

Chapter 7

Social Services—Delivering the Saskatchewan Income Support Program

1.0 MAIN POINTS

In 2019, the Ministry of Social Services began offering the Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) as a program of last resort to provide financial assistance for people to meet their basic needs while they take steps toward self-sufficiency.¹ During 2022–23, the Ministry had an average monthly SIS caseload of over 17,000 clients and expected to provide SIS benefits of \$261.5 million.

We found the Ministry had, for the period ended January 31, 2023, effective processes to deliver SIS other than the areas of our six recommendations. The Ministry needs to:

- Provide potential clients with better access to apply for SIS benefits—while the Ministry provides potential clients with options to apply for SIS online, over the phone, or in person, we found the application process is not easily accessible for potential clients. We found 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.
- Offer timely case planning supports—our testing of SIS client files found the Ministry does not always complete and update clients’ individualized case plans timely, or consistently provide clients, and follow up on, referrals to relevant supports (e.g., employment services, addictions counselling). Such planning is necessary for clients to meet their goals in relation to working toward self-sufficiency. We found one client who had been on SIS for 20 months and had yet to meet with Ministry staff to set an individualized case plan.
- Periodically analyze the overall causes of SIS client evictions and unpaid utilities—such analysis can help the Ministry understand common issues encountered by clients and potential changes needed to SIS. Our analysis of data obtained from SaskPower and SaskEnergy found over 5,200 SIS client accounts outstanding for more than 30 days with unpaid amounts greater than \$100, amounting to almost \$4.2 million.
- Implement further performance measures to assess SIS’s effectiveness—further measures focusing on client outcomes (e.g., proportion of clients leaving SIS but then returning within a specified time period) can help the Ministry consider improvements to SIS and identify areas to focus its efforts and resources.

Having effective processes to deliver SIS provides clients with adequate access to the Program and the support needed. Lack of sufficient supports can result in clients continuing to receive SIS benefits for long periods without progressing toward self-sufficiency and exiting the Program.

¹ Ministry of Social Services, *Saskatchewan Income Support Program Policy Manual* (September 2022), p. 14.



2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the results of our audit of the Ministry of Social Services' processes to deliver the Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) for the 12-month period ending January 31, 2023.²

2.1 Saskatchewan Income Support Program

Under *The Saskatchewan Assistance Act*, the Ministry of Social Services is responsible for delivering income assistance programs.³

The Ministry delivers several programs and services in the areas of income support, child and family programs, affordable housing, and support for people with disabilities.⁴ Overall, the Ministry has almost 400 staff in its Income Assistance Programs Division (e.g., call centre staff, planning and support specialists).

The Ministry began delivering the Saskatchewan Income Support Program in July 2019, and it became one of the Ministry's two core income assistance programs after it discontinued two social assistance programs in 2021.⁵ In 2021–22, the Ministry spent \$154.2 million on SIS and planned to spend \$261.5 million in 2022–23.^{6,7}

Figure 1 sets out the Ministry's average monthly SIS cases, and related expenses, since the Program's inception in 2019. In 2021–22, the Ministry had over 12,000 SIS households, which increased to over 17,000 households in 2022–23. A household is comprised of a client (i.e., the applicant[s]) and their dependents. As of December 31, 2022, 55% of SIS households self-identified as Indigenous peoples (e.g., First Nations, Métis, Inuit).

Figure 1—Caseloads and Spending for Saskatchewan Income Support Program

Fiscal Year	Monthly Average Caseload	Expense (in millions)
2019–20	2,575	\$32.8
2020–21	8,036	\$83.7
2021–22	12,906	\$154.2
2022–23 (10 months)	17,141	Not Available

Source: Adapted from information provided by the Ministry of Social Services.

The Ministry also partners with service providers to support clients in its income assistance programs—it provided almost \$7 million to such organizations in 2021–22.⁸ For example, the Ministry provides funding to community-based organizations (e.g., The Salvation Army, YWCA Regina Inc., Phoenix Residential Society) to provide emergency shelter, individualized case planning, and money management and trusteeship supports to clients.

² Our audit did not involve assessing the Ministry's financial processes to make SIS payments to clients, as we audit this extensively in our annual integrated audit of the Ministry. See integrated audit results for the year ended March 31, 2022, in our *2022 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 6*.

³ *The Saskatchewan Assistance Act*, s. 7.

⁴ Ministry of Social Services, *Annual Report for 2021–22*, p. 4.

⁵ On August 31, 2021, the Ministry discontinued the Saskatchewan Assistance Program (SAP) and the Transitional Employment Allowance (TEA). The Ministry required any clients remaining on these programs to apply for support from SIS, or their benefits would end. With this change, SIS and the Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability Program (SAID) became the Ministry's two core income assistance programs. The Ministry planned to spend more on SIS in 2022–23, as it was the first full year of operations including clients from the discontinued SAP and TEA programs.

⁶ Ministry of Social Services, *Annual Report for 2021–22*, p. 22.

⁷ Government of Saskatchewan, *2022–23 Estimates*, p. 114.

⁸ Government of Saskatchewan, *Public Accounts 2021–22, Volume 2*, p. 199.

2.2 Importance of Income Assistance

In 2020, over 6% of Canadians lived in poverty.⁹ In Saskatchewan, the poverty rate exceeded the national rate with almost 7% of the population living in poverty.¹⁰ Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) is a key program the Ministry of Social Services administers to support people living on low income or in poverty while they work toward self-sufficiency.

Clients use their monthly income assistance benefits to meet their basic needs (e.g., rent, utilities, transportation, and food). More recently, increased inflation can make it increasingly difficult for clients to make ends meet—increasing the risk of clients facing eviction or unable to access affordable housing, which can result in homelessness.

Research shows the amount of support people receive impacts their ability to exit income support programs. People may spend more time on survival activities, such as travelling to food banks, rather than on activities to help them work toward self-sufficiency.¹¹ Case management plans need to be tailored to each individual with action plans and access to appropriate supports (e.g., child care, housing).¹² This will help individuals succeed in a job, and move towards self-sufficiency. Stable employment is a good pathway to long-term financial security.

Research also illustrates the primary factors shaping the health of Canadians are not medical treatments or lifestyle choices, but rather their living conditions—these conditions are known as the social determinants of health. Canadians' health is affected by wealth distribution, employment, and many other factors (e.g., housing, food insecurity, education).¹³ For example, Canadians with higher incomes are often healthier than those with lower incomes.¹⁴ As such, appropriate levels of income are not only necessary for individuals to meet their basic needs, but also play a key role in their overall health, which lessens strains on the healthcare system.

Having effective processes to deliver SIS can help the Ministry reduce the risk of clients having inadequate access to the Program and not receiving the support needed. Not doing so can limit clients' abilities to become self-sufficient and ultimately exit the Program.

3.0 AUDIT CONCLUSION

We concluded, for the 12-month period ended January 31, 2023, the Ministry of Social Services had, other than the following areas, effective processes to deliver the Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS).

⁹ Canada's official measure of poverty is the Market Basket Measure (MBM), which is based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, transportation and other necessities) representing a modest, basic standard of living. The MBM recognizes the potential differences in the cost of the basket between similar-sized communities in different provinces and between different geographical regions within provinces. For example, the MBM (2020) for a single person living in Regina was \$23,094 compared to \$21,618 in smaller communities with less than 30,000 people. www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/dict/az/definition-eng.cfm?ID=pop165 (19 March 2023).

¹⁰ www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110013501&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.11&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2019&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2020&referencePeriods=20190101%2C20200101 (19 March 2023).

¹¹ www.on360.ca/policy-papers/resetting-social-assistance-reform/ (12 March 2023).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ thecanadianfacts.org/ (12 March 2023).

¹⁴ www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health.html (12 March 2023).

**The Ministry needs to:**

- **Provide potential clients with better access to apply for SIS benefits**
- **Establish a reasonable timeframe for completing initial planning meetings with SIS clients requiring supports**
- **Regularly follow up with clients on their individualized case plan goals**
- **Provide referrals (e.g., to employment services, addictions counselling) consistently and follow up on referrals timely**
- **Periodically analyze overall causes of SIS client evictions and unpaid utilities**
- **Implement further performance measures to assess SIS's effectiveness**

Figure 2—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach**Audit Objective:**

To assess whether the Ministry of Social Services had effective processes to deliver the Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) for the 12-month period ending January 31, 2023.

Audit Criteria:

Processes to:

- 1. Make the Saskatchewan Income Support Program accessible to eligible clients**
 - Make individuals aware of income support services (e.g., eligibility criteria, how to apply, use of service providers)
 - Have program easily accessible for all potential clients (e.g., homeless)
 - Address barriers to providing accessible income support services
- 2. Provide clients with supports enabling transition to employment**
 - Use validation tools (e.g., checklists) to assess the needs of clients
 - Create individualized case plans suitable for clients based on needs
 - Connect clients with appropriate services and service providers (e.g., employment training, housing) in a timely manner
 - Update individualized case plans timely
- 3. Monitor performance of the Saskatchewan Income Support Program**
 - Continuously align Program with good practice (e.g., reviewing and updating assistance levels)
 - Address complaints from clients and service providers within a reasonable timeframe
 - Analyze key performance information (e.g., length of time clients spend on the Program)
 - Periodically report key information to senior management and the public

Audit Approach:

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry's processes, we used the above criteria based on our related work, review of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with management. Ministry management agreed with the above criteria.

We examined the Ministry's criteria, policies, and procedures related to delivering SIS. We interviewed key Ministry staff. We evaluated the accessibility of SIS, analyzed key data (e.g., timeliness of processing SIS applications, SIS clients' arrears with utility providers), and tested the Ministry's adherence to its case management processes for a sample of clients. In addition, we assessed the Ministry's processes to establish and analyze performance measures. We also used an independent consultant with subject matter expertise in the area to help us identify good practice and assess the Ministry's processes.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 SIS Details Clearly Communicated

The Ministry of Social Services uses appropriate methods to clearly communicate information about its Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS).

We found the Ministry uses a combination of electronic, written, and verbal communications to inform individuals about SIS.

The Ministry's website is its primary method of communicating information about SIS.¹⁵ We found the Ministry also included information about SIS on posters distributed to service providers (e.g., community-based organizations) and in presentations provided to other government ministries and service providers. In addition, Ministry staff verbally communicated details associated with SIS in discussions with clients and service providers.

Our assessment of the Ministry's website found it clearly describes key aspects of SIS. It includes information such as the benefits available, eligibility requirements, and how to apply. We found the website contained information consistent with the Ministry's SIS Policy Manual, which is also available online.¹⁶ While the Ministry's website is its primary method of communicating information about SIS, this can be a barrier for certain individuals lacking connectivity or who are unable to access computers—see **Recommendation 1** regarding providing individuals with better access to apply for SIS benefits.

Any person who needs financial help can apply to the Ministry for income support. As described in **Figure 3** to be eligible for SIS, individuals must meet five primary criteria.

Figure 3—Eligibility Criteria for the Saskatchewan Income Support Program

- A Canadian Citizen, permanent resident, or have refugee status or are in Canada under the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel
- Living in Saskatchewan
- 18 years or older
- Have no income or low income (i.e., combined non-exempt assets and income less than the total SIS benefits available to a household)
- Have explored every other reasonable way to support oneself, including employment, seeking child support, etc.

Source: www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/financial-help/saskatchewan-income-support-sis#eligibility (13 March 2023).

The Ministry provides eligible SIS clients with financial support for basic needs (including food, local transportation, clothing, personal and household items) and shelter (for rent, mortgage payments, utilities, taxes, and all other shelter-related costs). **Figure 4** describes the levels of assistance SIS provides to eligible clients for basic needs and shelter. It shows that in 2022, a single person living in Regina would receive \$915 per month for basic needs and shelter. Whereas, a family of four in Regina would receive \$1,630 per month for basic needs and shelter.

¹⁵ www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/financial-help/saskatchewan-income-support-sis (13 March 2023).

¹⁶ publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/101659 (13 March 2023).

**Figure 4—Key Benefits under the Saskatchewan Income Support Program at September 2022**

	Singles	Couples	Families (1 or 2 kids) ^{A,C}	Families (3+ kids) ^{A,C}
Adult Basic Benefit:				
Northern Administration District ^B	\$380	\$760	\$760	\$760
Rest of the province	\$315	\$630	\$630	\$630
Shelter Benefit:				
Saskatoon & Regina	\$600	\$775	\$1,000	\$1,175
Rest of the province	\$540	\$665	\$765	\$865

Source: *Saskatchewan Income Support Program Policy Manual*—September 2022.

^A The figure above describes the adult basic benefit for families assuming two adults reside in the household. Single parent families receive the adult basic benefit for a single adult.

^B The Northern Administration District includes 55 communities (e.g., La Ronge, Buffalo Narrows, Sandy Bay, Wollaston Lake) in northern Saskatchewan.

^C SIS clients may also be eligible for a children's basic benefit to cover food, clothing, household items, local transportation and other child-related costs when they are not eligible to receive the Canada Child Benefit. The Ministry provides a monthly children's basic benefit (\$65 per month for each child) for residents of the Northern Administration District in recognition of the higher costs of basic items in this area of the province.

We found the Ministry developed SIS using a “whole income” approach, such that in addition to SIS benefits available to clients, the Ministry anticipates they may also receive income from other sources, such as federal benefits, income tax refunds, or employment.

Figure 5 illustrates examples of other financial support SIS clients may be eligible to receive from the Ministry. The amount of these other financial supports may also depend on factors such as income, where clients live, and family size.

Figure 5—Examples of Other Benefits Under the Saskatchewan Income Support Program

<p><u>Child Care Benefit</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefit of \$30 per day to assist in pursuing employment (e.g., job interviews, resume workshops), attending medical appointments, or participating in employment or training when licensed child care is not available^A <p><u>Change of Circumstances Benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Training Incentive (monthly benefit up to \$200) Employment and training benefit (\$140 annually) Relocation benefit (up to \$300) when relocation is required (e.g., due to fire, interpersonal violence, rental accommodations have been sold) <p><u>Health and Safety Benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prescribed diet benefit (monthly benefit up to \$150) Per diem travel benefits (e.g., to help clients with costs associated with attending medical appointments or job interviews) Short-term emergency support to remove an immediate risk of harm or to address a specific event (maximum of \$500 per household per event) <p><u>Supplementary Health Benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Ministry of Social Services may nominate SIS clients and their household members for supplementary health benefits (e.g., optical, dentistry, hearing aids) through the Ministry of Health
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Source: *Saskatchewan Income Support Program Policy Manual*—September 2022.

^A For a SIS client to be eligible for the child care benefit, the child(ren) needing care must be registered as part of the client's household. There are circumstances where SIS clients may not be eligible for the benefit (e.g., child care is provided by an immediate household member [e.g., older sibling], when the child care provider does not charge for their services).

In addition, SIS clients may also receive financial support in the form of federal tax credits and benefits (e.g., Canada Child Benefit, GST/HST credit) and/or provincial tax credits (e.g., Low-Income Tax Credit).

Effectively communicating details about SIS helps individuals in need understand the types of financial support available from the Ministry, along with the process for obtaining support.

4.2 SIS Benefit Rates Assessed

The Ministry of Social Services compares benefits available to clients within the Saskatchewan Income Support Program to other Canadian jurisdictions, and periodically assesses the need for changes to its benefit rates.

The Ministry's approach to assessing the SIS benefits available to clients involves comparing SIS benefits to similar benefits provided by other Canadian provinces. During our audit period, we found the Ministry analyzed the most recent *Welfare in Canada* report and provided senior management with a summary of Saskatchewan's income assistance levels and poverty thresholds (e.g., Market Basket Measure) in comparison to the other nine provinces.¹⁷ As shown in **Figure 6**, the Ministry ranked fourth highest or better in comparison to other provinces for SIS benefit rates in 2021. In addition, we found the Ministry ranked fifth highest or better in relation to various poverty thresholds (e.g., income assistance levels compared to the Market Basket Measure) in 2021.

Ministry staff noted they strive for Saskatchewan's income assistance levels in the top-half of the rankings when compared to the other nine provinces, but do not have a specific target established. This approach is reasonable as each jurisdiction in Canada is subject to unique circumstances (e.g., cost of living in Vancouver compared to Saskatoon).

Figure 6 illustrates the basic social assistance available on an annual basis to Ministry clients for varied sizes of households in Saskatoon, as reported in the *Welfare in Canada* reports for 2019 to 2021. Since implementation of SIS in 2019, the reports indicate basic social assistance rates for varied sizes of households in Saskatoon increased between 9% and 26% by 2021.

At October 2022, SIS households comprised of 60% single persons, 34% single parents, and 6% couples (with or without dependent children).

Figure 6—Saskatchewan Basic Social Assistance 2019 to 2021

Household Category	Saskatchewan Basic Social Assistance ^A (annual income and associated ranking in comparison to other provinces)			% change in benefits between (2019 to 2021)
	2019 (SAP/TEA)	2020 (SIS)	2021 (SIS)	
Single person/employable	\$8,196 (7 th)	\$10,320 (3 rd)	\$10,320 (3 rd)	26%
Single parent with one child	\$13,256 (4 th)	\$15,120 (2 nd)	\$15,120 (2 nd)	14%
Couple with two children	\$17,055 (4 th)	\$18,540 (4 th)	\$18,540 (4 th)	9%

Source: Adapted from information reported within the annual *Welfare in Canada* reports for 2019 to 2021.

^A The 2019 basic social assistance amounts refer to payments a client would expect to receive over the year from the Ministry's pre-SIS programs—the Saskatchewan Assistance Program (SAP) and Transitional Employment Allowance (TEA) programs. The 2020 and 2021 basic social assistance amounts refer to payments a client would expect to receive from SIS over the respective years.

¹⁷ Published by Maytree, an organization committed to advancing system solutions to poverty and strengthening civic communities, the annual *Welfare in Canada* reports show welfare incomes (income assistance) for four example households (in the largest city in each province) receiving social assistance in a given year across the country. For example, the reports examine how welfare income varies across Canada, components of welfare income in each province, and adequacy of welfare incomes in each province compared to poverty thresholds (e.g., Market Basket Measure).



In addition to analyzing income assistance levels in other Canadian provinces, we found the Ministry meets with officials from other Canadian jurisdictions on a monthly basis to gain insight into how other jurisdictions manage their income assistance programs. For example, our review of minutes from these meetings found jurisdictions discussed the benefits (e.g., income exemptions, shelter benefits, funeral benefits) available in their respective income assistance programs.

A common feature of most income assistance programs is the requirement for clients to liquidate their assets as a source of income to meet their needs. Income assistance programs can often be criticized for requiring clients to liquidate their assets to the point of destitution. We found the Ministry's approach to asset liquidation for SIS clients is reasonable, as it does not require clients to liquidate all assets—clients can keep exempt assets such as a house and a vehicle, which can help support them to seek or retain employment.

Saskatchewan is not immune to increased inflation—the province reported a 6% increase in the consumer price index from January 2022 to January 2023.¹⁸ All households must manage inflationary pressures on their finances, but such pressures can overwhelm low income households with little flexibility to absorb additional costs for basic necessities such as housing or food.

The Ministry designed the SIS shelter benefit to address clients' shelter-related costs (e.g., rent, utilities). A comparison of the 2022 average rent for a bachelor suite in Regina (i.e., \$728 per month) compared to the shelter benefit for a single SIS client (i.e., \$600 per month) illustrates how difficult it may be for clients to make ends meet, even before considering their monthly utility expenses.¹⁹ As described in **Section 4.1**, the Ministry assesses SIS benefits using a “whole income” approach. This includes considering SIS benefits available to clients along with income from other sources (i.e., federal benefits, income tax refunds, employment).

We reviewed the Ministry's process to assess its SIS benefit rates, but did not assess the sufficiency of the rates. We found the Ministry formally analyzes its SIS benefit rates available to clients as part of its annual budget process.²⁰ We found the Ministry considered the following factors in its analysis, using information from reliable sources:

- Inflation forecasted by the Ministry of Finance
- Rental market data published by the Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation
- Known utility increases released by SaskPower and SaskEnergy

Formal analysis of relevant factors, and benefits in other provinces, provides the Ministry's senior management with a reasonable basis to make recommendations about its SIS benefit rates.

¹⁸ dashboard.saskatchewan.ca/business-economy/key-economic-indicators/consumer-price-index (13 March 2023).

¹⁹ Average rent for a bachelor suite in Regina in 2022 adapted from Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation data. www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/professionals/housing-markets-data-and-research/housing-data/data-tables/rental-market/urban-rental-market-survey-data-rent-quartiles (13 March 2023).

²⁰ Effective April 1, 2022, the Ministry increased the SIS monthly adult basic benefit by \$30 and the monthly shelter benefit by \$25.

4.3 SIS Application Process Needs to be More Accessible for Clients

The Ministry of Social Services designed its Saskatchewan Income Support Program to be available to individuals to apply online, over the phone, and in person. However, it needs to provide potential clients with better access to apply for benefits.

To apply for benefits from SIS, individuals must complete an application online or over the phone.

We reviewed the online application and found it reasonable to navigate and complete. Individuals applying to SIS over the phone speak with client service representatives in the Ministry's service centre—these staff help individuals navigate the online application process or complete the application over the phone. There are about 170 staff who work in the service centre and answer phones weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

According to the Ministry, for individuals without access to the internet or a phone, they can access the necessary technology at one of the Ministry's income assistance delivery offices. The Ministry's six largest delivery offices are open weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. located in:

- Regina
- Saskatoon
- Prince Albert
- Moose Jaw
- Yorkton
- North Battleford

The Ministry also has 12 smaller offices and 30 day-offices geographically dispersed throughout the province.²¹ We found all offices reasonably located across the province.

The Ministry's income assistance delivery offices are not SIS-specific; they also provide services to clients for its other income assistance programs (e.g., Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability). In exceptional circumstances (e.g., where internet or phone lines are not in service), at Ministry staff's discretion, individuals can apply to SIS using a paper application in-person at one of the Ministry's offices. **Section 4.5** also describes how Ministry staff recently started visiting a community-based organization's premises to help individuals apply to SIS.

We toured two of the Ministry's income assistance delivery offices (one large office and one small office, conducting both scheduled and unscheduled visits). We also attempted to apply for SIS benefits over the phone. We found the following:

- The Ministry does not have computers available for individuals to use at all of its offices; computers are only available in its Regina, Saskatoon, and Moose Jaw offices. Furthermore, during our office tour in Regina, Ministry staff indicated the computers are for staff use only. Staff noted when individuals arrive at the offices, they direct them to a phone to call into the Ministry's service centre and apply for benefits over the phone.

²¹ The Ministry's smaller offices provide services similar to those the Ministry offers at its larger offices but serve a smaller population (same hours of operation). Ministry staff travel to its day offices to provide services to individuals on certain days of the week/month or on an appointment basis. Small offices are located in communities such as La Loche, La Ronge, Melfort, Weyburn, Kindersley, and Swift Current. Day offices are located in communities such as Unity, Hudson Bay, Indian Head, Estevan, and Maple Creek.



- We attempted to apply for SIS benefits over the phone on three separate occasions. During two attempts, we received an automated message asking us to call back later due to high call volumes (i.e., our call went unanswered) after waiting for approximately five minutes on the phone. During our third attempt, we received an option for a Ministry representative to call us back when available. The Ministry's phone system has a call back function to help mitigate long client wait times, but we observed it is not provided as an option on every call.

We also analyzed unanswered call data from the Ministry's phone system between August 2022 and January 2023. The Ministry received over 255,000 total calls to its SIS phone line during this period (including almost 50,000 calls specific to SIS applications). While unanswered calls tended to peak at or near the end of each month, we found examples of significant amounts of unanswered calls at other times of the month. The Ministry takes some steps to attempt to address high call demand, by shifting its staff between phones and case management responsibilities as needed.

Overall, the data showed 64% of the total SIS calls to the Ministry's service centre (65% of calls specific to SIS applications) went unanswered.²²

- During an unannounced visit to a large delivery office, we asked Ministry staff about applying for SIS benefits. We found staff did not sufficiently provide guidance or offer assistance associated with the SIS application process.

According to data provided by the Ministry, fewer than 50% of individuals use its online option to apply for SIS benefits and instead use the phone option. This may be indicative of individuals preferring to speak with a client service representative to assist them through the application process or not having access to a computer.

People experiencing difficult circumstances in struggling to meet their basic necessities need clear and accessible ways to apply for SIS. Providing an appropriate balance of reliable and service-oriented options (e.g., answered phones, reduced wait times, computer availability, guided application process) to individuals is necessary to improve the SIS application process and allow clients to best use their time (e.g., searching for stable employment, seeking health treatment).

- 1. We recommend the Ministry of Social Services provide potential clients with better access to apply for benefits from the Saskatchewan Income Support Program.**

4.4 SIS Applications Assessed Timely

The Ministry of Social Services assesses applications to the Saskatchewan Income Support Program in a timely manner.

The Ministry strives to assess all SIS applications (i.e., received online or over the phone) within five business days of receipt. It also strives to provide clients with their first SIS benefit payment within five to seven business days after completing an application and

²² The Ministry's unanswered call data does not include information to determine how and when the Ministry actually served individuals attempting to call the Ministry's service centre.

submitting all relevant information. The Ministry expects clients to provide all documentation, such as income details, within 30 days of application to aid in receiving their first benefit payment.²³ We found these timeframes aligned with good practice.

We analyzed SIS data from February to December 2022 and found the Ministry received almost 13,000 SIS applications during this period. Overall, we found the Ministry assessed the applications in a timely manner—within five business days about 90% of the time. In addition, we found the Ministry provided clients with their first benefit payments within 30 days (i.e., the timeframe within which clients must submit all documentation) about 92% of the time.

The Ministry also rejected almost 8,000 applications during this period. The Ministry rejects applications when clients do not meet eligibility requirements (e.g., did not provide required documentation or information, income exceeded their personal expenses, secured another source of income). The Ministry rejected about 76% of those applications due to clients not submitting appropriate documentation or information required to assess benefit eligibility.

We tested 10 rejected applications and found all were reasonably justified for denial. We also found the Ministry notified the clients timely about the denial (i.e., within eight business days).

The Ministry also has processes to provide income support to individuals in emergency situations, on a case-by-case basis. During February to December 2022, the Ministry processed around \$3.4 million in emergency payments. These payments also address circumstances when clients need their regular monthly benefits sooner, or situations where clients need support for other emergency benefits to remove an immediate risk of harm, or other special circumstances (e.g., no bank account, meals, temporary housing arrangements, transportation).

We tested seven emergency payments the Ministry provided to clients and found the Ministry provided all payments to clients in a timely manner based on the individual circumstances (ranging from the same day to eight days).

Assessing SIS client applications within an appropriate time or providing individuals with emergency payments helps to ensure clients receive timely benefits to meet their needs.

4.5 SIS Barriers Not Fully Mitigated

The Ministry of Social Services has yet to sufficiently analyze and address a number of key barriers to providing clients with accessible income support services.

The Ministry's income support staff meet regularly (i.e., weekly) to discuss its income support programs, including SIS. In addition, we found the Ministry regularly meets with key stakeholders, such as community-based organizations that also provide services to SIS clients. Such meetings provide opportunities for the Ministry and its key stakeholders to provide feedback about the performance of SIS and barriers clients may be experiencing. The Ministry can use this feedback to address barriers relating to SIS.

²³ The Ministry will provide SIS clients with their first payment before receiving some supporting documents (i.e., health service number, social insurance number, bank account details, and rental receipts) but clients must provide those documents to the Ministry within 30 days of application for their benefits to continue.



For example, under a SIS predecessor program (i.e., Saskatchewan Assistance Program), the Ministry provided an option for direct payment of rent and utilities to landlords and utility providers on behalf of eligible clients. The Ministry did not offer this option upon its initial implementation of SIS in 2019, instead providing shelter benefits for such costs directly to clients with the intent of encouraging clients' transition to self-sufficiency. However, the Ministry adjusted SIS in November 2021 to make direct shelter benefit payments to landlords and utility providers for certain clients who meet specific criteria.²⁴

We interviewed two community-based organizations that provide services to SIS clients to further understand the barriers clients experience with SIS. During these discussions, we learned of another example where the Ministry took action to address clients' issues with navigating SIS. During 2022–23, Ministry staff started visiting a particular community-based organization's premises in Regina and Saskatoon two to five times each week to help individuals apply for SIS (i.e., over the phone or online).

While the Ministry takes steps to identify and address barriers about SIS, our discussions with community-based organizations, and direct observations during the audit, identified the following key barriers the Ministry has yet to sufficiently analyze and address:

- **Accessibility**—while the Ministry designed SIS so individuals can apply for benefits online (i.e., available 24/7), individuals lacking connectivity or unable to access computers at Ministry offices do not benefit from the online option. Also, a number of calls to Ministry's service centres for help in applying for SIS go unanswered (see **Section 4.3**). Individuals with pay-as-you-go cellphone plans may needlessly use up their plan minutes waiting to speak with a client service representative on the phone. See **Recommendation 1** about providing potential clients with better access to apply for SIS benefits.
- **Lack of streamlined client support**—during our testing of SIS client files, we reviewed documentation of planning and support specialists' interactions with SIS clients.²⁵ We observed a few instances where clients had questions about their SIS benefits. Instead of addressing the clients' questions, the planning and support specialists directed clients to call the service centre so client service representatives could address their questions.

By referring clients to the service centre when they are already speaking to a Ministry representative, the Ministry may be increasing the strain on its service centre and the number of unanswered client calls. See **Recommendation 1** regarding providing potential clients with better access to apply for SIS benefits—this may include the Ministry considering ways to streamline processes for potential and existing clients.

²⁴ According to the Ministry's *Saskatchewan Income Support Program Policy Manual* (Chapter 9), SIS clients are eligible for direct payment of shelter benefits to landlords and utility providers when the Ministry assesses clients as a Service Level 4 (i.e., requiring intensive Ministry supports and referrals to help stabilize a client's situation) and are at risk of homelessness and/or essential service disruptions (i.e., heat, electricity). Ministry staff must also work with the clients to explore options to pay rent and utilities (e.g., trusteeship, equalized payment plan) and determine other options are not feasible in the circumstances. Finally, clients must be able to work with their landlord and/or utility provider toward covering any shortfalls (e.g., when the shelter benefit does not address the full cost of rent or utilities) within their available financial resources.

²⁵ Planning and support specialists are responsible for case management for certain clients. This includes working with clients to plan for their successful transition to self-sufficiency (e.g., developing individual plans, referring clients to required services).

- Missed appointments—the Ministry does not assess why clients miss appointments with planning and support specialists. Not determining reasons why clients miss initial planning meeting appointments (e.g., lack of transportation) reduces the Ministry's opportunities to identify and address barriers to SIS. In addition, as described in **Recommendations 2 and 3**, the Ministry needs to establish a timeframe for completing initial planning meetings with SIS clients and regularly meet with them to follow up on their individual plan goals.

Without sufficiently identifying and addressing barriers related to SIS, there is increased risk of the Ministry not meeting the needs of its clients and not considering necessary adjustments.

4.6 SIS Clients Screened to Determine Level of Support

The Ministry of Social Services uses a service level screening assessment to help determine the needs of clients within the Saskatchewan Income Support Program.

The Ministry requires staff to complete a service level screening assessment for each client within 30 days of the Ministry deeming a client eligible for SIS benefits. The assessment is a standardized method of determining a client's service-level support based on the person's strengths, barriers, and stability in six key areas: employment, education, child care, criminal record history, general health, and housing.

As part of the screening assessment, clients answer questions over the phone assessing their needs in these key areas. We found the assessment aligned with good practice.

Staff, along with the client, complete the assessment within the Ministry's case management IT system (MiCase). The client's answers to the questions do not impact their eligibility for SIS or the amount of benefits received, rather it helps the Ministry determine the level of service it needs to provide to the client.

The Ministry's MiCase system classifies each assessment area into one of four categories (see **Figure 7**), based on how the client responded to the screening questions. The system then provides a summary service level (i.e., Service Level 1, 2, 3, or 4) for the client.

If the system assesses a client as Service Level 3 in the areas of housing and health (e.g., client has unstable housing and addiction/substance abuse issues), but assesses all other areas as Service Level 1 or 2, it classifies the client at Service Level 3. At November 2022, as shown in **Figure 7**, the Ministry assessed 69% of its active SIS clients as Service Level 3, requiring dedicated Ministry case planning supports.

**Figure 7—Number of SIS Clients by Service Level at November 2022**

Level	Description	Number of Clients	% of Clients
Service Level 1	Clients assigned to this service level will access self-directed or online services and household budgeting information, as they will need financial assistance for a short period of time (e.g., awaiting employment insurance or have a job but waiting for first pay).	801	5%
Service Level 2	Clients assigned to this service level will have employment capacity and should be able to secure employment within six months. The Ministry will refer the client to online household budgeting information and employment services arranged by the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training.	3,117	20%
Service Level 3	Clients assigned to this service level will require dedicated Ministry case planning supports, with an emphasis on motivational interviewing (see Section 4.9). Clients will receive household budgeting supports and referrals to service providers who will support clients and enable them to address barriers as they move toward employment.	10,532	69%
Service Level 4	Clients assigned to this service level will require intensive Ministry supports and referrals to help stabilize the client's situation (e.g., accessing addictions treatment centre, addressing homelessness, domestic violence, trusteeship).	891	6%
Total		15,341	

Source: Adapted from information provided by the Ministry of Social Services.

We tested 40 client files and all had completed service level screening assessments. However, we found one file where the Ministry did not complete the assessment within 30 days of the client deemed eligible for SIS. It took the Ministry 71 days to complete the assessment. This resulted in delays in the client meeting with a planning and support specialist to develop an individualized case plan (see **Recommendation 2**).

Completing timely client service level screening assessments reduces the risk of delays in the Ministry providing appropriate support based on client needs.

4.7 Individualized Case Planning Not Timely

The Ministry of Social Services does not always complete and update individualized case plans for its Saskatchewan Income Support Program clients in a timely manner.

When the Ministry assesses and determines clients' service levels as either Service Level 3 or 4, the Ministry assigns a planning and support specialist to each client. As noted in **Section 4.6**, the Ministry assessed over 11,000 SIS clients as Service Level 3 or 4 at November 2022.

The planning and support specialist works with a client to develop an individualized case plan. To begin documenting the plan, the specialist has an initial planning meeting with the client to help determine their needs.

The Ministry expects the planning and support specialist to document this meeting within the MiCase system and address the key areas described in **Figure 8**.

Figure 8—Key Areas Documented During Initial Planning Meeting

<p>Circumstances—detailed description of the client’s circumstances.</p> <p>Explanation of SIS—detailing program requirements with the client.</p> <p>Budget worksheet—determining net surplus or deficit from all net income and expenses available to the client. If the client has a net deficit, document discussion of deficit with the client and outline the client’s plans to address it.</p> <p>Utilities—discussion of whether the client has utilities in their name or their landlord, and whether they have unpaid utilities. If they do, outline payment plans to address it.</p> <p>Goals—detailed description of goals and changes the client desires to make (e.g., finding affordable housing, attending counselling).</p> <p>Commitment—detailed description of specific commitments the client made as they relate to goals/changes the client intends to make (e.g., budgeting, making payment plans for utility arrears, contacting housing authorities).</p> <p>Follow Up Appointment Date—document follow-up date to build momentum and support client towards achieving their change goals.</p>

Source: Adapted from information provided by the Ministry of Social Services.

We tested 30 client files where the client was either Service Level 3 or 4 and found:

- Four Service Level 3 clients did not have the initial planning meeting. As of January 2023, these meetings had yet to occur 3 to 20 months after the screening assessment. In two of these cases, the Ministry had not yet assigned a planning and support specialist to the client. This means one client has been on SIS for 20 months and has yet to meet with a planning and support specialist to set an individualized case plan. In all four cases, clients having yet to develop individualized case plans delays their ability to identify goals toward self-sufficiency and lengthens their need for SIS benefits.
- Three Service Level 3 clients did not have the initial planning meeting properly documented. For example, in one case, the planning and support specialist only included an explanation of client circumstances and did not explain SIS, discuss budgeting, or set goals. In another case, the specialist did not document what they discussed with the client during the meeting.

We found the Ministry has not set a timeframe for planning and support specialists to complete initial planning meetings with clients. The Ministry will need to consider its income support staffing complement to determine an appropriate timeframe for completing initial planning meetings with clients. While the Ministry tracks its staffing complement for income support staff working with clients across all of its income support programs, we found it does not track the staffing complement specific to SIS clients.

We found 10 client files in our testing where the Ministry took between 40 and 220 days to complete the initial planning meeting. We found delays occurred because clients missed appointments, requiring rescheduling.

Without conducting timely initial planning meetings with clients, the Ministry is unable to assist clients in developing their individualized plans. Such planning is necessary for clients to establish goals in relation to working toward self-sufficiency. For example, if clients do not set goals to address their issues (e.g., addiction, mental health, housing), it is difficult for them to focus on tasks (e.g., employment training) to help them become independent and transition off of SIS.



2. We recommend the Ministry of Social Services establish a reasonable timeframe for completing initial planning meetings with those clients requiring case management supports in the Saskatchewan Income Support Program.

We also found the Ministry does not always follow up with clients on their goals as set out in their individualized case plans.

Each time the Ministry interacts with a client (e.g., scheduling meetings, sending emails, client phone calls, attempts to contact client regarding benefits or outstanding utilities, updating goals, providing referrals), it expects staff (e.g., benefit support staff, planning and support specialists) to update the client's individualized case plan.

While we found staff updated the plan whenever contacted by the clients (e.g., for questions relating to benefits), the planning and support specialists did not always follow up with clients on the goals set during the initial planning meetings or subsequent meetings. The expected timing of specialists' follow up with clients (e.g., in person, over the phone) depends on the goals set by clients. For example, if a client sets a goal to find more affordable housing in the next three months, their specialist should follow up with the client within at least three months.

We found 16 client files in our testing where clients set goals during initial planning meetings (or subsequent meetings) with planning and support specialists, but the Ministry did not follow up with clients on those goals. For example, we found a client set a goal to address their grief over the loss of a loved one, but we did not find evidence of Ministry staff following up with the client within the last year. In addition, we did not find evidence of staff referring the client to supports (e.g., counselling) to help address their situation—see **Recommendation 4** regarding referring clients to proper supports.

Within the MiCase system, there are tools planning and support specialists can use to help set, and follow up on, clients' individualized plan goals. However, we found the specialists do not always use these tools. We found:

- 12 client files where the specialist did not use the tool in the MiCase system to set and follow up on goals with clients
- 12 client files where the specialist set up clients' goals using the tool in the MiCase system, but did not follow up and document status updates regarding client goals

In addition, to determine whether it continues to provide the right supports to clients based on their needs, the Ministry requires staff to conduct an annual service level review.

We found 14 client files in our testing where the Ministry did not conduct timely service level reviews. Lateness ranged between 1 and 24 months.²⁶ Without timely service level reviews, the Ministry is unable to assess whether it effectively identifies or supports client needs.

²⁶ We also tested 10 files where the Ministry assessed the client as Service Level 2. We found the Ministry did not complete timely service level reviews (i.e., annually) for two clients. Once the service level review was completed, the Ministry assessed the clients as Service Level 3.

Again, we found staff did not use the MiCase system to its full capabilities. Staff can set tasks within the system to remind them when a client's service level review is due. We found:

- Seven staff did not use the task feature to remind them of required service level reviews
- Five staff used the task feature, but the task was marked overdue at the time of our testing

Not using the MiCase system to its full capabilities hinders the Ministry's ability to follow up with SIS clients on their goals, complete timely and required service level reviews, and continue to move clients toward self-sufficiency.

When Ministry staff do not follow up with clients on their goals, it may result in clients continuing to receive SIS benefits for long periods of time without progressing through the Program (i.e., to achieve self-sufficiency).

3. We recommend Ministry of Social Services staff regularly meet with Saskatchewan Income Support Program clients to follow up on their individualized case plan goals.

4.8 Client Referrals Not Consistently Provided or Followed Up

The Ministry of Social Services does not always provide referrals, or follow up with clients on referrals made, during meetings with Saskatchewan Income Support Program clients.

As noted in **Section 4.7**, the Ministry works with Service Level 3 or 4 clients to develop individualized case plans, including setting goals and commitments during initial planning meetings or subsequent follow-up meetings. The Ministry requires staff to make referrals, when deemed appropriate and in collaboration with the client, to address client needs and support for their individualized plan.

Management indicated it expects staff to be knowledgeable of the supports available in their community. For example, the Ministry expects staff to be able to find, and refer clients to, supports (e.g., mental health and addiction, healthcare, and learning/education) based on client needs.²⁷ Staff will either have the client directly contact service provider(s) for support (e.g., addictions counselling), or staff will contact service provider(s) on behalf of the client.

We tested 30 client files where the client was either Service Level 3 or 4 and found:

- Ten clients did not have referrals, or refusal of referrals, documented during initial planning meetings or subsequent follow up meetings. In four cases, it was due to the client not having an initial planning meeting with Ministry staff (see **Recommendation 2**).

²⁷ The Ministry indicated staff use the 211 Saskatchewan website as a resource to refer SIS clients to relevant supports. 211 Saskatchewan offers a database of over 6,000 community, social, non-clinical health, and government services across the province. [//sk.211.ca/](https://sk.211.ca/) (27 March 2023).



- 14 clients did not have referrals because the client was already in contact with appropriate support (e.g., counselling). We assessed this as reasonable.
- Six clients had referrals noted in their individualized case plan.

To record the referral information, the MiCase system includes tools staff can use to help set, and follow up on, referrals to service providers. However, we found staff did not use this tool for six clients with referrals noted in their individualized case plans. Rather, staff documented the referrals within the notes of the individualized case plan. As a result, we found staff only followed up with the client on their referrals 50% of the time. See **Recommendation 3** regarding following up with clients on their individual case plan goals.

When the Ministry assesses a client as Service Level 2, it refers the client to employment services arranged by the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training (ICT). The client is required to engage with ICT before the date set by the Ministry.²⁸ When a client engages with ICT, it determines the services (e.g., employability assessment, career action plan) the client requires.

The Ministry noted that ICT informs them of clients who do not engage with them for employment services. If the client does not engage with ICT, the Ministry will suspend the client's SIS benefits. We found the Ministry does not track how many clients had their SIS benefits suspended over a period of time due to not engaging with ICT.²⁹

We tested 10 client files where the client was assessed as Service Level 2 and found:

- Five clients engaged with ICT and continued to receive benefits.
- One client was not referred to ICT as expected. The client reapplied to SIS and the Ministry assessed them as Service Level 3.
- Three clients did not engage with ICT. The Ministry reassessed these clients and determined two clients as Service Level 3 and one as Service Level 4.
- One client file was closed due to no contact with the Ministry.

Not referring clients to proper supports increases the risk clients may not progress toward self-sufficiency and may stay on SIS longer than necessary.

4. We recommend the Ministry of Social Services refer Saskatchewan Income Support Program clients to proper supports (e.g., employment services, addictions counselling) when appropriate, and regularly follow up on referrals with clients.

²⁸ The Ministry sends letters to SIS clients including details (i.e., phone, email address) for contacting ICT to arrange employment services by a specific date.

²⁹ The Ministry only has information about SIS clients not engaging with ICT at a point in time (i.e., historical information is not available).

4.9 Sufficient Training Provided to Staff

The Ministry of Social Services provides adequate training to staff involved in the Saskatchewan Income Support Program.

Upon hiring, the Ministry provides all new income support staff a six-week training course on income assistance service delivery. For example, the Ministry provided the following training to over 120 income support staff during the 2022 calendar year:

- Motivational interviewing—a good practice approach to discussions that helps elicit client-led input, with collaboration with Ministry staff, to enable positive change for the client
- Service-level screening (e.g., questionnaire completion, conversation documentation)
- Individualized plan activities (e.g., appointments, tasks, letters/emails, client service referrals, individual plan goals)
- Initial planning meetings (e.g., engaging with the client, budgeting, documenting meeting)
- Follow up meetings (e.g., goal setting, referrals)
- Other topics (e.g., urgent services, unpaid utilities and rent, direct payment, education and training incentive)

The Ministry also provides refresher training to its income support staff on a periodic basis. The Ministry's Learning and Accountability Unit collaborates with income assistance supervisors to determine areas for specific training. We found the Ministry offered six different training sessions between February and December 2022. For example, in November 2022, the Ministry provided specific training on making referrals and documenting them in its MiCase system.

Having trained staff who are involved in SIS helps aid clients in receiving the proper support and services required.

4.10 Further Measures of Program Effectiveness Required

The Ministry of Social Services reports to senior management and the public about performance measures and targets related to the Saskatchewan Income Support Program. However, its performance measures lack the ability to fully assess the effectiveness of SIS.

The Ministry establishes public performance measures and targets related to SIS as part of its annual planning process. We found Ministry staff report progress on the following measures to senior management during quarterly meetings, and publicly within its annual report each year. **Figure 9** describes Ministry performance measures, targets, and results relevant to SIS for the 2021–22 and 2022–23 fiscal years.

**Figure 9—SIS Performance Measures, Targets, and Results for 2021–22 and 2022–23**

Fiscal Year	Performance Measures	Targets	Results
2021–22	Proportion of SIS clients who no longer require income assistance over the course of the year	More than 20% of SIS clients no longer require Income Assistance ^A	Approximately 25% of clients no longer required income assistance and left SIS over the year
	Number of Saskatchewan people who experience poverty ^E	By March 31, 2025, the number of Saskatchewan people who experience poverty for two years or more will be reduced by 50%	In 2020, 6.7% of Saskatchewan people were living in poverty, down from 11.9% in 2019 (44% decline year over year)
2022–23	Proportion of SIS clients who leave income assistance	In 2022–23, 25% of clients no longer require SIS benefits ^A	Not Available ^D
	Percentage of SIS clients reporting earned income ^B	In 2022–23, 2% of SIS clients will access earned income exemptions ^B	
	Percentage of SIS clients accessing the Education and Training Incentive ^C	In 2022–23, track the percentage of SIS and SAID clients accessing the Education and Training Incentive	
	Percentage of Saskatchewan people who experience poverty for two or more consecutive years	By March 31, 2025, the number of Saskatchewan people who experience poverty for two years or more will be reduced by 50%	

Source: Ministry of Social Services, *Plan for 2021–22*, p. 6, and *Business Plan 2022–23*, pp. 5–6.

^A Target reflects the total number of clients who transition off SIS throughout the year. It is not related to a reduction in clients served at the end of the year.

^B Earned income represents employment or self-employment income earned by an individual. SIS provides clients with earned income exemptions (e.g., \$325 per month for a single individual), whereby the Ministry will only reduce SIS benefits after the client earns more than the exemption in a single month.

^C The Education and Training Incentive (ETI) provides financial support for individuals who attend Adult Basic Education, workforce development or skills training programs approved by the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training. The monthly benefit available ranges from \$50–\$200 depending on an individual's particular circumstances (i.e., single, couple, dependents).

^D At the time of our audit, the Ministry had yet to publicly release the results for its 2022–23 performance measures.

^E The Ministry measures poverty using Statistic Canada's Market Basket Measure (MBM)—a measure of low income based on the cost of a specific list of goods and service and represents a basic standard of living for a family of four.

We noted the Ministry did not establish a specific target relating to its performance measure assessing the percentage of SIS clients accessing the Education and Training Incentive. While the Ministry only recently implemented this benefit in fiscal 2022–23, it is important for the Ministry to establish a target as a baseline on which it can strive to improve. Ministry staff explained they plan to establish a target after considering initial results for the benefit. Service Level 1 and 2 clients are individuals that may gain most from this benefit, as they are the SIS clients most ready to enter the workforce but may require additional employment training. As at November 2022, the Ministry found 2.6% of SIS clients accessed the benefit, which is significantly less than the percentage of SIS clients assessed as Service Level 1 or 2 (i.e., 25% of total SIS clients).

We reviewed presentations to senior management for three quarters during our audit period, along with the Ministry's *Annual Report for 2021–22*, and found all included accurate information about the Ministry's progress on the measures.

Our analysis of the Ministry's performance measures found they are a combination of output and outcome measures. Output measures, such as the percentage of clients accessing the Education and Training Incentive, provide information about an

organization's activities but do not address the value or impact of services on clients. Outcome measures, such as the proportion of SIS clients who no longer require income assistance, assess the level of performance or achievement realized because of the services an organization provides. Outcome measures are a more appropriate indicator of effectiveness—they quantify performance and assess the success of a process.³⁰

Measuring the proportion of SIS clients no longer requiring income assistance is a key measure to assess the effectiveness of SIS. Ministry staff indicated they encounter challenges in determining why clients leave SIS. Most clients do not specifically inform the Ministry about why they are leaving the Program, whether it be a result of finding stable employment or another reason (e.g., leaving the province, enrolling in training programs). Without having a solid understanding of the reasons clients no longer require income assistance, it is difficult to analyze results for this specific performance measure.

Consideration of further outcome measures can help the Ministry to improve in evaluating the effectiveness of SIS. Possible further outcome measures the Ministry could consider include:

- **SIS Client Recidivism**—measuring the proportion of clients exiting SIS, but returning within a specified time period. Such a measure may provide the Ministry with insight into how well SIS prepares clients for self-sufficiency.
- **SIS Tenure for Service Level 1 (SL1) and Service Level 2 (SL2) Clients**—measuring how long these clients stay on SIS. We found the Ministry expects SL1 and SL2 clients to require less supports and leave SIS within six months or less.

Our data analysis found 55% of SL1 and SL2 clients (i.e., 1,334) at February 2022 remained on SIS 10 months later. Of these clients, 62% (i.e., 832 clients) continued to be assessed as SL1 or SL2 clients when they should have already transitioned off SIS, while 38% (i.e., 502 clients) were reassessed as SL3 or SL4 clients. This means 832 SL1 and SL2 clients had been on SIS for more than the anticipated six months. Measuring these clients' actual tenure on SIS can alert the Ministry to specific clients possibly requiring more supports (e.g., employment training) than expected.

Without sufficient measures to assess the effectiveness of SIS, there is increased risk of the Ministry not having the necessary information to determine whether SIS is meeting its intended objectives. Improved measures can help the Ministry consider improvements to SIS and identify areas where to focus its efforts and resources.

5. We recommend the Ministry of Social Services implement further performance measures in assessing the effectiveness of the Saskatchewan Income Support Program.

4.11 Further Analysis of SIS Client Data Needed

The Ministry of Social Services maintains various information about Saskatchewan Income Support Program clients, but it should further analyze data about SIS client evictions and unpaid utility bills.

³⁰ measurementresourcesco.com/2014/02/02/outputs-vs-outcomes-matters/ (14 March 2023).



Monthly Statistical Reports

We found the Ministry maintains a number of operational statistics about SIS. The Ministry reports these statistics to its income assistance staff (e.g., senior management, operational staff) on a weekly and monthly basis. The reports include information such as:

- Number of SIS applications submitted by clients
- Statistics on service centre call response times
- Inquiries from landlords
- Changes in the number of SIS households paid by the Ministry

We tested two weekly and two monthly statistical reports and found the Ministry prepared the reports and communicated them to staff as expected.

In regards to service centre call response times, we found the Ministry specifically established an internal measure to assess its service provided to clients—the Ministry's service centre strives to address 90% of calls from SIS clients within 20 minutes or less.

The Ministry had yet to meet this internal target since July 2021, with monthly results ranging from 48% to 66% of SIS calls addressed in 20 minutes or less. As we describe in **Section 4.3**, over half of individuals applying for SIS use the phone to do so. The Ministry should provide potential clients with better access to apply for SIS benefits (see **Recommendation 1**).

Client Evictions

While we found the Ministry tracks data about client evictions it receives directly from landlords (i.e., across all of its income assistance programs as a whole), there is an opportunity for the Ministry to obtain more accurate information about the extent of SIS client evictions.³¹

Based on data the Ministry obtained directly from landlords, it identified 35 income assistance clients (not SIS-specific) evicted from their residences between May and November 2022. We obtained eviction data directly from Saskatchewan's Sheriff Services Office from February to November 2022.³² Our data analysis identified 228 SIS clients evicted during this 10-month period.

We tested 10 of these client evictions and found the Ministry was not aware of the evictions for two clients tested. There is an opportunity for the Ministry to strengthen its processes to collect data about client evictions so it has the best information available to support clients.

³¹ The Ministry maintains a confidential landlord inquiry email account (landlordinquiryss@gov.sk.ca) for landlords to provide information about income assistance clients who struggle to pay their rent and are at risk of eviction.

³² Saskatchewan's Sheriff Services Office is responsible for enforcing judgments from Saskatchewan's justice system. This includes enforcing judgments for evictions rendered during hearings of the Office of Residential Tenancies Saskatchewan.

Unpaid Utility Bills

We found the Ministry regularly meets with representatives from SaskPower and SaskEnergy to share information and discuss concerns associated with SIS clients' ability to pay for their monthly utility bills. Both utility providers also regularly send information to the Ministry about SIS clients' utility accounts. The Ministry noted it uses this information to help identify and support clients accumulating unpaid utility bills, such as highlighting options available to clients (e.g., using equalized payment plans to help budget for utility expenses, obtaining the Ministry's alternate heating benefit).³³ However, we found the Ministry does not formally analyze the data it receives to assess how SIS clients, overall, are faring in terms of paying for their utilities.

Our analysis of data obtained from SaskPower and SaskEnergy found 5,281 SIS client accounts outstanding for more than 30 days with unpaid amounts greater than \$100. These unpaid accounts totalled almost \$4.2 million at February 2023 (March 2022: 5,100 accounts totalling \$3.4 million).

In one specific example, we found a SIS client in northern Saskatchewan receiving the Ministry's alternate heating benefit of \$130 per month who incurred almost \$5,600 in unpaid power bills over an 11-month period (i.e., an average unpaid monthly power bill of almost \$510)—highlighting the challenges some clients face in having sufficient income to pay their utilities.

Further analysis of data about SIS client evictions and unpaid utility bills can help the Ministry understand root causes for the issues encountered by clients (e.g., inability to effectively budget for their households). Such analysis would help the Ministry assess the need for changes to the SIS program (e.g., case management supports provided to clients, alternate heating benefits).

- 6. We recommend the Ministry of Social Services periodically analyze the causes of evictions and unpaid utilities for Saskatchewan Income Support Program clients, and develop strategies to address them.**

4.12 Client Concerns Addressed in a Timely Manner

The Ministry of Social Services considers and responds to client concerns relating to the Saskatchewan Income Support Program in a timely manner.

SIS clients can appeal Ministry decisions with respect to SIS. The matters subject to appeal and the various appeal options available to SIS clients are set out in *The Saskatchewan Income Support Regulations* and summarized in **Figure 10**.

³³ SIS clients residing in a household where natural gas is not accessible and are required to heat their home with an alternate source (heating fuel, propane, wood, electricity) are eligible to receive \$130 per month as an alternate heating benefit from SIS.

**Figure 10—Appeal Options for the Saskatchewan Income Support Program**

SIS applicants or clients may appeal, in writing, the following matters:

- Decision disallowing an application or reapplication for benefits
- Request for benefits or an increase in benefits was not dealt with within a reasonable time
- Determination of eligibility
- Variation, suspension or cancellation of entitlement to receive a benefit
- Assessment of an overpayment
- Decision respecting the amount of a benefit

The three sequential levels of appeal available to SIS applicants or clients include appeals to:

- The Ministry—Ministry reconsiders decisions within 7 days of receiving the request and provides a written decision as soon as is reasonably possible
- One of four regional appeal committees located across the province—committees must provide written decisions within 30 days following the date of their appeal hearings^A
- The appeal board—board must provide written decisions within 30 days following the date of its appeal hearings^A

Source: *The Saskatchewan Income Support Regulations*, s. 3-12 to 3-14.

^A According to *The Social Service Administration Act* (s. 10), the Minister responsible for Social Services may establish appeal committees and appeal boards. The latter is also subject to approval of the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

The Minister may also receive concerns from clients or individuals in relation to SIS—referred to as Minister referrals. Ministry staff review these concerns and provide responses to the Minister within timeframes established by the Minister's office.

Our data analysis for February 2022 to January 2023 found the Ministry responded to 51 Minister referrals and the regional appeal committees heard 64 cases. In addition, as of January 2023, the appeal board heard 17 cases in fiscal 2022–23. Our analysis found appeal committees and the appeal board typically concurred with the decision rendered by the Ministry, with the common theme being with respect to benefits clients received from SIS (e.g., ineligibility for benefits, insufficiency of benefits).

We tested a sample of five Minister referrals, seven appeals to the regional appeal committees, and three appeals to the appeal board. We found the Ministry, regional appeal committees, and appeal board satisfactorily addressed (e.g., provided responses citing interpretation of SIS regulations or policy) all items tested in a timely manner. Of the items tested, two appeals resulted in overturning a Ministry decision due to its misinterpretation of a client's circumstances when determining benefits (e.g., inappropriate consideration of household income).

Considering and responding to client concerns in a timely manner helps ensure clients receive the correct amount of benefits and understand the rationale for the Ministry's benefit decisions.

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