

Minister's statement

May 14, 2013

Minister's statement from Frank Oberle, Associate Minister of Services for Persons with Disabilities

Mr. Speaker,

I rise today to inform this House, and Albertans, of the situation we face in our efforts to provide supports to persons with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, we are all beginning to hear from parents or guardians who believe they will see significant cuts in services for their loved ones. They believe that service reductions are driven by the resources available within the disability supports budget. This is evident in questions asked in this House and concerns expressed by my colleagues, in the communities I visit, in the letters and emails I receive.

Mr. Speaker, we are not adjusting services to individuals just because of fiscal capacity identified in the budget, though clearly we have signaled that we intend to change the form and purpose of the supports we provide. Changes in service levels, increased or reduced, will happen as a result of the fact that we are able to assess need, and we are going to allocate services based on need.

Mr. Speaker, we are currently doing assessments of need for all the individuals we support, based upon the Supports Intensity Scale or SIS. Those assessments show that there are a number of individuals whose support levels are greater than their measured need would indicate. I do not mean for a second to make light of their circumstances, or to indicate that they do not require any support – far from it. But I do mean to highlight that there are people who get more supports than they need.

Mr. Speaker, the SIS system identifies the needs of individuals on a scale of 1 to 7, with category 1 identifying those with low support needs, and category 7 indicating extraordinary behavioural supports are needed. We are finding that a number of individuals who are currently receiving significant supports do not appear to have the needs that such support levels would indicate – many of them fall within category 1. And among those who fall within category 1, we are providing an alarming range of services, from one individual who receives \$114 per year in supports, to one who receives just under \$300,000 per year in supports. This clearly underlines the fact that for some individuals, the supports are currently allocated based on reasons other than need. I cannot support such a model, Mr. Speaker, because it is not defensible, or sustainable. People who need services have to get services, but we cannot provide services beyond need.

Added to this reality, Mr. Speaker is the fact that there certainly are real transitions identified in the budget – we intend to move from an emphasis on community access supports to an emphasis on supports that provide for inclusion and engagement in the community. As a result, service providers who offer supports are hearing that they could face contract impacts, sometimes significant ones, as we move to renew contracts. We are working collaboratively with the service providers, so some of them have seen potential dollar figure impacts that are indeed very significant, Mr. Speaker. These service providers are concerned, and they have expressed their concerns to parents. They have suggested that they may not be able to offer certain supports in the future and that heightens the anxiety.

I understand these concerns, Mr. Speaker, but there is another side to this story, which I will discuss shortly. But first I wish to further underline the scope of the supports situation. This has to be dealt with, because I need to ensure that we provide supports to people that need them, and that the system is sustainable.

Consider this, Mr. Speaker: based on information from Statistics Canada, there are about 430,000 Albertans who have some form of a disability, something that serves as a barrier. About 100,000 of those individuals rely on natural and community supports, or they have found ways to engage and belong, without assistance – they get no supports and do not request any.

But there are about 330,000 people who have a range of disabilities, who may have barriers to employment or community engagement, Mr. Speaker, 330,000. Our current disability services funding provides support for 25,000 people, or less than 10 per cent of that population. Some of that population may not need support, but many do, and are currently asking for it. Yet they are often excluded from the system because of their inability to access programs, or because of entrance barriers, like the IQ test. This is not the right or the responsible way to provide services.

The right thing to do is to provide supports based on need. That need first has to be fairly and impartially determined by conducting a scientific, internationally recognized assessment, which is what SIS is, Mr. Speaker. SIS does not fully consider the individual's circumstances and, because of this, it cannot be used as a sole determinant of funding, but it is a credible measure of need. We will use SIS, and factors like personal circumstances, to determine service allocation. Mr. Speaker, the supports have to be considered on the basis of need, but they also have to be provided with compassion, to people who we clearly understand are vulnerable. We will do so, and ensure that there are appeal mechanisms for assessments, and for service decisions.

I do need now to talk about the other side of the story I referenced earlier, Mr. Speaker, when I talked about the impacts to service providers. At this point, the providers have not actually seen a new contract, Mr. Speaker. They do not know what impacts they face. When we implement the changes to community access supports, there will indeed be impacts, but they will not be as severe as has been suggested. We are now working at the individual provider level, and we are working on a way to ensure the impacts to providers are more manageable during this transition. To accomplish this, we will access supports from the budget in Human Services, and we may require additional support, which I will seek if necessary. This is going to be difficult, Mr. Speaker, but at this stage I believe this goal can be accomplished.

But moving forward we will continue our transition from community access supports towards supports that provide more engagement and inclusion in the community. Service providers who wish to contribute to this transition will find ample ways to do so, Mr. Speaker. In fact, we could not do this without them. This transition will ensure that persons with disabilities who can work, and who want to work (including volunteer work, Mr. Speaker) will have the supports to help them to do so. We recognize that there are people who cannot benefit from such supports who require community access as their only way to engage with the community. The supports will be there for those that need them.

Mr. Speaker, that is the situation, and the work we need to undertake. We have much to do, not the least of which is to finish the SIS assessments. This must be done in order to determine need going forward, and to begin the work of allocating services based on that need. This will be difficult Mr. Speaker, and I signal that now, but we will transition this in a caring, compassionate way. We will begin by having conversations with families and guardians, and together we will find a solution.

So I have described the difficult structural issues we face today, and the significant amount of work that needs to be done. I am confident that we can make the changes we need and I am going to drive hard to do so, because in the coming years, the goal is to make further transitions. In the coming years, Mr. Speaker, I would like to remove the artificial barriers that currently exist at age 18 and 65 – transitions that disrupt lives while often adding no value to supports. I would like to remove the IQ test that prevents so many individuals from accessing supports that would allow them to pursue their goals.

Mr. Speaker, I have been mandated by the Premier to provide services and supports to all persons with disabilities through a system that provides for supports based on need, that provides a continuum of supports as people age and change, and that provides supports in a compassionate manner. I am also mandated to ensure that the support system is open, transparent, measureable, and accountable, Mr. Speaker, and it has to be sustainable.

I am honoured to take that task on, and, with the partnership of an incredible group of dedicated individuals in the Department, this will be done. I make that promise, Mr. Speaker, and I am prepared to be measured by it. I will make one more, Mr. Speaker, though I've already made this one. If you need services, you will get services, end of story.

Associate Minister Frank Oberle

(Check against delivery)