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Youth Companion Program

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we've heard several reasons, different reasons for this government's decision to end the youth companion program, but Samantha Neill says this decision, and I quote, ". . . is nothing more than taking money and resources from one of the most vulnerable groups in this province, persons with disabilities." How can the Premier possibly justify this cut of vital services to youth with cognitive disabilities?

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said before in this House, we did a review of our CBOs, and we want to have measurable results on the work that they do. We're taking a look at the different contracts to see the mandate of the contracts, and some of them, there is some mandate drift from what the contract was originally meant for. Mr. Speaker, we want to see if the service is vital or if there's duplication or it can be provided by other CBOs, and we have duplication.

Mr. Speaker, this is a tight budget. Everyone in Saskatchewan knows that. We have said that we need to review our programs and make them effective and efficient. There is not very many families served by the \$64,000 cut that we made, and we'll be working with those families individually to try to get them the services that they need.

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the member from Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Samantha wrote a letter to our office in which she fact checks everything this government has said. Her son is a participant in this program, so she knows what she's talking about.

The minister says it's a duplication of service. Samantha says that's not true. The government said, community living provides this service. Again Samantha says that's not true. The minister said that not enough of the youth involved in this program are clients of Social Services, but Samantha says nearly all of the participants in this program are

clients of Social Services.

To the Premier: how many wrong answers will he tolerate from this minister before he makes the right decision to save this program?

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, the funding came from the child and family file, and the member opposite is well aware of that, as is Samantha. These are not children that are at risk that we're discussing here. We'll work with these individual families but we cannot . . . What it did was this particular program was linking the families to workers that could help take their child for the summer in essence — and these are adult children — and to different activities and help them. We will try and help them find those same workers going forward. We will work with these families, Mr. Speaker.

The organization in question also receives over half a million dollars from this government for skills training. Mr. Speaker, it isn't that the organization had its funding completely eliminated. It was the \$64,000 for this one program. It's a very small program, and we will help those families to find the services that they need.

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the member from Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Samantha writes, and I quote:

Even on their fourth or fifth attempt to explain the cut, it remains clear that the ministry and the minister had no real idea that they were cutting a unique program offering an important service. Perhaps now that the nature of the youth companion program has become clear, they will use this as an opportunity to find the appropriate and sustainable source of funds for this program.

This is a cut of about \$64,000 a year, which is pocket change for this government but so vital for these youth and these families, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Now the Premier knows that his minister did not do her homework. Why won't he step in and save this important program?

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, again we're going to . . . And although the member opposite just throws it off as pocket change, Mr. Speaker, we need to be mindful of each and every dollar that we spend. We need to make sure that we're maximizing those dollars and we're using them in a very effective way.

Mr. Speaker, there is no government in the history of this province that has dedicated more dollars to individuals with disabilities than this government. Year over year we have increased funding. We have increased housing for individuals with disabilities. We introduced the SAID [Saskatchewan assured income for disability] program, which is an income assistance program for people with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, we took the people with disabilities off of a wait-list that languished there year over year over year under the NDP government when that member opposite was sitting at the cabinet table and absolutely ignoring the file. Mr. Speaker, these were families that were desperate for places for their loved ones to live and for day programming for their loved ones, and those members opposite and that member opposite when he sat at the cabinet table didn't care. Mr. Speaker, this government is totally committed to programming for individuals with disabilities like no other before it.

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the member from Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, last week the Social Services minister promised to speak with Samantha, but she never bothered to do that. Perhaps if that minister had taken the time to speak with Samantha, she would have actually got her facts straight and she would have understood the importance of this program for youth with cognitive disabilities. Will the Premier instruct his Social Services minister to finally follow through on her commitment from last week to call Samantha and to hear directly from her about how vital this program is?

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, my chief of staff did speak with Samantha, and he offered to connect her with an official to help her with the services. Perhaps the member opposite isn't interested in having someone work directly with Samantha to help her get the services that she's needed. She has said that she wants someone to help her find someone to look after her son or help her son through the summer months and, Mr. Speaker, we can get someone that will do that. We were offering that to Samantha. My chief of staff, immediately following question period when he brought these questions up before, did contact Samantha, and they did have that conversation.