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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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General Revenue Fund – Social Services – Vote 36

Mr. Forbes: **Mr. Forbes:** That's the one I was asking about. I thought it was a Canadian national, but it's obviously an American. Okay. Fair enough. In the price, you know, for the work, I mean I wasn't struck necessarily by the size of the bill. It seemed to be fairly reasonable.

I want to shift gears and I appreciate being able to talk about this child and family services. It's a very important issue so thank you very much for that. What I want to talk about now is . . . I'm not sure who will answer this. Maybe the income assistance people. But it's about the Northwoods motel in Saskatoon. And some of you may know that just this past weekend there was a death at the motel and it really got the neighbourhood quite excited. I live fairly close to that area and Facebook was just lighting up. And of course and I know that there are some social services recipients in the past who've lived there because they called our office for help. And that's the, you know, we asked for their address and that's what they've given us so we know that there's a bit of a connection. And I did make a commitment to some of the local people that I would raise this.

They are concerned about what's happening at the motel and how it spills out over into the community. And so I don't know if you can tell me a little bit about what the ministry uses or how it utilizes the motel. And what, if there's any plans or have you been talking about it?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Okay. I will say what I know and probably the officials will have more to add. So income assistance does not use the Northwoods Inn and Suites as a resource for emergency shelter, and hasn't for eight years. However some of our clients may choose, which is their choice, to stay at that hotel. There was, however, one family residing at the hotel for which I don't believe and nor did the deputy minister believe was appropriate. So the officials in Saskatoon were asked to find better housing and to try

very much not to do that again. So we don't place them there for emergency shelter. It hasn't been used, as I said, for eight years, but a client may choose to stay there and that would be their choice.

Mr. Acton: If I could just add, I think the last time we had a child and family client there, a mother and some children, I think that ended in January or February. And we have no intention of using that facility again for on that side. I mean we'll find other locations that hopefully are more appropriate, and generally we can access housing.

But there has been times over the last years I guess when the suites there have been used. But I'm like you and the minister. I have concerns about the appropriateness of that. So I think, in terms of our social assistance clients, we may have some that choose to live there, and that's their choice.

Mr. Forbes: And so I'm getting the sense from you folks that you're not in favour, you don't refer people, and in fact you actually will work to refer them to other places. Is that right, that you've found it to be a problem place as well?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: That's correct. It's not appropriate for families, and a hotel isn't, for any long term . . . If it's an emergency over a weekend, sure, but long term . . . And again, clients, if they ask, we will give them ideas of where they can find appropriate places to stay. We probably wouldn't name the hotel.

Mr. Forbes: This is actually, I think, there were families . . . It was interesting. Before I came in here — and that may be the one family I mean — I just did a little check on, you know, I have a database of all the people come into my office, so I know where their addresses are, and a bunch came up from Northwoods, so it wasn't unusual. But I would say that it seemed like there was only one family. It seemed to be more single people and the issues they have because they're still dealing with violence and they're still dealing with inappropriate behaviour. And they're right beside a neighbourhood.

And I don't know what happened on this past Friday night, Saturday morning, but it really got the neighbourhood upset. And I think that they may be calling or there may be a meeting of the community association to talk with Social Services. So you may want to be prepared for that in Saskatoon. But I said I'd raise it here first, so whatever you say tonight might help in terms of further down the road because this is an issue.

So when people do get referred, especially single males or females without children, really they don't have . . . I mean it is such an expensive place to stay as well. You know, this is the challenge that single folks have. Where are they referred? What's the protocols when somebody says, I'm homeless? For whatever reason, they don't have a place to stay. What are the protocols in Saskatoon that you use?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Okay. So just to clarify, we don't refer them to this hotel. That is not a practice that we've done for eight years, utilized this hotel. And we've doubled the amount of emergency shelters. So we would be . . . If they were absolutely homeless, and there was no options in Saskatoon, there's Lighthouse and Salvation Army, is the two

emergency service providers that we have for emergency spaces. So again we do not refer them to this hotel, and we haven't for eight years. I don't know this answer and probably we should check with the Justice minister. I don't think the hotel can ask someone coming whether or not they're a social services recipient and turn them away. I don't think that can be done.

Mr. Forbes: That's against human rights, that's for sure.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Yes. So if they have or they're receiving assistance and they're not asking for emergency shelter, we don't even, necessarily wouldn't be following them to see if they're taking a hotel room.

Mr. Forbes: But you would know if folks are receiving social assistance because they have to give an address. So does that cause any problems if somebody says, a single guy says, I'm staying at 689 Idylwyld North? And everybody knows what address that is. So do you then say, does the caseworker say this, and we need to talk. Are there places where you say you should not be staying?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: We're fairly, I think fairly mindful of them making their own decisions. I don't think we would do that, but I'm looking to my officials to tell me I'm wrong.

Mr. Tweed: Gord Tweed. So the choice, in terms of where individuals elect to live, Mr. Forbes, is at their discretion. Our workers do work with individuals on a case-specific basis, obviously. We've talked about case planning in this forum before, and they would certainly be apprising individuals of rental opportunities that would fit within their means. Stays at hotels or emergency shelters are obviously short term in nature and the workers would counsel individuals on the amount of budget funding available to them to allow them to make informed choices.

Mr. Forbes: The community is concerned, and they hear these stories that it's Social Services over there. And I think it would be in the best interests of everyone to make sure first we know the facts, and (b) that if we can move people out of there and as . . . You're right. People have the right to stay where they want, but as Social Services, you have the ability to influence people into making better choices. And I think . . . So do you keep track? Or would you know? Like if a community did come to you and say, listen, we think there's 15 people over there on social service, on SAP [Saskatchewan assistance plan] tonight, would you be able to tell them that? Or say yes or no, that's not true.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: We probably wouldn't tell them that because of privacy. We probably wouldn't tell the community how many people are staying there that are income assistance recipients. It's a challenge. You living in Saskatoon and you're well aware of Saskatoon issues, there's some that don't want Lighthouse either. There are . . . in the area it is and, you know, there's other areas and other difficulties.

Mr. Forbes: And I think that's fair. You couldn't tell them really, is probably more appropriate because that's . . . So if they have, the gossip machine is working . . . But

what could you tell a community to reassure them that (a) Social Services is not to blame — maybe, I don't know — and that you're going to be doing everything you can as a good neighbour, you know? Because I mean not only are we concerned about motels, but you know how group homes get a bad rap and all of that. And you want people to be in their communities as much as possible, and so it's important to be a good neighbour.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Agreed, and I guess our message would be, yes, we do not refer people to this hotel. If there is a number of income assistance clients staying there, it is by their choice; it is not a referral from the ministry. And I guess the other comment would be that most income assistance clients are not criminals either. It's a bit of a stigma that I think that's being placed on them.

Mr. Forbes: Yes, that's fair enough too, and it's one that . . . But I'm hoping that in some way that I hope by raising it tonight you might go back and take a look and to say, so internally take a look and see if this is the case and do what you can from the inside to, you know, take another look. I mean it's great that you stopped. And I asked Justice this yesterday as well, and they're not referring anyone and they're pretty, pretty straight about that. And I think that's fair enough, you know.

I mean the interesting thing and many years ago when we had a bunch of old hotels, they would be the place where single people would stay, but we don't have those places anymore. And I don't think, you know, in Saskatoon we've lost the Pat, which would be one, and the Barry and different places; the old Lighthouse prior to what it was. You know, so it's a changing world and so for single people it's a little difficult for them to make ends meet.

But I wanted to raise that tonight and make you aware of that. I said I would, to the community, and it's an important one. And I think you are right in terms of, you know, poor bashing is not the way to go with this. It's important that everybody needs a good place to stay overnight, but sometimes that hotel really lights up at night. So anyways, I'll leave that right now for that and if I have any more information I may share that with you.