



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Seniors, Community and Social Services

Tuesday, April 23, 2024
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First Session**

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Sabir, Irfan, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall (NDP), Chair
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC), Deputy Chair

Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
de Jonge, Chantelle, Chestermere-Strathmore (UC)
Haji, Sharif, Edmonton-Decore (NDP)
Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC)
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Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
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Wiebe, Ron, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (UC)*

* substitution for Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk

Also in Attendance

Johnson, Jennifer, Lacombe-Ponoka (Ind)

Office of the Auditor General Participants

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Patty Hayes	Assistant Auditor General

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Teri Cherkewich	Law Clerk
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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Participants

Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services

Jenn Anderson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Preventive Community Services

Clay Buchanan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Disability Services

Cynthia Farmer, Deputy Minister

Sonya Johnston, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Corporate Finance

Toby Schneider, Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment and Financial Services

David Williams, Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing

8 a.m. Tuesday, April 23, 2024

[Mr. Sabir in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone in attendance.

My name is Irfan Sabir, MLA for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall and chair of this committee. As we begin this morning, I would like to invite members, guests, and LAO staff at the table to introduce themselves.

Mr. Rowswell: MLA Garth Rowswell, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Wiebe: Ron Wiebe, Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Ms Lovely: Jackie Lovely, Camrose constituency.

Mr. Lundy: Good morning, everyone. Brandon Lundy, Leduc-Beaumont.

Mr. McDougall: Morning. Myles McDougall, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Ms de Jonge: Chantelle de Jonge, Chestermere-Strathmore.

Mrs. Johnson: Jennifer Johnson, Lacombe-Ponoka.

Ms Anderson: Jenn Anderson, assistant deputy minister with SCSS.

Mr. Schneider: Tobias Schneider, SCSS.

Ms Farmer: Cynthia Farmer, SCSS, deputy minister.

Ms Johnston: Sonya Johnston, SCSS, assistant deputy minister and senior financial officer.

Mr. David Williams: David Williams, SCSS, assistant deputy minister for housing.

Mr. Wylie: Good morning. Doug Wylie, Auditor General.

Ms Hayes: Good morning. Patty Hayes, Assistant Auditor General.

Mr. Haji: Good morning. Sharif Haji, MLA for Edmonton-Decore.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ms Robert: Good morning. Nancy Robert, clerk of *Journals* and committees.

Mr. Huffman: Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: Thank you.

We don't have anyone joining online, but I would note for the record the following substitution: Member Wiebe for hon. Member Armstrong-Homeniuk.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and the transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting, and comments should flow through the chair at all times.

Moving on to the approval of agenda, members, are there any changes or additions to the agenda?

If not, can a member move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the proposed agenda as distributed for this Tuesday, April 23, 2024, meeting.

An Hon. Member: So moved.

The Chair: Any discussion? All in favour? Any opposed? The motion is carried.

We also have minutes from the Tuesday, April 16, 2024, meeting of the committee. Do members have any errors or omissions to note?

Seeing none, can a member move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the minutes as distributed of its meeting held on Tuesday, April 16, 2024?

Mr. McDougall: So moved.

The Chair: Moved by Member McDougall. Any discussion on the motion? All in favour? Any opposed? The motion is carried.

I would now like to welcome our guests from the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services, who are here to address the ministry's annual report 2022-23 and the Auditor General's outstanding recommendations. I would invite officials from the ministry to provide opening remarks not exceeding 10 minutes.

Ms Farmer: Thank you, and good morning. I'm Cynthia Farmer, Deputy Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services. You have met my colleagues sitting at the table with me. We also have three other ADMs that are sitting in the gallery: Shaun Peddie, ADM of strategic services; Clay Buchanan, ADM of disability services; and Dana Mackie, ADM of seniors.

I'm pleased to be here today to discuss the accomplishments of Seniors, Community and Social Services over the '22-23 reporting period. The role of this ministry is to support Alberta's most vulnerable citizens, and we really take that role very seriously. I want to thank the hard-working ministry staff across the department for their commitment to ensure supports and services are always in place for at-risk Albertans. I also want to acknowledge all our stakeholders who work day in and day out to make sure Albertans in need have access to appropriate supports in their communities.

In my time as deputy minister the Auditor General has asked us to take steps to improve the systems, processes, and programs Albertans rely on. In 2022-23 we developed solutions to the Auditor General's recommendations to improve the FSCD, AISH, and income support programs as well as the office of the public guardian and trustee.

In fact, the department updated the family support for children with disabilities policies and improved training and oversight to ensure more consistency when staff determine supports and services for eligible families.

We standardized program assessment guides to ensure consistencies when eligibility decisions are made by staff. We updated the policy manual and the staff training modules to reference the standardized assessment guides. We developed and implemented new processes and tools for staff completing training to ensure they have the necessary skills and knowledge to complete assessments consistently. These recommendations for FSCD will be fully implemented this spring.

In early 2020 the Auditor General found Seniors, Community and Social Services did not have the appropriate controls in place to keep clients' private and sensitive information safe and control access to it. The ministry takes our responsibility to protect the security of client information and their privacy very seriously,

which is why we took significant steps in '22-23 to address these recommendations. This included additional training to staff to clarify the roles and responsibilities between information controllers and custodians to improve processes for data management, and we developed policies and procedures to ensure the regular review and termination of access to our systems. We are now ready to have the OAG follow up on these recommendations to us.

In response to the recommendations to improve the performance management systems of the income support program, internal processes were implemented to make the program more accountable and accessible to Albertans by implementing key performance measures and a performance dashboard to monitor program effectiveness, develop new dashboards and reporting tools for workers and supervisors to monitor case management activities, and establish a process for implementing data and reporting enhancements.

In '22-23 the OAG completed an assessment of the implementation of our work to implement the income support recommendations and noted that we have implemented the recommendation to improve eligibility processes but repeated the recommendation to improve performance management processes. The OAG noted that we have improved monitoring and performance reporting for key steps in the intake and case management processes, which contributed to the program achieving the short-term program outcomes of clients receiving benefits for which they are eligible. However, they found that the department had not improved processes to measure and report on the program's performance in achieving the intermediate and long-term outcomes. The department has provided an updated implementation to the OAG and expects to have the work completed this summer.

In addition, the office of the public guardian and trustee addressed four of the five recommendations regarding the March 2022 assessment of implementation of their control systems, with improved supervisory review of client files, strengthening internal audits, strengthened approval and payment processes for payments from clients' trust accounts, and improved processes to ensure client files are appropriately documented. All of these changes are helping ensure that we are delivering our services efficiently, effectively, and sustainably.

Ensuring Albertans with disabilities have timely access to supports and services is a key priority of our ministry. The demand for our disability programs, both persons with developmental disabilities, PDD, and family supports for children with disabilities, FSCD, has increased significantly, resulting in longer wait times to access our programs. In '22-23 we increased the funding for PDD to help more people access the program, address service provider administrative costs, and increase wages for disability workers.

We are also working with service providers to build capacity to provide services to more individuals. Our approach to addressing the PDD wait-list prioritizes both speed and fairness, referring clients who have been on the wait-list the longest to service providers who have had immediate capacity and the ability to meet their needs. We also implemented operational improvements to address FSCD program backlog and reduce wait times for families to access services.

We've done a number of things in this area, including launching an online tool to help assess families' needs and streamline the assessment and reassessment processes between caseworkers and families. Using this tool, we have seen faster assessments by caseworkers and a 58 per cent reduction in the amount of data and information that is required from families.

8:10

We also introduced multiyear agreements for up to three years to ensure stability and continuity of services. We've improved how the program collects and tracks data to ensure quality and the integrity of their reporting. We've recruited additional staff to handle the application backlog and manage increasing caseloads. The ministry's disability programs continue to grow, and we continue to focus on improvements to ensure people with disabilities and their families have access to the vital services that they need.

Timely and consistent access to supports is something Albertans rely on, which is why we've been working to modernize our financial support systems to simplify and enhance our service delivery for Albertans. In 2022 the ministry moved clients on income support to a new digital case management system. As a result, there is an 80 per cent reduction in the number of system interactions for staff, allowing them to spend more time supporting Albertans and connecting them to work. We also improved access to our programs by enabling Albertans to apply online for AISH and income support. These online applications improve and simplify the user experience for Albertans. With streamlined processes staff are able to focus more of their efforts on clients who need supports, including helping them find alternative services and programs to meet their needs. These technological innovations are improving access to Seniors, Community and Social Services programs, ensuring Albertans can get the help they need when they need it most, regardless of where they live.

A major concern across Alberta is the fact that a growing number of Albertans do not have a place to live. This ministry plays a critical role in responding to the ever-increasing complex needs of Albertans experiencing homelessness. That is why the ministry began implementing its action plan on homelessness in October 2022, providing more than \$68 million to support the operation of more than 3,500 spaces in emergency and transitional shelters in nine communities across Alberta.

The amalgamation of seniors and housing into our ministry in October '22 has created some really good opportunities for us to find solutions to help prevent housing instability for vulnerable Albertans. Several key priority areas have been the focus since the department came together, including supporting the well-being of seniors and their ability to age in their chosen community and ensuring housing is affordable and accessible for Albertans across the province. In collaboration with Alberta Health, through the healthy aging Alberta initiative, we've implemented the Alberta home supports provincial model. This model supports aging in place by enabling local community organizations to provide personal, social, and mental health supports. We also implemented a new elder abuse prevention strategy to make Alberta safer for seniors. The strategy provides a guide for how Albertans, nonprofits, front-line workers, businesses, and governments can work together to prevent or reduce elder abuse.

The ministry is progressing to Alberta's 10-year plan to improve and expand affordable housing in the stronger foundations strategy. The strategy's goal is to ensure that the housing system is accessible, equitable, and financially sustainable and will help us support 82,000 low-income households by 2031, an increase of more than 40 per cent. In December 2022 the affordable housing partnership was launched, bringing together partners and housing providers to create more affordable housing where it is needed most. The first intake of the program closed in early 2023, with the ministry announcing \$54 million to support 17 projects in nine communities across Alberta.

With the increased cost of living and inflation many Albertans struggle to continue just to meet their basic daily needs. Throughout 2022-23 the department implemented several initiatives to make it more affordable for vulnerable Albertans, including increasing AISH, income supports, Alberta seniors' benefits by 6 per cent as of January 1.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would now turn it over to the Auditor General for his comments. Mr. Wylie, you will have five minutes.

Mr. Wylie: Thank you, Chair and through you to the committee members. I'd like to also thank the deputy for addressing our comments. It appears as though you are taking these very seriously and, in fact, have progressed in a number of areas to make the implementation successful. We look forward to working with you to be able to sign off on those recommendations. At the end of the day, one of our objectives is to see the work of the office acted on, and certainly it appears as though that is the direction of this ministry.

I thought I might, Chair, just highlight – I'm not going to go over the same ground as the deputy – the nature of the findings and what resulted in the recommendations in the first part, just spend a couple of minutes on that to help the committee members understand why we arrived at the recommendations.

Let me start with the work we did on the family support for children with disabilities. We did that work back in May 2022. What we found was that the assessment guides and service rates were not comprehensive. The staff training program was also not being delivered effectively at the time, and the oversight processes of caseworker performance were not effective, again, at that time. We believe that it's important to address those issues because without improving the guides, the training, and the oversight, the risk of inconsistent decision-making would remain higher than necessary, so families may not have similar experiences throughout the province, and outcomes for their children may not be met, those children with disabilities.

I'll move to the recommendation we made, that's still outstanding, on the control systems at the office of the public guardian and trustee. We repeated our recommendation there when we did our follow-up work, and that recommendation was to improve and follow policies and procedures because although the office improved its internal control systems, which were some previous recommendations that we made, there continued to be a significant number of errors with the day-to-day trust administration activities and the transactions that were being processed.

In instances where these activities and transactions do not comply with the office's procedures and policies, there were two important consequences, we believed, at that time. The first was an increased risk that client trust funds would not be administered properly. Although the dollar amounts of individual errors may not seem significant, many of the office's clients have limited – very limited – income, so errors of any amount, quite frankly, would impact those clients.

The second is that it's much less efficient across the organization if work is not done completely the first time through. We refer in the audit work to preventative controls and detective controls. Continually correcting errors after they've occurred, instead of ensuring that the errors are dealt with and policies are complied with in the first place, puts undue stress on the organization's systems of internal control and indeed the staff administering the programs.

Relating to income support for Albertans we repeated our recommendation as the department, at the time of our follow-up, had not improved its process to measure and report on program performance in achieving the intermediate and long-term outcomes of the program. This is important because without improved processes, it will be difficult for the government to evaluate program performance to ensure program outcomes are being achieved and report to Albertans that the program is working as intended.

Again, Chair and committee members, I am pleased with the deputy's comments and look forward to working with the ministry to get these recommendations off the books. That concludes my opening comments.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wylie.

We will now proceed to questions from committee members. Just a reminder that all comments, questions should flow through the chair.

We will begin with the Official Opposition. You will have 15 minutes.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That was a good way to start: awesome comments and encouragement from the Auditor General. That's really great to hear, actually. We certainly don't hear that at every Public Accounts meeting, so that's great.

I've got some questions about some of the disability services. We can see that the ministry spent about \$69 million more on disability services than the prior year and spent \$22.9 million less than budgeted in 2022-23. The overall increase in disability services certainly tracks with population growth and cost pressures, as you both mentioned, particularly as it relates to wages. What doesn't track is the fact that these programs – I'm talking about PDD and FSCD – are chronically oversubscribed. The ministry no longer appears to update open data related to wait-lists. We know that in December '21 there were approximately 600 adults waiting for services, 681 in 2022 according to the minister during budget estimates. Now, that's just adults waiting for services, for disability services. Last time the ministry updated the FSCD wait-list on open data, we saw that over 4,000 children and families, guardians as well included there, were waiting for service. Mr. Chair, through you, what this tells us is that the pressure for services is significant, so I'd like to know why disability services was underspent by over \$22 million.

8:20

Ms Farmer: I'm happy to answer the question about the \$22 million, but just to comment, if I may, through the chair, with respect to our open data, when the Auditor's report came in, which was really important for us in terms of FSCD, it gave us an opportunity and gave me an opportunity to sit down and look at the whole program, which was important. Not only were we concerned about the training, but then we started looking at: what were we training individuals to provide in terms of services? What we found was a very complicated application process and very complicated guidelines. And I think I shared at estimates last year that the application process is 126 pages.

Ms Renaud: That's brutal.

Ms Farmer: Yeah. And you had to do it every year. Also, if you had multiple children, you get to do those for multiple children. Not really a program that was set up to actually be serving Albertans and a process that was not helpful for our staff, not helpful for the Auditor's comments on consistency, and not helpful in terms of

really getting to serve who we were supposed to be serving, which is Albertans. So we've made so many changes to the program. As I shared at estimates just a few weeks ago, in so far as open data we will be publishing our data this year. But you'll see some difference in streams based on the recommendations and what my report was. We just used to have individuals on a waiting list. The waiting list was actually individuals that could be referred.

Ms Renaud: Sorry. If I could interrupt, Ms Farmer. I don't have that much time.

Ms Farmer: Okay. I'm sorry.

Ms Farmer: There was a decrease in FSCD, due to the lower anticipated caseload, of \$17.6 million. There was a decrease in terms of persons with developmental disabilities due to our anticipated costs per case. It went from \$6,831 to \$6,741.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm super confused by this. Mr. Chair, through you, there are really large waiting lists although, you know, keep in mind that they haven't been updated for a while, so I assume that they've changed somewhat, but it doesn't really make sense. If I look at the data about the number of families that have been served sort of for '21, '22, and '23, they've really changed by, like, 14 people over three years. But there's this massive wait-list. I know there's a lot of transformation going on, but there's a huge wait-list, a lot of pressure, and the ministry underspent specifically in disability services, which includes supports for kids, for children, and for adults, underspent by \$22.9 million. I'm just wondering why, when the cost pressures are so huge.

Ms Farmer: If we look at the year in its totality, the work that the staff were doing – as I mentioned, we spent a lot of time working with providers that year, so the same staff would have been working with providers with respect to increased staffing costs, increased administration costs, the affordability payments. As far as the work that was done in terms of the increase of 6 per cent for those benefits, that all takes staff time, and that would take a bit of time away from the caseload in terms of situations.

Ms Renaud: For '21, '22, and '23, Mr. Chair, through you, we see the number of families that are supported through FSCD. Again, this is from your documents. We've got 15,114, 15,100, 15,100. So the number of people served – I'm assuming some people left, turned 18, all of those things, but I'm curious why the number just virtually hasn't changed in three years.

Ms Farmer: I'm going to ask Clay Buchanan, our ADM of disabilities, to speak to that point.

Mr. Buchanan: Thank you very much, Deputy, and thank you for the question. Through the chair, a couple of points I'd like to make. One is that we do have a turnover of caseload, which means that as individuals on PDD pass away or leave the province, we have a turnover of about 500 cases per year. So we do take on new families, new adults every year. You may see the caseload maintain the same number, and that's because the budget, even though it's gone up repeatedly . . .

Ms Renaud: Sorry. I was talking about FSCD.

Mr. Buchanan: FSCD is the same thing. We have about an 1,800 turnover rate of families every year. In the year '22-23 we actually put 3,000 new families on the caseload, so it's all about the turnover.

Ms Renaud: So it's just a coincidence sort of that the numbers are identical for two years in a row?

Mr. Buchanan: It's just a coincidence. Yeah.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Fair. That's fair.

Mr. Buchanan: Really, we've had over 3,000 new families on the caseload in that particular fiscal year.

Thank you.

Ms Renaud: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Also, can you please introduce yourself for the record?

Mr. Buchanan: My apologies. My name is Clay Buchanan. I'm the assistant deputy minister for disability services. Sorry, Chair.

The Chair: No worries. I know that Cynthia introduced you.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thank you.

I'm going to ask a couple of questions about PDD. I think we can all agree that PDD is vital. It actually is a game changer for people with developmental disabilities, but it is an expensive program, and I think, as a result, it's really important that we ensure that all dollars are spent, you know, responsibly and that we provide as much oversight as possible. There are about 13,000 adults – I think it's just under 13,000 adults – that are supported through PDD.

On page 41 of the annual report it discusses complex needs. I think we – well, I know what complex needs are. Certainly, service providers have a special designation that they apply for and prove that they're able to meet the needs of people that are identified as complex. I note \$190 million set aside for complex needs for 1,301 people needing complex care. So, of the \$190 million, how much was spent on direct service? Direct service meaning directly for the individual with the complex needs, not administration or service delivery or any of the training costs. How much was spent on direct service for complex needs?

Ms Farmer: Thank you, Chair, for the question. I'm going to have to ask Clay to speak to that. Clay Buchanan, ADM.

Mr. Buchanan: Good morning. Clay Buchanan, ADM, disability services. Of the 1,349 active caseloads on complex service needs and the \$190 million, approximately 80 per cent of all funding will go directly to service providers to provide direct services to individuals. On average there are about 20 per cent that are indirect, so it's an 80-20 rule for most service providers. That ranges between each service provider and the nature of the services provided by that service provider.

Ms Renaud: Are there – sorry; through you, Mr. Chair – any variances on that 80-20 split, or are those negotiated?

Mr. Buchanan: They are negotiated. They're monitored very closely because we do track. We don't want to see a service provider spend more on administration than they need to spend because – and I think this is to your point – we want as much spending to go towards the individual as possible. There is variation, and I can say about 20 per cent, but, you know, we have some service providers that are down around 15 per cent, others up to 23, 25 per cent. It really depends on the type of service that they're providing.

Ms Renaud: What does it depend on? It was my understanding that complex supports – I mean, they vary somewhat, but they're not

terribly different. Why the variance from 20 per cent for administration to 25 per cent? What would cause a variance like that?

Mr. Buchanan: Through the chair, I would say that for complex services – when I talked about the range, I’m talking about PDD as a whole, on the complex service needs, provision of services. They are pretty consistent and around that 20 per cent mark, but each individual is different, and they need a different amount of services depending on that individual. We provide funding for staffing dependent on that particular individual.

Ms Renaud: I’m just curious what would cause that variance. I think one of the largest contracts PDD has is with a group in Calgary, CLAS. I think about \$38 million is their contract, a big difference between 20 per cent administration and 25 per cent, let’s say, if that’s what they got. I’m just trying to figure out what would cause that variance, Mr. Chair, through you.

Mr. Buchanan: Through the chair, it really depends. You know, some service providers have one complex service needs individual; some have 20. So that’s a variable and that depends – the overhead, the administration, the management, the supervision for that service provider would change. That would be one variable, the number of people with a particular service provider.

8:30

Ms Renaud: Thank you very much.

Mr. Buchanan: Thank you.

Ms Renaud: I’m going to, Mr. Chair, move on pretty quickly. I want to talk quickly about RDSPs. Those are registered disability savings plans. On page 29 it’s outcome 1.4. I think that the ministry was very clear that they wanted to – there was a grant that was some money made available to organizations to help get the word out. Actually, this is a compliment to the ministry that I think this was really good advance planning. I think we see right now the federal government look at – I mean, I’m not going to comment on when it’s coming or how little it is, but there is a disability benefit coming. There is a new disability benefit on the horizon that is coming. That will assist low-income disabled Albertans, for sure.

I think what the ministry tried to do was to ensure that as many people as possible with disabilities were eligible for the tax credit. So there’s a bit of work in that, to go through all of those steps to confirm eligibility and then also to be eligible for the RDSP. I think the ministry outlined that if a person is successful applying for the tax credit, getting that, and then applying for RDSP in their lifetime, they’re eligible for about \$90,000, which is good. That helps; every little bit helps.

I looked at the investment that was made. It was made to some terrific organizations, and I actually saw some of the work that they put out. I saw some of the social media campaign, but what I’ve never seen is any data whatsoever from the ministry about: where did you start, and where did you end up? Because I saw that – well, we’re looking backwards today, but we have seen a continuation of investment, which is good. Other than advertising the fact that RDSP is out there, you know, I didn’t see any partnerships with banks, which are very familiar with these products. Actually, they do a great job. So I’m wondering: where’s the data, and what could you tell us about where you started and where you ended up?

Ms Farmer: I’m going to begin the answer, and then I’m going to pass it to Clay from disability services to continue to discuss. You’re correct. We discovered, as far as trying to support families

in terms of getting an RDSP, just how complicated it is to work with the banks. That was our first step, actually, to try to do some partnership with some banks. It led us to needing to partner with individuals and resources in the community, so we did partner with family and resource centres. We also, I think, provided a \$304,000 grant. The Alberta Ability Network: \$40,000, so good to have those, and immigrant-serving agencies and the Native Friendship Centres. We’re trying to do as far as that everyone gets a chance. In terms of the evaluation, I’m going to ask Clay to speak to the evaluation of that work and the plans for it.

Mr. Buchanan: Great. Thank you, Deputy, and thank you for the question, through the chair. Clay Buchanan, disability services ADM. We’re currently reviewing the two-year program. So those results should be out towards the end of this year. We’re currently reviewing the program and the results of the investment over that two-year period.

Ms Renaud: You did a one-year investment, and I understand you’re saying that it’s a two-year investment. Was there any kind of review after year one to see where you could tweak it or maybe, you know, if there was something you could do differently or improve on?

Mr. Buchanan: Anecdotally from what came back from some of the providers or community that we funded: very positive results from them and working with families and working with adults as well. Those results will be out later this year.

Ms Renaud: And will that be with a partnership with CRA to get some data on numbers? Anything like that coming?

Mr. Buchanan: Really, it would be reviewing our investments.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move to questions from government members. Who will be starting? MLA Rowswell.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you. Yeah. My questions are revolving around the Auditor General’s recommendations. You covered a lot of it in your presentation, and it was good to hear the Auditor General say that you’re actually actively trying to solve these issues. The opposition’s first set of questions kind of were similar, but I’ll just ask the questions, and then if you’ve got anything you’d like to expand on relative to those, then feel free. If not and you’ve said all that you can say, then let me know, and I’ll go on to the next question.

Pages 39 and 40 of the annual report discuss department actions related to family support for children with disabilities, FSCD, which align with findings from the Auditor General’s performance review of the FSCD program. Three of the Auditor General’s outstanding recommendations were: to review and update guides to provide clarity and oversight on their use to promote and increase consistency when staff use judgment to assess the needs and complete a support plan; “further develop the program training and oversight processes to ensure staff obtain the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the assessment of needs and support planning consistently; and improve caseworker oversight processes to increase the consistency of the assessment of needs and support planning process.” The ministry committed to updating these guidelines, and I’d just like you to expand a bit on the actions that you took to do that.

Ms Farmer: Thank you, Member, through the chair. The team engaged in a thorough process of research and analysis to determine the best practice for assessment guides in the social services sectors.

Draft guides were updated with input of delivery services and then reviewed and updated. The implementation of the guides in the policy manager training and digital client information management system occurred in the last fiscal reporting period of '23-24. An external contractor was hired to conduct research and analysis to develop an FSCD rate decision guide to support future rate update decisions.

Mr. Rowswell: All right. The minister also committed to further developing program training and caseworker oversight processes to increase consistency and ensure staff obtain the necessary skills and knowledge. What actions were taken to fulfill that part?

Ms Farmer: Thank you, through the chair. We've updated our training across the department. We started with FSCD, but we're continuing with the PDD program as well as our other programs. One of the important elements of an Auditor recommendation is that the Auditor is very helpful in coming and pointing us in the direction of where some work can be done to improve, but then it's important to take that recommendation in its spirit and look across all of the programs in our department, which, in this case, for training we have continued focus. Just so that the committee is aware, training is reported to ADMs on a monthly basis in terms of the numbers of individuals completing the statutory training on FSCD but all of our other statutory programs, and it is also reported back to the executive team in a way that we can actually make some recommendations or some changes.

I'm happy to report that the training accountability framework for FSCD is very specific in dealing with mandatory training, core training that's required for our staff. It gives our managers and our staff very clear timelines of when that training needs to be completed. We have a framework for training compliance, which ensures a common understanding of responsibilities and accountabilities, that will lead to staff competence in the knowledge and skills that they need to perform their program roles and duties. I think what was happening is that in an effort to provide services and to deal with caseload, we weren't spending the time that needed to be done in terms of helping staff as far as clearly understanding some of their roles. We've spent a lot of time there. Therefore, we have clear, consistent processes for delivering and tracking training, which ensures not only training compliance but our data as far as integrity.

I'm very proud of the work that the team has done. What I'm also very proud of is that we've actually brought in experts to assist us, but we also had front-line staff that were very helpful in terms of us developing the program.

Mr. Rowswell: That's great. Well, it'll be interesting to see in the future the results of that going forward.

One of the Auditor General's outstanding recommendations was from 2013 relative to the improvements on policies and procedures for the office of the public guardian and trustee. Can the department expand on what steps were taken to meet this recommendation?

Ms Farmer: The office of the public guardian was transferred into the department in fall of 2022. There are a couple of things that you do when a department is first transferred in. One is that you understand the organization that's coming, the program and their mandate, but the second piece is: are there any outstanding Auditor General recommendations? We were interested to find that we had a couple, so we have been acting in these areas.

8:40

SCSS is taking, really, two distinct actions to address the recommendations. Action 1 is to develop a root cause analysis

process. The OPGT regularly reviews procedures and compliance rates. When areas of low compliance are identified, the issue undergoes a root cause analysis to determine why the issue is presenting and why mitigated strategies need to be implemented. Progress on these strategies is regularly reviewed.

Action 2 is to develop a revised formal public trustee delegation framework. The Public Trustee Act states that the public trustee can delegate any of the public trustee's powers, duties, or functions. The public trustee is revising the delegation instrument to outline the training and skill competencies required to become and remain delegated. The OPGT is currently identifying opportunities to collect compliance and error data that will inform performance and training plans.

Yesterday I also had the pleasure of meeting with the OPGT team as they provided me with an update in terms of their training but also with respect to their systems to deal with errors. We should have a new system in place by May of next year. The present system in place was designed in 1985, so it's time to make some changes.

I appreciate the Auditor's recommendations, and I can assure you that we've been taking it very seriously in this area.

Mr. Rowswell: Great. Well, thank you. I often wonder, when their recommendation is from 2013, why it takes so long, but you just got it in '22, you know, so it is a process. I appreciate the work that you've done on that. Okay.

What is the status of the Auditor General's outstanding recommendation to SCSS from 2019 to improve its process to measure and report on the income support program's performance?

Ms Farmer: We're very committed to improving performance management processes for this program. Work is under way to implement actions to address the recommendation to improve our processes, and an implementation plan was shared last month with the OAG. The implementation plan includes actions to address the audit findings related to the performance, including developing a refreshed logic model for the income support program, including key client-focused activities, outputs, and outcomes. This has been completed. Develop an inventory of current program performance measures and associated data pathways: this has also been completed. Conduct a data gap analysis to identify key measures for immediate development that will inform program outcomes: this has been completed. Develop new client-focused performance measures and associated data pathways: this is under way. Develop and implement processes to monitor and report on program performance measures and outcomes, including development of a new income support performance dashboard, which will be completed in June of this year.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Well, that's it for me, and I just want to congratulate you on the good work that you're doing in meeting those recommendations.

I will now cede my time to MLA Wiebe.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, and thank you, Member Rowswell, for your comments. Through the chair to the ministry, on page 18 of the annual report I see that the income support program provides financial and health benefits to individuals and families who do not have the resources to meet their basic needs.

Income support consists of two client categories. The first one is: expected to work, which is ETW, and barriers to full-time employment, which is BFE. In the ETW category it includes those who are searching for work, working but not earning enough income to meet their basic needs, or are temporarily incapable of

working. In the BFE category it includes those who have multiple barriers or persistent mental or physical health challenges that make obtaining employment take longer and require more support. In both categories caseloads are composed of single individuals, single-parent families, couples with children, and couples without children. What contributed to the 5.7 per cent average monthly reduction in income support for barriers to full-time employment caseloads in '22-23, as mentioned on page 18?

Ms Farmer: Thank you for your question. Through the chair, as per the income supports act income support clients must provide up-to-date information on their circumstances, including living arrangements and their finances. In addition, the act requires income support recipients to access all forms of income that they may be eligible for. In this regard SCSS staff undertake file reviews to assure that the current information on clients is obtained and that clients are receiving all the supports they may be eligible for. As a result of the review of client needs and circumstances, their benefits may have been adjusted. In this summer, in terms of the barriers to full employment, we reviewed every case file, and that led us to a drop by 5.7 per cent.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you.

Through the chair, you just mentioned that all the client cases were reviewed. How often are they reviewed and for what purposes?

Ms Farmer: For the BFE program, so the barriers to full employment, through the chair, there hadn't been a consistent review process. There had been intermittent reviews and maybe a small number of file reviews. Coming out of COVID, I thought it was important and the executive team thought it was important that we reach out and make sure that we reach out to every client, particularly on BFE, and find out their circumstances and update their circumstances. A number of individuals moved on to as far as ETW; their circumstances had changed. A number of individuals, actually, we investigated for fraud, so we have ongoing investigations going on. Simply, what we asked clients to do was to update their information with us. It was a review that took roughly six months for us to complete.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you.

I'll move on to my next question. Through the chair, looking at page 18 of the annual report, I see that – oh, I'm wrong. Same question. Alberta has a rich heritage of Ukrainian heritage and deep ties with Ukraine. As on page 22 of the annual report the government of Alberta helped Ukrainian evacuees fleeing the war in '22-23 "by providing access to emergency and ongoing financial benefits for those arriving in Alberta with little or no savings or income." What did the department do in '22-23 to help Ukrainian evacuees settle in Alberta, and how many Ukrainian evacuees benefited from these supports?

Ms Farmer: Starting in April of 2022, the ministry provided emergency financial benefits, ongoing financial supports, employment supports, rent supplements to displaced Ukrainians with a valid visa. Career and employment services funded services offered through the Centre for Newcomers in Calgary and the Edmonton Newcomer Centre, formerly the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. It also supported Ukrainian newcomers in their transition to Alberta's labour market. Services offered by these organizations included digital upskilling with low to moderate English language and computer skills, Canadian job search workshops, and information services on topics such as career planning, resumé writing, interview preparation, accessing

employers as well as employer connections and job placement supports.

In 2022-23 the ministry invested \$2.3 million in the Ukrainian evacuee emergency financial support and benefits program to provide one-time emergency benefits to 115 households and ongoing monthly financial assistance to 715 households. During '22-23 1,185 Ukrainian nationals accessed our career and employment services; 938 attended job search workshops.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move back to questions from the Official Opposition. In this round you will have 10 minutes.

Ms Renaud: Ten minutes. Thank you. A couple of quick questions on AISH. I'm going to start with page 19 – we see "improving applications and administration for the [AISH] program" – and on page 31 for reference. Page 19 really is kind of the fluffy part that talks about AISH processing, that it's faster, more effective onboarding, and then 12 pages later we go to page 31, and we see the ministry sort of blow through their targets without a lot of information about why that is.

8:50

I guess, one, I don't know why we talk about application processing and then 12 pages later have the actual targets and the reporting, but, you know, it is what it is. I'd like to know, I guess: what is the reason that the ministry is missing the target so significantly by three months? That is performance measure 1(a) on page 31.

Ms Farmer: Thank you for the question. I'm going to ask Toby Schneider, our ADM responsible for employment programs.

Mr. Schneider: Thank you. Toby Schneider, ADM. Thanks for the question. I think what we tried to find to balance in our write-up was to actually represent that there were actually two reasons why the targets were exceeded in the year. One of those was actually an increase in applications that caught us a little off guard, for sure. There was a 19 per cent increase in applications. Just a lot of volume hit us, and it hit us quite quickly, I think, in the kind of post-COVID recovering world. We also did, as many organizations through the COVID period, work as best we could to retain staff, but turnover and hiring were difficult during that time. An AISH adjudicator position itself is actually a long training incubation period because, obviously, there's a lot to know to do that job. Catch-up does lag. That certainly was one of the reasons.

The other part, Chair, that was referred to was around the adjudication process and enhancing that process, what we call, internally. We can call it that externally, too. We're happy to do so. What we noticed through the adjudication process was that it was very kind of stark. You get documentation. You review documentation. It's a yes or a no, and a kind of cold letter goes out to people saying – in most cases, if it's no, that's where it's hard. Obviously, yes is a different story as far as approval for medical application.

What we did during this time simultaneously, which caused a drag for us because it was more time – but we felt it was very, very important to do a couple of things. One was to make sure that if we're seeing information sets where we don't believe the information is complete enough but we do have reason to believe that if we dig a little further with the doctors and with others, we could get to a better, a more complete decision for that applicant. That means actually getting back to doctors and putting a little bit more onus on making sure the process works for Albertans. In the past...

Ms Renaud: Sorry. I'm just going to interrupt. I have, like, very little time. I apologize for the interruption.

Mr. Schneider: Sorry. I'll just finish by saying that the other thing we did is that we were more overt in contacting Albertans over the phone instead of just using a letter to let them know what's going on.

Thanks.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Maybe just tagging on that, does the ministry have, like, a staff turnover percentage rate for this fiscal year for AISH, for people that work in AISH? Sometimes that's a reflection of, you know, maybe there's some difficulty going on. Is that a stat that the ministry keeps?

Mr. Schneider: For 2022-23 I can't speak specifically to a stat, but I can say that we run somewhere between 5 and 10 per cent on turnover. A lot of our turnover is actually retirements because there are a lot of long-service people coming in, but it's varied.

Ms Renaud: One of the things the ministry does is that it doesn't report – actually, my question is: why doesn't the ministry report on the time between when the initial application is received and when the administration determines it's ready for adjudication? Really, the ministry is only reporting on the time for one part of the process.

The reason I'm asking – you know, you rightly mentioned the piece about doctors. Doctors are very much an active participant in this application process. We know that Albertans, thousands of Albertans, are struggling without a family doctor. I don't think that excludes people with disabilities or AISH applicants. I think that they also are struggling with the loss of a family doctor, can't find a family doctor. Completing the medical forms is a little bit more challenging when it's a new person. So why doesn't the ministry report on that first piece, when they get the application and when administration decides they're going to start counting?

Mr. Schneider: Thank you, Chair. Toby Schneider. During the AISH review and I believe with the Auditor General in 2016, if I recall right, one of the actions was the reporting around time frame. The decision was taken to use the medical adjudication period as representation. The ministry does track all the stages of the application, including what happens before and after the adjudication.

Ms Renaud: Do you have an average length of time when the application is received and when the administration determines it's good to go?

Mr. Schneider: The information – Toby Schneider, to say my name again – for the fiscal year that we're referring to, '22-23: I can get a stat from my staff. But what I would say is that we strive to keep that period of time under six weeks, and often applications do come in with lack of certain information, so we're working with Albertans to complete that information.

Ms Renaud: Okay.

The Chair: Just to clarify, at the table you don't have to introduce every time.

Ms Renaud: You know, one of the things we know and, actually, the previous Auditor General was very good about pointing out is that these processes are very difficult to navigate, and I think a lot of changes were made as a result years ago, but what I find is that

the annual report is not very accessible. It's just not very accessible. It's difficult to follow. It's certainly not in plain language. Could you tell me: just in this fiscal were there any other steps that the ministry took to make these processes more accessible for people, for applicants, for people with disabilities?

Mr. Schneider: Yes. Would you like . . .

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much for the question. We actually have undertaken a review that is being led by our ADM of seniors. It started with translation services in terms of as far as comments with respect to translation services and doing signing. But we also have been looking across all of our services in terms of our font size, our reading level. Dana Mackie – if you would like additional information about the work that he's doing across all the statutory programs, I can ask Dana to speak to that if you would like.

Ms Renaud: We don't have a lot of time, but if you could table anything, I'm sure other committee members would love to see that as well. That would be awesome.

Ms Farmer: We will table that. Dana has done a thorough review in terms of particularly starting with our statutory programs, and we will grow over the course of the next year or so in terms of improving accessibility.

Ms Renaud: I have a quick question, before I run out of time, about food banks. We touched on this a couple of weeks ago, but there was \$10 million set aside for food banks. Now, only part of that \$10 million was actually set aside for actual food banks; the rest was for organizations. I'm not entirely sure how those were selected, but anyway. I'm a little confused about what equation was used. I think we've heard speculation that it was possibly the ability of different food banks to fund raise or the geographic sort of area they were serving.

Let me use Airdrie as an example. In '22-23 the Airdrie Food Bank received \$110,000; for comparison, Edmonton's Food Bank received a total of \$280,000. Now, if you calculate per capita, Airdrie residents are funded at \$1.375 per person, and Edmonton received \$0.000000357 per person. Edmonton's Food Bank serves in two months what Airdrie does all year, not counting the meal and snack program. We also know they're a feeder food bank, very much like Calgary, getting food out to other organizations. Where did this funding formula come from? It doesn't – I don't quite understand the distribution of that one piece of that food bank grant.

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much for the question. Through the chair, we provided food bank grants to established food banks. Established food banks were identified based on as far as their participation in the Food Banks Canada HungerCount. Funding was allocated based on the Calgary and Edmonton service areas and on the population they serve as reported by the food banks. Food banks that did not participate in the HungerCount were eligible to provide a food security grant, and the Calgary Inter-faith Food Bank as far as – each received \$280,000.

When we looked at distributing the money for food banks and you look at it by a population base, there's a key difference . . . [Ms Farmer's speaking time expired]

The Chair: You can complete the sentence.

Ms Farmer: Pardon?

The Chair: You can complete the sentence.

Ms Farmer: There's a key difference between the ability of Edmonton and Calgary to raise funds and to actually have partners. We looked at the formula in terms of how we are distributing funding throughout the province, particularly in those areas that may have difficulty in terms of raising as far as money for food banks. We also heard, particularly from Calgary, that they didn't necessarily need the money because they have a very comprehensive donation program. So that was one of the factors.

Thank you.

9:00

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to questions from the government caucus. You also have 10 minutes, MLA de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the department and all the officials that are here today. I have a question about affordability, which is something that is, obviously, on the minds of many people and, as the parliamentary secretary for Affordability and Utilities, is also something that I care deeply about and hear often from my constituents that they struggle with the rising cost of living resulting from high inflation. You know, this government certainly recognizes the urgency of supporting Albertans through this affordability crisis, which is really global right now, and addressing the high cost of living. That's referenced on page 20 of the annual report. Through the chair, can you please describe the different measures that were made available in 2022-23 to help Albertans through this difficult time, and also, as part of that, can you comment on the impact of indexing AISH and income support benefits as well?

Ms Farmer: Thank you. The affordability crisis has made it more difficult for Albertans to feed their families and make ends meet. The department implemented several initiatives to make life more affordable for those vulnerable Albertans. AISH, income support, and the Alberta seniors' benefits were increased by 6 per cent on January 1, 2023. The benefits were indexed to keep pace with inflation, reaching \$44 million. All Albertans receiving financial benefits or PDD services beginning in January 2023 also received \$600 over six months for a total of \$219 million. This included \$170 million for 295,000 eligible seniors; \$49 million for other groups, including \$23.2 million for just under 75,000 AISH recipients; \$14.4 million as far as 52,652 individuals receiving income support; \$11.3 million for 18,832 Canada pension plan disability recipients; and \$300,000 for 960 individuals under the PDD program.

Food banks and civil society organizations working to provide food security for vulnerable Albertans received \$10 million. This included \$6.3 million to food banks and food security organizations and \$3.4 million to match donations made by Albertans.

Low-income transit programs received \$14 million. The program served regions across the province in 13 municipalities with established transit systems and an existing low-income transit program.

Effective January 1, 2023, AISH and income support benefits were increased, as I had mentioned, by 6 per cent. Also included was an increase to people's basic needs, including some programs, with respect to SCSS, that expensed nearly \$37.5 million towards the indexing of income support and AISH programs. Moving forward, it's intended that these programs will be indexed to inflation.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you.

I just want to dive a bit further into the issue of food security, which you were just previously speaking about. On page 13 under key highlights, enhancing food security, I see, as you've alluded to,

that \$6.3 million was provided "to food banks and food security organizations to ensure," of course, "Albertans can put food on their tables. An additional \$3.4 million was used to match donations," which you had referenced. Then, in relation, on page 21 of the annual report it says that SCSS "provided \$10 million in food security funding to food banks and civil society organizations." That includes \$2.8 million to food banks and \$2.9 million to civil society organizations. It again references the matched donations. Can you please inform the committee, through the chair, how many organizations benefited from this funding? And – it was a conversation that was happening earlier – how did SCSS determine which food banks received funding? I know you've touched on that already; if there's anything you wanted to expand on. How much funding did they receive?

Ms Farmer: Thank you, through the chair, for the question. A hundred and eleven established food banks received \$2.8 million in food banks grants; 76 civil society organizations received \$2.9 million in food security grants; 113 organizations received \$3.4 million to match donations they raised between December 1 and December 31, 2022. The funding was distributed by our partners at the family and community social services association of Alberta. The ministry worked in partnership with the association to distribute the funding because they really are a trusted funder. We recognize that they have strong community ties and have a really good understanding of community needs. As I had mentioned, established food banks were identified because of their participation in Food Banks Canada and the HungerCount. I believe our approach, as far as I had already discussed in the previous question – but I also would just be reminded that higher transportation costs also impacted how money was distributed to food banks.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, through the chair.

On page 21 of the annual report it states that "\$510,000 was provided to Food Banks Alberta to support capacity building . . . within Alberta's network of food banks." Food Banks Alberta certainly also, you know, supports food banks that are in more rural and remote communities and has also shared with me the increase of transportation costs. Can you please expand on what that work entails and a bit more about what that funding went to?

Ms Farmer: Thank you for the question, through the chair. I'm going to ask Jenn Anderson to speak to the work that she's doing in this area.

Thank you.

Ms Anderson: Thank you for the question, through the chair. Food Banks Alberta has 120 member food banks. We recognize that they're uniquely positioned to provide insight into Alberta's food banks, and they have established relationships with them, with the producers, and with suppliers.

This funding is helping them build capacity within Alberta's networks of food banks in a number of ways. First is to complete a review of the current food banking system infrastructure, including collaborative planning exercises; second is implementing technology solutions to increase co-ordination and capacity across member networks; and then third is to develop training programs, including board governance, cultural awareness, and helping food bank users move out of the system, which is also important. Through the work that they're doing with the funding, the intent is that they'll improve the food security service system in four key areas: communication, co-ordination of service delivery, internal operations, and staff volunteer training. It also helps Food Banks Alberta to develop technology and training to support the food

banks to respond to identified gaps in service, which is really important.

Thank you for the question.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you very much.

Moving on now to the labour market and supporting job seekers. On page 32 of the annual report it talks about, you know, supporting job seekers and supporting Albertans to participate in their communities through employment. What did the department do in 2022-23 to support unemployed and underemployed Albertans to reattach to the labour market, and can you please inform the committee about the types of employment programs that were made available to Albertans?

Ms Farmer: Thank you. For this question I'm going to pass it to ADM Toby Schneider.

Mr. Schneider: Thanks for the question, Chair. SCSS offers a range of current financial services to support job seekers in finding and maintaining employment. CEIS can be accessed by any Albertan in any circumstance at no cost, including those facing personal challenges or disability barriers in achieving employment. There are a wide variety of services available to Albertans, for potential employees and employers.

The program services include assessments, which are used to determine a job seeker's strengths, needs, and services that might be most helpful in meeting employment goals; career and employment counselling; job fairs and workshops; job placement services with partner employers; exposure courses, which are short-term courses, a maximum of two weeks for certification or specific skills required for jobs – examples of this would be things like H2S Alive or fall protection, things that are very practical, on-the-job pieces – workforce development initiatives that offer job seekers with barriers to employment opportunities, including opportunities for paid on-the-job training to gain practical work experience; as well as community supports and services to help achieve employment outcomes.

9:10

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move back to the Official Opposition for another 10 minutes.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. A couple of questions on income support. The Auditor General found in 2024 that the ministry still needs to improve its performance management processes. The AG found that the department has not improved reporting on long-term and intermediate outcomes for Albertans, which is the ability for Albertans to meet their basic needs and experience financial resiliency, which includes employment, obviously. I was very thankful to see that recommendation. We understand, through the report, that the ministry has another plan to transform things, and I understand we'll get some reporting at some point this spring. That's the most current reason, however, for insufficient metrics in the areas that were identified by the AG. So as the ministry doesn't currently report on poverty reduction or poverty deepening, will the transformation include any measures that address poverty for people on income support? Any plans to include any metrics?

Ms Farmer: I'm going to pass the question to Toby Schneider, ADM, employment.

Mr. Schneider: Thanks.

These are currently under development, as the deputy minister has spoken through where we are on the stages of getting that work ready for the spring. We are actually currently at the place where

we are looking through those pieces. We do have to match the stated goals of the program to what we're measuring. That's very important for us, and that's what the AG's expectation of us would be. In terms of how those stated goals or those stated policy goals would translate, we do look at a broad variety of things such as measures and market-basket measures and so forth to understand the context we're working in. Those don't become the actual performance measures, but they are included in our thinking and in the logic models that we're developing as we currently speak.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm assuming that there are some external experts that are being brought in to assist with this transformation. Is that the case? Through you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Schneider: We do have external experts that do help us. We have been engaged with Deloitte Canada for our employment services transformation – that's been ongoing for a couple of years – and we do retain other specialists. The government at large as well through JET has also retained various services to help with this type of work. In fact, we just recently received a piece of work that JET inspired around barriers to employment writ large, not just our programming element. So yes.

Ms Renaud: Do you have any idea what that contract with Deloitte would be worth? I think that was the first one you said.

Mr. Lundy: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Chair. This is point of order 23(b). The member opposite is asking questions about current contract values or projecting about current services and contracts into the future. Of course, we're here today to discuss the annual report from '22-23.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair. This isn't a point of order. The member was clearly referencing the '22-23 report in her question, and I'm sure that she'll be happy to remind the members opposite that her question was pertaining to the '22-23 report.

The Chair: Thank you.

I think I would agree with MLA Lundy here, that questions need to be strictly about the report that's before us.

Ms Renaud: I will move on.

The Chair: So I will ask the member to make your question relevant to the report.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thank you. I'll just move on.

Page 45. Approximately 31,000 unique individuals exited income support in 2022, an 18 per cent increase over the prior year. Now, interestingly, because I think the ministry was sort of slow getting people through – but, anyway, that's for another day. So this was obviously not because more Albertans were employed, as the ministry missed the employment targets as they have since 2019. Clearly, the decrease is due to something. I'm guessing it is the extensive file eligibility reviews that we read about in the report. Based on the report, based on that information, page 45 for your reference, how many of the 31,000 unique individuals left income support for AISH?

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much for the question. I'm sorry. I would not have that information at my fingertips right now of how many individuals would have left BFE or ETW for AISH.

Ms Renaud: Sure. If you could table that, that'd be great.

Ms Farmer: We can get back to you on that, and we'll try before the meeting ends also.

Ms Renaud: Sure. That'd be great.

This might follow along with that. How many were removed because mail, whether it's e-mail or snail mail, was returned unanswered in that review process? Any idea?

Ms Farmer: I'm going to ask Toby. Toby does have the answer, so I'm going to ask him to provide the answer.

ADM Schneider, please.

Ms Renaud: Maybe before he answers, I'll add the other piece I was going to ask because that might fit with what your answer might be. My other question was: how many were removed because they no longer met financial eligibility?

Mr. Schneider: Thank you. Let me begin with the transfer or people leaving income support and how many left for AISH. I don't have a specific answer for that year, but I can tell you that in general we trend with our AISH new onboarders that about 45, 46 per cent of those do come from income support, generally the barriers to full employment stream. Hopefully, that's sufficient.

As far as returned mail, when we actually do these file reviews, we do send a letter, and then we do also of course use a hold process. We don't like to put people in stress. If people notice that there's a hold and they don't see their cheque coming through, we essentially use a process where if they contact us, we will remove that hold. We need to know that they're still in Alberta, that they're still out there. As long as they say to us yes, even if I need more time to get the files – we do set up a specific line so that people can get through on that. As far as how many were held due to mail, I would have to go back to the team and find out how often that happened. That's the process we use to get there.

Ms Renaud: Financial eligibility was the last one.

Mr. Schneider: Yeah. The breakdown: the vast majority of people who would be removed would be because they either didn't ever get back to us and maybe they don't even meet the general eligibility of being Albertan anymore or if they have too much income or too many assets in the meantime, which would be part of the financial eligibility. The majority do fail on financial eligibility.

Ms Renaud: So 31,000 unique individuals exiting the income support program in a year is a big number, for sure. Understandably, the number is large because the effort was large to go through and review and do this massive file review. We know these are really vulnerable people. They're living on less than \$900 a month if they're receiving income support without, you know, top-ups. How do you ensure – I mean, a lot of these folks, I'm sure, can't afford rent, so they're without homes or couch surfing or don't have access to a phone or computer. What sort of measures has the ministry put in place to ensure that these 31,000 unique individuals aren't sort of losing benefits because they're homeless or in distress of some kind?

Ms Farmer: We have a number of steps in our system. One is that if you are getting a benefit, you have a requirement that you actually need to report back to us. The reason that you got the benefit was because you met a certain financial criteria, you live in Alberta, and you're actually looking for employment or engaging in activities so that you can actually get employment. We tested that, and that was an important test. We took great efforts over a period of time and

we continue to reach out to Albertans to make sure that their data is correct. We found in a number of cases, quite a number of cases, where individuals did not get back to us and they chose not to get back to us, so we would put their application on hold.

Ms Renaud: You know that they chose not to get back to you as opposed to they couldn't?

Ms Farmer: There's a choice in some of this also. There are individuals that we found – and I mentioned fraud. We have a significant effort that we're having in terms of individuals that may have been getting a benefit that actually weren't entitled.

For individuals that are entitled to it, we will do whatever we can as far as to – they can come to our offices; we have 52. They can call our phone lines. We are open 24/7, 365 of the year. We also have as far as, you know, application processes . . .

9:20

Ms Renaud: So I'm going to cut you off here.

I'm talking about barriers for employment. Again, on page 45 there are 31,000 unique individuals that are no longer on income support. Now, I have to assume that these are some very poor people, some very desperate people in many cases. I'm going to assume that some just don't get back to you, but I'm going to assume that there are some that just cannot for whatever reason, whether it's mental illness, whether it's disability. We know there's approximately 45 per cent of people going over to AISH eventually, so there's a disability involved of some kind. So with 31,000 unique individuals leaving income support, what are you doing to ensure that people that are homeless or vulnerable or disabled, that haven't got back to you to extend the benefits – what's in place to catch these people? This is a safety net. Income support is a safety net.

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much for the question. Through the chair, our offices are open on a weekly basis, one, in terms of: individuals can contact us, as far as 365, 24 hours a day – we have many service providers. We have many partnerships with FCSS communities as well as other service providers that also can assist those individuals.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move back to the government caucus for another 10 minutes.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you. Thank you for coming here and the work that your department is doing. On page 69 of the annual report it says that "housing capital programs are focused on providing funding for new and regenerated affordable housing units to support Albertans . . . in need." The 2022 capital plan outlined a \$281 million commitment to provide 2,300 units over three years. Can you talk about what progress was made on this in terms of 2022-23?

Ms Farmer: Thank you for the question. As of March 30, 2023, the government had completed 2,687 new units of affordable housing, including 350 shelter spaces.

Mr. McDougall: So you exceeded the commitment.

How many of these units meet the design requirements for barrier-free access?

Ms Farmer: Of the 36,200 housing units in Alberta Social Housing Corporation's portfolio, which includes senior self-contained units, lodge units, and community housing units, approximately 14 per cent are barrier-free, which equals to approximately 5,000 units.

Mr. McDougall: How many of these would be located in rural Alberta?

Ms Farmer: Eighty-three of the new units are in rural Alberta.

Mr. McDougall: Clearly, primarily an urban issue, then.

Through the chair, can the deputy minister highlight a few of the successful projects in the communities?

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much. Through the chair, \$30 million went towards the Gilchrist project in Calgary, which supported the construction of 115 units. The Neoma was a \$2 million project that converted office space to 92 units. In Fox Creek \$1 million at a manor projected support for eight units. The final example would be \$3.45 million for a project in Lethbridge that supported the construction of 64 units as affordable seniors' housing.

Mr. McDougall: Going back to page 69, we see that the affordable housing partnership program, or AHPP, was launched in December 2022 "to address the increasing demand for affordable housing in Alberta," which, of course, is a key issue these days. Through the chair, can the deputy minister provide an overview of the program and its purpose exactly?

Ms Farmer: Thank you. Through the chair, the affordable housing partnership program enables collaboration between Alberta's government and local partners to provide more innovative housing solutions across the province to meet the unique needs of each community. The program was launched on December 7, 2022. This was a key action under the stronger foundations affordability housing strategy to enable growth and development by using innovative approaches for partnerships with the nonprofit and private sectors.

More specifically, action 5.1 creates a partnership framework and program tailored to affordable housing. The program supports growth and investment by bringing together partners such as the federal and municipal governments, nongovernment organizations, and other housing providers to increase the supply of affordable housing units in high-demand areas. It encourages the development of mixed-income housing models, which will enable longer term sustainability while increasing the number of affordable housing units available for vulnerable Albertans, and the partnership program provides up to one-third of the capital costs to eligible approved housing projects. The remainder of the funding comes from housing providers and their partners, including municipalities, donors, and the federal government.

Mr. McDougall: How was the uptake on this program in its first year?

Ms Farmer: In the first year – thank you for the question. Through the chair, the intake closed on January 11, 2023. On March 9, 2023, the ministry announced approval of \$54 million to support 17 projects in nine communities across the province: \$8 million in 2023-24, \$18.3 million in '24-25, \$24.3 million in '25-26, and \$3.4 million for '26-27.

Mr. McDougall: Could you provide an update on the status or completion of those projects?

Ms Farmer: Through the chair, we'd like it to happen faster, but that's part of building housing. It takes a little bit. It takes a few years. Because the program launched in 2023 and due to the time requirement to build, we don't have completed projects, but my team is tracking to make sure that these projects will be completed within the contracted timelines.

Mr. McDougall: On page 39 of the annual report it is noted that there were 6,277 applications received for family support for children with disabilities, FSCD, in '22-23, so that's a 36 per cent increase over the previous year. It's a pretty large increase year over year. On the same page the report discusses some digital solutions that have been implemented to improve the experiences of the families involved in the FSCD program. What improvements exactly did the FSCD program make to enhance the access to the program and the overall family experience?

Ms Farmer: Thank you. Through the chair, we've undertaken, as discussed earlier today, a number of program improvements, including in the FSCD program, including in July 2022 the FSCD regulation was amended to remove the appendix that contained the FSCD agreement and notice of appeal to the Appeal Committee forms. This allows for the forms to be changed by the statutory director rather than requiring a change in regulation, reducing administrative burden but also allowing greater flexibility to amend forms to meet the needs of Albertans.

In January '23 a digital assessment was implemented that reduced the overall time it takes to complete an assessment. The reduction of wait times of FSCD agreements from application to agreement went from an average of 18 months in Calgary and 11 months provincially to nine months provincially. We're still, as far as having efforts to make this even shorter – in February 2023, following the COVID-19 public health emergency status being lifted, the program rescinded a number of interim policies and applied lessons learned to allow for greater flexibility for families to access supports. This included increased flexibility in virtual or in-person meetings and options, to share information via e-mail, to send documents and agreements via e-mail, to allow for digital signing of documents.

In March '23 disability services implemented a new approach to improve the family experience, ensuring timely access to FSCD services, tried to streamline processes for families and caseworkers by expediting access to family support services. The new family support service process was implemented in March '23, starting with Calgary first, 713 families, where the highest volume could be tested to get families connected to some services quickly. Full provincial implementation occurred in this new fiscal year, '23-24.

9:30

Mr. McDougall: Thank you.

Our government understands the issues that renters in Alberta and across the country are facing with respect to affordability, which is one of the big issues of the day. This is why I'm glad to see that on pages 72 and 73 of the annual report the FCSS has several programs intending to serve different groups in need as it relates to affordability. Through the chair, can the deputy minister please explain the available rent benefits and their differences? I'm having a hard time trying to sort that out.

Ms Farmer: Albertans who don't usually qualify for traditional affordable housing programs can access the rent supplement program to make their rent more affordable. The rental assistance benefit program is a long-term benefit that subsidizes rent for Albertans with low incomes. It is paid directly to the tenants. The benefit is available through most housing management bodies across Alberta. The amount is calculated based on the household income and the local market rent. Households are prioritized based on need.

In 2023 36 housing operators provided \$48.8 million through the program to support 7,489 households, compared to \$37.9 million to support 5,910 households in '21-22. This represents a 29 per cent

increase in the funding and a 27 per cent increase in the households. The variance is due to the increase in rent supplement funding to assist eligible households on the wait-list for rental assistance, including Ukrainian evacuees and the transition of households from a private landlord rental supplement program due to expiring funding agreements.

The temporary rental assistance benefit... [Ms Farmer's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will move back to the Official Opposition for a 10-minute block of questions.

Mr. Haji: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be quick on the questions. Because of the time, I will request if you could be precise in your response because I don't want to cut you off. The minister has spent \$282 million in building new affordable housing or renewal or maintenance. Page 99 of the annual report articulates that \$180 million, which is 65 per cent of it, is spent on community housing and seniors' community housing. How much of this was a federal transfer, and how much was a provincial budget allocation?

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much for the question. I'm going to ask David Williams, ADM of housing, to speak to the answer.

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. Thank you very much. For the federal capital programs each one comes down to – each of the projects will have a different specific allocation, and it's always on a reclaim basis. The revenue that you'll see coming in in this fiscal year is often for projects that have been already sort of completed. We can get you a specific sort of breakdown in terms of each of the projects if you like, but generally speaking up to 50 per cent of it is claimable through the national housing strategy, depending on the project, and there are some other eligibility criteria through there.

Mr. Haji: So it's fair to say that the \$282 million that was spent: 50 per cent is federal contributions.

Mr. David Williams: Not of the \$282 million because that would include – that's the total amount for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. I've got the number; \$119 million was federal contribution.

Mr. Haji: Okay. On page 9 of the annual report there was a decrease of \$53 million in spending from budget compared to the previous budget. I was a little bit shocked to see that given the housing crisis that we are in; \$43 million of that was due to delayed federal transfer. Can the department explain, through the chair, the reasons for this delay of \$53 million from federal transfer?

Ms Farmer: Through the chair, I'm just going to answer. I'm going to transfer to David in one moment, but just to answer your question on how much returned mail, to the member: one letter was returned in the review that we did, as one letter was received. Just to answer your question in the previous questions.

I'll ask David Williams to comment on the second question. Thank you.

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. Thank you very much, through the chair to the member, for the question. In terms of the decrease of \$53 million, that's primarily in relation to timing. A number of the projects: as they would come through, we anticipated the expenditure and the revenue to come in, so we matched the revenue to the expenditures. The \$20.9 million was a delay on unspent capital funding related to specialized housing, family, and

community projects – those would include projects in Lethbridge and Red Deer which were caught up in zoning and were unable to move forward during that time – \$7.2 million was just a delay in finalizing capital grant agreements under the affordable partnership, and then \$7.8 million we reprofiled from capital maintenance and renewal grant into capital maintenance and renewal investment in order to address pressures on...

Mr. Haji: Basically, was it a delay from our side or from the federal government's side?

Mr. David Williams: No. I wouldn't say – it's actually just a delay from project progress. We always pay on a progress base. Projects sometimes go faster, slower, just depending on the nature of the project. Some were zoning delays. There was no effort from the federal government to delay payments to us. It's just that we claim them on a progress basis.

Mr. Haji: Another reason for the decrease was explained as capital asset sales that were lower than anticipated. How much of the allocated budget was supposed to come from capital asset sales?

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. In '22-23 we actually only made two sales of the land. The Stoney Creek Lodge and cottage in Camrose was sold to the city of Camrose for \$626,306 for municipal use, and then we had a vacant lot up in Fort Chipewyan which was sold to a private individual. We only actually had about \$675,000 in revenue from asset sales.

Mr. Haji: Okay. How much did you budget? There's a shortfall of what you budgeted for sales and what you actually sold, so I want to understand the discrepancy between the two.

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. We'll have to get the breakdown for you. The budget originally was \$31 million in other revenue, but that would include other things other than just...

Mr. Haji: So will you be able to table that?

Mr. David Williams: Yeah.

Mr. Haji: Okay. Thank you.

The department signed a bilateral agreement with the federal government to provide the province funding under the national housing strategy. Under this agreement there were three cost matching, which were Alberta priorities, the Canada community housing initiative, as well as Canada housing benefit. All those programs have targets and outcomes in the agreement. Why were these targets and outcomes not shared with Albertans in the annual report?

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. All of those targets...

Ms Farmer: Through the chair.

Mr. David Williams: Sorry. Through the chair to the hon. member, all of those targets are available to Albertans through the – we have a Canada-Alberta action plan that's published as well as a progress report. That is published on the website for Albertans to review, and it lists the targets that we have under the reports and the progress that we're making towards those targets.

Mr. Haji: But it's not provided in the annual report. I'm just wondering why you wouldn't provide that in the annual report.

Mr. David Williams: We've already provided it. It's on a different reporting cycle, too. Because it aligns with the federal reporting

cycle, under the agreement there's specific timing for reporting underneath there, so we include it there. We didn't include it in the annual report because it was already publicly available.

Ms Farmer: To the member: it's a very good question. Perhaps we will, in terms of when we're doing our annual report, consider doing the link for that information in our next annual report so that people know that that information is available.

Mr. Haji: Yeah. Being a member of the committee, Mr. Chair, I struggled to find that, so I had to do my own research to find that out. From a transparency perspective, which is a principle in the agreement, I wondered why that was not provided. But thank you very much for the consideration.

Ms Farmer: We're happy to reconsider that piece.

Mr. Haji: The agreement outlines funding principles under section 6(e). It includes promoting environmental sustainability and energy efficiency. I looked in the annual report, and I couldn't see any reference to that. Through the chair, can the department report on our compliance to energy efficiency and environmental sustainability? Basically, as per the agreement we are responsible to be compliant on agreements that the province signs.

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. Through the chair to the member, thank you very much for the question. Yes. Under the agreement there are requirements to work on certain energy efficiency standards and other sorts of pieces. As per our action plan we've agreed and we're currently working through with the federal government on an agreed-upon approach on how to measure all of those various sorts of pieces. All of our programs have to – all of our buildings live up to the building code standards in the province, which are adapted from the national building codes, which do include certain provisions around energy efficiency.

9:40

As well we've also been targeting the older structures that we have for enhancements and regeneration and renewal. Obviously, a lot of our buildings are 35-plus years old as we begin to go through and replace windows, update boiler systems, other sorts of pieces, and renew or knock down and replace as we go forward. A number of our new buildings that we've built, including this one up north of Edmonton: we've got a lot of solar energy in. We're starting to incorporate solar into more in order to do that.

Mr. Haji: Would you consider that that is something that is important for Albertans to know in the annual report as well?

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. As we link into, you know – the deputy said that we take the consideration underneath in terms of linking the report in it. We do it publicly through that. We can link it to the annual report under the agreement.

Mr. Haji: Thank you.

Through the affordable housing partnership program the ministry announced a provincial funding support of \$54 million. This was supposed to be a third of the total amount, so I'm wondering: what were the contributions from other sources, whether it's municipal, business, or federal government?

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. Through the chair to the member, we'll be happy to share more of that sort of in the next annual report, because those agreements were announced initially, and some of those contributions were still being finalized. On average the benchmark cost per door, building affordable housing through a

traditional sort of approach that we've taken, used to be about \$300,000 a door, again, depending on the type of construction, the size. Through this program we found it was down to about \$100,000. That would include contributions from both the municipal government, private equity contributions from the individuals, as well as borrowing through CMHC. Each of those projects will be publicly reported on as we move forward.

Mr. Haji: Just looking at the time, will you be able to table that as well to see if we provided \$54 million? What are the other contributions that will make the other two-thirds of the contributions?

The Chair: You can say yes or no.

Mr. David Williams: That will be part of our annual report in the upcoming year.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move back to government for another 10 minutes of questions.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much, Chair. On page 13 of the annual report it mentions that during the 2022-23 fiscal year Seniors, Community and Social Services moved forward several key and innovative projects to continue making life better for individuals, families, and communities. One key highlight listed on this page is a \$44 million investment the government has made to index benefits for vulnerable Albertans and seniors. My question is around the indexing of benefits for seniors. Can you tell us which program for seniors was indexed?

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much, through the chair, for the question. In December 2022 the government passed the Inflation Relief Statutes Amendment Act, 2022, which reinstated indexing for the province's social benefit programs, which for seniors included the Alberta seniors' benefit program, the supplementary accommodation benefit program, and the special needs assistance for seniors program. In the '22-23 fiscal year the seniors' benefits were increased by 6 per cent effective January 1, 2023, to match the rate of inflation for 2022, in turn helping 176,000 seniors with low income continue to meet their basic needs. The government of Alberta expensed nearly \$6.6 million towards indexing seniors' benefit programs in '22-23.

Examples of indexing increases to the benefits provided under these programs included in the Alberta seniors' benefit: the maximum benefit for a senior rose from \$286 per month to \$303 per month; the minimum monthly disposable income ensured by the supplementary accommodation benefits after a senior pays their accommodation fees in continuing care increased from \$322 per month to \$342 per month; the maximum amount paid annually under the special needs assistance program moved from \$5,105 to \$5,412.

Indexing of seniors' benefits continues to occur in January.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much for the answer.

Again on page 13 of the annual report another key highlight listed was around the implementation of the Alberta affordability action plan. My question for the department is related to the affordability payment for seniors. Can you tell me how much support was provided and how many seniors benefited, and do seniors need to report the affordability payment on their tax returns?

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much for the question. As part of the inflation relief act passed in December, as I mentioned, the

government introduced the program, and it provided inflation relief payments, including seniors with household incomes below \$180,000. Most seniors were eligible to receive up to six monthly payments of \$100 between January and June of 2023 for a total of \$600. As I mentioned, as far as 176,000 seniors received the Alberta seniors' benefit, were automatically enrolled to receive the affordability payments.

I'm very proud of the work that my team did in terms of developing systems and electronic systems so that if you were receiving and you were a client of our department, we provided some automatic enrolment supports for those individuals. That would be across seniors, AISH, income support programs. Those were important steps that we took and a lot of staff time in trying to make it really, as far as seamless for an Albertan. I just would also like to mention that we had great partners in the affordability payments. Although our department did the lion's share of distributing those payments, we also had great partners with registries and our other service providers to help to do those payments.

One of the most important things that we learned, to the member, throughout that process was that seniors are a lot more adept at technology and accessing payments than we're giving seniors credit for. If someone is approaching that senior kind of line, I can appreciate that. But the online portals were developed. T and I was very helpful in trying to help us to make sure that the user experience for seniors was thoughtful.

We're very lucky that service Alberta and the registries came forward. Registry services are available in 300 offices in the province, far beyond our stretch, so it was wonderful. Just speaking anecdotally, my dad is a senior, and when he was applying for the payment – he's 91 years old and no longer can drive, but, boy, he liked going back to that registry service to talk to his friends for the payment. It was a great day. He was very excited. As much as I tried to talk him into the technology solution, Member, he was not interested at all. He wanted to go visit his people back at the registry office, which says a lot about many of our community partners. It was an important step in terms of helping individuals. It was also an important step to understand some seniors, some of their community partners, and how important it was to them.

Thank you.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much for the answer. On page 62 as part of key objective 4.5, which is to collaborate with community-based seniors-serving organizations, health and other sectors, and all orders of government to plan and deliver initiatives and programs that support aging well at home and in community, the report mentions the healthy aging Alberta initiative. Can you tell us about the \$3.2 million over three years to healthy aging Alberta to begin implementation of the Alberta home supports provincial model? I understand that the first phase of the project concluded with six communities awarding nearly \$1.1 million to support 55 organizations for nonmedical services for seniors. I'm curious about what this programming supports and if there's been any progress on the second phase, which was initiated in January of 2023.

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much for the question, through the chair. The grant has successfully provided funding in two phases for 15 community-based seniors-serving organizations. All projects will end by March 31, 2025. Phase 1 resulted in six funded projects in Bashaw, Camrose, Edmonton, Cold Lake, High River, and Medicine Hat. Phase 2, which started on January 31, 2023, resulted in nine additional projects being funded: Drumheller, Lamont,

Beaverlodge, Westlock, Grande Prairie, Vulcan, Fort Macleod, and two in Calgary.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much. On page 62, under supporting seniors' independence and well-being, the report mentions that Seniors, Community and Social Services provides funding, support, and leadership to advance seniors' independence and well-being. There is also mention that the ministry supported several organizations in 2022-23 through seniors community grants. Can you please provide a breakdown of these grants allocated?

Ms Farmer: Of the \$1.4 million that was provided in March 2023, we provided a grant funding for \$300,000 over three years to Caregivers Alberta for a seniors-serving seniors caregiver ambassador pilot program. Say that three times. A grant of \$75,000 was issued to the Alberta Elder Abuse Awareness Council for a project co-ordinator to oversee the administration of their navigation grant, which supports co-ordinated community response to funded Alberta abuse case managers across Alberta, support for several initiatives to strengthen Alberta's economy, including \$20,600 for mature workers job fairs, \$10,500 for supporting an aging workforce through policy and inclusion workshop, and \$48,000 in Alberta at work grant funding to support the development and dissemination of knowledge and translation products to employers on valuing, attracting, and retaining older workers in Alberta.

9:50

Ms Lovely: On page 55 of the annual report there are five key objectives under outcome 4, life is better for Alberta seniors. Can you tell me what Seniors, Community and Social Services did in 2022-23 to help meet key objective 4.1, which is: maintain financial stability for seniors with low income, and work with other ministries to support the health, safety, and well-being of seniors, their ability to participate in their communities, and for their communities to support seniors' independence?

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much for the question. The 2022 spending on grants and low-interest home equity loans was \$428.5 million and \$13 million respectively. The Alberta seniors' benefit provides financial support to seniors with low income to assist them with monthly living expenses, supplementing the government of Canada's old age security, guaranteed income supplement, and Canada pension plan programs; \$328.2 million was provided through the ASB to about 176,000 seniors in monthly payments. The supplementary accommodation benefit provides about \$86.3 million and was provided to 13,200 eligible seniors. The special needs assistance for seniors was \$13.3 million, and it was provided through the program to 22,825 eligible seniors.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move to the Official Opposition for three minutes of comments or questions.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Page 57 states that 295,000 seniors applied for affordability benefits by March 31, 2023. How many seniors were eligible for the affordability payments? What was the target the ministry set for the number of seniors who would receive the payment? How many seniors would have received the affordability payment if the government had paid the benefit out through the Canada Revenue Agency rather than relying on an application system?

Could the ministry explain why the Alberta seniors' benefit had a reduced caseload and a reduced cost per case that resulted in an underexpenditure in 2022-2023? Can the ministry also explain why

the accommodation rate increase for the supplementary accommodation benefit was deferred and when that rate increase will take effect? Can the ministry explain why the number of seniors who were approved for the special needs assistance program dropped compared to 2020 – 2021? What targets for the number of seniors to be accepted into the program did the ministry have?

Can the ministry explain why the number of applications for the SHARP program decreased in 2022-23 compared to the previous year? Does the ministry have a target for the number of applications it's aiming to receive per year to that program? The number of applications for the seniors property tax deferral program was much higher in 2022-23 than the previous year. Can the ministry explain this increase? What long-term plans did the ministry have to help seniors to be able to afford future property tax increases and avoid another spike in applications to this program?

That's all. I will defer to my other colleagues.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Can the ministry please explain to the committee which equation was used to determine the allocation of the food bank money and a list? Was it Food Banks Alberta? Please provide the committee with the equation.

We'd also like to know which outside contractors were used for income support work in this fiscal year. Who was the contractor, and what was the contract worth? The same question for AISH. Finally, what was the process to determine complex needs? What assessment tool was used, and who was responsible for that work within the ministry?

I'll pass to my colleague.

Mr. Haji: Yeah. A total of \$74 million was provided for rent supplement in '22-23. How much of this was part of the bilateral agreement with the federal government informed by the agreement according to the department action plan? The federal government's contributions were supposed to be \$30 million. Was this recognized? Has this been received?

ASHC owns almost 50 per cent of the current housing stocks, and most of these units require major repairs. In '22-23 the province made \$47 million in capital maintenance renewals. Is this all a provincial contribution, or are there contributions that come from the federal government as well?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move back to the government caucus for three minutes.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, of course, to the department officials for joining us today and providing such great information. I would like to read in a few questions. Page 24 of the 2022-23 SCSS annual report states that \$2.5 million went to two shelter service hub model pilots in Edmonton and Calgary, and initial success was reported. Did those pilots result in any lasting

impact? Did these pilots result in any permanent shelter service hubs, or have the pilots ended without any resulting permanent hubs?

On page 38 of the annual report it says that in '22-23 SCSS provided \$2.1 million to family resource centres. What support do the family resource centres give families assessing the family support for children with disabilities and the persons with developmental disability programs? How has this funding supported Albertans in '22-23?

I'd like to ask a question on the action plan on homelessness. Our government is committed to addressing the pressing issue of homelessness in our province. I see on page 23 that implementation of the action plan on homelessness started in October 2023 with a total of \$28 million being allocated to this action plan for the '22-23 fiscal year. What did this funding contribute to, and how does it interact with and complement other initiatives already under way to address homelessness?

A final question. On page 23 of the '22-23 SCSS annual plan it states that the government of Alberta developed and began implementation of the action plan on homelessness in October 2022, which included a funding commitment of \$28 million in '22-23. What are some of the specific outcomes of the \$4.5 million investment directed to expanding shelters to 24/7 service? How many of the shelters that received support to move to 24/7 operations in '22-23 are still running 24/7? Can you please expand on why 24/7 service is so important? How exactly does being open 24/7 help people experiencing homelessness?

Thank you, Chair. Those are my questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes the questions. I would like to thank officials from the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services and the office of the Auditor General for their participation in responding to committees members' questions. We ask that any outstanding questions be responded to in writing within 30 days and forwarded to the committee clerk.

Moving on to other business, I want to note for the record that a written response from the Ministry of Energy and Minerals regarding questions from the committee meeting on April 9, 2024, has been received and made available on the committee's internal website. Any other items for discussion under other business?

Seeing none, the date of the next meeting of the committee is on Tuesday, May 7, 2024, with the Ministry of Treasury Board and Finance.

I will now call for a motion to adjourn. Would a member move that the meeting be adjourned? MLA Renaud moved that the Tuesday, April 23, 2024, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be adjourned. All in favour? Any opposed? Motion carried.

This meeting stands adjourned.

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

