



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Ms. Meara Conway
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Mr. Muhammad Fiaz
Regina Pasqua

Mr. Marv Friesen
Saskatoon Riversdale

Mr. Warren Kaeding
Melville-Saltcoats

Mr. Hugh Nerlien
Kelvington-Wadena

[The committee met at 15:32.]

The Chair: — Welcome, everyone. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. I am Alana Ross and I am the Chair for this committee.

I would like to introduce the committee members: Mr. Jared Clarke, welcome; Ms. Meara Conway, welcome. On the government side we have Mr. Marv Friesen, Mr. Warren Kaeding, Ms. Lisa Lambert, and Ms. Colleen Young. Thank you for attending here today.

Pursuant to rule 148(1), the following supplementary estimates no. 1 were committed to the Standing Committee on Human Services on November 27th, 2023: 2023-24 supplementary estimates no. 1, vote 36, Social Services.

**General Revenue Fund
Supplementary Estimates — No. 1
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvotes (SS12) and (SS03)

The Chair: — Today the committee will be considering the supplementary estimates no.1 for the Ministry of Social Services. We will now begin with vote 36, Social Services housing, subvote (SS12), and income assistance services, subvote (SS03).

Minister Makowsky is here with his officials. And I would ask that the officials please state their names before speaking at the microphone and, as a reminder, please don't touch the microphones. The Hansard operator will turn on your microphone when you are speaking to the committee. I would ask officials not seated at the table who wish to speak to take a place at the table prior to speaking.

Minister, please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I am pleased to be here today to talk Ministry of Social Services and the supplementary estimates. To my left is Kimberly Kratzig, deputy minister. Further left is Louise Michaud, housing; to my right is Devon Exner, income assistance; and other officials off to my left if needed, and we'll introduce them as you said.

Since the '23-24 budget was announced this spring, the ministry has made significant commitments to improve the lives of Saskatchewan people by making life more affordable for working families with low incomes and supporting individuals who are struggling with chronic homelessness to transition to stable and supportive housing. I'm here today to discuss the additional funding required to implement these initiatives.

On the provincial approach to homelessness that was announced earlier this year, over the next two years the government will create 155 new supportive housing spaces, 120 new permanent emergency shelter spaces, and enhance community safety and outreach response that includes 30 new complex-needs emergency shelter spaces.

This integrated approach will help build on our continuum of services with target supports in appropriate settings that are aligned to protect the needs of the individual. This is a key priority for our government. We're acting quickly in collaboration with community and municipal partners to create the new permanent emergency shelter spaces and new supportive housing spaces as soon as possible.

To ensure this work occurs without delay and into the next fiscal year, Sask Housing Corp. requires an additional \$8.7 million. This investment will ensure funding will flow to community partners to begin operations of additional permanent spaces as soon as they are available and that new supportive housing units can be operationalized quickly.

By using two strategies we're purposing some units already owned by the housing corporation, creating new supportive housing units if and where needed. The ministry and Sask Housing are committed to supporting individuals to transition to stable and supportive housing.

Next, turning to income assistance, the Sask employment incentive was announced in this year's Throne Speech. Paying for the costs of being at work, like transportation and child care, can be difficult for low-income families, especially single parents. The Saskatchewan employment incentive supports families to manage those extra pressures so they're better off working than on other income assistance programs.

Working parents who have employment income of \$500 per month may be eligible for the monthly benefit of 400, 500, or \$600, depending on the number of children they have. The new program will also provide supplementary health benefits and connections to employment and housing supports. The employment incentive will make life more affordable for low-income families, and we're moving quickly to implement it so that Saskatchewan families can begin to receive benefits as soon as possible. I don't want families to have to wait for a new fiscal year, so to launch the program in early 2024, the ministry requires \$1.5 million. To support the program's first three months of delivery, the ongoing program costs will be incorporated in the ministry's budgets going forward.

So thank you very much, Chair and members of the committee, and we'll be happy to answer any questions.

The Chair: — I recognize Ms. Conway.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Chair. Minister, 23 minutes to scrutinize \$10 million. I'm just wondering, hoping for your agreement that, you know, I have jotted down about half a dozen questions here hoping that, if we don't get through all of them, at the end I can put them to you at that point and hear from you after the fact. How do you feel about that?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Well I mean you have many opportunities to ask questions in many different areas, whether it's written questions, question period. And we'll see how it goes, but we'll try and answer as many as we can in the time allotted.

Ms. Conway: — A noncommittal yes, perhaps, I'm hearing.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Pardon me?

Ms. Conway: — It's okay. Minister, is there anything budgeted here for hotels, hotel stays in this appropriation?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — No, not in the supplementary estimates.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, I've asked a few questions over the last couple weeks about the 2023 budget and expenditures on hotels. Do you have that information as well as going back five years for comparison?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So in terms of that question, nothing new than what has been reported already.

Ms. Conway: — You have nothing new at this time. But are you undertaking to provide that information?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Yes.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. Homelessness was just as bad before this budget as it has been after the announcement of this budget. What has prompted you to step forward with this new appropriation and this new approach?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I think, if I understand your question, we have been reaching out and hearing from many different groups and stakeholders. I think back to the federal-provincial-territorial meetings I've had, and there are challenges right across this country with homelessness and people dealing with mental health and addictions. So we're hearing more and more about this. We've heard this from police. We've heard it from municipalities. And so part of the approach we've brought forward is as a result of those consultations and hearing more and more about this.

And you know, we know there's challenges out there. And hopefully this investment, not only on this side of things, on the provincial approach to homelessness, but my colleague the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions increasing those treatment spaces and helping individuals to be able to overcome their challenges . . . And so that's what we're doing. We're hearing more and more of it and listening and trying to provide solutions through this appropriation.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. Which shelter spaces are specifically being funded by the housing appropriation, and where will they be located?

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. My name's Louise Michaud, assistant deputy minister for housing. So the shelters that will be funded, of the 100 shelters that were announced, or 120 that were announced as part of the provincial approach to homelessness, we have currently already got 45 under way in Prince Albert in partnership with the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] in Prince Albert.

And we also have 60 that are in place with the RT/SIS [Regina Treaty/Status Indian Services Inc.] in Regina, so they're operating out of The Gathering Place: New Beginnings in Regina. We have a request for service that is out looking for a service provider for, you know, another group up to 20 in Regina.

And we're working with other communities to identify where the rest of the shelters should go.

Ms. Conway: — We're hearing that there's been little consultation regarding locations. Can you speak to that, Minister?

[15:45]

Ms. Michaud: — For the emergency shelters under this appropriation — so this will be for basic and enhanced emergency shelters as outlined in the announcement that government made on October 6th — we are working with our municipal partners who will identify locations. And working with those municipal partners, we will be supporting them and doing the public engagement for people to understand the services that will be provided when new locations are identified.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, just to clarify, the province will be doing its own consultation? Or you'll be relying on municipalities to choose locations and rely on the consultation that they do?

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. Yes, as you know we are working in partnership closely with our municipal partners to identify the locations for the emergency shelters, again the enhanced and basic emergency shelters that will be open as part of the provincial approach to homelessness announcement. And it's our intention to rely on the cities. The cities will lead the engagement, and we have committed to being there as partners in the engagement to assist people in understanding the services that will be provided at those shelters.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] apparently isn't providing insurance to some shelters or is reticent to. Have you heard about this? And it strikes me that it will present a challenge if the province is looking to open more enhanced and basic shelter spots if SGI is taking this position. I know it was at least brought to the Premier's attention. Have you looked into this? It's concerning on its face. Any comments?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Yeah, the situation has been brought to my attention. Looking into it, I think it's fair to say. I would also mention we have several shelters that are operating currently and safely and have that in place. And so, you know, I certainly can't speak to the ins and outs of SGI but it is something that was recently brought to my attention and we're looking into it.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. When you have some clarity, do you mind providing some information to me? I heard that SGI personnel just basically, like drove by a shelter, didn't like the look of it, and then changed their approach to insuring that shelter. It's very concerning on its face. There's human rights considerations from a policy perspective. It's very concerning that a public Crown would take that position. So when you have some clarity, could you undertake to write to me with some clarification so I can distribute that to stakeholders that have reached out to me about this?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Well I'll look into it. We'll look into it and we'll try and get some information.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. So why is additional funding required for the Saskatchewan employment incentive?

Mr. Exner: — Thank you for the question. Yeah, so as part of developing the new Saskatchewan employment incentive program, it is a new program; therefore it does need the authority and a new line item as part of supplementary estimates to establish the budget for the program when we launch this in this fiscal year. So it was not part of the original budget, so therefore it is net new. So without this appropriation, we would not be able to support and invest in this new program to support low-income working families with children as they try to access the labour market, increase their career path, and support their family to meet their needs.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Going back to the shelters, the new appropriations for the shelter spaces, is the plan for these shelter spaces to be funded on a year-round basis? And will they be funded in subsequent years or is this just basically a cold-weather strategy on steroids?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Certainly the intention is to have these as permanent and ongoing shelters into the future. Of course everything we do is subject to budget appropriation every year and so there's a process to go through there. But that is the intention to be, again, all year-round. I think of the one that Ms. Michaud talked about in Prince Albert. They've asked for a need for a permanent location year-round and that's what that one will be, so yeah.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I actually only have two remaining questions, so I think I'll just combine them here. I guess more shelter space is obviously much needed in this province. You will find no opposition here.

But I guess as critic one of the things I'm hearing constantly is that we're constantly as a province in this sort of responding-to-crisis mode. Approaches are piecemeal. Community-based organization partners can't do long-term planning because they don't know what to expect.

And of course to find lasting solutions in housing, you know, emergency shelter is part of that but it's only the first step in the housing continuum. And creating more spaces is certainly needed. But I'm concerned at the lack of plan for (a) where those people will move on to and why we're not appropriating, I guess, additional dollars for some of the more stable housing solutions — supportive housing, for example, or you know, our public housing.

We know we have 3,000 vacant units. We heard from seniors who attended this building just yesterday that they feel unsafe. They feel abandoned. They feel like they don't matter. Reports of roaches, failures to maintain their units, concerns with mixing demographics in a way that's not sustainable or thoughtful — the list of issues in housing feels endless.

Why is there no funding in the supplementary estimates to take care of our most vulnerable seniors and families, provide them with the support they deserve both in public housing, and nothing here for more long-term, stable housing solutions?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Well again what I'd say, I might disagree a little bit with what the member said in terms of nothing for housing. I would note that there is significant funding over two years for supportive housing in our province, and I think

that's an important part of that continuum you talked about.

So on the intake side, there is the emergency shelters which are used, you know, not ideally to have a long-term stay there. You'd want to have people, you know, hopefully moving on from that, whether it be to the mental health and addictions side of things in terms of recovery and getting into some of those programs.

But on the supportive housing side, again there's over 150 spaces for that. There are some capital dollars but there's also operating dollars, which is being done through the Ministry of Health. And so I think that's an important thing to note that is important for those who are really having challenges but need maybe different levels of support. I think some individuals, depending on their circumstance, need a little bit of support, some need a lot of support.

And we have that within . . . currently, currently that is the case, and we're looking to expand that as well. So I think of the Kotawān property in Saskatoon, where there is supportive housing, and I would say that would be a bit of a lighter touch in terms of simply having security and having people checked on a couple times a day.

[16:00]

And I know there's facilities as well that have intensive supports with nurses and things like wound care and counselling and cultural supports and other things I'm probably . . . not coming to mind right now. So there are those investments again to help people in their situation.

But also on the public safety side of things, you know, these individuals are finding a place and hopefully over time, through treatment, through those supports, those wraparound supports that's in those supportive living situations, individuals will choose to move on to, whether it's Sask Housing or the private market or become homeowners. So there are housing options all along the way.

Of course we're working very hard to move people along into some of those units that are rent-ready. They're not all rent-ready. We've been over this many times based on numerous different factors.

But again that's sort of the overall direction I would say the ministry has, along with our partners in other ministries, to help individuals in emergency situations and hopefully move them along that housing continuum. This is one piece of it, helps with capacity to increase it. Certainly not, you know, the complete answer and we're done. I think there is certainly more work to do in this area but, you know, we'll continue to work hard.

In terms of mixing demographics, you know, I think I've said many times before to assertions from yourself and others that you can't just simply . . . Many of the vacant units, particularly here in Regina, are seniors' units. They're high-rise apartments and they're half full, less than half full. But certainly the quick solution isn't just to put people who might be experiencing homelessness in with seniors without some sort of support.

So I recognize that. I think maybe you do as well. Maybe that was a change. So again not easy overnight answers but I think

this investment, along with other investments we've been able to make over the last several years, will help improve the situation, but we know there's work to continue.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I'll just be brief because I know we're out of time here. You know, I heard a number there, 150 supportive spaces. That's good but it's just simply a drop in the bucket in the face of the scale of the crisis when we know that the hard-to-house will not be housed successfully without those intensive supports. And you know, this 24-hour shelter, it sounds good but it sounds a bit like detox. It sounds like, a bit like more of the same approach.

So while I commend you for doing more and I hope some of these measures make a difference, you know, I look closer at this new approach to homelessness quote unquote, and I don't see a new approach. I just see more of the same.

So I'm hoping to be proved wrong because, you know, for the houseless community and the rest of the community that is impacted by this in myriad ways, we definitely need to see improvements here. But those are my concerns so I wanted to put them on the record.

But, Chair, I've gotten through my questions, so thank you to the minister.

The Chair: — Having reached our agreed-upon time, we will now proceed to voting off the supplementary estimates. Vote 36, Social Services, page 13, housing, subvote (SS12) in the amount of 8,700,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Income assistance services, subvote (SS03) in the amount of 1,500,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Social Services, vote 36 — \$10,200,000, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Okay. I will now ask a member to move the following resolution:

Resolved that there be granted to His Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31st, 2024, the following sums for Social Services in the amount of \$10,200,000.

Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Minister, do you have any closing comments that you'd like to make?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Well just that I'd like to thank the committee for their time and their questions. Appreciate it.

The Chair: — Ms. Conway, do you have any closing comments?

Ms. Conway: — I have nothing more to add, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: — Minister and your officials, you are able to leave before considering the draft report.

Committee members, you have before you a draft of the sixth report of the Standing Committee on Human Services. We require a member to move the following motion:

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

I recognize Mr. Kaeding.

Mr. Kaeding: — Thank you, Madam Chair. I make a motion to move:

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

The Chair: — Mr. Kaeding has moved:

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

Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — That concludes our business today. This committee stands adjourned to the call of the Chair. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 16:09.]