

Title: Wednesday, November 28, 2007 Public Accounts Committee

Date: 07/11/28

Time: 8:30 a.m.

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to call this Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order, please. I would like on behalf of all members of the committee to welcome everyone in attendance this morning. Perhaps we'll go around the table and quickly introduce ourselves, starting with the vice-chair.

Mr. Prins: Good morning. Ray Prins, Lacombe-Ponoka.

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

Mr. Johnston: Good morning. Art Johnston, Calgary-Hays.

Mr. Eggen: Dave Eggen, Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Chase: Harry Chase, Calgary-Varsity.

Ms Pastoor: Bridget Pastoor, Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Bonko: Good morning. Bill Bonko, Edmonton-Decore.

Mrs. McCulloch: Susan McCulloch, Seniors and Community Supports.

Mr. Wiles: Tim Wiles, Seniors and Community Supports.

Mr. McCullough: Reagan McCullough, Seniors and Community Supports.

Mr. Arsenault: Dave Arsenault, Seniors and Community Supports.

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

Ms White: Ronda White, office of the Auditor General.

Mr. Dunn: Fred Dunn, Auditor General.

Mr. Dunford: Clint Dunford, Lethbridge-West.

Mr. Rodney: Good morning. Dave Rodney, Calgary-Lougheed.

Mr. Cardinal: Good morning. Mike Cardinal, Athabasca-Redwater.

Mr. Herard: Denis Herard, Calgary-Egmont, senior-in-waiting.

Mr. Strang: Good morning. Ivan Strang, West Yellowhead.

Mrs. Dacyshyn: Corinne Dacyshyn, committee clerk.

The Chair: Hugh MacDonald, Edmonton-Gold Bar, and a person who is eligible to become a member of the South East Seniors Association.

I would like to advise that under the provisions of temporary Standing Order 56 Mr. Richard Miller provided notice that Ms Bridget Pastoor would be substituting for him at today's meeting. I would also advise that the briefing materials for today's meeting were posted for viewing and printing on Friday of last week and Monday of this week.

If I could have approval of the agenda that was circulated? Moved by Mr. Strang that the agenda for the November 28, 2007, meeting be approved as distributed. All in favour? Seeing none opposed, thank you very much.

This gets us to item 3, which is our meeting with Mr. Tim Wiles, Deputy Minister of Alberta Seniors and Community Supports. Mr. Wiles has been here many times before, so we don't have to go through regarding the microphones. I will invite Mr. Wiles to give us a brief overview, please, of the activities in the department for the year 2006-07. Please proceed.

Mr. Wiles: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to introduce Chi Loo, who just stepped in a moment ago. He had trouble finding some parking, I understand.

Maybe I should just clarify my staff for you, their various areas of expertise. Chi is in charge of our seniors services division. On my left is Susan McCulloch, who's our chief financial officer. On my right is Reagan McCullough. He is the assistant deputy minister responsible for the disability supports division. Dave Arsenault is the assistant deputy minister responsible for community supports and strategic planning. I also have one member of my staff in the back, Dana Hogemann, who works with Susan, and I believe Pam Livingston from the minister's office is here in the back as well.

For purposes of this overview I think I'd draw committee members to page 17 of our annual report. Being an accountant at heart, I'd like to start with the numbers. That page gives a good overview. Our ministry in the '06-07 fiscal period spent almost \$1.6 billion. That makes us the fifth-largest ministry in terms of the spending that we have, behind some other fairly large ministries as well. That little pie chart on the bottom of page 17 I think gives a good overview of where our energies are spent.

The largest portion of our budget relates to income support for persons with disabilities. That's the AISH program primarily. That includes all three: the financial benefit, the related health benefits, and some personal support benefits as well. The next largest area is community support systems of \$506 million. That's our support for persons with developmental disabilities. The next area would be the seniors services area at 22.2 per cent. That comprises our Alberta seniors' benefit as well as a number of smaller programs, like support for education property tax, dental and vision benefits, and our special-needs benefits. The last large area is strategic planning and supportive living of almost \$180 million. Over half of that would be related to the Aids to Daily Living program, which provides devices to help persons with disabilities stay in their homes. The balance of that money would be for things in the supportive living area, like our rural affordable supportive living program and some of the supports around that as well as some of our activities on licensing and monitoring of supportive living and long-term care facilities.

During the year the Premier gave our ministry four new mandates, when the Premier was appointed. One of those mandates had to do with improving supports for persons with disabilities. We initiated a number of initiatives in that area throughout that year that are continuing in the current fiscal year: improvements to the AISH program through new legislation and adjustment to rates, we've done some piloting work on common intakes with the persons with developmental disabilities program and the AISH program, we've co-ordinated the eligibility for the AISH benefit with the Canada pension plan disability benefits, and a number of other areas.

The Premier also asked us to bring forward a plan to improve long-term care, and we've been working busily on that. Related to that in the '06-07 fiscal year were our abilities to augment the supportive living area through the RASL program throughout the year.

I think that with that, Mr. Chairman, I'll keep my comments brief so members can get to questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Before we proceed with Mr. Dunn, I would like to recognize Dr. Brown and Alana DeLong to our meeting. Welcome.

Please proceed, Mr. Dunn.

Mr. Dunn: I'll also be very brief. The results of our audit of the ministry start on page 141 of volume 2 of last year's annual report. In there we made one new recommendation to the department to improve controls over its information systems. That's on page 143 of that volume. The specific recommendations include improving controls to identify and protect data based on its sensitivity and reviewing user access to applications.

On page 201 of our annual report we have identified the recommendations we made to the department in previous years that are still outstanding. A number of the outstanding recommendations relate to our 2005 audit of the seniors' care and programs. In this report we recommended that the department work with Health and Wellness to develop standards for accommodation services provided in long-term care facilities, lodges, and supportive living settings and monitor compliance with those standards. We also recommended that the department obtain information to determine the program benefits for the Alberta seniors' benefit program and assess the effectiveness of that program.

In 2003-04 we also made three significant recommendations to the persons with developmental disabilities regional community planning boards – there are six of those – that are still outstanding. We recommended that the boards improve their contracting policies and the monitoring and evaluation of their service providers. We also recommended that the boards conduct audits of those service providers to ensure that the significant contractual requirements were being adhered to.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I and my staff will answer any questions directed to us.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate that, Mr. Dunn. We'll proceed with questions today. We'll start with Mr. Bonko, followed by Mr. Strang.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On page 203 of volume 2 of the Auditor General's report it lists 13 outstanding recommendations that still require action to be taken regarding the quality of seniors' care and programs. All of them need to be addressed to develop standards for long-term care facilities, to monitor the effectiveness and the quality of care services provided. What's the progress of the recommendations of the 13 that are still outstanding?

Mr. Wiles: I'll speak generally to the collective of them, and if you want a specific written answer to each of the 13, we could provide that at a later date. We've been working closely with the Ministry of Health and Wellness on a number of these. I'll focus primarily on those related to the supportive living recommendation, where the Auditor General suggested that we should establish standards in the supportive living framework. Those standards were released publicly in May 2006, and they are fully implemented effective April 1, 2007. We're currently in the process of reviewing all of the supportive living facilities in the province that we're aware of and licensing those facilities. This will be the first time that they've been licensed. That process is under way to address the area of supportive living.

8:40

Similarly, there's a recommendation related to updating the standards on the long-term care side as well. We've updated those standards. I should clarify that the health ministry deals with the health services standards. Our ministry deals with the accommodation portion of the standards, so we would deal with things like quality of the nutrition, cleanliness of the facility, safety areas, things of that nature. The standards for the long-term care side have been updated as well, and we're in the process as well, working with the regional health authorities, to co-ordinate our review of the compliance with those standards and the licensing of long-term care facilities.

Within the supportive living, lodge facilities are also being reviewed for compliance with the new standards. Although under their legislation they're not required to achieve licensing, many of the lodge operators, if not all of them, are participating in the program and are desiring a certification that they do comply with the licensing.

On the Auditor's recommendations related to the effectiveness of the seniors' lodge program and the Alberta seniors' benefit program, those are ongoing. There's ongoing work there, where we're looking at the levels of funding, looking at our performance measures in there. I might get Chi to comment specifically on the seniors' benefit program and the work we're doing there.

Mr. Loo: In that area we had put out an RFP to get assistance in the research area from the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. The University of Calgary has responded. They're going to lead the project of a number of researchers, looking at analyzing data in terms of reviewing the needs of the income of the seniors as well as what's out there, what is the typical financial requirement of seniors. That project is under way, and we expect a first draft report some time in 2008, probably around mid-2008.

The Chair: Thank you.
Please proceed.

Mr. Bonko: Okay. My second one is: when would the ministry support the introduction of legislation as recommended by the Auditor General and the MLA task force that outlined standards, monitoring, enforcement, and clear lines of accountability for continuing care, then?

Mr. Wiles: That's something we've been reviewing internally. Currently the standards are authorized under the existing legislative framework. We've got a memorandum of understanding with the ministry of health regarding the standards as they apply to the long-term care setting. As far as supportive living goes, our ministry now has responsibility for the Social Care Facilities Licensing Act, and the standards are established under a regulation under that legislation currently, so they do have the full force of law. We are looking at, potentially, new legislation that would update the provisions, perhaps make more clear our abilities to conduct inspections and things of that nature, access to facilities. That legislation is still being reviewed internally. I can't speculate as to when it might be in the Legislative Assembly, but it's something we're working on and will be bringing forward as soon as we can.

The Chair: Thank you.
Mr. Strang, please, followed by Bridget Pastoor.

Mr. Strang: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. To Mr. Wiles. My first

question is on the aspect of your annual report. Page 12 indicates that the minister has worked to implement supportive living and long-term care accommodation standards. Can you provide further information on the minister's process in implementing these standards?

Mr. Wiles: As I mentioned earlier, the standards were publicly released in May 2006. The Minister of Health and Wellness and the then Minister of Seniors and Community Supports had a press release. The process leading up to the development of those standards was a very consultative one. We engaged organizations like what's now called the Continuing Care Association and the Alberta Senior Citizens' Housing Association as well as a number of individual providers. We had a consultative process for the development of those standards in order to make sure that they struck the right balance, if I can use those terms, to ensure that the standards provided an adequate level of safeguards and comfort in the accommodation side but didn't layer excessive additional costs on the operators. We tried to strike that balance. We also had input from an MLA task force on continuing care in 2005 that helped with that process.

As I mentioned earlier, the standards were announced publicly in May of '06 so the organizations would have a period of time to adjust their operations so that when they came into force in April of '07, they had some time to work with those standards and were very familiar with them. I think also that during that period between the time that they were initially released publicly and the time they became fully effective, we had the opportunity to fine-tune the standards for things that didn't work as well as we had initially thought in that period.

Mr. Strang: Okay. Thank you. My next question is: how does the ministry plan to monitor and assess compliance with these new standards?

Mr. Wiles: In the current fiscal year we've started that process. We've created a unit within the ministry that specializes in licensing and monitoring. The teams go out and actually visit and work with the individual operators, go through the standards and some other items. Our objective is to monitor all the supportive living facilities this current fiscal year at least once. They will either be granted a licence that indicates that they're fully compliant with the standards, or in some cases where there are some deficiencies in their meeting the standards, we'll issue a conditional licence and have subsequent follow-up with the organization over the year and work with them to ensure that they get compliance as quickly as possible.

Dave, I don't know if you have anything to add.

Mr. Arsenault: Well, I think the other thing is that we've also created a complaints line, that individuals can phone in and identify complaints that they have. It's interesting to note that in the six months that it's been up and operating, most of the complaints are about groups that don't appear to be licensed, so that has helped us find a lot of groups out there that are operating but were not aware that they should be licensed. That's been a very positive outcome.

Mr. Strang: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Bridget Pastoor, please, followed by Dr. Brown.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just a question to follow along on that one. This licensing and the standards: they're straight across the board regardless of whether it's private or public?

Mr. Wiles: Yes.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. My second question may well have been answered by Mr. Loo, but I'll ask it anyway. On page 20 it states that 142,000 of Alberta's 359,000 seniors, 40 per cent of the seniors, received cash benefits from the Alberta seniors' benefit program. My questions would be: what are the main reasons to explain why 40 per cent of seniors need financial assistance, and what are the criteria for determining the eligibility? I'm wondering if these questions aren't going to come in that analysis that's being done by the U of C. Forty per cent of seniors is a fairly large amount. What kind of benefits do they need the most, or why do they need any?

Mr. Wiles: Well, I'll start, and then I'll ask Chi to supplement. The Alberta seniors' benefit program is an income support program. It's a top-up program to some of the federal programs, such as the old age security, the guaranteed income supplement, and Canada pension plan as well. We top up based on the income levels of the individuals. The maximum would be \$240 per month for an individual, and an individual whose basic income was only from those other federal sources would likely get the maximum Alberta seniors' benefit. Then, as they have income from other sources – perhaps other pensions, investments, RRSPs, and the like – the Alberta seniors' benefit phases out, so they would get a variable amount, depending on their other income.

8:50

In terms of the reasons why 40 per cent of seniors are on this program, I know Minister Melchin has commented that he views that as almost a bit of a disappointment from his perspective in that there are that many seniors on there. It's an indication that perhaps as a society people haven't prepared well enough for their retirement to do that. So part of the work that we'll be looking at with the demographic planning commission will be to find out some of the whys and see how we can manage that better as we go forward. But I think there is a challenge there, especially as the aging demographics come forward. We need to prepare for that.

I don't know, Chi, if you want to augment the answer a little bit.

Mr. Loo: Sure. Just following up on the last part about the work that's led by the U of C at this stage of the game. It is a multiyear project that we're working with. The first piece of it is to answer the recommendation from the Auditor General on the study. But the other part of it is to look at the focus for the future of seniors, you know, the nonseniors today, the 35, 45. How would that relate to the future? So that's where the model is going to be a multiyear facet.

As the deputy minister has responded, our program is a top-up. So, for example, the eligibility for single seniors: the income cut-off is at \$22,200. Again, is that a low income? It's a relative statement. We believe it is. We have one of the best sets of programs for seniors in Canada. That's part of the reason why the threshold is where it is.

I'd like to refer you to page 23 of the annual report. There is the performance measure that is measuring in terms of average income of Alberta seniors compared to Canada. If you notice, for the last five years we are, more or less at least, close to 10 per cent above the average across Canada. I think part of the contributing factor of that is the programs that we have in Alberta for our seniors.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Neil Brown, please, followed by Harry Chase.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On page 27 of the annual report of the department there is reference made to performance measures regarding the number of working days between completed applications and decision-making. That data, apparently, was unable to be provided in the report as it was incomplete. I notice that the Auditor General also made reference to that exception on page 144 of volume 2 of his report. I'm wondering what the department can advise regarding the circumstances of that exception, why it wasn't done, and what's being done to remedy the situation in terms of data collection.

Mr. Wiles: I think I'm going to ask Reegan McCullough to speak to that as he's more familiar with the detail than I am.

Mr. McCullough: Thank you. Certainly, it took some time to develop the appropriate baseline information in terms of we had to develop some of this system electronically. Then we had to do some work in terms of when the start and end dates would be. When a person actually applies, there's a fairly lengthy process in some instances. It's a two-part process. We look at the medical eligibility, and we also look at the financial eligibility. Depending on when a client first picks up the application form, when they provide their medical information, when all that information is collected, when the actual decision is made: we established some baseline criteria for that, and we developed an electronic system to do that. We will be reporting on that this year. It took us longer than expected to get that information together, starting from a manual process.

Dr. Brown: My follow-up question also comes out of page 144 of the Auditor General's report in volume 2. It notes that the Calgary region community board is "reporting that expenses include payments by the Community Board for services to individuals whose disability did not meet the [strict] legal definition." I certainly recognize the need for the exercise of some discretion in terms of the administration of a program of this nature, but I wonder if you could explain the circumstances and whether or not there needs to be some additional flexibility built into the regulations in terms of application or whether or not these, in fact, were made in error.

Mr. Wiles: I think part of the history there is that there was a significant review of the persons with developmental disabilities program in the late '90s. At that time the decision was made to establish the eligibility that is currently in place. Prior to that there were a number of clients that fell outside of that criteria that was established in 1999. The decision of the day was that we should continue to provide service to those people so as not to withdraw services from them. I believe that the point that the Auditor General has had to raise from his legislative requirements is that for that small group of people we're not technically in compliance with the existing regulatory regime. We've continued to provide services because that was the right thing to do for those people.

Since that time we've been working with some of those individuals to adjust their services so that they are in compliance with the current regulation to the extent we can, but we don't want to yank that away. We continue to work through that each year, but we'll always ensure that those people continue to receive the service they need even if it's outside the existing legislative requirement, and as a result we get that commentary from the Auditor General.

The Chair: Do you have a brief comment, Neil?

Dr. Brown: Well, I'm just wondering then: are you suggesting that perhaps there needs to be some adjustment of the regulations

regarding the administration of the program to make it conform to what you think is the fair and equitable way to apply the benefits?

Mr. Wiles: Well, I think that policy decision on a go-forward basis was made in 1999 that that should be the criteria, but we didn't want to take away an expected entitlement from those who had received it prior to that. I think that on a go-forward basis the current policy is the current policy of the government in terms of eligibility for the program. Whether that could be changed or not, that's a subject of a future policy discussion. But we will continue to ensure that those people who were receiving service prior to that date continue to receive what they had received prior to that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Harry Chase, please, followed by Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. On page 20 of your annual report it states that "income is one of the major determinants of health and well-being." Yet it is repeated throughout the report that AISH recipients only receive \$1,050 a month. Can the ministry explain how providing \$1,050 a month in an economy where inflation and housing costs are soaring will impact the health and well-being of people who cannot financially provide for themselves?

Mr. Wiles: I think that it's important to remember for the AISH program that the income support, which was \$1,000 in the year in question – it moved up to \$1,050 in the current fiscal year – is just one component of that. We also provide a health benefit, and we also provide personal benefits for things like child care in some cases or transportation to medical assistance. The current levels and the level in the year in question arose as a result of the review of the AISH program, an extensive review by MLAs in 2005. Those were phased in over a two-year period, so the rate has gone from \$850 to \$950 to \$1,000 to now \$1,050. As the minister said in the Committee of Supply, that amount is reviewed as part of the budget process each year. As well, in response to the MLA task force the government is committed to review that rate every two years in a bit of a more formal process. We monitor and we maintain, but it's a bit of a policy decision of the government as to the level of that.

9:00

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Just to set a reality example, I have a constituent on AISH living in a 540-square-foot one-bedroom apartment in the Varsity Drive complex whose rent increased by 50 per cent to \$1,100 a month, and that's not an extraordinary figure. Page 11 states that the ministry "continued to implement changes to improve the AISH program," and you've mentioned some sort of minor tinkering in increases. I'd like to know: why hasn't the ministry indexed AISH benefits to reflect, address the inflation-fuelled, uncapped rent boom reality? Why aren't we keeping up?

Mr. Wiles: Well, again, I would offer that the rate has increased for three consecutive fiscal years. The most recent increase was a 5 per cent increase, which just slightly exceeded the cost of living. The question of indexation is a policy question, and I'm not sure that I can answer that in this forum.

Mr. Chase: Well, at some point I hope that the government addresses the fact that if you don't have a cap on rent and it can go up anywhere from 50 to 400 per cent, AISH payments have to reflect that reality.

The Chair: Mr. Johnston, followed by David Eggen.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Chair. My question will take us to page 95 of the Seniors and Community Supports annual report '06-07. On page 95 the annual report shows a lapse of \$10.7 million for the seniors' benefits program, the ASB as it's commonly called, and lapses in the school property tax assistance and special-needs assistance programs. What is the reason for the funding lapses?

Mr. Wiles: I'll start with some general . . .

The Chair: Excuse me, sir. These are not policy questions. The members of this committee are very diligent today in having their questions directly reference the annual report, which is signed off as a Public Accounts document. So please provide the information that these hon. members are requesting. Thank you.

Proceed.

Mr. Wiles: I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman. If I haven't answered Mr. Chase's question, we'll follow up as best we can in writing.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

Mr. Wiles: To the question at hand. The lapses in this program are largely driven, I guess, by – in the budget process we make some forecasts of uptake and estimates of seniors' income. Sometimes there are some variances there. In this situation seniors' incomes were a little higher than we had anticipated. As their income goes up, their benefit goes down, so that explains part of the reason. Also, the program also provides for some support for seniors in supportive living situations, and the uptake of those was not as great as we had originally anticipated in the budget process.

I'll ask Chi to speak to the property tax aspect of that question.

Mr. Loo: The education property tax is designed to assist seniors with the increases in that portion of their property tax against a base year, and for most seniors in Alberta today that would be 2004. Therefore, we're again forecasting what that increase might be. Given the government's program as related to drawing the revenue to support the learning budget, the education budget there, the increase has not been as substantial as we anticipated.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you.

My supplemental. In '06-07 \$341 million was spent on the income support for seniors program in addition to the ASB. What other benefits are available under this program?

Mr. Wiles: Well, Mr. Chairman, there are two specific health benefits that are provided. Dental assistance for low- to moderate-income seniors provides up to \$5,000 for every five years for basic dental services. There's also optical assistance for seniors, again for low- to moderate-income seniors, aged 65 or older. This program contributes \$230 every three years for the purchase of prescription eyeglasses. In '06-07 \$60 million was spent on these two programs.

Also included in the income support for seniors program is the special-needs assistance for seniors program, which provides financial assistance to eligible low-income seniors for allowable one-time or extraordinary expenses. An example might be replacement of a furnace or a roof. The maximum payment is \$5,000, and assistance is provided on a case-by-case basis. The expenditure for this program in '06-07 was \$18.8 million.

Mr. Johnston: A question arising: did you say for a furnace or a roof, that type of thing?

Mr. Wiles: I did.

Mr. Johnston: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Eggen, please, followed by Mr. Dunford.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for coming in this morning. My questions have to do with supportive living and long-term care. It's come to my attention that there have been quite a number of redesignations of either beds or entire facilities moving from long-term care to daily assisted living. I was just curious to know: in this last reporting period how many beds or whole facilities were redesignated from long-term care to daily assisted living?

Mr. Wiles: I don't have that information at hand. We could follow up in writing.

Mr. Eggen: If you don't mind, that would be great. My cadence wasn't just quite right.

Have you realized significant savings as a result of these redesignations?

The Chair: Would you like, Mr. Wiles, to provide an answer in writing to Mr. Eggen's questions through the committee clerk to all members?

Mr. Wiles: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

Mr. Dunford: My question is on the PDD side of things. I think that southern Alberta generally but specifically Lethbridge is blessed with the kind of community agencies that we have providing, you know, quite a range of services. I'm never sure in looking at numbers just who is doing what for whom, so my question would be regarding the financial numbers. What are the 2006-2007 budget allocation and actuals for ongoing contractual services provided by agencies delivering mandated residential services, employment, community access, and specialized community support services?

Mr. Wiles: The '06-07 budget for the entire PDD program was \$506 million. I might ask Susan or Dave to give me the breakdown on community access. Do we have that information handy?

Mr. Arsenaault: I think that we do. I'm not sure of the question, Mr. Dunford.

Mr. Dunford: Well, just for clarification, I guess, on this first one. I mean, there will be government employees that provide some of the services, and there will be, then, contracted agencies that will provide maybe even some of the same services but certainly other services. I haven't got a neat place to go to to decide where the balance is in terms of the money that's being spent.

Mr. Arsenaault: Well, I think that basically the majority of the funding goes to community agencies that deliver the programs that you have just mentioned. In the range of about 80 per cent of the funding that the deputy mentioned goes to community agencies to provide service. The direct part of the service as provided by government employees amounts to in the range of I think 8 or 9 per cent of the total budget and serves those people.

9:10

Mr. Dunford: Okay. As a supplement, then: if I was to go to the annual reports of, say, '04-05, '05-06, and '06-07, using the 90 per cent number, I could see where the adjustments have been, either upward or downward, in terms of what is going to community agencies?

Mr. Arsenault: Well, we could definitely provide that for you.

Mr. Dunford: Could you?

Mr. Arsenault: Yes.

Mr. Dunford: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much. If you could provide that, please, through the clerk to all members, we would be grateful.

Mr. Bonko, followed by Mr. Rodney.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Chair. On page 33 of the ministry's annual report, supportive living units developed, it reported last year that 553 affordable supportive living units were approved in the 2006-07 year, but 1,640 affordable supportive living units were approved in the previous year, 2005-06. I'm just wondering if we're having a decrease in the amount of units that are being supplied out there to the general public. Are we going to be able to keep up with the existing and the forecasted demands?

Mr. Wiles: The units that were built in '06-07 reflect the funding that was available. That was the last year of a program called the rural affordable supportive living program in '06-07. The previous year there were some 77 million dollars in that \$100 million program, and this was the balance of it that was spent in '06-07. That program, when it was originally announced in, I believe, November of 2005, had a set life on it. In the current fiscal year, recently announced by the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports was the affordable supportive living program, which has about a \$30 million budget this year. The number of units available is contingent upon the budget that's allocated for these programs. Currently that's our budget allocation for that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before you proceed with your second question, the chair would like to note to all members that on page 96 of the annual report that program that Mr. Wiles referred to, the rural affordable supportive living program, was overexpended by \$3 million in the fiscal year we're talking about. For your information.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you for that, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to go to page 46, then, goal 7. It says, "The safety and security of seniors and persons with disabilities are enhanced." I'll just read the first piece. "A safe and secure environment, where people are free from abuse and neglect, is necessary for well-being and quality of life." How many complaints or investigations were taken by your department and were sustained and how many complaints compared to the previous year with regard to abuse or neglect with regard to seniors?

Mr. Wiles: Dave, do you have that number handy, or is that something we should get back on in writing?

Mr. Arsenault: Not the exact number, but we basically conduct

about 500 investigations each year. That has been pretty consistent over the last four or five years. The exact numbers I can get back to you on.

Mr. Wiles: We can provide that history.

Mr. Bonko: So you investigate roughly 500, but how many are substantiated, then? You're not sure of the exact number?

Mr. Arsenault: I'd rather get back without giving a number that I'm not sure of.

Mr. Bonko: Please. That would be valuable information. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Rodney, please, followed by Bridget Pastoor.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, sir. I've been inching towards becoming a senior as I've been awaiting my question. I'm very excited to have the opportunity to do so. I think you can see that these new glasses of mine indicate that I am moving towards that.

But without wasting any more time of the committee or our special guests here today. The Auditor General referred to it in his verbal report and, of course, his written report as well. People here have hinted at this, and I'm referring to page 143 of the AG's annual report '06-07. Not to dwell on any sort of negative news, hopefully it's an opportunity to set the record straight and, you know, present some good news. Volume 2 states that 17 of the 84 control activities were ineffective, things like general security, establishing policies and procedures, managing IT risks, et cetera. I'm just hoping that you folks can update us as to the progress on those 17.

Mr. Wiles: Thank you. As with any large computer system there are always, obviously, very many things you need to attend to, and we appreciate the support from the Auditor General in reviewing our systems. We acknowledge that there are things that we need to do better. Seven of the identified ineffective controls are related to our service level agreement with our partnership with Service Alberta. We're under active discussions with Service Alberta to address those particular areas where their operations interface with our operations.

A number of the recommendations from the audit identified that for a control to be effective, it has to have supporting documentation, and then it has to be actioned. The ministry has been developing a number of policy and process documents to support the activities that were already being actioned to protect and manage the IT systems in the ministry. This will address seven of the identified ineffective controls.

I think the other three are a work in progress as well.

Mr. Rodney: My second question related to that. Well, I had 17. If there were seven with Service Alberta, I might have thought there might have been 10 others, not three. I guess the question really is for all of them, whether it's 7, 10, or 17.

Mr. Wiles: Sorry. To clarify, seven were with Service Alberta; seven related to the documentation side, so that's 14; and the specifics of the other three I think relate to disaster recovery areas, and we're working on that as well.

Mr. Rodney: Very good. Thanks for clarifying.

The real question I have is, again, just an opportunity for you to let us know. For all 17 what sort of timeline are we looking at? I

think the best case scenario would be that in next year's Auditor General's report we would see that 17 of 17 have been taken care of. Is that realistic? Is it doable? How close can we come?

Mr. Wiles: That's our objective, and we're working to achieve them all in the current fiscal year.

Mr. Rodney: Aah. See the quick answer to five questions. Thank you, sir, and thank you, Chair. Thank you, colleagues.

The Chair: Thank you very much.
Ms Pastoor, please, followed by Mr. Cardinal.

Ms Pastoor: I can never follow him.

The answer to my last question left me quite puzzled when I thought I heard the ministry saying that they were going to look to see why 40 per cent of seniors hadn't looked after themselves properly. That to me is just a trifle judgmental. I certainly have a constituent who was married to a multimillionaire. You know what? Quite frankly – what's the word? – caca happens. She is now destitute, however. Destitute. So we can judge that.

On page 16 of the Auditor General's annual report it's explained that the ministry did not report on measured number of working days between completed applications and the decisions for AISH applications. The ministry states on page 27 that it's unable to report on this measure because the data was incomplete. Firstly, how many would be turned down, and then how many of those turned into appeals, and how many of those appeals are actually accepted? What is the time frame for this process to happen?

Mr. Wiles: If I may speak to your first comment first. I didn't mean to imply that we're trying to make a judgment. I think that what I was trying to say – and I apologize if I wasn't clear – was that our income support program is intended to look after the people who have low income, and we want to ensure that. Forty per cent is a large number, and we want to understand why and if there are ways we can mitigate it better. I think that's part of our objective.

As for your specific question on the appeals on AISH, I'm going to ask Reagan to speak to that.

9:20

Mr. McCullough: Straight out, I don't have all the details to respond but certainly can follow that up in writing. I can also add, though, that approximately two-thirds of the applicants go through to become eligible. But we can provide those details in terms of how many do and how many appeals there are for eligibility. We have many different appeals, some for eligibility, some for different types of benefits, so we could go back and break that information down for you.

Ms Pastoor: Could you also provide in that answer exactly how the criteria have been changed?

Mr. McCullough: Criteria for eligibility?

Ms Pastoor: To AISH.

Mr. McCullough: The criteria for eligibility have not changed.

Ms Pastoor: Have you not included the activities for daily living as a part of the medical part of that form?

Mr. McCullough: No, we have not, to the best of my knowledge.

Ms Pastoor: You haven't? Okay.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms Pastoor, for all those questions.

Mike Cardinal, please, followed by Mr. Chase.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd just like to take a moment to thank the department staff that are here because you're doing a heck of a job. It's a most challenging position, no doubt, in our government, and I think you're doing a good job. We are the policy-makers, the policies we make you guys try to deliver. The reason I say that is the issue I'm going into was a policy change at the ministerial level but impacted the AISH caseload.

I'm referring to goal 2, page 26. The AISH caseload I see has gone up to about 36,000 or so, somewhere in that area. At one time the caseload was around 17,000, and you guys continue to do a good job in delivering. But the area that I'm concerned with is the growth of the AISH caseload, coming from 17,000 to 36,000.

One change was made at the ministerial level – it wasn't Clint or me – a move over to income testing and asset testing. That's where, all of a sudden, then, the program became recognized as a pension rather than welfare. That caused more applicants to come in because most people, you know, don't feel bad about applying for a pension, but welfare was not really, especially in rural Alberta – now, maybe in Edmonton and Calgary it would be a little different, but in rural Alberta we found that that was one of the reasons why the caseload went as high as it did.

Is there any indication that the income and asset testing may be reviewed again? Because AISH is welfare; it's not a pension. Sometimes when you hear some of the questions here, people think it's a pension. It is not. It's part of the welfare system, an income support program. Now, though, I think it's being recognized as a pension, and that has caused the growth in the program.

Mr. Wiles: Maybe a general comment on the caseload growth in general. It has varied over the last probably five or six years between as low as 2 per cent on an annual basis to as high as almost 7 per cent. We don't have a lot of empirical evidence to understand the whys of that caseload growth. Reagan has initiated a project to better understand some of that. Some of it might be attributed to influx into the province. Some of it might be attributed to better diagnoses. But we need to understand that better.

In terms of the income testing, as a result of the MLA review in 2005 we did increase the employment income exemption from \$200 to \$400 at that time. We continue to monitor that, and we'll look at that perhaps. In the current fiscal year we've initiated a number of initiatives related to enhancing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, particularly on AISH, and as those filter through, it may give us an opportunity to look at the employment income level and whether that needs to be adjusted or not.

As far as asset testing I think that was discussed briefly as part of the 2005 review, and at that point it was confirmed to stay at the \$100,000 level, not including their home and specialized vehicle and an additional vehicle. At this point we haven't got any active plans to review that.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Chase, please, followed by Mr. Herard.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. On page 18 of your annual report 2006-2007 it shows that core business 1, the area which is responsible for providing financial and health-related benefits such as AISH, was

under budget by almost \$50 million. This year \$10 million from the AISH program was transferred to cover cost overruns for supportive-living units. Service providers have been eliminating day programs that allow people with disabilities the opportunity to volunteer and participate in the community. Insufficient funding has resulted in a severe shortage of staff and an inability to recruit and retain qualified workers. How does the ministry plan to delivery quality programs as outlined in the business plan when funding and staff shortages are causing these programs to be eliminated?

Mr. Wiles: During the '06-07 fiscal year we allocated an additional \$11.3 million from the existing allocation to the salary question. That was provided to service providers I believe in March of '07, and they were given the flexibility as to how to best use those funds towards staff attraction and retention. In the current fiscal year, as you know, we recently announced an additional \$15 million to salary pressures by the agencies. That's an area we continue to monitor and do the best we can to address their challenges.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I think it was noted that that increase translated to 30 cents an hour.

Are staff encouraged or subtly required to limit the amount of new AISH or PDD case applications? This kind of procedure has been previously noted by WCB applicants. So is there any kind of pressure, subtle or overt, to cut back on new applications?

Mr. Wiles: No.

Mr. Chase: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Herard, followed by Mr. Eggen, please.

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much. I'm quite sure I'd be reasonably accurate if I said that in my lifetime we've gone from a society where families looked after their severely handicapped children – in fact, testimonials were that these children were probably the source of their greatest joy – to a society that now from some circles expects the government to do everything.

I see a tremendous increase, following Mr. Cardinal's question with regard to the increase, a doubling over the last seven years, pretty much, of the AISH caseload and an acceleration in the last two years, a fairly steep acceleration. I'm wondering if there's something that we're doing to attract AISH from other provinces. I recall that back in the early '90s, when changes were made to welfare rates, there was a significant group of recipients that came to us from another province where the benefits were lower and suddenly went back home. So I'm wondering if it's just that the benefits are too high in Alberta and causing a tremendous influx of new cases.

Mr. Wiles: I can offer some general comments. As I mentioned earlier, our AISH caseload rate has gone up and down over that period of time. In discussions with other jurisdictions, they've experienced similar growths in their caseloads as well. Again, they don't have many better explanations than we do, other than sort of anecdotal. That's why we're trying to do some research to understand that better.

9:30

I would note, however, that in the current fiscal year our caseload growth has dropped to, I think, less than we expected. That was mentioned in the second quarter report, that was released publicly

that allowed us to do some reallocation of funds. I think some of the things we're also looking at are involving our health professionals more actively in our case assessments so that we're ensuring that we've got good medical information on which to base the decisions. In the past we did not use our own medical experts as much as we are currently.

Reegan, I don't know if you want to add a few comments.

Mr. McCullough: Certainly. Previous to 2004 there had been some piloting of contracting with external health professionals to help better assess the medical eligibility; in other words, the functionality of the individual, their ability to work, and to what extent. During the AISH MLA review it was recommended that we apply that same process province-wide, and we have done that. Just to add to the deputy's comments, when we had a recent federal/provincial meeting in Winnipeg, we were quite surprised to learn that basically the same rate of increase of eligibility over the previous two years, which would be '05-06, '06-07, had been quite high across Canada but coincidentally across Canada has also dropped down in the recent past. Again, we need to find out better information on why those sorts of things are happening. We certainly know that with an aging population – like, looking at some of the AISH statistics, the vast majority of the clients are over 40 years old, so some of these things are definitely age related, but we need to get better information on that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Herard: My supplemental question. When I look at AISH, you know, it's assured income for severely handicapped, yet I keep hearing "ability to work." Do you actually sort of classify "not expected to work" and "expected to do some work" or whatever? Are we spending money still on people who, in fact, probably do not have the physical capability to do work, yet programs and agencies are out there still trying and spending scarce resources to an end that probably is not even possible? Are you suggesting by your previous answer that you're now relying more on the medical capability reports to determine where the benefit might go with respect to trying to train people to do some work?

Mr. McCullough: If I understand your question correctly, where we use the contracted medical expertise is certainly not with every client that applies to the program. Some are very obviously severely disabled and not able to work. They could be living in a palliative care setting or that kind of thing, so we don't need to go to that extent.

It would probably be to a maximum in any given year of about one-tenth of the clients that are applying that we would actually refer to a specialized health professional. What we're trying to determine there is their ability to work and to what extent because under the eligibility requirements of the program it basically states that a person in order to qualify could not work to the extent that they could support themselves. That doesn't mean they can't work at all. In fact, approximately 18 per cent of the clients currently under the program are working to some extent, typically part-time types of work, so we need to determine whether or not they could work to any extent. In other words, if we believe through that review that they could work enough to support themselves, then, of course, they wouldn't qualify.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eggen, please, followed by Alana DeLong.

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'm interested in finding out about inspection of long-term care and assisted living facilities. My first question is: how much did your department allocate for inspections in the last reporting period, and how do you measure the success of that expenditure?

Mr. Wiles: Bear with me. I'm going to ask Susan to give you the exact number.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. How about the success rate part? What are you going to do about it?

Mr. Wiles: As for the details on the results of the inspection, I don't have that information here with me today, and we'll follow up in writing with that information. Susan, do you have the number?

Mrs. McCulloch: Yeah. We spend about \$5 million on the inspection side of the program. That's the staff that do the work.

Mr. Eggen: Do you tell the facilities before you come to inspect, or do you do surprise inspections?

Mr. Arsenault: Well, I think that we have the ability to do both. I think that in the period before the committee, as the deputy stated earlier, most of that work was getting the system up and running. It was creating the standards, working with the various stakeholders, announcing the standards in May of '06, giving the operators until April of '07. We did some training, we had some consultants that would go out and work, and since April 1 of '07 we have been actually out there inspecting. Basically, we have inspected about 60 per cent of the facilities out there now and have plans to do the rest within the year. As the deputy said, our goal is to inspect each of the facilities once a year.

Mr. Eggen: Both scheduled and surprise?

Mr. Arsenault: Those ones are, but basically we have the ability to do unannounced visits, and we'll do those if complaints come in in terms of: things don't appear to be right.

Mr. Eggen: Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Alana DeLong, please, followed by Mr. Bonko.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. Further about inspecting. These are all long-term care, supportive living, and lodge inspections. You have said that you are inspecting them. You know, all of this stuff that we're doing, we're reporting back to Albertans, but there's a certain kind of a report back to Albertans that'll actually be really interesting to them, that would be very useful to them, and that would be that these inspections be posted publicly. How far along are you in doing that?

Mr. Arsenault: Well, basically, we're working on the software that will let us track that and post those types of things. They'll be in a summary form, but we're likely about three or four months away from being able to do that.

Ms DeLong: Well, then, further to reporting. I was involved in the redesign of the AISH program back in 2005, and I notice that the Auditor General was sort of questioning whether you had the reporting side set up in terms of AISH. I was wondering: when

you're looking at analyzing your AISH program, are you looking at tracking?

Something which I found very interesting during the analysis was that what we found over and over again was that people would come to us and talk about the value that they found in being able to work, whether it was, you know, the appreciation side of it or whether it was just that they were involved in the community. So that was one of our goals, to get more people out involved in the work world. Are you tracking the number or percentage?

The other thing is that we have a break point in there where you can work a certain amount before there's any administrative extra work to be done by the AISH worker and where there's money coming back. Is one of the measures that you're looking at how many people go beyond that break point, or how many people come just up to that break point? Are you looking at those kinds of measures?

9:40

Mr. Wiles: I'll ask Reagan to comment more specifically on that, but I think we are tracking the employment income that people are earning. When the employment exemption raised from \$200 to \$400, we saw two phenomena happen. The number of people who were working increased marginally, about 2 to 3 per cent, I think, but we also noticed that their reported incomes rose close to that threshold, so we're continuing to analyze that and see what that means.

Reagan, can you add anything more?

Mr. McCullough: Certainly. As the deputy said, the basic employment earning exemption is \$400, and for a single individual between \$400 and \$1,000, 50 per cent of that is exempt. In addition to that, with our new legislation that we introduced in May of this year, we're now allowing clients to report less frequently. What that means is that previously they had to report monthly, so if they did any work, they had to either fax it in or drop off their cheque stubs and so on, which created a lot of work for the client and also the worker. We're now moving to something that allows quarterly reporting and annual reporting, depending on the individual's circumstances, the type of work, whether it's seasonal, and so on and so forth. That brings in another level of flexibility. We can actually average that out over the year if they're working seasonally and so on.

As well, this year we're piloting a number of employment initiatives under the program, and our front-line workers are working with the clients, those who are interested in working. I attended an information session. We invite those who are interested in working to come in, and we talk about some of the program changes and what may be some options for them. Clearly, all of those individuals were saying that they would like to be able to work at least part time. It would remove some of the isolation. It would help them to be more active and improve their quality of life. So we've developed a number of training programs, we're working with various employers, and so on. We're doing this on a pilot basis to better assess what works, what are the range of options that work best for people with severe disabilities. It's quite promising.

Ms DeLong: Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bonko, please, followed by Mr. Strang.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've got questions with regard to the Alberta seniors' benefit program. I'm just curious as

to what information you use to determine if the program benefits, in fact, meet the threshold and what cash benefits and accommodation benefits and if they're adequate.

Mr. Wiles: Can you clarify the threshold you're referring to?

Mr. Bonko: Well, you've got a threshold. If they're above, they don't qualify; if they're below, they do qualify with regard to that threshold.

Mr. Wiles: We measure that based on information we get from Canada Revenue Agency, based on their filed income tax return. We receive that information annually, electronically, automatically, and then that's fed into our system, and that, then, is used for the determination of their benefit for the subsequent year. That's adjusted each year. The seniors' benefit gets adjusted each year effective July 1 to go to the following June. Then if there's a change in their income, the amount gets adjusted on an annual basis, and it stays that way. We don't retroactively change things if their actual experience was different.

Mr. Bonko: Okay. How often do you revisit what that threshold is? Given today's economic conditions, obviously, what was once perhaps acceptable – given three or four years now, certainly it's going to be a lot tougher living below that threshold than it once was.

Mr. Wiles: Two points on that. Our program is a top-up to the federal programs, and those are adjusted annually. As well, we address the income threshold for the cost of living on an annual basis, so we try and keep up through those two mechanisms.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Strang, please, followed by Bridget Pastoor.

Mr. Strang: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. To Mr. Wiles. I guess the thing I'm looking at is page 46, goal 7, "the safety and security of seniors and persons with disabilities are enhanced." With the Protection for Persons in Care Act, seniors guardianship with review of the act, can you kindly explain the improvement in this protection for seniors with his or her guardianship?

Mr. Wiles: I'm going to ask Dave to speak to that.

Mr. Arsenault: Well, I think that over the last couple of years we have been in the review of the two major acts, meaning the Dependent Adults Act and the Personal Directives Act. The Personal Directives Act and its amendments are before the House now. I think that when we went out and we talked to approximately 4,000 Albertans, what we got back is that they wanted to ensure that if the time came when they were unable to look after their own affairs, they would have as much control as they were able to have. I think also there was the view of looking at some informal types of guardianship and how we would address the involvement of family or close friends. So some of those types of things are the work that has been done. We've also worked with the professional associations quite closely in terms of the various changes that came forward through that consultation process, and they're working their way through.

Mr. Strang: Okay. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, through to Mr. Wiles again. Do we have a recourse to review seniors' guardianship, you know, if the family feels that he or she is able to move back to look after their own affairs? I've run into quite a few of those cases.

Mr. Wiles: I'll ask Dave to follow up on that as well.

Mr. Arsenault: At the present time anybody can bring that question back to court to have it looked at. That would be the most appropriate way of going under the existing legislation.

Mr. Strang: Makes it tough for people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Bridget Pastoor, please, followed by Neil Brown.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. We don't have that much time. On page 141, volume 2 of the Auditor General's report. Basically, the questions are on the protection of people's identity, protecting them from theft as well as fraudulent activity once they get that. Are there adequate processes in place to safeguard the personal, and how and when will the recommendation be implemented? If you're already started, what is the time frame for its finish?

Mr. Wiles: We do deal with a lot of personal information of many of our clients both in the seniors area as well as the disability area. We devote a lot of time and energy on the protection of personal information, and I believe we do have adequate systems in place.

With respect to the Auditor General's specific recommendations, we hope to have those items fully addressed in the '07-08 fiscal year.

Ms Pastoor: Does this information go to Boston via Red Deer? Because of the way the medical records were set up via Red Deer, some of that stuff because of the PATRIOT Act gets ultimately into Boston.

Mr. Wiles: Not to my knowledge.

Ms Pastoor: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Neil Brown, please, followed by Harry Chase.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My question is in regard to goal 7, the safety and security of seniors and persons with disabilities and the enhancement thereof. During the last fiscal year there was a report prepared regarding a review of the Protection for Persons in Care Act. That review was completed with some very beneficial input from people in your department who are involved in the administration of the act. My first question is regarding the investigations that you undertake. Presently there is strictly voluntary co-operation with any investigation, and there's no way to ensure that people who have pertinent evidence with respect to incidents of abuse are compelled to give that information. In fact, there may be incentives in many cases for coworkers to cover up instances of abuse by their fellow workers. So I'm wondering what is being done to address those inadequacies in the present legislation.

9:50

Mr. Wiles: The review you referred to was submitted to the minister, I believe, in November of '06. We've continued to discuss that internally, but as yet we haven't come forward with any legislative amendments on that. So in that regard within the current legislative framework we continue to conduct our investigations based on the powers that we presently have, and we continue to look at that question.

Dr. Brown: Well, then, another inadequacy in the present legislation

is the fact that in our changing environment not all seniors or persons with disabilities who are under care are in institutional settings which are covered by the act, and there are other individuals who would fall within your goal of safety and security of seniors and persons with disabilities who are not subject to any investigations under the act. A similar question is: what's being done to ensure that those individuals are not being subjected to abuse?

Mr. Wiles: I think my answer is similar to the previous one. We continue to act under the current act, and as we bring forward proposals for expanding those powers, those will go through the normal process at this point. But under the current legislation we're bound to stick to those activities.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chase, please.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. With regard to earlier comments made about AISH increases and the magnetic quality of AISH, I can't imagine that there's an underground railroad or that other provinces have put up posters encouraging disabled individuals to rush to Alberta to live the life of Riley on AISH easy street.

Page 19 discusses core business 2, which provides supports for PDD, seniors' housing, and the rural affordable supportive living, RASL, program. It states that expenditures for this area decreased by 5.7 per cent because "there was a decrease in capital grant funding for the RASL program." What is the reason for the decrease in the capital grant funding for this RASL program?

Mr. Wiles: When the program was initially announced, it was announced at approximately \$100 million. Over \$70 million was allocated to the first year, with the balance to the second year. So it was announced as a two-year program. That program is now complete, and that was the pattern in which the funds were flowed out.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I'm not allowed to ask questions about the future, so given that the ministry supports a shift towards supportive living, what steps is the ministry taking to prevent the trend of having more and more costs for long-term care services shifted onto residents and their families?

Mr. Wiles: The programs we operate presently, in the year in question, were to provide capital support. As well, we also provide for low-income residents of long-term care through both the Alberta seniors' benefit and through the AISH program. Their accommodation costs are substantially covered by those programs. When the rates for long-term care are increased, as they were in the current fiscal year, the budgets and the amounts for those individuals were also accordingly adjusted so that they could continue to pay their accommodation costs.

Mr. Chase: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes the time permitting oral questions. There are still a number of members who indicated a wish to question the department. Perhaps we will read those questions now into the record, and you can provide through the clerk to all members a written response.

We'll start with Mr. Dunford, followed by Bridget Pastoor.

Mr. Dunford: My interest is seniors in lodging and the fact that they are to have \$265 a month left over after paying the costs at the

lodge. I understand that that number hasn't changed in quite a number of years. In the reporting period that's under discussion, how many seniors needed a subsidy in order to be left with \$265 of income, and was there anything that was allowed under legislation or regulation to reduce the \$265 per person if two people were living in a cohabit situation?

The Chair: Bridget Pastoor, please.

Ms Pastoor: I'm done.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Herard, followed by Mr. Strang.

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much. My question deals with the cost of health care with respect to the seniors' department and whether or not your budget actually pays for health care or if that comes out of the health care budget. The specific question deals with the fact that senior couples don't turn 65 together usually. I've had many constituents call with the complaint that the breadwinner still has a medical plan, but the senior's plan has to be the first payer regardless of what kind of coverage they may have. To me that sounds like an awful lot of wasted money. Subsequently, as well, certain things aren't paid for under the basic seniors' plan, which necessitates additional visits to the doctor to get letters of permission and all this kind of stuff. The cost to health care increases. If your department is paying for this, then I'd like to know what it is you're going to do to fix that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Strang.

Mr. Strang: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. To Mr. Wiles. I guess my question goes to your core business 2, page 31, providing and coordinating ranges of supports for living in communities. From my experience in my riding I'm finding now that we are moving our people around too much. Why aren't we just focusing, more or less, on developing rather than having all these other different names like lodges, assisted living, designated assisted living? Why don't we just have something organized so it's aging in place – and we go back to what Mr. Herard is saying – and being able to utilize health care so that these people don't have to move, disrupt the family and everything else? Then we can keep them in the communities, and this way they'll have a lot better quality of life.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes this portion of our agenda. On behalf of every member of the committee, Mr. Wiles, I would like to thank you and your staff for your attendance this morning and wish you the very best in administering our seniors' department.

Mr. Wiles: Thank you. It was our pleasure.

The Chair: I would also like to thank Mr. Dunn and his staff for their attendance this morning. We always appreciate that. Mr. Wiles, you and your staff are free to go while we carry on with the other items on our agenda, and thank you again.

Other Business, item 4. Does anyone else have any other business to raise at this time? Seeing none, the chair would like to note that I received a letter dated November 27, 2007, from the Minister of Children's Services, Janis Tarchuk. This letter reads, and I'll be brief:

Thank you for your letter of November 7, 2007 requesting information for Dr. Massolin and his research team. The requested information is contained in Alberta Children's Services' 2006-07 Annual Report. For ease of reference we have attached the 2006-07 Annual Report.

The chair is just providing that information to you because the officials from that department, I would like to note, asked last week for the good research document provided by Dr. Massolin and his staff. They asked for a copy of that. That's just for your interest.

10:00

I along with Mr. Cardinal and Mr. Herard – and I'm not being disrespectful if there are other members of the group that are on the committee that's chaired by Mr. Lougheed reviewing the Standing Orders. There is another meeting next week. Is there any interest in Public Accounts in Standing Orders? Is there anything that you would like us to bring to that committee's attention regarding the

standing orders around Public Accounts? If there is, just let us know either after QP or via e-mail or send us over a note. Is that fair enough? Okay.

Also, the chair would like to note that we have sent a letter over to the Hon. Hector Goudreau, Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture, and to the hon. Mrs. Cindy Ady, Associate Minister of Tourism Promotion, regarding a tentative meeting on December 12.

If there is no business other than the reminder of our next meeting, which is Wednesday, December 5, with the Ministry of Energy, may I please have a motion to adjourn? Moved by Mr. Johnston that the meeting be adjourned. All in favour? Seeing none opposed, thank you very much. Have a good week.

[The committee adjourned at 10:02 a.m.]