

Saskatchewan CBOs get \$18M cash injection from province

The people who work with the most vulnerable should be getting a raise thanks to an injection of cash from the Saskatchewan Party government.

Premier Brad Wall and Social Services Minister Donna Harpauer announced an \$18.3 million increase in funding for community-based organizations (CBOs).

Of that amount, \$13.1 million — an across the board seven per cent funding increase for more than 680 agencies — is to be used for recruitment and retention at those organizations, which currently employ more than 6,000 people.

"Today in Saskatchewan they work for too little pay, for organizations that perhaps have received too little support," Wall said at Cosmo Learning Centre.

The funding comes just before a series of CBO summits with the government begins this week and before the government releases a new financial plan this fall that is expected to focus on reducing the provincial debt, taxes and infrastructure, not social spending.

The government is currently projecting a \$3.1 billion surplus for the end of this year.

Harpauer told reporters the funding is without conditions but she expects the organizations will put the money towards salary increases and to bring in new staff.

The government is touting the announcement as the single-largest one-year increase for CBOs.

In 2005, the NDP gave a three-year, \$30-million hike to community-based organization funding.

The remaining part of the cash outlay — which kicks in on Oct. 1 — includes \$1.4 million for mobile crisis units in Saskatoon, Regina and Prince Albert, \$1.3 million more for family support services, \$2.1 million to increase assistance rates at private service and care homes and \$132,000 for First Nations Child and Family Service programs.

The news was greeted with enthusiasm by Rita Field, executive director of the Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service, who said mobile crisis units respond to over 50,000 calls a year in Saskatchewan, with over half involving children and families in critical situations

"They are complex and also very demanding," she told the small crowd.

"We've been suffering from a chronic struggle with resources to fund our units and this struggle has taken energy away from that which we would like to put towards direct service."

Murray Baird, board chair of the Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres, said salary levels have long been a concern for employees working with people with disabilities.

"Our sector, like many others, was caught by surprise by the boom in Saskatchewan's economy, which has made very difficult recruiting and retaining staff," he said.

Harpauer said she will not prejudge the results of the CBO summit but the government will provide additional funding if the organizations end up taking a larger role in providing services.

One topic that will likely be discussed at the CBO summit is financial accountability, acknowledged Wall.

Provincial auditor Fred Wendel has repeatedly warned that the government is not adequately monitoring the funding going to such organizations.

As Opposition leader last year, Wall promised more resources for the auditor to go along with increased funding for CBOs.

While the government has spoken extensively about debt, taxes and infrastructure as it figures out what it will do with its windfall energy revenues, Wall said he is aware of the need for social spending as illustrated by the Thursday announcement.

"I think it's reasonable to expect that there ought to be a benefit, there ought to be a dividend from living in a place like that at such a time and that includes CBOs ... most importantly, the ones that they serve should have that expectation that a province with greater financial capacity can do a better job of helping to take care of their needs," he said.