



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Mr. Hugh Nerlien
Kelvington-Wadena

[The committee met at 15:30.]

The Chair: — Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. My name is Alana Ross and I'm the Chair of the committee. Committee members with us this evening are Ms. Meara Conway, Mr. Doyle Vermette sitting in for Mr. Jared Clarke, Mr. Marv Friesen, Mr. Hugh Nerlien, Mr. Warren Kaeding, and Mr. Muhammad Fiaz.

**General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvote (SS01)

The Chair: — Today the committee will be considering the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Social Services. We will take a one-hour recess at 5 p.m. We will begin with the consideration of vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01).

Mr. Makowsky is here with his officials. I would ask that officials please state their names before speaking, and please do not touch the microphones. The Hansard operator will turn on your microphone when you are speaking to the committee.

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

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to be here to share the Ministry of Social Services budget priorities for 2024-25. To my left is Deputy Minister Kimberly Kratzig. Tobie Eberhardt is with child and family programs. Devon Exner, income assistance programs; Grant Hilsenteger, financial and corporate services; Joel Kilbride, disability programs; Louise Michaud, housing, and president and CEO [chief executive officer] of Saskatchewan Housing Corporation; and chief of staff Lee Guse. Other officials are of course there and, if required, will come forward to answer any questions. They're mostly executive directors for the different divisions.

Before I discuss the Ministry of Social Services budget, I'd like to begin by highlighting some of the great work in this ministry over the past year and take this opportunity to thank the many staff for supporting clients every day. The ministry employees across the province deliver front-line services and work directly with individuals and families. Services are also delivered in partnership with Indigenous and community-based service providers. Together we're helping people and families with their immediate needs and providing support as they build a better quality of life.

I'd like to highlight a few ways where the ministry is making a difference.

In October the Government of Saskatchewan announced their provincial approach to homelessness. The integrated approach between Social Services; Health; and Corrections, Policing and Public Safety provides a continuum of services with targeted supports in appropriate settings. Since October more than 100 new permanent emergency shelter spaces have been opened,

located in Prince Albert, Regina, Meadow Lake, La Ronge, and Moose Jaw, and the ministry hopes to develop additional spaces in Regina and Saskatoon. Seventy-five new supportive housing units were created in Regina and Saskatoon with a goal of developing 155 units overall.

To better support individuals at risk of homelessness, the income assistance mobile workforce pilot was launched to serve clients where they are. Seeing a positive impact, income assistance workers are now on site at 26 community-based organizations and locations in Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Moose Jaw, North Battleford, Yorkton, and La Ronge.

In the '23-24 budget we raised income assistance rates to provide an increase in benefits to help people with low incomes, families, and seniors to meet their basic needs. '23-24 was the third year out of our three-year commitment to increase the seniors' income plan benefit. The maximum monthly benefit today is 360. This compares to . . . It was \$90 a month in 2007.

Personal care home benefit increased about \$400 per month, and SAID [Saskatchewan assured income for disability] clients under the age of 65 who live in personal care homes received up to \$684 more per month.

Launch of the Saskatchewan employment incentive in January of this year is another way our government is making life more affordable for Saskatchewan families. This program provides a financial benefit of up to \$600 per month to working parents with low incomes. By helping parents enter and stay in the workforce, this program will have lasting positive impacts on the quality of life for families with lower incomes.

Finally I'd like to highlight two significant pieces of legislation . . . [inaudible] . . . *The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, 2022* received Royal Assent. The bill is anticipated to become effective this spring, and will improve child welfare services for children, youth, and families we serve by raising the age of the child from 16 to 18 years of age to allow youth to be supported as they transition to adulthood; strengthening language in the Act to enhance family, community, and cultural connections; and increasing the flexibility of information-sharing disclosure and confidentiality in the best interests of the child or former child in care who is now an adult.

On December 3rd *The Accessible Saskatchewan Act* came into force. The purpose of the Act is to remove and prevent accessibility barriers that persons with disabilities experience. Work is under way to develop the Government of Saskatchewan accessibility plan by December of this year. A public survey is open this month to gather feedback to help guide this work.

I'm pleased to turn to this year's ministry budget that provides more targeted investments to meet the evolving needs of clients. The '24-25 budget for the Ministry of Social Services is \$1.54 billion, an increase of 112.4 million. That works out to 7.8 per cent over the previous budget. Highlights include an increase to income assistance benefits; continued implementation of integrated approaches to respond to homelessness; investments to rejuvenate social housing and address vacancies; enhancements of services for people with disabilities; and increases to supports for at-risk individuals, families, children,

and youth.

I'll begin with the income assistance increases to support individuals and families with low income as they work to become more self-sufficient and independent to the best of their abilities. A \$17 million investment will deliver the first full year of the Saskatchewan employment incentive that provides working families with low incomes with a monthly financial benefit, supplementary health benefits, access to discount bus passes, connections to employment supports through the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training, access to the Saskatchewan housing benefit through the Sask Housing Corporation.

A 7.4 million investment will increase Saskatchewan income support benefits for the third year in a row. This 3 per cent increase will raise monthly benefits by up to \$90 a month. Saskatchewan assured income for disability benefits will also increase by 3 per cent. A 6.34 million investment will raise monthly income benefits by up to \$55 per month.

Clients in both programs who are single, or couples without dependent children will also benefit from increased monthly earned income exemptions, enabling those who work to keep more of what they earn. This aligns with the new Saskatchewan employment incentive program that is targeted to families.

Additionally the personal care home benefit monthly income threshold will increase by another \$100 this year to help make costs of living in a licensed personal care home more affordable for seniors.

The ministry remains committed to supporting individuals experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness. In '24-25, the province will continue to implement the provincial approach on homelessness, investing 28.9 million, which is an increase the previous budget of \$16.7 million. This includes a 7.2 million increase supporting ongoing emergency shelter operations across the province and a 9.5 million capital investment for supportive housing spaces in Regina and Saskatoon.

I previously mentioned the success of the income assistance mobile workforce initiative. Pleased to share that this budget provides a \$690,000 increase to expand the program to place up to 10 more ministry employees on site at select community-based organizations. We're also expanding trusteeship and money management supports by approximately 150 spaces. The \$250,000 increase will help more clients across the province to pay their expenses each month. A new benefit is also being introduced in income assistance to support clients to secure identification so they have better access to services.

Another key area of focus is social housing. The Sask Housing Corporation provides affordable rental options to people and families in 280 communities across the province who could not otherwise afford adequate, safe, and secure shelter. In '24-25, SHC [Saskatchewan Housing Corporation] will invest 83.4 million in repair and maintenance of provincially owned housing units. This includes an additional 9.6 million in provincial funding to prevent and reduce vacancies, and respond to the increased demand for social housing. In the coming year, investments will be focused where there is ongoing demand for those in greatest need, such as major urban centres as well as

northern Saskatchewan.

The '24-25 budget also provides additional funding for people with intellectual disabilities. Additional funding of 10.4 million will support the changing service needs of current clients and the delivery of residential and day programs to new clients. A 7.6 million investment will plan and construct 10 new group homes and one assessment and stabilization home.

The ministry developed a new quality assurance team to strengthen relationships and oversight of homes supporting adults with intellectual disabilities. The autism spectrum disorder individualized funding program will receive a \$4 million increase to continue to meet the needs of children and their families. Saskatchewan Accessibility Office will partner with the Rick Hansen Foundation to raise awareness about barriers to accessibility.

The final area I'll highlight is increased funding to this year's budget to improve services and supports for at-risk families, children, and youth. These investments include a \$2.7 million increase which will support additional residential care options for children and youth with complex needs, enabling them to remain in their home communities; 500,000 in new funding to assist youth transitioning from care to access housing, employment, and educational opportunities as was recommended by the youth advisory teams.

And there's a \$375,000 increase to expand intensive in-home services for at-risk families outside of Regina and Saskatoon to communities where those services do not exist. The ministry is also providing increased funding to partners providing support and out-of-home care services. This includes increasing foster care and extended family care allowance rates, and higher funding to the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder network as well as mobile crisis services in Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert.

I started my remarks today highlighting how the Ministry of Social Services works in partnership with community-based service providers across the province to deliver services that enable Saskatchewan people to achieve a better quality of life. In the coming year, the ministry will provide an additional 13.7 million to third-party service providers it contracts with to effectively meet the needs of the people we jointly serve.

I touched the microphone. I hope I . . . We were told not to.

We truly do not do this work alone. The ministry has many partners of course. Dedicated ministry employees and community partners work together every day to help Saskatchewan's most vulnerable people with their immediate and ongoing needs by ensuring that people's basic needs are met while also providing necessary support as individuals work towards self-sufficiency; supporting families and their children so they can stay together in safety; providing access to services for people with disabilities and their communities; increasing access to safe and affordable housing; and ensuring that children and youth in care have the support and services to be successful now and in the future.

Thank you for listening to the opening comments by myself to the committee. And so we are ready now, my officials and myself, to answer any questions that may come forward. Thank

you.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. I will now open the floor for questions. I recognize Ms. Conway.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Chair. Minister, approximately how many people from executive level of government to front-line workers work within the Ministry of Social Services, including the political staffers that staff your office?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I'll handle part of the answer and then I'll pass it along to Ms. Kratzig. In the political office here at the legislature, there are six staff members.

[15:45]

Ms. Kratzig: — And in the ministry there are 1,911 FTEs [full-time equivalent] in '24-25.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Minister, you'll recall the controversy that broke out in November of 2023 when Evelyn Harper was staying at the Sunrise. We had a number of questions around hotel use, hotel use policy by the Ministry of Social Services. And then on February 8th, 2024, I was going to say you penned a letter, but I believe it was . . . yeah, it was Ms. Kratzig penned a letter with some of the data points that we were looking for.

Did anyone else in the civil service assist with compiling those numbers, outside of the Ministry of Social Services?

Ms. Kratzig: — No. No one outside of the public service.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. As part of that letter penned by Ms. Kratzig there's an outline of what has been spent, total hotel expenditures by the Ministry of Social Services in both income assistance and child and family program streams. In the 2018-19 fiscal year, the total spent was roughly 1.7 million. In the 2019-2020 year, the total was roughly 1.3 million. In the 2020-21 year, it was roughly 1.38 million. 2021-22 year, it was roughly 2.7 million. And then the last year where we have a number that covered a full-year span is '22-23 where over 3 million was spent.

And then I'll also note — I'm referring here to appendix B of that letter — that the expenditures out to Sunrise for those same time frames were 2018, \$282; 2019, \$1,027; 2020, \$12,931; 2021, \$37,041; big jump in 2022 at \$220,474.

I'm wondering, Minister, if you have an updated number on total hotel expenditures for the 2023-24 year, and the total that was . . . just to complete that column regarding the Sunrise as well. Because of the nature of the time that we got this letter, you provided us data for the 2023-24 years from April to September, so we only got half of that year. Do you have that updated information today? And if so, can you tell me what those two global numbers are: hotel expenditures generally, and then what was paid out to the Sunrise Motel?

Mr. Exner: — Thank you. Devon Exner, assistant deputy minister, income assistance. All right, just before I answer your question, I'll just go back. And I believe that you indicated that in 2018-19 the total expenditure was 1.7 million. Our record has

that it was 1.166,605. So just wanted to clarify that.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. I rounded up one decimal too soon: 1.17. You're correct. Sorry about that.

Mr. Exner: — With the fiscal year just ending we do not have further information regarding the final total for the fiscal year of '23-24.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, can you undertake today to provide me with those updated numbers as soon as you're in receipt of them?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I don't believe we were asked for that at any point in the past, so that information has not been compiled. And if you're asking if we will, we can take a look at that, see if we can get that.

Ms. Conway: — Yeah, I guess I'm just asking for it now because back when we got this, I recognized that was the most up-to-date information you would have had. And I guess, you know, I'm just a sad opposition MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] so I don't know how these things necessarily work but, you know, when I grab . . . I see everyone working very diligently in that department. When do you usually have those year-ends available to you? Like when do you think you can get the information?

Ms. Kratzig: — Thank you. So as you've referenced the letter, the February 8th letter, you would know that we have implemented a couple of improvements to how we work with the hotel sector.

First we're implementing a new formal process to obtain quotes from three hotels. And we also have issued an RFP [request for proposal] to implement a one-year pilot project to look at the concept of damage deposits. We would plan to — after a year of operating in our new three-quote system and having an RFP that's awarded, which hasn't been yet — we would then evaluate the numbers for the end of '23-24. So that was our time frame to get those numbers.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry. You can't get me that number till a year from now?

Ms. Kratzig: — That would be when we were planning to track those numbers.

Ms. Conway: — Could you get them sooner?

Ms. Kratzig: — Thank you. So we don't currently have that information. Our teams are working, again in the two areas of improvement that we've talked about in terms of getting the best . . . the three-quote system, the RFP. So we do not currently have plans to track those '23-24 numbers until we're doing an evaluation of the new processes.

Ms. Conway: — So it's not that you can't get this information sooner; I'm hearing that you won't get this information to me sooner. Can you clarify, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I don't think it's a matter of won't. I think it's concern around implementing the new policy, getting

things going, and of course with limited resources within the ministry and other important work going on besides hotels or whatever. But if this is the will of the committee, the ministry can look into those. And in terms of a time frame, it's tough to put an exact number on it. But if the committee wishes so, that can be undertaken in the next couple of months, I think.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, when you wrote this letter it was February. It was early February. You provided me numbers up until, like till the end of September. So that was a three-month turnaround. Is it safe to assume that kind of timeline would be reasonable for this update? I think this needs to be a priority.

You know, this is a hotel owned by a government MLA. People have questions, rightly so. It also looks like hotel expenditures are trending upwards. It looks like expenditures at this government MLA-owned hotel are trending upwards. You know, I think it's important to prioritize this for the people of Saskatchewan given that there are a lot of questions around not only the fact that this is a government-owned hotel, but also just how is housing policy functioning more generally.

When the story first broke, you said that hotel use was trending down. That turned out not to be the case. That speaks to policies that aren't working very well, if we're having to rely more and more on emergency hotels.

So I'm really glad to hear that the ministry has adopted new policies around hotels. I still think that from an accountability, transparency perspective we need to close this loop on everything that went down, up until hotel policy and this government's approach to hotels changed.

[16:00]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So I'll just start off and then I'll get Mr. Exner to clarify a few things. But in terms of priority, you know, I'd say within the ministry there are many things that are going on as well as the Housing Corporation. That may be your priority, this particularly narrow focus on hotels, but I certainly as the minister have many priority areas — child and family, CLSD [community living service delivery] clients, family reunification, in-house supports to keep families together — and so frankly those do take a higher priority from my perspective. However we'll take your suggested timeline and take that under advisement.

But in terms of the . . . I think you've misrepresented what I may have said in the House that was on the income assistance side. That was the information I had at the time. But like I said, I'll turn it over to Mr. Exner to clarify in terms of usage over time.

Mr. Exner: — Thanks, Minister. Yeah, so the numbers that were previously quoted, and I believe as part of this committee as well last year, we had referenced about \$1 million in expenditures in '21-22 and \$0.85 million in '22-23, and those were related to individuals that could not access an emergency shelter. So those stats were more readily available and were tracked, so that was the information that was provided.

Of course there's a whole number of reasons why the ministry, rarely, provides funds for clients to stay in hotels. There's a variety of circumstances that do occur: so they're at risk of

homelessness; they're seeking safety due to interpersonal violence; currently living in unsafe living conditions; to facilitate family visits; participating in family reunification; maintaining family contact and/or cultural case planning; attending health care appointments outside of their home community; supporting foster parents and extended family caregivers with children in care to participate in recreation, school, or cultural activities; and facilitating Opik which includes travel and accommodations for elders and the cost of the meeting rooms to host Opik.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, I understand there are a number of reasons to use hotels. Can you break out any of that information for me? Do you track why you're using hotel rooms other than through the specific streams? If you do, I'd love to see that information.

I guess, Minister, this does paint a picture. You know, every single year that expenditure goes up. What do you take from that as the Minister of Social Services? How do you interpret those numbers?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Your question I believe was to me about, in terms of interpreting those numbers. We have seen, as Mr. Exner talked about, a decrease in the income assistance. I think that somewhat has to do with the investments that the government's made in terms of increasing in shelter spaces and supportive living and those sorts of things.

And as we go further along that, as we hope to open more beds and more spaces — as well as my colleague from Mental Health and Addictions, Minister McLeod; the work going on there — hopefully that will continue to decrease or maintain a steady rate. But acknowledging there are challenges out there, you know, on the homeless side of things, in emergency situations, hotels are used, as you know.

In terms of the child and family side, I'll get the two ADMs [assistant deputy minister] to talk a little bit more about that. I would say it's good work that is occurring. And if a hotel happens to be a place where it's a gathering point or a place to stay for whatever it might be, family reunification . . . And I hope the committee wouldn't put words in my mouth that it's a good thing. Of course we'd love to have a situation where there's no children in care or a need for reunification. Of course that's the case.

But this is a challenging environment or situation we're in and seeing more children come into care over time. But again good work is happening to hopefully reverse some of those things and hotels are one of the things needed to do that. So I'll turn it over to Mr. Exner, and then to Ms. Eberhardt.

Mr. Exner: — Thank you. Yeah, so as previously stated our overall expenditures when folks couldn't get into an emergency shelter was \$1 million in '21-22, and 0.5 million in '22-23. So the number is decreasing. This year we do believe that we will be projected right around that same value of \$850,000 as we kind of continue to work through that.

A couple of things to note is of course this is an emergency response, and again depends on availability in emergency shelters. In some communities there have been large fires — apartment fires and house fires — where individuals have had to be placed immediately to ensure that they had support and a roof

over their head. So this year we're seeing an increased number of those, which require emergency support.

So all in all we are still forecasting that number to be about \$0.85 million.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — And then, Ms. Eberhardt, on the child and family side.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, can I just . . . Sorry. I just missed the numbers, Mr. Exner, the first numbers you gave. Can you repeat those before we move on?

Mr. Exner: — So for individuals that could not access an emergency shelter, it was approximately \$1 million in '21-22 and 0.85 million in '22-23. And we're projecting for '23-24 to be roughly about 0.85 million.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry. Yes.

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

[16:15]

Within child and family programs we know that our hotel costs have been going up. One of the things that we've done that sort of has impacted that was in 2021, we implemented a new policy called ensuring family, community, and cultural connections.

And that policy requires for every child in care, if they're First Nations or Métis, that we're working with their home First Nation or Métis community to develop a cultural case plan for them. And as part of that it might have them having family visits more frequent, attending their home community for certain cultural events.

And in addition to that we have really been focusing on our Opiks, which is a dispute resolution process that we've been trying to use instead of a court process for families. And as part of that we need to bring groups together, usually in a meeting room. We bring elders to that, the family, whoever their supports are. And that can be up to a five-day event. So we've seen that cost going up as well.

Ms. Conway: — Ms. Eberhardt, to what extent do a lack of placements impact using hotel rooms for apprehended children and youth? Is that a driver of hotel use?

Ms. Eberhardt: — We don't use hotels for children's placements. But there would be times that children maybe are placed in a different community and we're bringing their families to visit them or their families are living somewhere else. So sometimes children are placed with extended family in a different community. And so we're using hotels to have their parents come visit them, or the other way around.

Ms. Conway: — In situations where you don't have a spot for a child or youth, be it in a group home or you can't find a foster placement or an extended family member, you don't use hotels in that situation?

Ms. Eberhardt: — It's been very rare that we've ever had to use

a hotel in the last few years for placement, and it would be because of something unusual such as bad weather and that they weren't able to travel somewhere. We work with our community partners, and our Indigenous partners have really been helpful when we've required placement. They are usually able to help us develop something in an emergency, so we haven't had to rely on hotels as a placement option.

Ms. Conway: — So the main, like this steep . . . sorry, maybe steep isn't fair. But this increase in hotel reliance in the family and children services stream is mostly just due to accommodating visits and elders? Yes?

Ms. Eberhardt: — Yes, and ensuring children are getting connected and attending their home communities for events.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, I understand that you are trying to distinguish from these two streams — the income assistance versus the child and family services stream. But in my experience, if there is an open child and family services file, you'll often use that funding stream to address the need for an emergency hotel in a situation of homelessness or housing insecurity.

So I guess I'm struggling to understand. I guess my first question is, do you acknowledge that? Do you agree that these numbers captured by child and family services also capture housing and homelessness issues in addition to the income security stream?

Ms. Eberhardt: — So within child and family programs, our first priority is always to support families to stay safely together. And so we do use hotels to prevent children from having to come into care if the family does not have safe housing. It's not the majority of . . . Like I think when we look at, really, our use more around the Opiks and around the cultural case planning and family visits. But we will use hotels to keep families together.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, do you have any data to support, you know, these claims? Like are you breaking down the reason for hotel use? Because I had understood the data that you collected wasn't this nuanced. But if you have this data, like can you tell me what you have and can you provide it?

Ms. Kratzig: — Thank you. As you'll recall when this issue started being discussed, the minister directed the ministry to look into Sunrise expenditures over the past five years. And that is information that we would be able to break down by child and family and income assistance. We don't have that information more broadly.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, but that wasn't my question. My question was further to that because, you know, Evelyn Harper, that's a perfect example of what I'm talking about. She was evicted — so it was a housing issue, a homelessness issue — but that hotel was covered through child and family services.

So what I hear you saying is, you know, number is coming down on the income assistance side so nothing to see here, and then on the child and family services side it's going up but most of the work being done through that side on hotels is around family reunification and Opik. I'm wondering, do you have any proof? Like are you tracking the reason that you're using hotels at all? And like are you breaking that down at all? Because I'd

understood you weren't, apart from the two streams.

[16:30]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I'll get the two assistant deputy ministers to talk, but in terms of something that you had said, it was something along the lines of "nothing to see here," I think. I'm not sure where that came; I haven't said that. Officials have worked very hard to come up with the information that has been asked for, and so they appear as they are.

I think I've acknowledged there are certainly challenges out there in our province, and we're working very hard to try and address those in this budget and in previous budgets. It's certainly not a panacea by any means. And hotels are used when needed, oftentimes in emergency situations where shelters are full. So I'm not sure I'd characterize it that way, but I'll turn it over to ADM Exner and then Eberhardt to answer the other part of the question.

Mr. Exner: — Thank you. As outlined in the letter sent by Deputy Minister Kratzig on February 8th, it does outline the policies for income assistance as it relates to hotel usage. So we do have short-term emergency supports that are available to clients when they need, due to unforeseen situations or circumstances. There's also procedures around that, around authorizing the approval of the stay.

There are travel benefits that are available for those clients if they have to travel outside of their current residence. And then those that are coming from another province or maybe leaving to go to another province for some reason that require a hotel stay, there's a policy for that as well. Each of those payments is made directly off the client file, and they are not categorized that we can easily report on that information.

Ms. Eberhardt: — And within child and family programs, under our child protection policy we can use hotels in exceptional circumstances to maintain a family unit and prevent children from coming into care. So we would know when we use that policy, but we wouldn't necessarily know the circumstances. So it could be the family had some kind of backup sewerage and they need to get out of the house for a couple of days. It could be that they didn't have safe housing. It could be they were fleeing a domestic violence situation. So the policy is pretty broad, but the detail, you know, it would be the caseworker and their supervisors that would know more the detail of why we've used that.

We also have a policy around using hotels, costs associated with this. This is for children in care. And that could include food, transportation, accommodation. So again we would know under what policy we made a payment, but the details, we'd have to go again talking to the caseworker or going into our system to see more the minute details of that.

And we also have a policy around using hotels, as mentioned before, for Opik. So there's a certain section of our policy that allows that. And we have policy to allow us to use accommodations for children in care for recreational opportunities, and then also around allowing so children can have visits with their families. So we have distinct policies, but again you would have to go in to see the specific details.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. And I guess that is kind of what I was getting at. I have received a lot of information on, you know, the policies and what's available, what circumstances may cause people to access hotels. But as they say, the devil is in the details in terms of what is driving these numbers and what is driving the increase. And it sounds like we don't actually know. We have a partial picture. We don't have a full picture.

And I think I gave the example of Evelyn Harper. That was a hotel expenditure made in the child and family services stream, but that was due to an eviction. It was due to homelessness.

And I guess, Minister, you know, you push back against my comment of "nothing to see here." I guess what I'm getting at is it sounds to me like . . . I guess I'll pose this in another way. Is it a controversial statement, in your view, to say that homelessness is going up in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I think the member of the committee asked if this is a contentious issue or is it a controversial thing to say, that homelessness is a challenge. No, I don't think that's the case at all. There are certainly challenges in our province. There's challenges in Alberta; Manitoba; BC [British Columbia]; every state in the nation, California in particular. And so we're dealing with complex issues and challenges, just like many across our nation.

In terms of, you know, knowing an exact number, that can certainly be a challenge, the number of people experiencing homelessness. I know there's point-in-time counts, and that's done by the third-party CBO [community-based organization] sector.

But I can certainly tell you what we are doing because we know there are challenges out there. We're taking a coordinated approach — I talked about this in my opening comments — about the need for increased shelter spaces. We often hear it, the conversation around homeless camps and, well if they're not here, what do we do with these individuals. So we need spaces for them. We're trying to increase the amount of shelter spaces here in our province by 100, and that is directly in this budget, being supported. It includes supportive living. That is also contemplated in this budget, as I said in my opening comments.

Complex-needs emergency shelter is another avenue. These are two 15-bed spaces here in Regina and Saskatoon for those most complex of individuals who are experiencing their challenges. Mental health and addictions are often the two most dealt with on the homeless side of things, you know. Large investment in those two facilities, 24-hour facilities that are essentially medical facilities.

And those are meant again for those most complex of individuals who have, maybe have been banned from various shelters or various organizations because of whatever the case may be. It might be behaviour. It might be other things. And so those two facilities are meant to fill that gap.

Some of the other things that we're working on: increasing the amount of funding to the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation on the repair of units to get those turned over as quickly as they can. I know that's been a challenge over the last several years with those units, and I'm sure we'll get into that later. So maybe I'll

save my comments for that a little bit later.

Outreach services. We have organizations like the Saskatoon Tribal Council. We're funding outreach with the sawēiyhtotān project. We've been partners with that community outreach to try and meet individuals where they are in the community to help get them to the many supports that are out there as well as, again in talking in my opening comments about some of the work we're doing in the income assistance side, for having those outreach individuals on the income assistance casework side to be at different facilities. We want to expand that.

So many different categories and many different areas working with our CBO partners, our municipal partners to try and bring some of these projects online. I could certainly go into the supportive work we're doing with Nēwo-Yôtina here in Regina, Phoenix Residential here in Regina, to support individuals. So not controversial to say that the challenges are increasing. Many different reasons for that. And probably goes down to the individual level as to the challenges an individual might be facing, trauma, whatever the case may be.

But I think what I'm trying to say here is there is a lot of things the provincial government is doing to try and help individuals when they do come forward needing help. And that work is continuing all the time with, again, our partners in the CBO sector who do great work each and every day.

So absolutely it's a challenge, I acknowledge that. And many of the things in government we're doing, not only from MSS [Ministry of Social Services] side . . . I talked about that coordinated approach with Corrections and Policing, with my colleague in Mental Health and Addictions, and of course the Health side. So we're all on the human services side of things trying to help these situations, and again avoiding some of those higher cost services. I think that when people don't have a place to go, they often find themselves in those situations as well.

[16:45]

So is the job complete? By no means, but I think this government is showing that we care about the situation, number one. The folks in this room care a lot about it. They've committed their working lives to make things a little better, and we should be thankful and acknowledge that. But to say job complete or there isn't more to do, obviously I hope I didn't give the committee that indication at all.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, my question was not whether homelessness is a challenge. My question was whether homelessness is going up. You referenced the point-in-time counts. Those suggest that homelessness is indeed going up across the province in not small ways, in significant ways. Do you as Minister of Social Services acknowledge that homelessness is getting worse?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So in terms of the member's question, you know, is homelessness getting worse? You know, I think the numbers, it wouldn't surprise me the next point-in-time the numbers go up, globally the number going up just like it has in many jurisdictions around our world. I'd say the complexity that is sort of . . . anecdotally I'm hearing about that as well, the complexity of individuals and their challenges they are facing.

But you know, in terms of an individual, I would hope that there are opportunities for things to be less worse for an individual, and some of those investments I talked about, having a place for them to stay, maybe getting some of those wraparound supports available to them if they so choose. And again I'll get ADM Michaud to talk about some of things we're trying to track with the provincial approach to homelessness in a second here. Again difficult to say an exact number as things go along, but in a general sense the numbers are increasing. But in an individual sense I hope there is some hope for people out there working with the CBO sector, working in the health system, for example on a recovery.

I think that's certainly the way out for many individuals experiencing a challenge is to be able to, you know, find a better path, whether that initial point is at a homeless shelter, whether that's at a complex-needs emergency shelter, whether that's a supportive living environment. Hopefully there can be those . . . Again like I said, I might be repeating myself a bit here, but those wraparound supports can hopefully make things better for an individual and having those supports available.

So in terms of getting worse, I'd say the numbers are going up, but hopefully if someone is able to connect and wanting to connect — I think that's an important aspect of this as well — there are more options. There are more doors. There are more facilities. There are more caseworkers. There are more CBOs in this space. Thank goodness for them. You know, things are getting a little bit better because of those supports out there for individuals that choose to take those supports.

So a lot of work to do. I think we are actively working on it, made some significant investments. Is it case closed, game over? Absolutely not. And there's certainly more to do. But I want to get ADM Michaud to talk about some of the numbers we're tracking to get a little context around this thing.

Ms. Michaud: — Louise Michaud, assistant deputy minister for housing. What we want to accomplish with the provincial approach to homelessness is to make sure that we bring all of government's services to bear on the situations that people are facing. And to that end, we have had a very strong governance and collaboration among ministries, as Minister Makowsky noted with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety.

We have an oversight committee of assistant deputy ministers that, you know, oversees the approach, the provincial approach to homelessness. The reason that we were doing it this way is because we recognize that there'll be no one ministry that's going to be able to provide all of the services that one individual or a group might need to respond to their homeless situation. And what we need to be able to do is wrap those services around, and more so as the implementation of the provincial approach to homelessness proceeds. This is of course the 155 supportive housing units and the 100 new shelter spaces which are, you know, a combination of enhanced emergency shelters and basic emergency shelters.

But we will be developing a comprehensive evaluation framework so that we are able to understand what the outcomes that we are achieving through this service delivery model. So we'll be looking to understand what is the impact of this service

on an individual's use of other services, and an individual's need for emergency health care versus being able to access primary health care. We're going to be looking at, you know, people's progress in acquiring and maintaining stable housing and making sure that we understand that stable housing will look different for people depending on their needs.

So we'll be working through the continuum of housing, whether that be, you know, shelter spaces while that's all a person is ready or able to access through the supportive housing continuum for some individuals, to social housing or potentially independent market housing. But we'll be tracking, at the individual level, what the impacts of the services they're receiving are.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. I just want to go back to that February 8th letter from Ms. Kratzig. You know, we had a little discussion about questions I haven't asked before. One of the questions I have asked before is Thriftlodge expenditures going back six years.

And just for some context, we didn't make that ask originally because we didn't have the information that we received on February 8th, that one of the top three utilized hotels by the ministry was the Thriftlodge. And then we learned that Mr. Grewal, member for Regina Northeast, is an investor in that hotel.

We also, going off just googling rates for these hotels — and I understand those shift from time to time — we see that the Thriftlodge, according to the information you provided, your ministry provided, is charging the average highest rates at \$186 per night. That's more than any other hotel, I believe, across the province is charging. And this is in comparison to hotels such as the one in Saskatoon that have a much higher market rate than the Thriftlodge. So naturally we're very concerned about that, the inflated rates, the connection of another hotel to a Sask Party MLA.

Do you have that information today? If not, can you speak to why not? It seems that you've done a lot of number crunching here. Like you've provided the expenditures out to that hotel, at least for the past two years you've looked at it. So wondering what the holdup is, and if you can speak to that. And wondering when we can get that information. Ideally we'll get it today.

[17:00]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Madam Chair, we will provide those answers. I believe we have an agreed-upon break time for the next hour. But after that we can provide most of the information I think the member asked for.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. So it now being 5 p.m., we will recess until 6 p.m.

[The committee recessed from 17:02 until 18:00.]

The Chair: — Welcome back, committee members. We will now resume consideration of estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Social Services. I would like to remind the officials to please identify themselves for the record before they speak. I recognize the minister.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Prior to the supper break, there was some questions asked about Thriftlodge motel. Prepared to table those with the committee this evening and I will do that right away here.

I think in terms of the numbers the member brought forward . . . I'll get officials to talk about the procurement and how that is handled. But when concerns were brought forward by the member and some of these things were brought to light, I asked officials to look into the process of procurement and see how we could maybe do things better. This certainly isn't a — what's the right word? not indictment — not a criticism of mobile crisis workers who do extremely difficult work in very difficult circumstances and situations. That is not what that is meant to imply by any means. We're very thankful for our third-party providers. They make very difficult decisions in not a lot of time.

So the new process, and again I'll get Mr. Exner to elaborate on this significantly, but asked officials how we can do things a little bit better in terms of maybe taking some administration pressure off of our front-line workers and having that done. But in a general sense, wanted to make things a little better, keeping in mind that at the end of the day we want to provide services to vulnerable people in oftentimes difficult and emergency situations, particularly on the income assistance side.

But I'll turn it over to Ms. Kratzig and Mr. Exner to talk a little bit more about procurement previously and the changes we're proposing that I've somewhat outlined publicly, but a chance to dive into those maybe a little bit more here tonight.

Ms. Kratzig: — Thank you. Kimberly Kratzig, deputy minister. You know, the ministry's priority is really about safety and well-being of individuals, children, and families. And that is sort of our guiding light in all of this. We balance, you know, the safety, the urgency of needing a room, etc., the cost-effectiveness, how we can best support people.

As you know, the minister directed us to do a review of our policies to make sure that we were transparent and open about how we were procuring hotels. I think it's really important to note that at no point in any of our use of hotels has the Minister of Social Services ever directed placement of an individual in any hotel. That is done by our front-line workers. That is done by our third-party service providers. That is not something that the Minister of Health has ever been involved in, and I think it's just important to really put that on the record. Pardon me, the Minister of Social Services. I spent a bit of time at Health, so old habits . . . The Minister of Social Services.

So as you know, we did do a review of sort of how we were procuring hotels and we did identify areas for improvement. One of the key things that I talked about earlier and Devon will elaborate on is we have implemented a formal process internally to ensure that we are obtaining at least three hotel quotes from each of the major cities: Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, and Moose Jaw. Caseworkers are using the lowest cost hotels when they are available, with consideration for things like the client's safety, the need, and circumstances. So that has been implemented.

We also are implementing a one-year pilot project by publicly procuring a block of five rooms in each of Regina and Saskatoon

at a confirmed rate. We'll also be including a damage deposit option guarantee for that stay. And that one-year pilot will really allow us to evaluate cost-effectiveness of this approach. And I know we've had discussions about our use of damage deposits and their potential impact on what we have been paying previously. So we're really looking forward to seeing the results of that RFP process which is under way.

I'll maybe just conclude by saying that we are also working really closely with the Provincial Auditor and have provided information and look forward to their findings and any recommendations on improvements that they may have in terms of how we utilize hotels. But again I really want to reiterate for the record that the Minister of Social Services has played no role in the placement of individuals in hotels in the experience of any senior official in the ministry that has been involved in this. So that really is handled by front-line workers and third-party service providers.

Devon will now give a bit more detail on sort of how we have worked with hotels in the past and what we're doing currently and going forward.

Mr. Exner: — Thank you. As Deputy Minister Kratzig outlined, the hotel policies that we had in income assistance and child and family programs are decades old, are very long-standing provisions, and as we conducted our review there was an opportunity to improve on those.

So we implemented a hotel-quote procedure on March 1st, 2024 to improve our procurement practices. So the procedure that we created and implemented was really collecting price quotes from hotels, and again that was to meet the immediate needs of our clients but also ensure that we were using public funds as best we can.

So ministry staff maintain a list of hotel providers that are accepting referrals from both child and family programs and income assistance programs in Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, and Moose Jaw. Twice a week we have ministry staff — these are central ministry staff — that are contacting these hotels to obtain price quotes in each location. So that occurs twice a week. Hotels in each location are contacted on a rotational basis. That way we ensure that we're reaching out to multiple hotels.

So the price-quote lists are then shared with our child and family staff and our income assistance staff and after-hours service providers, as those individuals are the ones that will be reaching out to confirm availability when a hotel room is needed. So the new procedure is really an improvement to our overall ministry's hotel procurement process as it helps to ensure that the lowest price options are utilized when appropriate for the client's need.

And as Deputy Minister Kratzig identified, there are situations where clients can't be placed in certain hotels, whether that's due to behaviour or there is multiple people staying there or it's a family versus a single that may have some complex challenges. So you know, we do our best to ensure that we're not only supporting our clients but also ensuring that the public is safe and that we're thinking about those things as we're booking hotel rooms.

I think, you know, we're very hopeful that this will expand the

number of hotels that will be working with us as we develop those relationships, as we continue to reach out and have those conversations twice a week. And again just, you know, that rotational approach where we're ensuring that we're placing clients appropriately and then working with them as we conduct ministry business week to week, month to month.

So that kind of outlines the three-quote process and at the same time we also are implementing our one-year pilot as it relates to booking a block of hotel rooms in Regina and Saskatoon through a request for proposals process.

So we posted the RFP, or request for proposals, on SaskTenders on March 1st, 2024. It closed at the end of March and we are currently looking at that information. So the RFP will select one hotel or motel in each location, being Regina and Saskatoon, to provide five rooms every night for the duration of the agreement at a single fixed rate for all nights. This will really allow us to ensure safe shelter for very vulnerable IA [income assistance] individuals and families. So I just want to be clear that this pilot is specifically targeted towards income assistance clients.

We will establish a process with the successful hotel or motel to assess, verify, and cover the damages of up to \$200 per stay if incurred by the clients. The successful hotel or motel, they will be required to submit documentation that shows damages as per the process defined by our ministry. So we will be working with the successful proponent on that process.

Once the process comes to be, we will be conducting an evaluation of this pilot which will assess the cost-benefit, the efficiency, potential innovations, longer term viability, and possibly expansion if deemed successful. And that will all be done after one year.

Ms. Conway: — The question was about the Thriftlodge and the expenditures over the past six years. I thought you were going to answer some of that, Minister.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — We're prepared to table the information.

Ms. Conway: — Oh, great. Minister, while we're just getting that document copied and distributed . . . So the new policy and the new pilot are not live at this time. Is that correct?

Mr. Exner: — At this time we have started the three-quote process so we're working through that. The RFP just closed so we are just receiving that information back through SaskBuilds and Procurement, and our team will be evaluating proposals here shortly.

Ms. Conway: — So in terms of the block-holding rooms, that's not begun yet or that has?

Mr. Exner: — There's a process to follow when going through the request for proposals process. So the competition closed. We have received the submissions. So the evaluation team in concert with SaskBuilds and Procurement will now evaluate the proposals. Part of that is potentially doing reference checks, and obviously then coming back with the final results of that which then lead into establishing a contract with the successful proponent.

The Chair: — I wish to table the following document: HUS 32-29, Ministry of Social Services: Responses to questions raised at the April 15th, 2024 meeting. Copies will be here in a moment for committee members.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Chair. According to Public Accounts, the directions of the Public Accounts Committee is that all expenditures to specific payees greater than \$50,000 must be listed in volume 2 of Public Accounts. Is the Ministry of Social Services now going to begin to list hotels that they use in excess of \$50,000 a year?

Ms. Kratzig: — Since the mid-1990s, supplier payments made for accommodations and other supports under large, high-volume programs of a confidential and personal nature, such as income assistance and child and family programs, have been reported in Public Accounts together as one amount, as per the government's financial policy established under *The Financial Administration Act, 1993*, and accepted by the Provincial Auditor, FAM [financial administration manual] 2010.

[18:15]

The ministry will continue to follow government's financial reporting standards.

Ms. Conway: — When I wrote back in February, in the final paragraph of my letter I write:

The original justification you gave for paying the inflated \$200 a night [this was in reference to the Sunrise Motel] was the ministry's policy of not paying a damage deposit. I see nothing referring to this in your disclosure package. Can I safely assume it doesn't exist?

We've heard a lot of talk about the ministry's policy around damage deposits. I haven't seen anything official. Is there an official policy floating around? If so, can I have it in writing? And I'm assuming I'm going to get follow-up numbers on certain things I asked tonight. As part of that follow-up, can you please provide the new policy for hotel use in writing, like how it will appear in a policy manual? Can you provide that going forward? But could you specifically speak to the existence of this damage deposit policy and where it exists and if so, can I have a copy of it?

Mr. Exner: — Thank you. I apologize but I would ask, could you just repeat the question just to ensure that I can answer it accurately for you?

Ms. Conway: — Sure. Well one of them is straightforward. I'm just wondering if I can get the written policy as it will appear in the policy manual, the new hotel use policy, the one that you've already been over — you've summarized it — when it's available.

And then, I'll just read the last paragraph of my February 13th letter to the minister:

The original justification you gave for paying the inflated \$200-a-night rate at the Sunrise Motel was the ministry's policy of not paying a damage deposit. I see nothing referring to this in your disclosure package. [By "this," I

mean like not paying a damage deposit.] Can I safely assume this policy doesn't exist?

So is there a written policy anywhere around damage deposit and if so can you provide it to me?

Mr. Exner: — Thank you. So as far as the three-quote process, so we have developed the process and we will be building out a policy to support that process after we've had a bit of time around, you know, kind of working through the implementation. So we will be documenting that policy. That policy will be available publicly, so it at that point can be shared.

In regards to damage deposits, it's important to note that currently we do not have a damage deposit policy. So part of our process in working with hotels when we're securing a hotel room, we do identify . . . the organization, the hotel, the damage deposits are not covered. So that's the responsibility of the individual that's staying there and to work that through with the hotel.

So we do not have a policy specifically for damage deposits; therefore we do not pay for damages.

Ms. Conway: — So, Minister, what I'm hearing is the damage deposit was the responsibility of the client previously. So in the case of Evelyn Harper who had paid a damage deposit, why did the ministry then agree to the inflated rate of, you know, close to \$200 a night for someone like Evelyn if she had put down a damage deposit? It still doesn't make sense to me. Could you speak to that?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I'll ask Ms. Eberhardt to say a few comments and I'll have a few comments after that.

Ms. Eberhardt: — Thank you. So of course under *The Child and Family Services Act* we can't speak of any cases or any services we've provided to a family. So I'll just answer in a sort of general way.

You know, when our front-line workers are looking to support families that are requiring some kind of housing service, they're sort of balancing what's best for that family. And so they'd want to look at stability, what's the best match for the number of children they have, the location. And so prior to the new three-quote policy, that would be how they would look around finding a hotel for a family member.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — And so I guess in a general sense I understand the need to have a look at this. And that's exactly why I directed the ministry to look at the policy around this situation. Can't speak to the situation, any situation in specifics, but in a general sense, my focus will and has been looking after vulnerable people in a difficult situation, an emergency situation. I hope members of the committee would agree with that.

Haven't heard from anyone a number which you would not go beyond. Now I understand these are taxpayer dollars, and I want to ensure there's a balance between expenditures and keeping people safe with erring on the side of not having a tragic situation here or anywhere in our province.

[18:30]

So I understand the member's concern, but I hope she also realizes that we are dealing with very vulnerable people in many instances in difficult situations. Front-line workers are in challenging situations, and you know, at the end of the day we want to keep people safe. And so, not sure where the number is where you shouldn't go over. Again that's some of the context I wanted to provide around this matter.

Ms. Conway: — Respectfully, Minister, I would pit my advocacy around the right of people to be housed and live with dignity against any member in this House. This is not about putting a number on that. This is about transparency and accountability. This is also the explanation that you, as minister, gave for the reason that Evelyn Harper paid a certain rate when she checked herself into the hotel and then paid a \$200-a-night rate, a highly inflated rate, once the Ministry of Social Services started picking up the tab.

It was literally the explanation given by yourself that this had to do with the ministry's policy around not paying a damage deposit. That was the explanation you gave. And so I'm scrutinizing that explanation, as is my job as critic on behalf of the people of Saskatchewan, to ensure that public money is being spent as, you know, responsibly as possible.

So it doesn't sound, again, like that damage deposit explanation makes any sense if your answer is, I agree this doesn't really make sense; it doesn't really hold water and that's why we're looking at the policy. I hear that. But if there is still some suggestion that these rates were being charged because of the lack of damage deposit, it simply doesn't make sense to me. Because Evelyn Harper did pay a damage deposit.

And the lack of written policy or formal policy around this to this day, five months later, I haven't received it, so I am going to continue to ask. If it doesn't exist, I hear you. It sounds like it doesn't exist. So I think that's where we've landed. But I think I also heard kind of a reliance on that damage deposit issue again. So I'm really trying to get at the heart of that because I think people are concerned, not just because of the huge increase in the rate that was paid on behalf of Evelyn Harper, but then the additional connection to a Sask Party MLA as well as the steep difference between what someone . . .

The Chair: — Ms. Conway, I am going to interrupt you here and ask you to focus back onto the estimates, not to specific casework.

Ms. Conway: — Can you speak to whether, Minister . . . It sounds like this damage deposit policy doesn't exist. Do you want to say anything else about that? Is it safe to assume that the damage deposit issue was not the main driver in the rates that were being paid to hotels by the Ministry of Social Services?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So I'm not 100 per cent clear where the member may have got that. It might have been in a media scrum or however in terms of me saying damage deposits are the only thing affecting rates.

I would say it's one of many things that could potentially affect rates, is my understanding. So I guess anecdotally there would be things like time of year, how full a particular establishment might be, might not be able to put certain family members in the same

hotel, whatever it may be. There could be many different reasons for those things. I think the situation you're referring to is one situation, but there could be so many other different variables, you know, including a hotel willing to take income assistance clients to begin with right off. But I turn it over to Mr. Exner to add further colour to that.

Mr. Exner: — So just to clarify maybe my previous statement, so in income assistance, benefits must be really included or outlined in policy. Our staff are required to follow those policies before a payment is made. So in income assistance we do not have a provision nor really a mechanism to make any payments for damage deposits.

Again, there are multiple reasons why hotels may charge a higher-than-regular rate. It could be availability. It could be time of year or events that are occurring. It could be past practices.

You know, anecdotally we don't know if they've increased their rates or not. So we don't have any, you know, evidence or information that outlines that. What we do know is that we are working through the RFP process to trial this new process to ensure we get a better understanding of damages, and working with hotels to better understand that to help inform and improve our policies going forward.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. One of the things that I learned in looking into this matter, and I don't know if it's true, but I understand that the ministry can sometimes . . . there's sometimes a delay of upwards of six months or more sometimes for ministry to pay hotel bills. Might be something you want to look into. I don't know whether that's true. That's just what I've heard.

So as we await this RFP to kind of go through the process and then have this in place, is it fair to say that we're just kind of continuing on as status quo and that the ministry is still paying for hotel rooms at both the Sunrise and the Thriftlodge motels?

Mr. Exner: — Thanks for the question. So in response, it definitely is not status quo, and that's what the three-quote process really is about. And kind of further developing that policy, as Deputy Minister Kratzig outlined, we will be evaluating that process after a year.

I think it's fair to say, as we work through obtaining three quotes twice a week, we try to ensure that we are getting the lowest available rate. And again that's balancing client need and kind of what's going on at that hotel — you know, it could be due to availability or maybe there's a sporting event and there's families there — so working with those hotels to ensure that we are supporting our clients but also understanding and supporting them.

An example of this could be where we've gone through our lowest available hotels when it comes to rates, and there's a house fire or apartment fire where we have to place a number of individuals. We will continue to work through that process and those rates to utilize the least expensive ones. But that could be that we are utilizing other hotels, and their rates at that time due to availability and circumstances may be higher.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Mr. Exner. And some of it may just

be that I'm . . . So the three-quote process is in place, and the RFP is for the block rooms. Okay. You're nodding yes, just for the record. Okay.

The document that was just tabled, total expenditures to the Thriftlodge, indicates that in 2018-19, zero money went to the Thriftlodge. In 2019-2020, zero money went to the Thriftlodge. In 2020-2021, zero money went to the Thriftlodge. In 2021-22, 46,679 went to the Thriftlodge. In 2022-2023, \$163,704 went to the Thriftlodge. And for the first half of 2023-24 — yes, first half-ish — \$139,478 was paid out to the Thriftlodge hotel. How long, Minister, have you had these numbers crunched?

[18:45]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I think I had alluded publicly before about, and maybe just in this committee here today, but priority has been implementing the new policy and procedures and the process. That's what the ministry has been working on. I asked them to prioritize that. But along with that, my office has been working with the ministry to gather information. We got the final information that we presented here today, today.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I guess I just have one more question about hotels. As far as you're aware, are any of the other hotels utilized by the Ministry of Social Services financially connected to Sask Party MLAs?

The Chair: — Ms. Conway, I will overrule that question and have you move on to the estimates, please.

Ms. Conway: — Chair, this is money that's going out on this budget to hotels. It's fair game to ask whether any of them are connected to Sask Party MLAs.

The Chair: — No. Continue questions about the estimates, please.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, the budget for hotels . . . Obviously the ministry has hotels they've used in the past and one can expect they'll continue to use similar hotels going forward. You have a budget for hotel use. As far as you're aware, is any of that budgeted money, is there any risk that it will go to hotels connected to Sask Party MLAs?

The Chair: — Minister, do you wish to answer that question?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I'm going to ask the officials a question about that.

Ms. Kratzig: — I was wondering if you could repeat that question, just so we are answering it correctly, and understanding if you're asking about current hotels or different hotels. So could you just repeat that question for us?

Ms. Conway: — So the ministry has a list of the hotels that they utilize for AI and child and family services clients. And I'm just wondering if money is being paid out to any other hotels apart from the Sunrise or the Thriftlodge with connections to . . . in which other Sask Party MLAs or the same Sask Party MLA has any financial benefit.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Thanks for that clarification. There are

none that I or the ministry is aware of.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I'm going to move into the Sask Housing Corporation area. I don't know if Ms. Michaud wants to come down or if you want to change your configuration at all, but I think I'm just going to jump into it.

Last estimates, you provided a breakdown of number of units for both social and affordable housing managed by SHC together with vacancies, client groups — so be it senior, family, or disabled — and broken down by community. I don't know . . . Sorry if I already said that. I'm just wondering if you can commit to providing that same breakdown just updated to this past year in that same format so I can compare apples to apples. I don't expect that today because it would take a very long time to read out all those communities. But just wanting a commitment on the record that you will provide that.

[19:00]

What I would be interested in maybe hearing tonight is the total number of units in the province, the overall vacancy rate broken down for senior and family, and then breakdowns for just Regina, Saskatoon, and P.A. [Prince Albert] in terms of units in all of those communities by seniors versus family, the vacant units, and the available units for those three communities.

So just to sum up, the SHC inventory list. I think you provided me last year like a 74-page inventory list updated. So that same piece of information this year, but not right this second. And then at this moment the number of vacant units, the number of total units, and then some meat on the bone for just those Regina, Saskatoon, and P.A. communities if possible.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So I do have quite a bit of information here. Hopefully it matches up with what the committee had asked for.

In terms of vacancy rate right across the province, I guess I'd start in 2018. It was, provincially, 17 per cent.

2019, 16.8 per cent.

2020, 18.5.

2021, 19.5 per cent vacancy rate.

2022, 18.1 vacancy rate.

2023, 16 per cent.

As of March 15th, 2024, 15.5 vacancy rate.

And that roughly equates to . . . There's approximately, I believe this is as of Q4 [fourth quarter] 2023 — some of the information I just gave you is more updated in terms of the 2024 numbers where we're seeing a continual decline — 17,599 units available provincially and 14,752 occupied, 2,819 vacant.

Of course that's . . . Not all units are available, but that is where we are at in the province in the three major centres. In Regina we have 3,003 rentable units, March of 2024 that is. The vacancy is 562, so again that is decreasing over time. In Saskatoon the

rentable units of March 2024, 2,417. The vacancy is 247. Prince Albert, 934 are the amount of rentable units in that municipality as of March 2024, and the vacant units is 140.

And again I'd note to the committee that . . . of course a difference between vacant units and available units. There's lots of reasons, that I've gone over several times, as to why a unit may not be available. But I'm sure there'll be subsequent questions about that.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. Yeah, I think we have discussed that in the past. I'm just trying to get those concise records.

Minister, I don't need these today, but can you break down those numbers for families and seniors? I guess what I've asked for would do that, so I just want a commitment from you that you'll provide the — sorry, I want to get my wording right here — the number of housing units and the number of vacancies for all social and affordable housing managed by the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, in the same format that you provided me last year, up until March 31st, 2024.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — In terms of tracking available units and all that, that happens to update the spreadsheet. I believe that we can endeavour to get that to the committee. Will take some time.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. There is a bit of daylight between the number you quoted for 2023 and what I was provided. And I believe the inventory I was provided, it says, at least on here, that it is up till April. So you've quoted 17,599 total units. The information I had was that there were 17,465 total units and that there was a vacancy rate of 17 per cent, not 16 per cent.

Can you speak to that daylight or have one of your officials speak to that daylight?

[19:15]

Ms. Michaud: — Louise Michaud, assistant deputy minister for housing. The difference between the numbers is that the numbers that you were provided for 2023 did not include purpose-built life lease units, and the numbers provided this year do. And they're part of our senior housing portfolio.

And the difference for the vacancy rate is that between the number that the minister provided here this evening was as of December 2023, and so we had seen improvement between April '23 and December 2023.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, can you explain what purpose-built . . . Sorry, I missed the term. What are those? And like why would those have not been included in the previous disclosure?

Ms. Michaud: — So the information provided in 2023, I outlined that it did exclude these purpose-built life lease units. And the answer that we've provided today is more comprehensive.

So what life lease units are is a program that allows seniors with low to moderate incomes to be able to access an affordable housing option where they provide a deposit and then for the term of their tenancy with the housing authority, their monthly fees

are based on maintenance fees for the unit. And then the deposit is returned to them when they depart the unit.

And the reason that these were not included in 2023 is we had tried to answer the asked question around social and affordable housing units. And today's response was to answer sort of what the whole inventory includes.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, when you provide the updated information, can you just keep it to, or can you at least distinguish between what those numbers are — including those life lease purpose-built units and without them — just so I can compare apples to apples going forward.

Ms. Michaud: — Yes, we can do that.

Ms. Conway: — How many new units did SHC acquire in Regina in this past fiscal year, so 2024? Right.

Ms. Michaud: — We have not acquired any units in Regina this fiscal year.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Again there's a discrepancy between the number of overall units I was quoted for Regina. At this time last year it was 2,952. Now that number is 3,003 rentable units. Is that because you've now included the life lease purpose-built units?

Ms. Michaud: — Yes.

Ms. Conway: — I think, just for the record, that was a yes, just for future people reading the *Hansard* in case that wasn't captured. So of the 2,952 — that doesn't include the life lease purpose-built units — how many of those are vacant, just so I can again compare apples to apples?

[19:30]

Ms. Michaud: — Louise Michaud, assistant deputy minister for housing. I need to make a correction. You asked if the difference from last year to this year was related to the life lease. It's not. One of the things that . . . Our records show that we had provided a number of 2,999 units last year, and our records this year do show a difference of four. And so there's a data issue that we will undertake to sort out and follow up.

Ms. Conway: — So you're not taking issue with the number that's quoted in *Hansard*. You're just saying that when you provided that 2,952 to me last year, that was perhaps an error? Just to clarify what we're talking about.

Ms. Michaud: — I'm just looking at the copy of what we had provided last year, and our records show that we had provided the number that we tabled — that we provided in writing — the number 2,999. But we are going to sort out the difference between that number and the number 3,003.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

Minister, just for clarity, you are right that in the written inventory that you gave me, the total units listed in Regina is 2,999, but in *Hansard* on April 5th, 2023 at page 419 the total number of units you quote for Regina is 2,952. And it strikes me

that the difference might be . . . Well no, none of that makes sense. I thought maybe the difference was affordable housing units, but yeah, there is a difference between what was quoted to me in *Hansard* and what was provided as a follow-up. So if we could just get to the bottom of that, I would appreciate it. And I'm getting nods, so no issue there.

Minister, so for example in Regina, looks like this time last year we had just shy of one in four units were sitting vacant. Now there's been a bit of improvement, and just shy of one in five units is sitting vacant. It's an improvement, but not a significant one, particularly when we consider the cost-of-living crisis that we have.

Recent calculations of housing needs in Canada has Saskatchewan at the second-highest level of housing need among the provinces. We also see huge increases in rents in our major urban centres.

And then, like a corresponding total lack in acquiring new public housing units even though, you know — and this is something the Sask Party likes to talk about a lot — we're a growing population. There's been growth, and we just haven't invested in public housing over the last decade. If anything, we've cut. And you know, public housing can have a really positive impact on housing affordability.

Is acquiring new units not a priority for the province? Is there any plan to acquire additional units in our urban centres where the housing need is highest and growing every day?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So thanks for the committee's patience. There's a lot of numbers to filter through here, based on the question.

So in a general sense I think there has been an improvement in our major centres in terms of vacancies going down and turnover units. Unfortunately it's an ongoing process. Once a unit is repaired, whether it's minor or major, that doesn't mean it can't be used gently or used very roughly, let's say, with the next tenant. So there's always that constant cycle.

But some of the things the Sask Housing Corporation has done, we've talked before about the flat-rate pilot here in Regina, allowing a flat rate no matter the number of people in there that have income, and I'd say the vast majority would be on income assistance. So that allowance to have different family members or roommates has really been popular in North Central. It started with a pilot with four. It was increased to 21, and now it's increased to 67 units within North Central, which has traditionally been a tougher area for individuals to choose to stay over time.

Another thing the member noted in the question, and part of the affordability context that we're all hearing about, the rent has not increased in Sask Housing units since 2021. So that has stayed flat where, you know, for the affordability side of things, that will continue. But IA rates have increased on top of that.

So what we've focused on, what the Sask Housing Corporation is focused on is units that we do have and improving those so they're brought up to rent standards. And like I said before, that's always a constant turnover and a thing that we have been

focusing on, including in this budget.

And we've done several partnerships, that I think I talked briefly about, to better use units within our existing portfolio. So whether it's moving people around . . . We have several in Regina in particular — large seniors' housing complexes, whether they be towers or whatever the case may be. They have had larger vacancy rates, so moving tenants around when feasible. Well it's never a simple thing, but we're trying to make best use. And that includes partnerships, and so we partner with third parties with existing Sask Housing units to deliver supportive housing.

And in this budget there's \$9.5 million to either convert or, if needed, we can use that to acquire if necessary. But again, the focus has been on using those units that are underutilized within the portfolio. And so acquiring units at this point outside of the supportive living, which we have that budget for, I wouldn't say it's a priority at this time; using the existing units and using the funding we have in place and the increase in this year's budget to be able to turn over those units in a quicker manner.

There's several programs that are available. I could certainly go through them, but the two I want to point out is the co-investment program that is a fixed amount that is available to third parties who want to develop units, and there are several examples of that here in Regina. For example, the dancing horse, I believe it is on Broad Street, is just one example of that. It's supportive housing.

We're working with other partners, the city of Regina, and I believe RT/SIS [Regina Treaty/Status Indian Services Inc.] does the operating. Don't quote me on that. But you know, that is another partnership. And Silver Sage is the entity that is bringing that deal, I guess you'd say, all together. There's the rental development program that there's an expression of interest every year. And then, you know, that's another way that we in the Sask Housing Corporation are able to get new units going, not owned by Sask Housing Corporation but in partnership with the Sask Housing Corporation, and by extension the Government of Saskatchewan.

In terms of cuts, you know, I think that was mentioned by the member. And you know, I think maybe based on the report I read she put out, you know, there's this characterization of a decade worth of cuts. Now I think maybe that member is talking about money that was received more than a decade ago from the federal government. This goes way back to the Stephen Harper government, and that seems like a long time ago to all of us. That was part of the Canada economic action plan in 2009 and to be completed and committed by March 31st, 2011, so one-time stimulus funding that the Sask Housing Corporation received from that.

And so that was obviously a major spike in the expenditures by the corporation. And then obviously it went down after that when that stimulus funding was not continued, as it was known as a one-year agreement or one-time thing. So in a one-time situation, there's going to be a spike. After that there's consistent funding throughout. In the last several years there has been, including this year, increases to investments in housing, whether it's on the homeless side, whether it's the partnership side, but also on the upkeep and renewal of units within the province.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I'm glad you brought up

my report because you're right that I do compare ongoing provincial contributions to SHC compared to 2011 levels. But then in fairness to the government I also compare the decade, the year-by-year provincial contribution to social housing based on the average from 2008 through 2011.

Just hoping to get through as much as we can tonight and to kind of use our time as best as I can. There's a few data points I'm hoping to get at a later point, like you can just follow up with them, and then there's a few things I'm hoping to just kind of focus in on tonight.

So with your indulgence, I just might mention a few things that I'm happy to get at a later point. I don't think they'll be controversial. They're along the lines of things I've been given in the past. But on that topic that we were just covering, I'm wondering if you can provide the provincial subsidy budget for social housing in '24-25, and the provincial subsidy estimate for social housing in '23-24.

And then if you could go back 10 years, that would be great. I don't need that right now. I just, I'm hoping to get that at a later point. So specifically the provincial contribution to SHC, because as we know, SHC has a number of revenue generators — one is federal money, one is provincial money, one is municipalities, and another is, you know, stuff like rental income. So if you could commit to that, that would be great.

I'm also looking for the number of demolished, transferred, or sold units, just an update to that number from this past year, broken down by community. You've provided me that in the past, so I'm guessing that will not be controversial.

I'm wondering if you could also provide the SHC maintenance budget for this past year. Last year you provided that going back to 2013, so I just want this past year's update to that, as well as this past year's update, 2023 update, to the modernization and improvement expenditures. Does all of that so far sound like it can be provided at a later point before I move forward?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I think we'll endeavour to get that information, if available, to the member.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I'm also wondering if the minister could at a later point provide me with a list of housing authorities in Saskatchewan receiving provincial subsidies for the operation of social housing, together with the board members of each housing authority as of April 1st, 2024. If there is an existing list that is dated late in 2023 I'm happy to receive that as well. Is that something you can commit to providing at a later point, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — We'll certainly look into those requests, and I know they've been asked for. You know, we'll see what information is available. But I know the request has been out there, so we'll take that under advisement.

[20:00]

Ms. Conway: — Concerningly noncommittal. It sounds like you're willing to provide that data if it exists. Is that what I'm hearing, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Yeah, we'll certainly take a look if we have that available. Yes, you bet.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Is the minister able to table the budget detail for the Sask Housing Corporation down to the program and major expenditure category level for administration? Is that something that you could provide? I'm happy for that to be at a later point. Just wondering if that exists and can be provided.

Ms. Michaud: — Louise Michaud, ADM, Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. And those will be found in the SHC financial statements which will be published in the annual report at the end of April.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Minister, this is kind of a multi-pronged question. It's about seniors housing at SHC. How many seniors buildings does the province currently manage under SHC? Can you provide a list of those seniors buildings? And how many now have a mix of clientele other than seniors in those buildings? So that's the data point I'm looking for. Do you think it's good to mix seniors with other types of social housing clients? And if you do, what are the parameters that you use to guide the decision to mix clientele?

And then just on this, we had some seniors come out from a Moose Jaw seniors social housing high-rise earlier, I believe, in the fall session. I'm just wondering if anything was done to address the issues that they're facing and if there's any plans to address the issues facing the seniors that came forward to the media I believe it was just last week.

So how you're approaching these issues and then if you can answer the policy question as well as the data point question. And if you need to provide this at a later point, I'm happy to receive the list of seniors housing and which ones have mixed clientele at a later point if necessary.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So I'll start off with a few comments then I'll pass it on to Roger for what's done with the security side of things. But obviously the government and the Sask Housing Corporation take tenant safety very seriously, and it is certainly a priority.

Heard a few different situations previously. I believe you brought, Ms. Conway, you brought individuals from the Moose Jaw Housing Authority, their building and some of the concerns there. They weren't able to meet with me specifically so that wasn't . . . For me to sit down and get the particulars of that case wasn't able to happen but I believe . . . I can't remember if I directed or the Sask Housing Corporation, upon hearing the case wanted to know more about it. And there was an inspection that took place, a meeting. And I'll get Mr. Parenteau to talk about that.

In terms of the mix of clientele within a given building, again that's not something that's tracked. Certainly want to be careful when, I guess, I think the word you use is "mixing" of clientele, but I think it also highlights the . . . There's certainly a lot of nuance in these particular situations. I know many have said — I believe including yourself — that well, we have all these vacant units and we have a homeless problem; let's just put the two together and there we go.

But it's certainly not as simple as that. We have to consider the type of building, the vacancies, and supports needed for individuals. And so it's not a simple one-plus-one situation. There's a lot of different things that you have to consider before doing any of those sorts of things.

So again in terms of the number of buildings, I don't think we have that readily available. We can look at that, see if we have it, but I'll turn it over to officials about the specific situations. Usually starts with a tenant meeting and understanding what's going on, but can go on from there. So anyway, Roger.

Mr. Parenteau: — Thank you, Minister. Roger Parenteau, executive director, housing operations with the corporation. Yes, the corporation takes the tenant safety very seriously. And projects that are experiencing challenges, we're definitely out there talking with them.

Specifically to Moose Jaw, as Minister Makowsky mentioned, we were in Moose Jaw with my SHC team, along with the housing authority, and met with the tenants of that project and talked to them about the concerns that they did have.

We did a number of things to improve the safety at that project, such as installing access controls on all exterior doors that automatically lock at 8 p.m., along with some door-ajar alarms; also having tenant outreach and education sessions with the tenants on just some public education and awareness in what to do and stuff when individuals are coming in or trying to get into the vestibules, and calling and reaching out to the police services and, you know, just ensuring that they stay safe themselves and not put themselves in a vulnerable position.

For overall in Regina what will be undertaken here is some education and tenant meetings. We've also brought in the Regina Police Service, partnered with them to bring in and bring them to tenant meetings and talk about again public safety and awareness and best practices on what to do when individuals are trying to get into the building, and also looking at ways to keep the doors and the vestibules closed so that people that are trying to buzz in and not . . . tenants are not just kind of freely buzzing people in that they don't know, so trying to get a lot of public education on that.

[20:15]

Some security measures that we've taken in different buildings across the province is again upgrading the security door systems and a fob system, a fob access system, so having a fob system instead of a physical key, and we're able to track those fobs a lot better . . . It's better tracking as well as we can track tenants coming in and out of the building. If they happen to lose their key we can better, easily track those keys and cancel them and provide new fobs to the individuals that lost their fobs.

Installing some cameras at entrances, more security cameras, better lighting in the parking areas and the exterior of the buildings, and in some locations hiring some on-site security guards as well at different times of the day depending on what kind of activity that's going on at a given project.

So just some examples of some different things we're doing around safety at our seniors buildings.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. One of the questions was, how many seniors buildings are in the province, if I could get a list of those. Can you provide that? And then are you saying you cannot differentiate between which of those seniors buildings are accepting clients outside of the senior demographic?

Ms. Michaud: — Louise Michaud, ADM for housing. And we don't track the people who are under 55 who do live in our seniors building. It's not a specific thing that we track. The housing authorities do have the discretion to allow people who will live a seniors-like lifestyle or people who have a physical disability. They're given the opportunity to live in our seniors buildings.

One of the other things that I think is important to note is that we are finding that it isn't necessarily people who are, you know, not seniors who may present with complex needs with regard to housing. So what we try to do is match people according to the housing need and try to get the best fit, versus you know, always making that distinction exactly by age.

Ms. Conway: — Just in response to the previous answer about Moose Jaw, what those seniors talked about was actually feeling locked in. They felt they . . . I think they described it as feeling like a jail and the closure of their common space. So I appreciate the answer focused on some of the security measures that have been taken, but actually I think maybe some of the concerns that were raised were kind of in response to that, in reaction to that, that those measures are not a response to the concerns that were brought forward. They were perhaps partly a catalyst for some of the concerns in addition to feeling like, you know, that this policy was not being followed, that this combination of people was not being done thoughtfully. Perhaps, Minister, you can speak to that.

And then, Minister, you did say in your answer that I said we should just throw them all in together. I challenge you to point to where I've ever said that. I have urged your ministry to get vacant units up and running during an affordability crunch and a homelessness crisis. I have never advocated for what you've just accused me of advocating for.

Mr. Parenteau: — In response to your question, the housing authority and SHC team that went out to meet with the tenants of that project did hear that concern. And it's a balance of the individuals that are feeling threatening of their safety of individuals getting in by buzzing in and stuff and then feeling that . . . another group feeling that they can't let people in with hitting their buzzer and letting people in, so they have to physically go down to the main floor and let the individuals in that's coming over to visit for company.

So that first door of access to the building is locked after a certain time, either 8, 9, or 10 p.m. — I'm not sure what exactly it is for Moose Jaw — but before that people can buzz in and go in and visit their friend or relative inside. But after 8 p.m. they would have to physically go down to the main floor and let them into the building.

So there is a balance of individuals that were feeling that people were coming in, trespassing, coming in, and others that felt like that they couldn't, you know, just allow people to use the buzzer to let company in. And the choice was to err on safety, caution

on safety, and have the doors locked after a certain time at night.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, it strikes me there aren't very many seniors high-rises. Has any consideration gone to, you know, getting a doorman security person after hours so that, you know, people don't feel like they're "in jail"? Has any thought been given to that? And I don't think I've gotten an answer of whether I can get a list of seniors buildings in the province.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Sorry. I thought maybe it was mentioned before, but we should be able to find the list of seniors focus buildings here in Saskatchewan. And then Mr. Parenteau will answer the second part of your question.

Mr. Parenteau: — So similar to what we've met with and worked with senior groups in Moose Jaw, we do that in many locations across the province. We assess the safety issues that they are bringing forward at the different projects. And there's many instances and examples of where we do employ security companies to have oversight of these senior projects, using different hours of the day depending on the severity of some of the concerns that are being raised.

We've done that in many locations, including this project at one time. We did employ security officers, a security company there. The reports and information that we were getting from this security company . . . We reduced the hours of it and then minimal activity was occurring, so we just ended up just using housing authorities to have oversight of the safety issues and no longer employing the security companies in Moose Jaw.

But there are other communities right now that we do have active security companies with the oversight of some of our projects.

Ms. Conway: — Perhaps, Minister, you could include the number of these buildings that have active security in what you disclose to me, if you're agreeable. The tenants of this particular high-rise did speak about that period of time when they had that in place. They spoke of it fondly. I think it increased their quality of life.

I'm sure there are always budgetary constraints, but this seems very important for seniors to be living in a way that they feel they're safe and at ease, so maybe it's something you can take a look at again. But if you could provide a breakdown of how many of these buildings have some kind of security on site, that would be appreciated.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — We can look into that. Yeah.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. So I'm wondering if SHC, if the Sask Housing Corporation tracks the number of eviction notices they send out to tenants.

[20:30]

Ms. Michaud: — Louise Michaud with the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. We don't track the number of eviction notices, and the reason we don't is because far more of those are issued than ever result in eviction. The way that the housing authorities are required to notify tenants and begin the process of notifying tenants for rent arrears, etc. in order for — if it should come to that — for the Office of Residential Tenancies to

recognize it, the process begins with a notice to vacate. And as I said, we don't track the number of notices to vacate because the vast majority of those result in a tenancy being continued. They result typically in arrears being resolved, a solution being found.

The housing authorities. I'll talk a little bit about what housing authorities do in order to prevent evictions — and I want to note that — with good success, recognizing certainly that social housing clients may typically present with or often present with more complex needs than, you know, overall tenancies. And according to the UBC [University of British Columbia] Housing Research Collaborative, the overall eviction rate provincially in Saskatchewan is at a rate of 4.5 per cent between 2016 and 2021. For that same period Saskatchewan Housing Corporation's actual eviction rate has been below 1.5 per cent.

So you know, certainly the eviction for housing authorities is the last resort, and it's only the last resort when tenants have arrears or, you know, behavioural issues that impact other tenants. Housing authorities support and work with tenants to resolve issues in a number of ways that are, you know, beyond what's required in *The Residential Tenancies Act*.

So some of the things that the housing authorities will do is they will actually . . . So just give me one second to find the right spot. So some of the measures that they take is they will work with tenants to identify sort of, you know, a payment plan, a repayment plan if there are rent arrears. They will work to connect tenants with services in other parts of the ministry or other parts of government if tenants need other supports.

There is also . . . You know, they'll provide advice, as I said, on budgeting. There's also work with the tenants and make available to them the rent education program to help people understand sort of their rights and get the proper skills to be, you know . . . And that's offered through Camponi Housing. That's a program that was developed by Camponi Housing. And also refer tenants to interagency tables for wraparound supports when available, where tenants need more supports than, you know, affordability to remain safely and stably housed.

If an eviction process has begun, then you know, the housing authority . . . and the issue is resolved, arrears are paid, etc., the housing authority will typically reverse the eviction.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud. So one of the challenges in analyzing and understanding the eviction sort of horizon, as it were, is that a lot of . . . Like we can track what evictions go through the ORT [Office of Residential Tenancies], but we can't track how many tenants out there, be it with private landlords or with housing authorities, get a notice to vacate or something along those lines and then just leave, which is one of the challenges.

I guess one of my questions is, how do you know that most of these get resolved if you're not tracking it? And then my other question is, what data are you tracking around evictions, and would you agree to provide me those numbers going back, say, 10 years?

Ms. Michaud: — Louise Michaud, assistant deputy minister for housing. So as I mentioned earlier, the notice to vacate itself is used as the initial contact officially where there's an issue. And

we work closely with the housing authorities who work with these on a day-to-day basis. And they tell us that they issue many, many more of these than tenants that, you know . . . than situations that result in tenants having to vacate or being evicted. So while we don't track it . . . Because, you know, what we do is ensure that what we're careful about is that we want to make sure that eviction prevention measures are happening.

The other question asked was around eviction, sort of numbers over the past 10 years. We're going to look at the data and just, you know, we'll take it under advisement. We want to make sure that the data is, you know, make sure that the data is ready.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud. What do you track? Like I understand that you may not be able to get it back going as far back as 10 years, but surely you do track something around evictions. Is that correct?

[20:45]

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. We do track sort of eviction as a reason to vacate. We're going to have a look at the data and ensure that there are no gaps, and we'll take your request under advisement.

Ms. Conway: — What does that mean, take my request under advisement, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — We're aware of what you're asking for. We'll look into it.

Ms. Conway: — Will you provide me with the data that you do have available?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So I guess what I'd say is, I believe Ms. Michaud has said and I've said we'll look through their information — there's a lot of information — trying to get the most accurate information. So we'll endeavour to get it for the committee, but I believe Ms. Michaud has committed to that as well. So there's some work to do. We'll look at it and endeavour to get that if we're able.

Ms. Conway: — Do you have any data with you on evictions here with any of your officials today?

Ms. Michaud: — We don't have data with us this evening that we are able to share. We don't have anything that's been validated with us. We will endeavour to get data focusing on the largest six housing authorities and going back a few years to provide that.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud. How far back do you think you can go?

Ms. Michaud: — We'd have to do the validation before I could commit.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Can you go back as far as 10 years, obviously with a view that you may not be able to go that far back based on what you can acquire? But can you try to go back as far as possible but no further than 10 years?

Ms. Michaud: — Yes, we'll review it. And certainly we'll

provide what we can and commit to not going back further than 10 years.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. I just have a couple more questions on the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation file. Three areas. I'll just maybe mention them all and you can answer them however you see fit, Minister.

My first question is rather simple: have you acquired any new Sask Housing Corporation units since the 2020 election? That's my first question. My second question relates to the federal government announcement of a new housing program to develop new housing across Canada to address the lack of new construction, to ensure housing is available for all Canadians. Will the province be signing on to the program and financially supporting the development of new housing for Saskatchewan families through that program? If not, why not?

The feds also announced a top-up to the Canada housing benefit. If you could take us through how the province will be using those funds, that's the second area.

And then the third area of outstanding questions that I have are around that 9 million you designated to repair vacant units. How far do you see that amount going? How many units do you think that that will address? Which communities are you going to focus on?

And you know, we've seen in the media and elsewhere some of the issues with inhabited units around mould, sewage, pests, the like over the past couple of years. Is any of that money going to go to non-vacant units that are in need of maintenance? And then what is your plan with respect to the outstanding units that won't be captured through that \$9 million increase?

So those three areas. I know there's a lot there and they're different topics, but that's the rest of what I want to ask around Sask Housing. So feel free to address that in whatever order you'd like.

[21:00]

Sorry, I'll just put one thing on the record. I just realized I have the new units for 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 broken down by community. So if you could just provide new units that SHC has taken on for 2024, either today or at a later point, I'd appreciate that. Thanks.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So quite a few questions in that from the committee. I'll start, and then I'll ask Ms. Michaud or Mr. Parenteau to answer some of the questions. So just in terms of the federal agreement or potential agreement, I would say the provincial government has worked with the federal government on the national housing strategy. That is a ten-year agreement signed a few years ago, and that work is under way.

In my, I guess, my first year as the minister, I happened to be the Co-Chair of the FPT, federal-provincial-territorial group of ministers on the housing file. And I know rarely is there a consensus of all the provinces and all the territories, but at our first meeting, when I was first brought to that table, there was general consensus across the country that there is a need for flexibility in agreements that are signed with the federal

government. So what may work in Toronto and Vancouver might not necessarily work in Regina or Swift Current or Estevan or what have you. And so generally what I'd say we've been asking for flexibility and alignment from the federal government with not too much success so far. So we'll see.

But in terms of the most recent announcements — and I believe the federal budget is being announced tomorrow — we'll have to wait and see. We need details on what is being proposed. Is it going to be cost matched? Is it going to be per capita? It's difficult to sign on to an agreement we haven't seen. So that would be obviously something I, officials, and the government in general I think, would be looking at very carefully to see how it can align with the province of Saskatchewan.

So I think that's what I wanted to say on the federal side of things. I turn it over to Ms. Michaud for any other technical questions that I believe the member brought forward.

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. In response to the question about acquisitions made by Saskatchewan Housing Corporation in 2024, we did acquire in Saskatoon the property formerly owned by The Lighthouse Supported Living, and so that consists of 120 units. And then I can pivot to the question on housing repairs and how the \$9.6 million that you asked about.

So the overall goal for repairs for the housing corporation in '24-25 is 1,400 units. And through the 9.6 million, that will include bringing back online 150 units this coming year.

And the community breakdown for that is going to be, in Prince Albert, we'll bringing back 20 units, we'll be bringing online 20 units; in Regina, 25; in Saskatoon, 20. And then through being able to do major component replacements in urban centres, we'll be able to bring an additional 35 units on for a total of 150 units sort of being brought back into the portfolio.

The 1,400 units that we anticipate, that we target for repairing this year, will include both vacant units as well as needed repairs to units that are currently occupied.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, so the budget is for 1,400 units. But I don't understand the 150 units versus the 1,400. I'm just . . . I think it's just getting late. Sorry.

Ms. Michaud: — So we're saying our overall target is 1,400. The 150 is where that 9.6 million is focused.

Ms. Conway: — So the 1,400, that's just to maintain existing inhabited units?

Ms. Michaud: — So every year the housing corporation has, you know, a budget to maintain for modernization and improvement, and so that 1,400 will cover that. So that will be major repairs to units. That will be component replacement. So it's not just turnover; it's turnover of units that require major repairs to be kept rentable.

Ms. Conway: — So the 1,400 is targeting rentable units to ensure they remain rentable. Is that a fair statement?

Ms. Michaud: — So I would say 1,250 is targeting that, and 150 will be to bring new units, like to bring units that are currently

not available into rent readiness.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud. You anticipated my next question about whether that 150 was part of the 1,400 or in addition to it. Sounds like it's part of the 1,400. Okay. Okay, thank you. So the 120 new units in Saskatoon, those are the only new acquires in 2024. There were no new units in any other communities. That's correct?

Ms. Michaud: — Correct.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. And then I believe the only outstanding issue is the Canada housing benefit. I believe, like, a hard number . . . I thought that that was separate from this federal housing program and that they have committed a very clear number on that. Am I wrong in that? And if I'm right, where is that going to go in terms of administering the Saskatchewan housing benefit?

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. So for the Saskatchewan housing benefit, and this relates to the question about the top-up, so we have done a number of things in order to increase the top-up. The federal top-up was presented to provinces, including Saskatchewan, with a number of conditions, and one of those was around having the Saskatchewan housing benefit fully subscribed.

And this is something that we have been working on for a number of years, and we are seeing some improvement in the numbers for the Saskatchewan housing benefit. So by the end of December, for 2023 we were in excess of 2,900 people receiving the Saskatchewan housing benefit. Some of the things that we have done to expand the program is creating new streams of the housing benefit for individuals who are fleeing domestic violence and individuals in supportive housing.

When the top-up came out with the federal government, the way that it was designed we were not able to take advantage of it. So we sent a letter to the federal government requesting flexibility to allocate the unused portions of the housing benefit to other housing programs, and we're waiting to hear back from the federal government on that.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you for that. I think I'm ready to move on from the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. I'd like to go to income assistance next.

But actually on child and family services, I actually am mainly interested in getting updates to the data points that I was provided last year in appendix A. So I'm just going to read out what those are and you can let me know. Like I'm fine to just get it as I did this past year at a future point. And I understand, like, Ms. Eberhardt will have this appendix, so she'll hopefully know what I'm reading off of. And I made a copy if that would be helpful.

So I'm seeking the total number of children in care and then broken down: number of youth in the 16/17-year-old program, so section 10; number of children in the custody of a PSI [person of sufficient interest]; number of children in care under apprehended status; number of children in care under a section 9; number of children/youth in care under a temporary wardship order; number of children/youth in care under a long-term wardship order; number of permanent wards; number of youth

under a section 56 agreement, an extension of support agreement; number of children/youth under wardship of another province or territory; and the number of children in foster homes, not including First Nations agency transfers. So that's the breakdown of the number of children in care.

I'm also wondering a number of approved foster homes; a number of foster homes with more than four foster care placements; the percentage of children in care who are Indigenous; the number of licensed group homes; the number of Indigenous-operated group homes.

And then I have questions around death and critical injury in care, which I understand is tracked according to a calendar year. So I'm asking for 2023. That would be the number of children who have died in ministry care in 2023. And then the legal status of children who died in care — long-term ward, permanent ward, temporary ward, or apprehended status; the placement type of the children who died in care — group home, hospital, etc.; the location of their death — group home, hospital, community, etc.; the number of children who were critically injured in ministry care; the legal status of children who were critically injured in ministry care; the placement type of children who were critically injured in ministry care; and the location of the incident for children who were critically injured in ministry care.

So again I'm just seeking an update on these numbers. I'm happy to receive this at a later date. My one question — I believe this is how I did it last year for the minister on this issue — is whether the total number of children in care is trending upwards or downwards, and whether the death and critical injury in care is trending upwards or downwards.

So if you could answer those two substantive questions today that would be great, but I'm happy to receive, you know, all of the validated numbers and all that at a future time.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So quite an extensive list asked for by the committee. And I'll turn it over in a minute to Tobie Eberhardt, ADM, child and family services to get into some of the details there. And we'll of course maybe not have all of the extensive information requested, but there are some available data today.

So I want to inform the committee about a few of the things we're doing in order to hopefully decrease the amount of children in care, and this budget increases those supports for at-risk families, children, and youth. It will support additional residential care options for children with complex needs, increase supports for youth transitioning from care, and bringing in intensive in-home support programs to communities where they currently don't exist.

The ministry, those preventative-type programs, it's also increasing funding to partners in providing care, increasing foster care and extended family care allowance rates, increasing funding to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder network and mobile crisis services. I think I maybe touched on a few of these in my opening comments.

But I want to let the committee know that the government takes this very seriously. I take it seriously, and there are increases in this budget. For example, 5 million for service providers

supporting at-risk children, youth, and families in their homes and communities — that's more detail on what I just said.

1.8 million to support growing needs for private treatment for those highest complex need patients or children; 950,000 to expand group home services for children and youth and provide eight new spaces in those services to children.

This summer a \$600,000 increase to foster care and extended family care allowance rates to help cover the cost of caring for a child, such as school fees and promoting family contact for children in care.

\$500,000, an increase to assist youth transitioning from care to access housing, employment, educational opportunities as recommended by the use of the advisory team. So again I could talk quite a long time about the youth advisory teams. In the last several years, last couple of years I should say, I've had the chance to meet with this group. Looking forward to it again right after session and listening to the people who have been through the system and knowing what they would like to see happen to make things just a little bit better for those going through those tough times.

And so as a direct result of those interactions this budget, as well as previous budgets, have group homes for mental health for youth, for example, teamed with CBOs to bring those particular homes online. And again that transition we're always hearing — once you turn 18 and once you graduate from grade 12 hopefully — services become different so that's what this infusion in this budget will be able to do. We'll partner with some, again, CBOs to deliver that programming.

Increase in mobile crisis support for critical after-hour services. I had mentioned 375 to increase expanded intensive in-home services for those families outside Regina and Saskatoon. That's a situation maybe I should defer to Ms. Eberhardt on this . . .

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, Minister, sorry. Can I just weigh in for a sec? I don't mean to be disrespectful. We have a little over 20 minutes left. I get to do this once a year. You had an opening statement . . .

The Chair: — So, Ms. Conway, the minister will answer the question the way he chooses to answer. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I also only have estimates once a year so I want to talk about the good budget that we've been able to bring forward. And I'm almost done, but there's a lot of things. You had a lot of points in your question, so I, you know, using equal time to answer.

375 to expand intensive in-home services for at-risk families outside of Regina and Saskatoon. We've talked about that, how we use third-party providers to not always remove children from a family situation but provide wraparound supports for that family so they can stay together, and you know, continue to work as a family and work out their challenges.

And then 135 increase to support the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder network to expand supports. They do good work and they'll have, my understanding, more outreach people as a result of this budget.

I turn it over to Ms. Eberhardt to answer the specific questions that the member had, but I want to give the committee a good context of the important work in general being done, including in this budget.

Ms. Eberhardt: — So I can speak to some of the trends that we're seeing. So you know, over the last fiscal year what we've seen is our intakes and investigations are about the same. There hasn't been a lot of change in that, which is good. But we are seeing increased number of children being discharged home and also a decrease in the number of children coming into care, like within that fiscal year. And the number of children under the age of 30 days, so infants having to come into care, has also decreased.

So I think some of that, you know, as Minister mentioned, there was some targeted investments around supporting families to safely care for their children. We've also seen an increase in the number of families that we're able to support to safely care for the children at home. So that's gone up almost 5 per cent from last year. So that's good news.

Regarding children in care — and so these stats are as of March 31st, so they're a point-in-time count — the number of children in care was 3,916. So we've seen that has gone up about 2.7 per cent from last year. However the number of children who are placed in the custody of a PSI, a person of sufficient interest, has gone down. So it's 1,981, so that's a decrease of 5.5 per cent.

So what we're finding is, as we work with families and with First Nation communities, you know, obviously we're working with them around what's the best plan for the child on a long-term basis or longer term basis. And what we're finding is oftentimes now families are wanting a little bit more support.

And so we are oftentimes now, the trend's been that we're going maybe more often with a wardship order as opposed to a person-of-sufficient-interest order.

Ms. Conway: — Why is that a positive trend?

Ms. Eberhardt: — Sorry?

Ms. Conway: — Like, would you consider that to be a positive trend? And if so, why? Because the PSI placement, like usually that's someone that's more connected to the child. Am I not right about this?

Ms. Eberhardt: — Yeah. And sorry, I didn't mean that necessarily that part is the positive trend.

Ms. Conway: — Okay.

Ms. Eberhardt: — I think, you know, what it points to is really the work that we've been doing to work with families and their supports and their communities, and really working together to come up with the best plan that everyone can get behind and support for that young person or that child. And so those plans are geared and developed specific to each of those children.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Do you have any breakdown for those wardship numbers? Temporary, long-term, or permanent?

Ms. Eberhardt: — Yeah, I can give you those. So of those 3,916 wards, we have 726 were on apprehended status; 407 are a voluntary agreement, or section 9, we call that; 1,080 are temporary wards; 1,162 are long-term wards; 306 are permanent wards. We have 77 who are wards of another province; and 158 are getting the extension of supports, the section 56, post-majority extensions.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Can you speak to the trend in death and critical injury?

Ms. Eberhardt: — Yes. So last year, we had six children who died while in care, and this year we have seven. And so more of those specifics I don't have with me right now about the location.

Ms. Conway: — That's fine, thank you. Sorry, I forgot to ask this: there were previously two CBI for-profit group homes functioning. Are those two group homes still functioning? Are there any other for-profit group homes functioning in the child and family services realm?

[21:45]

Ms. Eberhardt: — Thank you for the question. Last year we had five homes in the province that were operated by for-profits: two by CBI and three by Neighbourhood Home Care. And this year we have added one additional one with CBI. So there's a total of six homes now in the province.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, can you repeat the other company?

Ms. Eberhardt: — So last year we had five homes, and we've added one. So now there's six.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, the name. I know CBI. Sorry, the other . . .

Ms. Eberhardt: — And Neighbourhood Home Care.

Ms. Conway: — Neighbourhood Home Care. Where's the third CBI? Where are those additional homes operating out of?

Ms. Eberhardt: — The three CBI homes operate in Saskatoon.

Ms. Conway: — And the Neighbourhood Home Care?

Ms. Eberhardt: — So the three homes that are operated by Neighbourhood Home Care, two are in Saskatoon and one is in Regina.

Ms. Conway: — Do you know what's been budgeted in this budget to go to Neighbourhood Home Care and CBI in total?

Ms. Eberhardt: — Thank you. So the contracts for Neighbourhood Home Care are budgeted for \$2.7 million and for CBI it's budgeted for 3.1 million. I think it's important just to note that we sort of have standardized rates for our contracts. You know, there's not a difference between if they're a for-profit or a not-for-profit. And the standardized rates are really based on the type of service that they're providing; the number of children they're caring for; are they children with special needs, medical needs, developmental needs. And so that's all part of what would help determine what the cost of the contract would be.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. I'm prepared to move on to income assistance . . .

The Chair: — I will just remind members that we have 10 minutes left of our time tonight.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. We'll just get as far as we can get in. Maybe I'll just start with the data points. I'm looking for the number of SAID and SIS [Saskatchewan income support] beneficiaries and households, the dependency rates, an update on global expenditures to Linkin and MiCase, how many people left the ministry in '22-23 and '23-24. We can start there . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . Do you want me to repeat them?

Ms. Kratzig: — If you could. And particularly the last question — is that about staff leaving the ministry?

Ms. Conway: — Yeah, the way that you've couched it to me in the past, number of people that left the ministry per year including retirements. And I'm looking for an update on '22-23 and '23-24.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — SIS and SAID . . .

Ms. Conway: — SIS and SAID, so both beneficiaries and households because sometimes we couch those in both of those terms; the dependency rates for '22-23 and '23-24; an update on the global expenditures for Linkin and MiCase; and the number of people who have left the ministry per year including retirements for the '22-23 years and '23-24 years. And if any of this you need to provide at a later time, that's fine.

[22:00]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So, Madam Chair, I know there was a lot of information asked by the committee just a few moments ago. The officials are working hard to endeavour to get that information. It looks like we are going to expire for tonight's deliberations. I believe we're coming back tomorrow, and so we'll have that information for the committee.

Once we resume, we'll talk about the SIS and SAID caseload, dependency rates, Linkin, MiCase, people who left the ministry. Talk a little bit about some of the investments we've made in the income assistance side to help individuals who are of low income or, you know, trying to meet some of their basic needs, realizing that these programs are income of last resort.

Talk a little bit about the Sask employment incentive, which hopefully will have an impact on some of the numbers on the SIS and SAID caseload as well. So making those investments in individuals.

We'll — at your discretion, Madam Chair — pick it up at the next opportunity. We'll have that information, is what I wanted to let the committee know about, when we resume.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of these estimates, we will adjourn consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Social Services. Minister, do you have any closing comments?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I know, like I said, I look forward to continuing the examination of the Ministry of Social Services budget the next time this committee meets. And thanks to all the members for their questions, and the officials of course for their work today but also all year round to help vulnerable people.

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

Ms. Conway: — Just looking forward to continuing the conversation tomorrow. I left out one ask, and it may not be something that can be provided tomorrow, but in the past I've asked about the closure of files in March of each year. So I'm also wondering about closure of files for core AI programs for March '21-22, '22-23, '23-24, and new SAID applications. I forgot to include that. It may not be available tomorrow, but I thought if you're doing all this work of compiling what I've already asked for, I would complete some of my asks in this area.

But apart from that, no closing comments at this time. Just looking forward to continuing this conversation tomorrow at 7 p.m., I believe.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister and officials. Thank you, committee members and Legislative Assembly staff. That concludes our business for today. I would ask a member to move a motion of adjournment. Mr. Nerlien has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. This committee stands adjourned until Tuesday, April 16th, 2024 at 3:30 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 22:03.]