

## **Job cut decision went under minister's radar**

Social services workers told positions will be eliminated

Lana Haight, The StarPhoenix

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Social Services Minister Donna Harpauer learned her staff announced hundreds of job cuts when she read The StarPhoenix the day after the provincial budget was released.

"We'll be investigating as to who ultimately made this decision," Harpauer said in an interview Wednesday.

"I can only say it's unfortunate. I'm very disappointed. It has caused unnecessary alarm because it has not been approved by cabinet."

On March 19, while the provincial budget was being unveiled, about 400 employees with the Ministry of Social Services were called to meetings at their offices throughout the province. They were told the income assistance division was being "modernized," affecting about half of their jobs. Within four years, 75 positions would be eliminated and another 125 jobs transferred to a Regina call centre.

Harpauer says she learned of the four-year proposal in January at a pre-budget meeting with top department officials: The deputy minister, assistant deputy ministers and some program directors. She directed them to proceed with Year 1, which included upgrading computer equipment at the call centre and cutting about 12 positions through attrition. Harpauer says she did not approve the rest of the proposal, which included a change in the payment structure and a reorganization of the department by eliminating in-person service, replacing it with telephone service.

"Directing everyone through a call centre, I think, is impersonal. A lot of clients need one-on-one help and assistance with life-skills and direction, guidance, counselling," said Harpauer.

Under the current arrangement, operators at the Regina centre field calls, gathering basic information and booking appointments with social services workers located throughout the province.

NDP MLA Kevin Yates, a former minister of social services, questions how significant changes could be announced without the government's approval and the minister's knowledge.

"If you made decisions, stand up and be counted. And if you haven't made decisions, then deal with those who implemented it without your approval. That's the bottom line -- she's either the boss or not," said Yates.

Yates sees significant flaws with the proposal, which would more than double the size of the Regina call centre.

"They're eliminating the step of meeting with the social worker and they're decreasing the benefits," said Yates.

"It makes the system easier to hand out money, but there are no checks and balances."

On Wednesday, Harpauer was in the Saskatoon office, apologizing to staff members.

"What I said to employees? 'I'm very sorry. I don't think it was done respectfully.' My heart goes out to them. This was done just before a long weekend. I know they all probably had a very unsettled weekend," she said.

Harpauer says she isn't going to make a "knee-jerk" decision and fire any of her senior executives. An internal investigation is being delayed because the deputy minister is in hospital, she said.

"I don't want to make accusations blindly," she said.

"I don't want to think that they blatantly defied instructions, but I can't really comment at this point."

She also doesn't think she should resign as social services minister.

"It was done without my knowing it. I'm not sure how you can control that. Specific direction was given and it wasn't followed," said Harpauer. At next week's cabinet meeting, she plans to raise the leaking of the proposal -- as well as the proposal itself. She says she will recommend against its implementation.

The head of the union representing government workers hopes the whole mess is a bureaucratic mix-up.

"It wouldn't be the first time the bureaucrats were on a different page than the politicians. When that happens we try, as diplomatically as possible, to inform the politicians of it," said Bob Bymoan, president of the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union.

Bymoer says the union expects to meet with government representatives later this week.

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