

Chapter 27

Health—Providing Special Needs Equipment for Persons with Disabilities

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Health, under an agreement, relies on its service provider—the Saskatchewan Abilities Council—to provide special needs equipment for persons with disabilities through the Special Needs Equipment Program.

By December 2018, the Ministry, primarily through its service provider, improved some of its key processes to provide special needs equipment, but more work remains.

The Ministry increased the number of certain types of equipment available to reduce wait times. In addition, it identified clients with loaned equipment who were deceased or no longer living in Saskatchewan. Through the Council, it was determining how best to recover this unused equipment.

The Council continued to face challenges in completing preventative maintenance on loaned equipment requiring preventative maintenance (like lifts) within a reasonable timeframe to avoid safety risks to clients. Although it was more actively asking clients to return such equipment for maintenance, clients often did not do so.

In addition, the Ministry has not determined how to measure the success of the Program or set clear expectations for when its service provider should escalate complaints.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

As part of its responsibilities under *The Health Administration Act*, the Ministry of Health may provide programs for persons with residual physical disabilities due to accident, congenital defect, injury, diseases, or other illness. The Ministry established the Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living program to help fulfill this responsibility. The Special Needs Equipment Program is one of 14 sub-programs of the Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living program.

The Ministry has engaged a service provider, the Saskatchewan Abilities Council, to directly deliver the Special Needs Equipment Program. The intent of this Program is to loan and repair special needs equipment (e.g., wheelchairs, walkers, cushions) at no cost to eligible clients throughout the province.¹ The total cost to operate the Program in 2017-18 was \$6.8 million.² From April 2018 to December 2018, the Program spent approximately \$5.7 million with an approved 2018-19 budget of \$7.2 million.

¹ Ministry of Health, *Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living (SAIL) General Policies*, (2018).

² Ministry of Health, *Drug Plan and Extended Benefits Branch Annual Report for 2017-18*, p. 26.



2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow-up of the Ministry of Health's actions to implement six recommendations we first made in 2016 about its processes to provide special needs equipment for persons with disabilities. Our *2016 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 27 concluded that the Ministry of Health had, other than matters reflected in our recommendations, effective process to provide special needs equipment to persons with disabilities.

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry's progress towards meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Ministry management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

In this follow-up audit, we interviewed Ministry staff and service provider staff responsible for providing special needs equipment to persons with disabilities. We examined quarterly reports, planning documents, the agreement between the Ministry and the service provider, and other relevant documents. In addition, we tested a sample of equipment repair records and preventative maintenance records.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at December 31, 2018, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

3.1 Some Progress to Reduce Equipment Wait Times

We recommended that the Ministry of Health implement further strategies and action plans so that clients receive special needs equipment within an acceptable timeframe. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 162, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status – Partially Implemented

Since 2016, the Ministry initiated some action plans that may help reduce wait times.

It designed these action plans to address identified root causes of clients not receiving equipment within an acceptable timeframe. It consulted with the Council to identify root causes. For example, one identified root cause was insufficient funding to acquire new equipment. From September 2016 to December 2018, the Ministry purchased 442 pieces of equipment for \$1.6 million including 315 manual wheelchairs and 107 power wheelchairs. Wheelchairs were in high demand.

The demand for power wheelchairs continued to be strong. For power wheelchairs, wait times increased over the last three years even though the Ministry bought 107 power wheelchairs during this period. As of September 30, 2018, 70 clients in total waited for power wheelchairs compared to 57 clients in 2017 and 51 clients in 2016.

As shown in **Figure 1**, over the last three years, clients, in general, had shorter waits to receive other requested special needs equipment from the Council. On average, the total wait time decreased for each type of equipment:

- 60% decrease for walkers/commodes/cushions/transfer benches
- 11% decrease for hospital beds
- 24% decrease for manual wheelchairs

Figure 1—Wait Times for Certain Special Needs Equipment as of September 30 from 2016-17 to 2018-19

Type of Equipment	Number of clients with <2 weeks wait time				Number of clients with 2-4 weeks wait time				Number of clients with >4 weeks wait time			
	16-17	17-18	18-19	3 yr chg.	16-17	17-18	18-19	3 yr chg.	16-17	17-18	18-19	3 yr chg.
Walkers/Commodes/Cushions/Transfer Benches	95	84	53	Shorter	24	5	10	Shorter	29	4	8	Shorter
Hospital Beds	6	14	11	Longer	6	7	5	About the same	17	5	0	Shorter
Manual Wheelchairs (standard and ultralight)	74	67	70	Similar	65	46	48	Shorter	37	45	22	Shorter

Source: Special Needs Equipment Program quarterly reports for 2016-17 Quarter 2 to 2018-19 Quarter 2.

At December 2018, the Ministry and the Council were considering a pilot project that would give eligible clients an option to either directly receive a grant to purchase the equipment needed or receive equipment from the Council. At December 2018, the Ministry expected to implement the pilot by April 1, 2019.

Without having strategies and action plans to allow clients to receive special needs equipment within an acceptable timeframe, it increases the risk of clients waiting longer than necessary for required equipment. This could adversely impact clients' quality of life and their day-to-day functions (including their ability to live independently). As a result, it may place additional pressures on the health care system.

We recommended that the Ministry of Health work with its service provider to identify special needs equipment on loan that is no longer utilized, and to recover this equipment within a reasonable timeframe.

(2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 163, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status – Partially Implemented

Beginning in fall 2017, the Ministry generated a monthly report for the Council that listed the names of the clients with loaned equipment who were deceased or left the province since January 2000. However, by December 2018, neither Health nor the Council had determined how to recover equipment that can be reused (e.g., manual chairs, hospital beds).

By December 2018, the Council had started to develop ideas on how to recover unused equipment. For example, the Council was considering asking long-term care facilities to return loaned equipment after a client was deceased.



Our review of the Ministry's monthly reports found 24,517 clients with 39,957 pieces of loaned equipment were deceased or left the province as of September 2018. Unused loaned equipment included 2,617 manual wheel chairs, 68 power wheel chairs, and 312 hospital beds that the Council could potentially recover and reuse. Our review of the reports also noted some equipment had been unused by the client since January 2000.

Recovering unused equipment would help to decrease the wait times for providing equipment to other clients in need.

3.2 Timely Equipment Repairs and Preventative Maintenance Needed

We recommended that the Ministry of Health work with its service provider to track the quality and timeliness of repairs of special needs equipment. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 164, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status – Partially Implemented

The Council tracked the results of repairs, but did not collect sufficient information to enable it to monitor the timeliness of repairs of special needs equipment on loan.

In 2017 and 2018, the Council developed checklists for repairs related to refurbishing certain equipment for redeployment to another client. It has checklists for: manual wheelchairs, hospital beds, manual patient lifts, guardian bath tub lifts, and convaid cruisers.³ Checklists help the Council document work it does to ensure equipment is in proper working condition prior to redeployment. For other equipment repairs, technicians document the work completed on a repair slip.

For each of the 30 repairs of equipment on loan we examined, the Council sufficiently documented (either on a checklist or repair slip) work done and when. However, because none of the 30 files indicated when the client brought the equipment in for repairs, the Council did not know if it had completed the repairs within a reasonable timeframe.

Not tracking timeliness of repairs increases the risk that clients may go long periods of time without the required equipment. It also reduces the ability of the Council to monitor the timeliness of the work of its technicians.

We recommended that the Ministry of Health assist its service provider in developing a process to complete appropriate preventative maintenance on special needs equipment on loan. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 165, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status – Partially Implemented

³ The Convaid Cruiser is a lightweight special needs stroller.

Although the Council better communicated with clients, as well as the Ministry, about upcoming and outstanding maintenance on loaned equipment, it did not always complete preventative maintenance as required, or keep accurate records of equipment requiring preventative maintenance.

The Council is responsible for maintaining all lifting equipment consistent with the manufacturers' recommendations. At December 2018, the Council had about 900 pieces of lifting equipment on loan to clients.

The Council maintains a database of the required service dates for each piece of equipment requiring preventative maintenance but this database is not complete. Although in August 2017, the Council advised the Ministry, in writing, that wider-model hospital beds require preventative maintenance; it did not add this equipment to its preventative maintenance schedule in its database. At December 2018, it had about 30 wider-model hospital beds.

Beginning April 1, 2018, the Council adjusted its communication strategy with clients as follows.

- Two months before maintenance on a loaned piece of equipment is due, its IT system automatically generates a service letter to send to the client. The letter advises the client that preventative maintenance is due. It asks the client to contact the nearest depot to schedule the delivery of replacement equipment, and to return the loaned piece of equipment requiring maintenance.
- If the client does not respond to the first service letter, the Council sends a second letter two months after the month the maintenance was due. The second service letter repeats the request made in the first letter.
- If the client does not respond within three months after the issuance of the second letter, Council staff is to call the client to ensure the client received the letters, and is aware of the required service.
- If the client does not respond within three months after the phone call, the Council sends the final service letter to the client notifying of attempts to contact the client, and the importance of the equipment receiving service to ensure it functions safely.

In April 2018, the Council began reporting to the Ministry, on a quarterly basis, the number of clients in each category (e.g., first letter sent, second letter sent). This keeps the Ministry aware of the number of pieces of equipment in each stage of the maintenance process.

As shown in **Figure 2**, many clients with special needs equipment on loan do not respond to the Council's requests.

**Figure 2—Special Needs Equipment on Loan as of September 30, 2018 Requiring Preventative Maintenance**

	Number of pieces of Equipment
No service required	461
Maintenance due in two months (first service letter sent)	17
Maintenance due (second service letter sent)	11
Maintenance past due by at least three months (telephone calls)	6
Maintenance past due by at least six months (final service letter)	97
Final service letter issued and no response from Client	357

Source: Special Needs Equipment Program September 30, 2018 quarterly report.

For the 10 pieces of lift equipment we tested that required preventative maintenance, we found that:

- For one piece, the Council did not have any records of service done since 2012 (when it was first loaned). In addition, the Council did not perform preventative maintenance on this piece of equipment before loaning it to a new client in 2017.
- For the other 2 pieces, the Council did not service the equipment until 9 and 10 months after maintenance was due, and did not send follow-up letters to the clients.

Failure to perform proper preventative maintenance on equipment on loan increases the risk of injury to clients.

3.3 Measuring Success of Equipment Program Needed

We recommended that the Ministry of Health set out how it plans to measure the success of the Special Needs Equipment Program.

(2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 166, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status – Partially Implemented

Since 2016, although the Ministry and the Council discussed potential ways to measure the success of the Program (e.g., conduct a survey), they, as yet, had not decided how.

The Ministry plans to survey clients to obtain information as to whether the Program contributes to the achievement of the Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living program objectives. At December 2018, it had not yet developed questions to include, or decided how often to survey.

Without measuring the Program’s success, the Ministry cannot know whether the Program is meeting the Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living program objectives, such as improving affordability of disability supports or providing people with physical disabilities a basic level of coverage for disability related equipment, devices, products, and supplies in a cost effective and timely manner.

3.4 Documented Escalation Process for Complaints Needed

We recommended that the Ministry of Health set clear expectations for when its service provider should escalate complaints to the Ministry related to the Special Needs Equipment Program. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 167, Recommendation 6; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status – Not Implemented

The Ministry has not set clear expectations, in writing, on the types of complaints the Council is to escalate to the Ministry. In addition, the Ministry has not set expectation on the types of complaints (e.g., equipment not in good working condition, wait times for equipment) the Council is to escalate to the Ministry.

In practice, when the Council receives a complaint or issue that is outside the policy (e.g., requesting specialized equipment or requesting additional equipment) or if it receives a complaint it cannot resolve on its own, it continues to escalate it to the Ministry.

The Ministry tracks the complaints escalated from the Council. From September 2016 to November 2018, the Council escalated 19 complaints related to the Program to the Ministry.

The Council does not keep track of the nature or number of complaints received. Thereby, the Ministry cannot know if the Council escalated all relevant complaints.

Setting expectations for escalating complaints for the Program would help the Ministry identify issues in the Program and gain timely insight about the Council's delivery of the Program. This would allow the Ministry to make informed decisions about improving service delivery to its clients.

