

Chapter 23

Social Services—Delivering the Saskatchewan Income Support Program

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Social Services offers 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 2025–26, the Ministry had an average monthly SIS caseload of over 20,000 clients and planned to provide \$263.8 million in SIS benefits (2024–25 actual: \$271.3 million).

By March 2026, the Ministry implemented four of the six recommendations we first made in our 2023 audit of its processes to deliver SIS.

The Ministry made it easier for potential clients to apply for SIS benefits by bringing services to potential clients through mobile outreach in various communities, offering computers and Wi-Fi at most of its service centres, and striving to return phone calls timely. It also analyzed causes of SIS client evictions, including clients' unpaid utilities, and made changes (e.g., new \$1,000 one-time utility arrears recoverable benefit) to help address these issues. The Ministry identified about 1,200 SIS clients with unpaid power and gas utilities totaling almost \$900,000 at June 2025.

Additionally, in 2026, the Ministry began monitoring whether its staff follow updated SIS service standards that included timeframes for scheduling initial planning meetings with SIS clients, following up on clients' individualized case plan goals, and referring SIS clients for housing support and career counselling.

The Ministry still needs to:

- Establish targets for its two new performance measures intended to help evaluate the effectiveness of SIS—one looking at the extent of clients who return to SIS within 12 months and the other measuring the number of clients who require less supports and yet continue to receive SIS payments for more than a year
- Take further action to ensure initial planning meetings with clients are scheduled within the timeframe (i.e., 30 days) set out in its updated SIS service standards

Having effective processes to deliver income support provides clients with adequate access to the SIS Program. Ineffective processes can result in clients experiencing delays in timely support they need, as well as 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*, p. 15.



2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The Saskatchewan Assistance Act makes the Ministry of Social Services responsible for delivering income assistance programs.²

The Ministry works toward delivering programs and services that help people in need achieve a better quality of life, which includes the areas of income support, child and family programs, affordable housing, and support for people with disabilities.³ Overall, the Ministry has 435 full-time equivalent positions in its Income Assistance Programs Division (e.g., call centre staff, planning and support specialists).

In 2019, the Ministry 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. The Ministry provides eligible SIS clients with financial support (based on factors such as income level, where a client lives, and family size) for:

- Basic needs (e.g., food, local transportation, clothing)
- Shelter-related costs (e.g., rent, mortgage payments, utilities)
- Health and safety related costs (e.g., short-term emergency assistance, prescribed diet benefit for clients with medical conditions requiring additional nutritional supplements or food)
- Change in circumstances (e.g., employment and training benefit, childcare benefit, relocation benefit)

During 2025–26, the Ministry had an average monthly SIS caseload of over 20,000 clients and planned to provide \$263.8 million in SIS benefits (2024–25 actual: \$271.3 million).^{4,5}

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow-up audit of the Ministry's actions on the recommendations we made in 2023.

We concluded, for the 12-month period ended January 31, 2023, the Ministry of Social Services had effective processes to deliver the Saskatchewan Income Support (SIS) Program except for areas in our six recommendations.⁶

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 toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Ministry management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

² *The Saskatchewan Assistance Act*, s. 7.

³ Ministry of Social Services, *Annual Report for 2024–25*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵ Government of Saskatchewan, *2025–26 Estimates*, p. 110.

⁶ *2023 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 7*, pp. 101–125.

To carry out our follow-up audit, we met with key staff responsible for delivering SIS, examined relevant documents (e.g., service standards, monthly reports, program evaluations), and reviewed a sample of quarterly progress reports outlining SIS performance measures.

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 March 15, 2026, and the Ministry of Social Services' actions up to that date.

3.1 Access to Apply for SIS Benefits Expanded

We recommended the Ministry of Social Services provide potential clients with better access to apply for benefits from the Saskatchewan Income Support Program. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 110, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 22, 2025)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services made it easier for people to apply for SIS benefits by bringing services to potential clients through mobile outreach, offering computers and Wi-Fi at most service centres, and striving to respond to phone calls timely.

Since our 2023 audit, we found the Ministry took several steps to improve potential clients' ability to apply for SIS benefits. About 1,300 people typically apply for SIS benefits each month.

Established Mobile Outreach Services

The Ministry implemented mobile outreach services whereby Ministry staff can meet individuals where they are located to assist them in applying for SIS.

During 2023–24 and 2024–25, the Ministry added 30 full-time employees to provide mobile outreach services as well as offer further support in its call centre. We found the Ministry now delivers mobile outreach services at over 40 community-based organizations (e.g., shelters, supportive housing, addictions facilities) in eight communities (i.e., Regina, Saskatoon, North Battleford, Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, Melfort, Yorkton, and Buffalo Narrows). For example, the Ministry delivers mobile outreach services at some community-based organizations daily and at others on specific days each week (e.g., three days each week).

The Ministry evaluated its mobile outreach services in early 2026 and found a sustained need for mobile services. The evaluation found that between April 2024 and March 2025, the Ministry's mobile outreach staff served about 3,500 hard-to-reach individuals by helping them in applying for SIS benefits, sharing information about income assistance, and completing case planning. It also found almost 75% of interactions between mobile outreach staff and clients were positive.



The Ministry's evaluation identified some challenges with mobile outreach, including staff safety and procedural issues (e.g., limited authority to process SIS benefits onsite, delays in communicating with Ministry service centres). We found the Ministry made recommendations to help address the challenges, such as addressing safety and training gaps to better support frontline staff and enhancing coordination and information-sharing between mobile workers, Ministry service centres, and community-based organizations.

Changes to Call Centre Service

On a monthly basis, the Ministry's call centre staff typically answer over 13,000 calls along with over 30,000 calls deflected (i.e., around 70% go unanswered)—this is consistent with results from our 2023 audit.

Since 2023, the Ministry implemented an option for clients to leave a message when their phone calls go unanswered (i.e., deflected).

The Ministry indicated it strives to respond to deflected calls within three days. Our review for May 2023, 2024, and 2025 found the Ministry responded to about 70% of deflected calls on the same day and about 85% of deflected calls within three days—we found this reasonable given the large volume of calls the Ministry typically receives in a month.

Expanded Computer and Internet Access and Service Hours

The Ministry made computers available (for staff or client use) to help potential clients in applying for SIS benefits at 18 of its 19 service centres offering income assistance services throughout the province. Additionally, the Ministry provided public Wi-Fi in each of these service centers, giving some clients additional access (i.e., so clients do not have to use their own limited cellular data) to apply for SIS benefits. This is an improvement from our 2023 audit, which found only three service centres in Regina, Saskatoon, and Moose Jaw had computers available.

The Ministry also launched a pilot program in October 2025 for three large service centres (two in Saskatoon, one in Regina) to remain open during the lunch hour. For example, the Ministry found these service centres had a total of 711 client visits over the noon hour in October 2025—with almost 80% related to clients seeking income assistance supports, indicating improved program accessibility and response to client demand.

Finding a balance of reliable and service-oriented options helps improve client access to apply for SIS benefits.

3.2 Service Standards Updated but More Timely Initial Planning Meetings Needed

We recommended 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 (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 116, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 22, 2025)

Status—Partially Implemented

We recommended the Ministry of Social Services staff regularly meet with Saskatchewan Income Support Program clients to follow up on their individualized case plan goals (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 117, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 22, 2025)

Status—Implemented

We recommended 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 (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 118, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 22, 2025)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services updated its SIS service standards in January 2026 to establish timeframes for scheduling initial planning meetings with clients, following up on clients' individualized case plan goals, and referring clients for housing support and career counselling. While the Ministry monitors whether staff follow its updated services standards, it needs to take further action to ensure staff schedule initial planning meetings within its established timeframe.

We found the Ministry's updated service standards require staff to:

- Schedule initial planning meetings with Service Level 3 or 4 clients within 30 days of validating their service level.⁷

A planning and support specialist is to work with a client to develop an individualized case plan that begins with an initial planning meeting to help determine their needs (e.g., specific financial situation, client goals). We consider scheduling an initial planning meeting within 30 days of validating a client's service level reasonable to allow clients time to gather necessary documents (e.g., utility bills) in advance of the meeting. If a client misses an initial planning meeting, the Ministry expects its staff to reschedule the meeting within 30 days of the original meeting date.

- Interact (e.g., meeting, phone call) with Service Level 3 and 4 clients at least once every three months to follow up on their individualized case plan goals.
- Follow up with SIS clients or service providers on housing or career counselling referrals within 30 days of the referral.

We found the Ministry appropriately focused its required follow up on housing and career counselling referrals because it is more directly involved in these types of referrals (i.e., through interactions with the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation and Ministry of Immigration and Career Training). The Ministry indicated it may expand this service standard to other types of referrals (e.g., addictions or mental health concerns).

⁷ The Ministry of Social Services requires staff to complete a service-level screening assessment for each client following a client being deemed eligible for SIS benefits. Clients assessed as Service Level 3 or 4 are higher risk thereby requiring more support. Service Level 3 clients require dedicated case planning support from the Ministry. They receive help with household budgeting and referrals to other service providers to address barriers as they move toward employment. Service Level 4 clients require intensive Ministry supports and referrals to help stabilize a client's situation (e.g., accessing addictions treatment centre, addressing homelessness, domestic violence, trusteeship).



We found the Ministry appropriately communicated its updated service standards and associated expectations to income assistance staff through updates to its SIS procedures manual as well as delivery of specific staff training in January 2026.

The Ministry also began preparing monthly reports in January 2026 to monitor staff compliance with its updated service standards. We reviewed the monthly reports the Ministry issued to income assistance management (e.g., directors) between January and March 2026. We also observed evidence of directors communicating results with their staff so they could follow up with clients as necessary. Our review of the monthly reports found:

- Staff interacted with an average of 70% of Service Level 3 and 4 clients at least once every three months.⁸
- Staff followed up with clients or service providers within 30 days for, on average, about 85% of housing referrals and about 93% of career counselling referrals.⁹
- An average of 36% of Service Level 3 and 4 clients had initial planning meetings scheduled within 30 days of their service level validation.¹⁰ The Ministry indicated these results may under-represent the actual scheduling of initial planning meetings with clients due to staff not correctly using the Ministry's case management IT system. The Ministry needs to work with staff to ensure that information in the system reflects the initial planning meetings scheduled with clients so it can effectively assess compliance with its service standard.

Without conducting timely initial planning meetings with clients, the Ministry is unable to assist clients in developing their individualized case plans. Such planning helps clients to establish goals to work toward self-sufficiency. For example, without set goals to address their issues (e.g., addiction, mental health, housing), it is difficult for clients to focus on steps (e.g., employment training) toward independence and in exiting the SIS Program.

Regularly following up with clients on their goals and referring them to proper supports helps clients move toward self-sufficiency and reduces how long they rely on SIS benefits.

3.3 Targets Not Yet Established for New Performance Measures

We recommended the Ministry of Social Services implement further performance measures in assessing the effectiveness of the Saskatchewan Income Support Program. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 121, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 22, 2025)

Status—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services implemented two new performance measures to help assess the effectiveness of SIS but had yet to set associated targets.

⁸ The Ministry of Social Services supported an average of over 13,400 Service Level 3 or 4 clients as reported in the monthly reports it issued between January and March 2026.

⁹ The Ministry of Social Services averaged 154 housing referrals and 245 career counselling referrals for clients each month between January and March 2026.

¹⁰ The Ministry of Social Services validated an average of 422 clients at Service Level 3 or 4 each month between January and March 2026.

The Ministry establishes public performance measures related to SIS as part of its annual planning process. We found Ministry staff report progress on measures to senior management during quarterly meetings, and publicly within its annual report.

The Ministry implemented two new performance measures related to SIS in 2024–25. We tested two quarters and found the Ministry accurately reported to senior management about the results for these two measures, as well as publicly reported results in its annual report. **Figure 1** sets out these new performance measures and their associated results for 2024–25.¹¹

Figure 1—New SIS Performance Measures and Results for 2024–25

Performance Measures	Target	Results
SIS Client Recidivism—Proportion of clients who exited SIS and did not return within 12 months	Target yet to be established	73% of clients who exited SIS in 2023–24 did not return to SIS within 12 months
SIS Client Tenure—Proportion of Service Level 1 and 2 clients who began receiving SIS benefits and were still receiving benefits after one year ^A	Target yet to be established	40% of Service Level 1 and 2 clients who began receiving SIS benefits in 2023–24 were still receiving benefits after one year

Source: Ministry of Social Services, *Annual Report for 2024–25*, pp. 11–12.

^A The Ministry expects Service Level 1 and 2 clients to require less supports and require SIS benefits for a shorter time.

As described in **Figure 1**, the Ministry had yet to establish targets for its new performance measures. Ministry management indicated they are using the initial data for these measures as a baseline that can help inform future targets.

Setting targets for its new SIS performance measures will help the Ministry set out clear expectations to evaluate the effectiveness of SIS and allow the Ministry to make adjustments to SIS when targets are not met.

3.4 Client Evictions and Unpaid Utilities Analyzed

We recommended 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. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 123, Recommendation 6; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 22, 2025)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services analyzed causes of SIS client evictions, including clients' unpaid utilities, and made changes to address these issues.

¹¹ While we found the Ministry of Social Services reported its progress on these performance measures to senior management during 2025–26, it had yet to publicly release the 2025–26 results for these performance measures at the time of our audit.



We found the Ministry studied SIS client evictions in fall 2024 to help understand reasons for evictions. The study involved interviews with Planning and Support Specialists and an examination of 13 SIS eviction cases. This study showed client evictions are affected by:

- Individual SIS client factors (e.g., addictions, mental health concerns) that influence negative behaviours (e.g., stop paying bills, reduced decision-making ability) increasing eviction risk
- SIS program factors, such as early awareness about client evictions or relationships between Ministry staff and clients or partners (e.g., housing authorities, trustees) that can mitigate eviction risk
- External environmental factors (e.g., access to treatment for addictions or mental health concerns, affordable housing) that either mitigate or increase eviction risk

The study set out steps the Ministry could focus on to help mitigate eviction for SIS clients, such as increasing information sharing between Planning and Support Specialists and call centre staff (e.g., increase awareness of potential clients with high risk of eviction) or emphasizing relationship-building between the Ministry's Income Assistance Division, its Housing Division, and other government agencies. In response to the study findings, we found the Ministry:

- Assigned a client service centre supervisor responsibility for each region of the province to improve information sharing between Ministry staff
- Arranged for its mobile outreach staff to visit the Regina Correctional Centre one day every two weeks to help inmates leaving custody plan for their basic needs upon release, including establishing shelter plans to help mitigate risks of future eviction
- Collaborated between its Income Assistance, Child & Family Programs, and Housing Divisions to analyze unpaid client utilities using data from SaskPower and SaskEnergy

We found the Ministry's analysis identified that unresolved debts can be a barrier to stable housing and a client's financial stability—debts complicate household budgeting for clients on SIS. The Ministry found about 1,200 SIS clients with unpaid power and gas utilities totaling almost \$900,000 (average arrears of over \$700 per client), with about 20 new or returning SIS clients coming onto the Program with unpaid utilities each month (with total arrears averaging \$650 per client). This analysis supported development of its new \$1,000 one-time per household utility arrears recoverable benefit in 2026–27 to help prevent client evictions.¹²

Analyzing causes of SIS client evictions and unpaid utilities helped the Ministry identify root causes and assess the need for changes to the SIS Program.

¹² www.saskatchewan.ca/Government/News-and-Media/2026/march/18/social-services-budget-increases-benefits-and-supports-for-saskatchewan-s-most-vulnerable (16 April 2026).