

POSITION PAPER

Saskatchewan Income Support (SIS) Program

September 2020

Background

The SIS program was announced in early 2019 and began implementation on July 15, 2019. The program replaced the Saskatchewan Assistance Program (SAP) and the Transitional Employment Allowance (TEA). The Association was not consulted during the program development process, even though our members are some of the largest providers of housing to individuals on income assistance.

Program Challenges

Since the introduction of this program in July 2019, tenants and landlords have seen significant issues with implementation, government employee conduct, and rent arrears. The most detrimental change to the SIS program was the elimination of joint and/or direct payment to landlords.

Prior to SIS, landlords were paid directly, and tenants consistently had their rent paid through this mechanism. Since this was eliminated, rent arrears have risen dramatically and evictions have increased because tenants are receiving the funds directly and spending these funds on other things, prior to rent being paid. With limited financial literacy training provided to tenants, landlords have made the following comments:

“It is not reasonable to think that people that have never had responsibility with their finances, that a 40-minute session with a worker will eradicate years of improper money management”

While landlords are happy to provide housing to tenants on income assistance, the Ministry of Social Services has created conditions that prevent landlords from doing this in a streamlined and low-risk manner. In response to these new conditions, our Association has heard comments such as:

“We simply cannot accept the promise of funds by a SIS client anymore because we’ve given signed leases to a tenant, they take that lease to their social worker, receive funds, and then we never hear from them again”

“There needs to be some sort of mechanism that ensures the landlord gets paid for housing and the tenant doesn’t just take the Ministry’s money and spends it on any number of things”

A landlord’s ability to communicate with the Ministry of Social Services has also been eliminated because the previous mechanism of a letter of guarantee is no longer in place. Prior to the SIS program being implemented, a landlord was able to contact a tenant’s social worker if the tenant failed to begin the tenancy or if there were concerns about rent payment, property damages, etc.

Under the SIS program, a landlord has no way of communicating with a tenant’s social worker. For example, in the event that the tenant receives a lease from a landlord and receives SIS funds from the Ministry but does not return to the landlord and begin the tenancy, the landlord cannot alert the Ministry of the situation. The tenant can then receive funds month after month for housing that they are not receiving because the Ministry is not aware that the tenancy never began. Meanwhile the tenant may be spending hundreds of dollars on non-discretionary items.

Association Recommendations

To ensure landlords can equitably provide housing to people on income assistance, the following changes to the SIS program are recommended by the SKLA:

- Reinstating joint/direct payment for rent and damage deposit funds
- Providing a mechanism for communicating with the Ministry to decrease misused funds
- Reduce wait times for tenants and improve the user-experience for tenants applying to SIS
- Require tenants to complete a rental-education program that outlines their responsibilities during a tenancy, which could be used in the place of a landlord reference

Without these changes, arrears and damage costs will increase and landlords will have no recourse for compensation and will be less likely to rent to tenants on income assistance.

Moving Forward

The Association continues to work with government and industry partners on making amendments to the SIS program. We are proud to provide housing to tenants on income assistance, but we cannot do this if the SIS program continues unchanged because of the significant challenges described above.

These comments were submitted to the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission in September 2020 and the Association awaits their report examining this program and provincial income assistance changes.