



# ESIA – Special Needs Funding

Standing Committee on Community Services  
January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017

# Presentation Outline

## 1. ESIA program overview:

- The operating budget & caseload demographics

## 2. Special Needs funding:

- Transportation, Bus Passes, Special Diets & Telephone

## 3. Update on the ongoing transformation progress

## 4. Update on housing, housing maintenance and repair, and pest control

# 1. ESIA Program Overview

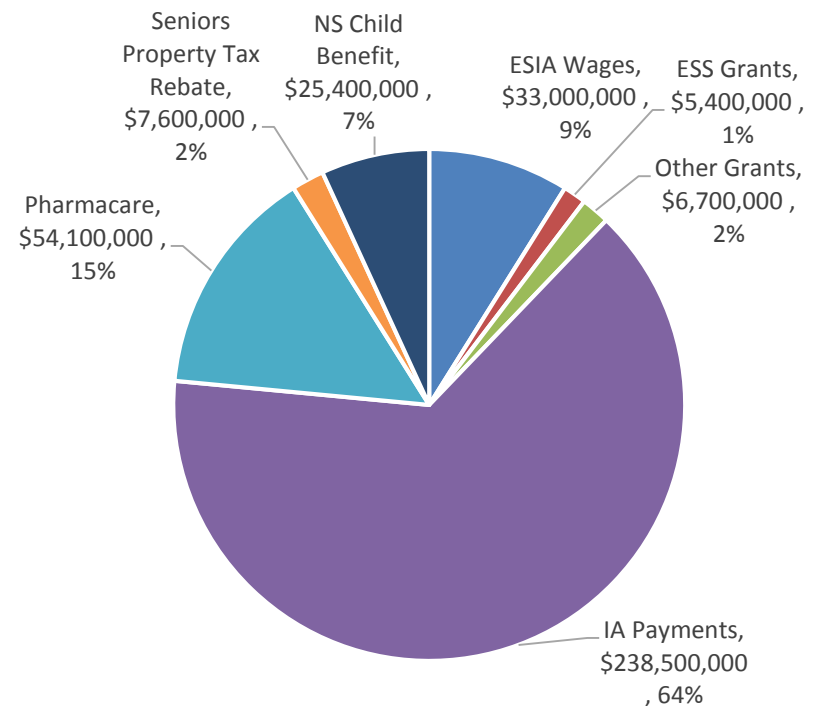
# Employment Support & Income Assistance (ESIA) Program

- The purpose of the ESIA program is to provide for the assistance of persons in need and, in particular, to facilitate their movement toward independence and self-sufficiency.
- ESIA provides financial assistance for basic needs (food, clothing and shelter), employment supports and for specific special needs items.
- Our staff work with our clients to support and assist them with accessing education and jobs, discharge planning from hospitals, shelters, and transition houses, referring and collaborating with community agencies, medical professionals and many other government services.

# ESIA Program Overview

- As of November 2016, there were approximately 26,123 ESIA cases and 38,594 beneficiaries.
- In 2015-16, approximately 66% of ESIA cases received special needs each month, accounting for approximately \$40,000,000 that year.
- Other expenditures include:
  - \$54,100,000 in Pharmacare
  - \$238,500,000 in IA Payments

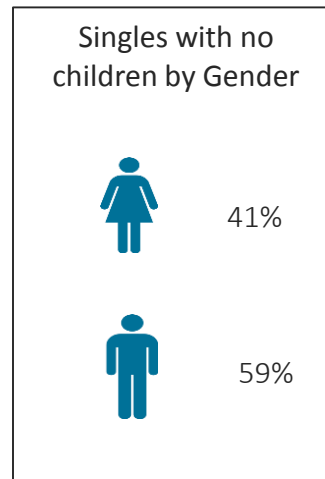
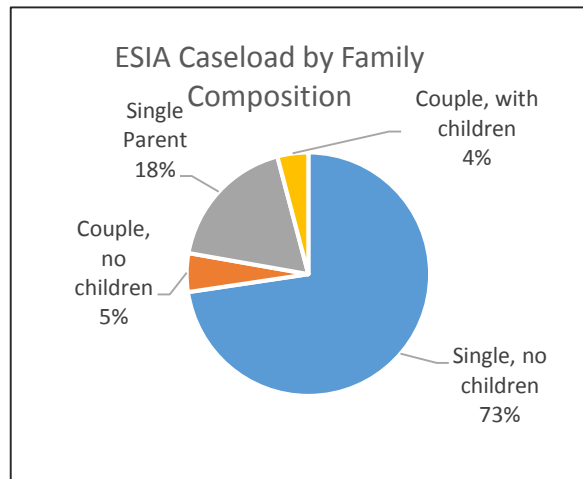
2015-16 Operating Budget Actuals



# ESIA Caseload & Demographics (2015-16)

Fiscal Year	Avg. Monthly Caseload	% Change
2009-10	27,753	
2010-11	28,389	2.3%
2011-12	28,813	1.5%
2012-13	28,950	0.5%
2013-14	28,923	-0.1%
2014-15	28,100	-2.8%
2015-16	26,783	-4.7%

- The caseload has been in a steady decline since approximately 2013-14, most recently reducing by 4.7% in 2015-16 from the previous year.
- Single people with no children make up almost three quarters of the caseload.
  - Of those singles, 59% are male and 41% are female
- Single parents make up roughly 18% of the caseload.
  - The single parent group has declined by 7% over the last decade (25% in 2006 to 18% in 2016)



## 2. Special Needs Funding

# Special Needs - Overview

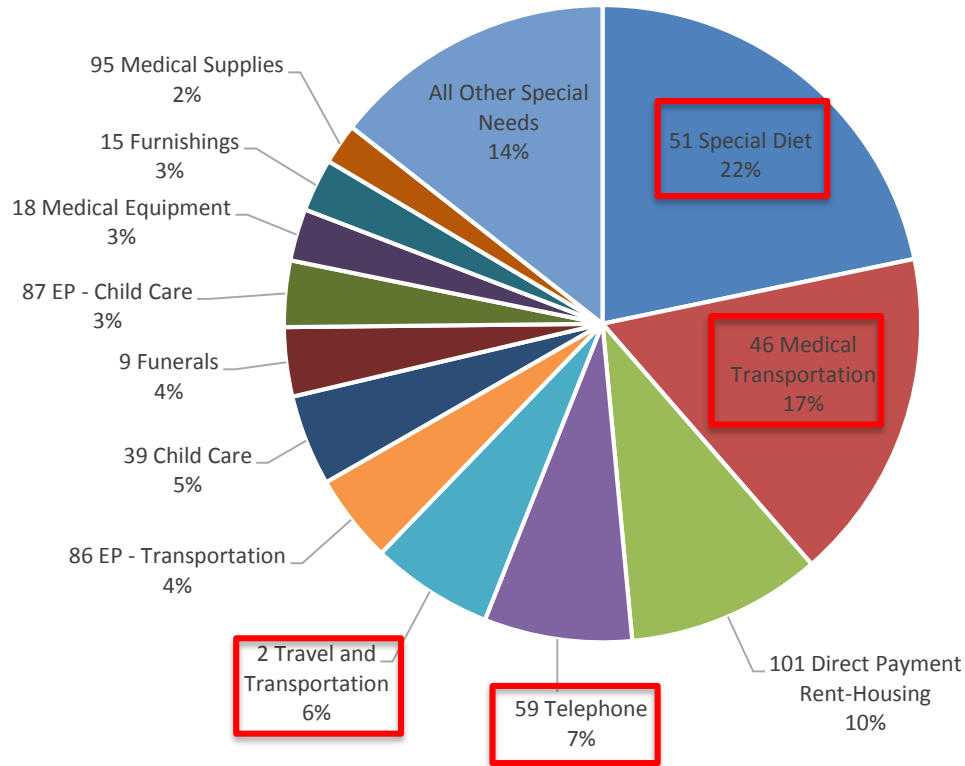
- Special Needs is part of the “assistance” provided under the ESIA Act. The ESIA regulations further define what is and what is not included as a special need item or service.
- Special needs may be provided to meet specific:
  - health/safety needs; or
  - to support participation in employment/employability activities.
- To be eligible for special needs:
  - Must first access available resources, private/publicly funded or community organizations.
  - Not be provided for medical purposes where an alternative exists under MSI (DHW), or otherwise funded by government.
  - Based on the most economical and actual costs up to the allowable amounts in regulations/policy.
- Approximately 66% of ESIA clients received some type of employment, medical and/or emergency-related special need each month in 2015-16 (at a cost of \$40,000,000 that year).

Year	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Special Needs Payments	38M	42M	44M	44M	46M	45M	40M



# Total Special Needs Payments

Total Special Needs Payments - 2015-16



In total, payments for Special Diet, Telephone, Medical Transportation & Travel and Transportation make up approximately **52%** of all Special Needs Payments

# Special Needs – 2011 & 2013 Amendments

## 2011

- DCS made changes to eliminate the open clause that allowed for items of special need not covered under private or public health plans.
  - This change was not about limiting access but rather including defined eligibility parameters.

## 2013

- Government included certain medical treatments that were excluded in the 2011 amendments.
- ESIA Special Needs Regulations were amended to include funding for essential medical treatments under certain circumstances. Examples include, but are not limited to:
  - massage therapy, chiropractic treatments, acupuncture and some dental treatments.
  - Essential medical treatments must be **prescribed** by a physician, dentist or nurse practitioner and **provided** by a medical professional licensed or registered to practice in Nova Scotia.

# Annual Review Requirements

- Annual reviews are a program requirement to ensure client eligibility, and provide ongoing case planning supports. This includes an assessment of a client's current expenses (basic and special needs) and income.
  - If necessary, medical documentation is required to verify certain types of ongoing medical related special needs such as medical transportation, telephone for health and safety, special diet and medical supplies.
  - When a change occurs in employment / training needs or health condition, the related special needs are adjusted up or down based on the actual needs and actual expenses of the individual.
- At the time of the 2015 Auditors General's report, there were 9,000 outstanding Annual Reviews across the province, of which 3,000 were overdue by more than twelve months – some were several years overdue.
  - Central region had the highest number of outstanding Annual Reviews at 52% and the highest number that exceeded twelve months at 63%.
- As a result, there was a priority on Annual Review completion.

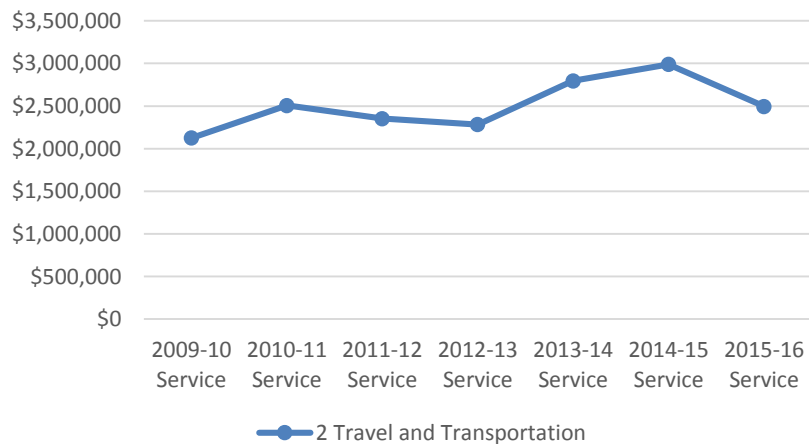
# Special Needs - Transportation

- An allowance for **transportation** may be provided:
  1. in instances where the health and safety of an individual would be jeopardized,
  2. when the transportation is required for a recipient to participate in employment, training, upgrading, volunteer activity, job search, attendance at Employment Services and any other activity deemed appropriate as part of the employment plan, and/or
  3. where an individual with significant mental, physical or cognitive barriers is participating in an approved learning, volunteer or day program.
- Applicants/recipients and/or spouse will be provided with the actual cost, up to a maximum total of \$150 per month based on the most economical and efficient means of transportation.

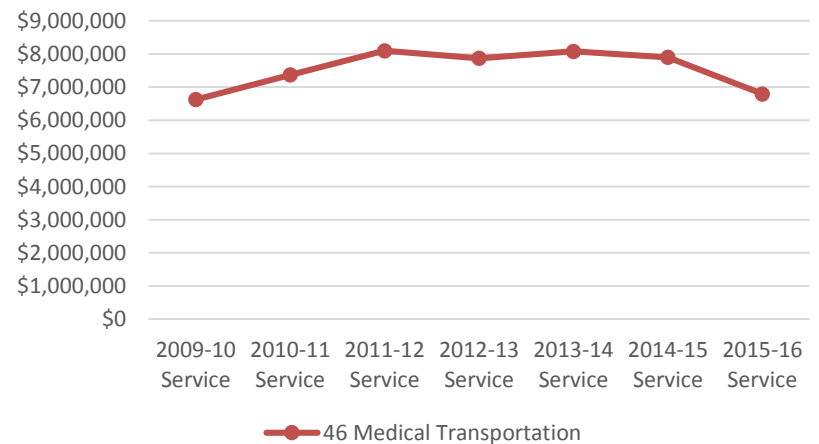
# Special Needs – Transportation

Special Needs Payments	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Travel & Transportation	\$2.1M	\$2.5M	\$2.4M	\$2.3M	\$2.8M	\$3.0M	\$2.5M
Medical Transportation	\$6.6M	\$7.4M	\$8.1M	\$7.9M	\$8.1M	\$7.9M	\$6.8M

2 Travel and Transportation



46 Medical Transportation



# Special Needs - Transportation

% of Cases Per Month Receiving Special Needs	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Travel & Transportation	9%	10%	9%	9%	10%	11%	10%
Medical Transportation	26%	28%	29%	28%	28%	28%	28%

Avg Special Need Payment Per Month	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Travel & Transportation	\$75	\$77	\$77	\$77	\$81	\$84	\$81
Medical Transportation	\$77	\$79	\$81	\$80	\$82	\$83	\$77

# Special Needs – Transportation – Bus Passes

- In the HRM, about \$6.5 million in funding each year provides bus passes and tickets, taxis fares and other transportation.
- In 2014-15, the majority of people receiving ESIA in HRM received support for their transportation costs.
  - More than 8,000 clients received money for a bus pass, 1,400 received money for tickets, and about 700 received more than the cost of a bus pass for services such as taxis.
  - 600 clients received no support for transportation costs because they did not meet the current eligibility criteria.
- HRM recently launched a low-income bus pass program. This option is available to ESIA recipients who do not receive special needs funding equivalent to the cost of a full bus pass.
- Currently, the *Employment Support and Income Assistance Regulations*, section 26 (1) and (2) allow a transportation allowance to be provided to clients based on the actual cost and/or the most economical option. Any change that would allow an amount to be provided in excess of the actual costs - such as bus pass for all - would require a regulatory amendment.
  - The potential financial impact of providing funding in the amount equal to the cost of a bus pass for all ESIA adult recipients across the province would be an additional \$11.1M annualized cost.

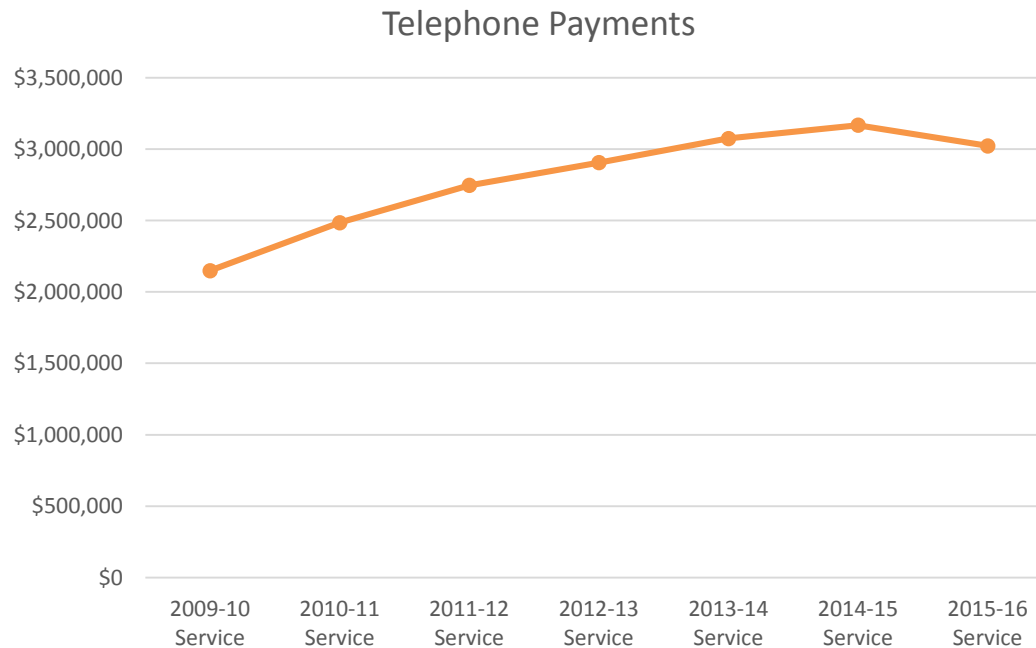
# Special Needs - Telephone

- Applicants/recipients may be eligible for assistance to cover the basic service for a **telephone**, where a telephone is required for medical or personal safety reasons.
- Connection charges and deposits will not normally be paid by the Department. Approval criteria includes:
  - The minimum monthly basic service charge
  - May approve purchase of telephone one (1) time only when required based on most economical option
- The cost of special telephone equipment may be considered, when a medical condition prevents a recipient/applicant from using basic equipment, and assistance is not available from other sources (e.g. volunteer organizations).
- Documentation of need from relevant professionals (medical or otherwise) must be provided by an applicant/recipient.



# Special Needs - Telephone

Special Needs Payments	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Telephone	\$2.2M	\$2.5M	\$2.7M	\$2.9M	\$3.1M	\$3.2M	\$3.0M



# Special Needs - Telephone

% of Cases Receiving Special Needs	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Telephone	21%	23%	25%	26%	27%	29%	28%

Avg Telephone Payment Per Month	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Telephone	\$31	\$32	\$32	\$32	\$32	\$33	\$33

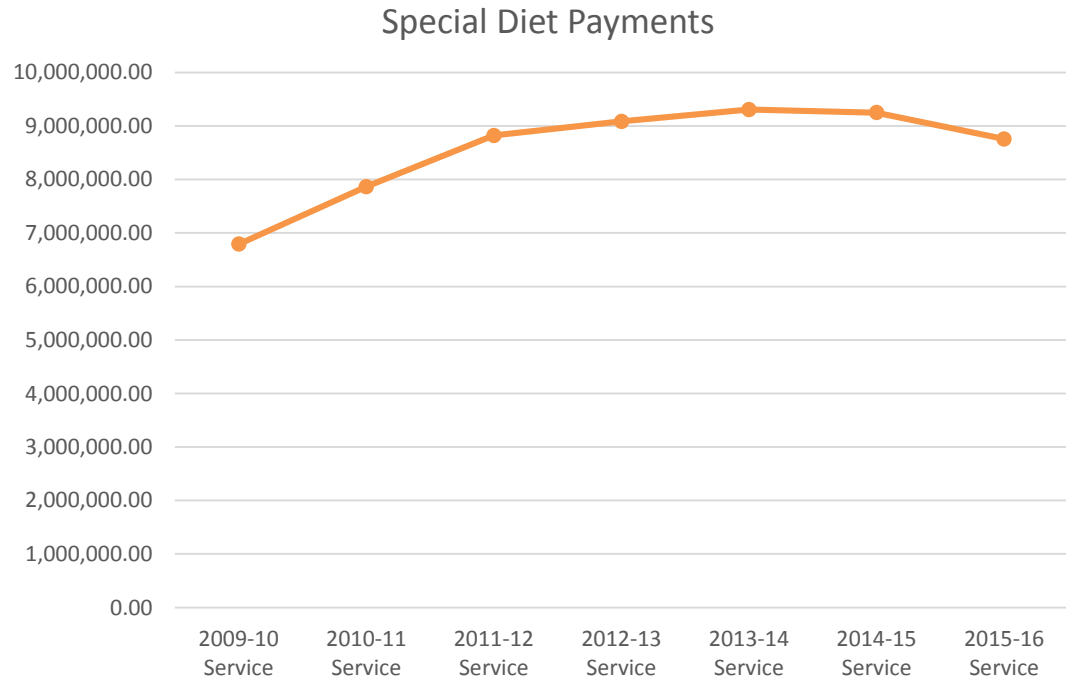
The **additional cost** to provide every Adult case with a telephone would be approximately **\$7M**

# Special Needs – Special Diet

- A **special diet** allowance may be provided, up to a maximum of \$150 per month per person. Approval for a special diet allowance is based on receiving medical documentation specific to the condition, to support the type of special diet and approved allowances set out in the Policy 6.3.3 - Special Diet Rates Schedule.
- Medical documentation can be accepted from a medical doctor, nurse practitioner or registered dietitian and is required prior to the approval of a special diet allowance. The medical documentation is to include information based on the diagnosis and reason for the special diet, the type of special diet required and the time frame the special diet is required.

# Special Needs – Special Diet

Special Needs Payments	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Special Diet	\$6.8M	\$7.9M	\$8.8M	\$9.1M	\$9.3M	\$9.2M	\$8.8M



# Special Needs – Special Diet

% of Cases Receiving Special Needs	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Special Diet	26%	29%	31%	32%	33%	34%	34%

Avg Special Needs Payment Per Month	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Special Diet	\$80	\$82	\$82	\$82	\$82	\$82	\$81

### 3. ESIA Transformation Update

# Scope of Transformation

## Overall transformation

### Strategies and Projects

### What have we been working on?

#### Modernizing and Innovating Service Delivery **Admin Improvements**

- Design and implement 'short-term' administrative and client service improvements
- Review the intake and eligibility regulations, policy, and processes to determine where efficiencies could be implemented

#### **Standard Household Rate** Business Case Analysis

- Conduct a business case to look at how we can simplify the current eligibility and benefit disbursement administration; simplify or enhance how we provide a shelter rate / allowance to clients; review special needs and what could be "bundled"; and improve adequacy for clients

#### Simplifying **Income Security**

- Analyze how government structures financial support and develop options for how financial support can be restructured and delivered to clients

#### Targeted and Innovative Program Policy and Interventions **Program Design**

- Develop a model to segment its client base to target programs for Nova Scotians who are in need of income assistance
- Develop an evidence-based program model and identify specific interventions that target client segments and their respective needs and desired outcomes.

# Update on Transformation

- ✓ Within ESIA, we are working towards simplifying the administrative burden experienced by clients and staff alike. Some examples include...
  - **Simplifying the reporting requirements for our clients** – Where possible, we reduced clients' reporting requirements to only needing to report their income statement periodically instead of every month
  - **Helping clients understand the services provided by the department** – We developed a client friendly and easy to understand document that will help our clients understand available supports and services
  - **Accessibility of clients to caseworkers** – We have expanded an existing pilot to introduce a phone service line during work hours that improves clients' access to a caseworker to help them with their immediate needs
  - **Increasing response time / reducing confusion** – We gave ESS caseworkers access to make ad hoc child care and transportation payments. In this situation, clients can go directly to their ESS caseworker for quick ad hoc payments
  - **Simplifying ICM correspondence language** – We have updated multiple ICM correspondence templates to make it easier for clients to read and understand
  - We are also working on streamlining the **ESIA medical form**



# Update on Transformation

- ✓ Engaged **180 clients** in meaningful discussions in **19 First Voice focus group sessions** and received over **1750 client survey responses** (1037 completed surveys were analyzed); we've held summary webinars with staff and hope to release a public report soon
- ✓ Engaged staff in a number of sessions across the province (approximately **50 ESIA staff** participated in **service delivery model design workshops** and **90** participated in **ESIA program current state workshops**)
- ✓ Held a number of change champion meetings, working group sessions, etc. with staff representation to work through the analysis and design of key streams of work
- ✓ Conducted **one staff survey** to gather feedback on one-time needs and ICM correspondence
- ✓ Completed a number of summaries to document the "**current state**" (information from staff on how things work), "**jurisdictional scan**" (what other provinces do), "data models" (to analyze cost impacts of potential changes), and "**project framework**" (to set direction on next steps)

# Round 2 of external stakeholder engagement

## Schedule and locations

<p><b>Halifax</b> Best Western Chocolate Lake November 8th (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>	<p><b>Dartmouth</b> Mic Mac Aquatic Club November 9th (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>	<p><b>Dartmouth</b> Mic Mac Aquatic Club November 10th (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>
<p><b>Sydney</b> Membertou Trade Centre November 15th (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>	<p><b>New Glasgow</b> Summer Street Industries November 16th (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>	<p><b>Truro</b> Best Western, Glengarry November 18th (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>
<p><b>White Point</b> White Point Resort November 22nd (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>	<p><b>Kentville</b> Old Orchard Inn November 24th (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>	<p><b>Halifax</b> Best Western, Chocolate Lake November 25th (9:30 am to 4:00 pm)</p>

# Post Secondary Changes

## Approved Enhancements



### EDUCATE TO WORK DEPENDENTS

- Expand for ESIA dependents
- Some tuition support, books and student fees



### CAREER SEEK

- First year tuition
- Student fees and books
- Home internet/data plan
- Childcare and transport
- Campus Incidentals

Minimization of Barriers to Post-Secondary

## 4. Housing, House Repairs, Maintenance, & Pest Control

# Housing, House Repairs, Maintenance & Pest Control

- Housing Nova Scotia continues to invest the annual funding allocation of **\$20.4** million under the (2014-2019) CMHC-NS Investment in Affordable Housing Agreement in order to create or preserve affordable housing for low income Nova Scotia families.
- In 2015-2016, Housing Nova Scotia has helped over **2,200** households with repair/adaptation programs. This includes:
  - 1,240 homes preserved through major home repair/adaptations
  - 985 seniors and individuals with disabilities helped by health and safety related repairs or home adaptations to enable them to continue to live independently in their own homes and communities
- As of October 2016, there were **1,339** private sector rental units being subsidized via rent supplement. The average monthly subsidy per unit is **\$319.68**. Rent supplements are a tool to remove clients from the public housing waitlist.

# Housing, House Repairs, Maintenance & Pest Control

- Since 2014, **\$24 million** of the Deferred Federal Contribution has been committed to renovations and repairs in public housing including building envelope, electrical, plumbing, paving, safety upgrades.
- In March 2016, the Government of Canada announced **\$74.8** million in new housing funds for NS (to be committed by March 31, 2018)
  - This new investment includes funding for the creation of seniors housing, construction or repair facilities for victims of family violence and renovations for existing social housing (all subject to Executive Council approval)

# Housing, House Repairs, Maintenance & Pest Control

- **\$3.9 million** invested in pest control since 2014: new pest control contractor, educating residents on prevention and treatment, undertaking building wide assessments, and modifying areas susceptible to infestation, including installing fully sealed baseboards and plugging holes where heating and plumbing pipes enter the wall
- Pilot project in the fall of 2014 added four five-person bedbug teams to work with tenants who required assistance throughout the process (seniors, persons with disabilities, etc). To date, **1535** households have benefited from program - HNS is looking to continue and expand this initiative

Questions?



Wednesday, 11

January 2017

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# Questions and worries. Kendall Worth on Income Assistance transformation

By [Kendall Worth \(https://nsadvocate.org/author/kendall-worth/\)](https://nsadvocate.org/author/kendall-worth/) - December 7, 2016

 [2 \(https://nsadvocate.org/2016/12/07/questions-and-worries-kendall-worth-on-income-assistance-transformation/#comments\)](https://nsadvocate.org/2016/12/07/questions-and-worries-kendall-worth-on-income-assistance-transformation/#comments)

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*The Department of Community Services wants to change how it delivers welfare. But it isn't clear what that means, says Kendall Worth. In fact, there is reason to worry.*

KJIPUKTUK (Halifax) – Last month I attended an update on the transformation of the *Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA)* program. The session was organized by the *Department of Community Services*.

This was the second update I attended, I also went to an earlier one in the summer of 2015. I get invited because of my connections with the *Benefits Reform Action Group* (<https://nsadvocate.org/2016/11/02/kendall-worth-about-the-benefits-reform-action-group-a-personal-reflection/>), of which I am the chair.

And I also went to a *First Voice* session, in March of last year. You can [read my report here](http://halifax.mediacoop.ca/story/community-services-first-voices-consultation-my-ta/34607) (<http://halifax.mediacoop.ca/story/community-services-first-voices-consultation-my-ta/34607>).

I walked out of the meeting both hopeful and concerned.

## Many questions, few answers

During this session, everyone who was attending was hoping that there would be a presentation on what the department is doing to address people losing their special needs allowances. But there was no talk of restoring the special needs that people have lost over the years or adding new special needs.

There was also nothing presented and talked about in regards to how the new system is going to affect persons

*Kendall Worth.*

with disabilities who have no choice but to depend on the system of

income assistance/welfare.

In addition there was nothing mentioned regarding allowance increases, which in itself is a real concern because as we all know people on income assistance are struggling to make ends meet with their limited allowances.

One unanswered question is whether under the new system persons with disabilities who are not expected to return to work are going to be allowed to work at least part time?

## No additional money

Also during this session one of the things they talked about was turning ESIA allowances into a standard household rate. This was concerning because no actual allowance amount/rate increase was discussed. Overall it sounded like no new money will be invested into income assistance allowances.

So all BRAG members agreed that there are still a lot of unanswered questions about the ESIA transformation and what the new system is going to look like. We really want to know what all different things are going to happen to different types of clients once the new system is in place.

## It's all about getting back to work

During the presentation, there was talk about what they called *segmenting* the caseload. There would be three different types and groups of income assistance clients, who would be treated differently.

**Group one.** This group would consist of people who are on income assistance and cannot work because of their disabilities and related health issues.

**Group two.** These are people who will be able to return to work eventually, if the right supports were in place for them, and other barriers which currently keep them from being employed could get resolved. By the way, they never explained what *the right supports* means.

**Group three.** People who are on the system only because they are unemployed for the time being.

I worry that the hammer will come down hard on people in group two and three, that portion of ESIA clients that the department believes are able to work now or at some time in the future.

## My advice: don't get your hopes up!

During the session there was also a lot of talk about changing the current system into an income based system. Even though an allowance amount that clients would be receiving was not defined, they did speak about creating a liveable income. I found understanding that part confusing, and I was not at all sure what they were talking about.

Anyway, overall I got the gut feeling that the Department is still remaining secretive about what they are really doing to change the system. So my advice is, let's not get our hopes up!


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**Michael R  
Murphy**

Community Services wants to cut people off benefits and throw them out on the street. Because the far right establishment in Nova Scotia telling the MacNeil government what to do doesn't believe in welfare or supporting poor people. It's as simple as that.

[Reply to https://nsadvocate.org/2016/12/07/questions-and-worries-kendall-worth-on-income-assistance-transformation/#comment-1152](https://nsadvocate.org/2016/12/07/questions-and-worries-kendall-worth-on-income-assistance-transformation/#comment-1152)

**Dorothy**  
**(<http://none>)**

Good article Kendall. Doesn't sound like there are positive changes coming.

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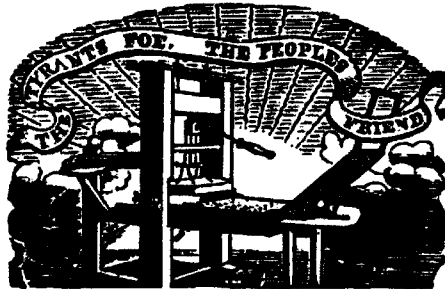
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## Group upset about Community Services welfare transformation

By [Robert Devet \(https://nsadvocate.org/author/robertdevet/\)](https://nsadvocate.org/author/robertdevet/) - December 16, 2016

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KJIPUKTUK (Halifax) – A group that advocates for people on welfare is very worried about the way *Income Assistance and Employment Support* (ESIA) programs are being transformed by the *Department of Community Services*.

*Rally at the constituency office of minister Joanne Bernard in Dartmouth. Photo Robert Devet*

Community Services initiated the transformation in 2015 because it wants to change how social services are designed, delivered, and managed within the province. Tenders for external consultants to assist with these changes are worth \$1.5 million, the CBC reported (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/nova-scotia-welfare-tenders-1.3291949>) at that time.



In November several members of the *Benefits Reform Action Group* (<https://www.facebook.com/BRAGNS/>) (BRAG) attended sessions in Halifax and Dartmouth meant to update stakeholders. These sessions are not to be confused with the updates provided to welfare recipients (<https://nsadvocate.org/2016/03/31/people-on-welfare-talk-back-to-community-services-first-voices-become-one-voice/>) earlier this year.

At the meetings members of the group heard that the overall income assistance budget will not increase, meaning that people on welfare will continue to fight a losing battle to make ends meet.

"It is our understanding that no new funding will be made available to increase the basic, shelter or special needs allowances received monthly by ESIA recipients," BRAG writes. "This decision fails to address the important fact that current ESIA rates are completely insufficient. We believe that no Departmental transformation will be successful unless this very basic fact is addressed."

Earlier Community minister Joanne Bernard appeared to suggest that such improvements would be part of the transformation.

"We are working on benefit reform to make sure we look at the longer term. We know that incremental changes, \$2 here and \$5 there, does not make a substantial difference in the lives of people," Bernard said in July 2015 (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/nova-scotia-income-assistance-remains-frozen-for-2nd-year-1.3144931>) in response to complaints about insufficient allowances.

BRAG members are also worried about DCS' strong emphasis on getting people off the welfare rolls, something they say became apparent during the information sessions.

"We are also troubled that the proposed streamlining and rationalization efforts are structured around a model that segments ESIA recipients according to their distance from the labour market, e.g. their ability to be employed," the letter states.

"This lens is too narrow and regressive which will lead to success being measured solely on the basis of people finding employment. We propose that the Department consider a model that is primarily based on the individual needs of recipients, e.g. their physical environment, educational needs, health requirements as they move toward independence and health," BRAG members wrote.

That's a mouthful, but what it really means is that BRAG wants DCS to address the many and varied immediate needs of the people in their care.

And it's an urgent matter. Keep in mind that kids go to bed hungry in Nova Scotia. (<https://nsadvocate.org/2016/11/24/child-poverty-in-nova-scotia-another-year-no-improvement/>)

*Click [here](https://nsadvocate.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/BRAGlettertoMLAsretransformation.pdf) (<https://nsadvocate.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/BRAGlettertoMLAsretransformation.pdf>) to read the BRAG letter to Nova Scotia MLAs.*


*Disclosure: The author at times does volunteer work for BRAG*


*In the unlikely event that you have a bit of money just sitting around, please support (<https://nsadvocate.org/donations/>) the Nova Scotia Advocate so that it can continue to cover issues such as poverty, racism, exclusion, workers' rights and the environment in Nova Scotia.*

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Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today about Special Needs funding through the Employment Supports and Income Assistance Program.

At the Department of Community Services, we provide some of our most vulnerable citizens with supports and services to help them get back on their feet, and to meet their ongoing needs.

To help move toward this goal of independence and self-sufficiency, ESIA gives financial assistance for basic needs, including food, clothing and shelter, employment supports and for specific special needs items.

Funding for special needs is also available to help people meet specific health and safety needs, or to support participation in employment/employability activities.

These may include:

- Transportation
- Pharmacare
- Child care
- Special diet
- Emergency dental
- Essential medical treatments
- Employment related needs
- Medical supplies and equipment

About 66% of our ESIA clients received some type of employment, medical and/or emergency-related special need each month in 2015-16 (at a cost of \$44,000,000).

As you know, our Department has been undergoing a significant transformation and redesign of our programs to ensure that they are as effective and efficient as they can be.

We are committed to a social service system that helps people become as independent as possible and reach their full potential. We want a system that makes it easy for Nova Scotians to find the services they need. And we want those services to be there for years to come.

Simply put, we want better results for Nova Scotians. To do this, we need to look at our programs and services from the perspective of the people who use them. And that's exactly what we have been doing.

Within ESIA, we are working towards simplifying the administrative burden experienced by clients and staff alike. The Employment Support and Income Assistance program needs to change and modernize to better serve Nova Scotians.

These changes include:

Simplifying the reporting requirements for our clients: Where possible, we reduced clients' reporting requirements so that only clients whose situation or income is expected to change will be required to report monthly.

The changes will also help clients understand the services provided by the department. We developed a client friendly and easy to understand document that will help our clients understand available supports and services.

It will improve clients' access to caseworkers: In particular, we have expanded an existing pilot to introduce a phone service line during work hours that improves clients' access to a caseworker to help them with their immediate needs.

The changes will increase response time and reduce confusion; We gave ESS caseworkers the ability to make certain child care and transportation payments. In this situation, clients can go directly to their ESS caseworker for quick ad hoc payments.

And it will simplify the language we use in our correspondence to clients, making it easier for them to read and understand the information coming from the department. We are also working on streamlining the ESIA medical form.

Our Minister has also recently announced enhancements to the Post-Secondary Special needs available to our clients. These supports include child care and transportation for clients participating in the Career Seek and Educate to Work programs offered through ESIA.

Our ESIA transformation is happening with the help, advice and feedback of our ESIA clients and stakeholders. So far, we've engaged over 180 clients in meaningful discussions in multiple First Voice focus group sessions, and received valuable feedback from them.

We recently held a second round of ESIA Stakeholder engagement sessions across the province to inform participants of the progress we have made to date through ESIA Transformation and to gain further feedback on topics including special needs.

We will create a program that is administratively simple, transparent, sustainable, empowering, and streamlined. It will be fair and easily understood by clients and stakeholders.

Changing the ESIA program overall will take some time. Community Services will continue meeting with interested individuals and groups over the coming months.