

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts – April 23, 2024
Seniors, Community and Social Services
Supplementary Responses**

Question 1: Ms. Renaud (PA-84)

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

The median time between when an AISH application was received until it was sent for medical adjudication for the 2022-23 fiscal year was 5.6 weeks.

Question 2: Ms. Renaud (PA-84)

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?

The following actions have been undertaken by the department to improve access:

Access to Technology

- The department has updated online application forms to the newest accessibility standards for Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD), Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) and income support programs.

Appeals Secretariat

- Several steps have been taken to accommodate Albertans with disabilities so they can access the appeals process, including:
 - improving communication with appellants regarding accommodation requests at various stages of the appeal process;
 - providing accommodations to meet appellant needs (e.g., offering hearings by teleconference, video, written only, or in-person);
 - continuing to collaborate with external and internal agencies to accommodate persons with disabilities and language barriers by providing services free of charge including language interpreters, American Sign Language Interpreters, Communication Access Realtime Translation for deaf and hard of hearing Albertans and Online Claims Reimbursement documents for visually impaired Albertans;
 - providing Citizen's Appeal Panel members and Appeals Secretariat staff with trauma informed training and training on human rights, including the duty to accommodate; and
 - providing appellants with a list of organizations that can assist them with their appeals, such as the Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities, regional legal aid centers, or Voice of Albertans with Disabilities.

Question 3: Ms. Renaud (PA-86)

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?

In 2022, of the 31,000 unique individuals who exited the Income Support program, about 14 per cent transitioned to the AISH program.

Question 4: Mr. Haji (PA-89)

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?

Budget 2022 included an estimated \$20 million in revenue from asset sales.

Question 5: Mr. Schmidt (PA-91)

Page 57 states that 295,000 seniors applied for affordability benefits by March 31, 2023.

How many seniors were eligible for the affordability payments?

Approximately 95 per cent of seniors would have been eligible.

What was the target the ministry set for the number of seniors who would receive the payment?

100 per cent of the 176,000 low-income seniors eligible for the Alberta Seniors Benefit were automatically enrolled into the Affordability program.

Seniors not eligible for the Alberta Seniors Benefit, but who had household incomes below \$180,000, could apply for Affordability payments.

The program ran from January to June 2023 and an eligible Albertan could apply at any time during this period to receive their full six months of payments.

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?

Automatically enrolling low-income seniors receiving the Alberta Seniors Benefit ensured 100 per cent of the most vulnerable seniors were provided Affordability benefits in a timely manner.

The use of a convenient online portal, along with utilizing in-person registry offices, ensured those seniors who needed to enroll in the program had multiple options to do so.

Question 6: Mr. Schmidt (PA-91)

Could the ministry explain why the Alberta Seniors Benefit had a reduced caseload and a reduced cost per case that resulted in an under expenditure in 2022-2023?

As noted on page 57 of the 2022-23 Annual Report, the caseload and cost per case did not decrease in 2022-23. The 2021-22 caseload was 174,000, which increased to 176,000 in 2022-23. The 2021-22 monthly cost per case was \$149.95, which increased to \$155.40 in 2022-23.

Regarding the under expenditure in 2022-23, \$25.8 million or 7.3 per cent variance from the adjusted budget, the 2022-23 budget was prepared for higher-than-average client growth based on uncertainty stemming from potential long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on seniors' incomes. This level of client growth was not realized in 2022-23.

Question 7: Mr. Schmidt (PA-92)

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?

The amount and timing of the accommodation rate increase for seniors in continuing care is administered by Alberta Health. In 2022-23, the accommodation charge typically would have increased by 3.6 per cent, based on Alberta Consumer Price Index, effective July 1, 2023; however, Alberta Health delayed the increase to be effective October 1, 2023. The timing of the increase to the Supplementary Accommodation Benefit was adjusted accordingly to ensure seniors maintained a minimum monthly disposable income after paying their increased accommodation charges.

Question 8: Mr. Schmidt (PA-92)

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?

As noted on page 58 of the 2022-23 Annual Report, the number of Special Needs Assistance recipients in 2021-22 was 23,350 as compared to 22,825 in 2022-23, a change of 525.

The Special Needs Assistance is a needs-based program allowing seniors with lower incomes to make a claim for eligible funded items, and the application rate can fluctuate year-to-year. There are no targets for the number of seniors applying each year.

Question 9: Mr. Schmidt (PA-92)

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 Seniors Home Adaptation and Repair Program provides financial assistance to eligible seniors for home repairs and adaptations through low-interest home equity loans and grants. As noted on page 58 of the Annual Report, in 2022-23, 416 low-interest home equity loans and 258 grants were provided, compared to 485 loans and 284 grants in 2021-22.

The access rate for the program can vary for a number of market-based reasons: the level of interest rates, availability of contactors and cost of doing home repairs. There are no specific targets on the number of applications the program should receive year-to-year.

Question 10: Mr. Schmidt (PA-92)

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?

The Seniors Property Tax Deferral Program provides eligible senior homeowners the opportunity to defer all, or part of, their municipal property taxes with a low-interest home equity loan, to be paid back when they sell their home. As noted on page 58 of the 2022-23 Annual Report, in 2022-23, 898 new applications were received for the program, and more than 2,180 homeowners were enrolled, as compared to 507 new applications and 2,150 total enrolments in 2021-22. When applying to the program, a senior can choose to enroll for up to 10 years, so they do not need to re-enroll annually. The 10-year enrollment option was ending for seniors that had applied in 2013, requiring renewal applications and resulting in an increase in applications in 2023.

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?

The program launched in 2013 and the 10-year enrollment option was ending for seniors that had applied in 2013 with this option, requiring renewal applications and resulting in the increase in the number new applications in 2023.

Question 11: Ms. Renaud (PA-92)

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.

Established food banks were identified based on their participation in Food Banks Canada 2022 Hunger Count. Food banks and Civil Society Organizations that did not participate in the 2022 Hunger count were eligible to apply for the Food Security Grant.

The department used the number of individuals served, as reported to Food Banks Canada and the population of the food bank's service area, to determine how much funding each established food bank received.

This approach recognized that food banks that operate in some smaller communities and rural areas may face greater costs and have less access to donated food in their communities than food banks located in large urban centers. They may also have higher transportation costs because their organizations serve a large geographic area.

Question 12: Ms. Renaud (PA-92)

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 department contracted MNP to support expansion of the Supports and Financial Services Coordinator contact centre approach. The total contract value was \$300,000.

The same question for AISH.

There are two types of contract services used by AISH:

- Assessments Consulting Services
- Medical Consulting Services

The contract value for the assessments consulting services with AssessMed Inc. was \$3.0 million and the total contract value for the medical consulting services with AssessMed Inc. was \$0.9 million in 2022-23.

Finally, what was the process to determine complex needs? What assessment tool was used, and who was responsible for that work within the ministry?

Complex service needs are determined based on information gathered through discussions with an individual, their caregiver, guardian or delegate supporters. Staff (Persons with Developmental Disabilities caseworkers) determine if the individual meets the criteria for complex service needs and work with the individual and family to ensure that the individual has access to the most appropriate supports to meet their needs.

To enhance the client experience for PDD and support effective case management, the ministry is also developing a digital case management system that will simplify program administration, enhance provincial consistency, improve data integrity and reduce administrative burden for individuals, families and staff. This case management system is targeted for launch in 2024.

Since December 2021, all existing PDD-contracted service providers supporting adults with complex service needs were required to complete accreditation for Complex Service Needs Designation and, where applicable, Secure Treatment accreditation.

Question 13: Mr. Haji (PA-92)

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?

The ministry received \$35.6 million from the federal government for the Rent Assistance Benefit and Temporary Rent Assistance Benefit for fiscal year 2022-23.

Question 14: Mr. Haji (PA-92)

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?

In 2022-23, all the funding for Capital Maintenance and Renewal was provincial funding.

Question 15: Mr. Lundy (PA-92)

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?

An evaluation confirmed the Shelter Service Hub pilot sites were successful in providing individuals experiencing homelessness with enhanced connections to housing and key recovery-oriented supports and services including primary health, detox, treatment and

stabilization. The pilots were successful in shifting shelter services to provide lasting positive impacts for clients.

During the program evaluation from January to June 2023, Hope Mission housed 295 clients, a 467 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2022.

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

An evaluation of the service hub pilots found that shelters can successfully provide temporary accommodation and basic need services and provide enhanced services and connections to housing and recovery-oriented supports.

Based on the findings of the two successful pilots, the department is continuing to support the Service Hubs and has expanded the approach to additional communities in 2023-24.

Question 16: Mr. Lundy (PA-92)

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?

Family Resource Centres (FRCs) support individuals with disabilities and their families to access and navigate the variety of disability supports and services available in Alberta by providing tools, resources and information uniquely tailored to support the needs of individuals and families.

In 2022-23, there were four FRCs supporting individuals with disabilities and their families manage Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD) and Persons with Developmental Disabilities services: Autism Society Alberta, Gateway Association, Inclusion Alberta, and STEPS. These FRCs supported 10 centre locations across Alberta: Edmonton, Red Deer, Calgary (2), Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Crowsnest Pass, St. Paul, Medicine Hat and Lethbridge.

In March 2022, FRCs began supporting families applying for Registered Disability Savings Plans, creating better financial security for Albertans with disabilities to live in their communities into their senior years.

FRCs were also available to support families navigate FSCD improvements including those who required assistance:

- to use the new secure digital signature tool, and
- to use the new online user-friendly FSCD application.

How has this funding supported Albertans in '22-23?

This funding supported:

- over 1,900 families to access and navigate disability supports and services in their community; and
- more than 3,399 individuals, family members or staff attended FRC workshops and educational courses to increase family capacity such as on financial planning and hiring support workers.

Question 17: Mr. Lundy (PA-92)

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?

The Action Plan on Homelessness is a significant initiative and provided additional funding of \$28 million in 2022-23 to respond to homelessness throughout the province.

The Action Plan funding supports:

- The expansion of shelter services to operate 24/7, better supporting people to access recovery and housing services they need, and to respond to growing public concerns about encampments and social disorder issues.
- More emergency shelter spaces in rural areas and in Edmonton during extreme weather conditions, when demand for shelter services is higher.
- Implementation of a shelter service hub model in Edmonton, Calgary and Grande Prairie – providing more access to recovery-oriented and housing-focused services to better meet the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Additional funding for housing with supports programming, so individuals are better equipped to maintain their housing and not fall back into homelessness.

Question 18: Mr. Lundy (PA-92)

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?

There are currently 27 shelters in nine communities. All provincially funded emergency shelters operating on a year-round basis are 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?

By ensuring shelters are available around the clock, individuals experiencing homelessness always have access to safe and supportive spaces, which gives an increased sense of public safety and reduced risk in communities.

Operating shelters 24/7 also allows for increased opportunities to access recovery-oriented and housing-focused supports and services, such as counselling, substance abuse treatment, mental health supports and assistance with finding and maintaining stable housing.