



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Ms. Alana Ross
Prince Albert Northcote

[The committee met at 16:29.]

The Chair: — All right, welcome, committee members. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. I'm Ken Cheveldayoff, MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for Saskatoon Willowgrove, and I'll serve as Chair for us this afternoon and evening. Members of the committee are Ms. Meara Conway, who's the Deputy Chair; Mr. Ryan Domotor; Mr. Derek Meyers; Mr. Hugh Nerlien; and Ms. Alana Ross. Today we are going to have Mr. Tim McLeod substituting for Mr. Muhammad Fiaz.

**General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvote (SS01)

The Chair: — This evening we will in committee be considering the estimates for the Ministry of Social Services. We'll begin our consideration of vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01). Minister Carr is here with an official. Minister, please introduce your official and make any opening comments that you may have. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Well good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. I'm pleased to be here to talk about the Ministry of Social Services budget and priorities for 2021-2022. In the room with me here are Deputy Minister Tracey Smith and my chief of staff, Clint Fox.

Also standing by to help answer your questions are the ministry's assistant deputy ministers: Tobie Eberhardt, child and family services program; Devon Exner, income assistance; Kimberly Kratzig, finance and corporate services; Louise Michaud, disability programs and housing; Jason Pirlot, finance. And Louise has actually just joined the ministry, so we also have available to us some other officials: Tim Gross in housing and Shelley Reddekopp in disability programs.

In the short time I have been Social Services minister, I've been so impressed by the commitment shown by staff across the ministry in serving Saskatchewan citizens during this past year. The ministry responded to the pandemic and clients' needs in a number of ways.

Our offices have remained open throughout the province since the pandemic began. We provided a one-time benefit of \$50 to more than 40,000 income assistance clients to help with extra costs related to COVID-19, and we temporarily reduced reporting requirements.

We increased our funding to emergency shelters by more than 340,000, so they could better serve our common clients in the face of new COVID measures.

We developed and delivered targeted respite support of up to \$400 to more than 2,000 caregivers of people with intellectual disabilities and mental health challenges. This COVID-19 respite benefit payment helped to ensure that caregivers had resources available to get a break from their caregiving responsibilities and maintain their physical and mental health.

We introduced interim policies for the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation's social housing program to protect tenants' health and safety, and to help those experiencing financial hardship.

Child and family programs recognize that young people who were planning to transition from care need an extension of services to ensure that they could continue to receive supports during the pandemic. We have provided these extended supports and services to more than 280 youth to date.

We made sure that foster families and extended family caregivers received the Canada child benefit top-up.

We supported more than 2,300 people who had to self-isolate because of COVID-19 and did not have the means to do so themselves.

We also made the safety of our clients, third-party service providers, and our staff priority. We provided personal protective equipment, communicated information as soon as we received it, made it possible for some staff to work from home, and followed safe workplace practices for those working in their office or in the field. The safety of our citizens and employees continues to be our government's top priority as we continue to provide important services and benefits to our clients throughout the pandemic. The ministry forecasts spending nearly \$23.7 million since March 2020 to protect the health and safety of our clients, third-party service providers, and staff as a result of the pandemic.

Our government is responding to COVID-19 using a one-team approach by deploying employees to areas of critical need such as contact tracing support, vaccine booking, and emergency social services. As of April 1st, 2020, more than 450 Government of Saskatchewan employees, including 91 Social Services employees, have been redeployed to support various ministries, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, and the Saskatchewan Health Authority in their COVID-19 response.

Not only did the ministry respond to the challenges of COVID-19 but we also continued our work on some key initiatives. The income assistance division continued their important work on supporting clients throughout the new Saskatchewan income support, or SIS, program. SIS focuses on helping people overcome their barriers and move to employment and independence to the best of their abilities as quickly as possible.

It includes increased monthly earned-income exemptions so people can keep more of what they earn as they transition to employment. Because SIS is simpler than our current programs, our workers have the time they need to work closely with their clients, helping them make positive changes to move to employment or participation in their communities to the best of their abilities.

Our workers use a new approach to work with their clients called motivational interviewing. This approach encourages clients to make positive changes in their lives, including developing their own educational and employment goals. I'd like to read you part of a letter one of our income assistance workers received from a client:

When we finish our talk, my worker points out to me how far I have come along, that I am sounding stronger and more confident. He has a way of reframing the narrative, so I can be looked at in a positive way. I always feel better after talking to him than I did before. I want to say thank you to him, and I also want his manager to know what a great and caring job he is doing.

This testimonial really captures the impact of motivational interviewing on our clients.

Since the Saskatchewan income support program launched in 2019, we have continued to focus on providing more effective and efficient services for clients within the new system. Currently 45 per cent of SIS clients submit their applications online, the first time that an online application has been available for those wanting to apply for income assistance.

We've also worked to move as many clients as possible to automatic deposit to avoid any delays in receipt of benefits. As of December 2020 approximately 70 per cent of clients on Saskatchewan income support and the Saskatchewan assured income for disability programs receive their benefits through automatic deposit.

Last year child and family programs implemented phase 1 of their parent resources for information, development, and education, or PRIDE, levels-of-pay program for foster families. This is a new payment structure that compensates foster families when they complete mandatory training, including specialized training on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and trauma competent caregiver training. This gives us a better trained pool of foster care providers to care for children with specialized needs.

Child and family programs continues their improving outcomes in the group home care project, which focuses on reducing resilience on high-cost treatment, group home spaces. Using cost-effective solutions based on specific outcomes and rigorous oversight, more than 200 children and youth with complex needs were able to remain with their families using in-home supports.

CFP [child and family programs] also awarded a contract to Egadz in Saskatoon to operate a 10-space safe shelter for youth. The shelter will be operational in the coming months and will provide youth with safety, security, and assistance in developing social capacity.

The disability program division developed 10 new group homes for people with intellectual disabilities. They also transitioned 78 clients into their new homes and provided 33 new day-program supports to clients.

Disability programs continued their important work towards developing an accessibility Act for the province by launching an online engagement plan and forum to solicit citizen feedback. Through disability programs we've provided \$350,000 to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind and the Saskatchewan Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services to help bridge service gaps. This funding, which was the first of a four-year commitment, helped increase American Sign Language Deaf interpreter services and Deaf-blind community intervener services in the province.

The ministry's housing division partnered with several organizations to improve services to people who are considered hard to house. For example, we worked with Egadz to rent to a single mother recovering from substance abuse; the Saskatchewan Health Authority and the Lighthouse to rent to clients transitioning from acute care to more permanent housing; and the Ministry of Health, city of Saskatoon, Saskatoon Tribal Council, CBOs [community-based organization], and other parts of the ministry to find housing for more than 100 clients when Saskatoon's City Centre Inn and Suites suddenly closed due to unsafe living conditions.

This partnership between Social Services and the Saskatoon Tribal Council and several Saskatoon agencies led to the development of a new initiative called sawêiyhtotân, which means "to bless each other through our show of respect for each other." This pilot project began in 2020 with an outreach team supported by a multi-sectoral steering committee to help people experiencing homelessness access the services they need, so they can find stable and long-term housing.

During the first phase of the project, the team had nearly 500 interactions with people where they offered daily health check-ins, transportation assistance, meal delivery, and help securing housing. The team helped more than 75 people find either short-term or long-term housing.

Given the impact of the pandemic, we extended the pilot to further realize the benefits of this important work. We added an additional \$350,000 to our initial \$100,000 contribution for this for-Indigenous, by-Indigenous initiative. Also during the last fiscal year, we launched the Saskatchewan housing benefit to help people with low income with their housing costs.

Although the past year was extremely difficult and challenging in so many ways, I am proud of the work the ministry has accomplished. And I want to recognize the staff for their extraordinary dedication to serving Saskatchewan people.

Social Services' budget for this new fiscal year will allow us to build on the great work that was done in 2020-2021 and continue to respond to the effects of the pandemic on our clients and community partners. The ministry's total expense budget for '21-22 is \$1.34 billion. This represents an increase of 4.2 per cent or 54.5 million over the last fiscal year. This funding increase touches all areas of our ministry and will enable us to continue supporting at-risk children, youth, and families, seniors, people with disabilities, those with low income, and those in need of housing.

Our government is making this record investment in Social Services because we recognize that many Saskatchewan citizens need our help. People today are dealing with many complex issues including abuse, crime, gang activity, domestic violence, mental health challenges, and substance abuse, and now of course a global pandemic. We are committed to supporting our vulnerable citizens and helping them achieve a better quality of life. That's what our budget of 2021-2022 will help us do.

One of the highlights of the budget is an increase of 6.7 million for third-party service providers or community-based organizations. Social Services relies on these agencies to deliver crucial services on our behalf to clients throughout the province.

Of the total increase, 4.2 million is for service providers that work with people with intellectual disabilities. This includes an increase of 444,000 for approved private service homes that care for people with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues.

Service providers support at-risk children, youth, and family will see a \$2.5 million increase. The funding provides a lift for salaries for workers in these agencies as well as an increase for operating expenses included in this year's increase. Our government has increased funding to these organizations by more than \$80 million since 2007-2008 to help with recruitment and retention in these sectors.

I'd now like to provide some of the highlights of the ministry's budget by division, starting with income assistance. The ministry's '21-22 budget continues to build stability for those in need. It provides 619 million — a \$9.3 million increase overall — for income assistance programs. The budgets for the Saskatchewan assistance program, or SAP, and the transitional employment allowance, or TEA, are decreasing as these programs are targeted to end in August 2021.

The Saskatchewan income support program budgeting is increasing as the new clients come on, the existing SAP and TEA clients transition. The Saskatchewan assured income for disability, or SAID, program budget is increasing by 19 million so we can continue to support people with significant and enduring disabilities.

[16:45]

We will fulfill one of our platform commitments by increasing benefits under the seniors' income plan by a maximum of \$30 per month to \$300. This investment of an additional 3.5 million will help approximately 14,000 seniors with low income enjoy a better quality of life. This is the sixth increase our government has made to the seniors' income plan, and we have committed to further increasing the benefit by \$30 each year for three years beginning in '21-22.

Next I'll turn to child and family programs. As I said earlier, children, youth, and families face many challenges in today's society, and that has a direct impact on the ministry's programs and budget. For example, the rate of interpersonal violence is a concern for Social Services, along with Corrections, Policing, and Health. The prevalence of drug abuse is growing and remains a concern. The impact of drug abuse on child safety is now the most common reason for children to come into care.

Many children stay in care longer due to the complexity of issues they and their families are facing, resulting in increased costs and a greater need for access to services. The budget for child and family programs is increasing by \$21 million this year. Of that, 8.2 million will support the development of new residential care spaces for children and youth with developmental and complex behavioural needs.

We will also implement PRIDE levels of pay phase 2, with an increase of 1.6 million. As I mentioned earlier, PRIDE is a specialized training program that supports foster families to care for children with more intensive needs. When children are in need of protection, the ministry first looks for families who could become caregivers. An increase of 3 million this year will help

the ministry support more of these extended-family caregivers. Prevention services, such as support provided to families 24-7 in their homes, help keep children from coming into care. The budget for these services is increasing by 1.4 million.

Our government ended the practice known as birth alerts on February 1st, 2021. This decision aligns with the recommendations from the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls inquiry and also recognizes concerns from Indigenous partners and community stakeholders. With the end of birth alerts, we committed to working with community organizations to provide services and supports to at-risk expectant mothers. To do this, we are providing an additional 500,000 to Sanctum 1.5 in Saskatoon for enhanced outreach and coordination of services in Prince Albert, Regina, and Saskatoon.

Next I'll provide some of the highlights for disability programs. This division's budget will increase by 18.3 million this year. About half of that increase, 9.1 million, will address the current needs for people with intellectual disabilities. It will also help respond to the anticipated need for services from new clients, including youth transferring from child and family programs to a disability program.

Social Services currently supports more than 5,700 people with intellectual disabilities across the province. I'd like to take a moment to tell you a story about one of those people. I'll call him James. James's family could no longer manage his challenging behaviour at home. He was moved to a home the ministry operates to help clients who are in crisis. According to James's grandmother, his stay in that home was absolutely a life-changing experience for him and his family. She said she was so impressed by how the home is adapted to fit the needs of people with intellectual disabilities. In her words, "This crisis facility is one to be celebrated, and we are fortunate to have this kind of support in Saskatchewan."

James moved to his forever home on April 6. Some of his caregivers went with him and stayed a few days to ensure a smooth transition. James's grandmother thanked the ministry and the government for supporting James and said, "We can only admire people like you, who have such a gift for caring and helping those in need of your strength and energy." Our government is proud to invest in programs and services that help people like James.

We will meet another of our government's platform commitments by increasing the budget for autism spectrum disorder individualized funding program by \$6 million. This increase will allow us to expand services to children up to the age of 11, from the age of six.

To build on the investment I mentioned earlier, funding to Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada and Saskatchewan Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services will increase by an additional \$246,000.

Also in this fiscal year, we will continue our work to develop accessibility legislation for our province. In 2019 from the throne announced our government's commitment to introduce legislation to remove and prevent accessibility barriers for people with disabilities. We have been reaching out to people with disabilities, third-party service providers, other government departments and agencies, the private sector, business

community, and the public to gather broad input on the development of accessibility legislation.

We launched the accessibility legislation engagement website in February of this year. The website offered the public the opportunity to share their feedback through surveys, filling out a discussion guide, asking a question, and share their vision for what an accessible Saskatchewan could look like. We also held eight virtual discussion forums in March using the Zoom video conferencing platform.

The second phase of the engagement will begin in the fall of 2021 and will focus on regulations under the key areas of the Act. Our government will continue to work towards our goals of building strong, inclusive communities for people with disabilities and making Saskatchewan the best place in Canada for people with disabilities to live.

The ministry's fourth key area is the housing division. This division's budget will increase by 1.1 million this year. In April 2019 Saskatchewan officially signed a bilateral agreement with the federal government as part of the national housing strategy. This agreement will bring nearly 450 million to our province over 10 years. Our priorities are to ensure that the agreement reflects Saskatchewan's unique housing priorities, that it supports our vulnerable population, and that it preserves our existing housing stock for future generations.

A key priority for housing this year related to the national housing strategy will be the expansion of the Saskatchewan housing benefit to help more individuals and families who need rental support. The benefit was first launched in 2020 for those who paid 50 per cent or more of their income on rent. This year the benefit will expand to serve clients who paid 40 per cent or more of their income on rent. The province will provide up to 8.7 million towards the benefit in '21-22 as a 50/50 cost match with the federal government.

I hope this overview has given you an understanding of the key investments and priorities for the Ministry of Social Services in this fiscal year. The theme of our government's '21-22 provincial budget is protect, build, and grow. Social Services does all of those things. We protect Saskatchewan's most vulnerable people, we build stronger and healthy families, and we grow more inclusive communities. The achievement of these goals depends on the right investment, and I am proud of the investment we are making to support Saskatchewan's most vulnerable citizens.

So thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for listening. My officials and I would be pleased to take questions.

The Chair: — Thank you very much, Minister Carr. Ms. Conway, the floor is yours.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Chair. Thank you to the minister for that overview. And I'd like to thank all of the officials that are here on behalf of the ministry this afternoon — almost this evening — and of course all those who work in the ministry both within the ministry, as well as partners, organizations, agencies that work under the ministry's umbrella.

We have five hours allotted to us tonight and given the size of this budget, it's not a lot of time, so I'm just going to jump into

my questions here. And I'd like to start with CERB [Canada emergency response benefit] and the clawbacks that the government made folks on assistance that began to receive CERB . . . Now the NDP [New Democratic Party] did push for this government to reverse that decision. BC [British Columbia], Yukon, Northwest Territories all fully exempted CERB, and many more partially exempted it. They treated it as income that was at least partially exempt.

So the way this was going to play out was always a concern to us, and today I have a couple of questions about how that process has played out. I'd like to begin by asking how many unique CERB applications we have had in Saskatchewan, as well as the breakdown for how many people who were previously getting SAID switched over to CERB; how many people either on SAP, SIS, or TEA were switched over to CERB; and how much was saved by the ministry in terms of its budget for income assistance?

And as with all of these questions, you know, if it's going to be a lengthy time to consult — some of these numbers of course are not readily available to you — I'm happy always to move along to my next question because I'm always cognizant of time and the fact that we only have the time allotted here this evening.

[17:00]

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. So thank you very much for the question. Unfortunately we don't actually know how many clients applied for CERB. So we wouldn't know the answers to your questions about people that got CERB and then were previously on whatever program it was.

What we did do is we know the clients that no longer requested the services from us, we left their accounts open for about 60 days and then after that 60 days if we didn't hear from them, then they dropped off of our services. And if they've reapplied, they've reapplied back on through our SIS program unless they're on SAID. So that's how it works. We don't know who received CERB and who didn't.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. There's still the question about how much was saved that was budgeted for income assistance. But your predecessor in last year's estimates indicated during the line of questioning along CERB that folks would have a choice of applying for CERB — and I want to come back to that in a moment — but that their files would not be closed.

So my understanding is that the files shouldn't have been closed if someone opted to apply for CERB if they were previously receiving social assistance. But I'm hearing now that those files were closed, whether or not they were on SAP, SIS, TEA, or SAID.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I'm just going to let Tracey address that one.

Ms. Conway: — Sure.

Ms. Smith: — Sure thing. Thank you for the question. So just by way of background in terms of our programs and how they work . . . So again the CERB, you know, with it being a federal benefit, we treat that like other types of federal, sort of, income-replacement programs. And CERB was treated the same

way.

So in terms of the way that our programs work is if a client is on our program and if they, you know, no longer for whatever reason, no longer is in need of income assistance, then the way that the program and the policy works is that their file is kept open for a period of time. And it's during that time, again, if anything changes in their circumstances that we ask them to connect with us so that, you know, we're up to speed on where their file is. But if we haven't heard from them, then their file will close after a period of time until they do contact us if they are in need again.

Ms. Conway: — So haven't heard from them, but in terms of a change of circumstance, if someone was then to receive CERB they would . . . in theory the worker would know that. That would be deemed to be a change of circumstance leading to, you know, closure of the file or not giving them social assistance because it was being clawed back dollar for dollar. So surely the ministry tracked the clients that they knew of that switched over from either one of the basic assistance programs or SAID. Is that not the case?

Ms. Smith: — So I would say that, you know, every client situation is different. And there are thousands of households that are on the caseload. And so in those instances where, you know, if a client has reached out to talk to us about a federal benefit that they're receiving then that is really, you know, the conversation between the client and the income assistance planning and support worker. So at a worker-to-client basis, you know, they understand kind of what's going on in their file. At an aggregate level we don't have that information in terms of, you know, the exact reason why their file closed, because it really does vary from client to client across the entire program.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Well if I could get the number of files that have been closed since CERB came into existence. And maybe it would be helpful to have a comparator, like compare that to the previous two or three years, that would be great. I know that's not something you'll have right here, but if I could ask for that information to be tabled. Surely we can track, in some sense, the impact that CERB has had on this ministry and what it's paying out to clients.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So I would just say we will look and see what information we have. If it's something that we're not tracking and we're not reporting on, it's not something we can go back on at this point in time. As my deputy minister already said, there are several reasons why people fall off of these programs. CERB isn't the only indicator. They could have a change in their circumstances. They could have got a job. They could have done several different things why they have fallen off the program. So we'll do what we can, but if it's not something we track . . .

Ms. Conway: — Okay. And I just want to clarify for the record: your ministry has not tracked how many people at an aggregate level have gone off of social assistance to collect CERB.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Correct.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. And if there were expenditures that were less than was budgeted for . . . I mean, this was budgeted for back before we knew a pandemic was coming or CERB would be

available. So surely the ministry knows how much was saved in terms of income assistance during the time that CERB was available to people. So if I could get that information as well, that would be helpful.

And maybe we could come back to that because I have a couple more questions under the sort of CERB theme. And I know there's technical difficulties with going back and forth, so it might be the best use of our time and the most helpful if I just kind of get my questions in around this theme and then we can see what is or isn't available, if that's okay with you.

My understanding is that, and I'm surprised to hear that the ministry wasn't tracking who went off of assistance to CERB, because what we were hearing on the ground is that several people were told by their worker that they would need to apply for CERB. This is people on basic assistance as well as SAID, which I was surprised to learn, because the federal CERB was intended for people . . . It was portrayed as a benefit to workers whose earnings had fell below \$1,000 a month.

So I was interested to learn that workers were encouraging folks on basic assistance as well as SAID to apply for CERB. And actually they weren't just urging them to, they were telling them that because basic assistance is a benefit of last resort, they would need to apply for CERB before they could continue to get their benefits.

So I'm interested to know if that's not the case. We heard that from several different clients that contacted me as critic in the area, as well as community-based organizations working with these folks. So I'm surprised to hear we're not tracking that. I'm wondering what went into this decision to encourage people to apply for CERB given that, generally speaking, people on SAP weren't employed, with a couple of exceptions.

And the other thing I would want to ask before you just go back is what the plan is now as the federal government looks at people who may have received CERB in error. If there are folks who switched over to CERB at the direction of their worker and then are found to have not been eligible for CERB after all, is there a plan for those people? Because they will have not been receiving social assistance for that time. They may be on the hook vis-à-vis the federal government, and of course adding some complexity is the fact that CERB is taxable income.

So if you could just maybe respond to those questions. In particular I'm concerned about the fact that people were told to apply for CERB when they were on these programs.

[17:15]

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so once again, thank you for the question. To your question: what went into the decision to encourage people to apply for CERB? And you use the words "encourage," "urge." In speaking with the people that work with these programs, we did not encourage or urge people to apply for CERB.

When a client would come and talk with their caseworkers, and they would go through their individual circumstances, and you know, they talk about what income they earned last year and would they be eligible or not eligible, if the client felt that they

may be eligible, then we didn't stop them from going ahead and applying for CERB.

Ms. Conway: — So no one was told that if they didn't apply for CERB and then demonstrate . . . So no one was told that they had to apply for CERB in order to keep getting benefits? Because as this ministry says, you know, for basic income, it's a benefit of last resort. So workers did not say, you know, you have to demonstrate that you've applied — at least applied and then been, you know, rejected — before you can continue to remain on your benefits? No one was told that?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — No, absolutely not. They were not told that. It was all part of the interviewing process, the discussion they have with their caseworkers. If the client felt like they may be eligible and they wanted to go ahead and see if they would receive the CERB benefits, then that was incumbent on them based on their past information. We did not encourage them to apply or at any time say they had to apply for CERB to continue getting social assistance.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. How many files . . . And you can't tell me how many files were closed due to receipt of CERB?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — No, we cannot. We don't track that.

Ms. Conway: — But you can tell me how many files were closed. You just can't tell me why?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Correct.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. So could we get the number of files closed between March 2020 and March 2021 and then the previous maybe two years, just to kind of compare what that looked like? I understand you won't have that today, but if we could get that tabled at the next Human Services Committee, I would appreciate it.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. In terms of just . . . I want to turn to the new program, SIS. We are hearing a concerning number of people who receive SAID who are being kind of downgraded to SIS. And I've heard this from physicians who are getting patients coming in being downgraded from SAID to SIS. I've heard this from social workers not employed by the ministry, and we've had people approach our office with this issue.

Do you have any idea why this is happening? My understanding is a SAID client is a SAID client for life. Why is this happening? Do you have any insight? And could you tell me how many people within the last year have been moved from SAID to SIS?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so you had a couple of questions in there, specifically clients being downgraded from SAID to SIS. As far as we're aware of, there are no clients that have been downgraded from SAID to SIS.

Obviously there's criteria to get on the SAID program, one of them being significant and enduring disability, correct? So a reason they might fall off that is we do . . . When a client gets on SAID, doesn't necessarily mean they're going to be on it for the rest of their life. Lots of times they are because they do have those

significant and enduring . . . but sometimes circumstances can change.

So we do review the clients on occasion to see where they're at. And so that might be a reason they could fall off: their disability has gotten better for whatever reason it is. Or with technology, people can have jobs in different areas of life right now, right from their home computer. So there's a possibility they've educated themselves and they've now bettered themselves so they're able to do stuff on their own financially instead of relying on our services for that. So that would be a reason they might fall off the program.

So as far as SAID goes, in March of 2020 we had 16,555 households; and in March of 2021, we now have 16,779 households. And as a rule, this number always goes up year after year just because of the nature of the significant and enduring disabilities that these people have. But, Tracey, I'm going to let you go ahead and elaborate on that if you'd like.

Ms. Smith: — Sure, Minister. Thank you. I think you've really answered the questions just in terms of the intent of the program. And you were able to describe again that, you know, quite often people are on this program, you know, for the extent of their lives. But there are times as well when their circumstances can change and they might find themselves where they no longer need SAID or they're off it for a period of time.

But again it's sort of that connection, you know, back to our staff so that if a client's circumstances are changing, we always encourage them to connect with our staff to describe kind of what their situation is, what they're going through so that we can help determine, you know, whether or not they would be eligible again or, again, if they're no longer in need of the program.

Ms. Conway: — If we were to bring examples of people that are being downgraded to your attention, that would get your attention pretty quickly to find out what's going on there because that would be quite bizarre.

Ms. Smith: — What I would suggest is if there are some cases that you're aware of or that have been brought to your attention to please, you know, bring those to our attention. That is something that we can have our staff look at. You know, for the most part my general comment would be about these types of programs, and in particular SAID, is it really can vary from client to client in terms of their circumstances. And so that conversation between the client and the staff person in terms of what's happening is really important because it can vary from client to client, you know, depending on their unique circumstances. So if you are aware of something, we would be happy to take a look at that.

Ms. Conway: — I appreciate that.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I would just add to that if you're going to do that, just do it through the regular channels, through casework as individual instances — and you know, that person would have to come forward, sign the consent form, say this is my issue; I've been asked to leave SAID for this reason, and I don't think it's fair — so that we can work through them individually.

Ms. Conway: — Sure. I appreciate those numbers: 16,555 in

March of 2020 and 16,779 in March of 2021. Is that correct?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Correct.

Ms. Conway: — How many new applications did you receive for SAID during that same period of time? So between March '20 and March 2021.

A Member: — The difference?

Ms. Conway: — No, I don't think it would be the difference because some people would be on SAID and go down to SIS based on the information I'm getting, or may move on in life for all the reasons you've described, may not need the program anymore.

So new applications would actually be a more demonstrative number of the issue that I'm trying to get at with these questions because it would indicate whether . . . Yes, for reasons that I think are obvious.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Actually if you could elaborate what you're looking for exactly that would probably be helpful instead of us assuming.

Ms. Conway: — I'm just looking for how many new applications the MSS [Ministry of Social Services] received between March 2020 and March 2021 for SAID, new applications?

[17:30]

Hon. Ms. Carr: — That's not something we're going to have right on hand, so we will try and get that. I'm not sure what happens to an application form if they're turned down, if they stay in the system, or how that works. But we'll try and get it.

Ms. Conway: — New, successful applications.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — New, successful applications? Okay, we will take that away.

Ms. Conway: — So you can't get that now? I'm just wondering.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — No, we'll go ask for sure.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Great.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so I think I'll just start, and then I'll turn it over to Tracey to elaborate a little bit more. But with our programs, depending who the client is or what the situation is, they start by doing that application form and answer a series of questions. They're directed to SIS or to possibly SAID. So did they start out absolutely wanting to be on SAID at the beginning? Maybe, maybe not. But it's through a series of questions that take them to those two individual streams.

So while a client is waiting to be eligible for SAID, they have to first qualify under the financial piece, and then secondly qualify under the enduring disability piece. So that takes time to get that information from their care provider and do the assessments and all of that kind of stuff, could be three to four months depending on the situation. But during that time frame, they are actually

placed on interim SAID benefits. We give them the benefit of the doubt, that if they think they are going to go there, that that's what they're going to . . . if they get all their information to us, that that's what they may qualify for. So I'm just going to let Tracey take it from here.

Ms. Smith: — Sure. Thank you, Minister. So just in terms of that process, so as the minister said, the individual, they make an application to our program. You know, depending on their responses, if it sounds like they may have an enduring and significant disability, then there's, you know, a series of documentation that they need to get from their physician to go through that process.

So in that interim basis we put them on what's called temp SAID benefits. In that situation the benefit levels are the same as what a person would receive under the SIS program. And the reason for that is if through the end of that assessment period, while they're waiting to be determined whether or not they are eligible for SAID, again we don't want to be in a situation where they're getting a certain level of benefit for a period of months and then that has to change if it turns out that they're not eligible for that particular program. And so for that period of time they'll receive those types of benefits. Then when it's determined if they are eligible for SAID, then they would be fully enrolled in that program and they would start receiving the benefits through SAID.

Ms. Conway: — My understanding is that during the disability assessment phase they receive the SIS, but they don't get back payment for what the SAID rates would reach even if they are eligible, which is a concern, but I understand that's the way it functions. And I had understood that that assessment period was about three months. I understand it can take a bit more. So I'm just wondering if you were able to determine how many new SAID applications there were this year. And I'm guessing this is going in the direction of some of those are temp SAID and some of them are SAID.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes. So we don't have those numbers right now. They're going to actually have to go back and look at the applications and how they all come out. But they said they should be able to look that up and we'll get that to you.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Is that something you track on Linkin?

Ms. Smith: — Well that would be a different system. So the Linkin system is primarily used by child and family. We have a different system through the income assistance programs.

Ms. Conway: — Is that the new one that you started to develop a few years back?

Ms. Smith: — That's correct. Yes.

Ms. Conway: — And that doesn't make it just pretty easy to spit out the number of new applications?

Ms. Smith: — Our team, we will endeavour to take a look at how, you know, what information we can get. Absolutely that's something we'll take back and we'll see what we can bring back.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, great. And do you think your team can

get that tonight, or you mean that's not something you can get at the moment?

Ms. Smith: — That won't be something that we can get tonight, but we'll endeavour to get it as quickly as we can.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. So I'm new at this and I'm told to get it on the record that you will table that at the next committee.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — We'll try and get the information that we have to you, yes.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry. Tonight or at the next committee?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Not tonight. We don't have the ability to gather all of that information. You just said the words "just spit out a report." This isn't one of those things where we can just spit out a report. They have to do some work to get the number for you.

Ms. Conway: — And it may take a bit longer, but you will table those numbers?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes, we will.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. In terms of the transition to SIS, I guess the last thing I just wanted to say about SAID is I had understood that, you know, the ministry worked very closely with disability advocates, and I had understood that kind of one of the commitments that were made is that, you know, once you're a recipient of SAID, you're always a recipient of SAID.

So I'm a little concerned to hear some of the backsliding on that. I understand there may be some really exceptional times when, you know, you might see that that's not the case, but I had understood that that was one of the commitments made to the disability community. And certainly in my conversations with the disability community, that's something that they're very eager not to see any kind of backtracking on.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So I'll just comment on that. Backsliding is . . . I don't really care for the term, I guess, simply because if someone is eligible for our program and they need our benefits, then we're more than happy to be there to help them out and provide for them. But if someone's circumstances have changed and they don't need those benefits any longer, that they're more than able to take care of themselves financially through whatever they have, then we're not going to continue to pay a benefit that is a benefit of last resort if they don't need it.

If they can take care of themselves . . . and it's through all of the contact that we have with them through their caseworkers, through discussions. It wouldn't be a surprise for anybody that they're now in a better position, which is actually a really good news story, is to have these people get off of benefits whether it's SAP, TEA, SIS, SAID, whatever the program is. Any time we have someone that can get off a program because they've bettered themselves, is a good thing.

Ms. Conway: — But in the context of SAID, it's a disability benefit. Disabilities, because of the nature of them, they can flare up and they can improve, there's no question. There are income exemptions in place to provide for scenarios where people go

through periods of more independence. And certainly if that is the case they won't be receiving money, but it's not that they're downgraded from SAID. If they need to come to rely on that program again then they can is my understanding. And maybe I just want to confirm that that's . . .

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes, I think that would be a fair assessment. If their circumstances change again and they need to come back to us, we're absolutely there to help them out.

[17:45]

Ms. Conway: — Okay. In terms of the transition to SIS, I have been hearing from a lot of individuals and groups on the ground that there are a few concerns with SIS. SIS does represent a reduction in assistance for many people, or it will represent a reduction in assistance for many people. And then I'm hearing a lot of concern about the transition. So I just want to touch on a few things here.

In terms of the basic amount, this isn't really an improvement from SAP. Because my understanding is the SIS basic amount for southern individuals is 685; previously on SAP it was 255, but people were eligible for a \$30 cell phone allowance which has now been rolled into SIS. So these basic amounts are pretty much the same, and there have been a number of cuts when we're looking at SIS vis-à-vis SAP.

My understanding is that the disability benefit has been cut. Under SAP my understanding is you'd get \$50 for that disability benefit if you were flagged and a \$20 mobility allowance, and that's no longer available under SIS. There are increases to overpayment clawbacks under SIS. And there's a cut to the clothing and furniture grants that were available under SAP. School supplies, there's no longer an allowance for school supplies. That's a big change. There's no longer coverage for laundry. I understand people who had coin-operated laundry could access some money for that. And there's been a cut for water heater rental benefits.

And these are compounded by kind of some of the more previous but recent cuts which include the transition to the emergency home repair program; the cut to the general living allowance since 2015 at least; the cut to the rental housing supplement which is now clawed back dollar for dollar, so anyone who's on SIS or SAP in reality they don't see that.

And there've been changes to the diet. I know that that's been . . . The range will benefit many people because it's increased to kind of 50, 100 to 150. But I've been hearing a lot of concerns that folks that were on the costed diet — so even higher than that — based on the advice of a dietitian, won't have access to that. And I think folks are hoping that that isn't kind of an indication of what's to come on the SAID, that that costed diet isn't going to be cut from the SAID program. So I just wanted to start by sort of going through those because those are my understanding. And feel free to chime in if I'm wrong.

But my concern here is that, you know, especially for individuals — so folks who aren't living with children, who of course get the Child Tax Benefit, so that helps a lot — this is just not objectively enough to live on for an individual. The shelter benefit is 575 and the adult allowance is 285. That's 860. I know here in Regina,

you know, a one-bedroom is about 940; a bachelor is 750. Even if you're staying at Souls Harbour, so Souls Harbour, the rent there is 650. That leaves you \$64. And that's the lowest rent someone will find. That leaves you \$64 for food, clothing, transport, you know, \$25 for the low-income bus pass. That leaves you \$39 to feed yourself, clothe yourself, get around the city. How are these people going to, you know, get out and apply for a job? How are they going to be able to better themselves on this SIS program?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — You're good? That's it? Okay, we'll need a minute.

Okay, so thank you very much for the question. You had a lot packed in there, so I'm just going to do a really high-level of the program, kind of background and why we went in the direction we went. And then Tracey's going to elaborate on some of the additional stuff that they are eligible for when they do their motivational interviewing.

Ms. Conway: — And if you want to do that, you're free to. I am very familiar with the program, so if you want to cover the stuff that, you know, additional stuff that people are eligible for, we can do that too.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes, but I think it's important to understand why we went to the program we did. And it wasn't just us that wanted to go that direction, it was clients that wanted a simpler program. So the new program will actually focus on helping people overcome their challenges and help them move to employment or participation in their communities to the best of their abilities. So we're shifting our emphasis from paperwork to people, from confusion to simplicity, and from compliance to support. So that is the goal that we're trying to do.

A simpler benefit with a few additional benefits for health and safety, job-related expenses means that we're able to increase the adult basic benefit and shelter benefit in the new program. There will be increased earned income exemptions. This means that clients can keep more money of what they earn before their benefits are reduced. It also encourages clients to take on more hours of work, so they can move to self-sufficiency.

Using a new approach called motivational interviewing, our staff will work alongside clients to make positive decisions, manage their benefits independently, and accomplish their goals. SIS will also be more client friendly, and I had talked about the online portal earlier. SIS will provide a financial benefit for shelter and basic needs, with additional benefits for some situations such as emergency health and safety needs or starting a new career.

So our staff will help their clients learn how to make good financial decisions, manage their benefits, budget for their household expenses, and work to make changes in their lives to become self-sufficient to the best of their ability.

And I'm just going to let Tracey talk about some of those additional benefits.

Ms. Smith: — Thanks, Minister. So just building on that. So again the intent of the program and a big shift in what we're doing at Social Services is really how we work with clients differently. And it's really around that planning and support so that we can

better understand where the client's at in their lives and help to work with the client to set, you know, the goals that they want to see themselves achieve in their life.

So in addition to the core of the program, you've got the core benefits that are available to people. And then there's additional benefits that are also available, depending on a person's circumstances. And this is where that communication and that contact between the planning and support specialist and the client is critically important. And that's also where, as the minister had mentioned earlier in her remarks around motivational interviewing, this is where we have, you know, trained our staff to be able to have these critical conversations with clients when they're coming to us so that we can, again, best help them in their life situation.

So you know, as we mentioned at the front end of this program, we have increased employment incentives, where we have increased earned income exemptions so clients can keep more of what they earn before their benefits are reduced. And we also have an employment and training benefit to help with the costs of starting a career or at the beginning of a training program. So that's available for clients, you know, if they're ready and available at that particular point in their situation.

Ms. Conway: — Is that a one-time benefit? The \$140 available under the employment training benefit?

[18:00]

Ms. Smith: — That goes back to the individual's case plan. So you know, if it's a part of the case plan and they start something, you know, they would be eligible for that. I would say that, you know, if down the road if they weren't successful in that at that particular time, they would be able to work with their caseworker again to determine what they would be eligible for given what their plan is, if they do plan to go back into some sort of training or education program.

We also have situations or benefits available for household health and safety benefits in an emergency situation to provide replacements for household items. We have a stabilization benefit that can be provided to support clients who have difficulty maintaining stable housing.

Ms. Conway: — Can I just stop you there for a moment? The stabilization benefit, is that, again, a one-time \$150 amount?

Ms. Smith: — It would go back to the individual's case plan. Again it's not a situation where . . . You know, one of the other parts that would be important in that conversation is, you know, understanding again where a client's at in their life. And so it's not intended to be something that would be, you know, every month you're in that stabilization situation. The intent would be that if they were in need of that benefit, you know, that's something that they would talk about with their planning and support specialist. And if it was determined at another point, you know, later that that was something that they needed to be able to fulfill their case plan then that's a conversation that they would have.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. And in terms of the health and safety benefit, \$500 due to disaster, what would meet the

definition of . . . I know also domestic violence, and I think that's pretty clear. What about a disaster? What would meet that criteria?

Ms. Smith: — I would suggest that if there was a fire, for example, and they had to leave their . . . obviously they would have to leave their home immediately. Those kinds of situations would be taken into consideration. We also have . . . Short-term emergency assistance may be provided to address unforeseen emergency situations, again, that could result in harm. We do have the prescribed diet benefit for clients . . .

Ms. Conway: — Can I just ask you . . . Sorry to interrupt. Can I ask about the short-term emergency assistance benefit? I didn't see an amount listed. Is there a cap?

Ms. Smith: — That is something I would need to get some clarification on in terms of looking at that policy in a bit more detail.

Ms. Conway: — Okay.

Ms. Smith: — We have the prescribed diet benefit for clients whose medical conditions require additional nutritional supplements or food. We do have a travel benefit for people if they have to travel outside of their community for medical purposes.

Ms. Conway: — Do you mind if I just go back to the diet benefit? Because it's just as you go through them, I think it makes sense for me to flesh them out a bit.

Ms. Smith: — Sure.

Ms. Conway: — It's a 50 or 100 or \$150 kind of rungs is my understanding. If you're diagnosed with HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] you're eligible for the 150 and then short of that it's 50 or 100. My understanding is that folks previously receiving SAP did qualify for a costed diet by a dietitian that could exceed 150, and that's no longer available to folks on SIS. Is that correct?

Ms. Smith: — So the approach in the Saskatchewan income support program, it really is based on, you know, a simpler program where clients receive, you know, the dollars that they receive from us. And really again looking at the whole income approach because as you've noted clients, you know, they do receive quite often benefits other than those they receive from income assistance. And so that goes back to, you know, a big part of this program around that planning and support piece.

A lot of the conversations that our staff are having with clients, and in particular as we're transitioning them to the new program, it really is around some of those fundamental pieces, around household budgeting and understandings for what your needs are relative to the income that you have coming in. And so the approach to this program — again, to ensure that it's simpler and that it's easier for clients to understand overall — is that they understand what dollars are coming into their household, and then they can actually help work . . .

And this is where the planning and support specialist can work alongside the client to help understand what are those costs that

they have to pay for in a given month; what are their expenses? And if they do have expenses associated with a prescribed diet then that's something that they can account for within their budget. And they can use, again, they use the dollars that they receive through the program to help pay for those expenses.

Ms. Conway: — So am I hearing that people who have a costed diet won't have that cut back? That'll be grandfathered out and just not available to new SIS recipients? That people who have this, who receive basic assistance either on SAP . . . or I guess on SAP, will be able to maintain that costed diet once they transition to SIS?

Ms. Smith: — If they are on the SIS program, then they will receive what's available through the SIS program in terms of that benefit to help pay for those costs.

Ms. Conway: — So that is a cut under SIS. That costed diet is no longer available to them.

Ms. Smith: — They will be getting dollars to help with that cost, but again it's a different approach.

Ms. Conway: — Like dollars out of their basic support?

Ms. Smith: — They would take . . . That would be a part of it — their basic support, their shelter, plus the dollars that they would receive through their prescribed benefit. And again it's looking, it's working with the clients at that . . . you know, understanding as a whole what are they receiving into their monthly income on a monthly basis.

Ms. Conway: — I understand the philosophy behind motivational interviewing. I'm just wondering like literally what's available to folks under the program. The costed diet was previously available to them in excess of \$150 if they receive that costed diet from a dietitian. That is no longer something that they're eligible for under SIS. Is that correct? Like it's a pretty straightforward question.

And maybe you don't know. And I want to know too because this is something that I'm hearing from folks a lot about, that there's concern. And will the people that currently receive that costed diet be able to maintain that into SIS?

Ms. Smith: — I will confirm . . . [inaudible].

Ms. Conway: — Thank you . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . I'm happy for you to go through the . . .

Ms. Smith: — Travel, and then we touched base on the discounted bus pass. As well there's also for clients . . . They can be eligible for an alternate heating benefit for clients who reside in households where natural gas is not accessible and are required to heat their home with an alternate heat source.

We also have a series of change-in-circumstance types of benefits for clients as well. So we do have a children's benefit available for parents who are not eligible to receive the Canada child benefit for child-related costs. We've got a child care benefit to help in the short term when a client is looking for employment or going to a job interview.

We do have a benefit available for relocation that can be provided to assist with moving costs due to health emergencies, starting employment in a new location, evictions that might be beyond a client's control, or finding a more affordable place to live.

And again a travel benefit associated with attending a job interview outside of the community or beginning a training or job employment. And then we also provide security deposits up to the amount of the shelter benefit that is available to clients as well.

Ms. Conway: — Are the security deposits then clawed back from the future monthly amounts that clients get?

Ms. Smith: — They are recoverable.

Ms. Conway: — Recoverable, sorry.

Ms. Smith: — Yes.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. And those recoverable amounts have gone up, is that correct?

Ms. Smith: — Well they would be consistent with the shelter benefits that are available within the program, that's correct.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. If you want to just wait to check on the costed diet the next time you step out, I am fine with that, unless it's your preference to go out and check now.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — We'll maybe just go out right now and . . .

Ms. Conway: — Okay.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes. Thank you.

Ms. Smith: — So we did have a chance just to confer with the group. And so you are correct in that there are the three sort of levels of benefits that are available within the prescribed diet benefit piece.

And the other piece that we'll just share is when we were developing the program, and particularly around this piece, we did work with health professionals to, you know, understand in terms of the different types of health conditions that a person might have and what their prescribed diet might look like. So we did actually work with health professionals, you know, in determining those rates in those circumstances.

Ms. Conway: — And just to clarify, so the costed diet in excess of 150 is now cut from SIS? That's not available to people on SIS?

Ms. Smith: — Yes, that's correct.

Ms. Conway: — And even people that were receiving it on SAP being transitioned to SIS won't be able to maintain that costed diet?

[18:15]

Ms. Smith: — That is where, you know, as we were saying earlier in terms of the transition to a new program, that is really

where we are working really hard with clients in terms of understanding their current circumstances so that we can help, you know, plan and support with them as they transition to the new program if that's the situation. And that's what we will continue to do is put that emphasis and energy into really working closely with those clients to have a good transition experience.

Ms. Conway: — So the workers may have a bit of flexibility for those folks that are currently getting the costed diet in their transition to SIS?

Ms. Smith: — You know, the workers and the staff will work with those clients on an individual basis, again to understand their entire life circumstance and to see, you know, how the program can work with them to address those needs.

Ms. Conway: — And motivational interviewing has been around since 2017 in the ministry?

Ms. Smith: — That sounds correct, yes.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. And I want to return to that in a moment. But just before moving off of SIS, the other change here that I'm hearing a lot of negative feedback about is the decision to no longer pay landlords, pay rent directly on behalf of clients, and the decision to no longer pay for utilities directly. So folks have to pay for heat, water, power, and rent out of that 575. Landlords are not a fan of this change. There's been quite a bit of coverage, media coverage on that. I haven't heard good feedback from clients.

As you know, money can be a trigger for folks who have addiction or mental health issues. And the biggest concern to me is that clients don't even have the choice to say, actually I want you to continue to do it the old way and do these direct payments for rent and utilities. And I think we're going to be seeing a lot of issues with that. I know our office deals commonly with evictions due to nonpayment of water bills because clients assume water is covered like other utilities, when it's not. So I believe this is going to . . . In addition to the fact that for the reasons I've stated, especially for single individuals, this is just not . . . It may be a simpler program; it's also an inadequate program. I worry that this is going to create all kinds of issues, and I'm wondering what the thinking was behind this change.

But perhaps before you answer that, I'd just like to also ask about the transition and the plan for the transition. The previous track record for the transition to SIS has not been great, both in terms of backlog and in terms of the overpayments which were reported on back in the summer. My understanding is that there was a backlog. Some people, like, applied for assistance in July and didn't get benefits until, like, October and this caused a great amount of hardship. I've been reached out to by many of the CBOs in the province wondering what the plan is for the transition. There's a lack of transparency around the plan. I myself reached out to the minister and I asked for a technical briefing on the transition and I was told to bring my questions here.

So yes, the transition has already had quite a bumpy start. So I guess I'm wondering, what is the plan? What is the hard cut-off for transitioning folks from TEA and SAP to SIS? Are we sure

that clients are being communicated that this needs to happen? We're hearing from a lot of CBOs who are worried that their clients don't even know that this needs to happen. Is there a system in place? What happens to the folks that fall through the cracks?

I know that, you know, one idea might be to learn from the summer and not close their SAP files before you make them apply for SIS, so that we know that people are covered during that transition period. And I would just . . . In the child welfare review that was done in 2015, I'll note that one of the issues that was noted there was access to benefits during transitional periods. This can be very difficult for families. A lot of the clients of the Ministry of Social Services are often not equipped to manage those challenges in terms of the transition.

So I'm wondering what's proactively being done to ensure that this transition goes smoothly because there are many, many concerns. So if you could speak to the transition, and if you could speak to why this change from the direct payment to landlords and utilities, I would appreciate that.

[18:30]

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So I think first of all I will . . . Is it working? Okay, thank you. Just one thing from a previous question, a comment that you made about SAID benefits and the whole interim part while they're deciding if they're going to actually be accepted as a SAID client. The comment was made that they do not get retroactive pay. But if they qualify, they do get that retroactive pay for those two, three months, however long it took for them to qualify.

Ms. Conway: — They get the difference?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes.

Ms. Conway: — They get the difference between SAID and SIS during the transitional period?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — That is correct.

Ms. Conway: — Okay.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. I just wanted to clear that up before we went on. So as far as the new SIS program, you had a few questions in there, but the transition . . . So, so far every single client that is on our program has actually received at least one letter. There have been some telephone conversations. Every time a caseworker or their specialist talks to them, they will remind them that the program they're on is coming to an end, and they need to endeavour to work on that new application so that they can qualify for the new program. Right now our goal is applications to be in by June 30th so that by August 30th there is no disruption in their benefits. So get that application in, get you moved over, and get you on to that new program.

You talked about some people applying for the new program and it's taking them months and months to get on the program. The turnaround time for an application on to SIS is five business days, so that might have been a one-off situation. Who knows what the circumstances were? But as a rule it's five business days for them to get on to the new program once they fill out their application

form.

Ms. Conway: — That's wonderful to hear. And sorry, to be clear, I was talking about the summer. There was a period in the summer there where I think there was — what's the word — backup. The term is escaping me. But I wasn't trying to suggest that that's the common experience. I'm glad to hear it's now five days, but certainly there were a number of clients back in the summer where they weren't being processed. And I thought that was an issue of sort of common knowledge, but perhaps I'm wrong there. But I'm glad to hear that it's been improved to five days. That's fabulous.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. No, that's great. So I guess the other thing is the new program has been announced, just about going on two years now. So it shouldn't be a surprise to anybody that's on existing benefits that we're moving in this direction. I know sometimes for clients it's hard to go from their existing, where they are to move to something new but that is the goal that we have with those motivational interviews that we have with the clients, and to get them budgeting and moving on to the new program.

You had made the comment that some of the community-based organizations were concerned that there was a lack of information. So on the onset of this program, we actually were in contact with about 200 community-based organizations and talked about what the new program would look like. And you know, it definitely is going to take time to transition to the new program. There's no way we can do it all at once.

So right now that . . . we actually just firmed up the date on when we want people to actually have that final transition to hopefully successfully get everybody over to SIS. All of those organizations will now get a presentation. It'll be a PowerPoint presentation from the ministry on exactly what the steps are moving forward, what it's going to look like. They'll have an opportunity to ask questions, get their concerns answered during that time that we have those presentations with those community-based organizations.

One of the things, as far as communication to the clients goes, we've sent over 16,000 letters out: just over 3,000 to our SAP clients, and 13,000 letters to our TEA clients. So it's been substantial communication that's been going on, and slowly but surely things are moving over.

We're hoping that there is no gap in benefits for people. I mean in an ideal world everybody would get that application in, the transition would happen smoothly, and they would move on to their new benefits. But the people that lag behind or whatever the situation might be, we do have their contacts that they have, that they can work with if for some reason there is a small gap in benefits, that we get them back on that plan as soon as we possibly can and get them going again. So our goal is that hopefully nobody falls through the cracks, like you said.

Ms. Conway: — Will there be sort of a . . . Are you saying that you're going to task someone within the ministry to deal with those situations? Like there's a number people can call to get fast-tracked or something along those lines?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I don't know the exact details on that, but

they would definitely have the opportunity. Everybody has a caseworker that they have contact information that they deal with on a regular basis, someone that's already working on that motivational interviewing with them. By the time we get down to the people that have not transitioned over automatically from the letters, we're going to be reaching out. Some we've done phone calls already, but continue that telephone conversation, and we'll be working with them on an individual basis.

Ms. Conway: — Do you have kind of readily available right now the number of people that are currently on TEA, SAP, and SIS right now? Like do you have that? And maybe you could just get that the next time you have to step out, just because I'm cognizant of time. I knew you had the SAID March 2020, March 2021, but that would be great to know as well.

I have a couple . . . I just want to jump to the motivational interviewing here for a second because . . .

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Did you want us to answer the question about the utilities?

Ms. Conway: — Yes. Yes.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes. I'm just going to let Tracey go ahead and talk about that.

Ms. Smith: — Thanks, Minister. I'll just maybe back up. In terms of the letters, we had the program swap. So it was the SAP group that got the 13,000 letters, and TEA around 3,000. So I just wanted to share that.

In terms of the approach to working with clients, in terms of payments to their landlords, other types of payments to utilities, you know, we wanted to share as well that, you know, this was a change in the program in terms of the new program. And really a big focus for us has been again to be working very, very closely with clients. But in addition to working with clients, we've been working closely with our other partners — with the utility companies, for example — to help them understand the changes in the program and why we're making them as well.

And a big focus for our staff is, you know, in those situations where clients have rent that's due to a landlord, or utility payments that are due to utility companies, again helping the clients get their bank accounts set up with direct deposit so that those payments can go directly to their landlord or to utility companies. And that's been a really big focus from the very beginning of the program.

As the minister said, when we launched this program we had been very, very focused for the last couple of years in terms of being proactive with clients and helping people understand the new program, and how we can again plan and support with them alongside to help them be successful. That is something that we will continue to do, and we do continue to do through this transition, is to ensure that clients again have a good understanding of what their responsibilities are, what their accountabilities are, and that we can help support them. In doing so, it is really around, you know . . . Setting up bank accounts is a really good example, and getting those direct deposits in place.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry to interrupt. So the ministry is going to

allow for individuals to have their income assistance directly deposited to either Crown utilities or the landlord directly from the Ministry of Social Services?

Ms. Smith: — No. The ministry will work with clients because clients have bank accounts, for the clients to set up their direct deposit to whatever. A landlord is an example, utility companies, but they might have other examples where they have payments that are due to other people. And you know, many of us use that feature within our bank account and that's something that we're working with our clients on as well, so that they can have that set up.

There are some specific examples where, again with landlords, where we are working with those clients that might reside in a particular building and, again, working with those clients to get those direct deposits set up so that it does happen automatically from their bank account.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. I mean I use direct deposit, but I think it's going to be difficult for people with \$64 a month left over for food, Wi-Fi, clothing to have, you know, consistent access to a computer and internet. So I do think that this is going to create some significant issues, but I guess we'll see.

In terms of the motivational interviewing, I'm hearing you say that this is a big part of . . . The ministry is banking on the success of SIS and really a lot of that has to do with the hopes it has put in this motivational interviewing, although my understanding is that the motivational interviewing has been around since 2017 and that the per capita rate of people on social assistance hasn't really improved. And I'd like to ask a couple questions about the motivational interviewing. I think first of all, we need to talk about staffing because I think in order for this model to have any hope of being effective, we need to have a manageable caseload for ministry social workers.

But before we talk about that, I'm just wondering what the ministry has spent on getting this motivational interviewing in place. My understanding is that a company called Empowering Change was given the contract to do this. It's an out-of-province company, and it's been . . . I don't know what's been spent since 2017, but I am wondering what the tally is to date.

[19:00]

I'm also wondering about the staffing issues. The ministry has an issue with low retention especially, I think, in its maybe child protection area, but certainly there are workload issues and absenteeism issues in the ministry. So I'm wondering, in addition to what has been spent on motivational interviewing since it was brought in 2017, what is the current worker-to-client ratio both in income assistance and child protection? And I understand it will vary from region to region so I'd like it broken down by region and by area. And if possible, I'd like to get that over the last five years or so just to show whether that's getting any better, because this has been a chronic issue within the ministry, is workload and retention.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, thank you very much for the questions. I'm going to start with the motivational interviewing question. Yes, you are correct. The company was called Empowering Change and it is an out-of-province company, as you noted. Their

initial contract was from . . . April 2018 is when we started the motivational training — I think we talked 2017, but it was actually 2018 — and their contract went to December 31st, 2020. And they did get the contract through a request for services, so it was a competitive process is how we ended up taking up with this company.

To date we have 355 employees who are fully trained. And by the end of December 31st, 2021, which is the end of the extension of their contract, we as a ministry will be self-sufficient, meaning that from all of the training that they've done, everybody will be trained. And within those employees, we actually have employees who are kind of like train the trainers. So now we will be able to train from within and we will have no need for the services any longer of Empowering Change.

Ms. Conway: — And what's the dollar amount that you've spent to date?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — The initial contract was 294,500 and our extension was 105,000 to ensure that we are fully trained up.

Ms. Conway: — So for just under 400,000 is what you've spent on Empowering Change to date?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes, 399,500.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — And so I think that is it on the motivational interviewing unless you have any further questions.

Ms. Conway: — No, I have no further questions about the motivational interviewing.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. I'll just turn it over to Tracey to touch on the other stuff you talked about.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you.

Ms. Smith: — Thanks, Minister. So you'd had a question just around some point-in-time data around the TEA, SAP, and SIS program. So I can provide that to you right now. So our recent . . . March of 2021, the number of households on SIS is 7,521; on SAP is 6,880; and on TEA is 1,889.

Ms. Conway: — Can I get individual beneficiaries, not households?

Ms. Smith: — That is something I can take back to the group and see what kind of a breakdown we have there.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. And does that correspond to when the ministry uses the terms "beneficiaries" and "cases"? Like cases are households, beneficiaries are individuals?

Ms. Smith: — Beneficiaries would be individuals and then households, yes. A household can be one person.

Ms. Conway: — Right, of course. I'm interested in the beneficiary number just because that's what I have. My understanding is up until 2016 the ministry was reporting publicly on recipients, beneficiaries per population. That was

available publicly. But that seemed to have ended under the previous minister, so I could not find that anywhere. I'm not sure why the ministry stopped reporting on that.

But I did access Maytree. Maytree does report on Saskatchewan social assistance numbers, and according to them that number, the number of folks receiving social assistance has increased per capita consistently since 2010. So I'm just looking at the kind of breakdown of those numbers.

Ms. Smith: — Just so I'm clear, you're looking for the number of beneficiaries?

Ms. Conway: — Beneficiaries, yes. And that would be great to get since 2016, just because I think that's the last time it was reported on publicly. I may be wrong about that, but I did comb through a few things and wasn't able to find it.

Ms. Smith: — Okay.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. You don't have to do that now, but . . . And then I asked about the staffing ratios.

Ms. Smith: — Yes. So thank you, and thank you for your question. So maybe I'll just start by, just in terms of . . . You had asked more specifically, I think, about child and family and income assistance. And so just to share in terms of our approach in terms of staff and clients, so we don't approach it in terms of having specific ratios per staff. Just really generally I would say, and this crosses both child and family and income assistance, it really is dependent upon employees working really closely with their managers and their directors, as an example, because every — I'll just use child and family as an example — every situation is different.

And some require more sort of intense supports and services, and some maybe don't require it to that same degree. And so it really is a situation where you've got managers and employees working very closely in terms of understanding the caseload and understanding where the different, you know, where there might be some different pressures, just in terms of what staff are working on.

We do absolutely, you know, as a part of that conversation . . . And again this is something that staff and managers and directors are talking about continually, is in terms of the work that they have in front of them and the clients that they're working with, you know. If there is a need and there's a need to add some temporary resources into certain spots or certain areas of the province, you know, that is something that the team does when there's a need. And again, that's based on those conversations between the staff and their managers.

Just shifting a little bit to income assistance as an example, so that's a situation where you've got a number of different programs within income assistance. We've talked about a few of them here, but we also have a number of supplement programs as well. And so similarly, not every program is the same. Some are simpler, some are a little bit more complex. The individuals that are eligible for those programs, their situations vary as well. And so it's really that conversation between the employees and their managers to best understand how the work gets, you know, distributed and that staff ultimately are feeling supported, you

know, with their managers understanding what their cases are and where they need to spend their time.

You know, I would just also add that from a ministry perspective, this is an area that I take really seriously, the entire management team takes very seriously in terms of, you know, working with our staff and really helping ensure that we've got good conversations around work-life balance, making sure that we've got an environment where staff . . . there's really good communication between staff and their managers. And that is something that we continue to support and encourage.

I know myself as being newer in the role as deputy minister, you know, that's a commitment that I make to the team in terms of that open communication so that we are able to be able to provide the support to our staff across the ministry in terms of the work that they do in supporting the clients across all of our programs.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. I just want to flesh that out a bit more. I'm concerned to hear the ministry isn't tracking this. This is a perpetual theme, particularly when it comes to child and family services. Recommendations again and again are addressing the need for better caseloads. They've identified retention as an issue. Burnout is . . . What I'm hearing on the ground, burnout — I believe you call it compassion fatigue now — is an issue particularly in child and family services. I understand you're having trouble retaining some of your senior social workers in child and family services. I'm hearing that on the income assistance side, it's not uncommon for someone to have 200 cases.

And in terms of the child and family services, maybe we can just talk about that a little bit. Because out of the twin tragedies report from the child and youth advocate, my understanding is that there was an internal push to kind of track workload. I understand a third party was brought in to look at that and my understanding is that report is somewhere collecting dust and has not been released to the public. So can you speak to whether something like that was completed in response to the twin tragedies report and whether anything has been done as a result of that?

I think even as recent as the . . . Just give me one moment please. I believe that staff pressures were even identified as an issue as recently as the someone to watch over me report just released by the child and youth advocate. So to suggest somehow that everything is going fine I think is . . . All signals point to the fact that this is an issue within the ministry.

So I'm wondering, what are you doing to measure this? What are you doing to address it? If you don't track ratios even with Linkin, which I understand cost over \$60 million to put in place, if we still can't see what the worker-to-client ratio is, I'm concerned about that.

And I'm also wondering if you can speak to the existence of a report that was contracted to look into those issues of workload and caseload coming out of the twin tragedies report.

Ms. Smith: — Thanks, Minister. And thanks again for your question. So just to follow up, a little bit more sort of context and information just around child and family. You had noted sort of a workload report. So what I will share with you is that, you know, this is . . . As I said earlier, this issue around sort of

workload and understanding our caseloads, it is very much sort of front and centre and a priority for our teams.

They do regularly . . . Staff meet with their managers to really understand their caseload and the complexity because as I had mentioned earlier, caseloads vary from worker to worker. Our client situation varies from worker to worker. And that's a part of that team approach in terms of understanding, you know, what they're working with and the complexity of the different cases.

In terms of that study, since that time we have added new FTEs [full-time equivalent] to child and family specifically. Just to give you an example, since 2008 and '09, we've added 142 front-line positions since that time. And that's a part of . . . Again there was a workload study, but there is just that ongoing acknowledgement, you know, where the teams and the staff need to be working to again understand the caseloads and understand what they have coming forward. So they've done that.

There's also again some examples of where they've implemented training differently for staff so that, you know, staff are able to have the training within their home location versus having to travel for example outside of their home area and then also then take away from their time working with clients.

So the division itself has made a number of sort of improvements and efficiencies just around how, you know, how they approach their work, how they again work and communicate with one another to ensure that there is that understanding around their caseload and what needs to happen. So you know, again I would just share that the division, you know, takes this area very seriously. It's a front-and-centre conversation that happens regularly as a team, and that will continue to be the case going forward.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. I understand we're taking a break pretty quick here and I'm just nearly at the end of my questions on income assistance. But you know, time . . . we don't have much time in and I know because of COVID we need to step out and stuff but there has been quite a bit of stepping out. So I just want to make sure I cover everything else that I wanted to cover in income assistance and I'll come back to the answer on that in a moment.

The big picture here, you know, if we take the market basket measure for poverty, all of our income support programs have people in deep poverty. Deep poverty is defined as 75 per cent of that official line for poverty, including people on SAID. So including our disability benefit, it has people living in what's referred to as deep poverty. And my understanding is that the rates of people on assistance are only getting worse, and this transition to SIS will represent fewer available resources. Now there are a few things that I think could be done to address that, and I'm just wondering if anything is being contemplated on your end. Groups have called for a \$300 increase in rates. I'm wondering if that's something that the ministry is considering?

I have spoken to working mothers who, when they factor in the cost of child care, it's actually cheaper for them to just stay home with their children and collect social assistance then work a minimum-wage job and pay for child care because they're not eligible for the low-income subsidy. Raising the minimum wage would probably assist with these very concerning trends. This is

historically the largest budget that MSS has ever come up with, and it's just going to keep heading in that direction unless we deal with some of those root issues.

Something as simple as child support. Right now child support, my understanding, is considered income that is . . . it's non-exempt income. I know that British Columbia took the step of exempting child support. Our most, our deepest poverty rates are amongst lone parent families of children, so usually that's 95 per cent of those households are single moms. Exempting that child support payment would go a long way to helping with our child poverty crisis which isn't improving over time.

So I'm wondering if any of those steps, which are very immediate and would transform things pretty drastically pretty quickly, would be contemplated by this ministry given these concerning trends. So that's the first group of questions.

Just in terms of little things: the switchover to the emergency home-repair program. I'm not sure if you've heard good feedback on that. But people have to get two quotes in order to be eligible for that program, and they have to get those quotes at their own cost. So this is prohibitive and I think . . . I'm wondering if utilization of that program uptake has been high given that barrier, especially in rural communities, where if a tradesperson comes to give you a quote, they're going to charge you for that quote. And that's not something that's covered by the ministry.

In terms of the cuts to the Saskatchewan funeral benefit, I did hear from the Sask Funeral Service Association. They're concerned about a lot of things since the cuts, but one of the things they are really concerned about is they feel that the ministry has moved away from their agreement, which is that they agreed to provide funeral services at a reduced cost. And now when an individual has an asset that is retrievable — say the death benefit is retrievable — the funeral home is getting the difference between that death benefit and what they're eligible for from the ministry, and then the ministry is making them retrieve that benefit.

I would suggest that, you know, a lot of these homes are already working at, operating below cost. They're doing this for low-income families out of the goodness of their heart oftentimes, and they're just ill-equipped to be the one retrieving those benefits. So I'm wondering if the ministry has given any thought to that request for them to do that benefit retrieval and just give the full amount that the funeral homes are entitled to to the people.

There's some issues around communication there. We're hearing about bodies sitting in the morgues for over a month. I'm hearing that consistently. With the increase of death by overdose, with COVID, that hasn't helped. So I'm wondering if your ministry is looking into that. I mean the rates need to increase, because it's, again they're operating at a loss, but I think these are some immediate things that they wanted addressed. And of course I'm also concerned as critic in this area. So those . . . just to kind of finish off income assistance.

The other thing is CPP [Canada Pension Plan]. My understanding is the ministry asks people to apply for CPP at 60 instead of waiting to 65. There was a recent decision from the Manitoba

Court of Appeal saying that this shouldn't be done for folks on disability. They're already disenfranchised, of course.

[19:30]

So people are forced to apply for this at 60 instead of 65. It gets clawed back dollar for dollar. Then they have less available at 65. These are already, like, very low-income individuals. So I'm wondering if Saskatchewan is going to make any change to that policy in light of Manitoba Court of Appeal's decision.

And then, last thing, I'll just come back to the answer . . . Thank you, Deputy Minister, for that answer. I guess I'm wondering, what are you doing to track this? What are the tangibles that I could get eyes on? Like, surely there must be something you're tracking, whether it's year-to-year changes. I'd also like to know what the name of that workload study is, and I'm wondering if I can get a copy of it as well.

The Chair: — All right, colleagues. I think we'll take a break somewhere between 5 and 10 minutes. Just to remind members that we'll be tacking the time on at the end, so let's make it as efficient as possible. Thank you.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

The Chair: — All right. Welcome back, colleagues. We'll continue with the estimates.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Thank you. Okay, so you asked a bunch of questions in there ranging from, you know, policy to meetings with funeral directors. And I just want to say that we're not going to make decisions like that on the floor of a committee.

We continue to work with our providers, such as the funeral directors, on ongoing issues. And everything that you brought up, we have spoke to them about. And we also continue to review all of our programs and policies, and we'll make changes moving forward based on the information and the feedback we get. But we're not going to make any decisions on the floor here at the committee. And I'll turn it over to Tracey to talk about the other topic.

Ms. Smith: — Thanks, Minister. So in terms of . . . again you had made a reference to the study around the workload. So my understanding in talking to the team is that that really was a point-in-time document that was done a number of years ago. It's an internal document. It's not information that's been released. And the intent again, just given the fact that it is a point-in-time, is that it was never intended to be released.

So that's the information that I have from the team. They did say that, you know, they will follow up with me later. If there is some additional information that they can provide or some additional context, that's something that they'll share with me. But that's the information that I wanted to pass along at this point.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. It's a point-in-time document. What's the name of that document?

Ms. Smith: — I understand that it was . . . I believe it was called a workload study or a workload report. I don't even know if it had a formal title. It was again an internal point-in-time

document.

Ms. Conway: — What year was that prepared? Like, what was the point in time?

Ms. Smith: — I understand that it was 2016.

Ms. Conway: — 2016? Thank you. So my understanding is the minister won't release that to the committee?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I don't believe so, but she said she would go back and talk to her team and see if there is anything she can provide you.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, because I mean, I'm sure that this, even if it's an internal document, it will be available through either an FOI [freedom of information] or other kind of thing. So I mean it would be a shame to go through that route if it's something that just could be released to the committee.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — She has committed to going back and looking and seeing what she can release to you.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. I appreciate that. In terms of any data-tracking workload, any clarification on that? Like, are there any tangibles that exist that I could have eyes on as the critic for this ministry in terms of the workload issue?

[19:45]

Ms. Smith: — So you know, at this point I don't have anything further to share beyond what I had communicated earlier. Again this is an area that I will absolutely take back to the team and see if I can get some more, you know, some more additional detail in terms of what I've provided already. It is, again, it's an area that is constantly communicated, you know, within the team and within the division. And that's the information that the team has provided to me tonight, that they will continue to have those conversations, and that really helps inform the caseloads and the work that a particular team might be involved in.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. And I'm very heartened to hear that the minister has been speaking with the Saskatchewan Funeral Service Association which, of course, represents 400 members across the province. The majority of those members are in rural Saskatchewan, and I understand it's been quite a difficult transition for them. So I'm happy to hear about that.

Moving along then to housing. One of the things that goes a long way in addressing poverty is affordable, accessible, and stable housing. And we've seen a loss of key shelter supports under this ministry as of late. I'm certainly concerned about the reduction in supports for housing given that investments in housing have the capacity to save money in the long run, be it in health care, justice, and the like.

Back in June of 2018, the ministry stopped taking applications for the rental housing supplement, and those provided benefits up to \$364 a month. This was grandfathered out so folks who previously received it will maintain it, although if someone is on the new SIS program, that benefit will be clawed back dollar for dollar. And so, you know, in theory, it doesn't exist for those people. Folks on SAID, there will be no new applications for

SAID either. And I should add that the rental house supplement was fully exempt prior to October of 2016. That was a change to make that no longer exempt. So that is clawed back for folks.

Now my understanding . . . And I'm a new critic for this area, so it's important to me to make sure that I understand the timeline. But my understanding is that was a decision of your predecessor, Minister Carr, and that he justified this cut by pointing to the higher vacancy rates, the 3,000 vacant social housing units across the province as well as the fact that a replacement would be coming through the National Housing Strategy's Canada housing benefit sometime in 2020. And he indicated that both to the media as well as in last year's estimates. Sorry, not last year's estimates, but the vacant units were referred to in last year's estimates.

Now the Canadian housing benefit replacement has not come to fruition for folks on assistance. They are not eligible for the Canadian housing benefit, which has caused a significant amount of hardship. My understanding of this Canadian housing benefit, as you mentioned in your overview, Minister, is that it's an agreement with the feds. It's a 50/50 agreement.

And my understanding is that this was premised . . . According to a release put out by the Government of Saskatchewan, it was premised on high standards of transparency, public engagement, housing quality, and it sought to implement a benefit through a human rights-based approach and gender lens.

Part of the goals of that strategy was a reduction in homelessness by 50 per cent and a reduction in families in need of housing by 530,000 across the country. Of course that was a federal goal, but of course the Saskatchewan government put in place a three-year action plan. So I just, I guess I want to clarify that timeline. I want to clarify that folks receiving assistance are not eligible for that benefit.

And I just want to speak for a moment about the benefit. It covers a maximum rent . . . Sorry, prior to I think three days ago when the change came into . . . or it was announced. Or that's what I was able to find, or maybe it was earlier. The housing benefit was only available to people who were paying 50 per cent of their income to housing. And now we know that the definition of affordable housing is 30 per cent of income. Affordable housing is anything based on 30 per cent of your income or less.

But this benefit is not available to anyone paying between 30 to 49 per cent of their income to housing, although that's now changed to 40 per cent. So now it's not available to anyone who's paying between 30 and 39 per cent of their income. And it's not available, arguably, to those with the highest housing need — folks who are already receiving income assistance.

So I guess I have . . . And my understanding is that the cap on this benefit, although this may have changed, I have the income cut-off but I don't have the actual benefit that you can receive. I don't know if that's been increased. But my understanding is the maximum benefit you can receive, if you meet these highly restrictive criteria, is \$150 per month for a single or couples, 200 for singles or couples with one dependant, and 250 for singles or couples with two or more dependants.

So I just want to clarify that and, I guess, because I'm on a bit of

a roll, I may as well just wrap up this theme and then, you know, you can seek out some answers. The goal, I guess I want to hear about whether this . . . My understanding is the benefit has a cut-off so it's on a first-come, first-serve basis so it's not guaranteed that everyone who applies, even if they meet the eligibility, will get the benefit because it may run out, and then anyone who applies after it runs out won't get it.

So I guess I'm wondering, under the previous 50 per cent cut-off, was the benefit being utilized? Like how many people were utilizing the benefit? Why the change now? Is it because the benefit wasn't really being maximized? Are we achieving some of the stated goals? Is homelessness going down? Do we have fewer people on social assistance? I think my understanding is, the answer to that is no.

And how is that 40 per cent, previously 50 per cent — which really floored me because, of course, affordable housing is 30 per cent or lower — how is that initial 50 per cent number arrived at? And why now the change to 40 per cent? Why not make it 31 per cent and up? Because really that's the cut-off for affordable housing. I just want to focus on those questions for now.

I'm happy to summarize my questions if you . . . I know there was a lot there. So just whether the homelessness rate has been adjusted, how you arrived at that number, whether it has in fact impacted the number of people on assistance, and why was this not available to people with the highest housing need, the people on social assistance. Particularly as the previous minister committed that the rental supplement was being taken away, and then it would be replaced with this benefit.

So if you could address those, I would really appreciate it.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so you did ask a few questions in there. I'm going to try and cover them off, but whatever I miss, Tracey will fill in for me.

So I guess your first question about people being on income assistance and why they don't qualify. So I guess if you are on income assistance, you are already receiving a shelter benefit within your program, so that's what we consider.

Within this actual new program, the Canadian housing benefit, the intent all along was that we would stage approval. So to your point, we started with 50 per cent, and by using that number, we ensured that people with the greatest needs would qualify first.

And we had to ensure that we didn't oversubscribe, because as you already noted, it was first come, first served. So if we opened it up at too low of a number, like the 30 per cent that you're talking about, we might get three times as many applications than we could subscribe to the program. So as we move forward, the number will come down. We'll see what 40 per cent comes in at, and then we'll move on from there. And 50 per cent is the extreme for housing need under federal guidelines. That's what they consider. So that's where we started, was at that 50 per cent.

It was not fully subscribed in the first year. We only have one year under our belt. But the money that was not spent — it's an eight-year program — we're allowed to move it forward into the upcoming years, so there's just more available in future years. So we haven't lost anything. And so this year we'll do the 40 per

cent.

You asked about income thresholds. If you are single, your annual income has to be less than \$43,000. If you have one child it's \$2,900, and if you have two children it's \$3,800.

And am I missing anything?

Ms. Smith: — No, you've covered it all, Minister.

Ms. Conway: — So are there any numbers available on how, like, utilization?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes. So I guess what we would say is this is the first year of the program, so we don't know how it's affecting homelessness and the other stuff that you asked about, because we have no measures on it yet.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Will you be doing reports on that?

Ms. Smith: — You know, I would just add that because this is a program, you know, that we've been working on with the federal government as well, that I can't say that it would be like a formal report, but absolutely something that we would be looking at and needing to understand the uptake of the program and how it's doing, in order to make decisions as we go forward.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Minister, you mentioned that there are existing shelter benefits under income assistance. Under SIS that's a \$575 shelter benefit for a single person to cover rent and utilities. So even on that South Harbour rent that I mentioned, \$650, it's just not enough. In terms of market rent, you know, a basic bachelor is, you know, \$750; a one-bedroom is upwards of \$900. So this just isn't cutting it. Dollars invested in housing save many down the road. And I'm going to suggest that the lack of housing supports is a flawed approach that will see this ministry's budget increase year after year with worse incomes, sorry, worse outcomes for people.

The other justification that your predecessor gave for cutting the rental supplement — in addition to the fact that it would be replaced with this, which never happened — is the Sask Housing vacancies. He said that there were 3,000 of them. And maybe I'll cover vacancies and evictions together just because I'm cognizant of time, and it takes a bit of time for you to leave the room and seek answers each time I ask a question. So in terms of the vacancies, I'm wondering if I can get the number of units available per community that are inhabited, the number of units that are vacant, and the number of units that are in disrepair.

I know that your predecessor, as I said, spoke to the existence of 3,000 units and the need to maximize their potential. So I know in my constituency and particularly in North Central, there are dozens of empty Sask Housing units and they appear to be in a lot better shape than a lot of the housing that people are relying on there. I'm wondering if there is any insight as to why those units are sitting empty, as families receiving assistance with children reside in barely habitable, what I would describe as slum dwellings, renting from private landlords. A landlord in my riding in passing told me he thought it was because it was too . . . Like the ministry didn't want to pay to keep these units in a habitable condition. I don't know whether that's the case.

My understanding is that the criteria for Sask Housing can be quite limited. I had a couple in my riding. He's a Saskatchewan resident, a Canadian citizen; she's on a student visa. They had a baby together. Because she was on a student visa, they weren't eligible for housing, for social housing.

So I guess just to reiterate, my questions are around the available units. Why there hasn't been a plan to utilize those units? I know, for example, your predecessor in last year's estimates spoke about working with shelters to make . . . to transition people from shelters to those units. He mentioned he was working with Carmichael on that. I spoke to Carmichael. There's been no movement on that that I'm aware of.

In terms of evictions, I'm just going to pose these all together in the interest of time. I'm wondering if you're concerned, as the Ministry of Social Services, about the impact of the changes under *The Residential Tenancies Act* for the clients who utilize your ministry. That is decreasing the non-payment of rent eviction deadline from 15 days to 7. It's regular that we have clients come to us that have delayed payments from your ministry — shelter benefits that are delayed more than seven days — so I, as critic, am very concerned about that. I'm wondering if you have given that any thought and spoken to your colleague in the Justice Ministry.

I am also wondering if you've given the decision of Justice Danyliuk any thought. He wrote about the ORT [Office of Residential Tenancies] officers. There were some concerns in how that was playing out. I know that Dr. Buhler at the U of S [University of Saskatchewan] has indicated that that may be symptomatic of a broader approach on the ORT.

Most of those decisions favour landlords, and during the moratorium and evictions, we saw an increase in section 68 evictions and I'm wondering, I guess in that vein, whether there are any plans to reimpose the moratorium during this very brutal third wave. Things are worse here than they've ever been in the province. So will we reinstate that moratorium on evictions given the need is there? And are there any plans to strengthen tenant protections in Saskatchewan? And I think that's all for Sask Housing vacancies and evictions.

[20:15]

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so we'll start with your evictions question. I guess from our ministry's perspective, we're not concerned about the 15 to 7 days. We work with our income assistance clients and anybody that's in our housing authority units, we work with them very hard to try and ensure that they don't get evicted. So our time frame would be longer than that anyways because we're going to work with them to try and work out a payment program and ensure that they keep their housing.

Ms. Conway: — But the vast majority of people on income assistance are renting from private landlords.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So regarding the actual legal pieces within the bill, those really are for Justice.

Ms. Conway: — You're not concerned as the Ministry of Social Services? Your payments are often later than seven days. And now with this change to people having to pay their rent

themselves rather than that come from the ministry, there's going to be further delays potentially.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Well what I can say is that the officials at Housing just told me that they've looked at this and they'll work with the clients. And they're not concerned about it.

Ms. Conway: — That's great to hear about Sask Housing. But the majority of income assistance clients are renting from private landlords across the province. And this will affect them. They will be evicted, and that is going to be costly for the ministry. It's going to cause hardship and cruelty.

I'm wondering if, as the ministry in this area, you can approach your colleague and see if there's something that can be done about this change.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I think that's more than fair to ask. I will be speaking with Minister Wyant about it.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — You're welcome. Okay. And then you had asked a bunch of other stuff about Dr. Buhler, section 68, all of that kind of stuff. So I'm committed to talking to Minister Wyant, and I'll let you know how that goes.

Ms. Conway: — Yes. The Danyliuk decision spoke to the ORT officers' lack of consideration of equity and fairness in their decision.

And Sarah Buhler is an associate professor at U of S who studied evictions since the COVID pandemic. She has indicated in a media story that she's concerned that this is indicative . . . This isn't just a one-off. This is indicative of ORT hearings more broadly. And the vast majority of those hearings favour landlords, which is just another reason maybe to revisit the changes to the residential tenancy Act.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Fair enough. Thank you. And regarding the rental supplement . . . And I guess there was a few things in here that you had talked about. But the Sask Housing vacancies . . . We are at approximately 80.6 per cent inhabited, 18.4 per cent vacant. And 1 per cent is what we would consider needs maintenance, so disrepair.

And I guess when you think of our housing inventory as a total, I guess about 17,859 total units. That's not too bad. Like, it's probably reasonable that 1 per cent would be ongoing maintenance as we move along.

[20:30]

So you asked about the communities and each individual community and where they're at. So Moose Jaw has 733 occupied, 113 vacant for a total of 846 units. Prince Albert has 855 occupied, 95 vacant, for a total of 950 units. Regina has 2,474 occupied, 640 vacant, for a total of 3,114 units. Saskatoon has 2,077 occupied, 377 vacant, for total units of 2,454. Battleford has 97 occupied, 6 vacant, for total units of 103. Estevan has 166 occupied, 129 vacant, for a total of 295. Humboldt has 138 occupied, 35 vacant, for total units of 173.

Lloydminster has 175 occupied, 15 vacant, for a total of 211. Melfort has 166 occupied, 43 vacant, for a total of 209. Melville has 153 occupied, 16 vacant, for a total of 169. North Battleford has 401 occupied, 118 vacant, for a total of 519. Battleford has 97 occupied, 6 vacant, for total units of 103. Swift Current has 240 occupied, 72 vacant, for a total of 312. Tisdale has 112 occupied, 51 vacant, for a total of 171. Weyburn has 217 occupied, 101 vacant, for a total of 318. Yorkton has 281, 34 vacant, for total units of 315.

And obviously there are several, several other communities that we have housing units in. We do have a total of 17,859 units — 14,571 are occupied and 3,288 are vacant, for a vacancy rate of 18.4 per cent.

Ms. Conway: — So what explains that vacancy rate, especially in some of the bigger urban centres where we're seeing a housing crisis and large use of shelters and the like? And is there a plan, as per your predecessor's indication last year, to transition folks into these units that are sitting empty?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So we actually work with our shelters on an ongoing basis. We meet with them regularly. And I would say that if someone is in need of housing and we're not aware of it, they need to make us aware of it if that is the case. And we will be more than happy to help them out with that.

We really want to be utilizing all of the units that we have. And we do have a plan in place for that, and we have made some changes as we went along. So we've actually changed the age limit for seniors from 60 to 55; the asset limit for seniors has increased from 250,000 to 300,000; the seniors' housing program has expanded to all communities for seniors who are eligible for social housing programs because their income and assets exceed the program limits, provided there are no eligible social housing program applicants.

Housing authorities have the flexibility to serve different household types, such as two or three singles, two couples, or one couple and two or three singles who are sharing a unit. Eligibility for these applications is based on each applicant's income, rather than combined household income.

And you gave us an example earlier of someone who had applied for housing and one of them had a student visa. Everybody that lives in Canada and lives here is eligible for our housing, so we're not sure what happened there. I would encourage her to follow up with housing authority to see if that can be rectified if they're still looking for housing.

The maximum rent calculations were updated to reflect market rates while covering operating costs. This new calculation resulted in a decline in maximum unit rents across all communities.

Ms. Conway: — Can you just clarify when these changes were made? Like are these recent changes?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Well I guess if the question is, what is the Sask Housing Corporation doing to address vacancies in its rental units, these are the changes that we've been making to address . . .

Ms. Conway: — But when did these changes take effect? Like are you just reading me the eligibility criteria for Sask Housing or are these recent changes?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — No, I'm actually reading you the changes that have been made in the past couple years. I will confirm that for you, for sure. But as our vacancy rate has increased, and you can see we have 18.4 per cent vacancy rate, we changed some of these things to . . . Just like the housing benefit we talked about. We started at 50 per cent, saw what the uptake was. Obviously it wasn't meeting the needs, so we changed it to 40 per cent.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. I'm just asking because your predecessor, on the record last year, said he was working with shelters. He named Carmichael. I reached out to Carmichael. I said great, what's happening? There's all these vacant units in Regina. How are your people in your shelter being transitioned to these vacant units? And they said, we don't know anything about it.

So I don't think some of this is happening on the ground. Awasiw was a shelter that existed here in Regina; I reached out to you about that. It was serving sometimes upwards of 300 people. There was no plan to shelter those folks into these vacant units.

Battlefords is another example of a shelter that may not make it through for lack of funding. And I'm not aware of any work that's being done with them to transition those folks to some of this vacant housing.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So we as a ministry meet with the shelters on a very regular basis. I guess if they have some of these concerns that you're speaking about, then they need to tell us that specifically.

Ms. Conway: — I'm suggesting the ministry is aware of these homelessness issues and should be proactive in making sure the 20 per cent of our social housing units that are vacant in communities that have high, high, high housing need should be proactive about housing those vulnerable folks in those vacant units.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — And I guess I would agree with the fact that the people that approach us, who come to social assistance and are looking for housing, we always try to get them into housing and try to get them into our housing as well. So that's what we're doing, is we're trying to help them get there.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, in terms of the shelter funding, you've heard me get up in the house a number of times on the Lighthouse for The Battlefords petition. That petition is calling for a change to the funding model for shelters.

Right now, domestic shelters are funded on a core funding model basis, but ministry-funded shelters are funded on this . . . what I would say is a highly ineffective method of funding them per person per night, per eligible person per night. So we're seeing a lot of issues with on-reserve people utilizing the shelters, not getting covered. Organizations are struggling with being able to plan because they don't know what their budget will include.

Awasiw shelter was set up in my constituency. I reached out to you about that shelter to get some funding for it. That funding

never came. And mobile services was actually bringing people to that shelter. So a provincial support was actually utilizing it for people in terms of filling that housing need.

So I really think that the ministry has to rethink how it's funding its shelters and follow in the footsteps of the Ministry of Justice. Victims of domestic violence are no more deserving of shelter as the folks that rely on these general shelters.

So I'm wondering if there's any thought being given to transition away from this per diem model. We're the only jurisdiction in Canada that still uses it.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So I guess once again, with all of the programs that we provide as Ministry of Social Services, those are decisions that we'll be making as we talk with shelters, as we move forward, not decisions that are going to be made on the floor of this committee.

Ms. Conway: — I appreciate that. I'm asking you to take it to heart and engage with these stakeholders because that's what I'm hearing from them on the ground.

I have a question about hotel use. The emergency shelter response announced as part of your COVID strategy said they were going to house individuals in housing need in hotels if they needed to self-isolate or the like. I'm wondering which hotels were being utilized for that in Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Which? You want me to name the individual hotels?

Ms. Conway: — Yes, that are being used. And if I could go on to my next question, and you could maybe ask that of your officials the next time, if you like, because it's not a sort of stand-alone thing. But we're just wondering which hotels are being utilized.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. Next question.

Ms. Conway: — The other issue I wanted to raise along with housing is the discharge to homelessness issue, which of course came into the spotlight with the tragic death of Kimberly Squirrel. I have been hearing from stakeholders on the ground that there is often a gap between when people are released . . . incarcerated folks are released and when they can access social assistance.

I know that the Ministry of Justice takes the approach that, you know, as soon as they walk out our doors, they're not our problem. And then it's not until . . . There's that delay until they get onto social assistance that they become, you know, that they can access supports from the Ministry of Social Services.

So it's a bit of a silo issue that has been raised as a result of this issue. I know that some stakeholders have been trying to raise it with the ministry. I'm wondering if there's been any thought to this discharge to homelessness issue, in particular, whether the ministry would consider proactively placing people who are released on social assistance sooner so that there's not . . . You know, I mean in Kimberly Squirrel's case, she froze to death. She didn't have access to supports after her release.

In general, like, discharge to homelessness is an issue I understand also in terms of discharge from medical settings. My understanding is they work not to discharge people to homelessness, but that without supports in place, that can delay discharge from medical facilities, hospitals, and the like. And so by proactively putting some supports in place for people, on the ministry's end, it would actually save a lot of money in the long term because of course one night in the emergency bed or one night in the hospital is far more costly than even a month's worth of social assistance. Right?

So I'm wondering if there's any thought being put to this discharge to homelessness issue because I think there's a lot of potential to address pain, like suffering and hardship, but also it just seems to be like a fiscally smart thing to be looking at.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — We're going to go discuss that one. Are you good for now?

Ms. Conway: — Yes. I have other questions. I can give you a bunch at once or because . . .

Hon. Ms. Carr: — We'll go do these two and then we'll be right back.

Ms. Conway: — Okay.

[20:45]

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, thank you for the questions again. You had asked what hotels were being utilized for self-isolating, and that is not something that we're actually disclosing.

Ms. Conway: — Oh. Why not?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Well I think the privacy of the hotels and who they take in as clients is their business.

Ms. Conway: — Really? Okay. The answers to the other questions?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so as far as having a release plan when someone is getting out of a correctional facility, they actually work before they get released on something called a release plan. And at that point in time we can actually take an application through housing up to 10 days in advance if they choose to come into our housing units. But as part of their release plan they could choose to go to a family member's, they could choose to go to a friend's house, whatever they tell.

But in all honesty, this whole area here is probably a Corrections and Policing process. But I guess just as far as Social Services goes, no, that we do allow them to apply in advance so that when they do get released, if they need to come into housing with us, we can make that available for them. If for some reason they have to go to a hotel for whatever reason for an individual night, then we'll ensure that we hook up with a social services worker the next day to try and get them into housing moving forward.

Ms. Conway: — Has there been any discussion of changes coming out of the Kimberly Squirrel death in your ministry?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — It's fairly early in that. We haven't discussed

it and it is ongoing. I know that they're working on looking at the details of what happened there and we'll see what comes out of that.

Ms. Conway: — Anything else to add?

Ms. Smith: — There is a piece I could add just around individuals being released from jail. Just as the minister was saying, there's typically a release plan and, you know, in addition sometimes they need a shelter, but it could also just be more generally income assistance. And so the way that our policy is structured, that we actually enable somebody who is incarcerated to apply for income assistance for the new Saskatchewan income support program up to 10 days in advance, and that is something that can be done online.

So that was one of the new features of the program, is that a person would be able to use that online application. And so that gives that individual, when they're working with their coordinator on the release plan, if one of those steps says that they need income assistance, they can make that application. So that by the time that they are released, they've got that in place and they're able to access sort of the benefits that are provided within that program. So I just wanted to share that context as well.

Ms. Conway: — I'm cognizant of time and we have less than an hour left, so I am just going to try and get through my questions because I'll just note that you have left each time I've asked a question. And I know you have to take the time to get the answers, but it's been between 5 and 20 minutes per question. So I just want to sort of get what I can into . . . well 5 and 15. I mean it's mostly along those lines. I do want to get my questions in and if there's anything we can't touch on today, I can always follow up with you, Minister.

I want to touch on child care. It's key to helping low-income and struggling parents and in particular women, who are most likely to be in lone-parent households. Of course we have pretty staggering child poverty numbers, particularly for lone-parent households and particularly for children ages zero to six which is of course a developmentally very key period of time.

So in terms of the subsidy available under the ministry, the cut-off is \$1,640 per month, so that's 19,680 per year. It's extremely low. Someone making minimum wage at 11.45 per hour working full-time makes 23,816 gross and then 20,526 net; that's 1,710 per month. And with one, two, or three kids they still wouldn't qualify for this subsidy. Even if we consider that they get the maximum child benefit from the federal government, that would mean they have a take-home income of 3,420. So with two kids they'd be . . . You know my child care cost is 765. That's pretty standard for one child in licensed daycare. That would be, you know, cost 1,350 with two kids, 2,025 with three. So that would have them paying between 40 and 60 per cent of their income if they were to get licensed child care for their children. That's astronomical when you consider rent, food, utilities. It's simply out of reach.

This child care subsidy has not increased in over 25 years, since 1995. In 1996 the minimum wage was 5.60 per hour so working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, you're making \$11,648. Back when that amount was decided on, someone making minimum

wage with one, two, three kids would easily qualify and some.

This government keeps announcing more spots. It's important to address wait-lists, but it doesn't address the main issue here, which is affordability. I'm hearing a lot from child care centres that they have almost no eligible families for this subsidy. I'm wondering how many actually are accessing this subsidy. Is there a plan to increase it? I would suggest this should be an urgent priority of the ministry.

The other thing along child care is that people on social assistance are not eligible for the subsidy. The idea is that if you're not working, you don't need child care. But as your own, you know, child welfare review panel indicated back in 2015, all children need a good start in life. And key to that is robust education between ages zero to five. And that's where we're seeing some of the worst poverty. So I think key to addressing some of the harmful cycles that your ministry deals with is making public education available to children between ages zero to five. It could help break some of those really damaging cycles.

So I'm wondering if you've put any thought into making child care accessible to folks on income assistance even if they're not working because it's just good for kids. It will save money down the road in Justice, Education, and in your ministry. I know that there used to be a program where certain spots were covered in core neighbourhoods. I'm wondering if, you know, some kind of program like . . . We have community schools. Could we fund some spots in child care facilities in core neighbourhoods so that some of our most vulnerable kids that are most highly impacted by poverty could be accessing those child care spots?

So those are my child care-related questions. The minister will probably know whether these discussions are ongoing, so I'm hoping you don't need to step out to talk about this. It wasn't announced, to my knowledge, as part of this budget unless I'm mistaken. But I'm wondering if it's something the ministry is considering.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I think we're always having ongoing conversations on how we can improve programs and services. And once again we're probably not going to make those decisions right here on the floor of this committee meeting. But we're always continually talking about how we can improve our services. And your suggestions will be taken forward.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. Turning now to child protection . . . You know, it's a difficult thing to cover in so little time because there have been obviously different reports done by the Advocate for Children and Youth. Different strategies have been announced by your government around reducing the number of children in care and Indigenous children in care. You've implemented the core practice model, the structured decision-making, the risk assessment tool, counsel for children, and we're really seeing no improvements in this area. So you know, I'm hoping this is an area where we could expect the ministry to be pulling out all the stops.

My questions in this area, just in the interest of time, we have seen an end to birth alerts. So I know that you announced that we're seeing a 1.4 increase in prevention of apprehensions, but I would expect something a little further certainly because birth alerts have been going up, and I really think the future needs to

be in these family preservations programs. I know they're high resource, but we need them. And if you compare that to the investments we're making in foster families these years, it's more; it's 1.6. So I would suggest we're moving in the wrong direction there.

We really should be . . . We need to support the families that are fostering for sure, but we need to be investing in keeping these families together. You know, 500,000 for Sanctum is great, but when we're talking about what this work entails, it's really peanuts.

I guess I'm wondering how many children . . . I'd love to get some updated information. I mean in general I'll just say a lot of jurisdictions have dashboards available. They have dashboards. They have a website where you can go and see how many people are in social housing, how many people are receiving assistance, how many kids are in care. We don't have that information readily accessible, and I think we should think about doing that, making it more accessible.

I'm wondering how many children are in care right now, what percentage of them are Indigenous, breakdowns of whether they're in group homes with PSIs [person of sufficient interest] or family members, whether they're incarcerated. And I hope that's all of the categories. So if I could get that . . . It doesn't have to be now, but if it could be tabled, that should be readily available to the ministry.

But I want to talk about for a minute here Cowessess First Nation, because I understand you're in discussions for their agreement to take over jurisdiction of their child welfare system. I'm wondering what the update is there. And I'm wondering what the government is doing to encourage similar steps elsewhere with other nations. I'm wondering if the ministry agrees that this needs to be what the future looks like, is to resource nations to take over jurisdiction of their child apprehension systems or their child welfare systems given that what we're doing just doesn't seem to be working.

[21:00]

In terms of child welfare — and I'm sorry to pack all these questions in — I'm wondering how you keep track of the reports and recommendations from the Advocate for Children and Youth, the coroner, and other internal reports that you do, how you keep track of those recommendations and track whether you're actually meeting those recommendations. And maybe we'll start there because that's a lot.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — From the . . . ?

Ms. Conway: — Yes, sorry . . . If whether there's a central mechanism for tracking the recommendations made by the advocate, the coroner, as well as your ministry's internal serious incident report teams. We saw a huge . . . well we saw a significant jump in deaths in children in the ministry's care, and I know that there's a report prepared each time that happens. And I understand they aren't made available to the public. So I'm wondering how the ministry tracks the recommendations that come from those reports and whether there's a central way of tracking them. Is there a master list of recommendations? And, I guess, can you table it so I can see?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — That's it?

Ms. Conway: — That's it for now.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — We're going to try. I don't know if we got all your questions. But child care subsidy, Tracey's going to start with that one.

Ms. Smith: — Thanks, Minister. So just to give a little bit of, again, background around this particular program because you had made some comments just around how the program operates. So just to confirm for the group, the amount of subsidy is calculated on a sliding scale based on gross family income, family size, and type of service, so whether it's full- or part-time, the age of the child, the child care fee charges, and the community where the child has access. And so again that's where it's very dependent on, you know, the individual client situation in terms of . . .

Ms. Conway: — Okay, I'm just going to interrupt you because it's 9:20 and we have 20 minutes left. And I didn't ask about the amount of subsidy; the amount of subsidy I am aware of. But the eligibility cut-off, I said, was 1,640 per month. Is that not correct?

Ms. Smith: — So I'll just, I'll give you a little bit more information. So just in terms of, I'll use the example of one child, like one child. So the income threshold to be eligible for the maximum subsidy benefits is 1,640, and then they would be eligible for a 570 maximum benefit if they're working. So for example, if a person is working minimum wage full-time, they would be eligible for a subsidy of \$484. I think I would just sort of point out there is that we're talking about the maximum. So depending on where a family sits in terms of their income and all those factors that I noted before, they could be eligible for something up to that amount. We're really talking about maximums in the example that you were sharing with us.

Ms. Conway: — Is someone receiving \$20,000 a year eligible for a subsidy?

Ms. Smith: — So the maximum, I'd have to maybe do a bit of the math, but the maximum, so the example of one child, the maximum monthly income threshold where they would no longer be eligible for the subsidy would be \$3,900.

Ms. Conway: — Thirty . . . Sorry.

Ms. Smith: — \$3,900, the maximum monthly income threshold. So that's where they would no longer be eligible.

Ms. Conway: — And what subsidy is available to them if they are making that amount?

Ms. Smith: — That's something we could look to provide further. I don't have that information with me right now, but I could commit to bringing that back.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. And do you have the numbers on how many people are accessing the subsidy?

Ms. Smith: — I can look to see if we have those numbers. I don't have them with me.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, I'm just cognizant of time because you just stepped out for 17 minutes on that question. So I don't know whether you want to go through any answers you might have to my questions, and then I can finish my questions and we can deal with them in maybe correspondence after if we don't cover everything tonight. That's one idea.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. Well I mean, fair enough. We stepped out for 17 minutes on probably 10 questions that you asked in that little last shuttle round that you did there.

So I'm just going to touch on Cowessess First Nation and the new federal child welfare legislation. That was one of the questions that you asked. So we do respect the intent of the legislation overall where Indigenous children and families are supported by their communities and within their own customs and cultural traditions. We welcome the opportunity to participate in planning discussions with Indigenous groups and the federal government to identify the best approach to effectively transition services, while ensuring the safety and well-being of children and families.

Three Saskatchewan First Nation bands have provided notice of their intent to assume responsibility for child welfare services for their members — Cowessess, Pasqua, and Muskeg First Nation. Cowessess has actually commenced to coordination agreement process, and we will wait to hear from them on when that actually concludes. That's a decision that is in their court, not ours. And as far as engaging with other First Nations, it really is the decision of those First Nations to decide when they're ready to move in this direction on that federal legislation.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. I'm just wondering if you have an answer about the master list of recommendations. I had understood there was a quality assurance unit that tracks those recommendations.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes, we do. Go ahead.

Ms. Smith: — Thanks, Minister. So within child and family programs division, we do have an area that effectively tracks all of the different recommendations that come from the reviews including the Children's Advocate, the Provincial Auditor's office, and the coroner's office. So that is something that we do track internally. We also meet very regularly with all three of those organizations, so that's an important part of our process as well.

And again it is something that's tracked, and you know, we work towards addressing those issues. And then periodically as they do reviews on our work, they notify us of their intent to close off those recommendations. So I am aware that the Provincial Auditor, you know, has indicated they will be closing some of their recommendations, as well as the Children's Advocate has indicated the same that there will be some that they do ultimately close.

Ms. Conway: — Would it be possible to table the list of recommendations and the advances that have been made on those?

Ms. Smith: — That is something I can take back and follow up with the team.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I mean, I think in fairness all of the recommendations are actually within all of the reports that are public.

Ms. Conway: — I'm wondering about the central internal recommendations and how they're being dealt with, including the ones that have been closed off as you said. I'd also be interested in a master list of all the recommendations that have accrued over the years.

I know that recently with the *Someone to Watch Over Us* report, there was an indication in that report made by the Advocate for Children and Youth that some of their 2017 proposals were not adopted. That's at page 14 of their report and that the ministry neglected to follow up.

Of course this was a report about Elijah who is a young boy who was found confused — highly vulnerable, complex needs — found confused and naked in a parking lot in Saskatoon. And his discovery prompted this report, and the investigation also led to discovery of another child in that same home that suffered severe medical neglect and malnourishment.

I mean, like I said before, I could take five hours on each of these recommendations, so it's very difficult. But one of the things that really stuck out to me in that report is that a for-profit company, CBI Health, was providing those group homes. And there's been some observations made that because of the increasing rate of children in care and the decrease of available foster parents, we've had to rely more and more on group homes.

My understanding is three years ago we weren't using for-profit homes, so I'm wondering why there was a change now to include for-profit homes. CBI, as part of the investigation, they found, you know, shocking issues with this company. The staff were not trained. There was no verification of training by the ministry. It wasn't sufficiently staffed. As I said, cases of egregious medical neglect.

The advocate indicated in this report they had deep and persistent concerns that the ministry's current oversight mechanisms for these homes didn't provide adequate resources to ensure quality of care for these children, and that the ministry was not fulfilling its duty to these kids.

In terms of CBI, my understanding is they're still operating two homes in Saskatoon. In the last public accounts, it indicates that they were receiving . . . Let me just find that here. The most available public accounts indicates that CBI was on contract with the ministry for 3.7, upwards of 3.8 million for child and family services, and 4.6 million for disability programs.

The investigation by the child and youth advocate found that senior staff or senior management, a senior staff member in the company had not been forthcoming in their investigation. They fell well below of the standards in place.

So I found the report very troubling, but I'm finding it even more troubling that CBI continues to operate and receive money from the ministry. I wonder if you can comment on that, and I'm wondering if you can comment on this shift to using for-profit

group homes — which I think is a terrible idea — and the extent to which they're doing this. And if we can't cover this all tonight, I can always send some correspondence to follow up. If you could confirm whether it is the case that, prior to 2018 or thereabouts, the ministry did not use for-profit companies for their group homes.

It's 9:30 and we have 10 minutes left, so I'm just going to go through a couple more of my questions.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Well actually, if you would allow us . . . We took the time to get answers for you.

Ms. Conway: — Oh, I'm sorry.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — You have not let her finish giving you the answers to the questions that you asked the last time. So I'd appreciate if we could finish.

Ms. Conway: — I'm sorry. That was actually rude, and I do apologize for that.

Ms. Smith: — Thanks, Minister. So you had asked some questions just around some statistics with child and family programs, and you were looking for the current numbers of children in care and other. So for 2021, the number of children in care: 3,695. The number of children considered to be with non-wards or persons of sufficient interest is 2,133.

[21:30]

Your third question was around the percentage of Indigenous children in out-of-home care. That percentage for 2021 is 84.7 per cent, but I would add that that number . . . You know, something that we've changed recently, or more recently over the last number of years, is when we do have children coming into our care, is that we ensure that we understand if they are registered. And that is to make sure that they are connected to their culture and their community.

So we don't necessarily attribute that increase, you know, more so than what we would have seen in past years, but we are seeing a higher percentage, we think, because of that change.

Ms. Conway: — So in 2017 that number was 71.2 per cent, so that's a pretty significant hike. And you think that's mainly due to reporting so you can notify the home communities?

Ms. Smith: — That would be one of the examples in terms of why we're seeing that change. And I will just share that for '17-18, the information that I have available to me says it's 72.1 per cent.

Ms. Conway: — Oh, maybe I had those numbers mixed up. Sorry about that. And I'm sorry that I went on without letting you answer that. Does that complete your answers to my previous questions, or are there further answers?

Ms. Smith: — You know, you had also asked just generally around prevention programs. So you know, as a part of the child and family budget as a whole, prevention is an area that we do make investments in. And just some examples around the types of prevention programs that we have in place are around family

supports. So those include programs that offer parenting supports, education, and resources. We also offer intensive in-home supports that are provided by community-based organizations throughout the province. And we have another example, being supportive family living programs, that ensure children remaining in the family home are safe and cared for.

These supports provide one-on-one parenting advice, guidance, and supervision to ensure children remain safely in the home. And it's a service that's offered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by community-based organizations and is directed towards higher-risk families. So we just wanted to give you some examples of the types of prevention programming that we have within the division.

Ms. Conway: — Are there any new programs, or just increases to some of those existing programs?

Ms. Smith: — I would have to follow up and confirm. When I think back to some of the new investments, again our budget and our news release did focus in on some of those investments that we're making in child and family programs. So I'm not . . . In terms of the name of a program, it's not jumping out at me. But that's something that I can take back and follow up to see, specifically within those investments.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Am I okay to just move on quickly here or was there more? I don't want to cut you off.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I think that was all that we had prepared for this round.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. So I do have those questions about CBI and the for-profit group homes. We did, the NDP did make a call for an oversight mechanism to be triggered when there were concerns — sorry, I'm moving on to CBOs now — for a mechanism to be triggered, one of independent oversight overseen by the ministry, when there were issues with community organizations.

I am concerned. There have been a few things coming up. Raising Hope was one. Street Culture was one. I was contacted by some former employees at Street Culture. They were concerned because that investigation, which I know was not ministry-led, excluded former employees from that process. Former employees of Street Culture were not included as part of the formal investigation. I understand that one of the high-level managers there was put off work. And I'm in receipt of a text message which suggests some misuse of funds, and referring to the young kids that utilize this program as junkies.

I'm not sure whether the minister is aware of that or whether she's satisfied that this investigation was okay, but this is a CBO, community-based organization, that continues to receive public funds. So I'm wondering if there's been any thought to developing, in consultation, a formal oversight mechanism of organizations that are in receipt of significant ministry funds.

I would note, you know, in your overview you noted that addictions are on the rise. We do continue to have a lot of wait-lists, which is difficult for folks in this ministry. We have no resources announced for harm reduction here in Regina or Prairie Harm Reduction in Saskatoon. I'm wondering if the

ministry is taking any steps to advocate within the government for more investments into harm reduction, given it's one of the huge barriers to clients that utilize the ministry.

In terms of disability issues . . . because we have five minutes left here and I just have two more things to cover, disability and then one other issue. And I think this can be addressed in a letter and I'm happy to send you a follow-up letter reiterating this stuff. But in terms of the disability issues, I have gotten a lot of feedback about vaccine availability. There was some talk of having home care folks making the vaccine available but I guess there was no uptake on that, and there are persistent concerns about accessibility of the vaccine to people living with disability. So I'm wondering what steps have been taken there. I'm wondering about the timeline for the legislation that you're developing. And I know you're not going to be able to answer this all now and I can send a follow-up letter.

Terri Sleeva, she won her case against Rider Express, which of course was the bus that took over the cancelled STC [Saskatchewan Transportation Company]. She won her case. She's wheelchair bound. It's been ruled that Rider Express is not accessible to people like her. I'm wondering what the ministry is going to do for people living with disability to make sure they have accessible transportation across the province.

The case of Nathan Carlson, I'm wondering if you're familiar; no consent form required. There's a petition going around the internet, and I know his mother Diana has been very active. He was allegedly mistreated in a private group home, so I think there are some concerns about how those private group homes are managed. And I'm hoping that you and I can have a conversation about what steps the ministry is taking to address situations like Nathan Carlson's.

In terms of COVID, I did see a press release from RRRC [Regina Residential Resource Centre], kind of a nightmare scenario where their close-contact staff were told to go home and self-isolate, even though they were wearing PPE [personal protective equipment] during the contact. And they were getting conflicting advice from Public Health and the ministry and . . .

The Chair: — Ms. Conway, you're asking several questions. We're getting near the end. I think we should give the opportunity to the member and the minister to, you know . . .

Ms. Conway: — Completely. We have two minutes left. The minister has left each time I've asked a question, so I just want to get these on the record, and I'll follow up with a letter.

The Chair: — I think to be fair, you asked several questions at once. And you know, I've been in charge at the Chair here for several different estimates now, and I think the volume of questions that you have asked is in excess of anything that I've seen. So I think to be fair, we should do that.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, I'll retract my questions on disability issues and I'll follow up with a letter. There's no reason that we can't address it that way. And I have one final question for the minister, if I can be so presumptuous as to ask it.

The Chair: — Yes, we have seven minutes left so go ahead.

Ms. Conway: — This is a question about the Linkin program. The Linkin program is an IT [information technology] program that I understand began in 2017, and it's not a program that is listed. I understand it's an IBM [International Business Machines]-related company but I can't find any cost that's paid out under goods and services for the Ministry of Social Services. I believe it all goes through Central Services.

So I haven't been able to kind of see what the ministry is paying out for this program. I have been able to kind of glean from past estimates that the amount that's been spent on Linkin is upwards of over I believe 60 million, but I don't have an exact number on that. I'm wondering if you can tell me what has been the amount spent on Linkin up to now and what are the year-to-year costs in terms of maintenance and licensing.

The last time I see a reference to it was in 2015. It was 57 million with a further 5.8 million budgeted for that year, but as recent as 2019 I understand there's been some vulnerabilities with Linkin and you're still working it out. So I'm wondering if we could get an update on what has been spent on Linkin up to now.

The Chair: — Okay, I think you've asked your question. I think, you know, the minister can defer or answer. And we have reached the allotted time so, Minister, I'll just give you time to make a short response.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, thank you for the question. We don't have it with us right now. So we will provide it. I just have one comment before closing comments happen if that's okay, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: — You bet.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So I mean it's important to stress the wonderful work that the staff does within the ministry. They have yeoman's work to do there and they do a pretty good job. Our front-line workers and income assistance, child and family, disability programming have all done and continue to do tremendous service for our province. So with that in mind, I'm just wondering, will you correct the record here today and apologize to the staff and Social Services for your comments in your response to the Throne Speech when you referred to Social Services as a system of bureaucratic violence?

Ms. Conway: — The system of social services, and requiring the people that I see in my constituency every day to jump through the hoops that they have to jump through to get the negligible benefits that are available to them, it is a system of bureaucratic violence. Those decisions are not made by the hard-working social workers and staff members of the ministry.

Just the other day I was speaking with social workers who are front-line child protection workers who are concerned that they're not getting access, priority access to the vaccine when schools are closed. These are the people that are on the front line, and I have nothing but respect for the social workers and staff members that do this work.

I will not retract my comment that the Ministry of Social Services has a system of bureaucratic violence, but I will clarify that that system is one of policy made at the upper level and at the political level, and that I have nothing but admiration and respect for the

work . . .

The Chair: — All right.

Ms. Conway: — That ministry staff are doing on the ground.

The Chair: — Okay. Thank you very much for the conclusion.

Ms. Conway: — Chair, it was a bit of an inflammatory question, and I just wanted to be able to answer it.

The Chair: — No, that's why I let it go a couple minutes later. So having reached our agreed-upon time for the consideration of business tonight, we will now adjourn the estimates for the Ministry of Social Services. Thank you, Minister, and official. If you have any very, very brief closing comments, please at this time.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes, I would actually like to thank very much — unique situation with not everybody being able to be in the same room, but I think the staff did the best they could — the people within the ministry, to answer the questions that came our way. And just thank you to all of them for staying up on their computer and watching this throughout the evening. Thank you very much to the committee for being here tonight and taking in all of the information that was provided. Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Ms. Conway.

Ms. Conway: — I would just like to close by thanking all of the officials that joined us tonight. The time constraints meant that I had to be quite direct in some of my questions, and I hope that that was not interpreted in any way except that I'm simply trying to do my job as the critic. This is one of the largest budgets that this government has, and of course this is very important work we're doing, scrutinizing how these dollars are spent. And again I would like to express my appreciation for the staff of this ministry that does absolutely some of the most challenging work in this province.

The Chair: — All right. Thank you very much to the minister and the member. And I would now ask that a member move a motion to adjourn the committee. Mr. Meyers has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

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

[The committee adjourned at 21:45.]