



Provincial Auditor's 2023 Report–Volume 1: Social Services Needs to Improve Access to Apply for Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) Benefits

The Ministry received over 255,000 calls to its SIS phone line (including almost 50,000 calls specific to SIS applications) over a six-month period, with over 60% of those calls going unanswered

REGINA—June 6, 2023: In her 2023 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 7, Provincial Auditor Tara Clemett audited the Ministry of Social Services' processes to deliver the Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS). She made six recommendations.

The Ministry administers SIS—a core income support program offered since 2019—to provide financial assistance for people to meet their basic needs (e.g., food, local transportation) and shelter (e.g., rent, mortgage payments, utilities) while they work toward self-sufficiency. The Ministry developed SIS using a 'whole income' approach, anticipating clients may also receive income from other sources (e.g., employment, federal benefits, income tax refunds) in addition to SIS benefits; potential clients can apply online, over the phone, or in person.

We found the Ministry needs to provide potential clients with better access to apply for benefits, such as making computers available at all of its offices, offering sufficient in-person assistance with the SIS application process, and consistently providing a call-back function. Overall, 64% of the total SIS calls to the Ministry's service centre (65% of calls specific to SIS applications) went unanswered with monthly results ranging from 48%–66% of SIS calls addressed in 20 minutes or less.

The Ministry also needs to:

- Periodically analyze data about SIS client evictions and unpaid utility bills, and develop strategies to address them
- Offer timely case planning supports and regularly meet with SIS clients to follow up on their individualized case plan goals
- Refer SIS clients to proper supports (e.g., employment services, counselling) when appropriate, and regularly follow up on referrals
- Implement further performance measures to assess SIS's effectiveness, such as measuring how long certain clients stay on SIS as well as the proportion of clients exiting SIS but returning within a specified time period

The Ministry assesses SIS applications in a timely manner (within five business days about 90% of the time); however, it has yet to sufficiently identify, analyze and address a number of key barriers about SIS, including:

- Accessibility—no computer access, unanswered phones
- Lack of streamlined client support
- Missed client appointments with Ministry planning and support specialists

"People experiencing difficult circumstances in struggling to meet their basic needs require clear and accessible ways to apply for income assistance," said Tara Clemett. "Offering SIS clients with an appropriate balance of reliable and service-oriented supports provides them with the resources needed to improve their lives by reducing poverty, and promoting their progression to self-sufficiency."

The full Provincial Auditor's 2023 Report – Volume 1 available online at auditor.sk.ca.

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- Less than 50% of individuals apply for SIS benefits online
- Over 5,200 SIS clients have unpaid SaskEnergy or SaskPower bills greater than \$100, amounting to almost \$4.2 million at February 2023
- During an unannounced visit to a large delivery office, we found staff did not sufficiently provide guidance or offer assistance related to the SIS application process
- More than 17,000 SIS clients were provided an expected \$261.5 million in benefits in 2022–23