

Wall backs Harpauer despite communication flub

James Wood, The StarPhoenix
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REGINA -- With Social Services Minister Donna Harpauer under fire from the NDP for government mishandling of restructuring within her ministry, Premier Brad Wall said she retains his confidence.

About 400 Social Services employees learned on March 19 -- provincial budget day -- of a four-year "modernization strategy" in the income assistance division that would see about 75 jobs eliminated and another 125 from around the province transferred to a call centre in Regina.

But after a story on the changes appeared in The StarPhoenix, Harpauer said she had only approved the first year of the plan, which includes upgrading computer equipment and the cutting of 12.5 jobs through attrition.

In the legislature Monday, Harpauer reiterated she told senior officials she had serious concerns about elements of the plan beyond the first year.

"I, as social services minister, take responsibility if some of my officials did not understand me," she said to laughter from the Opposition benches.

Harpauer said she had met with staff in Saskatoon and sent e-mails to apologize and clarify the government's position.

In an interview later, Harpauer said she was not comfortable the plan serves the needs of front-line workers or social services clients in the way it took away face-to-face contact.

"Until I am comfortable with that, it's not going forward. I need some comfort and I think there needs to be more consultation," she said.

Harpauer said she would bring a number of recommendations to cabinet to address the issues around the modernization strategy.

She plans consultations with employees on how the income assistance division operates unless cabinet says otherwise.

But NDP social services critic David Forbes said the minister's explanation of miscommunication between herself and officials doesn't cut it because

she would have signed off on a four-year plan for her department in the province.

He pointed out that Harpauer not only is a member of cabinet but a member of the Treasury Board.

"That's three separate, sure-fire ways that the minister should have known her plan for her ministry," said Forbes in question period, adding the issue raises doubts about Harpauer's ability to do her job.

Wall told reporters Harpauer had his confidence because she had taken responsibility and made amends to affected staff.

"I think acknowledging the challenge, the problem that existed with respect to this initiative and her ministry, quickly and acting quickly, is what people expect their government to do and in this case that is what the minister has done," he said.

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