, Grant Hilsenteger; and behind me I also have Joel Kilbride, my assistant deputy minister of disability programs, as well as Giselle Marcotte, assistant deputy minister of housing and president and CEO [chief executive officer] of the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation.

We also have the support of ministry senior officials who are joining us who will introduce themselves if they come forward to answer a question. And also joining me this afternoon is my chief of staff, Lee Guse.

Before I speak to the 2025-26 Ministry of Social Services budget, I'd like to take this opportunity to highlight the important work of the ministry, the positive difference it makes in the lives of citizens, and key accomplishments over the past year.

The ministry has a broad and vitally important mandate to deliver a wide range of programs and services to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our province are safe, supported, and participating in their communities. Dedicated ministry employees interact with thousands of clients every day, helping people with their immediate needs and providing one-to-one support as they build better lives.

In 2024-25 the ministry strengthened supports to individuals, families, and seniors with low incomes. The year began with an

increase to the personal care home benefit monthly income threshold. Starting in April 2024, eligible seniors received up to \$100 more per month to help with the cost of living in a licensed personal care home.

In May 2024 Saskatchewan income support and Saskatchewan assured income for disability clients received a 3 per cent increase in their monthly benefits. These benefits help provide for basic needs as clients work to become more self-sufficient and independent to the best of their abilities.

While most income assistance clients are able to manage their finances on their own, we know some individuals need more help. Through expanded partnerships with community-based organizations over the past year, the ministry is now providing trusteeship and money management services to 150 more clients across the province. Overall seven partner agencies are helping over 1,200 clients with complex needs to pay their rent and bills each month. We have seen the positive impact of these expanded services. They are providing even more clients with the support they need to build a better life and greater independence.

Enabling families to enter and stay in the workforce is a priority for this government. Last year marked the first full year of the Saskatchewan employment incentive, or SEI. SEI provides working parents who have low income with a monthly financial benefit to manage costs that include transportation and child care while transitioning to employment. It also provides access to supplementary health benefits and connections to employment supports through the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training. I am very pleased to say that we are seeing more working families accessing this benefit with more than 1,200 households enrolled in the program as of December 2024.

Saskatchewan continues to be one of the most affordable places in Canada to live, work, and raise a family. At the same time, we have all seen food costs rise across Canada. To help food banks and families, our government announced a \$1 million grant to the Food Banks of Saskatchewan last July. In the first year of this two-year commitment, the ministry partnered with Food Banks of Saskatchewan to distribute the funding to agencies based on the population and average food bank usage of the communities they serve.

Through the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, the ministry provides affordable rental options to individuals and families across the province who could not otherwise afford adequate, safe, and secure shelter. Over the past year we invested in the repair and maintenance of provincially owned housing units to prevent and reduce vacancies and respond to the growing demand for social housing.

We are making progress. Government social housing vacancy rate has been trending downward since peaking at 20 per cent in November of 2021. As of February 2025 the social housing program has improved to an overall vacancy rate of just 12.7 per cent.

We know we still have work to do and you will hear more about our plans in my remarks regarding this year's budget. We are making progress in providing emergency shelter and supportive housing services for people who are experiencing homelessness,

or are at risk of homelessness.

Increased funding in 2024-25 supported the continued implementation of the provincial approach to homelessness, or PATH, first announced in October of 2023. In collaboration with all levels of government and Indigenous and community partners, the Government of Saskatchewan has delivered on its commitments laid out in our provincial approach to homelessness. We have developed 120 new emergency shelter spaces, 155 new supportive housing spaces, 30 new complex-needs emergency shelter spaces, and new street outreach and community safety responses.

PATH has provided a foundation for government and our partners to collaborate and be flexible to respond to arising needs. Through PATH we expanded street outreach services in communities across the province to connect people experiencing homelessness with the services and supports they need. This included an additional \$386,000 in grants to the Prince Albert Métis Women's Association, the Regina Downtown Business Improvement District's Regina street team, and the Olive Tree in Lloydminster to expand its Homebase outreach program.

We also worked together quickly to respond to the extreme weather conditions this past winter. The ministry provided funding to increase capacity in the enhanced emergency shelters in Regina and Saskatoon, adding 29 additional temporary shelter spaces. We also came together with partners to support vulnerable people through the extreme weather by supporting warming spaces. \$750,000 in new funding supported the cities of Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert to establish warming spaces in their communities.

The ministry also expanded its income assistance mobile workforce to serve clients on site at over 30 community-based organizations. The ministry added 10 more income assistance workers to support and serve clients where they are in the communities of Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Moose Jaw, North Battleford, and La Ronge. This approach is making a difference. We're reducing service gaps and barriers for clients, working more closely with community-based organizations in joint case planning, and accelerating the path to stability for clients with high needs.

Strong partnerships are essential to the ministry. Many critical services are delivered in partnership with third-party service providers or community-based organizations. In 2024-25 the ministry provided an additional \$13.7 million to third-party service providers it contracts with to effectively meet the needs of the people we jointly serve.

The ministry also increased funding to partners in providing care to children in need, increasing foster care and extended family care allowance rates. Over the past year we provided targeted investments to improve services and supports for vulnerable families, children, and youth. Our government is supporting drop-in centres for youth in Saskatoon, Regina, and Prince Albert. This assists them as they transition to adulthood.

The ministry provides operating funding to John Howard Society in Regina, Prince Albert Outreach in P.A. [Prince Albert], and Egadz in Saskatoon. In addition to operating funding, the ministry acted on a recommendation by youth advisory teams to

enhance services for youth at the drop-in centres. We provided \$500,000 last year for new supports to help youth access housing, employment, and educational opportunities.

To support families in crisis, the ministry expanded intensive in-home support to communities outside of Regina and Saskatoon. Annual funding of \$700,000 is supporting Prince Albert mobile crisis unit co-operative to provide prevention and intervention services to the Prince Albert and Melfort areas. These services are helping keep families together. They provide support and strategies for managing behaviours in the comfort of the family home. This in turn decreases the likelihood of children having to come into care or minimizing the time that they are in care.

In 2024-25 a \$2.7 million investment supported additional residential care options and intensive specialized care for children and youth with acute medical and developmental needs to remain near their home communities. This funding supported the growing needs for intensive stabilization and group home services. It also supported Autism Services of Saskatoon to expand to a second four-space location focused primarily on children with autism spectrum disorder.

The ministry also provided a \$4 million increase to the autism spectrum disorder individualized funding program in '24-25 to continue to meet the needs of children and their families. This important program supports parents with funding to purchase services that best suit their child's individual needs. This provides families the flexibility and freedom to choose from a range of eligible therapeutic interventions and family supports that will most benefit their child.

The ministry remains focused on supporting the inclusion of people with disabilities and works with individuals and families who require support. Along with increased funding to deliver residential and day programs to clients with intellectual disabilities, the 2024-25 budget supports capital projects. An additional \$7.6 million was committed to plan and construct 10 new group homes and one assessment and stabilization home, also known as a safety net home, that supports adults with intellectual disabilities.

Over the past year we celebrated two group home grand openings, one in Watrous operated by Interlake Human Resources Corporation, and three group homes in Saskatoon operated by Elmwood Residences. Later this year we look forward to grand openings for a new group home in Creighton operated by Karis Disability Services and a group home operated by Chip and Dale Homes here in Regina.

Our government works to foster strong, inclusive communities by removing barriers that limit the full participation of individuals with disabilities. We achieved a significant milestone towards that goal in December 2023 when *The Accessible Saskatchewan Act* came into force.

Since then the accessibility advisory committee was established to advise government on proposed accessibility standards and public awareness initiatives. The ministry partnered with the Rick Hansen Foundation to begin to deliver education and training to public sector bodies and government employees, and the Government of Saskatchewan's accessibility plan was publicly released.

Under this plan, government will provide leadership on accessibility and inclusion in the province, work to improve knowledge and awareness of accessibility, and improve the accessibility of digital content, provincial parks, and government buildings.

[17:15]

I am now pleased to provide highlights for this year's ministry budget that includes benefits and services for individuals, families, and children in need. The 2025-26 budget for the Ministry of Social Services is \$1.61 billion. This is an increase of \$70 million or 4.5 per cent over 2024-25.

This year's budget will raise monthly income assistance benefits for clients, increase funding for partners in service delivery, create more social and supportive housing, expand programs that keep families safely together, and enhance services for people with disabilities.

I'll begin with investments in income assistance that will make life more affordable for seniors, families, and for people with disabilities. An \$11 million investment will increase monthly income assistance benefits by 2 per cent starting in May of 2025. For the fourth year in a row, Saskatchewan income support benefits will rise.

A \$6 million investment will increase the adult basic benefit and shelter benefit. For the third year in a row, Saskatchewan assured income for disability or SAID benefits will increase. A \$5 million investment will raise monthly living income benefits. A \$500,000 investment will increase SAID earned income exemptions by \$1,000, enabling clients to earn more from employment before their benefits are impacted.

For the third year in a row, the personal care home benefit will increase, helping make the cost of living in a licensed personal care home more affordable for Saskatchewan seniors with low incomes. This month a \$10 million investment will increase the benefit by up to \$1,000 per month for eligible seniors. This is the largest increase in the program's history.

Government will also provide another \$1 million grant to the Food Banks of Saskatchewan this year to fulfill our two-year commitment to help food banks across the province.

Saskatchewan people and families with low incomes will also benefit from other affordability measures introduced in the 2025-26 provincial budget. This includes doubling the active families benefit, enhancements to basic tax credits, and a 5 per cent increase to the Saskatchewan low-income tax credit annually for the next four years.

This budget continues our focus to respond to the demand for social housing by increasing the availability of safe and appropriate housing. In 2025-26 the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation will invest \$88.6 million to ensure rent-ready units are available across the province. This includes an increase of \$9.2 million to start multi-year repair and renovation projects for 285 provincially owned units in Saskatoon, Regina, and Prince Albert.

In the coming year, up to 1,600 provincially owned housing units

will be repaired and 350 more households will have access to safe and affordable housing. We are also investing \$5 million in the rental development program so we can partner with housing providers to develop new supportive housing units for people who need additional support to live independently.

We are continuing to invest in enhanced emergency shelter and supportive housing to help vulnerable citizens experiencing health and other personal challenges. We will also continue to work in collaboration with our partners at all levels of government to seek new approaches to address the complex issue of homelessness. As I mentioned earlier, our strong partnerships have supported more flexibility to meet emerging needs over the past year, and we will build on this foundation in the coming year.

Ensuring the safety and well-being of vulnerable children and families continues to be a priority for the government. Foster care and extended family care providers will receive a 3 per cent increase with a \$1.45 million investment. This increase to basic maintenance strengthens support for family-based care and assists approximately 3,300 care providers across the province.

This year's budget also provides a \$1.5 million increase to support keeping families together. This investment includes \$750,000 in new funding to establish intensive family preservation services for families caring for children with complex needs in two new communities. These in-home support programs provide 24-7 access to emergency intervention when crisis arises and strengthens families by providing them with the tools and strategies for successful parenting.

In addition a \$785,000 investment will bring respite services, for families experiencing crisis, to Regina. This provides families with access to skilled and competent care providers until they are no longer needed.

A \$430,000 investment will develop a 12-space semi-independent-living home for youth in Regina. This was another recommendation of the youth advisory team to support youth to successfully transition from care into independent adult life. Youth aged 16 to 19 will have access to on-site mentorship where they can attain life skills and be supported to pursue employment and education opportunities.

The ministry is also enhancing and expanding supports for people with disabilities. A \$9.7 million increase will address the changing service needs of current clients and support delivery of new services for adults with intellectual disabilities attending day programs and living in group homes. Following from the capital investment in 2024-25, 10 new group homes and an assessment and stabilization home are in various stages of development. This year's budget supports continued work with an additional \$1.7 million capital investment.

The ministry will also begin planning for the construction of a new eight-space medical group home in Saskatoon for individuals with complex medical needs. A \$200,000 investment will expand capacity and improve infrastructure at summer respite camps. These camps provide seasonal respite for year-round caregivers. They also provide meaningful recreational activities for adults with intellectual disabilities.

This budget will also expand interpreting services for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community in our province. Saskatchewan Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services will be able to expand American Sign Language services, particularly in the North, with \$140,000 in new funding.

I mentioned earlier how important strong partnerships are to the service the ministry provides. In 2025-26 community-based organizations will receive a 3 per cent increase in funding. For Social Services this represents an increase of \$14.8 million for third-party service providers who work with persons with intellectual disabilities; support at-risk children, youth, and families; and provide emergency shelter services.

Overall in the coming year the ministry will provide a total of over \$510 million in funding to community-based service providers. Not only does this better enable our partners to meet the needs of the clients we serve, but this also represents a significant contribution to the province's economy and over 32 per cent of the ministry's budget.

As I conclude my remarks today, I've touched on the ways that the 2025-26 budget delivers targeted investments to benefit clients across the ministry's wide range of programs and services. Together and with our partners the ministry will continue to deliver income assistance to provide for individuals' basic needs as they work towards self-sufficiency and independence, services and supports so families and their children can safely stay together, access to services for people with disabilities that meet their needs in their communities, safe and affordable housing for families and individuals, emergency shelter and support services for vulnerable citizens, and support for children and youth to be successful now and as they grow into adulthood.

With that I'd like to thank you, Mr. Chair. And to the members of the committee, my officials and I would be pleased to now take your questions.

Chair Weger: — Thank you, Minister Jenson. I will now open the floor for questions. Ms. ChiefCalf.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you. I would like to start just by thanking everyone for being here this evening. We appreciate all the work that you do in the Ministry of Social Services. I apologize, I'm getting over a bad cold and still a bit croaky. I will drink my water.

I have questions tonight for the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation and my questions, some are statistical and some are policy. And I know that some are quite detailed, so I'm perfectly fine with information being provided by the end of next week if it can't be provided this evening.

So just to clarify, for 2025 can you please advise how much money Sask Housing has budgeted for the maintenance and rejuvenation of the social housing portfolio and for the affordable housing portfolio where the units are directly owned by the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So to answer your question, the total budget in 2025-26 is \$88.6 million for social housing as well as supportive housing initiatives. The breakdown on that, Sask Housing Corporation doesn't break that down. That money is

allotted to the housing authorities, and the housing authorities determine where best those dollars go within their own community based on need. So you know, one community might use more for supportive housing than social housing and another it could be vice versa.

So Sask Housing Corporation has that pool of money that gets distributed out to the housing authorities, and they do the breakdown at the local level.

April ChiefCalf: — Okay, thank you. Is the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation taking on any debt in 2025-26 that would be used to either build or remodel government-owned housing units in the province?

[17:30]

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So the short answer to that is, no, Saskatchewan Housing Corporation is not using debt or using debt financing for different projects. But what I will say is Sask Housing Corporation is utilizing, where possible, partnerships with the federal government so that we can leverage extra dollars and make the province's or the housing corporation's dollars maximized that way, so we can get more projects done using that additional money.

April ChiefCalf: — Okay. Does that mean grants from the federal government?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Those would be agreements that the federal government come up with from time to time when it comes to different housing initiatives, correct.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you. So it seems counterintuitive to see the government reducing its housing budget in the 2025-26 budget by 1.3 per cent when houselessness in the province is at the highest levels we have ever seen and when both the cities of Saskatoon and Regina have declared homelessness emergencies. Can you explain why your government has cut the budget?

Grant Hilsenteger: — Grant Hilsenteger, ADM [assistant deputy minister] for finance and corporate services. So it's not a decrease. It is numerically, but there's a lot of capital that's one-time funding that's falling off.

And so there's a number of new initiatives coming on. So the 2025 budget includes 14.9 million in new funding in the housing allocation. So there's a \$9.2 million increase to repair and renovate provincially owned housing units in Regina, Saskatoon, and P.A. and then there's an additional \$5 million for the rental development program.

And then these increases are offset by about \$15.9 million in reductions that reflect completion of one-time investments, and this includes the completion of 155 new supportive housing units under PATH and completion of the Meadow Green rebuild project in Prince Albert in '24-25. So that's the details around that.

April ChiefCalf: — Okay. Thank you. Can you please advise how many government-owned housing units we presently have and how many we had in 2020?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So if I'm reading your question correctly, you're wondering about the total number of units in 2020 and the total number of units in 2025. So the 2020 units we don't have here tonight, but we will get you that number as soon as we can possibly do that. 2024 Q4 [fourth quarter], total number of units: 17,428. And the breakdown of that is 7,185 family, including affordable; 10,243, senior.

April ChiefCalf: — Okay. Thank you. Does this government have any plans in the coming year or the next two or three years to completely renovate any of the seniors' high-rises in Saskatchewan — and by renovate I mean rebuilding mechanical systems, the roof, finishes — or reconstructing those buildings to meet the needs of our seniors today?

Sean Burnett: — Good evening. Sean Burnett, executive director of program and service design, housing division. So this year there will be investments made into the seniors portfolio throughout the province. The \$9.6 million allocation is for major capital components, and that's to replace critical components that are at risk of failure and can pose risk to tenant health and safety, so that does include roofs, boilers, HVAC [heating, ventilating, and air conditioning] systems, elevators. So we will see part of that \$9.6 million going to the seniors portfolio and some going to the family portfolio.

In addition, of the \$9.2 million for the major repairs of the three buildings, 4,287 of that will go to Prairie Place which is a senior high-rise in Regina. It's a 154-unit high-rise building for seniors. And currently there's vacancies in that unit, so this will go into some of the major building components of that building and will help to bring units back online and into service. That project is going to happen over a three-year period, so that's the first-year investment of a three-year project for that project.

April ChiefCalf: — Do you know how many vacancies there are at this time in that building?

Sean Burnett: — Ninety-three vacancies.

April ChiefCalf: — And you said there were three buildings that you'll be . . .

Sean Burnett: — That's the only seniors building from that \$9.2 million allocation. The other two buildings are family buildings, so that's Bryant Place and Westview. Westview's in Saskatoon and Bryant is in Prince Albert. They're both family portfolio.

April ChiefCalf: — Yes, Westview Place is in my constituency. Okay. Well thank you.

Can you list for me the changes that you have made to the Moose Jaw High Park seniors building to address the following concerns? So the first is the mixing of different client groups. The second is insect infestations. Third is security for seniors. And how much did the government invest in renovations to High Park last year? And how much do they intend to invest in the upcoming year?

[17:45]

Hon. Terry Jenson: — First of all, since we're talking Moose

Jaw, congratulations to Scotland on winning the world curling.

But aside from that, it's a very serious question. And so with Moose Jaw High Park, there were some different things that were identified with that facility. And one of the things that was done was there's security that were hired to, you know, watch the building during peak hours to ensure the safety of the tenants. There is enhanced pest control measures that were undertaken.

And then as far as the tenant mixture. It's a 55-plus building. But if there is a potential tenant that is leading what would be comparable to a senior's lifestyle — and these tenants are, you know, reference checked, and you know, really screened — that helps with the occupancy of the building and ensures that, you know, we're providing housing to not only the seniors but also some of the other people that are maybe not eligible at age but do need a place. And they are living a very good lifestyle that way.

In 2024 Moose Jaw Housing Authority was allocated \$1.96 million for repair, maintenance, and operations within their entire portfolio.

Saskatchewan Housing Corporation along with Moose Jaw Housing Authority did meet with tenants of the High Park facility to provide them with some education on general upkeep, cleanliness, security as well to ensure that, you know, others in the building were being kept safe as well. And so far that has worked out fairly well.

April ChiefCalf: — Do you know how many vacancies there are in High Park at this time?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — At the present time we don't have that number with us, but we can provide it to you as soon as we can.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you. So over the past few years our population has grown in Saskatchewan, yet the number of housing units being built is far below the number of new people coming to the province. The number of housing units being built is less than half of what we need to provide housing for Saskatchewan people, and Saskatchewan has the second-highest level of housing need among the provinces. What is your government doing to increase the number of housing units in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So in 2024 Saskatchewan Housing Corporation added 36 new group home spaces to its portfolio. These spaces house individuals with intellectual disabilities in partnership with third-party service providers.

In the '25-26 provincial budget, we're going to be investing an additional \$5 million in new funding for the rental development program. This will help increase the number of new supportive housing spaces through the partnerships that we have with third-party organizations.

And then on top of that an investment of \$9.2 million in the provincial capital funding to begin the multi-year renovation and repair projects for 285 Sask Housing Corporation-owned units, and that will expand access to social housing in Saskatoon and Regina and Prince Albert. So with this investment, units will better meet client needs, and currently vacant units will be coming back into service.

Should further add on to that in terms of the entire housing continuum in this province. The Ministry of Finance is offering some programs aimed to incentivize housing in the private market as well, including the Saskatchewan first-time homebuyers tax credit, which is a provincial non-refundable income tax . . . eligible for first-time homebuyers on qualified incomes.

In 2025 the credit increased from 10,000 to \$15,000, providing eligible applicants with a benefit of up to \$1,575. Combined with the federal benefit of 750, first-time homebuyers are eligible for a total benefit of up to \$2,325. There's also the Saskatchewan provincial sales tax, the PST, rebate on new home construction, a rebate of up to 42 per cent of the PST paid on the purchase of a newly constructed, previously unoccupied home. As of January 31st of this year, more than 3,200 rebates have been approved, totalling almost \$22 million.

And then there's also the Saskatchewan secondary suite incentive which is a grant of up to 35 per cent to a maximum of \$35,000 of the cost to build a new secondary suite at a homeowner's principal residence. As of January 31st of this year, more than 350 grants have been approved, totalling more than seven and a half million dollars.

So there's a bit of a snapshot in terms of what is happening in this province with increased number of housing opportunities for residents.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you. In 2025 how many social or affordable housing units directly owned by the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation do you expect to demolish, sell, or transfer or give to other entities?

Hon. Terry Jensen: — Thanks for the question. And you know, this is something that is ongoing literally week to week, month to month, year to year within Sask Housing Corporation. When it comes to getting best use of available properties around the province — and it doesn't matter which community it is in — we're always looking to the different communities to see, are those properties, are they occupied on a regular basis? Is there any need for those properties in a given community? And we work with municipalities and various housing authorities regularly to determine that.

So that's kind of the policy in terms of, you know . . . The 35,000-foot view is, we're always looking to make sure we're making the most and maximizing what we have for inventory. But I've got Roger Parenteau . . . sorry, Roger's over here. Roger can provide maybe some insight into last year to give kind of a picture of how that works, and then from there we can just . . . I'll just turn it over to you.

Roger Parenteau: — Thank you, Minister. Roger Parenteau, executive director of housing operations with housing division. So we work very closely with our community partners throughout the province to strategically divest housing assets and ensure that there's sufficient supply of social housing in the communities where we know there's long-term need. And we go about that working very closely with our partners and we have the discussions with the municipalities, with the housing authorities, before we divest any units. We're having discussions with regards to the need and demand of seniors and family

housing in these communities, just to ensure that we're getting full utilization of these units across the province.

So when the communities are showing low demand for either senior or family housing units in a community, we have those discussions with the municipalities and talk to them about divesting and putting them to a different ownership model where a private individual, private owner of a building could own those units and not have any . . . Just for market housing.

So we ensure that the units stay in those communities and are still available to individuals of their community. So throughout 2024 as an example, we sold . . . There was 142 units that were divested across the province through this portfolio management framework, and these units were, again, they stayed in the community that we divested. They were used for a different purpose, for market housing. And the community partners were, you know, satisfied that we had those discussions with them and knew the plans we had for them.

April ChiefCalf: — So they were sold to private or market versus non-profit?

Roger Parenteau: — They were sold to, could be a private individual or a non-profit group, depending on who . . . Because they would go through the real estate process, MLS [Multiple Listing Service] listings, and be publicly listed through MLS.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you.

[18:00]

Sean Burnett: — Sorry, I'll just add in there as well. Just to add to that, so that's the divestment. But yeah, I think you were asking about demolition and transferring other ownership, and I just wanted to touch a little bit on the other ownership.

It's not necessarily that we transfer ownership, but we do do third-party lease agreements, and we do those with different community partners as well. So we would do those in communities where there's support service agencies that will do partnerships with the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation to lease those units in order to provide . . . Typically supportive housing is one of the main examples of that.

And so partnership in Saskatoon, an example would be the Kotawān project that we did with Saskatoon Tribal Council. In Regina, an example would be Phoenix Residential Society that we did a partnership lease with them in order to lease a building. And so they provide supports and services through those units, and the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation maintains ownership but is able to do something slightly different with those units and make good use of them.

April ChiefCalf: — Okay. Thank you. Okay, I'm just being mindful of the time because I have a detailed question that is actually several questions. The detail is important to me just because of the different communities that I have been meeting people within.

So I'd like to know how many vacancies the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation had at the start of 2025 in the directly owned housing portfolio, which we would break down into the

social and affordable housing units and then again break it down by community and client group within those two programs. So I know you've provided data like this in the past, but we would like to know for the start of 2025.

And then to follow up on that, can you specify, of the vacant units, which ones are in need of the following? So we'd just like to know how many need extensive repairs versus, you know, typical, minimal repairs, or no repairs, so if there's vacant units that don't need any repairs.

And then I'm going to ask something further, just because I'm living in the city, and so I'd specifically like to know with the cities of Regina, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw, and Prince Albert if we could have a breakdown of vacancies in the different complexes. So for example, Dundonald Village, Westview Place, how many vacancies are there in each of those?

And I know that that's not something you can provide tonight, so if you could commit to providing that by the end of next week, that would be great.

Hon. Terry Jensen: — Yeah, we will endeavour to do what we can to get it to you as soon as we can. So my answer still holds. It's going to take some time. It's going to take a long time, but we will endeavour to get that to you as soon as we possibly can. But what Sean can do is he can, you know, break out some of those numbers by city or by community, and that'll give you kind of the aggregate number per community. So I'll let Sean go into that.

Sean Burnett: — Yeah. So we do track the information and do have some of that information, and what we have typically provided has been by community. And so we serve households in approximately 260 communities across Saskatchewan, and so we can break that information down by the seniors units and vacancy rate, the family units and vacancy rate, as well as the affordable.

By building, there are approximately 4,522 buildings owned by Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, so that level of detail I'm not too sure . . . Again, as the minister said, like the time it would take for us to pull all of those 4,522 buildings. So I'm not too sure if there's something . . . like if to narrow that a little bit in terms of maybe the largest six communities or something. It might be a little bit . . . be able for us to produce that a little bit quicker. But across 4,500 buildings would be challenging for us to get all of that information.

That being said, we do track vacancy rates. And you know, primarily in the large six communities, like . . . So in Regina our family portfolio is approximately 9.5 per cent vacant, and our seniors portfolio is about 19.9 per cent vacant, for the total vacancy rate of about 14.8 per cent. And in Saskatoon it would be, in the family portfolio 8.9 per cent, and then in the seniors portfolio 7.9, for a total vacancy rate of 8 per cent. Prince Albert would be 8.2 per cent and seniors would be 9.2 per cent, for an overall vacancy rate of 8.7. Moose Jaw, vacancy rate of 5.4 per cent, seniors portfolio of 8.4, for an overall vacancy of 7 per cent. The Battlefords, family is 4.1 per cent. The Battlefords senior portfolio is 25.6 per cent, for an overall vacancy of 16.3. And Good Spirit Housing Authority is 10.2 for family, 14.9 for senior, for an overall of 13.7.

And then we aggregate the other housing authorities into what we call south major urban centres, so that would be, outside of that six, the other . . . about 18 other communities. And the vacancy rate there would be, for family 18.3 per cent, senior 17.3 per cent, for an overall vacancy rate of 17.7.

And other south would be all those other communities — so as I mentioned, that would be about 230-odd communities — would be, family is 11.3 per cent, senior is 13.7 per cent, for an overall vacancy rate of 13.

And then we separate out northern Saskatchewan, so the family portfolio is 14.5 per cent, senior 8.8 per cent, and then 13.7 for the total. So currently the overall provincial vacancy rate is 12.6 per cent. That was as of December of 2024.

April ChiefCalf: — Would you happen to have the vacancy rate in Sandy Bay in northern Saskatchewan on you?

Sean Burnett: — I don't have that on me, no.

April ChiefCalf: — Okay. Thank you. So we have recently been advised that the Saskatchewan government is not renewing its support agreements with family or seniors non-profit organizations when the existing agreements have expired. Is this accurate? And if so, can you provide me with a list of the non-profits that have not been renewed in the past two years and that will not be renewed upon expiration in the next budget year? So I believe there's one in Regina, Sacred Heart.

Hon. Terry Jensen: — So the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation works closely with non-profit housing partners to ensure projects are sustainable and they can provide quality, affordable housing for many years to come. The corporation will honour all operating agreements and subsidy payments under the 35-year innovative housing program. No agreement will be terminated early by the housing corporation.

And Sask Housing Corporation is meeting with non-profit housing providers and offering amendments to innovative housing program agreements. The amendments will help housing providers remain financially viable as they transition to affordable rents and will have little to no impact on existing tenants with low incomes.

As of January 31st, 2025, Sask Housing Corporation has met with housing organizations for 32 out of 33 projects eligible for agreement amendments. Of these 32 projects, 28 agreement addendums have been fully executed and one project was transferred to Sask Housing Corporation.

I'm going to let Roger Parenteau expand on that a little bit just to flesh out some of those projects for us.

[18:15]

Roger Parenteau: — Thank you, Minister. So a little bit of background on the innovative housing program. SHC [Saskatchewan Housing Corporation] delivered the innovative housing program from 1989 to 1994 with operating agreements that were in effect for a term of 35 years. And all innovative housing program agreements expire between 2023 and 2030.

The innovative program buildings are in very desirable neighbourhoods, are in good to excellent condition, and have low vacancy rates. The innovative housing program projects typically have subsidized units; however there are a few projects that have mixed subsidized and unsubsidized units as well, including life lease units, market rent units, and privately owned condominium units.

So for the discussions that the minister mentioned we've been having with the groups, we've been talking to them about amendments to their agreement upon expiry. So all projects under the program, as I mentioned, will expire and mature between 2023 and 2030. And SHC will continue to subsidize the projects until the agreements mature, until their maturity date. And as of January 31st, 2025, 15 projects have matured.

So once an agreement matures, existing tenants still pay income-based rent and will transition to affordable rental rates, which cannot exceed SHC's maximum monthly rent. Most organizations have set their affordable rental rates below the maximum monthly rent.

SHC anticipates most tenants with low incomes that transition to affordable rents will be eligible to receive the Saskatchewan housing benefit. And tenants are eligible for the Saskatchewan housing benefit if they spend more than 35 per cent of their before-tax household income on shelter, including rent and utilities. Tenants paying more than 45 per cent of their before-tax income receive a higher monthly benefit amount. And in some cases, tenants who qualify for the housing benefit will have lower shelter costs than they did when they paid rent geared to income, which is typically set at 30 per cent of their income.

April ChiefCalf: — Okay. Thank you. Can you advise how many provincial government funding housing units, not including emergency shelter beds or group homes, are under construction at present?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Okay. So provincial housing units under construction in the social realm, correct? No supportive, no group homes, nothing like that? Okay. So I guess we'll start 2025. We opened up the Meadow Green facility in Prince Albert. As of right now there's going to be a new duplex constructed in Martensville; there's a family housing unit going to be built in La Ronge, a social housing unit being built in Saskatoon. There's also projects slated for La Loche, another one for Pinehouse.

And then within this year's budget, under the rental housing program, there's a \$5 million incentive there for developers. There's been expressions of interest being sent out on that. That is not community-specific, but it is part of the housing initiative that we have in the province to expand our housing stocks.

April ChiefCalf: — That just inspired more questions. I'm just wondering how many units will be available in, respectively, La Ronge, La Loche, and Pinehouse with the new construction.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So you were wondering, La Loche, Pinehouse, and what was the other?

April ChiefCalf: — La Ronge.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — La Ronge. Don't have that available

tonight, but as soon as we have that information available, we will get it over to you. Okay.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — You're welcome.

April ChiefCalf: — So looking at the provincial . . . Sorry, you called it PATH.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Provincial approach to homelessness.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you. I'm just wondering which communities have received emergency shelter spaces and supportive housing units. Do you have that information?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Right. So in terms of communities that have received shelter funding under PATH, Saskatoon with The Mustard Seed, 20 spaces there. In Regina we have RT/SIS or Regina Treaty/Status Indian Services New Beginnings, 10 spaces. And that's not the total number of spaces in the facility, but that's the number of PATH-funded spaces. Also in Regina the YWCA Regina Joan's Place and My Aunt's Place, there's 20 spaces there.

Stepping Stones in Prince Albert, 45 spaces. John Howard Society Willow Lodge in Moose Jaw is 15 spaces. We also have the Meadow Lake Homeplate Shelter Coalition Corporation, five spaces there.

Now I think it's also important to put everything into context that PATH is providing a number of spaces that are funded, but there's several other groups in the province that are doing exceptional work in this space as well. And some of them receive some spaces funded by PATH, others don't. For example, you know, STC [Saskatoon Tribal Council] in Saskatoon with the Wellness Centre, there's no PATH spaces funded there, but Sask Housing funds 106 spaces. Salvation Army Crossroads in Saskatoon, you know, another 75 spaces there. Keep going down the list. Salvation Army, the Waterston Centre here in Regina, 26 spaces funded through Sask Housing Corporation. Further down the list, the Lloydminster Social Action Coalition, 14 spaces funded by Sask Housing.

So there's the PATH funding spaces but then there's also all these other ones that are funded either through the housing corporation or through the community-based organization doing the work themselves.

Since October '23 the ministry, through Sask Housing Corporation, has partnered with the Ministry of Health. In terms of supportive housing spaces there's 155. These supportive housing provide on-site and visiting support services delivered by community-based providers.

These are for individuals who need some supports to live independently. And the new ones include 55 spaces at Kotawān which is a housing corporation-owned property in Saskatoon operated by Saskatoon Tribal Council; 20 spaces operated by Nēwo-Yōtina Friendship Centre here in Regina; 10 spaces at Kii Kinaahk Southwinds, an SHC-owned building in Saskatoon and that's operated by Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Services; 20 spaces at Lovering Place, which is a housing corporation-owned

building in Regina operated by Phoenix Residential Society and I should add that there's going to be an additional 16 spaces opened there in 2025; and 34 spaces at Robinson Manor which is also a Sask Housing Corporation-owned building in Saskatoon that's operated by Crocus Co-operative.

April ChiefCalf: — Is it possible to get the breakdown that you're reading from, like a document version of that?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Well, *Hansard*.

April ChiefCalf: — Yes, but is that everything or is there maybe some . . .

Hon. Terry Jenson: — That's pretty much the entire list, but I'm pretty sure I can get somebody from my office to shoot that information over to your office, yeah.

April ChiefCalf: — Perfect. I'm wondering if any of the beds from the Saskatoon Tribal Council Wellness Centre are going to be transferred over to the new shelter in Saskatoon on Pacific Avenue.

[18:30]

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Thanks for the question. And the short answer is no, we are not transferring beds at this present time. What we are doing is we're going to renew the agreement for one more year, one additional year, to operate the wellness centre in Fairhaven. Reason being — and there's a couple — earlier this winter, we heard loud and clear from the City of Saskatoon as well as some of their partners that there were concerns that there weren't enough shelter spaces in Saskatoon. And even with Mustard Seed opening with 40 additional spaces, we don't think now is the time to start pulling back on the number of spaces in Saskatoon.

You know, this past winter was what it was. But I don't think it's a very good time right now to start reducing those spaces as we try to plan out the long-range strategy, you know, utilizing programs like PATH, right. And with the point-in-time counts that the City of Saskatoon has compiled, that data is telling us again that we need to maintain the spaces that we have. So we are going to be extending the use of that shelter.

And I should also add too, in terms of security around that shelter, I've had conversations myself with police chief Cam McBride, and we are taking some additional steps to try to ensure the safety of not only the community around it but also the safety of the people that are utilizing that shelter.

You know, we're doing everything we can, recognizing a lot of the individuals that are there are going through crisis. And as far as outside the building, again we'll work with our police partners and try to mitigate any problems there. And I think the Minister of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety has said it well, with the additional 100 municipal police officers in the municipal police forces around Saskatchewan — of which Saskatoon is going to be receiving several of those — that we've heard the message loud and clear about security around that facility, and that's something that I think we're going to be able to improve on.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you. Just in the interest of time, I'm going to eliminate some of my questions, but I have one that I think is very important to ask, so I'm going to prioritize it at the end here. And we do know that houselessness is a significant problem in a lot of our southern cities, but it's also a problem in the North, the far North. What kind of money or supports are in place for our northern communities?

I did visit La Ronge this past winter, and they weren't able to actually access provincial funding because the only space that they could get for a shelter was on-reserve. And I feel very strongly that this is an issue, that this jurisdictional divide needs to be dealt with because not everybody who is using the shelter on-reserve is a status Indian under the *Indian Act*, right. So they are providing supports for people who should, you know . . . There should be some provincial funding provided for folks in the North.

So what's in the budget for northerners to provide for the unhoused populations in their communities?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So in La Ronge the ministry hasn't received any application for a shelter operation. You know, not to say that we're not open to it, but we haven't received anything.

So as far as supports go for northerners when it comes to this issue, Sask Housing Corporation collaborates with partners and stakeholders to address the housing needs in northern Saskatchewan communities, and that's pretty obvious. In northern Saskatchewan the corporation offers government-owned rental housing through the social housing program and the affordable housing program. These programs are targeted to individuals and families with low incomes and are administered by six local housing authorities in 25 communities.

Since 2007 Sask Housing Corporation has invested \$55 million in northern Saskatchewan to repair and develop units, including Sask Housing Corporation-owned units and through partnerships with third parties.

In terms of some of the other benefits for northern residents, you know, within SIS [Saskatchewan income support], providing additional children's basic benefits to children in the North. There's also additional benefits included in the adult basic benefit in recognition of the higher cost of basic items in the North — you know, the SIS and SAID programs. You know, there's also an additional monthly benefit for alternative heating for those who use things like wood or propane. Also we cover clients' actual utility costs under SAID, including power, energy, alternative heating, and things like that.

Should also add that because this is an ongoing issue, and it's an issue that I personally take extremely seriously, I've had the opportunity to have meetings with my federal Housing minister earlier this year. And I think there's some shared priorities there in terms of working together and collaboratively as a province and as a federal government — depending what happens in a few weeks — to be able to allow northern residents that have had to leave because of different, you know, conditions and things like that, to be able to allow those northern residents to go home and have a place to go home to.

So those are conversations that I'm still willing to have regardless

of who forms the next federal government or who the next Housing minister is. It's a conversation that we've had, and I'm going to continue to have and work collaboratively to make that happen.

April ChiefCalf: — Thank you. I'm going to pass over to my colleague here for his questions. Thank you so much.

Brent Blakley: — Thanks, April. I just want to add my thanks to the folks here — Chair MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] Weger and Minister Jenson and his ministry team — for being here tonight. I know it gets to be a late night for you folks and you have to put in a little bit of overtime, so I thank you for being here and the work that you do as well. It's really important work.

I know it's understood that your ministry has a financial obligation to fall within certain parameters, to follow an overall budget, account for payments and expenses that your ministry has. And Social Services, as Minister Jenson already maintained, you do have an obligation — perhaps even more than other areas — have an obligation to serve and consider the impact of the people that you serve and of the province.

That's kind of where I'm going to be coming from with my questions this evening. I've got a few questions here regarding our SAID and SIS programs. SAID, of course, is Saskatchewan assured income for disability, and SIS, Saskatchewan income support. I'm going to come at them from a couple different angles.

So regarding SAID and SIS in this budget, I note that there was a 2 per cent increase for both SAID and SIS for this budget. SIS and SAID recipients will receive an extra \$30 per month per person, or \$43 a month per family. How does this amount help lift SIS and SAID recipients out of deep poverty? Considering inflation and cost of living, how is this minimal increase explained and justified, considering, like I said, cost of living and inflation?

[18:45]

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So with regards to SIS and SAID rates, yes, this budget includes a 2 per cent increase for both SIS and SAID, and that's for the base benefit. And that 2 per cent is reflective of the inflation rate that is being projected for 2025, and that again is just on the base benefit. And then you start stacking the other benefits on top, and there is increases throughout both programs in there. For example, when it comes to travel and meal per diems there's an increase this year to cover some of the inflationary costs that we've seen for travel and food.

And then also under SAID there's the additional \$1,000-per-year employment exemption. So that means somebody in SAID can earn an additional \$1,000 a year before their benefits are impacted. On top of that there is a federal program, the Canada disability benefit. And for those that qualify under that program that's an additional \$2,400 per year, so an additional \$200 per month. And all of this is on top of the base benefit that is going to be increasing by 2 per cent.

But I think what I'll do is I'm going to turn it over to my deputy minister of income assistance, Devon Exner, who can step us

through maybe a little bit more in terms of how everything is formulated and everything to that area. So I'll turn it over to Devon.

Devon Exner: — Thank you. Devon Exner, assistant deputy minister, income assistance. To add on to the minister's comments, the 2 per cent increase was to the base benefit, so the adult basic benefit shelter in SIS, and then also the living income benefit on SAID.

Along with that are all the benefits that are available to those that have other needs. So that could be a prescribed diet, it could be medical travel, in SAID the actual cost of utilities, or maybe some other sort of accommodation that that person needs to meet their needs. So some of those benefits where we pay actuals are protected. So therefore there is no inflationary cost to the individual because we pay the actual cost.

So an example. Since replacing the Saskatchewan assistance program and the transitional employment allowance in 2018, benefits have increased by around \$260 or approximately 29 per cent. That's higher than the 21 per cent increase in the Saskatchewan consumer price index.

On the SAID program, very similar. Since replacing the Saskatchewan assistance program in 2009-10 for clients with significant and enduring disabilities, benefits have increased by more than \$550 or 65 per cent. That's higher than the 43 per cent increase in the Saskatchewan consumer price index. So that demonstrates the increases that have been made in the programs and how we're supporting individuals.

I think your other question was, how do we determine the increases in the funding? So there's a lot of information that goes into that. So we look at low-income poverty measures. We look at CMHC [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation] data, Canada Mortgage and Housing data. We also have information on what rents individuals are paying in different communities. We look at the Maytree provincial rankings and what that income looks like across Canada and how do we compare with that.

We also take into account geographical variances and look at family composition. So we have tiered benefits depending on where you live, based on community. And then of course we also have additional benefits, which was mentioned earlier, in the northern administrative district as well. So thank you.

Brent Blakley: — So those other benefits you're talking about are on top of the 2 per cent. Is that right?

Devon Exner: — Those benefits are also available to individuals, yes.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, yeah. Okay, great. Thank you very much.

You were talking about rent just a minute ago, and I'm going to go there. Rent for one-bedroom apartments in Saskatoon and Regina have seen increases between 7 per cent and 15 per cent over the past year. In today's rental market SIS, and SAID recipients receive a benefit that is mostly or totally consumed by rent and have little or no funds to allot for food, clothing, transport, or other needs.

With rental rates increasing between 7 to 15 per cent, how does the minister explain and justify a 2 per cent increase in benefit rates?

Devon Exner: — Thank you for the question. I'll maybe start with just a little bit of context around SIS and what we're seeing today. We're seeing actually more housing stability through the Saskatchewan income support program than we were seeing previously under the Saskatchewan assistance program, which has been closed for four years now.

So on average, 12 per cent of social assistance clients moved two or more times a year between 2015 and 2018. Since the SAP [Saskatchewan assistance program] program closed in 2021, only 6 per cent of SIS clients have moved two or more times per year.

So when we talk about SIS and the benefits that are available to pay for your shelter and utilities, meet your basic needs, again we look at a whole-income approach. It's not just the SIS benefits that are available. So we have clients that are working part-time. Of course we have our income exemptions which allow them to protect some of those dollars that they're earning before they're deducted from their benefits.

We have individuals that are receiving the Canada child benefit, the GST [goods and services tax] credit. They're benefiting from the low-income tax credit. So much of that information is taken into account when we're looking at rates and ensuring that people do have enough money to meet their needs.

So shelter benefits are provided through SIS and SAID. SIS pays a flat rate for rent and utilities. SAID has an option to cover actual utility costs, and we can also pay actual shelter costs in certain situations. Exceptional situations, I should say.

In addition to that, under the Saskatchewan housing benefit, there are two streams where SIS and SAID clients are eligible for the SHB, or Saskatchewan housing benefit. That's where they're seeking safety from interpersonal violence, and the supportive housing stream.

Brent Blakley: — Okay. Thank you. Talking about SIS and SAID recipients, the average SIS and SAID recipient receives the benefits that are, according to numbers, well below the official poverty line. And SIS recipients are \$14,000 below the poverty line, and SAID almost \$10,000 below the poverty line.

When you take these numbers into account — including the income exemption, considering this — how can SIS and SAID recipients, how do these people support themselves on so little when they are so far below the poverty line?

Richelle Bourgoin: — So I'm happy to answer that question. My name is Richelle Bourgoin. I'm the deputy minister.

Our income assistance benefits in this province are amongst the highest in Canada. We are in the top five for meeting those basic needs as a program of last resort. And that's before the 3 per cent increase to assistance benefits in May '24 and the 2 per cent increase in May of 2025.

At the same time, I think some new information that will increase

affordability is the fact that the Government of Saskatchewan does intend to exempt the Canada disability benefit from income assistance.

Brent Blakley: — Okay. Thank you. And I think my next question, Minister, it was already answered. You said there has been adjustment to the shelter benefits; is that correct? And if so, could you give us those numbers and those figures? I believe you said it was increased.

Devon Exner: — Thank you. So for the Saskatchewan income support program, I'll walk through the SIS monthly shelter rates. So for single individuals in Saskatoon or Regina, it's \$660 per month which is up \$10. The remainder of the province, it's \$600 per month, and that is also up \$10. For couples living in Saskatoon and Regina it's \$845. That's an increase of \$15. The remainder of the province it is \$735. That is up \$15.

For families with one to two children the rate is \$1,085 per month. That's up \$20. For the remainder of the province it's \$840 or an increase of \$20. Families with three or more children living in Regina and Saskatoon, it's \$1,265 which is up \$20. And for the remainder of the province it's \$945 or an increase of \$20.

On the Saskatchewan assured income for disability program, this one's going to take a little bit longer. There's more calculations here. So the monthly living income benefit rates increased. So for a single individual in tier A is \$1,159 which is an increase of \$30. In tier B it's \$1,104 which is an increase of \$30. In tier C it's \$1,058 or an increase of \$30. In tier D it's \$1,021 or an increase of 30.

For a childless couple in tier A it's \$1,617 or an increase of \$40. In tier B it's \$1,526, an increase of \$40. In tier C \$1,475 or an increase of \$40; tier D, \$1,375 which is an increase of \$40. Singles with one to two children living in tier A is \$1,421 which is an increase of \$30. In tier B it's \$1,294 which is an increase of \$30. In tier C it's \$1,268 which is an increase of \$30. And in tier D it's \$1,129 which is an increase of \$30.

[19:00]

For singles with three to four children the rate in tier A is \$1,483 which is an increase of \$30. In tier B it's \$1,355 which is an increase of \$30; in tier C \$1,332, an increase of \$30; and in tier D it's \$1,180 or an increase of \$30. For a single with five-plus children living in tier A it's \$1,559 or an increase of \$30; in tier B \$1,434 or a \$30 increase; in tier C \$1,395 with a \$30 increase; and in tier D \$1,262 with a \$30 increase.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you. Thank you very much for those numbers. Previously MLA ChiefCalf was asking questions about homelessness. I have just one here for the minister. Does the minister believe that low benefit rates may be contributing to homelessness?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So to answer your question, the Saskatchewan income assistance program is not driving homelessness. It is not driving homelessness in Saskatchewan and it's, you know, not driving homelessness across the country either. What is driving homelessness, not only in Saskatchewan but across the country, are the very complex needs of each individual. And to say that income assistance rates are driving it

would be, in my opinion, very false.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you. In kind of researching questions for tonight I looked up regarding direct payments to clients and it said the SIS program primarily provides cash payments directly to recipients rather than directly paying landlords or utility providers.

I guess my question is: with regards to rent and utilities, could the minister explain the decision to not implement direct payment to landlords and utilities in this budget?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So thanks for the question. So yeah, there's probably been some public statements made around, you know, assumptions that the ministry is no longer directly paying landlords or utility companies for individuals who are on income assistance programs and that information is not correct. That information is not correct.

People who have complex needs and who are at risk of homelessness are eligible for direct payments from the ministry for utilities as well as to landlords, and that's a fact. We've also included, the ministry has, funding to community-based organizations that are providing trusteeship and money management services to clients that have complex needs or need assistance.

Since 2020-2021 the ministry has more than doubled the funding to the community-based organizations to more than double the number of trusteeships available for income assistance clients, increasing funding to almost \$2 million per year for approximately 1,200 spaces across the province. Those are 1,200 potential individuals who can receive assistance in getting their rent paid, their utilities paid.

If a landlord has a tenant that's in arrears, they can simply reach out to Social Services, to the nearest ministry office. We have a dedicated email inbox for housing providers. If a tenant is an income assistance client, we will connect them with the client and help them manage their benefits and work with them to avoid eviction. And again the trusteeship program is there as a support to assist individuals that need that help. Devon? Yeah.

Devon Exner: — You know, just to expand on that, our staff do an excellent job of working with the clients, assessing their needs. And in the realm of trusteeship, it's not just managing and paying their rent and utilities; it's supporting, you know, their daily living activities to meet their basic needs. So they support all of the income that's coming into that household, whether it's a single individual or a family, and any income that they have access to and ensuring that they are purchasing food appropriately, covering their utility bills and their rent. So it's that whole-income approach again where a trustee is able to provide that.

We in the ministry cannot direct individual benefits for groceries and those sorts of things out of their basic benefits. So direct pay is one option. That helps individuals that are maybe struggling or finding themselves with a few arrears around shelter and utilities, but it's trusteeship that really supports them. And part of our trusteeship program is not only just to manage their benefits and administer them on a monthly basis, it's helping our clients to grow those skills over time so that we can . . . At some point they

will be successful in managing their own benefits moving forward.

Brent Blakley: — But it has not been implemented across the board. And that's, you know, kind of the decision I'm asking for. Why was that decision, that made not to implement it across the board?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — I think it's important to keep in mind that when you're talking income assistance, what you're trying to do is you're trying to lift people up. You're a teacher by trade. You teach your students. And it's no different in social services. We work with our clients to try to educate them and help them become independent where possible, or live to, you know, live at their best possible . . . You know what I mean.

So it's something that is there for those that need it, but there's others that are able to live independently and are able to manage their own money, and they're quite proud of that fact. So to institute direct pay across the board would be doing a disservice to the individuals that do take pride in managing their own money and affairs. And I don't know if you want to add anything to that, Devon.

Devon Exner: — Yeah. And again that's where . . . Going back to our staff, in the SIS program, which is different than the previous SAP program, we did not have case managers that focused their attention on sitting down and understanding a person's monthly budget and helping them to work through what those items were that were in their budget and how to balance some of those items.

In SIS we do take a very strong case management approach to working with clients. We talk to them about budgeting and the steps that they need to take and we support them through that process to try to build those skills, as we talked about earlier. So it doesn't just happen on the trusteeship side. Our staff are also doing that with clients to help them build that independence as they move forward.

An example would be, you know, we know that there are individuals at some point that will become seniors and become available to other income support programs that don't direct pay or don't have trusteeship services. So helping individuals at this point in their life to create that stability and move forward is a very important piece for our clients.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you. Switching gears a little bit here, in 2016 the Sask Party government committed to reducing poverty by half by 2025. When the poverty reduction strategy was announced poverty stood at 9 per cent. Today poverty in Saskatchewan is 11 per cent. If the Sask Party had succeeded at its goal, poverty would be at 4.5 per cent. What does the Sask Party government intend to do now that the poverty reduction strategy has failed?

Richelle Bourgois: — Thank you very much for the opportunity to respond to the question. With the best intentions, the poverty reduction strategy was disrupted by a number of issues that were beyond our control, namely the global pandemic and then more recently economic uncertainty that certainly has pressure on Saskatchewan families as well as those around the world.

But what I will do is ask Devon to speak to the specific programs within the Ministry of Social Services that can generally address affordability for Saskatchewan residents.

[19:15]

Devon Exner: — Thank you. As we offer a number of income assistance programs, I'll just take the opportunity to touch on a few of them here. With the Saskatchewan income support program, in May of 2025, as the minister identified earlier, we will be increasing benefits for the fourth year in a row. It's a \$6 million investment that will increase monthly income assistance benefits by approximately 2 per cent.

Under the Saskatchewan assured income for disability program, in May of this year we are increasing benefits to the tune of \$5 million, and that will increase benefits by up to \$40 per household per month. Also in the SAID program, in April of 2025, or right now, a \$500,000 investment will increase SAID annual earned income exemptions by \$1,000, enabling clients to earn more from employment before their benefits are impacted.

But you know, just another note on that. Maybe it's not often noted, but individuals that are eligible for SIS and SAID also qualify for supplementary health benefits. So they either pay zero or \$2 prescription fees. They have access to dental and optometry services and those sorts of things that doesn't cost them money out of pocket.

On the personal care home benefit program, a \$10 million investment will increase the personal care home benefit monthly income threshold by \$1,000, so it's raising it up to \$3,500 this year. As part of the \$10 million investment to increase the personal care home benefit monthly income threshold, SAID level-of-care benefits for personal care home residents is also increasing by up to \$120 per month. We also have an increase in there. Approved private service homes that support people with intellectual disabilities and approved homes that support people with mental illness will receive increases of up to \$93 per month.

In the seniors' income plan, since 2018 we've increased the benefit by \$90. This represents about a 33 per cent increase from 2018 maximum SIP [seniors' income plan] benefits eligible to seniors of \$270 per month.

The minister did mention earlier tonight the new Saskatchewan employment incentive, which was launched on January 16th of 2024. This program provides a benefit to those low-income working families with children to support them as they are entering the labour market and provide those supports. Those families also qualify for full supplementary health benefits on that program.

The minister had also mentioned the million dollar grant to Food Banks of Saskatchewan to fulfill the \$2 million commitment over two years.

In prior years we've also introduced the education and training incentive. That was introduced in July of 2022 to support SIS and SAID clients attending eligible education or training programs.

We increased the SIS alternate heating benefit in SIS by \$60 or 46 per cent in the past, and we've obviously increased earnings

exemptions over multiple years.

In October of 2024 we implemented an incidental income exemption up to \$100 per month per household for both SIS and SAID clients to support clients in retaining more income before their benefits are impacted, and of course we continue to cover the costs of actual utilities and other special needs as I had mentioned earlier.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you very much. I'm going to change gears a little bit. I've got some questions regarding child and family services. So I don't know if you need to get some players off the sidelines and into the huddle, that's fine.

My first couple of questions are regarding caseloads and the first question is, can you tell us the average caseload size for child protection workers? And how does this compare to five years ago? So just the average size of the caseload.

Tobie Eberhardt: — Tobie Eberhardt, assistant deputy minister for child and family programs.

What we don't have necessarily is the tracking of the caseload sizes because each case is different, so you can't compare a case to a case. So what we look at — and our supervisors and managers really work with the staff around this — is what's going on with the family? So how many children are they? Are the children in care? Are they not in care? And what's going on with the family, the complexity of it? And so the supervisors are really determining how to distribute those cases when they first come to our attention based on those complexities.

Brent Blakley: — Okay. Could you get me an average number then? At some point, maybe not today, but next week? Is there an average?

Richelle Bourgoin: — May I ask a clarifying question?

Brent Blakley: — Sure.

Richelle Bourgoin: — So are you talking caseload by a child and family programs employee or the number of cases that are currently being served by the ministry?

Brent Blakley: — Per child protection worker. Per worker. Yeah. Just kind of an average.

Richelle Bourgoin: — Yes.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you. Next couple, just regarding out-of-home care. First question, what is the trend over the past five years in the number of out-of-home care placements in the past five years? How is that trending?

Tobie Eberhardt: — So I'll just give a little context in how we sort of, how we're tracking children in out-of-home care. So in the province we have either children that come into the care of the ministry, so we are their caregiver, their guardian; and then there's also children that have been placed in the custody of a person of sufficient interest. So this could be a grandparent, an aunt. We financially support that type of placement, and we also provide additional supports as needed for the family. So those are the two ways we track for children.

So the overall number of children in out-of-home care this year as of December 31st, 2024, it was 5,937. And so what we're finding with the change of that, it's been pretty stable. In the last year, I think it was about 0.2 per cent decrease. But over five years there has been some growth.

For children that are in the ministry's care, as of December 31st, there is a total of 4,025. And so comparing it to March 31st, it would have been 3,916. And then for the number of children who are in the custody of a person of sufficient interest, as of December 31st, 2024, it was 1,912. Comparing it to March 31st of 2024 when it was 1,981.

Brent Blakley: — Further to that, what do you anticipate will occur over the next five years considering numbers, needs, changes, type of placements, etc.? What do you anticipate might happen in the next five years going forward?

Tobie Eberhardt: — So what I would say is, some of the trends we're seeing is . . . First of all, over the last number of years, our focus has really been on prevention. We've made a number of investments in prevention. The minister can touch on a couple of those that are in this year's budget.

So really focusing on how do we support families to safely care for their children. And so one of the trends that we're seeing is, entries into care — so that's children coming into care — that has actually decreased over the last five years by 7.7 per cent. The children that do come into care, what we're seeing also is that their needs are much more complex; the families' needs are much more complex. And so they're staying in care longer.

And so that's where we're looking at really what are the things that we can put into the family to help mitigate that risk and get them back to their parents or to extended family whenever we can find one that's suitable. So I'll maybe turn it over to the minister.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Sure. And thanks, Tobie. And when we talk about prevention, you know, it's important. It's important work that needs to be done, and we're going to continue to do that. And in this year's budget we're committing \$750,000 in new funding to establish 24-7 intensive family preservation services for families caring for children with complex needs in a couple of new communities, being Prince Albert and Melfort.

These in-home support programs provide prevention and intervention services for families with children with complex and diverse needs, as Tobie had said. It's changing. We're seeing more complexities all the time and the 24-7 access to emergency intervention when a crisis arises. So it's an investment like this that strengthens families by providing them with the tools and strategies for successful parenting. The services offered in these two new locations will provide support to five families in each location at any given time.

Again when we talk about, you know, caring for children, trying to work on the prevention angle is important. It's easier . . . or not easier, it's better to work on the prevention than the after, right. And so that's the kind of work that our ministry is committed to.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you very much for answering my next

question. Regarding a little bit about foster care, I note that you are . . . The Sask Party government's not meeting their targets for recruiting new foster families. The target was 50, and in 2023-24 only 36 were recruited.

What are the implications of this, maybe not meeting our targets to get foster families or recruiting new foster families?

[19:30]

Tobie Eberhardt: — So I think that I'll start just talking about some of the trends in foster care. You know, we see across Canada that people interested in being foster parents has declined, and I think part of it is, you know, looking at the makeup of families. Previously you might have had one parent who stayed at home, whereas now we maybe have both parents are working. In addition, we're finding that people who do go into fostering tend to want to care for less children, so they're maybe caring for one or two children, as opposed to in the past where you might have a foster parent caring for four children.

So in response to that one, we continue to really work with our partner, the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, about how can we be innovative, how can we look at recruiting foster parents, how we look at supporting them. We brought in a number of things to help support foster parents, such as in-home support program that the Foster Families Association runs.

We brought in the PRIDE [parent resources for information, development, and education] levels of pay, where we're looking at specializing some foster homes and then providing compensation on top of the regular rates that a foster parent would receive. So that's some of the things that we're doing around recruiting additional foster parents.

In response to some of the other things that we're doing, as the minister mentioned, really are focused on prevention. I mean that is always our primary goal. And then when children do have to come into care, looking at the family first. So we really work hard to find family to care for children. We support them, provide them payment rates to help them care for those children, and also provide additional support.

One of the challenges we have of course is if a child comes into care, we have to find a placement for them. And so one of the implications with the decrease in foster homes is that we have had to increase group homes to care for some children, especially sibling groups. You know, we're able to put a large sibling group together in a group home.

But the cost is higher for children to be cared for in a group home setting. And so that would be one of the implications, is really it does, you know, does affect our budget when we're having to create some of these more costly options to care for children when we can't find a suitable family-based home for them.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you. And can somebody just tell me what per cent of foster homes are Indigenous?

Tobie Eberhardt: — We don't have the percentage of foster homes that are Indigenous.

Brent Blakley: — Can we get that number at some point next

week?

Kari Paton: — Hi, I'm Kari Paton, executive director for child and family service delivery. Yeah, thank you for the question. We don't track a person's ethnicity or First Nations and Indigenous background, but we do work with our partners in supporting foster parents to care for all children in care, specifically our partners with the First Nations agencies who provide child protection on-reserve and complete and work with them on Indigenous foster homes that they have on-reserve to help support families and children.

We also provide cultural training and Indigenous supports that way to the foster homes, including cultural case plans for children.

Brent Blakley: — So it's not a priority then to put Indigenous children with Indigenous families? Is that what you're saying? It's not a priority?

Richelle Bourgoin: — No, it's absolutely a priority. But technically, when you're asking for the registration of foster parents who have expressed interest and who have gone through the screening criteria for the foster parents program specifically, there is no indicator required to self-identify any Indigenous heritage or heritage of any kind, only to meet the eligibility criteria to be a foster parent.

So specifically when you're talking about the statistics of Indigenous representation in foster parents in that program, we don't have that number. But what we do have is all of the tools that we can provide any foster parent in Saskatchewan to ensure that the children in their care are receiving the appropriate and necessary cultural supports that they need while they are in the care of that family.

Brent Blakley: — Okay. So if it's a priority to put Indigenous children with Indigenous families, how is it a priority if you don't know who the Indigenous families are or which the Indigenous families are?

Kari Paton: — So on priority, placing Indigenous children with Indigenous families is our priority, and we do that with our policies and procedures regarding priority placements. So our first priority is to keep a child with their biological family; the second one is to place them with extended family; and then the third would be to place a child with a First Nations band member or community member. And then that's when we would look at other placements such as foster care or non-Indigenous care would be our last priority. We feel like we've shown this in our stats. We have 57 per cent of children placed in care with extended family members and 16 per cent with foster families.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you. Thanks for the answer. That explains it to me a little bit. I have a close relationship with a foster family here in town. And out of the seven kids they have, they have a number of Indigenous kids. And they're very cognizant of the cultural things that they do with them and take them to, and so I appreciate that as well.

Just moving a little bit towards group homes, the trend respecting availability in the use of group homes. Do you have sufficient spaces to meet the need? So what is the trend with regards to

group homes and are you able to meet that need?

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you. So we work really closely with our community-based organizations and our Indigenous partners around developing the appropriate group home spaces for children. It could be that we're looking at developing a special kind of services. For example, we have children with autism, and last year we expanded on our group home spaces for autism.

So it's always really assessing what are the needs of the children we currently have. Where are they from? Partly we always want to keep children in their home communities, and so that might mean us working with our group home providers about, would they move their service. I mean, we've done that before, you know, when we've identified a higher need in a different community. And so really it's around the partnerships we have.

We have sufficient group home spaces on any given day, but we do sometimes have additional spaces needed. So in the summer months we find the number of children requiring out-of-home care might be larger, so we work with our CBO [community-based organization] partners to develop some summer contingency spaces, we call them, just so that we know that we have them and we're not scrambling at the last minute.

Brent Blakley: — The Children's Advocate continues to receive reports of concerns regarding the quality of care children in group homes are receiving and is concerned about the lack of compliance with policy guidelines, posing a risk to children. What is the ministry going to be doing to improve staff training, monitoring, and oversight of these homes?

Ellen McGuire: — Good evening. My name's Ellen McGuire. I am an executive director with child and family programs in the program and service design area.

Thank you for the question. We've done quite a bit in terms of improving our group home oversight in the last few years. Namely we have five mechanisms, five different teams, that are providing group home oversight. One of them is the community services development team that oversees our contracts with the CBO-contracted group homes.

[19:45]

We also have a quality assurance team. That team is the one that's responsible for conducting child death or critical injury reviews. So if something were to happen in a group home placement, then they would be providing a look at the initial review of that critical injury or death. We also have a resident services team that goes out to all the group homes and the protocol homes on any First Nation, band, or agency and conducts a group home review with them.

We have also then our operational oversight unit that was added a few years ago that provides training and additional supports to the group homes. And then we also have . . . I'm missing one now. The resident services team that has the . . . Yes, the resident services team that provides the group home reviews.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you very much. Again switching gears a little bit, I noticed that child and family services sometimes uses hotels to house children in. Under what

circumstances does child and family services use hotels? What are the circumstances that that involves?

Tobie Eberhardt: — So thank you for that question. So child and family programs has not used hotels for caring for children for a number of years. Our focus has really been on developing more appropriate out-of-home care options for children. So hotel use within child and family programs would maybe be used or has been used more so when a family is requiring a safe place to live, and we want to prevent that child from coming into care. So in those cases we would help support the family with obtaining a hotel until we can help them get stable housing.

There might be a rare occasion where a hotel was used for a child in care. For example, in this last year with the road conditions, you know, we had staff transporting a child to a placement and because the highways were closed they had to use a hotel for a night. So that would be a rare situation that we would use it.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you. I'm going to just go to a last question here. Let me find it here. It's here, I'm sure. So I just want to read a definition here of institutionalized poverty:

Institutionalized poverty refers to poverty that is perpetuated and reinforced by systemic issues within society rather than solely individual circumstances. Individualized poverty is not simply about individual failings, but rather about how societal structures and policies can create and maintain conditions that lead to and entrench poverty.

So I guess my question is, doesn't it make more sense to make the investment now in social services, in SAID and SIS, to help people get out of the cycle of poverty that some find themselves in? To invest in people now, to help them and to have them break free or able to leave income assistance programs, rather than administering minimal increases that do not keep up with inflation, having people continue receiving benefits, unable to claim income assistance, the government paying out benefits year after year after year?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So if I understand, the premise of the question is, why are we not providing more than what individuals are getting now so that we don't have to continue doing this into the future.

Brent Blakley: — Correct. Just to help them out of that poverty cycle.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Right. Well when it comes to the programs and services that the ministry offers, it goes beyond dollars and cents. It goes to making sure that individuals are safe and supported to begin with.

Number two, going to ensure that our community-based organization partners are providing additional services such as training opportunities. They're providing additional education opportunities. They're providing additional community supports to these individuals who, you know, if they have either no barriers or very few barriers, have the opportunity and, through that work with the community-based organizations and through the work with their caseworker, can set goals for themselves and strive to achieve those goals as they work towards becoming

independent.

So you know, I mean, our government's goals for everybody in this province — and it's regardless of where an individual is — we want to ensure that we've got strong communities and strong families. And you know, with the ministry working, like I said, in conjunction with our community-based organizations, with our case workers, and funding the different things that we do within income assistance, whether that's in the SIS program or the SAID program, ensuring that our investments that we're making in those are over and above what the inflation rate is. That lends that extra cushion to those individuals so they can better themselves and live, you know, to the best of their ability.

So it goes beyond dollars and cents. It goes to what each of us in the province are able to provide for supports. And you know, I'll just take a second to really thank the community-based organizations across this province who have done remarkable work with so many individuals — and there's success stories out there — and for the work that those CBOs do, and for the work that our other community partners, whether that's Indigenous organizations or otherwise. You know, there's some really good work being done. So it comes down to more than just dollars and cents in this case.

Brent Blakley: — Okay. Thank you very much. That was my last and final question. I'll pass it on to MLA Senger.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you so much. I just want to start off by thanking everyone that's here this evening. It's truly such a pleasure to be here, to be able to get some clarification around this budget.

And I just also want to share, I've met with a number of individuals and organizations over the past few months that have worked with the Ministry of Social Services. And I wish I could say this off the record, but I can't. You know, everybody that I spoke to has spoken so highly of the staff within social services. And again, this is the part I would say off the record if I could, but obviously I can't. In comparison to other ministries, you guys just go really above and beyond.

And so truly, thank you for everything that you do. It's such a delight to hear so many great stories about the support and availability and accessibility of people within the ministry. So thank you again for all that you do. And with that, I will move on to some of my questions.

So my first question. Minister Jenson, you were just speaking about community-based organizations. I was wondering if you could please table a list of all the CBOs that will be receiving a 3 per cent increase in funding.

Erin Kiefer: — Hi. My name's Erin Kiefer. I'm the executive director of finance for the Ministry of Social Services.

So just to clarify on your question, so we go through a contract production process. And so right now in the spring we're entering into new contracts with the CBOs and we're going through the refresh. So we don't extend that lift until after the budget is passed around the May long weekend. And then also throughout the year we're also contracting with new CBOs, so it's not really like a list today. But we can provide you a list of CBOs that we

have contracts with.

Another good place to look is in Public Accounts. So Public Accounts shows all of the actuals and what we've spent on CBOs in the prior year. So the Public Accounts that was published in this past year would show you the year prior. And for what we're entering into this upcoming year, that's still another 14 months away from where we'll be ready to publish that information.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. That's very helpful. It would be much appreciated if you could provide me with the list that you do have ongoing contracts with.

Erin Kiefer: — Sure.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. And is it all CBOs that receive funding from Social Services that are receiving the 3 per cent increase?

[20:00]

Erin Kiefer: — So the lift is applied across most of all of our funded contracts. So third-party service providers that use a per diem or a fee-for-service model do not receive a general lift. These costs are reviewed and updated regularly through other avenues.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. Is the increase just coming from the Ministry of Social Services or is it coming from other departments as well, such as Education, the Status of Women, health care, and Justice?

Erin Kiefer: — On budget day, government announced that the 3 per cent lift would be extended across multiple ministries, and so across human services there will be a 3 per cent lift to CBOs.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you very much. Okay, moving on, I've got some more statistic, number-based questions. If you don't have the numbers, I would appreciate it if you could table them and provide them to me at another date.

My first question is, do you have any statistics about the number of people accessing SAID, and has that number increased?

Richelle Bourgoin: — Would you like the statistics for the last three years?

Brittney Senger: — Yes, that would be great.

Devon Exner: — Thank you. I'll run through the statistics. So just to qualify the question here, I just want to make sure I'm answering it correctly. So are you looking for the number of beneficiaries on SAID or the number of households on SAID?

Brittney Senger: — Beneficiaries, please.

Devon Exner: — Beneficiaries? Okay. So SAID beneficiaries starting in February of 2022 was 22,929, and then April '22 was 23,112. May '22 was 23,117. June of 2022 was 23,160. July 2022 was 23,085. August of 2022 was 23,107. September of 2022 was 23,027. October of 2022 was 22,922. November of 2022 was 22,919. December of 2022 was 22,978. January of 2023 was 22,997; February of 2023, 22,942. March 2023 was 23,052.

April of 2023, 22,933; May of 2023, 22,933; June of 2023, 22,959; July 2023, 22,818; August of 2023, 22,793; September of 2023, 22,743; October of 2023, 22,627; November 2023, 22,661; December of 2023, 22,623; January of 2024, 22,603; February of 2024, 22,548; March of 2024, 22,528.

April of 2024, 22,599; May of 2024, 22,614; June of 2024, 22,564; July of 2024, 22,578; August of 2024, 22,563; September of 2024, 22,631; October of 2024, 22,811; November of 24, 22,818; December of 2024, 22,906; January 2025, 22,960; and February 2025, 23,011.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you very much. What is the estimated number of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Saskatchewan?

Joel Kilbride: — Hi there. Joel Kilbride, ADM of disability programs. We actually don't track the number of individuals in the province that have intellectual disabilities, only those that are on our caseload.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. What is the number of individuals on the CLSD [community living service delivery] group home wait-list?

Joel Kilbride: — Thanks for the question. So centrally we don't track a wait-list for people waiting for service; instead we have an emerging needs process that we follow. And we're planning with families for service all the time, assessing the urgency of the need of those services. And we sort of measure those against the resources that we have available at the time.

So there's some circumstances where, you know, a family might be looking for a group home placement in a certain community, and we might not have that type of service available. So we might be able to offer like a day program or flexible funding or other options until, you know, the service is available that they're looking for.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — Sure, thank you. And if I could just add to that, in this year's budget we're going to be providing an additional increase of \$9.7 million to support the changing service needs of some of the clients and the delivery of new services for adults with intellectual disabilities attending day programs in group homes, like Joel had outlined.

So we're looking at different emerging needs and meeting those needs head-on. So this investment this year's going to ensure an additional . . . It will ensure 215 individuals with intellectual disabilities have services in place to meet their changing needs, including an increase of \$1.8 million to continue services for individuals who began to receive these new services in 2024-25, an increase of 4.2 million to serve another 80 new clients this fiscal year, a \$2.7 million increase to serve 43 youth with intellectual disabilities that are transitioning to adult services, as well as a \$1 million increase to provide funding to operate three new group homes that will be serving 12 adults.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you, Joel. And thank you, Minister Jenson. Do you have any numbers at all around folks that may be waiting for services that aren't available right now?

[20:15]

Jeff Redekop: — Good evening. Jeff Redekop, executive director with disability programs service delivery. I can talk about information on how many people are being served right now. So the current overall caseload for the disability programs division is 6,488. That covers all of the programs that we deliver.

I think your question was more about the process moving forward and how we plan for people and how we make that work, if I'm interpreting it correctly. So we continually work throughout the year with our caseworkers, engaging with the third-party sector, with our partners across the province and the various CBOs that we work with, to understand what the needs of clients are. Literally that's a weekly process where needs can change. Given, you know, we're serving people with disability, those needs can change rather quickly and our staff maintain that information on a weekly basis. And it's really a continual planning process.

So we focus on person-centred planning with individuals so we make sure we understand what the individual with a disability wants to do with their life. So that's a really critical factor. We look at the needs and suitability, you know, where do we have resources that could meet those needs for individuals.

So it's really a continual planning process where we work with individuals, with families, gather information from our CBO partners. And with the new investment with this year, we're starting that work right now to figure out who is the highest priority for what type of service, who's got the highest need, based on kind of what the intel is on a weekly basis.

Joel Kilbride: — I think I could add to that as well. I just want to note that while we're planning with families, development is constant and ongoing. So over the last five years we provided on average 131 new services in CLSD each year; 135 additional will be added in this budget. And in addition to that, our group home development has also been very continuous as well. And so we're just completing three group homes right now and as mentioned earlier, 10 new group homes will be under construction very soon.

So development is continuous and it works alongside the planning with families.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you, Jeff and Joel. On the note of CLSD, the funding model for CLSD hasn't been updated since it was initially developed 20 years ago. With increased cost of living, the threat of tariffs, inflation, does the government have a plan to re-evaluate or do a comprehensive review of the CLSD funding model?

Joel Kilbride: — Okay. Thanks for the question. It's true that we haven't updated the complete funding standards in many years, and it's something that we will look at. But there has been targeted investments in both salary and non-salary, so many adjustments have been made to the CLSD funding standards over the years, just not as a whole.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. I appreciate your commitment to looking at the CLSD funding model.

You kind of touched on this, but there is a funding gap between CLSD funding and health care funding, meaning that a lot of people that work in similar roles in the health care sector rather

than the CBO sector receive higher pay. Will the increase to CBO funding offset that pay gap?

Hon. Terry Jensen: — Thank you for the question. So after this year's budget's calculated, the hourly wage is going to be within a dollar of the health care figure that is being used.

Now it's important to remember that, you know, we're always looking to make things equitable. We're always trying to help with recruitment and retention wherever we can. And I think in one of those ways we have engaged and we're started the engagements. And we want to continue the dialogue and the collaboration with our partners to be able to provide, you know, some additional education opportunities whether that's, you know, certificate programs or things like that too, to be able to enhance the standing of those workers so everybody knows when you have that education, the wage comes with it. So those are going to be discussions that we'll continue to have with our providers.

Brittney Senger: — Okay. If I have time I definitely have questions on that that I'll circle back to, but I am going to jump around here a little bit. I'm wondering if you track the rate of emergency room visits for individuals living with disabilities that are supported by group homes in Saskatchewan.

Joel Kilbride: — Okay, we do actually track serious incidents that occur, but we don't track specifically where our clients receive treatment. On the case file we do, but not in a database where we can report, you know, visits to an emergency room.

Brittney Senger: — Do you have those numbers or can you table those numbers?

Joel Kilbride: — Hi. Yeah, we're going to have to table that number. We don't have the exact number.

Brittney Senger: — No problem at all. Thank you. And I have a couple of other questions to follow up on that, numbers that may need to be tabled. If you track the rate of hospitalizations for individuals with disabilities that are supported by group homes, so that would be different than emergency room visits; and then also just to follow up on that, if you track the 30-day repeat hospitalizations for individuals with disabilities in Saskatchewan and whether or not that's an increase or decrease year over year.

Joel Kilbride: — Yeah, so the answer is the same as the ER [emergency room] visits. We don't track those visits. We do track serious incidents. And again, on the individual case file, we have information if people are hospitalized or if they go to the emergency room. But we don't have a central database that tracks how many of those incidents and tallies them up. So we do have a report on the number of serious incidents, just not where they're served.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. I would very much appreciate it if we could table that and if I could have a look at that information. And then as well, as I mentioned, just if there are any repeats for individuals as well would be something that would be helpful to know.

Richelle Bourgoignie: — We'd be happy to provide you with any information that we have. I would just clarify for the sake of

interest that in many cases there will be occurrences where individuals who are in group homes have to attend to an emergency room or to a hospital for treatment that is unrelated to what would be tracked as a serious incident, but just a matter of general health care. So you won't see that number reflected, but we will absolutely provide you with what we have.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you so much. I very much appreciate that. Okay, now I'm jumping around a little bit and I kind of lost my place here. I'm going to jump over to a question about the Saskatchewan assisted independent living program.

As technology has changed for people experiencing disabilities, to provide a better quality of life will the government expand the coverage to cover devices, to cover new devices just as technology has changed? Sorry I phrased that weird.

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So that would be a question for the Ministry of Health, actually.

Brittney Senger: — Okay, thank you. Are there any plans for financial support for people who require specialized equipment that's manufactured in the United States, products that may be affected by tariffs such as specialized vehicles or other medical devices? And has the ministry accounted for tariffs and how higher costs brought on by tariffs will affect the ministry?

[20:30]

Joel Kilbride: — Just to answer your question, we actually don't have any plans in place to purchase any specialized equipment from the United States for any of our facilities. Nothing, no plans in that regard.

Richelle Bourgoin: — And I would just maybe add that the big capital investments that are made in the disability programs are really around those group homes that are developed in local community by local tradespersons and construction companies.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. Do you have any statistics about retention of people with disabilities in employment?

Richelle Bourgoin: — That budget item is housed with the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training.

Brittney Senger: — Okay. Are any steps in place to simplify the application process for the disability tax credit, particularly around physicians and completing the appropriate documentation?

Richelle Bourgoin: — I'm so sorry. That budget item is housed with the Ministry of Finance, so we don't have the information that you're looking for.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. Okay. My next question here: will the government expand individualized funding for children age 12 to 18 in Saskatchewan who have autism?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So the answer to that question is no, there are no plans at this time. But we want to be able to do a program evaluation because this program's been in operation since 2018, and we want to sit down and take a good look at it and see where improvements can be made or expansions can be made before we

commit to anything like that.

Brittney Senger: — Okay. Will affordable housing units be made available to people with disabilities, given that there is a bit of a wait-list? And will there be a focus on ensuring the units are accessible?

Giselle Marcotte: — Good evening. Giselle Marcotte, assistant deputy minister, housing division with Social Services and CEO/president with the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. Individuals with disabilities can apply through a housing authority and they can be prioritized for a unit. And we will make efforts through the housing authority to adapt the unit to assist them.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you, Giselle. Okay. I'm going to jump back and revisit the professional development opportunities for staff. I think that that sounds like something that's very interesting, and I'm eager to learn more. I'm wondering if you can tell me what programs that will cover and if the cost of those programs will offset any annual pay gap.

Richelle Bourgoin: — So really the work that we're looking at in terms of professional development is driven by pretty consistent feedback about recruitment and retention for direct services, direct support workers in the disability and CLSD programs that we administer. And so over the last number of months, we've had the opportunity to hear from organizations who are operating and administering group homes, from the unions that represent them, from our colleagues at organizations like Sask Polytech, around the ways that we can best support the professional development for those individuals serving in those roles.

And so oftentimes you'll see that comparison to a CCA, to a continuing care aide, as an example. But in fact the education that supports the continuing care aide provides a bit of a different pathway to the services that are provided to the individual. And so what we've heard and what we believe is there's an opportunity to work specifically — and I should say, including our federal government colleagues at Employment and Social Development Canada — to drive more positive outcomes for those workers.

And so we're a little early in the stages, but what that could look like, as an example, is an earn-while-you-learn model that would look like an apprenticeable trade. It could look like a modular program that really recognizes the long service and expertise of individuals who are currently in those roles.

Many organizations in our province have the benefit of having long-serving professional experts who are providing support to individuals on the ground. But at the same time, we know there's a lot of turnover. And so we want to try and arm the individuals that are serving in these very important roles with some of the skills and the abilities that will allow them to stay longer, perhaps expand their scope of service.

We hear pretty consistently about increased complexity in needs in some of the smaller communities in Saskatchewan. And so being able to do this might in fact enhance the ability for those individuals to stay in their homes longer than expected before having to transition to something like a long-term care facility.

So we're relatively new in exploring this, but we are committed to working very closely with our partners who are delivering these services, with families who are receiving them, with the post-secondary institutions, and then with our other community-based partners who have the same objective.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. And just in regards to that, I wanted to inquire about what the timeline will look like for implementing that program? As well as what's the timeline looking like for re-evaluating the CLSD funding model?

Richelle Bourgoin: — I'll go first and talk a little bit about the recruitment and retention initiatives. So they're ongoing. Part of that is the funding increase to CBOs that are serving people in the CLSD programs. And we will have to wait for the outcome of the federal election because we do need the support of our partners at ESDC [Employment and Social Development Canada] to be able to advance. And so while we continue our consultation we don't have an end date in mind, but we're certainly active in doing that today. And I'll ask Joel to speak specifically to the evaluation.

Joel Kilbride: — In terms of reviewing the funding standards, I also don't have an end date, but Minister Jenson has provided some direction that we'll begin this work in 2025. So I can't speak to the conclusion date, but we will begin this work in 2025.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. Okay, so as we've kind of touched on, oftentimes or in most circumstances, to access provincial resources and supports people have to go through a process of connecting with physicians and going through applications. I'm wondering if there are any opportunities to allow for more self-determination for individuals with disabilities?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — So the answer to your question is no, not at this time.

Brittney Senger: — How many people on SIS and on SAID, or on SAID, have been evicted since 2019?

[20:45]

Devon Exner: — Thank you for the question. So earlier I had talked a little bit about housing stability on the SIS program and that we are seeing fewer clients moving as often as they previously did under the Saskatchewan assistance program.

So you know, just to go back to that, on average 12 per cent of Saskatchewan assistance program clients moved two or more times a year between 2015 and 2018. Since that program closed in 2021, only 6 per cent of SIS clients have moved two or more times a year. So that talks a little bit about kind of stability and being able to maintain that property.

We do also have a dedicated inbox for landlords across the province where they can let us know if somebody is falling into arrears or potentially facing eviction. So when we receive that information we reach out and we set up a time to meet with that client to have a discussion about their budget, the arrears, repayment plans, and trying to ensure that they are getting the support that they need.

If for some reason that is not enough support, that's where we start to entertain and talk about direct pay and trusteeship with that client, and working through that process if it seems that it's becoming an ongoing challenge — as an example, as the minister had mentioned earlier today.

One of the other things that we did is we were doing a bit of a review of the SIS program as a result of the Provincial Auditor finding to try to, you know, find some . . . always looking for opportunities to improve the program. We don't track eviction data per se because we may not know when somebody's evicted if folks don't tell us that. It could be treated as a move, as an example.

So we looked at a sample of SIS cases. So less than 1 per cent of SIS clients, so that would be 228 out of roughly 28,000 unique SIS clients from February 1st, 2022 to November 30th of 2022, faced eviction through the Office of Residential Tenancies. So you know, that's less than 1 per cent of our overall caseload. So it's a smaller number, and it's not always due to nonpayment of rent. Sometimes it's behavioural challenges that get folks into challenging situations with their landlord.

So I think, you know, those findings tell us that we know people's lives are very complex. They're very dynamic. They're often . . . you know, there are other health-related issues, addictions issues, that sometimes contribute to some of those different factors when somebody's potentially being evicted.

But again, you know, our staff work really hard with our clients, especially around setting up repayment plans, talking to them about not only their rights, you know, expecting service and benefits from us, but also their responsibilities and how to follow through on those. You know, setting up those case plans where the minister talked about maybe your goal next month is to pay your rent on time.

And we monitor that, and you know, we have clients return and we follow up with them to make sure that they are taking those steps and those small, incremental milestones towards success.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you so much. I know that it is getting late, and I'm sure everybody is just as tired as me and getting ready for bed. So I've just got . . . Do I have time for one more question? Two more questions? Two more? Okay, perfect.

So the Provincial Auditor has indicated that the Ministry of Social Services continue to inconsistently record and inadequately recover SIS overpayments. Overpayment accounts receivable have increased substantially between 2021 and 2024. What is the ministry doing to correct this?

Devon Exner: — Thank you for the question. So since that, you know, the performance audit, we did complete a targeted review of SIS cases where overpayment recovery had been established, so ensuring that we are following up and doing our own homework around that to make sure that we are doing everything that we can.

I would just like to remind the committee, SIS became a brand new program in July of 2019. So obviously over time as the caseload increases, as people were transitioning from SAP and TEA over to . . . sorry, Saskatchewan assistance program and the

transitional employment allowance programs were transitioning over to SIS, with that their overpayments also come over. And if somebody leaves assistance, had maybe left SAP or TEA and is now returning to the program and has an overpayment on one of those two historical programs, that overpayment is now carried forward. It's a debt owing to the Crown, and we will recover against that overpayment.

We've also developed and implemented — we call it spotlight or very targeted — training for our staff to make sure that they're following the policy and the processes to ensure that overpayments are being not only posted on the file but collected as well, making sure that those recoveries are in place.

And we've also implemented, as I'd mentioned, that ability to transfer overpayments between programs. So again, it's important that we kind of ensure that we're supporting our clients. If they have multiple overpayments across multiple programs it's very complicated, so trying to simplify that for them and ensure that we're not recovering across three different programs, which could put them in, I'll call it financial hardships, whereas it would be one recovery coming off the SIS program.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. The government hadn't increased funding for the SAID program between 2015 and 2023. And during that same period of time Saskatchewan families and single people experienced a 27 per cent increase to the cost of living. Is a 3 per cent increase fair to the recipients in this program and the disabled people of Saskatchewan? Sorry, 2 per cent.

Devon Exner: — Thank you. Yeah, we had spoken about some of the increases earlier on, but I'll just run through them.

So in May of 2023, SAID clients began receiving \$30 more per month living income benefits. The SAID personal care home level-of-care rates also increased. For level 2 clients that increased from \$976 per month to 1,427, and for level 3 clients that increased from \$1,217 a month to \$1,901 per month. There was also a 3 per cent increase to approved private service homes and mental health private service homes level-of-care rates.

In May of 2024, all living income benefits increased by 3 per cent, ranging from \$10 to \$55 depending on the family size and location of the household. Annual earned income exemptions for households without children increased by \$500. Annual education expenses for children, the benefit increased by 10 to \$30; that varies based on the child's age. Approved home level-of-care rates also increased by 3 per cent in May of 2024.

And then in May of 2025, SAID benefits will increase for a third year in a row. Eligible SAID clients will receive about 2 per cent or up to \$40 per month.

And I think, you know, with that being said, I could go back through some of the other increases going back in time. But as I had mentioned, since 2009 — and that's when the SAID program replaced the Saskatchewan assistance program — SAID benefits have increased by 65 per cent. In that same time, the consumer price index has increased by 43 per cent, which means that benefits have outpaced inflation by 22 per cent.

Brittney Senger: — Thank you. I know it's not question period,

so I'm not going to get into things too much further, but I do appreciate everybody taking the time to be here tonight. I know that it is a long day. And as I said, you know, I've talked to a lot of folks, and everybody has very positive things to say about the Ministry of Social Services. You know, as I said, they speak so highly that in comparison to other ministries they rank it the best to deal with.

Anyways, thank you guys so much for taking time to answer our questions. I really appreciate the opportunity to have some clarity. Speaking for my colleagues as well, I know that we all do. Thank you to the folks at Hansard who are recording things this evening and taking notes for us. And yeah, just really grateful for everybody taking the time this evening to be here.

Chair Weger: — Okay, having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of these estimates, we will be adjourning consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Social Services. But, Minister, did you have any closing comments?

Hon. Terry Jenson: — I absolutely do. Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thanks to you for this evening and also to all the committee members who have been here this evening. It's been some good dialogue and some good information, and I'm very thankful for that.

I'd also like to thank my officials that are surrounding me here tonight, which is really nice. And in addition to the officials and all the ministry staff that work downtown, I also want to just say thank you to all of our front-line workers that are out helping the most vulnerable people in our province each and every day. The work that they do is absolutely appreciated and we can't say enough, so to them I would like to say thank you.

Also to Hansard, as well as the video production, the camera operators, the Clerks, the security, the maintenance people for setting up the Chamber for committee tonight, as well as the LDSU [legislative district security unit], even the custodians who give us such a beautiful, nice, clean, warm, inviting place to come to work each day. So with that, I would like to say thank you again, and I'll turn it back to you. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chair Weger: — And MLA Chiefcalf or Blakely, any comments from yourselves as well?

Brent Blakely: — No, I'd just echo what Mr. Jenson said, just echoing his thoughts with thanking everybody for being here till 9 o'clock, and thank everybody for their dialogue. I think we got a lot out of that today. So thank you very much for everything.

April Chiefcalf: — Yes, just thanking you for being here this evening and for sharing the information with us. Thanks.

Chair Weger: — Okay. Well that's enough thank yous for everyone then. So that concludes our business for today. I would ask a member to move a motion of adjournment. MLA Gartner.

Kim Gartner: — I so move.

Chair Weger: — Okay, MLA Gartner has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Weger: — Okay, carried. The committee stands adjourned until Wednesday, April 9th, 2025 at 5 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 21:00.]