



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Seniors and Community Supports

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8:30 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Quest, Dave, Strathcona (PC), Deputy Chair

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Bhardwaj, Naresh, Edmonton-Ellerslie (PC)
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Chi Loo	Assistant Deputy Minister, Seniors Services Division
Susan McCulloch	Senior Financial Officer
Reegan McCullough	Assistant Deputy Minister, Disability Supports Division
Tim Wiles	Deputy Minister

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8:30 a.m.

Wednesday, April 8, 2009

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I would like to now call the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order and welcome everyone in attendance. I would advise our guests that they do not need to operate the microphones as this is taken care of by the *Hansard* staff. I would also like to note that the meeting is recorded by *Hansard*, and the audio is streamed live on the Internet.

Now we will quickly go around, starting with the vice-chair, and introduce ourselves for the convenience of *Hansard*.

Mr. Quest: Good morning. Dave Quest, Strathcona.

Dr. Massolin: Good morning. Philip Massolin, committee research co-ordinator, Legislative Assembly Office.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Good morning. Naresh Bhardwaj, MLA, Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Vandermeer: Good morning. Tony Vandermeer, MLA for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. I'm going to apologize in advance. I have to make a presentation to cabinet at 9 o'clock, and I don't know if I'll make it back here.

Mr. Dallas: Good morning. Cal Dallas, MLA for Red Deer-South.

Mr. Kang: Good morning. Darshan Kang, MLA, Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Chase: Good morning. Harry Chase, Calgary-Varsity, Alberta poet laureate.

Ms Pastoor: Good morning. Bridget Pastoor, Lethbridge-East, and I'm not a poet.

Mr. Loo: Good morning. Chi Loo, seniors services division.

Mr. Wiles: Tim Wiles, Deputy Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Ms McCulloch: Good morning. Susan McCulloch, senior financial officer, Seniors and Community Supports.

Mr. Arsenault: Dave Arsenault, community support programs.

Mr. McCullough: Reegan McCullough, disability supports division.

Mr. Neid: Good morning. Al Neid, office of the Auditor General.

Mr. Ryan: Good morning. Ed Ryan, Assistant Auditor General.

Mr. Dunn: Fred Dunn, Auditor General.

Mr. Benito: Carl Benito, Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Olson: Good morning. Verlyn Olson, Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Ms Rempel: Jody Rempel, committee clerk, Legislative Assembly Office.

The Chair: Hugh MacDonald, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

May I please have approval of the agenda that was circulated?

Thank you, Mr. Dallas. Moved by Mr. Cal Dallas that the agenda for the April 8, 2009, meeting be approved as distributed. All in favour? None opposed. Thank you.

Now, the minutes were circulated. As item 3 on our agenda may I have approval of the minutes? Mr. Chase. Moved by Mr. Chase that the minutes for the March 18, 2009, Standing Committee on Public Accounts be approved as circulated. All those in favour? None opposed. Thank you.

Of course, this comes to item 4 on our agenda, meeting with the officials from Alberta Seniors and Community Supports. We're dealing with the Auditor General of Alberta's reports from April and October 2008; the annual report of the government of Alberta 2007-08, which includes the consolidated financial statements and the Measuring Up progress report; and the Seniors and Community Supports annual report from 2007-08. I would like to remind everyone of the briefing materials that, again, were provided to us by the LAO research staff. We really appreciate that.

Now, Mr. Wiles, if you have a brief opening statement on behalf of the department, sir, please proceed.

Thank you.

Mr. Wiles: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning. I'm pleased to be here on behalf of the Hon. Mary Anne Jablonski, Minister of Seniors and Community Supports, to discuss the documents that you laid out before us. I would like to introduce one more of my staff, who is in the back. Dana Hogemann works with Susan and did a lot of work in helping us prepare for this meeting. I think we should also acknowledge that Pam Livingston is here from the minister's office as well.

I just have a very few brief remarks to highlight some of the things that the ministry has accomplished in the 2007-08 fiscal year. I think our programs did a lot to contribute to seniors and Albertans with disabilities. Some of the key initiatives included the ministry responding to the growing need for supportive living across the province through the affordable supportive living initiative, or ASLI as we call it internally. This initiative committed \$48 million in capital funding to support the development of 793 affordable supportive living units across the province. We also allocated \$21.3 million to assist with the increased construction costs for supportive living units that were approved in the '06-07 fiscal year under the rural affordable supportive living program.

The ministry also implemented accommodation standards for supportive living settings in long-term care facilities in 2007. The standards promote the safety, security, and quality of life of residents in supportive living settings. To support the compliance with standards and make it easier for Albertans to see which facilities are compliant with the accommodation standards, we began developing a web-based public reporting system, and I'm happy to report that that system went live shortly after the fiscal year, in the summer of 2008. We also established an accommodations standards complaint line for the public to voice concerns with the accommodations and related services in the supportive living and long-term care facilities.

Switching to Albertans with disabilities that we serve, we had an improvement in the AISH rate in the '07-08 fiscal year. In January of 2008 the maximum living allowance was increased to \$1,088 per month. That's the fourth increase in four years, and as of yesterday that rate has now gone to \$1,188 with the announcement in the budget.

We've also done a lot of work to improve employment opportunities for AISH recipients who are able to work and wish to work by working with agencies to provide assistance to AISH clients who are able to work to develop their skills and find jobs. We've had a lot of one-on-one sessions and group sessions with AISH clients, and

they tell us that working not only increases their income but their self-confidence, their connection to the community, their independence, and their overall quality of life.

We also took action to support the recruitment and retention of staff who serve adults with developmental disabilities and other vulnerable Albertans. Our ministry contributed \$15 million in year to help these agencies meet their staffing needs. Within the budget for that year as well \$11.3 million for agency recruitment was included. The funding is intended to help adults with developmental disabilities continue to get the support and services they need to enjoy a high quality of life in their communities by supporting the local agencies who serve them. Since '05-06 Seniors and Community Supports has committed \$60 million to help agencies hire and keep their staff, and with yesterday's budget we committed another \$24 million to that area.

We did some work on legislation in the ministry during the fiscal year. We spent some time developing the Supportive Living Accommodation Licensing Act in consultation with stakeholders. The legislation will improve the quality of care and monitoring of standards in a wider range of supportive living facilities. It is currently making its way through the legislative process, and it was introduced in the current sitting.

We also passed amendments – or you passed amendments, I should say – to the Personal Directives Act in December 2007. A personal directive allows Albertans to make their wishes known or identify someone they trust to help make decisions on their behalf in case of an illness or injury that leaves them unable to make personal decisions on their own.

During '07-08 the ministry also continued work on the Adult Guardianship and Trusteeship Act, which received royal assent in December '08. It replaces current legislation, the Dependent Adults Act, and addresses situations where an adult no longer has the mental capacity to make personal or financial decisions on their own and does not have a personal directive in place.

Quickly looking at the numbers for the ministry for '07-08, our ministry budget was \$1.78 billion, and we spent \$1.73 billion of that. That provided needed supports to help vulnerable Albertans, including about 140,000 low-income seniors, 91,000 adults with developmental disabilities, 37,000 AISH clients, and about 80,000 clients who accessed the aids to daily living program.

The vast majority of these expenditures fall under three areas. We spent about \$712 million in the disability supports area. That would include AISH, aids to daily living, and the supports we provide for adults with acquired brain injuries. The second area is the community support programs and strategic planning, which took up more than \$650 million of our budget. This includes the PDD, or persons with developmental disabilities, program, the public guardian services' protection of persons in care, and the work we do in the supportive living field. The third main area is seniors' services, which includes about \$353 million. This includes the Alberta seniors' benefit program, dental and optical assistance, and education property tax assistance for seniors.

Turning quickly to the Auditor General's report for this period, I'm pleased that the department had some satisfactory comments from the Auditor General. The Auditor did not make any specific recommendations for our ministry in either his April or October reports of 2008. Our ministry continues to work with the Ministry of Health and Wellness and the Alberta Health Services Board to continue to address the recommendations from the Auditor's 2005 report on seniors' care and programs. Some of the work on the accommodations standards that I mentioned earlier helped address that.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'll conclude my comments.

8:40

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dunn, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Dunn: Yes. Thank you. I'll be very brief. Mr. Chairman and committee members, the results of our audit of the ministry are briefly summarized on page 343 of our October report. We have not made any new recommendations to the department this year, as just mentioned by Mr. Wiles. On page 386 of the October report we list the recommendations made to the department in previous years that are still outstanding. The committee members may want to ask management about the actions taken by the department and the persons with developmental disabilities boards to implement the 2003-04 recommendations to improve contracting policies and monitoring processes for managing service providers that provide services to persons with developmental disabilities.

We also completed work from the results of our follow-up of our 2005 audit on seniors' care and programs, as just mentioned by the deputy. The result of this work begins on page 95 of our April 2008 report. We report that the department has implemented three of our prior-year recommendations by establishing accommodation standards for supportive living and long-term care facilities and has made satisfactory progress in monitoring these facilities for compliance with the standards. We also report that to fully implement the recommendation, the department needs to complete its inspections of all facilities and enforce compliance with the standards. The committee may want to ask management about the status and the results of their inspection processes.

On page 144 of the April report we have listed recommendations from our seniors' care audit that are still outstanding and have provided a summary of management's actions. The committee members may want to ask management about the actions they have taken to implement these recommendations, particularly the recommendation on page 147 to obtain the information necessary to make income threshold, cash benefit, supplementary benefit decisions for the Alberta seniors' benefit program.

Those are my remarks, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The chair would like to welcome Mr. Jacobs this morning.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you.

The Chair: Good morning.

We'll proceed now to questions from the members. Mr. Chase, followed by Naresh Bhardwaj, please.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I will pass off this first opportunity to my esteemed colleague who is in charge of seniors for the Liberal Party.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you very much, and thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Before I start asking for a whole bunch of this and that, I really would like to I think commend the ministry. I've had this portfolio for four years. I've worked very hard at it, and I'm pleased to say that I think I have seen some really major changes that have helped the vulnerable and the people that I represent as the critic for the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports.

Having said all of that, I think that I'm going to start with – I think this is partly where some of this money came from for the ones that we got in the budget – page 90, that shows that the AISH financial assistance was unexpended by \$23 million. What was the reason for the unexpended monies, and have these monies in fact gone forward into the raises that were shown in the budget yesterday?

Mr. Wiles: First of all, thank you very much for those compliments. I will pass those on to the minister. She deserves a lot of credit for the leadership she provides.

The reasons for the lapse of funds in the AISH program primarily relate to some of the assumptions we made at the time of the budget for '07-08 onto the AISH caseload. We had factored in an expected percentage, and it came in under that amount. When the caseload is less, then that frees up that money, so that was then lapsed into the general revenues for the broader use of the government. I can't speak to how that was used in the current budget process, but I think that's taken into effect and did permit that. I think that was the primary reason.

Reegan, do you have anything to supplement?

Mr. McCullough: I would just add that the actual caseload growth that Mr. Wiles is describing varies a fair amount from year to year. Some years it may be roughly 2 per cent. We've had some years as high as approximately 8 per cent. So we were basing in that year, I believe, around 4 per cent as caseload growth. That would explain the lapse for that year.

Ms Pastoor: If I might, just a supplemental. I think that the criteria had been adjusted in some fashion during that period. Would that account for the decreased caseload?

Mr. McCullough: The eligibility criteria has not been adjusted, but whenever we increase the AISH rate, that allows more individuals to qualify for the program from a financial perspective. So when it went from, say, \$1,000 to \$1,050, that allowed more individuals to qualify.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Bhardwaj, please, followed by Mr. Kang.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. My question from page 18 under Core Business 1, Seniors and Community Supports annual report: "seniors in need have access to financial assistance that will enable a secure and dignified way of living." What are the types of assistance and total of assistance provided to the seniors by the department?

Mr. Wiles: Thank you very much. I would point out that our seniors in Alberta are eligible for one of the most comprehensive benefits packages of seniors in the country. They include the income support they receive through the Alberta seniors' benefit; \$255 million was spent on that in '07-08. They also receive dental and optical benefits, totalling \$55 million in '07-08. All senior homeowners are eligible for the school property tax assistance, and that was \$5.3 million in '07-08. As well, low-income seniors are eligible for the special-needs assistance grants, which totalled \$19.6 million in '07-08.

Our seniors receive the highest monthly provincial income supplement support, and we have the highest thresholds in the country. I would point out that with yesterday's budget our rates for single seniors increased \$40 to \$280, and for couples it increased \$60 to \$420 per month that they're eligible for. As well, our thresholds will be adjusted effective July 1 to coincide with the benefit year, and the thresholds will rise to \$24,000 for singles and \$36,000 for couples.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much.

Can I ask a supplemental as well, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: You bet. Go right ahead.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Okay. Thank you very much. On page 19 the Seniors and Community Supports annual report indicates that the minister is working towards obtaining better information for demographics and providing better programming, and I think the report has been completed and submitted. Can you tell me what some of the results are indicating from that?

Mr. Wiles: Well, you're absolutely correct. The Demographic Planning Commission was established in May of '08. They worked over the summer and fall, did a consultation, focus groups in five communities across the province. They also did an online survey, and we had more than 10,000 respondents, seniors and people of all ages, actually, in the survey results. The report was released in December of '08. It was a findings report, and that will be used to help us as we move forward in developing an aging policy framework to help us frame some of our future policies as they relate to seniors.

Chi, can you comment on some of the themes that came out of the Demographic Planning Commission report briefly, please?

Mr. Loo: Sure. There are 10 themes. I will name a couple of the major ones. There is a lot of discussion around housing, incomes. Another major theme that came out quite strongly is about supporting seniors currently as well as in the future in terms of aging in the community, transportation, and so on. As the deputy indicated, the online survey that we did was not limited to seniors specifically because in the aging population and the demographic planning work we are planning for the future.

We got respondents, over 10,000 of them, and the demographic breakdown of the respondents almost parallels the demographics of the province. We probably got around 12, 13 per cent of respondents from individuals 65 and over, but we actually did get a fair number of respondents between 45 to 64. That's the input.

The findings report is available online. There's the bigger report, but there is also a summary report that reflects on the themes as well as some of the values that the commission members suggest we need to consider when we're establishing the aging population framework.

8:50

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kang, please, followed by Mr. Quest.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. On page 18, 140,000 of Alberta's 370,000 seniors – that's about 40 per cent – received monthly cash benefits from the ASB program, which provides assistance to eligible lower income seniors to improve their financial situation. What are the main reasons why 40 per cent of those seniors need that financial assistance? Low income?

Mr. Wiles: Yeah. The seniors' benefit program is linked to income. That's why we have that income threshold. Currently our demographic is that almost 140,000 seniors are eligible based on the income we get reported to us. We get that automatically through a linkage with Canada Revenue Agency, with the seniors' permission, of course. I think what we've found in recent years is that as the demographic shifts, the income levels of newer seniors coming in are a little bit higher. We're seeing across the country through StatsCan reporting that seniors' incomes are improving, but where

it is today is based on the current information that's available. I think that's reflective of the working conditions that those people had during their working lives.

Mr. Kang: I've got a supplemental. Okay. Is that the only criteria being used for that, or is there any assessment done about the help the seniors get? You know, are they having comfortable lives with the assistance?

Mr. Wiles: Well, I'll ask Chi to supplement that. I think that from the income supports side we are really looking at a financial benefit based on their income. We do offer other benefits for low-income seniors through the dental and optical programs. The special-needs program as well can help them with a number of I don't want to say one-time but extraordinary expenses that they face.

Chi, do you want to supplement that, please?

Mr. Loo: Sure. Again, the Alberta seniors' benefit program is not the primary income source of low-income seniors. Right across Canada it's the old age security and the guaranteed income supplement. It's just that in Alberta we're fortunate enough to be able to top that up for them. In terms of the number of seniors it is targeted, still, to give a boost to those that are most in need. Actually, if you refer to page 20, that is the trend at the time of reporting from 2001 to 2005. When you look at the average income of Albertans versus Canada, we've been exceeding, over, the national average. The latest Stats Canada information we have currently publicly available for 2006 also supports that trend continuing.

In terms of the additional help for low-income seniors, if they do have some one-time, extraordinary stuff, special-needs assistance will provide assistance quite often with home repair, like a furnace, et cetera, and so on. Those are on an as-needed basis. Okay? Those are additional. Seniors are eligible for up to \$5,000 of assistance through that program each year. The optical and dental programs, again, are obviously available to seniors. As you can see from the numbers, there's quite a bit of uptake on those, like over \$50 million a year for dental and optical assistance.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Quest, please, followed by Mr. Chase.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm just looking on page 10 of the annual report at the affordable supportive living for seniors and persons with disabilities program, \$48 million on that. I'm just kind of wondering – it's a fairly short blurb – if you could maybe tell me a little bit more about what that program does.

Mr. Wiles: Certainly. As noted in the write-up, it was \$48 million used to provide 793 affordable supportive living units across the province. The process we go through is that we partner with for-profit and not-for-profit providers in communities. A call for proposals comes forward. We go through an exercise when those proposals come in. They're reviewed by our staff and assessed as to the need in the community, the financial viability of the proponent, and the ability to get started quickly, the key criteria we use. Then we go through a scoring system. We often get more requests than we have funding for, of course, but in this case we had funding for \$48 million worth, which we were able to award through the proponents. That was announced, I think, later in that fiscal year.

Dave, are there any other things you want to add on that?

Mr. Arsenault: I think the one thing is that the program will provide up to 50 per cent of the capital costs. We find many groups coming in at under the 50 per cent ask, so we're able to stretch the money as far as we can and focusing in on affordable supportive living units for seniors and persons with disabilities.

Mr. Quest: Okay. Thank you.

Just in, actually, the same paragraph there's another \$21.3 million – now, it says "top-up"; I'm not sure I understand the top-up term there – for the rural affordable supportive living program, which looks like it's a different program than the first one, but I'm not sure I understand how it's different.

Mr. Wiles: Okay. I'll try and help you understand that. The rural affordable supportive living program and the affordable supportive living initiative are very similar programs, the distinction being that the rural affordable supportive living was the predecessor program, and it focused on supportive living in rural locations whereas the newer program applies to all Alberta, including Edmonton and Calgary. That's the biggest distinction between those two.

The top-up funding component relates to the fact that a number of projects were awarded in the '05-06 year and '06-07 year. At times they were based on the estimates of the construction costs at that time. As those projects got up, as they got their zoning and things in place, in the economy at that time we found that for a number of those projects the costs had escalated beyond what we had originally anticipated. In order to allow those projects to proceed, they needed some top-up money, and we were able to get permission from Treasury Board to provide that additional money.

Mr. Quest: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chase, please, followed by Mr. Jacobs.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I'm going to take a leaf out of the minister of finance's budget approach and provide a specific name and example to demonstrate the difficulties AISH recipients have surviving, never mind thriving.

Fred Bisshop is a Calgary-Varsity constituent in his mid-50s. He suffers from an extremely troublesome heart condition, which necessitates him living in close proximity to the Foothills hospital. For a 540 square foot, one-bedroom apartment he has to pay over a thousand dollars in rent alone. Therefore, my question is: what factors are taken into consideration in determining AISH allowance rates; for example, geographic cost-of-living factors, inflation? Calgary's a high-rental area.

Mr. Wiles: Well, I think I would initially respond to that that the AISH rate is universal across the province, and that was a policy decision I think since the inception of the program if I'm not mistaken, Reagan. What I would point out, though, is that AISH clients are eligible in some cases for personal benefits. That can include transportation to medical appointments, some child care things, and a number of other opportunities there.

Reagan, is there something you'd like to add?

Mr. McCullough: I would add as well that they're also eligible, depending on their situation, to apply for housing assistance so in Calgary could apply through the housing management body there for social housing. They're certainly able to do that, and there are a number of programs that housing would have in that regard.

Mr. Chase: In my experience I've taken Fred around to a number of developments, and it's very hard to find housing, never mind affordable housing. Of course, the proximity to the hospital is another concern. But the universality of the payments for AISH, unfortunately, does not take into account, then, local inflationary costs. It's probably considerably cheaper for an AISH recipient to live in Nanton than in Calgary. My question would be: in the 2007-2008 year has any thought been given to making the funding for AISH recipients realistic, sort of taking a basket-measure approach based on where it is they're required to live?

9:00

Mr. McCullough: The response I would give to that is that basically the AISH program provides financial, health, and personal benefits. Certainly, we take a look within those categories to see if they're meeting the needs, but when it comes to the housing costs, we look to the Housing and Urban Affairs ministry in terms of the housing supports that would be provided. The program has not provided housing supports. We have administered some of the homeless eviction prevention fund, but there is not a designated housing component to the AISH financial benefit.

Mr. Chase: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Jacobs, please, followed by Ms Pastoor.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My questions are going to be around the AISH programs. I've always been interested in, you know, how we're doing to give AISH recipients the opportunity to be employed. I notice that of the 37,000 AISH recipients we have, only about half of them are employed. I guess my first question is: how many of the ones who aren't currently employed would be potentially employable? How many of them could get employment if the opportunity provided itself for them to receive employment?

Mr. Wiles: Okay. Just to clarify the numbers, of the 37,000-odd AISH clients today about 17 per cent are reporting employment income. I think that's the most current number.

Mr. Jacobs: Okay.

Mr. Wiles: That percentage has increased recently over the last few years for a number of reasons, I would suggest. One is that we've increased the employment income exemption for AISH recipients. So the amount that they can earn before their financial benefit starts to get reduced has been increased, most recently last July. I think that's contributed to more AISH clients being employed.

We've also been working within our AISH division, putting on sessions and having focus discussions with AISH clients to help them understand some of the possibilities and benefits of employment, also working with Employment and Immigration to access some of their training programs as well. That's helped contribute to that increase in the number of people who are employed.

What the maximum number is, I don't think we can answer that question because by definition to be eligible for AISH, you have to have a disability that is significant enough to prohibit you from earning a living over a long period of time. To the extent we can help AISH clients achieve a certain level of employment to the extent they're able, we hear anecdotally that there are a lot of positive results from that. But by definition I think there is going to be a significant number of those that will have barriers to employment that they may never be able to overcome due to their disability. But it's an area we continue to work on and try and help as best we can.

Is there anything you want to add to that, Reagan?

Mr. McCullough: Well, certainly, the economy over the last couple of years, I think, has also had an impact. We're watching that closely to see if there is a reduced number of people working, but so far the numbers are still remaining very strong. We report that information largely on a monthly basis. I think also that through the various workshops that we've had with AISH clients – a lot of them were not necessarily aware of some of the changes that we made to the employment exemptions, what kind of training supports are available. Even transportation to go to apply for a job: those kinds of things are all somewhat beneficial.

Basically, through those workshops a lot of them have strongly expressed that one of their number one goals is to have some form of employment. A lot of these things, though, depending on the needs of the individual or the barriers, come back to awareness, whether it's awareness with employers of their abilities, awareness of the public sometimes, and awareness of the individuals themselves in terms of what kind of employment they may be able to achieve.

Mr. Jacobs: A supplementary, if I may: when you speak of workshops, are you referring to pilot projects? Do you have some pilot projects to help AISH recipients? I guess, as a follow-up, how many of the AISH people who are employed have long-term employment versus short-term employment?

Mr. McCullough: First of all, we don't track the length of employment. At the present time our system basically allows us to track employment earnings per month, so we aren't tracking whether they have long-term work. Certainly, some of the work that they do is seasonal and is part-time. We're looking to build on that over time in terms of better data and so on, whether it's shorter or longer term employment.

We definitely do have pilot projects. As I was previously discussing, though, we do have workshops that we hold right in our offices, where we invite clients who are interested in working to come in and we explain some of the benefits of working and how the employment earnings exemptions work. Then if they're interested – we've had some pilot projects – we'll also connect them to E and I's employment training programs as well. So there are a number of opportunities there for them, for sure.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you.

Mr. Wiles: I would just add that in some of those workshops it's not just our staff explaining to AISH clients the benefits of working; we actually bring in AISH clients who are having the employment experience, and they talk to the other clients. I think it really helps them to hear about the benefits from people who are in similar situations.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pastoor, please, followed by Mr. Bhardwaj.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. My next question may well be a recurring one through this session. From the Auditor General's '08 report, page 101, there really is a growing need for long-term care facilities, and the actual number of long-term care beds is decreasing. How much funding was specifically directed towards developing more long-term care facilities – I think at this point in time I may rephrase that into long-term care beds, and I'll explain that in a minute – in comparison with the funding directed toward designated assisted living or supportive living facilities?

Why I say long-term care beds is because, perhaps a bit of editorialization here, I think the optimum would be that even if you do have a designated assisted living facility, in that facility there should be some long-term care beds so that people can age in place but also die in place, so that they're not being moved around, and it would eliminate that first bed. I think I've now moved a bit over onto the Health side, but I'll let you take a whack at it.

Mr. Wiles: Yeah. I'll start. Some of your question does move into the Health side.

I would comment on your latter point about facilities. I think we're seeing that some of the newer facilities have that range of beds in them. I think of the Kensington in the northwest of Edmonton, where they have all the way from privately owned condos to limited supportive living, where people might be getting meals and house-keeping, all the way to designated living, to long-term care in the same facility. As the system is growing and evolving, I think that's going to become more common.

Certainly, some of the proposals we receive – we might be funding some of it from our ministry. We fund the supportive living piece. Some of them are getting money from Housing and Urban Affairs for affordable housing without supports, and there are plans for components to have the long-term care piece as well.

Your question about funding for the long-term care beds: that is a Health question, so I can't offer information on that.

[Mr. Quest in the chair]

Ms Pastoor: Okay. Thank you.

Just a supplement, and it's a word that I probably should have used in the first place. Moving through that continuum, I think that we have to perhaps not be afraid to use the words "palliative care" because that is a component of the whole continuum of a person's life towards the end.

Thank you.

9:10

The Deputy Chair: All right. Mr. Bhardwaj, please, followed by Mr. Kang.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Page 92 of the annual report shows overexpenditure of \$18 million to the PDD boards. Can you please describe the reason for this overexpenditure?

Mr. Wiles: Thank you, and yes, I can explain that.

Mr. Bhardwaj: I guess that's why you're here.

Mr. Wiles: During the fiscal year the PDD boards and, more specifically, the contracted agencies that provide a vast majority of the services to adults with developmental disabilities were experiencing some challenges hiring and keeping staff, and in-year we made a decision to give them an additional amount of money to help them address that issue of hiring and keeping their staff. We allocated an additional \$15 million within the overall ministry budget to address that specific issue. The money that we found was from other programs within the department, but that's why this particular line shows an overexpenditure.

We also added another \$3 million to the PDD program to help deal with complex needs. I think we're finding more and more as time goes by that a number of our clients in the PDD world have multiple disabilities, and we need to look at ways to better support and co-ordinate with other providers of supports with those multiple

disabilities. The \$3 million was one-time money to help find some suitable accommodations for people with complex needs.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you. My supplemental would be along the same lines, there. What portion of that would be providing the salaries, and what kind of incentives are you guys doing in terms addressing the staffing needs? What kind of incentives are you providing? I know you partially answered that question, but can you elaborate on that just a touch more?

Mr. Wiles: The nature of the work in providing supports for adults with developmental disabilities is labour intensive. It requires a lot of staff support. I think we would find that the agencies have probably 10,000 to 12,000 staff themselves, supporting probably 8,700 adults through the community agency approach. So their percentage of staff costs would be very high. I think that within the community boards we estimate it to be within the range of 80 per cent, give or take. We don't have precise information because a lot of it's in the agencies as well. So it is a highly labour-intensive process. Our incentives have been – as I said in my opening comments, since '05-06 and up to the end of the year that we're talking about, we'd put over \$60 million to that, and then with the budget yesterday we're putting another \$24 million to that.

Money isn't the only solution, though. We've been working closely with the Alberta Council of Disability Services, which is an association of many of the provider agencies, working on workforce issues as well. We're looking at training and opportunities for benefits, and it's an ongoing conversation with them to see if there are ways to help address some of that.

Dave, is there anything you want to add?

Mr. Arsenaault: Well, maybe just to pick up on that work, in the winter there were two public service announcements that were on television, I think on Global, that, on the one hand, showed a person with a developmental disability working at a daycare, showing that the person has the ability to do that. The other one was encouraging people to consider this area as a career. Those are a couple of things that have gone on. There are workforce councils in some of the regions that include PDD and the service agencies looking at ways of attracting employees to the field and retaining them.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kang, followed by Mr. Dallas, please.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. On page 91 in the report under Supportive Living Grants and under Management and Operations the seniors lodge assistance was unexpended by \$5 million. There are some other programs there, too, you know. They are also unexpended. What are the reasons for this discrepancy?

Mr. Wiles: I think that the supportive living and long-term care grant is the line item where we fund some of the work we've done on establishing the standards and the monitoring and licensing work. I think some of the initial start-up costs for that were less than we expected. As well, I think we probably had some delays in getting staffed up on that.

On the lodge assistance program grant, that's driven by the volume of low-income seniors who are in the lodge setting, and we probably had some estimation differences there. Dave, is there anything to add on that?

Mr. Arsenault: I don't think so.

Mr. Kang: I've got a supplemental here, too. What is the criteria determining, you know, the factor for the allocation of these grants, and what has happened with this leftover money? Has it moved to other programs, or is it carried over? What's done with those funds?

Mr. Wiles: The lodge assistance program is a grant program where we fund the lodge operators directly. They get subsidized by the province for low-income seniors who are living in a lodge setting. For a low-income senior currently the rate is \$8.25 per day for a low-income resident. Then if they have some higher needs, they could be eligible for another \$3.50 per day to support some of those increased needs. There's also an allowance for the very small lodges, and I can't remember that number off the top of my head. Dave?

Mr. Arsenault: If they're under 30 units.

Mr. Wiles: Under 30 units, and they get an additional top-up as well. The criteria is that they're a lodge operator, that they have residents who are below our income threshold. They are then eligible for that top-up.

I've missed the second part of your question. I'm sorry.

Mr. Kang: What is done with the funds left over?

Mr. Wiles: In a ministry as large as ours – and you can go through the pages in the annual report – there will be a variety of areas that are over and under, and we take opportunities to try and reallocate some money. We originally had only budgeted \$30 million for the affordable supportive living initiative. One of the things we did this year is actually put \$48 million into that program, so that was one of the areas where we reallocated money. We also reallocated money to address that PDD contracted agency wage issue and to do that. But we do those decisions taking into account the sustainability of the future and how it affects future budgets as well. At the end of the year we did end up lapsing some money overall that, you know, goes back to the general revenue and contributes to the province's overall situation.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, sir.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dallas, followed by Mr. Chase, please.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome to our guests. Today is a very good day for Seniors and Community Supports. My questions are along the lines of Mr. Kang's with respect to understanding in the budget process how we can most accurately determine the required amounts to optimize the investments that we're making in each of these programs. I'm first looking at page 90, schedule 4, the second item from the bottom, Alberta aids to daily living grants. I'm noting that we overexpended by close to \$7 million in the '07-08 year. I wonder if you can just speak to the variance there, why it's overexpended and, if it's possible, some explanation on the degree of difficulty in determining the actual targeted expenditure.

9:20

Mr. Wiles: Thank you. I think that in the aids to daily living program, you know, we're serving over 80,000 Albertans in a variety of supports from respiratory to prosthetics and orthotics to

wheelchairs and postsurgical needs, ostomy supplies, so quite an array of possible supports that we can provide. To forecast accurately what and how much each of those items is going to be, it's looking at our historical trends, but it's difficult to forecast with a high degree of precision. We face price variances as well as costs going up from our providers. It's not as scientific as we'd probably like, but we do our best based on history and what expectations are in the price. Taking that into account even as things go, as the year goes on we may face pressures as a result of higher demand or price increases on specific things. In this fiscal year we were fortunate enough to have flexibility within our overall ministry budget to accommodate that overage. In other times sometimes it is more difficult to do that, and then we're forced into sort of managing as best we can.

Reegan, is there anything else you want to add on that piece?

Mr. McCullough: Largely, it would be the demand and the increasing cost, depending on the type of technology. Under prosthetics and orthotics there are various kinds of prosthetics, for instance, that can be provided, and, you know, some of those procedures and devices can range anywhere from a thousand dollars to \$25,000, depending on the kind of need the individual has. Largely, those would be the reasons.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you. A supplemental, if I may, along the same lines perhaps. Just above that, 3.1.5, brain injury initiative and other supports, the line item shows a budget of about \$14.6 million and expenditures of \$11.9 million. I wonder if you could speak just to some of the initiatives or expenditures that might be included in that line item and, again, to the variance.

Mr. Wiles: I'm going to ask Reegan to supplement. That line item includes supports we provide to adults with acquired brain injury. We do a number of things. We have some contracts with organizations like the Northern Alberta Brain Injury Society and other similar organizations across the province that really help families and individuals who are faced with an acquired brain injury connect to supports that are available within the community. A lot of times, you know, when families are faced with this difficulty, they're at a loss, and those kinds of organizations really help connect with the natural supports that are there.

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

As well, we also fund some supports for individuals who can't find sufficient supports in the community. I think it's up to 10 hours a week, Reegan, that we would fund those individuals so they could have a paid caregiver to assist them with the things that they need to get done during the day. Again, depending on the requests and the volume, those are the biggest challenges in that line.

Reegan, are there some other things to add there?

Mr. McCullough: I would also add just in terms of the variance there that we were starting with a program that was assisting people who were living in long-term care with disabilities and largely people under the age of 65 to better connect with the community. In that year we were having a number of meetings with the various clients and facilities as well to help determine what would be some appropriate ways to help them connect to the community. In some cases these individuals don't get out very often, so it may be going to a show, going out for dinner, that kind of thing. In that year we were making a number of those arrangements but didn't fully expend the budgets.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chase, please, followed by Mr. Olson.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Page 92 reports Seniors and Community Supports achievement bonuses of \$921,000 for the 2007-2008 year. Given the backdrop of understaffing and high turnover being rampant in seniors' facilities due to low front-line worker wages, what are the criteria used for determining how upper management achievement bonuses are allocated?

Mr. Wiles: The achievement bonus program is a corporate program that's authorized by the corporate human resources office under the Treasury Board ministry. They establish the percentages and the pools for the various categories, and that sets the limits on the amounts of the bonuses. For bonuses within the ministry based on those pools and the percentage guidelines provided by corporate human resources, we go through an exercise of assessing and working with our staff and awarding bonuses based on their achievement of the results based on their performance contracts.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. My supplementary: given that the Premier has stated that this year \$40 million worth of bonuses will be distributed to over 6,100 high-ranking officials in the various ministries, will your department provide a breakdown to the Public Accounts Committee on who received achievement bonuses and the amount they received or, if FOIP prevents such specifics, the number of upper management officials who received the majority of this senior ministry bonus funding? In other words, what I'm looking for: \$921,000 was divided by how many individuals in terms of receiving the majority of this funding?

Mr. Wiles: Well, you're talking about reporting for the '08-09 fiscal year. I believe we will continue to report the way we have in the '07-08 year. In terms of broader reporting beyond that, I'd have to take that question under advisement.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. If you wish to change the number to more accurately reflect the 2007-2008 year, I'm looking for that kind of comparison. How many people got the majority of this money?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Olson, please, followed by Ms Pastoor.

Mr. Olson: Thank you for being here. My questions relate to PDD funding and the individual and contract funding. I know it's been commented on that there are some challenges in evaluating how the money gets spent, particularly with individual funding. I'm just wondering if you can speak a little bit about where you're at with that and how you're kind of balancing the challenge of accountability. I know I've had providers express some concern to me about the weight of having to provide a lot of financial information, too.

Mr. Wiles: I think we've been on a bit of a journey in that. Starting with some recommendations from the Auditor General back in '03-04, when I think they first surfaced, we've looked at a number of things in that area. I think the Auditor General correctly pointed out to us that some of our accountability mechanisms didn't enable us to ensure that we were getting value for the public money that was being disbursed, so we've been working with the providers and trying to reach that balance of accountability for the taxpayers' funding that's been spent and trying to ensure that we're getting outcomes for that money as well. That is a challenge in some cases,

but we're trying to bring more businesslike processes to the contracting process, I think.

In the past there has been a lot of money funded in advance, and then there was post follow-up to see if we got money. There was a focus on inputs, on hours provided and things, and that created frustrations as well. We're trying to shift that to having less money in advance and more up-to-date reconciling of services provided to the money you had, much like if you were buying a widget. I know these aren't widgets, so it's not a perfect analogy. But if you're buying services from a consultant, you'd want to have a better sense that they're actually doing some work for you, more timely, so we're shifting that a fair bit. We've been working with the providers and the ACDS, Alberta Council of Disability Services, in working out the new contracting template. The majority of providers have signed a new template effective April 1 of the current fiscal year that we're in. There are some that have still continued under the old as we work through some of the bumps in the road there.

9:30

Is it perfect yet? It's probably not. I see this as a continuing dialogue, and I think the thing as we go down in the future is that we want to make sure we get outcomes involved in our contracting process. That's a difficult thing to measure, and that takes – you know, we're looking at current research on how you can move that way. So we're working hard on it. I think we're better than we were. I think we've addressed some of the deficiencies that the Auditor had raised for us. We've also done some things along the way where we've had a couple of – and this is the exception, not the rule – providers where there wasn't evidence of money spent. Some of them have voluntarily returned some money, and some we're in court action on as well.

Mr. Olson: Thank you. If I might just ask a supplementary. You actually anticipated my second question, which was about the contracts because I understood that there was some discussion going on about them. Again, the anxiety that I've been hearing from the providers is that if the upfront money is not there, it's very hard for them to operate. Have you been able to sort that out with them so that they feel as though they can keep the doors open?

Mr. Wiles: I think, through the pilots that we had with some providers before we actually went full bore across the province with the new contracting template, there was a lot of concern about that very issue: how do they keep their working capital, keep going forward? The new contract template does provide for a one-month advance, and then we reconcile that. For the most part that seems to have been working. Are they all happy with that? There are probably some that are still having some challenges, and I think that through the six community boards we're trying to iron those things out as we go. But I think we are better off than we were before.

Mr. Olson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pastoor, please, followed by Mr. Bhardwaj.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My question is just really brief because I think the former questions were really where I was trying to go as well. I'm coming from the other side of it. How tightly can you monitor the dollars that are being given to the contract agencies even if it is through the boards? I do know that sometimes what has happened is that money was topped up to retain staff, but in fact that money was held sometimes for two and three months, and it isn't

going to the front-line staff. There's a whole implication there of how they can top up their bottom line when, in fact, that money really was meant for front-line staff. How can you monitor that situation?

Mr. Wiles: Well, I'll go to the situation of the \$15 million in-year top-up money for salaries and wages that was provided in the '07-08 year. When that money was provided through the community boards, each community board went to their providers in their community, and they agreed upon a plan as to how that money would be used to go to support front-line workers. We've tried to give the individual agencies the flexibility to meet their specific needs rather than trying to mandate an across-the-board percentage increase or salary increase because some agencies prefer to bonus that out. Some used some of that money for training or benefits that were of particular need. So we've tried to give them the flexibility to do that. But the monitoring of that is that there was a plan between the individual community board and the provider as to how that money would be used, and then there was an accountability reporting back by the provider showing how they fulfilled the plan. Dave, is there anything you want to add to that?

Mr. Arsenault: Well, I think that's it, basically. The other thing is that there were some plans that had higher hourly wages for people who served individuals with complex needs because of the increased skill and training that were needed for that. There were a number of different approaches that were used.

Ms Pastoor: So, in fact, the evaluation is ongoing on how this particular process is working. Clearly, I get complaints in my office that they know that their company has been given the money, but they're not getting what they think are their raises, and they quit or they go to the higher paying contract agency.

Mr. Wiles: I mean, we do hear. You know, we get letters, and through the community boards we hear that as well. I think it is an ongoing process to refine that.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bhardwaj, please, followed by Mr. Kang.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. My questions are regarding the Auditor General's recommendation to the PDD boards and service providers. My question is: what is the department doing in addressing those recommendations? It's on page 386 of the AG's report.

Mr. Wiles: I touched on some of this in response to the earlier question.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Yes, you have.

Mr. Wiles: It was in '03-04 that the Auditor initially made the recommendations. In looking at it, I think I touched on the new contract template. We've done some auditing of the higher risk providers. The boards, which I didn't mention, are all individually implementing some risk assessment at their individual levels as well. Again, we're working with the Council of Disability Services to identify operational issues. The new contract template was piloted from January to August '08 with 36 agencies from across the province, and that has now been rolled out to basically all 200 and some providers across the province. I think, as I said earlier, it's an

ongoing evolution. We've got the contracts in place this year. We'll evaluate those as we go into next year and see if there are some further refinements to that contract that need to be made.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Okay. Thank you. Just a quick supplemental, then: what kind of improvements can you expect after implementing some of these contract changes? What do you anticipate?

Mr. Wiles: Well, I think one of the big advantages of the new contract change is some consistency across the province. We had seen that different practices had evolved in different regions throughout the province, and there was some inconsistency in that. So I think that's a big advantage, that both the providers and the families can expect consistency across the province. I know that the minister has, you know, been talking about more consistency not just in the contracting process but at more levels of the program as well. So that's a big focus, and I think that would be the big benefit from this.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Kang, please, followed by Mr. Jacobs.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My questions are about a cost comparison analysis of long-term care facilities and designated living facilities. Has the department, you know, conducted some kind of cost comparison between both of those, and what are the results if you have done any?

Mr. Wiles: I think the short answer would be that this department has not done a lot of cost analysis of that. What we do in our ministry is fund the capital cost for the development of affordable supportive living facilities primarily, and we also provide income supplements through the Alberta seniors' benefit for low-income Albertans who are in designated assisted living or long-term care. We supplement their Alberta seniors' benefit so that they can afford the accommodation portion of their charges for that. Whether a person is designated long-term care or designated assisted living is a decision made by the Health Services Board, so we don't have any influence on that. We also provide funding, as I mentioned in one of the earlier questions, to the lodge program, to lodge operators. But we don't do a cost analysis of other forms of supportive living because we're not funding those.

9:40

Mr. Kang: Okay. My supplementary question is: don't you think it would be a good idea to do a cost analysis? Another question, you know, related to this: what is the daily cost to the province for an individual taking up a bed in the hospital while waiting for a long-term care bed compared to the cost of a bed in a long-term care facility?

Mr. Wiles: I think that the detailed answers to those questions would be with the health ministry. But, you know, generalizing, I think it's cheaper outside of the hospital setting. Those are discussions that we have with Alberta Health in the joint implementation of the continuing care strategy, but the specifics of the points you're getting at is information that would be in Alberta Health.

Mr. Kang: I think it's interrelated. I think, you know, maybe you should have some information on that, too. That was my understanding.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jacobs, please, followed by Mr. Chase.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Chair. Probably my question has already been asked because it relates to PDD, and I think two or three of my colleagues have been around this. I have to confess that I probably don't really understand the relationship between boards and service providers and so on and so forth. But I would like to observe that recently I had lunch with what I call an employment centre – in other words, there were 25 or 30 people there with developmental disabilities – and they were there working on various projects, trying to earn some money to help them in their programs. I was very impressed with what I saw. I visited several of these. You know, they had provided lunch, and we communicated.

I trust that we are as a department using common sense in dealing with these people. I don't know if you guys know what that means, but I think they do good work. I hope we don't put so many rules and regulations in front of them that they can't continue. I guess my question is: how do you really evaluate the progress and the good that these places do with what it costs? I realize you have to do that, but I hope you keep in mind that they also do a lot – at least, I think they do a lot of good for a lot of people.

Mr. Wiles: Well, I would agree with you. We do, as part of the PDD program – and I don't have the exact number off the top of my head – have in the neighbourhood of \$20 million where we focus on employment supports. It's a variety of things to help adults with developmental disabilities gain the skills to participate in the workforce. It can be things from a job coach that might help an individual who's higher needs be in an employment setting. It might be training to an employer to help them understand some of things they need to understand to help support a person with a developmental disability, and then the supports can be withdrawn, and the employer actually naturally assumes all that. I think we've got lots of examples of that as well. There's a fair bit of work being done on the employment side to help adults with developmental disabilities have that opportunity for employment. I think a lot of it is breaking down barriers in the employer field as well because some employers don't understand the benefits, and they're more fearful of it. So a fair bit is going on there.

Dave, do you have some additional comments on the employment?

Mr. Arsenaault: Well, I think the example that was shared is that part of the money that the deputy identified goes to supporting people who are in preparation for work. I think there's work out there.

I think the other comment that I would make is that in the approximately 200 service providers across the province, we have a wide range, from some that are very small to some that are very large. I think, as we try to deal with that range, it's trying to find the right balance that we need in terms of the flexibility for the organizations but the accountability for the public dollars. I think that what we're trying to do through the contracting part of it is find that right balance.

Mr. Jacobs: I don't have a supplemental, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chase, please, followed by Mr. Benito.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I hope that this particular question can be answered within the time remaining, and I have another question that

I'd like read into the record if time permits. On page 89 it shows that the seniors' dental assistance program and the seniors' optical assistance program were unexpended by \$7 million and \$2 million respectively, yet there are a significantly large number of seniors on lengthy waiting lists both for cataract surgery and for dental services. Therefore, my first question is: why are these programs that assist seniors underspent when there is such a high demand?

Mr. Wiles: I'll ask Chi to supplement my answer here. Again, the program parameters for both dental and optical are based on the applications received. There are some limits, a five-year limit of \$5,000 on the dental for basic dental services, and those are defined by the program parameters. The cataract surgery question is not relevant to our optical program. Our optical program is focused on a subsidy for eyewear for seniors that are entitled to a \$230 reimbursement every three years. So that's not related to that.

Chi, do you want to supplement on the variance, please?

Mr. Loo: Sure. On the dental side, again, you know, the assistance is dependent on the kind of services, et cetera, that seniors require. The other side is the availability of supplies. Okay? Sometimes you may laugh at it, but when we have a cold spell in winter for a couple of weeks, we see the billing go straight down because it's more challenging for seniors to try to go out, et cetera. Again, on a budgeting basis we need to look at the situation, the most extreme situation, but we have no control in terms of the availability of dental service hours. Are they going in for just cleaning, or do they need a denture repair? Again, there's quite a bit of price variance and difference in those.

Mr. Chase: My supplemental would be: given that this program is undersubscribed to the tune of almost \$9 million, in what manner does the department communicate the availability of these services to seniors so that they can take advantage of them?

Mr. Wiles: Well, we do annually publish our seniors' benefit booklet. I think we distributed 50,000 of those last year.

Mr. Loo: A fairly high number.

Mr. Wiles: A fairly high number.

As well, through our seniors' helpline we get probably 800 or so calls a day on a variety of things, and our staff are trained to help people understand what benefits are available to them both through our programs and other programs as well. So those would be the primary means that we make seniors aware of that.

Mr. Loo: Actually, I'll supplement on the dental program. Even if a senior is not aware of the program itself, by and large for seniors that have applied to any of our programs – the Alberta seniors' benefit or the special needs and so on – we determine the eligibility for all the programs in one instance, so they are informed of that. But even if they forget about that, when they visit a dental office, the majority, almost 90 per cent, of dental offices have a linkage to Alberta Blue Cross, which is our benefits administrator for us. The senior doesn't even have to know. Basically, when they go to the front counter, the receptionist will say: "The service today is this much. Because you are on the seniors' benefit program, you only have to pay this portion." That kind of service has also just been extended now to the optical side.

There was a challenge because a lot of the optical practitioners did not have a common system like that. That has just been introduced on April 1. So, again, right now probably about 40 per cent of the

optical shops throughout the province, including large shops like Wal-Mart and so on – and right now they're working hard to get Pearle Vision to come onboard. Again, when a senior goes in there: "Your prescription for eyeglasses is \$180. Because you are on the seniors' benefit program, you're eligible for assistance. You don't even have to pay a dollar." That's the kind of service we're trying to give because, again, when someone doesn't require services on a daily basis, they may forget what they may or may not be eligible for, and we shift that burden away from the senior.

9:50

Mr. Chase: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Benito, please, followed by Ms Pastoor.

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Good morning. Thank you so much for coming today. Your time is appreciated.

I would like to start by saying that I'm still in a budget mood because of the good speech by the minister yesterday, so my first question is about the budget that you mentioned in your introduction. You mentioned an amount of \$1.78 billion and that the amount spent was only around \$1.73 billion. My question is: what happens normally to the balance, the unexpended money? Can that be easily shuffled from one program service to another program?

Mr. Wiles: For the year that we're talking about, \$1.78 billion was our budget, and we spent \$1.73 billion. So we lapsed around \$50 million, but before we lapsed that, we did do some reallocations in the year. We have some flexibility to do that; sometimes we need the approval of the Treasury Board before we can do that. In the fiscal year that we're talking about today, we did allocate additional dollars to the affordable supportive living initiative, about \$18 million more than we had originally planned. We also allocated about \$18 million to the PDD program to deal with the salary issue and the complex needs that I talked about earlier this morning as well. We did do some of that reallocation within our budget target, but at the same time as we do those, we have to, you know, stay within our program parameters and make sure that the decisions we make on those reallocations are sustainable in the long run into the future years as well.

In this year we ended up lapsing about \$50 million primarily because of the AISH caseload that we talked about earlier. It was the big contributor to that reason we had some extra money. As well, with the seniors' benefits we talked a little bit about the dental and optical, but we also had a lapse in the Alberta seniors' benefit as well. That was primarily because not as many people were in the designated assisted living setting that we would have to subsidize accommodation for as we had thought. Again, it was an estimate, and those monies were lapsed.

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much for that clarification.

My second question. In your 2007-2008 annual report it shows that you spent more than \$300 million for seniors' services but no mention about spending on elder abuse. Is there any work that your department is doing to address abuse, and what program services does your ministry do to address this issue?

Mr. Wiles: We do a number of things on the elder abuse front. Through part of the annual elder abuse day on June 15 of each year we distribute awareness information. That information was developed in partnership with federal, provincial, and territorial governments across the country to increase the awareness of elder abuse. So that's one of the things we do.

We participate with the Alberta elder abuse network in the distribution of that information, and that's a partnership of the large cities and municipal groups to help deal with that. I think we've also worked with the elder abuse network recently to develop some information and awareness materials particular to financial abuse, and that's been distributed to financial institutions across the province to deal with that. So those are some of the areas.

We're currently working on building an elder abuse policy framework to help sort of co-ordinate and get a better understanding of that. That information and that network is going to be rolled out in concert with the aging policy framework that we're also working on because they are very closely linked. So those would be the highlights.

Chi, is there anything else that we need to touch on?

Mr. Loo: Not much. I just want to make a slight clarification because we are on the record. Both the network and the annual elder abuse day: this is an awareness day and the awareness network. It's not a case that we're promoting elder abuse. Okay? It is awareness. Also, it's the prevention of elder abuse framework that we're working on.

The only comment I want to add is that the material that we did partner with the network on, that was brought out last summer, was specifically targeted to one area; that is, the area of financial abuse. There were two pieces of key material. One was for the seniors themselves to be aware of situations, how they may be taken advantage of. The other piece, a document, was distributed to all the financial institutions in Alberta to assist the staff because quite often they are the first ones to become aware of potential financial abuse against seniors.

The Chair: Thank you.

In light of the time – there are four members left on the list that are interested in asking questions – if we could please have those questions read into the record. Mr. Wiles, if your department could respond through the committee clerk to all members, we would be grateful. We will start with Ms Pastoor, please.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. A quick comment. Thank you for the work that you're doing on elder abuse. It's a huge issue on my plate.

My question would be: when will the dental and optical benefits be reviewed? In my opinion, at this point in time they really don't cover what they should because most people don't necessarily have dentures. They've got implants; they've got any number of things that aren't covered under these programs.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Olson, please.

Mr. Olson: Thank you. On page 343 of the Auditor General's October 2008 report there is a note that PDD Calgary region was reporting expenses which included payments for services to individuals whose disability didn't meet the legal definition of a developmental disability, and I'm wondering what the ministry has done to address that situation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kang, please, followed by Mr. Chase.

Mr. Kang: I'm referencing page 117. What are the 13 supportive living facilities that were reported as not meeting the standard after multiple inspections, and why is it taking so long for the facilities to achieve compliance with the inspections? What's being done to address these issues?

The Chair: Thank you.
Mr. Chase.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Referencing page 115, what were the reasons for Peace Country-Grande Prairie not showing enough progress towards the Auditor General's recommendations on systems for monitoring compliance with care standards which resulted in a repeated recommendation being given?

Secondly, on the same page it states that "a fully functioning monitoring system should identify and resolve non-compliance issues appropriately and promptly." How were noncompliance issues dealt with within Peace Country during the period when the Auditor General found that monitoring systems were not adequately in place?

The Chair: Thank you.

We look forward, Mr. Wiles, to those written responses. As chair on behalf of all members of the committee we would like to thank you and your delegation this morning for your time and your

answers and wish you all the best in your future administration of these necessary programs. Thank you.

Mr. Wiles: Thank you.

The Chair: I would like to thank the Auditor General as well for his time this morning.

Under item 5 on our agenda is there any other business this morning by members? No?

The date of our next meeting, of course, will be next Wednesday, April 15, from 8:30 until 10, and we will be meeting with officials from Alberta Education.

May I please have a motion to adjourn? Mr. Bhardwaj. Thank you. Moved by Mr. Bhardwaj that the meeting be adjourned. All in favour? Seeing none opposed, thank you very much. Have a good week, everyone.

[The committee adjourned at 9:59 a.m.]

