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2025

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SASKATCHEWAN INCOME SUPPORT PROGRAM

RECOMMENDATIONS



Saskatoon Poverty
Reduction Partnership

Report RECOMMENDATIONS

To access the full report that supports the following recommendations please click here: [!\[\]\(529949c2c3dadbaa4e538e8c643454bc_img.jpg\) SIS Research Report SPRP May 2025 \(1\).pdf](#)



Full report here

Recommendation 1: Improve current and prospective clients access to SIS services and supports.	
<p>Action 1: Improve SIS clients access to SIS supports and services through enhanced service delivery models.</p>	<p>Rationale: Currently, the MSS model provides service access via the online, phone and in-person models, including mobile community staff who are placed at key community agencies to ensure access to services. The purpose of this recommendation is to build off lessons from these current practices and improve overall access and outcomes of SIS.</p> <p>A 2023 Provincial Auditor's report highlighted systemic inefficiencies in the SIS Call Centre's ability to meet client needs. In response, the Ministry invested in 10 additional full-time employees in 2023-24 to improve response times and improve clients access to services (Ministry of Social Services, 2024). However, despite these efforts, SIS clients and community service providers who participated in this research continued to report significant barriers in reaching SIS staff through the SIS Call Centre and other communication channels.</p> <p>SIS clients shared that they continue to encounter long wait times, dropped calls, and difficulty obtaining clear and timely information about their benefits. Overall, these access issues create unnecessary delays in receiving essential support and increasing frustration among SIS recipients, which can erode trust in the SIS program. Additionally, the burden of assisting SIS clients often falls on frontline community service providers, further straining their already limited resources.</p> <p>While there is still clearly a need to expand the SIS Call Centre's capacity, whether through increased staffing, extended hours, or improved technology, it would be pertinent for the Ministry to explore enhanced service delivery models to meet SIS clients' needs and preferences beyond what is currently provided.</p> <p>These enhanced service delivery models could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expanding in-person supports provided by community service providers (with appropriate funding), particularly in rural communities• Expanding direct, in-person support by increasing the presence of SIS staff and caseworkers in Government of Saskatchewan buildings• Establishing collaborative community satellite locations in partnership with community service providers, where SIS caseworkers can provide on-site assistance to SIS clients in the community <p>These alternative service delivery options may align with client needs and foster stronger relationships between SIS caseworkers and clients that render more positive</p>

	<p>outcomes.</p>
<p>Action 2: Ensure that access points provide inclusionary processes for clients who require language, mobility and cognitive supports</p>	<p>Rationale: Community partners who work in the settlement, health and disability sector(s) indicated that both the SIS Call Centre and the Case Management for MSS lacks extensive inclusionary processes.</p> <p>These include, but are not limited to language barriers (EAL & capacity to understand technical English), health and wellness barriers (particularly around mental health, anxiety, substance use and trauma) and limited options for clients with mobility needs.</p> <p>Current practices within the MSS systems involve hiring a diverse workforce and ensuring internal language interpreters are available, accessing a language service called “All Languages,” and working with community partners to ensure language is not a barrier.</p> <p>Moving forward, the MSS team should ensure that this information is well known by MSS staff and work with community partners who specialize in supporting clients with distinct language needs to ensure that the service provider understands the options available to the SIS client.</p> <p>While mobile, in community, case managers are also deployed across the province, increased investment in this model will assist with clients who have mobility and health barriers.</p>
<p>Recommendation 2: Reinstate Direct Payments to Landlords and Utility Providers for SIS assessed at a Service Level 3 or 4.</p>	
<p>Action 1: Create an OPT OUT mechanism for direct payments to landlords for all clients.</p>	<p>Rationale: The Government of Saskatchewan currently provides direct payments to landlords and utility providers for select clients assessed at Service Level 4 or deemed at risk of homelessness. Noting that once the client is approved for direct payment, they automatically are classified as Tier 4 until that agreement changes.</p> <p>This research highlights the need to broaden eligibility criteria for direct payment options with the potential <u>NOT</u> to be classified as Tier 4.</p> <p>Clients at Service Level 3 are often categorized as having “unstable housing,” “addictions and mental health issues,” and requiring “budgeting support.” These factors strongly indicate that access to direct payment options would enhance their housing stability and financial security. In 2022, 69% of SIS clients were assessed to be at Service Level 3 (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023). And by the agreement for access to direct payment to landlords to re-classify to Tier 4, these clients are assumed <u>NOT</u> to have direct payment.</p> <p>Moreover, delays in service level assessments by SIS staff exacerbate this problem. In 2023, the Provincial Auditor found that it takes SIS staff an average of 71 days to complete a client's service level assessment. This lag can lead to financial instability for individuals who urgently require support, such as direct payments, to avoid eviction</p>

	<p>or utility disconnections (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023).</p> <p>The SIS program could adopt an opt-out approach to further support client stability while preserving autonomy. Clients would be automatically enrolled in direct payments, with the option to “opt-out” of the direct payment process should they choose to do so. This strategy uses the default setting to promote outcomes aligned with housing stability and financial well-being, recognizing that many SIS clients may benefit from the structure and safeguards of direct payments during periods of greater vulnerability, while promoting them to achieve greater independence when they are able.</p> <p>By creating an OPT OUT mechanism for direct payments for clients, the program can address critical gaps, reduce stress for clients facing budgeting challenges, and mitigate the risk of eviction or homelessness. This policy change can ensure timely support and help SIS clients maintain stable housing during periods of financial vulnerability, while also ensuring that service provision approaches are tailored to their unique needs.</p>
<p>Action 2: Work with community working group, including SIS clients (past and present) to develop appropriate Choice Architecture for all aspects of the Income Assistance Program</p>	<p>Rationale: Since the introduction of the SIS program on June 19, 2019, community partners have been sounding the alarm that many clients relying on these supports require more comprehensive wrap-around services than those currently provided under existing SIS policies and practices.</p> <p>While the program was released stating it would “be simpler, transparent, client-friendly and have new features that will help transition clients to greater independence and a better quality of life,” community advocates, and research outlined in this report, highlight several areas where improvements are needed.</p> <p>For example the new SIS program was designed with the stated goal of promoting client well-being and self-sufficiency: “Through Motivational Interviewing, [MSS] staff will support clients to make positive decisions, manage their benefits/household expenses and reach their goals.” However, a closer examination of SIS processes and movement of clients along the SIS’ tiering system has found that only clients who are Tier 3 & 4 get access to the Motivational Interviewing and wrap-around services, leaving others in Tier 1 & 2 with minimal support, that oftentimes, they are self-navigating.</p> <p>Moving forward, a more equitable and supportive SIS model should be developed in consultation with previous and current SIS clients' perspectives. A new SIS model should engage evidence-informed practice regarding choice architecture, be focused on client outcomes and needs, and avoid unintended bias created when people who are not users of a system develop policy and practices for people, without them at the table.</p>
<p>Recommendation 3: Increase sustainable transitions to training, education, and employment for adults receiving income assistance</p>	

<p>Action 1: Increase monthly earned income exemption thresholds to encourage SIS clients participation in meaningful employment and to improve their self-sufficiency and independence.</p>	<p>Rationale: Income exemption policies are designed to encourage income assistance clients to work or participate in employment training programs. As a key policy tool, they help clients (re)engage with the labour market and gradually reduce or end their reliance on income support.</p> <p>By allowing individuals to improve their financial situation through employment while maintaining essential support, these policies promote greater economic stability and long-term self-sufficiency. Higher income exemption thresholds further encourage participation in training, education, and employment, fostering skill development and workforce engagement. While the SIS program does provide earned income exemptions (i.e., \$325 per month for single individuals, \$425 per month for couples, and \$500 per month for families), increasing earned exemption amounts could further empower SIS clients. Higher earnings exemptions would enable clients to retain a larger share of their earnings, thereby enhancing their self-sufficiency through employment activities and building greater financial independence as they work toward transitioning off the SIS program.</p> <p>To further enhance the effectiveness of current earned exemption policies, the Government of Saskatchewan could look to adopt a combined flat-rate and percentage-based exemption approach to increase earned exemption amounts while controlling overarching SIS program costs. British Columbia successfully employs this approach, allowing income assistance clients to earn \$500 per month for single recipients and \$750 for families before a percentage-based withdrawal rate gradually reduces benefits for earnings beyond these thresholds (Maytree, 2024; Aldridge, 2018). This mixed model approach can help to incentivize initial workforce engagement while gradually reducing support as earnings increase, ensuring recipients have the opportunity to stabilize their financial situation before transitioning off assistance.</p> <p>While this approach would not solve SIS clients and community service providers concerns regarding the inadequacy of SIS benefits, it would help to work towards a more balanced whole income approach that can more efficiently meet the needs of SIS clients.</p>
<p>Action 2: Allow monthly earned income exemption to be allocated in a manner that improves access to meaningful full time employment without clawbacks of SIS base amounts.</p>	<p>Rationale: On March 20, 2019, the Ministry committed to finding the right balance for Saskatchewan, ensuring that they continue to deliver programs and services that make a real, lasting difference in the lives of those they serve by making key investments in programs that help vulnerable children, families, adults and seniors achieve a better quality of life, while at the same time we balance the budget and ensure the sustainability of our programs for the future. In this media release, modifications to the SAID program regarding earned income exemption were described as:</p> <p><i>“Exemptions are calculated monthly and are equivalent to annual amounts of \$3,900 for individuals, \$5,100 for couples and \$2,400 for families. Beginning in Summer 2019, these exemptions will be calculated annually and will increase to \$6,000 per year for individuals, \$7,200 for couples and \$8,500 for families.”</i></p>

	<p>The rationale was clear: “The ministry will also simplify the way income exemptions are calculated and increase them, so SAID beneficiaries who are able to work can keep more of what they earn.”</p> <p>In 2025, as a mechanism to increase capacity for SIS clients to find meaningful employment that doesn’t limit them to \$325/month (at minimum wage this is 22 hrs/month or 5 hrs/week) and allows an annual exemption calculation similar to that of SAID would create circumstances where SIS clients, particularly tier 1 and 2 clients, could secure meaningful full-time employment, above minimum wage for upwards of 3 full months before having SIS benefits subject to clawbacks. Holding a FT employment opportunity over the 3-month probationary period would increase stability for SIS clients.</p>
<p>Action 3: Improve SIS clients connections to employment, training and education opportunities.</p>	<p>Rationale:</p> <p>SIS clients and community service providers have highlighted significant gaps in services that connect individuals to employment, education, and training opportunities. While the Ministry of Social Services (MSS) refers all employment related clients (Tier 2 and higher) to Immigration and Career Training (ICT), community service providers are concerned that uptake of these supports remains limited and/or there is a disconnection between service providers supporting SIS clients who are unaware of the additional Ministry involved in the employment journey.</p> <p>Many clients identified the struggle to navigate available programs, and existing supports or have a limited awareness of what benefits are available for them to access, especially new benefits such as the Saskatchewan Employment Incentive (SEI) that was implemented in January 2024.</p> <p>To address this challenge, part of the learning objectives in recommendation 6 should include how SIS clients access ICT, and how movement through the SIS Tiers is fluid depending on client circumstances. Community service providers often assist with employment services navigation and would benefit from a fulsome understanding on when clients access SIS case management and when they access other Ministry’s services and case management systems.</p> <p>Further, to ensure that SIS clients are able to access and take up employment supports and services to help them transition off of income assistance, MSS and ICT case managers should work with community partners to ensure easy access to wraparound supports like childcare, transportation, and stable housing.</p> <p>Throughout this survey, SIS clients noted that they would like to see increased access to support services. This support can include monetary benefits through Income Assistance and/or building formal agreements with other agencies to ensure the SIS clients are prioritized for services like Housing Authority units, \$10/day child care, municipal low income bus passes, etc. To achieve this, stronger partnerships with employers, education and training providers, and community service organizations offering wrap-around support and services to SIS clients must be strengthened (see recommendation 6).</p>

Recommendation 4: Improve SIS clients access to affordable housing.

Action 1: Increased shelter benefit amounts to be closer to average rentals rates in Saskatchewan.	Rationale: Access to safe and affordable housing is a fundamental human need and a cornerstone of individual and community well-being. However, as highlighted throughout this report, both SIS clients and community service providers have consistently emphasized that the current Shelter Benefit, along with overarching SIS benefits, is insufficient to keep pace with rising costs of living, particularly housing costs. For example the cost of living increased by 3.9 per cent nationally in 2023. While the SIS program increased total benefits provided to clients, these increases were below the rate of inflation, meaning that SIS clients incomes did not keep pace with inflation (Maytree, 2024). As such, SIS clients are often forced to choose between covering rent and meeting other essential needs, such as food, transportation, and healthcare. Housing costs have risen well beyond the benefit levels , creating a gap so large that even meticulous budgeting of individuals accessing SIS cannot bridge it. This gap not only exacerbates housing insecurity but also leads to higher overall system costs. For instance, Rental Housing Saskatchewan, formerly known as the Saskatchewan Landlords Association, reported a surge in rental arrears and evictions following the implementation of SIS, with nearly half of SIS renters falling into arrears during the program's rollout (Saskatchewan Landlord Association, 2020). These arrears not only impact private sector actors like landlords but also generate hidden costs for the public sector. The broader implications of housing insecurity extend beyond rent and evictions. A 2024 study by Richard et al. on healthcare costs in Toronto revealed that individuals experiencing homelessness incur annual healthcare expenses six times higher than those of housed individuals, even after adjusting for health history and income. This disparity underscores the immense strain homelessness places on the healthcare system—an area where the Government of Saskatchewan allocates its largest budget. In the 2024-25 fiscal year, the province invested a record \$7.6 billion in healthcare, reflecting a 10.6% increase from the previous year (Richard et al., 2024). While this budget supports a complex system with multiple cost drivers, one significant factor is the provision of emergency care and extended hospital stays. For individuals experiencing homelessness, the average hospital stay is 22 days, costing \$22,516, significantly higher than the cost of a 7.5-day stay for housed individuals, which averages \$8,809 (Maxwell, 2024). These figures illustrate the financial toll of homelessness in the healthcare system, emphasizing the need for upstream interventions to prevent such costly outcomes (Patterson, 2024). Increasing the Shelter Benefit to align more closely with current housing costs would provide critical support for SIS recipients , enabling them to secure and maintain stable housing. This preventive measure would also serve to mitigate the risk of homelessness, reduce high-cost service usage and costs in the healthcare system, and promote greater housing security for vulnerable SIS clients. Further, this increase would support SIS clients in becoming more independent, one of the core objectives of the SIS program, as it would allow them to better keep pace with the increasing costs of living.
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<p>Action 2: Increase access to and availability of deeply affordable housing options for SIS clients.</p>	<p>Rationale: To address the critical need for affordable housing among low-income individuals, particularly SIS clients, who live well below Canada's national poverty line, significant and targeted housing efforts must be introduced (Maytree, 2025). These efforts should prioritize housing options that are accessible, affordable, and supportive, ensuring they meet the diverse needs of SIS clients.</p> <p>Affordable housing should be defined using the CMHC standard, which considers housing affordable if it costs less than 30% of a household's before-tax income (CMHC, 2018). For SIS clients, this means a concerted effort is needed to expand access to rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing options, which are currently limited and primarily provided by the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. To address this gap, we recommend that the Ministry of Social Services strengthen its collaboration with Saskatchewan Housing Corporation and local housing authorities to ensure that SIS clients, particularly those deemed to be in the greatest need, have improved access to the province's limited RGI housing stock, enabling them to better manage their housing costs while relying on the limited financial supports available through the SIS program.</p> <p>Given the inadequate capacity of existing RGI housing stock in the province, it is recommended that the Government of Saskatchewan actively partner with non-profit affordable housing providers (e.g., Quint Development, CUMFI, Cress Housing) who specialize in providing affordable housing. These collaborations should focus on expanding access to and availability of deeply affordable housing options for SIS clients and other vulnerable populations.</p> <p>To support this work, Government of Saskatchewan must consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Targeted Subsidies: Providing financial subsidies to non-profit affordable housing providers with existing below-market-value rentals to enable them to offer RGI housing options for SIS clients. ● Programmatic Funding: Allocating resources to nonprofit service providers who support SIS clients for enhanced case management and support services, empowering tenants to maintain stable housing and addressing barriers such as mental health challenges, disabilities, or addiction. ● Capital Investments: Increasing capital funding to both preserve and maintain existing affordable housing stock and to develop new units, thereby expanding the overall availability of deeply affordable housing across the province. <p>Additionally, targeted measures are needed to address the unique challenges faced by SIS clients with significant mental health issues, disabilities, or addictions. Expanding supportive housing programs tailored to these populations is essential for ensuring their long-term stability and well-being. This reinforces earlier recommendations for the Ministry to connect these clients with comprehensive wraparound supports that meet their basic needs, promote self-sufficiency, and support their path to independence. Achieving this requires a collaborative approach, with the Ministry working closely with relevant partners to provide the necessary resources and services (see recommendations 2 and 6).</p>

Recommendation 5: Evaluate, Monitor & Strengthen SIS Case Management Practices	
<p>Action 1: Evaluate case management practices within the SIS program to identify gaps, improve service delivery, and strengthen client support strategies, including tools like Motivational Interviewing.</p>	<p>Rationale: The redesign of Saskatchewan's income assistance programs and the shift to the SIS program aimed to simplify administration while fostering a more client-centered approach. Central to this redesign was improving case management practices, including the integration of Motivational Interviewing (MI)—a strengths-based, collaborative approach designed to build trust, engage clients, and create individualized case plans (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023). These changes were intended to enhance service delivery, support client self-sufficiency, and improve program outcomes.</p> <p>However, findings from this report and the 2023 Provincial Auditor's audit reveal significant gaps in the current case management approach. Key issues include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak Client-Caseworker Relationships: Many clients report limited or no meaningful interaction with SIS caseworkers, resulting in a lack of trust or connection, which are core components of effective case management. • Delays and Deficiencies in Case Planning: As reported by the Provincial Auditor, SIS client case plans often take weeks or months to complete, with little to no follow-up on client goals, leaving clients unsupported in achieving progress (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023). • Inadequate Referrals to Support Services: SIS clients frequently miss critical connections to additional supports, such as mental health or housing services, due to insufficient engagement and planning by caseworkers (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023). <p>These gaps suggest that case management practices, including the intended use of MI, and other tools such as trauma-informed, culturally-relevant care approaches, are not being implemented effectively, undermining the achievement of SIS program goals and outcomes.</p> <p>To better understand the current challenges and opportunities underpinning SIS case management practices and approaches, the MSS should undertake a comprehensive program evaluation. This evaluation would help to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify Case Management Practice Gaps & Opportunities: Identify areas where case management practices fall short, including barriers to effective implementation (e.g., high caseloads, insufficient training, and lack of follow-up contribute to these challenges), as well as identify opportunities to expand positive case management practices currently employed. • Provide Data-Driven Solutions: Develop evidence-based recommendations to enhance the training, capacity, and oversight of SIS staff and caseworkers in achieving the core program goals and outcomes (e.g., supporting SIS clients to meet their basic needs, become more self sufficient and independent to the best of their abilities). • Improve Outcomes: Strengthen SIS client-caseworker relationships, improve communication pathways, service provision and connection, and ensure more

	timely and effective case planning to better support SIS clients in achieving self-sufficiency and independence.
Action 2: Develop an outcome measurement framework to assess, monitor and report on the SIS program's progress toward key program goals and outcomes.	<p>Rationale:</p> <p>This research highlights the need for the Ministry to better assess whether, how, and to what extent the SIS program is achieving its intended outcomes. According to the Government of Saskatchewan's website, SIS is designed to "<i>help people in need meet their basic needs while they become more self-sufficient and independent</i>" (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.). However, this research was unable to determine how the Ministry defines and measures "self-sufficiency" and "independence" within the SIS program and found no structured approach for how outcomes of the SIS program were being measured and monitored. Further, in 2023, the Provincial Auditor also identified gaps in performance measurement approaches employed by the Ministry, recommending that the Ministry "<i>implement further performance measures to assess SIS's effectiveness</i>", particularly measures focused on the achievement of client outcomes (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023).</p> <p>Without a structured approach to tracking the progress and outcomes of the SIS program, it is difficult to assess whether the program is achieving its intended outcomes or identify areas for improvement (e.g., case management practices). Clear performance measures or indicators, along with regular program evaluations, will provide valuable data to inform policy decisions, enhance service delivery, and ensure that SIS clients receive the support they need to transition toward financial stability.</p> <p>Outcomes reporting dashboards should be shared transparently with a working group of community service providers and governments to ensure accountability and informed decision-making (see recommendation 6).</p> <p>Community partners and clients identified the following data of interest:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rates and reasons for recidivism • Transition times and reasons from tier to tier • Average time it takes for employment and any associated recidivism • Rates of eviction for SIS clients • Average number of caseworkers over a client tenure • Release from systems (health, justice, etc.) onto SIS
Recommendation 6: Strengthen Collaborative Partnerships to Address SIS Client Needs	
Action 1: Create a working group with community service providers, including Indigenous-led organizations and government(s) (i.e., municipal,	Rationale: The challenges and barriers faced by SIS clients are complex and cannot be addressed by the SIS program alone. Meeting the needs of SIS clients requires a systems-based approach that ensures access to essential supports, such as housing, mental health services, employment programs, childcare, and other resources that enhance well-being and promote self-sufficiency and independence. These interconnected issues often demand coordinated efforts from multiple service providers, many of which are funded through government contracts, to deliver holistic and effective support.

<p>provincial, federal and indigenous) to address SIS client needs and guide program reforms.</p>	<p>While income assistance benefits remain insufficient to fully meet clients' basic needs, building strong partnerships with community service providers creates opportunities to fill service gaps and ensure a more seamless and client-centered support system. Collaboration can also prevent duplication of efforts, maximize the use of existing resources, and improve the overall efficiency and impact of service delivery.</p> <p>Ultimately, this systems-based approach acknowledges that no single program or organization can meet all the needs of SIS clients. It requires collective action, shared accountability, and innovative partnerships to ensure individuals and families needs are sufficiently met. The establishment of a joint working group between SIS administrators and community service providers is essential to fostering open dialogue, identifying service gaps, and developing pathways for seamless support delivery. Additionally, it provides a platform to identify and implement program reforms, enhancing the program's effectiveness and its ability to achieve its goals and desired outcomes.</p> <p>This working group should also focus on learning events and community access training materials to ensure that all agencies working to support community members have positive outcomes are privy to the most up-to-date and accurate policy and practices.</p>
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Contact the SPRP

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