

Speaking Notes

AISH Review Launch

Minister Dunford

- The Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped ... or AISH ... program is a made-in-Alberta social program.
- 25 years ago, when the program was conceived, there were only 3,200 people receiving the AISH benefit and the annual budget was \$2.2 million.
- Today, it provides financial and health benefits to more than 31,000 severely disabled Albertans. This year the annual budget is nearly \$400 million.
- AISH is unique in that it provides this assistance outside the regular welfare system.
- Benefits are structured so people can work if they are able, and they can easily come back into the program if their experience in the workforce is not successful.
- AISH is a program we can all be proud of. But maybe there are ways to make it even better.
- Today, I am announcing that a committee will begin consultations about renewing the AISH program.
- Let me be clear. This consultation is about ensuring AISH provides the right supports to the people who need it. The AISH program is here to stay, and the budget for the AISH program is secure.
- I say this because, like all MLAs, I have met AISH clients. They have told me about how they rely on AISH, and how they have ideas for making it better.

- It would be easy to say we should just raise the AISH benefit rates across the board.
- In the last ten years the number of people receiving AISH has nearly doubled and the budget for AISH has more than doubled.
- Raising the rates across the board will not benefit all equally. We need to find ways to get more money in the pockets of people who need it most.
- We need to ensure the dollars we spend go to where they can do the most good.
- Raising rates is one solution, but not the only one.
- As part of this review of the AISH program, we will be consulting with the people most affected ... AISH clients, their families, disability groups, and others.
- Over the next months I hope we will hear more personal stories from individual Albertans and their experiences with the AISH program.
- I would now like to introduce two of my colleagues who will make up the Government MLA AISH Review Committee.
- Thomas A. Lukaszuk, from Edmonton Castle Downs, will chair this committee. Three years ago, Thomas chaired the MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs.
- The other member of the AISH Committee is also a veteran of the low-income review, Alana DeLong from Calgary Bow.
- Thomas Lukaszuk will now briefly discuss the review process.

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Thomas Lukaszuk

- Thank you Minister Dunford
- It is my pleasure to be part of the Government MLA AISH Review Committee.
- As Minister Dunford said, during this review we will be listening to Albertans. We want to hear from AISH clients, their families, organizations and agencies that work with disabled people and other Albertans.
- We have prepared a Discussion Guide that will outline some general information about the AISH program, some of the issues facing AISH and some specific ideas to consider.
- Minister Dunford already outlined some of the rising costs and caseloads the program has been experiencing. As our province prospers, our population grows, and so does the number of people receiving AISH.
- The rising costs of health benefits continue to pressure the AISH budget. Currently the health benefits portion of AISH makes up one-third of the budget.
- The Guide presents six ideas that balance improving the AISH program with helping ensure that it remains affordable in the long term.
- These ideas are not new. Some ideas came to us through previous consultations. Some ideas came to us through AISH clients and organizations that work with disabled Albertans.

- We want Albertans to tell us whether these are the right areas to focus on. We think that fairness, good administration, and helping people be as independent as they can are the things that need to be looked at. We're prepared to listen to all ideas.
- We want people to read the Guide and respond to the questions – the deadline for submissions is November 30.
- Printed copies of the Guide will be available at MLA offices and AHRE offices across the province.
- The guide is also available on-line at www.aishreview.gov.ab.ca and is available in Braille and audio formats.
- We will hold two public consultation sessions in October to allow individuals and groups to make presentations. People will have to pre-register. We want to make sure we hear from a mix of AISH clients, disability groups and the general public.
- Following the review of the submissions we will prepare recommendations to the Minister in the new year.
- I would now ask Alana to discuss a key element in the consultation process.

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Alana DeLong

- Thank you Thomas, Minister Dunford
- As the Minister mentioned, Thomas and I were members of the MLA Committee to Review Low Income Programs.
- As part of that consultation we heard from many Albertans about the challenges they face. Some of these individuals were severely disabled.
- There are many people in Alberta living with disabilities. About 75,000 are **severely** disabled and just over 31,000 of these people are receiving AISH.
- We want to know about the personal experiences of people impacted by AISH – the people receiving it, their families, and the many agencies and organizations that support disabled Albertans.
- We want to hear how people live with a severe disability, how the AISH financial benefit impacts their lives and how their lives could be made better. We also want to hear about their successes.
- AISH is a program for people ... and we want to hear from the people it helps.
- Many of the people who have an interest in AISH are with us today. Many more will be a part of the consultation that is now being announced.
- We are listening.

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Minister Dunford

- Thank you, Alana and Thomas.
- Before we open for questions, I would like to thank the representatives of many organizations that have come today to hear this announcement.
- You do very admirable work that often goes unnoticed by Albertans. Your work and dedication to people with disabilities truly is a great benefit to our society.
- Now, as Alana said, it is our turn to listen.