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Standing Committee
on the
Economy

Department of Employment and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, April 14, 2009
6:31 p.m.

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[Mr. Campbell in the chair]

**Department of Employment and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: It is 6:31. Welcome to the meeting of the Standing Committee on the Economy. I'd ask the members to introduce themselves for the record, and I'd also ask that the minister introduce his officials that are with him here today.

Also, for the record, pursuant to Standing Order 56(2.4), Dr. Brown is substituting for Mr. Weadick tonight.

I'll start on my right.

Mr. Taylor: I'm Dave Taylor, MLA for Calgary-Currie and deputy chair of the committee.

Dr. Brown: Neil Brown. I'm the MLA for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Mr. Marz: Richard Marz, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Amery: Moe Amery, Calgary-East.

Ms Notley: Rachel Notley, Edmonton-Strathcona.

Mr. Allred: Ken Allred, St. Albert.

Mr. MacDonald: Hugh MacDonald, Edmonton-Gold Bar. Good evening.

The Chair: Robin Campbell, MLA for West-Yellowhead and the chair of the committee.

Did I forget you, Kevin? I'm sorry.

Dr. Taft: I'll help you remember me as the night goes on, Robin. Kevin Taft, Edmonton-Riverview.

The Chair: Sorry about that, Dr. Taft. Minister Goudreau.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good evening, everyone. I, too, am pleased to introduce my staff. I'm Hector Goudreau, MLA for Dunvegan-Central Peace and Minister of Employment and Immigration. To my immediate right is Shirley Howe, Deputy Minister of Employment and Immigration. On my left is Alex Stewart, assistant deputy minister for strategic corporate services division. Against the wall on my far right is Shelley Engstrom. She's the senior financial officer for Employment and Immigration. Janice Schroeder is our director of communications. Angela Woo is the deputy minister's executive assistant, and somewhere is Wendy Rodgers, my executive assistant. I guess Wendy has yet to come into the room, but she will a little later.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

We have two members that have just shown up. Mr. McFarland, would you like to introduce yourself?

Mr. McFarland: Barry McFarland from Little Bow.

The Chair: Mr. Xiao, introduce yourself, please.

Mr. Xiao: Okay. David Xiao, Edmonton-McClung.

The Chair: Thank you.

Okay. Pursuant to Standing Order 59.01 the main estimates of government departments for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010, stand referred to the policy field committees according to their respective mandates. I'd like to remind members that the vote on the estimates will be deferred until we are in Committee of Supply when consideration of all ministry estimates have concluded. You will note from the calendar that was tabled in the Assembly by the Government House Leader on March 12 that the date of the Committee of Supply vote has been set for May 7, 2009.

Should any amendments be moved during committee consideration of the estimates, the vote on these amendments will also be deferred until May 7, 2009. On the issue of amendments I would like to remind members that an amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. Amendments must be in writing, with sufficient copies for distribution to all committee members and support staff; that is, 20 copies. Members wishing to propose amendments are asked to consult with Parliamentary Counsel no later than 6 p.m. on the day that the amendment is to be moved.

Members are reminded that the standing orders of the Assembly governing who can speak apply during the policy field committee's consideration of the main estimates. Members of the committee, the minister, and other members present may be recognized to speak. Departmental officials and members' staff are permitted to be present during consideration of the estimates but are not allowed to speak. This is the same process that was previously followed during Committee of Supply consideration of the main estimates.

Hansard transcripts will be provided as quickly as possible, but House transcripts take precedence. *Hansard* staff will focus their efforts on producing Blues for all committees that meet to discuss the budget, with the final transcripts being produced as time allows. All Blues will as usual be available on the intranet site, Our House, and the printed copies will be available in the committee rooms' common area.

This evening we have three hours to consider the estimates of the Department of Employment and Immigration; however, if prior to this time we should reach a point where members have exhausted their list of questions, the department's estimates shall be deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and we will adjourn.

I'd like to remind members that pursuant to standing orders which came into effect on December 4, 2008, in particular Standing Order 59.01, the meeting will proceed as follows. For the first 10 minutes the minister will have the opportunity to present opening remarks. For an hour that follows members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Following that hour members of the third party and the minister may speak for a total of 20 minutes. Once that time has expired, any member may speak.

The chair will recognize members on a rotation basis between government members and the opposition. As is the practice in committee, members may speak more than once; however, speaking time is limited to 10 minutes at a time. A member and the minister may combine their speaking times for a total of 20 minutes. I would ask that members so advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they wish to combine their speaking time.

The committee clerk will operate the timers, one for the individual speaking times and the other for the overall committee meeting time. The chair will endeavour to alert the member or minister speaking when their time is close to expiring. Points of order will be dealt

with as they arise, and the clock will continue while these points are dealt with.

With that, I'll invite the Minister of Employment and Immigration to begin his remarks. What I'll do with the clock here: when you're getting close, I'll go like that, and that will mean that you have one minute left.

Mr. Minister, welcome, and the floor is yours.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Again, good evening to each and every one of you. I hope that everyone had a great Easter and a good long weekend. Earlier I introduced my staff, and I want to take just a few seconds here to thank my staff for their work, their dedication in helping me to prepare this particular budget that I'm presenting to you tonight. Without their help I would not be able to do the work that I'm able to do.

Mr. Chairman, life in Alberta is very different now than it was a year ago or even six months ago. My ministry has gone from dealing with labour shortages to responding to layoffs. You've seen the labour force statistics report. In March of this year Stats Canada reported a seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for Alberta of 5.8 per cent. Employment in our province fell by 15,000 people. Staff in our 59 offices are busy providing support both to Albertans who have been laid off and to the employers, who issued the layoff notices.

In 2009 Employment and Immigration's primary focus is to support Albertans through these challenging times. We are working hard to help individuals affected by the economic slowdown to find new work quickly or upgrade their skills. For those who need extra assistance, we provide income support and health benefits through our Alberta Works program. We're working to ensure that health, safety, and fairness remain top priorities in Alberta's workplaces.

Immigration has a deep history in Alberta, and we have many supports in place for newcomers to our province. We also look at Alberta's future labour needs, Mr. Chairman, and will implement strategies to build a workforce that will improve the long-run sustainability of our economy.

In a fiscally uncertain climate we are presenting a budget that balances the needs of Albertans with the realities of the economic situation. This year Employment and Immigration is committing \$1 billion to helping Albertans. This represents an increase of \$34 million in investments over our 2008-09 spending. I'll give you a brief overview of how we will be investing this money over the next 12 months.

As I mentioned, keeping people working and providing assistance for low-income Albertans remain our top priorities. Our employment programs account for \$795 million in expenditures, or 79 per cent of the ministry's total budget. We have increased funding to employment and training programs to \$164 million. Our programs provide career and employment services, including training, career planning, and assistance in finding and keeping work.

6:40

I'll give you an example of how these services are used. In February GE Money Canada closed their Edmonton call centre and announced 250 layoffs. Our Employment and Immigration staff contacted them shortly after the announcement and offered support. We set up a job fair with 20 different employers to help these people find new employment. Staff also talked with employees about their career options and the kind of training they would need to get a particular job as well as the tuition assistance that was available. Unfortunately, we're getting increased calls about layoffs, but this is the kind of work we do to help the individuals who are affected by the economic downturn.

An additional \$5.5 million will be allocated to workforce partnerships in order to enhance the skills of working Albertans to address common labour market needs. The purpose of these programs is to prepare our workforce for the future. Developing our labour workforce during this economic downturn is important because when the economy turns around, we will need people with the right skills.

Continuing the work of the building and educating tomorrow's workforce strategy, Employment and Immigration will develop an Alberta human capital plan that identifies shortages in critical occupations and provides a detailed response on how to address them to support Alberta's future labour force development.

Mr. Chairman, Albertans in need will receive \$361 million in income support payments and \$112 million in health benefits over the next year. While this represents a relatively small increase over what we spent last year, it's important to remember that we increased income support rates and health benefits as well as the maximum qualifying income levels last fall. This year's estimate of \$473 million for income support and health benefits represents an additional investment of \$70 million over our 2008-09 budget.

Keeping Alberta's workplaces healthy, safe, and fair has always been an important component of Employment and Immigration. When times are tough, it can be tempting for companies to cut costs in these areas. Our employment standards officers have been busier as Albertans are being laid off. To ensure that Albertans continue to be treated fairly, whether they're working or they've been laid off, we've allocated an additional \$1.2 million to this program. With the support of the Workers' Compensation Board \$26.2 million will fund various initiatives in workplace health and safety. These programs include the Work Safe Alberta three-year strategy, which will work to reduce workplace fatalities, injuries, and illness by an additional 25 per cent over the next three years. Workplace relationships, which includes mediation services, will receive \$3.6 million in funding.

On immigration. Our ministry remains committed to our immigration programs. The majority of the \$83.7 million allocated to immigration is dedicated to help immigrants in Alberta integrate and settle into their communities and to ensure that foreign-trained professionals are gainfully employed. We have allocated \$60 million for settlement, language, and bridging programs as well as living allowances for immigrants. We also provide funding to settlement agencies throughout the province to assist these newcomers with outreach, orientation, information and referral, interpretation and translation as well as supportive counselling.

Our spending commitment to international qualifications assessment services has more than doubled to help immigrants with the recognition of their qualifications in Alberta so these highly skilled people can fully participate in the labour force. This increase in funding will allow us to implement the foreign qualification plan, which will ensure that immigrants have easy access to information on how to obtain recognition of their credentials.

We will continue our work to attract labour to the province, although you'll note that we did not increase funding to this area. Labour attraction will continue to be an integral part of building Alberta's workforce in sectors that have persistent labour shortages, such as the health care sector.

We will continue to work with Advanced Ed and Technology and Health and Wellness to support the implementation of the health workforce action plan with \$45 million in funding. This plan will address the critical labour shortages in the health care sector by informing, attracting, developing, and retaining health professionals in Alberta.

There is also the \$10 million federal community development

trust that will be targeted to work with communities and develop training programs for individuals that have been affected by the industrial and economic downturn. These funds will also be allocated to programs to increase the number of aboriginal Albertans in the labour force to 74,000 by the year 2010.

The Labour Relations Board and the Appeals Commission for Alberta Workers' Compensation Board are important parts of this ministry. The Labour Relations Board will receive over \$3 million in funding, and we have allocated over \$10 million to the Appeals Commission to ensure that appeals are processed in a timely fashion.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to present this budget for this committee's review and will answer any questions the members may have. As well, if I don't have the answers, I will be happy to present a written response. I'm looking forward to the questions tonight.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Goudreau.

Dr. Taft, do you want to go ahead?

Dr. Taft: You bet. Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Just a query with the minister on procedures here. It's usually most normal and constructive to have a conversation back and forth as opposed to me talking for 10 minutes and you talking for 10 minutes.

Mr. Goudreau: Sure. I'm open to that.

Dr. Taft: Okay. That's great.

Probably it won't be a surprise to you that I'm going to open up by focusing on – well, it's goal 4 in the business plan: Alberta has a fair, safe and healthy work environment. I'm assuming that in the fiscal line items it's probably vote 3.3, workplace health and safety. I'm on page 87 of the business plan, goal 4: "As part of making Alberta's workplaces world class, Employment and Immigration will emphasize the importance of safe workplaces and reduce the incidence of work-related injuries and illnesses." It goes on at length there.

I want to focus on farm safety, which I feel needs some desperate work here. Alberta trails the country. It's not that it isn't world class; it trails the whole country, much less leads the world. I've raised this issue, as you know, in the Legislature a number of times. There's been confusion among the Premier and cabinet ministers about whether or not there is a review on farm safety under way and the way that it's handled and whether we're going to bring in protection for paid farm workers or not. The Premier has indicated that there is a review under way, and I believe you or the minister of agriculture has indicated that there isn't. So my first question: is there a review actively under way to look at upgrading farm safety standards in Alberta and, in particular, extending the rights that all other paid workers in Alberta have to paid farm workers?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, Mr. Chairman, the Member for Edmonton-Riverview asks a question that's very dear to me. I spent my whole life working in agriculture prior to becoming a politician, born and raised on a farm and working with farm families for over 27 years. There's no doubt that the last thing that farmers want are injuries or deaths on their individual farms, whether it's caused by themselves or by outside sources.

6:50

I also am fairly well aware of the hard work that staff from ARD are doing to enhance or at least bring forward the issues of farm safety. As an example, groups like the ag societies have taken farm

safety as a strong mandate. The ag service boards, the seed cleaning plant organizations, everybody that I meet in the farm community talks about farm safety. There are even little stickers that were developed for people to put on their individual equipment that say, "Make sure we come back home safe," those kinds of things. So in that particular culture, in the agricultural community, there is a strong sense of farm safety already.

The other thing that we need to keep in mind is that individual farms are not only a place where people go to work; they're a place where families live, where they raise their children, where they come to visit. Generally speaking, it's hard to make that distinction between the actual work environment and a living environment as we tend to have totally different environments in urban centres or small communities, where you go to work and you come back home. There they're home and often are at work.

There's no doubt that we looked at the Chandler inquiry and the results that were there, and we're certainly looking at the judge's recommendations very, very seriously. The minister of agriculture and myself as Minister of Employment and Immigration have met now a couple of times, one very formally and a couple of times informally, to talk about farm safety and what we can do to enhance farm safety beyond what is actually happening as we speak.

Yes, we have asked the staff, and I believe we're just finalizing a contract with a private individual to actually go on farms and to talk to individual groups to see what else could be done when it comes to farm safety, especially focusing on corporate farms, especially focusing on farms that do hire additional help aside from their family, and then trying to focus on maybe those areas where it's questionable whether the farm is a farm or a processing plant, so trying to get better clarification and definitions of all these. We're expecting this individual to come back with some recommendations that we will look at, and this is to happen over the next few months.

Dr. Taft: Okay. I appreciate that. So that would be the consultation, I guess, that the Premier has referred to or something like that.

I look at the budget here. I'm looking at page 151 under 3.3, workplace health and safety, and there's about \$26 million or so that you're asking us to approve for that. I try to connect that to the goal which is in your business plan: making Alberta's workplaces world class. I know that other provinces – B.C., Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec – all the other provinces, in fact, have sorted out the kinds of problems you identified on farms. They've been able to work out in Saskatchewan and B.C. what counts as a farm and what doesn't and what counts as a family farm and what counts as a paid farm. They've been able to implement all kinds of activities: legislative activities, educational activities, and so on. They actually have real standards. They extend WCB to paid farm workers. They allow them the right to organize, which the Supreme Court of the country has ruled in favour of and has said that Alberta is offside of the Charter on.

When you're asking us to vote millions and millions of dollars to make this a world-class setting for workplace safety, I can't support it unless I see some action. I don't know why we're allowing Alberta's paid farm workers to be at the absolute bottom of the class nationally when your goal is to be the best in the world and we're giving you \$25 million to do it. Why is this happening? Why does Alberta sit at the bottom of the ladder when every other province exceeds it? Do you not have enough money? Is it just because the budget is not big enough, or is it a matter of political will?

Mr. Goudreau: If I may, Mr. Chairman, certainly the request is not coming from family farms or from farm members themselves.

We've had requests coming in from a number of individuals, and the group is rather small, in terms of saying that we need to do more on farms. But, as I indicated, we've hired a consultant, and he is gathering feedback and will be providing input to us we hope by the summer.

I hate to use numbers, Member for Edmonton-Riverview, but when I look at the numbers of farms that are registered – and farms can vary quite dramatically in terms of what constitutes a farm – when I compare the numbers and the number of incidents that are occurring on other farms compared to what we're experiencing in Alberta, our numbers are certainly not any higher. They're, in fact, lower in a lot of instances. I believe they're lower on a per capita basis or on a per-farm basis than they are in B.C. or Saskatchewan or even Manitoba.

Dr. Taft: Would you be able to table that, then? I'd be very interested to see.

Mr. Goudreau: I don't have the numbers here, but I could provide those particular numbers to you.

Dr. Taft: Thanks.

Mr. Goudreau: Certainly, we are looking at, you know, maybe a clearer definition of what constitutes corporate farms and what constitutes the hiring of staff, recognizing that there's a huge difference between allowing a neighbour to come and give you a hand for a couple of days versus somebody that might hire individuals on a year-round basis.

There are still quite a number of farmers who provide WCB coverage to their employees. It's on a voluntary basis, but WCB is available to them. The farmers are still open to lawsuits by individuals getting hurt on their particular farm if they're found negligent. So those are still there for employees to go back to the operation.

Dr. Taft: Okay. I'll turn it over to my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. Good evening. I must say that this budget process, even as it is unfolding, is disrespectful, Mr. Chairman, I believe, to the taxpayers of this province. It certainly is not an improvement. We're looking at a budget here that is billions of dollars in deficit, we're looking at changing the Fiscal Responsibility Act to facilitate this government's mismanagement, and we have so little time to deal with each and every department regardless of the size of it.

In light of that time restraint I should get on the record some of my questions. It'll be like every other year, Mr. Minister: we make recommendations and suggestions, and we don't hear from you. Last year I can recall debating this department, and you were going to look into some things not only on our behalf but on behalf of workers and taxpayers. We haven't heard from you.

My first question will be around the hosting expenses of this department, Employment and Immigration. I was astonished to learn from a government spokesman via the media that there is no formal budget for hosting expenses in excess of \$600. In the *Alberta Gazette* in 2007 Employment and Immigration spent \$10,000 on hosting expenses in excess of \$600 at various times and various locations. Last year you spent \$83,000, which is a huge increase in hosting expenses. Where would I find in your government estimates an allocation for hosting expenses over \$600?

Thank you.

7:00

Mr. Goudreau: Well, Mr. Chair, first and foremost, I just want to indicate to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar – and I would challenge you to look in last year's *Hansard* when we debated our budget – that for all the promises I made that I would send information back to you, I did that. Furthermore, throughout the year in question period I indicated to the hon. member that I would return information to the member via letters and written information. I'm very astute to that. I do make it a very strong point to respond to those questions that I have not been able to respond to. If I've made an indication that I would respond and write to you, I have done that. I can remember in the last couple months sending you specifically, hon. member, letters to respond to additional information that you requested. So to indicate to me that I'm not following up on some of the comments that I've made, to me, is totally wrong. You know, I find it somewhat offensive, Mr. Chairman, that this member would challenge me to that particular extent.

When it comes to hosting expenses, the hosting expenses are spread throughout the budget. Individual sections, or parts, of the ministry have the ability to do some hosting. Those expenses are in fact allocated throughout individual groups or budgets. Each ADM is responsible to manage that portion of the particular budget. As part of the overall budget for this particular year we've agreed as the minister and my staff to look at a 10 per cent reduction in hosting expenses. We're trying to be a little bit more strategic in terms of, you know, the various groups that we meet and the work that we do throughout the community and the expenses that we might have when it comes to hosting. So our target is a 10 per cent reduction for this year's budget in hosting expenditures.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Before I get to my next question, for the record, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Minister, last year we talked about moving the monument for injured and deceased workers, which is a flame over on the south side of the Legislative Assembly, to a more visible and permanent location where people could gather to pay their respects. In the last year we have seen 166 Albertans through no fault of their own lose their lives as a result of their workplace. I didn't hear from you on that, nor have I heard from you on the request, and it is a valid request – many Alberta workers, including those that are involved in the welding trade, have a rate of cancer that is higher than the provincial average in any region. I have not heard from you. I haven't heard a thing.

My next question will be this: how much in hosting expenses under \$600, which are not publicly disclosed, is budgeted this year in Employment and Immigration?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, I don't have those exact numbers in terms of how many there are throughout the whole ministry. I'm not sure in terms of exact numbers there.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you. My next question would be around the unemployment statistics. I don't think there's a member around this table that doesn't have concern about what has unfolded since January. It is not the hon. minister that indicated this but, certainly, the minister of finance who suggested that we would only have a net reduction of 15,000 jobs throughout the calendar year of 2009. In the first three months of this year we see, unfortunately, an average of about 15,000 job losses per month. This is very, very concerning.

We had the third-lowest unemployment rate in the country, behind Manitoba and Saskatchewan, but with unemployment at its highest rate in years, does the department feel that this increase in funding

under section 2.2 of the estimates on page 150 is adequate to address the number of unemployed Albertans who will need these programs? I would certainly remind the minister that in the age group between 15 and 24 there is an unemployment rate of over 11 per cent.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chair, there's no doubt that we are very, very concerned about the level of unemployment rates in the province of Alberta. For the third consecutive month we've seen an increase in unemployment statistics. We are still behind Manitoba and Saskatchewan. There's no doubt that the world economic situation is causing our numbers in Alberta to rise as they are in virtually every jurisdiction across North America.

There are quite a number of things that we are involved with and that we are doing. Generally our mandate is to try to help Albertans find work as quickly as possible or take this particular time to upgrade their skills. As I indicated, I believe, in my opening comments, a total of \$180 million has been allocated to employment and training programs and partnerships with industry and employers. You know, these dollars will fund a wide range of career and employment services to help laid-off workers find new jobs. Those are workers here as well as our aboriginal workers. We are working with the community development trust fund – there's \$10 million, which is an increase of \$5 million over last year – that is being targeted to work with communities and to develop training programs for individual Albertans that have been, again, adversely affected by the recent downturn in the industrial sector, the forestry sector, and the construction sector. This will also fund efforts to increase the number of aboriginal people in the labour force.

Generally we're also still negotiating and finalizing our agreement with the federal government. It's not included as part of this budget, but we're expecting another \$49 million in federal dollars to help us do the kinds of things that I've just indicated. We anticipate finalizing and signing this agreement within a month or so here.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I can appreciate it when you note the \$180 million in spending, but specifically two elements here, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, the career development services and the basic skills and academic upgrading. The funding for career development services is \$2.4 million less than what was forecast in 2008-09. Why is this? Also, the funding for basic skills and academic upgrading is \$2.4 million less than what was forecast. Why is that, when we have unemployment rates that are, unfortunately, going through the roof?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, it is a good question. As I indicated, the majority of the \$48 million that we're negotiating with the federal government will go in this particular area exactly. So you can anticipate that we're just virtually days away from signing the agreement with the federal government, and that's where the extra \$48 million will mostly be spent.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. Again on page 150 of the government estimates the forecast amounts spent for 2008-09 on disability-related employment supports was \$3.5 million less than budgeted. What accounted for this decrease?

Mr. Goudreau: You're looking at the number \$9,761,000 going to \$14 million? That's right. The lower number there was because we signed the LMA agreements partway through the year, and now we're looking at a full year's funding. Is that the question you were asking, you know, why we've gone from \$9 million to \$14 million? The \$9.7 million was dollars we used for only part of a year rather than a full year.

7:10

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I appreciate that.

Now, we know in the last year that you have been travelling abroad – I won't say extensively, but you've hit a few high spots – recruiting temporary foreign workers. The temporary foreign worker program I think has been a disaster from the get-go. I spoke to an individual on Easter Monday, an individual from Germany who was part of the recruitment in 2007, another German worker, this one, oddly enough, living in St. Albert. The experience that they have had, this gentleman and his family, has been awful. What other new initiatives will the government be starting to address the increase in unemployment? I suggested that you work with Ms Ambrose, the Minister of Labour, to see if we could get some changes to the EI rules or the eligibility rules. What other initiatives are you working on?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, first, just a couple of comments on the trips that we did. Our first trip was to both Germany and England, where we did focus on workers, part of the trip emphasizing not only the temporary foreign worker program but emphasizing the full immigration program. The majority of our focus was around health and health care workers, professionals in the health system. We knew that in England there are about 30,000 people who leave England on a regular basis. We also know that there are a few hundred thousand people that are Canadians that are living in London, for instance, alone. A lot of them are saying: we want to move somewhere else. Our message at that particular time in those particular countries was: if you're looking at moving somewhere, please consider Alberta to come and work.

On our Asian trip we were in Korea, the Philippines, China, and Australia. The hon. member will know that a lot of our temporary workers do come from those particular countries as well as the U.S.A. and Mexico. Again, we were trying to focus on better systems and agreements in terms of how we would better assure suitable treatment of workers when they are here on their contracts. For instance, the agreement that we signed with the Philippine government was to ensure that the workers that were coming here were prepared to come here, that they were aware of the situation they were coming into in Alberta as well as making sure that they were not being charged exorbitant fees to come and work here as well as assuring ourselves that when temporary workers are in Alberta, they are treated like any other worker is treated in this particular province, that they have a safe environment, that they are secure, that their pay is on time, that they are, you know, not expected to work exorbitant hours. They are treated with respect and dignity when they are here in the province of Alberta.

As far as new things that we're doing, we are very much working very, very closely with the federal minister to look at changes to the employment insurance program. We know that there are quite a number of Albertans that do qualify for employment insurance. There are Albertans already that benefit from some of the changes that were made to employment insurance, and those changes were negotiated with the federal government prior to the release of the budget.

I did write to Minister Finley in December of this particular year indicating that, you know, somebody that's unemployed in Alberta has the same needs and demands and issues as anyone unemployed elsewhere in the country and that we are trying to see that the scope of the program, the eligibility, and the duration of benefits are equal for all Canadians, including those that live in Alberta. For the time being, there are certain distinctions amongst the recipients, and we're working with the federal government to ensure that these distinctions are eliminated.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Our records indicate that only 1 in 3 unemployed Albertans currently are eligible for EI.

Does the minister acknowledge that the temporary foreign workers face unfair working conditions and are not afforded the same rights as other workers? They don't have the same rights as landed immigrants or Canadian citizens because they don't have freedom of movement, for one thing. They're restricted and limited by their visa. I think that to say that they have the same rights is wrong, just flat-out wrong. Given all the flaws in the temporary foreign worker program when will this government end the program, allow those who are currently here to finish their stay and their work period on their visa and move towards immigration, which is fair and permanent, such as the Alberta immigrant nominee program?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much for the question. When I talk about how the temporary foreign workers have the same rights as any other workers – you're right when it comes to freedom of movement across the nation. They do come to Alberta with a particular contract. There is a linkage with an employee and an employer that's created. There is an onus on the worker to work for that particular individual as long as there's work there. If the worker chooses to leave or wants to do something different, he must have permission, again, from the federal government to work for another employer that has a labour market opinion that will allow them to hire another temporary foreign worker, allow that particular individual to go from one job to the other.

Once the permit expires, there's an expectation that that particular worker would go back home. Keep in mind, Mr. Chair, that the temporary foreign worker is exactly that. It's a temporary foreign worker program. The word "temporary" indicates that they are here for a particular purpose, whether they're here for the season, as in the agricultural sector – and quite a number of them are showing up at our doorsteps as we speak; they're here till fall, and then they go back home – or they come on a one-year permit. Others might come on a two-year permit.

The emphasis of our particular government is to make sure that Albertans have priority. We are wanting to make sure that individual Albertans have first choice for getting employment. Then we open it up to any Canadians that want to work in this particular province. Within that we are making a strong emphasis on mature workers, on disabled individuals in the province, on our aboriginal communities, and on our youth. If they want to work and have that particular opportunity, they would have first choice.

Our second choice, then, becomes the temporary foreign worker program, which – and I need to remind the member – is a federal program. It's a program that we take advantage of as a particular province to fill very special requirements that certain companies need. Our unemployment numbers are certainly going up, but there are still companies who are looking for people, and there are still a number of individuals that are short of workers. There's still a role for the temporary foreign worker program to fill that particular void.

7:20

We're doing a lot of other things to help our temporary foreign workers. We've opened up a couple of advisory offices, one here in Edmonton and another one in Calgary, where we do spend a lot of time with workers that may have individual concerns. We've translated a lot of information into various languages to make sure that the temporary workers might have access to the information in a language that he or she can understand. We respond to phone calls in well over a hundred different languages, I believe, that individuals can access. We've got a system whereby we can detect languages and respond to individual languages to help them. We've added

inspectors. We've beefed up our inspection process to look at the employers who do hire temporary foreign workers. We're doing more aggressive inspections of their premises. We respond to whatever complaints we get, all in light of protecting temporary foreign workers.

Notwithstanding, the immigration program is still a very, very important program for the province of Alberta. Every year we bring in anywhere from 22,000 to 23,000 permanent immigrants to this province. That program is ongoing. I believe that there are about 250,000, 260,000 immigrants that are allowed to come into Canada, and we get about 10 per cent of those particular immigrants. This country was built on immigration and immigrants. We believe in that. We believe in immigrants as the foundation for the province, for the future of this particular province.

In the short term, as our economy really evolves and develops, we've got shortages. Last year I think we peaked at about 57,000 temporary workers in this province. Without them there are a lot of us that would not have been able to receive the type of services that we expect to receive as we move about this province. So there's still a good strong role for that.

Having said that, again, we don't expect that the federal government will approve as many positions under the temporary foreign worker program. The rules are tightening up. They have changed whereby the employers have to advertise a lot longer. They have to show that they've done a better job of advertising. They have to show that there's nobody else within the province or within Canada that can fill that particular position or is willing to fill that particular position before they will get permission to bring in a temporary foreign worker.

We did peak. I don't anticipate that those numbers are going to stay as high in the next short while. But as the economy turns around, I still believe that the temporary workers will provide a valuable service to ourselves as Albertans.

The Chair: Mr. MacDonald, do you want to continue?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, when we look at this department, I would remind the minister that not only is it employment; it's immigration as well. I don't think he can just pass the buck to the federal government because it was one of your former colleagues, Dr. Oberg, who signed the original memorandum of understanding to initiate this temporary foreign worker program.

I, too, would agree with you that this country is built on immigration, but I would remind you at the same time that we have recently had to make a public apology to two groups which we mistreated because of a flawed immigration policy. Hopefully, we won't have to do it again with this temporary foreign worker program.

Now, I have, quickly, three questions. Speaking of numbers, does the department know the average wage of a temporary foreign worker here in Alberta? Can the department tell us how many temporary foreign workers in Alberta are currently without health coverage? If the government is planning on continuing with the flawed temporary foreign worker program, how many new workers does it plan to have in Alberta over the next two years, both in per-year increases and in total numbers?

Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau: Just a very, very quick comment on the wages. The wages are set by the federal government. They're set on a regional basis, and the wages have to be equal to or above those wages that are typically paid in that same business or that same enterprise in the region where the temporary worker will be working. As an example, if a temporary worker is working for Tim Hortons in Fort McMurray

and they are paying the other employees \$15 an hour, that temporary worker has to earn that same amount of money. If they're working in Edmonton, where Tim Hortons is paying \$12 an hour, then the temporary worker can earn that level of dollars. It's regionally set, and it's not meant to compete or lower other wages. They have to pay what the going wages are for a particular district or area in the province of Alberta.

I don't have the average wages for temporary workers. Generally the temporary workers tend to work in lower paid occupations. I'm suggesting the hospitality industry, some of the home care types of areas. I would suspect that the wages would maybe be a little lower than the average in the province of Alberta, but I don't have those numbers. We don't keep track of average wages of temporary workers across the province.

My understanding is that, as well, on health coverage the temporary workers are covered to what their employers have for their employees. Up until the elimination of the Alberta health care premiums it was my understanding that they were paying their premiums so that they could access health care.

We certainly expect a lot less temporary foreign workers this year and next compared to the past year. There's no doubt about that. You know, as we see our unemployment levels climb and because it is and will be much harder to bring in temporary workers, we expect our numbers to go down.

Mr. MacDonald: I have one more question, Mr. Chairman, and then I'm going to cede the questions to Kevin.

Mr. Minister, are you aware of any temporary foreign workers here in Alberta that are being hired as strikebreakers, or scabs, on any legal strikes?

Mr. Goudreau: Are you talking about the Valleyview situation?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes.

Mr. Goudreau: My understanding is that the employer has a number of facilities that he runs, and he's been able to move people around to accommodate the Valleyview situation in southern Alberta. That's the only one that I know of that is using temporary workers in that particular situation. I'm not aware if they're all temporary workers or if there are permanent workers that he has moved from one facility to the other to accommodate the needs of the patients that are in that facility.

Mr. MacDonald: They are temporary foreign workers, and they have restrictions and limitations put on their visa, so how can this employer move them around to be used as strikebreakers in a legal strike? Does that not concern you?

Mr. Goudreau: I don't have the full details on that. Certainly, they're contracted to work with an employer. I'm not sure if there are regulations around that in terms of where that employer would ask them to work.

Mr. MacDonald: Each visa – and I've seen hundreds of them from temporary foreign workers – is explicit on where that person can work and who they can work for. There are restrictions and limitations put on them. So I'm quite surprised that your department is not on top of this if these individuals are being moved around and used as strikebreakers during a legal job action. I can't understand why you're not putting a stop to this.

Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau: I'll take that as a comment.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to ask a bit about communications in the department. I'm not sure which line item in the budget this would come under. I'm looking at the government's directory, communications, dated January 30, 2009, for each department. There's a surprising number of communications people in Employment and Immigration. There is a director and an assistant director of communications. There are seven public affairs officers, a student public affairs officer, an office manager, and an administrative assistant. Now, the list here says that this includes both PAB and ministry staff. I guess my first question is: which positions are PAB and which are ministry staff, and what's the nature of that relationship?

7:30

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much for the question. You are probably alluding to line 1.0.5, communications, where we had last year \$724,000, and this year our estimate is \$711,000. That's the level of dollars that we are spending on communications.

Dr. Taft: Just for clarification on that, there are 12 staff people listed here in the department working on communications. Does that \$711,000 include all 12 and all their expenses and activities and everything or is there communications turning up somewhere else or is some of it covered under the Public Affairs Bureau?

Mr. Goudreau: There would be a few of those members covered under the PAB. That's right. There are probably nine or 10 being paid by the ministry and then probably a couple by PAB. It'd be maybe three.

Dr. Taft: Okay. And what's the nature of the relationship between the PAB and the department's communications people?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, I think there is a need to co-ordinate messages to make sure that, you know, the overall government message goes out to the clients that we work with. There is a co-ordinated approach. We work very, very closely with a number of ministries in this government, specifically children's services, our seniors' ministry, and there are a couple of other ministries that we do work very, very closely with. It's important that we do have the same message going throughout the system.

We've got a group of offices, and you're aware that we deal with thousands of clients right across the province. We've got a regional system that we utilize. We've got 59 offices across the province under that regional structure. There is a need to meet clients' expectations and to make sure that the message to our southern clients is the same to our northern ones, so the relationship needs to be very, very tightly knit.

Dr. Taft: All right. Another question, then, on vote 2, employment, which is the biggest chunk, as the minister has pointed out, \$795 million basically, of the department. I think we all need to consider the basis of this forecast budget, which has to be heavily influenced by the unemployment rate. The government, as the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar pointed out, has sort of staked out a claim that there will be 15,000 job losses this year in Alberta, and we're already running that much every month. My concern is that the basis of this budget is perhaps based on the province only losing 15,000 jobs, when, in fact, we're already way, way past that. Do you understand where I'm going with this?

My first question, I guess, would be: is this budget based on the

forecast of 15,000 job losses, or did you do your own forecast somewhere in one of these items? And if you did your own forecast, what was that forecast for job losses? And if you didn't, if you relied on the finance minister's forecast, is there some sensitivity analysis in this budget? It's going to be, I think, desperately out of whack in a big hurry.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you for those. Those are good comments. I know that 79 per cent, basically, of our full budget is in the area of employment. The whole idea is to bridge individuals from the time they lose a job, for instance, till employment insurance triggers in. We're working with the feds to shorten that time frame, to try to get the employment insurance to trigger much quicker.

We anticipate that in terms of job losses there's no doubt that we'll still see additional job losses in the foreseeable future, but we anticipate these numbers to level off as spring comes around and our construction sector starts over again or even our provincial budgets will trigger activities to build our roads, our schools, or our hospitals. I think the finance minister indicated that for every billion dollars that is being spent, there's a potential to keep another 11,000 or 12,000 people working. Typically we've got increased employment on farms, as I indicated.

We anticipate those numbers to level off. Inasmuch as we're seeing dramatic increases in numbers, I don't anticipate that those numbers will continue to increase at the pace that they are presently increasing. I'm sensing that we're going to level off.

If I may continue?

Dr. Taft: Sure. I just want to make sure that we're on the same . . .

Mr. Goudreau: Our goal, then, and our big emphasis is to take individuals and move them into training and employment as quickly as possible. That's our overall goal. Our staff have been doing a tremendous job in being able to do that. Just a couple of weeks ago I visited our employment office here. They changed the process that they're using in the office to deal with individuals much quicker.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Let me try to narrow my question down here. From what you've described, if the unemployment rate goes higher, your budget is going to cost more. Your budget is going to go up. The government seems to have staked out a position that there will only be 15,000 job losses in Alberta. We're way past that already. So unless it not only stops dropping but actually has a dramatic recovery, we're going to have a lot more people out of work than 15,000, which means that this budget isn't going to be enough. It's a hard-core budget question. Have you done a sensitivity analysis? What are the odds that this budget is going to make it through to the end of the year without getting dramatically changed?

Mr. Goudreau: I need to go back. I cannot control the unemployment numbers. You know, those things are happening, although we can create the environment to try to stimulate jobs and to make sure that people will continue to hire individuals.

My earlier comments were about the agreement that we're about to sign with the federal government in anticipation of those numbers changing and being able to respond to that. Although our numbers appear to be rather small, add another \$48 million to those particular numbers, and that's the agreement that we're about to sign here. Spread that over there, and that will indicate quite a dramatic increase in our overall budget dollars. If you look at our numbers and those dollars that we're negotiating with the federal government, that is all part of our preparation of this particular budget in terms of our ability to be able to respond to higher unemployment numbers.

Dr. Taft: Good luck.

The Chair: Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to move an amendment, if I could, please. I will hold on while this amendment is passed around. I think we have the required number of copies there. I should hold onto one for myself as well. I'll take a couple of minutes, if I can, while those are passed out.

The Chair: Has everybody got copies?

Mr. Taylor.

7:40

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll read this into the record. I move that

the estimates for strategic corporate services under reference 1.0.3 of the 2009-2010 main estimates of the Department of Employment and Immigration be reduced by \$42,000 so that the amount to be voted for expense and equipment/inventory purchases is \$1,015,314,000.

A word of explanation about this, and in order to do that, I'll refer back to an exchange that happened between the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and the minister quite early on in this hour, where the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was asking about hosting expenses, which had jumped from about \$10,000 two fiscal years ago to \$83,000 last fiscal year. In response to the member's questions the minister said that his department was targeting a 10 per cent reduction in hosting expenses this year coming up no doubt in an effort to bring a little bit of discipline to bear on the hosting expenses that have broken out across the breadth and depth of this department.

This motion is designed to bring a little more discipline to bear in these tough times. I would not want to deny the ministry or the minister any of the money that he has budgeted or needs to spend on helping those 45,000 or so Albertans who have already lost their jobs and however many more may lose their jobs. Along with the minister I certainly hope that those numbers recover and that we do bounce back to a net job loss of 15,000 before this calendar year is out, although I remain less optimistic than either the minister here tonight or the minister of finance on that one.

I think that that money is very definitely going to be needed, every penny of it and probably more than is budgeted here. However, I'm a strong proponent of the notion, within the context of a \$36 billion, \$37 billion budget, that in times like these there's a real necessity to choose your priorities in terms of where you're going to spend and reallocate your spending so that the people in the province of Alberta are getting the most bang for the government's budgetary buck. With that in mind, I think it's timely and appropriate to cut the budget for the hosting expenses from what they were last year to a budget that would be essentially half of that, 50 per cent of that.

Those are my remarks, Mr. Chairman, and I'll see where it goes from here.

The Chair: Okay. We have an amendment that will be tabled to be voted on May 7, 2009.

You have four minutes left. Mr. MacDonald, do you have any other questions?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, I do.

The Chair: Or Dr. Taft?

Dr. Taft: I have lots, but you go ahead.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I'm still curious about the use of these temporary foreign workers as replacement workers, or scabs, on a legal strike. How long has the department known about that practice?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is making assumptions. You know, he indicated that those individuals are scabs or that those individuals are illegal workers on that particular work site. I submit to you, Mr. Chair, that I don't know that there are, in fact, illegal workers there or that the employer did not have permission from the federal government to move those individuals from one of his job sites to that particular job site. So I'm not aware that there's anything illegal going on in that particular situation.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Well, I realize the federal government is investigating this, but I'm surprised that your department is not.

Now, briefly touching on labour relations. To maintain independence and impartiality with the Labour Relations Board, there have been some issues come up in the past around the drafting of legislation and who got to see it and when. Does the minister consider, whether it's the Labour Relations Board or the Appeals Commission of the WCB, the fact that achievement bonuses – and I must recognize that they're no longer, at least I hope they're no longer, going to be paid out in this fiscal year. How can those boards and those commissions be independent and impartial whenever they're reliant on a judgment call from the department regarding the size of their bonus?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, the relationship is very, very independent, and we do our best to make sure that the quasi-judicial process is followed. The bonuses are preset. They're fixed. They know what they will anticipate as part of the negotiations that we do with them. They've got their mandate to operate, and they do operate, as I indicated, as a quasi-judicial system. We do not assess and indicate the bonuses. That's a process internal to them and themselves alone.

Mr. MacDonald: The Labour Relations Board, the Workers' Compensation Board, and the Appeals Commission will still in this fiscal year that we're discussing this evening be eligible for achievement bonuses?

Mr. Goudreau: Yes, they will be.

Mr. MacDonald: They will still be eligible. Okay. Just to clarify, the Labour Relations Board and the Appeals Commission?

Mr. Goudreau: As far as I know, they will be. Yes.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay.

Now, could you tell me the . . .

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. MacDonald. It's time, but I'll let you finish your question.

Minister, if you can keep your answer short.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I really appreciate that.

On page 151 of your budget estimates, the workers' compensation medical panels, element 3.5.1, the medical panels for the Alberta Workers' Compensation Board are estimated to be \$304,000. The 2008-09 budget was a little over a million dollars. Why is it so much less? Is there no need for these medical panels or what?

Thanks.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chair, there were a number of costs that we thought we would be picking up that were actually picked up by the board themselves, so we did not incur those particular costs.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Notley, it's your turn. You have 20 minutes. Do you want to just go back and forth with the minister?

Ms Notley: Absolutely. I'd like to go along the same way you have been already.

I guess I'll start maybe with the area under employment, that big-ticket item, that \$794,000,000, and try to follow up on some of the questions that have already been asked. We've already talked, of course, about the change, the really significant change, in unemployment since last year as well as, I think, even since this budget was first put in place. I mention that because I was just looking at the business plan, and I look at your strategic priorities. I note that priority 1 is still talking about managing the pressures, there being too much demand for employment and not enough people to fill that demand, and that's your number one strategic priority. It's a little concerning that that's still in your business plan at this point.

Then I note that under goal 5 at the very end of it the last of about four sentences is about you wanting to "assist those who are unable to find employment, help people who are working remain employed and ensure those unable to work meet their basic needs." That sort of takes up about one-third of your fifth strategic priority. So I am also concerned that this budget and this plan were not really designed with a view to today's realities.

Just to get right to the heart of it, we've talked about unemployment numbers changing. We've had discussions about your caseloads. I know that there was some information that came out fairly recently, and I'm wondering if you can just give me numbers in terms of what your most recent caseload amounts are compared to this time last year and what that increase is month over month. What do you have for the most recent months? Can you do that?

7:50

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much. First, I want to emphasize that we are experiencing a higher unemployment level right now, but our long-term plan for this particular province is still to see this province grow and develop and expand. We want to make sure that we're going to be there and we're going to be ready to have the right people with the right skills at the right place at the right time. We experienced some severe pressures six months ago and a year ago, and we anticipate going back to that particular situation. Our business plan is built over three years, keep in mind, so although we're experiencing a dip here, we think that in the long run we're going to see ourselves going back to a situation where we're going to be crying for the right people to come to the province. You know, there's no doubt that we still anticipate some huge growth. That's why we still have that priority 1 as one of our priorities.

As part of the fact that our monies are quite similar to last year, you'll recall two things. One is that we did some big changes last fall. We've added some dollars, and that was part of our supplementary budgets that we debated earlier in this session. As well, there are federal dollars coming into our picture. That's taken into consideration when we look at the overall budget that we've planned.

When it comes to caseloads, in terms of those individuals that are expected to work and that we're helping now or the not-expected-to-

work categories, I don't have the February or March numbers, but I do have April, May, and June numbers. For instance, they tended to run around 26,300 to about 26,700 at the beginning of the year. Now in January, February, and March we've gone to between 29,500 and about 31,500 for caseloads. We've got a monthly average of 27,800 as we speak. That's the average caseload that we're carrying and helping.

Ms Notley: Right. I think it's kind of difficult to really get a good assessment of that if you're not doing month-over-month comparisons.

Mr. Goudreau: Oh, but we do. I don't have them here, but we do.

Ms Notley: Right. My understanding is that we're looking at about a 15 per cent increase on a month-over-month basis. Back in December there was about a 15 per cent increase year over year in the same month. I mean, where this is going for me, of course, is that basically in your forecast budget for the costs that you expended last year and then what you're planning on spending this year, there's virtually no change.

If we can maybe just go, for instance, to the issue of income supports. In October or November of this year you announced benefit increases. In fact, you would actually have to have fewer people access your services in order to maintain the numbers that you are currently projecting this year because you've actually announced funding increases, for instance the \$90 so that the single person who's able to work is now receiving \$90 extra per month, that kind of thing. It would seem to me that this budget actually contemplates fewer people drawing on your services and drawing on the income support than did last year, and I have to ask if that is remotely in touch with reality.

I know that we're all crossing our fingers, and we're hoping, and it's a three-year plan. There's no question that six months before the election the birds are going to sing, and it's going to be a little Walt Disney scene about how great the jobs are in Alberta. But right now and six months ago versus six months from now, particularly when people's EI claims start to run out, it would be prudent, I would think, to project an increase in caseloads, yet I don't see that in this budget at all. That's a concern for me.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, Mr. Chairman, the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona is asking a very legitimate question. I did find our numbers; I do have the past numbers. In '05-06 our actual caseload number was 26,694. That was our monthly average. In '06-07 it was 24,817. So we were at 26,000, 24,000. In '07-08: 25,440. Now in '08-09 – and that's from April to March – we're averaging 27,800, so not much different from what we were doing in '05-06. There's very little difference in the numbers there, but there certainly is a 2,400 increase from last year to this year.

Ms Notley: Given that your average is premised on the first half of the year, pre . . .

Mr. Goudreau: From April to March.

Ms Notley: Yeah, April to September.

Mr. Goudreau: We've got just about a full year here.

Nonetheless, our whole goal is to move people into training or employment, and that's exactly what we're doing. We're trying to move people faster. We're getting better at doing those things. We've got staff that do a tremendous job working with people, doing their initial assessments and moving them forward.

I did indicate that this year's budget is certainly quite a dramatic increase over last year's budget because we did make an adjustment partway through the year. As well, there's still federal funding that we're not accounting for in this particular budget, \$48 million, as I indicated. We will be using those dollars to help Albertans that need it to move into employment or training. Part of resumé writing, you know, the mentoring that we do with individuals is exactly to meet what you're indicating.

Ms Notley: I'm wondering, though, for instance, if we look at that line item, 2.2, again, your forecast for last year was \$59 million. That last year, of course, was premised on a much more economically healthy first half of the year versus this year. Now you're looking at \$60 million. So, again, I'm not sure how it is you think you can provide the same level of re-employment service per person that needs it as you did previously. It appears to me that you're budgeting to do less for these people that are unemployed.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, I don't know how many times I have to say it. The majority of the \$48 million that we're getting from the feds is going to be earmarked for exactly that. So we're probably going to go from \$59 million to \$80 million or \$90 million in that particular category alone, which indicates a huge increase in support and budget dollars.

Ms Notley: Yeah. I still think that, overall, the amount that you're proposing to increase for this whole area doesn't reflect the percentage draw, and it doesn't appear to me to reflect the reality of what the demand is going to be.

I'd like to move on really quickly to the issue of safety. There's already, of course, been discussion about farm safety. I'm going to sort of throw three questions in here to make sure that I get a chance to get them all in.

We've of course heard a lot about the standard rationale about why we can't possibly provide the same kind of protection to people who are employed on farms as opposed to every other worker in the province. We are constantly hearing this refrain: well, you know, it's kind of a workplace, but it's also a vacation spot, and it's also grandma's house; it's where we work and we live. This whole "it's where we work and we live, so therefore we can't do it" thing is really quite a common refrain, so I'm wondering if the minister can distinguish for me between the live-in caregiver, who is eligible to be covered and protected under all this legislation, and the farm worker, who probably, you know, lives in a house, maybe in the farmer's house or maybe some other place in the yard. Why is it that the live-in caregiver can get this protection but the farm worker can't? That's the second question.

The third question is just with respect to the investment in safety. I think I mentioned it last time around, that we still on a per capita basis fund quite a bit less than many other provinces, certainly, including B.C. I think it's about almost twice per capita that they spend on prevention initiatives versus what we spend. Regardless, my question to the minister is why it is that we are still not moving forward on joining the rest of the country in providing for workplace health and safety committees, which any person who's at all involved in or committed to workplace health and safety injury prevention will tell you is the fundamental backbone to any kind of prevention initiative? Why is it that we still do not have mandatory health and safety committees in this province like we have in pretty much any other province in the country, I believe?

8:00

Those are my three questions with respect to the issue of safety. That, I suppose as well, in addition to the fact that we're still not

seeing any kind of significant increase in this area. While you say your injuries are coming down, I see that the number of fatalities is going up, and I think that your injury statistics, coming from WCB as they do, are not as consistent, not as useful in terms of cross-jurisdictional comparison as, say, something like fatalities, which are kind of hard to deny. Those fatality stats show that Alberta is not doing well relative to other jurisdictions. I think that the differences between jurisdictions vis-à-vis the Workers' Compensation Board result in us not being able to rely as effectively on the disabling-injury statistics.

That being said, though, I am concerned with the growing number of fatalities. It doesn't appear as though there's any kind of significant change – if I can just make sure I'm correct here. Sorry, there's a bit of a change there. But I'm very concerned that we haven't moved forward on occupational health and safety committees yet because, ultimately, that's going to be what you need to do if you're going to bring about any major change.

So if you could answer those three.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Just to quickly go back on farm safety, I did indicate that the minister of agriculture, Minister Groeneveld, and myself and our departments are working with the agricultural industry on farm safety issues. As I indicated, our focus will be on farms that have paid farm workers. The feedback process has begun. We've engaged an external consultant, and he is expected to provide us with feedback fairly shortly. Then we will be reviewing that material that he will provide to us.

Ms Notley: Will you be making that public?

Mr. Goudreau: That's a good question.

Mr. MacDonald: No.

Mr. Goudreau: He doesn't want to. That's right.

For the most part. We'll review the recommendations – it will be an internal process – and then I would hope that by fall if we're going to move with changes, that's when that particular material would become public.

Nonetheless, our focus is still very, very much on education, and we've been able to see some dramatic changes on farms and in the workplace on the basis of education. We've got a huge amount of farmers, for instance, that are dealing with their pesticides totally differently than they were a number of years ago. They're assuring that they've got rollover protection on farm tractors, for instance. They've got better cages going up and down their silos or their grain bins. There have been some dramatic changes on farms, and we're pushing farmers more and more towards that.

When it comes to workplace health and safety, our budget this year is increasing by 18.6 per cent. That's not an insignificant number; it's very, very significant. We are going up by 18.6 per cent to \$26.2 million. Again, that's with the support of the Workers' Compensation Board. Those extra dollars will give our occupational health and safety staff the necessary resources to ensure that employers are providing Albertans with a safe and healthy work environment. We're working on preventing serious injuries, workplace illnesses, fatalities. We'll continue to inspect high-risk industries and employers that have demonstrated some poor habits. If they're not compliant with health and safety rules and regulations, we will target them, and we'll keep on being very, very aggressive there.

The addition of new funding from the board will allow the Work Safe Alberta initiatives to develop a number of new strategies that

are related to things like motor vehicle incidents, workplace fatalities, traumatic injuries, occupational cancer – that's one that we're putting a fair amount of emphasis on – as well as other occupational diseases.

Ms Notley: Maybe you can tell me exactly how many inspectors you have in your employ. I would suspect that there's no way that in the next thousand years each of those inspectors could get to every workplace. So I go back to my question. Anybody who has ever done anything in workplace health and safety knows that the most important component to preventing accidents and injuries is giving workers the tools to insist upon a safe workplace, and the primary tool is the joint work-site health and safety committee, which does not exist in Alberta. So I go back to asking – I'm assuming that when you give me the number of your inspectors, it is simply not possible in this dimension for them to be in all workplaces – why is it that we have not yet joined the rest of the country in bringing in joint work-site health and safety committees?

The Chair: Minister, you have a minute left, but I'll let you finish.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you. Very quickly, most companies will have safety committees of their own. You know, there's a large number of corporations, municipalities that do have regular safety meetings. They meet on a fairly regular basis to discuss safety issues. Nonetheless, our numbers of occupational health and safety officers have increased over the last years, where we stand at 83 inspectors now for the province of Alberta. In the last couple of years they've gone from just over 12,000 inspections to where in '07 we did 13,760 inspections, and in '08 we did 13,934 inspections.

The important thing is that not every site gets inspected, nor do they need to get inspected. We gave an award at lunchtime to Shell Scotford, who have not had any incidents or workplace injuries for years and years except for this week, when they recorded their first one. It was one incident in 500 man-years of work. So they don't need to be inspected. We're very targeted to those employers that really need to be targeted, and we work very closely with those individuals who are breaching some of the regulations out there.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We're heading into the second part of our agenda. I would suggest a five-minute biological break for the minister and his staff if we have the concurrence of the committee to do that.

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. We will take five minutes. Minister, if you could be back in your seat at 14 minutes after. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 8:09 p.m. to 8:14 p.m.]

The Chair: Okay, we're back on the record. Mr. Minister, are you ready to go? Okay.

Dr. Brown.

Dr. Brown: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would request with your leave that the minister and I would share our appropriated time as the predecessors have done in the questioning.

Minister, in your opening remarks you alluded to the continuing shortage of workers in the health care field. I would like to ask you a couple of questions in that line. If one refers to your budget estimates for this year on page 151, line item 4.2.4, you have allocated just over \$7 million for a labour attraction budget. My

question would be: given your remarks about the shortage of health care workers, how much of that budget would be specifically dedicated to attracting people into the health care field? Following up on that, what other types of workers are targeted in that labour attraction budget? Thirdly, I see also that under line 4.2.2 you've allocated \$5.685 million with respect to international qualifications assessment. Similarly, I'd ask you: of that amount, how much is being dedicated to attracting health care workers to the province of Alberta? I'll let you proceed on that before I get to any further complications.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much for the questions. You talk about labour attraction, and that budget has gone up by a little over a million dollars. I refer you to line 5 on page 152, where health workforce development has a budget of \$45 million. Part of the health workforce action plan, where we're working with the Minister of Health and Wellness as well as the Minister of Advanced Ed and Technology, is to bring some individuals in the health field into the province but as well to train additional people from the province of Alberta in that particular sector. Actually, on the exact numbers of dollars that we will be spending on the health workforce action plan, I don't have the exact figure, but it's built into 4.2.4 as well as line 5 on page 152.

Dr. Brown: Minister, just so I'm clear on that point, are you suggesting that there's an overlap between those items that are shown in 5.0.1 and 4.2.4? Is the labour attraction component contained within your health workforce development or separate?

Mr. Goudreau: Health workforce development, I believe line 5, where we talk about \$45 million, does include a number of targeted health professions since the particular plan was released. If you remember, we released the health workforce action plan in September of 2007, so that goes back a couple of years. As I indicated, that was an initiative between a number of ministers: our ministry, Health and Wellness as well as Advanced Ed and Technology. Those dollars under the action plan include more things like educational spaces for health programs, support for medical education, public funding of midwifery services, improving workforce retention, recruitment, and bridging initiatives for immigrants. So the two do overlap in that way.

We've actually increased our targets by 12 per cent, and that's the number of targeted health professionals since the plan was released. It's provided direction and funding for more than 30 different types of initiatives that we're doing to address Alberta's health workforce shortages, and it's promoted changes on how we might use our existing health workforce. So the two do tend to overlap. Part of it is in terms of attraction and then retention.

Dr. Brown: You've anticipated in part my follow-up questions, but I'd just go back to: do you have a ballpark figure of how much of the international qualifications assessment and how much of the labour attraction budget, those two items specifically, are allocated towards the health care professions?

8:20

Mr. Goudreau: Of the \$5.685 million, there's very little that's been allocated specifically towards the health workforce. We're dealing with probably about 60 different other professional associations, and we're dealing with quite a number of individual groups in terms of recognition of international qualifications. The health workforce would be a very small percentage of that full \$5.6 million.

Dr. Brown: Minister, if I remember correctly, we had a budget of \$2 million or \$3 million that was specifically dedicated to upgrading the skills of foreign-trained nurses. This was in last year's budget. Is that being continued, and is the upgrading of the foreign-trained nurses part of the component of the international qualifications assessment?

Mr. Goudreau: No. It would be under the health workforce action plan. That's right. So it's not part of this international qualifications assessment service or the labour attraction. It's totally separate from those two.

Dr. Brown: Let me just follow up and take up your response with respect to, you know, co-ordination with Advanced Education and Technology and so on with respect to their increased spaces for education of health care workers and so on. I wonder if you could advise the committee how your department's efforts in those areas, including the international qualifications assessment service, including the labour attraction budget and so on, and your general share of the health workforce plan fit into the overall picture. When are we going to close the gap on the number of trainees given the fact that we have these additional spaces that are training licensed practical nurses, registered nurses, and physicians, the additional spaces? When are we going to close the gap? When are we going to get to the point where we are producing enough in the province of Alberta to take care of our own domestic needs? What's your assessment of that time frame?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you. I don't have a specific time frame, but I can indicate, you know, that we are short of our own people for a lot of professions, including the medical professions. There's still a need and a demand to entice others from the rest of Canada or around the world to come and be part of the whole solution to our medical shortages, which is not any different than a lot of developed countries around the world. But, specifically, there are things that we are doing as a ministry. One is the added support to the Bredin Institute here in downtown Edmonton. The other one is the support that we've given to Bow Valley College in Calgary, whereby we can take individuals that come in from other countries who have qualifications in the medical field and can literally take them by the hand and actually move them through the process that they need to move through to be able to practise faster in the province of Alberta.

As well, we're very aggressive in terms of recognizing individual skills under the foreign qualifications recognition program, whereby for individuals that come here with a particular certificate or diploma or degree or any other piece of paper, we know, in working with institutions from around the world, exactly where they stand and what they might have missing to be able to practise in their particular field. We're quite aggressive in those two areas.

I'm not sure if I'm really answering specifically the questions that you're asking.

Dr. Brown: Well, I'll move on to another area, Minister, and that is with respect to the temporary foreign workers. You already answered some questions in that regard, but I wonder in the same vein whether you could advise the committee what specific areas of recruitment you are still continuing to target with respect to the temporary foreign workers. What are we doing to eliminate the need for the temporary foreign workers, and what do you envision there as a timeline to train sufficient workers in those targeted areas so that we would not need to recruit the foreign workers?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, when it comes to the temporary foreign workers, we don't necessarily target. It's employers that are working with the federal government. They identify needs. You know, it might even be an electrical company in my constituency that just cannot get electricians, for instance, and they will apply to the federal government to have an LMO. If they've done everything to advertise and to show the federal government that they cannot get somebody, an electrician might be approved to work in my constituency whereas in maybe another part of the province there's a surplus of electricians. Those kinds of things can happen under the temporary foreign worker program. So as the government, as a ministry we do not target specific groups within the temporary foreign worker program. When it comes to immigration, that's a different story.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll yield the floor to one of my colleagues at this point.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Brown.
Mr. MacDonald.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would like, first, to go back to the issue of achievement bonuses that are still to be paid to officials at the Labour Relations Board and the Appeals Commission. Now, the only guide I have – because there's no separate line item that I can find in this year's budget estimates or in any other year's budget estimates for this going back to supplementary estimates in 1999, where \$16 million was taken out of, ironically, this department to start the program. I believe \$16.6 million was taken from income supports. But in the annual report last year for this department in the programs that we're looking at this evening under our budget estimates, there is an amount of over \$3 million for achievement bonuses in the year 2007-08. There is a small footnote, (b), at the bottom of the page.

We can go through programs 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, which is the Labour Relations Board, and program 8, which is the workers' compensation appeals. If I look at the budget estimates now, on page 152 I see the Labour Relations Board and the workers' compensation appeals. In those amounts of \$3 million plus in the Labour Relations Board and \$10 million plus in the workers' compensation appeals where is the money that is being set aside for achievement bonuses for those two respective boards?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, just in overall achievement bonuses, the bonuses are in all the various program elements. If you look at all of the particular programs, the bonuses that accrue to the individuals working in those particular areas come out of that particular program, which is the same for the Labour Relations Board or the workers' compensation appeals group. The bonuses would come out of the \$3.176 million for the Labour Relations Board, and the bonuses would come out of the \$10.162 million for the workers' compensation appeals. It's built into those numbers.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you. And that's for this year that we're talking about, 2009-10?

Mr. Goudreau: For 2008-09.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Where is the money now coming from for 2009-10?

Mr. Goudreau: There are no bonus monies for '09-10.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I misunderstood you, then, before we had our recess.

Mr. Goudreau: I'm sorry. I thought you were talking about this particular year that we were in, last year.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Now, while we're talking about the Appeals Commission, I'm having difficulty on the website locating the annual report for the Appeals Commission. Why am I having such difficulty?

Mr. Goudreau: I don't know. I'm just wondering if you looked at our annual report and whether they would be part of our annual report. Have you looked there? I haven't searched for it.

8:30

Mr. MacDonald: They have a statutory obligation to produce an annual report.

Mr. Goudreau: Yes, they do.

Mr. MacDonald: It's been late in the past. I'm having difficulty – and it could be me – either on their website or yours finding that. So that's an ongoing issue. I would appreciate that if you can . . .

Mr. Goudreau: Yeah. We'll follow up on that. We'll identify a process whereby you can locate that report.

Mr. MacDonald: Yeah. I can find every other annual report that the government puts out, but not that one.

Now, the employment standards govern probably 78 or 80 per cent of workers in this province. This is very, very important legislation, the Employment Standards Code. It protects the physical, emotional, and financial well-being of all Alberta workers who are not covered by a collective agreement. There was an employment standards review. It's over four years old. The department of human resources noted in 2005 that it was last reviewed in 1988, and since then technological advances, globalization, and changes to family and workforce demographics have altered Alberta's workplaces. Over 50 labour, employer, and social advocacy associations and 5,500 individual Albertans contributed to this review through the public consultation process. It's a very important issue for the majority of Alberta's workforce. Can the minister update us on the status of the implementation of this review?

Mr. Goudreau: I know the review was done, and there were recommendations that were made. It seems, if I remember – and I was not minister at that particular time – that we've gone back now to look at some of the recommendations. We have not acted on any of the present recommendations. I don't have a particular time frame to bring that back up again.

Suffice to say that, you know, I as the minister don't get a lot of requests to change the employment standards. I think that for the most part things are working quite well in the province of Alberta. There certainly might be some particular issues, but there's not a lot of pressure to change the employment standards.

Mr. MacDonald: That's interesting because we get lots of contact with workers who are very, very dissatisfied with the employment standards office, and they're very dissatisfied with the investigations that occur.

Now, Alberta is the only province in Canada that does not provide protection under the Employment Standards Code to workers who must take time off to care for terminally ill relatives. This means that employers of Albertans who leave work in order to care for their

loved one, their dying spouse or parent or child, are not obliged to keep their jobs or reinstate them after the leave ends. We dealt with another side of this with Bill 1 at the start of this legislative session. What is the justification behind Alberta's failure to provide for compassionate care leave under the Employment Standards Code?

Mr. Goudreau: I want to indicate that I would suspect that most employees have agreements with employers. Those that fall under union rules and regulations would have, you know, negotiated their individual compassionate leave or other leaves that are there. As I indicated, as the minister I'm certainly not getting a lot of requests for that. There are a lot of employers that provide flexible work arrangements. You know, it's part of attracting people. It's part of retaining individuals that work with them. There's a pile of employers out there that are very, very flexible when it comes to those types of leaves. But it's not legislated as such.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you for that.

We have seen an increase in workplace-related fatalities. It was sort of touched on by other members, but it's up a staggering 34 per cent since 2006 levels. While it's important to have employment standards, it seems as though there are some significant problems here in Alberta with enforcement. You may not be hearing about it, and that surprises me. Or your office is not hearing about it. That really surprises me. How much of this budget will be directed towards enforcement of employment standards?

Mr. Goudreau: Just to go back to fatalities, as a minister I want to indicate that any fatality is one fatality too many. It's our goal to see those numbers reduced. This year we are focusing on a number of initiatives to see our numbers go down. Our budget has increased from \$9.3 million to \$10.5 million, so about a \$1.2 million increase. You can't weigh it. You know, we're doing a lot of advertising, a lot of promotion. We are emphasizing things like Know Your Rights as an awareness campaign. That one was launched this past year. Our three-year campaign includes a lot of work on radio, print advertising about various employment standards topics.

Last year we focused on the temporary foreign worker program and their employers. We had materials that included things like radio and print ads in ethnic newspapers, for instance. We've created DVD training for community uses by community agencies. This year we'll have campaigns to provide more information to our young workers, and we're targeting the construction industry. Again, our plan for the third year will focus on the retail and the hospitality industry and their employers and employees. So we do have some very specific kinds of goals and objectives to see that these numbers are actually reduced again.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you. I know time is limited. I would like to shift from employment to immigration. Now, we have been trying to encourage your department and the government to change, get rid of the flawed temporary foreign worker program and go to the Alberta immigrant nominee program. Manitoba has been very, very successful. I wouldn't object at all, Mr. Chairman, if you were to hop on WestJet and go down to Winnipeg and talk to the government there about how they're operating. If you look at the federal government statistics, regardless of whether it's British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, or Saskatchewan, they're using the provincial nominee program much more than we are here.

If I look at your latest numbers that have been released, for the provincial nominee program you had a budget of about \$4 million into 2007-08, and you expended 60 per cent or less of that. So the province has consistently fallen short of its targets for the Alberta

immigrant nominee program, and again you have chosen to use the flawed temporary foreign worker program to recruit workers. Why have the targets not been met for the immigrant nominee program?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, first, Mr. Chairman, I want to indicate that we will not walk away from the temporary foreign worker program. As I indicated before, that particular program serves a very, very useful purpose. We'll continue to work with our federal counterparts to improve their program and to make sure that it meets the needs of Alberta employers and Albertans in general.

When it comes to the Alberta immigrant nominee program, we've been very aggressive in the last couple years to improve that. There's no doubt, I don't believe, that last year we met our targets, but this year we've surpassed our targets. Our target was for 3,000 individuals under the Alberta immigrant nominee program, and we issued 1,658 certificates, for a total number of individuals nominated or coming to Alberta of 4,297.

8:40

I think the difference often that you'll find between or amongst provinces is how we report those particular numbers. Alberta has always reported the number of certificates that were issued, whereas other provinces will report the numbers of individuals that were nominated. So if you look over the years, although Manitoba was in the gate before Alberta – and we do meet with them on a fairly regular basis, and we learn from each other. We looked at the success of their particular program. Our target, then, this past year, as I indicated, was surpassed by well over a thousand individuals. Our target for 2009-10 is, again, just about a doubling of those particular numbers of individuals being nominated.

Certainly, our targets are going from 3,000 to 4,000 under the Alberta immigrant nominee program for certificates issued, but our total numbers of individuals being nominated would jump to about 9,200, and those numbers keep on climbing as we move forward into the year. So if we look at 3,000 this year, 4,000 next year, the following year we're targeting 5,000 and, again, going from 4,000 total numbers of individuals to 9,000 to 11,500. Those are our numbers as we move forward.

We recognize the importance of that particular program, and we, too, believe that, you know, permanent immigrants are probably, in the long run, a better basis for the development and the growth of this particular province.

I go back to the temporary foreign worker program. They're used on a temporary basis to fill those gaps as we move up and ramp up the other numbers.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Well, I'm looking at your business plan on page 90, and I've certainly looked at the report to the Canadian Parliament, the department of immigration, and the number of provincial nominees, and we are far, far behind that of our western neighbours. I think you need to work harder at that.

If you're going to increase and rely on the temporary foreign worker program for many new workers, why have you failed to sign the agreement on the protection of migrant workers that the United Nations has? Don't you think we should sign that if we're fair and responsible?

Mr. Goudreau: The national agreements are usually signed by the federal governments and not by individual provinces.

Just to go back to your initial question, we've added 1 and a half million dollars to the Alberta immigrant nominee program, so we are ramping up additional dollars there. The Alberta immigrant nominee program is tied with our standard immigration program,

and those are over and above the other immigrants that come through the normal streams in the province.

Again, going back to signatures on national agreements, usually that is left up to the federal governments to sign.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. That's an interesting response.

Now, program 4. The guide that I have is program 5 out of the 2007-08 annual report, and there was an authorized expenditure in immigration of \$50 million; there was \$17.8 million unallocated.

Mr. Goudreau: If I may ask, what page are you on?

Mr. MacDonald: On page 151, immigration policy support.

Mr. Goudreau: Okay.

Mr. MacDonald: We are anticipating – and I'm looking at the 2007-08 actual of \$52 million, but when I look at the annual report that was released last September, \$17.8 million of that was unallocated, which is interesting in itself. The money that you were planning on spending when you're saying that you're ramping up all these programs – and I realize you need money for the many organizations that are hiring social workers to try to deal with some of the problems the temporary foreign workers are having, and they are coming to these social agencies. I realize you need money for that. What sort of effective programs do you have under this element 4 on immigration?

Mr. Goudreau: Were you finished with the questions?

Mr. MacDonald: Yeah.

Mr. Goudreau: We don't hire social workers as such. The increases that we have in the immigration budgets are focused on helping immigrants basically integrate and settle into the community and the labour market. There's an additional \$3.3 million that's allocated to settlement and integration services and enhanced language training. As I indicated earlier, there are many internationally educated professionals that are underemployed and face challenges with getting their qualifications recognized, so we've allocated \$5.7 million there, and that's an increase of \$3.2 million over last year. That has been allocated for the international qualifications assessment service to ensure that the foreign-trained professionals are gainfully employed. We're also providing over \$48 million for English as an additional language and bridging programs and do provide some living allowances for immigrants out of the \$74 million. Those are the places where we are putting some emphasis.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. McFarland.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just had a couple of comments. One was in relation to the farm safety and the different unfortunate circumstances that might happen. Tonight there are three people who are actually from a rural setting, and as I look around, one is from the north, one is from central, and one is from the south. Everyone has a different makeup in their constituency when it comes to agriculture, no doubt. The area that I'm in has an awful lot of intensive agricultural operations. It has a lot of employment, a lot of sophisticated equipment that might not be seen in other parts of the province.

I want to make it very clear that I'm not criticizing or picking a fight with anyone. Unfortunately, when something tragic happens, it draws media attention, and everyone knows about the sad situation. I don't know how to say this really politically correctly, but knowing quite a few of the people that have been the victims of a tragic circumstance, unfortunately, it's going to happen. It hasn't always happened. If I'm being very careful, it's for a reason.

There are groups of people on farms today that might be relative newcomers to the province, and a lot of those folks try to encourage their own kids to help earn income. Being around a farm situation, they're treated like family, and this is the unfortunate part. A lot of times it involves little kids: little kids falling into big grain hoppers, little kids falling into power take-off loaders, in a communal setting little kids that might venture away from the farm building to swim in a lagoon unsupervised. But they're part of a family. I don't know how you would ever legislate an activity that they don't see to be a part of the everyday production side. It's their entertainment, you know, to get away from everyone else and go for a swim in a lagoon. Unfortunately, they slip on the bank and don't come out. Anyway, let's just keep that in mind when we're talking about a very, very small number of tragic circumstances in a very large population base. It is a tough one, I think, personally, to legislate, regulate, or do anything else because no one is going to feel any worse than the family that was impacted in the first place. So I've got that off my chest.

The reason I raise it is that under 4.2 on page 151 you've increased some of the immigration programs. I hope I don't offend anyone by identifying the group, but in our area there has been quite an exodus of people from the state of Chihuahua. They are commonly referred to as Mexican Mennonites. The history is that they actually went to Chihuahua from Ontario a generation or two ago, and now they're coming back up here. Initially a lot of the young people came here to try to earn money to go back and buy some more land for their family because in the federal legislation in Mexico people didn't have the right to own land. Now, with the change in their government a number of years ago they were encouraging private ownership, so it became really attractive for them to try to get money so that those that have been the serfs of the land can now own some of this land. Hence they came up here to the land of opportunity.

They have large families, and here's what I'm getting at. The Horizon school division in the MD of Taber has done a remarkable job with the Kanadier group, and they're trying to implement a lot of things, including safety and education. The adults are somewhat reluctant to have their children exposed to very much more than grade 7 or 8 education. Horizon is doing a heck of a job in trying to get the parents to come in after school hours to take upgrading classes to encourage the kids to stay in school.

I was just wondering, Mr. Minister, if your programming helps eliminate some of the duplication that might be done currently between your department, the Horizon school division in this case, and others, like Palliser, who are now even operating alternate school programs just for Mexican Mennonite children who don't feel totally comfortable integrating with the rest of the general population.

Mr. Goudreau: Yeah. I really appreciate your comments, and I do agree with what you're saying when it comes to farm safety and intensive agricultural operations. In general in all farm situations – you know, we might have a child that lives in Edmonton and decides to go walking near a river and drowns or decides to go swimming in the local water hole that's there and drowns, and we never allocate it as a farm accident. Yet if the same thing happens on a farm, we

automatically say that it is a farm accident and that we need all sorts of rules and regulations around that. That's the pressure we're under.

We cannot take away parents' responsibility to, you know, make sure that their children wear hard hats when riding a bicycle. There are certain responsibilities that are out there. If there is a river going by a farm or on a farm, parents have a certain responsibility to make sure that their children are safe and secure when it comes to those types of environments. I think you're right in a lot of ways. We tend to blame it on the fact that they are living on a farm because those accidents actually happen there, and they do receive a lot of attention and publicity.

8:50

When it comes to groups that are coming in from outside, I appreciate where the member is coming from. I, too, in my constituency have a growing population in the Worsley-Cleardale area. The majority of the new arrivals are Mennonites, and they're establishing themselves there. They do not have an affinity for education. The minute the children are old enough to go out and work and earn a living somewhere else, to drive a truck or try to fix somebody else's piece of equipment, they're pulled out of the school system and actually put into the work environment, often much before the legal age for being pulled out of the educational system. A lot of them are home-schooled, so the parents then maintain a sense of control over the type of education and how much education their children actually get. It is a serious issue out there.

As for the individual children, our ministry does not necessarily work directly with enhancing educational activities for children, but we will work with the parents. You identified Horizon, for instance, as a school that's doing some great work. We would be prepared to work with them to ensure enhanced opportunities for the parents in the hope that it would percolate down to their children. Most of our mandate within this ministry is generally to work with adults, although we've got medical programs that are aimed at poorer families with children. We target those particular individuals.

For the most part we work with settlement agencies and all sorts of, you know, communities right across the province. We provide a lot of outreach programs, some orientation programs, information referral programs if there's a need. We provide a lot of training opportunities for individuals that want them. I'd be open to talking with the officials of Horizon and seeing how we could best cooperate and participate.

Mr. McFarland: If I could, Chairman. Do I have time for one more?

The Chair: You still have 10 minutes.

Mr. McFarland: Oh. I won't take that long.

I had one other comment, and it's unrelated to this particular field. I heard some comments about employment standards and how one of the members here gets a lot of concerns from workers. My experience has been that those folks that are in employment standards try to do a good job of mediating an unfortunate circumstance both for the employer and the employee. Naturally, when a decision is finally made, somebody isn't as happy as the other side of the equation. I guess it's human nature that any one of us would hear from the person that wasn't happy with the ultimate decision as opposed to those that – I imagine that out of a hundred that they resolve, they must have a pretty high percentage that are actually quite satisfied at the end of the day as opposed to those that are totally dissatisfied.

The supplementary that I had was with respect to the immigrants with foreign credentials and how you might be helping them. I don't know if it's proper to use actual examples, but the one that came to my mind – and it may be a case where you could help with the Minister of Health and Wellness.

A British-born doctor ran into just seemingly duplicate application processes, starting with their own British government, then coming to the federal government, and then to their professional field, sending copies of the same material to get a job as a doctor when the job had been offered to them before they had even left Britain. That same doctor had actually gone down to Australia or New Zealand – I can't remember; pardon me for not recalling it exactly – and within a space, I believe, of three weeks had all the documentation, the verification on their credentials done. They worked there for a year and then came here. It cost them in excess of \$7,000 for all the different duplicate materials that they had to send to all the approval agencies, starting with their own medical profession over there, as I said, federally and provincially in order to get a job in southern Alberta that had been offered to them when they were dying to have them there. I mean, they weren't dying; they were really excited to have this doctor there, but she became so frustrated with the system.

I wondered if there is any of this credential work that you could offer, maybe, to the Alberta medical profession, Canadian medical profession, and our Department of Health and Wellness in helping them. What this person said is, "We need the advocate" – or maybe that's not the right word – "to carry this paperwork for us so that we're not inundated with all this expensive duplication that we have to provide for the credentials search."

9:00

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much for that. You know, having heard the same story or very, very similar stories over the last few years, we moved fairly aggressively in terms of getting the foreign qualification recognition plan for Alberta in place. That was in November of 2008 when we launched that particular program. It really focuses on three particular strategic areas. The first one is to make sure that we've got specialized information out there so that those individuals coming in have at least very easy access to current, accurate, and very understandable information on the steps that are required to obtain recognition of their credentials. We are working with two institutes. One is the Bredin Institute here in Edmonton, as I indicated before, and the other one is Bow Valley College out of Calgary. Those groups of individuals are meant to be able to take the individual, basically, by the hand and say: these are the steps that you need to go through. We are working with a lot of foreign countries to assess where individuals are coming from and the level of credentials and what they need for practising in Alberta.

The second one is the assessment standards and resources to assess the foreign qualifications and to make sure that our professional organizations are very open, that they're very transparent, that there is fairness involved here, and that there is a fair amount of accountability in that a lot of the decisions are made and based on the most current and accurate information that's out there. We are providing mentoring programs, again, to make sure that we can bridge those gaps that are identified.

Working with our Prime Minister and the Premiers across Canada, one of the things that we've agreed on is that we would recognize full labour mobility, at least across Canada, so eventually somebody that would be recognized in Ontario would automatically be recognized in Alberta, or somebody that's recognized in Saskatchewan would automatically be recognized here or vice versa so that the individual can move from one part of Canada to the other.

That's not only with our immigrants or those foreigners that might be working in Canada, but it's also working with our own Canadians

so that if they've got a trade in a particular province or a particular skill in a particular province, those would automatically be recognized in this province. We're pretty aggressive in those areas, and that's why we've increased our budgets to move that particular process forward.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you.

The Chair: Do you have any other questions?

Mr. McFarland: I do, but I'd like somebody else to have a chance at it.

The Chair: Next on my speakers list is Dr. Taft. Ms Notley, you have a problem with that?

Ms Notley: Well, it was my understanding that the routine is simply that after the first hour and 20 minutes it goes from government member to opposition member and back and forth. Then it alternates between the Official Opposition and the third party.

The Chair: No. It just goes opposition back and forth: government, opposition, government, opposition. There is nothing in the standing orders for the third party.

Ms Notley: That's certainly how it was done with aboriginal affairs. Are you suggesting that I just have to give you a note when I walk in and say that I want to be on the list, absolutely right that second? Is that the deal? Otherwise, you're suggesting that the way this time breaks down is that we get to speak once, and we get to ask questions once. That's not what was anticipated.

The Chair: Well, I have Dr. Taft next. Dr. Taft, do you have a problem if Ms Notley goes ahead?

Dr. Taft: It's the ruling of the chair. Last week, I think, it alternated between the third party and the Official Opposition, so she's correct in saying that that was the precedent last week. I'm looking at the standing orders here, and it's an issue of being heard in a reasonable rotation. I've got a ton of questions.

Ms Notley: Me, too.

Dr. Taft: You go ahead. I think, though, that maybe the chairs of the committees need to get together because you had talked to me at the beginning of the meeting about how it would work this way, so there's confusion here now.

The Chair: I'll get that straightened out for our next committee meeting.

Dr. Taft: Thanks.
You go ahead.

Ms Notley: I appreciate that. For what it's worth, I won't take the full 20 minutes.

I just wanted to follow up on two questions, although I need to sort of start out at the outset to respond just ever so slightly to the discussion that we just witnessed here on farm safety and the role of being a new Canadian in that respect. It was, I have to say, a little bit excruciating. It was for this reason: having spent, you know, roughly 20 years of my life working as an advocate for workers who are attempting in a number of very difficult situations to advance

their right to a safe workplace, I find it very, very difficult to listen to a conversation about how workers are basically not interested enough in education to learn how to keep themselves safe.

The fact of the matter is that the obligation for a safe workplace rests with the employer. Whether it's something that's asserted through a lawsuit, which is currently what is required by workers who work on farms, or whether it is something that is asserted ultimately through simply a no-fault entitlement to workers' compensation, the genesis of that comes from the notion that it is the employer's obligation. They control the workplace; thus, it is their obligation to keep it safe. The lack of rules and standards in that regard, which is so unique to this province, plays a very large role in the number of injuries and fatalities.

I distinguish again, as I did before, the accidents that occur with somebody swimming in a dugout. I'm talking about people who are following the directions of their employers and are injured in the course of that activity. I don't care if they happen to be adjacent to a dugout. If they're asked to ride an ATV in the course of following those directions or if they're in the middle of a packing plant in northeast Edmonton, it doesn't matter. The issue is the same, and the dynamic is the same.

It goes back to a question that still hasn't been answered, which is: when every other jurisdiction in the country has recognized that the most effective way to reduce accident and injury is to give workers the tools to protect themselves through mandatory joint work-site health and safety committees that give to them certain rights to education and access to laws, why are they not in place in this province? That's just a renewal because we've yet to really answer that question.

Having said that, I'd like just really to go quickly to the issue of the disability-related employment supports, line item 2.2.4. I believe that the minister indicated that the reason that that line item was underfunded last year was because there was a program or an entitlement to a project or something that happened halfway through the year. I believe that was the explanation for the failure to use that whole support. I'm assuming that it will be used in its entirety. But I'd like to simply raise for the minister's attention that probably another fundamental gap or absence in Alberta as it relates to this issue is the lack of understanding on the part of pretty much all Alberta employers and almost all Alberta employees of the right under the human rights code and through the Charter to be accommodated in their employment to the point of undue hardship on the part of the employer and to be able to keep their jobs as a result.

9:10

It is remarkable in this province, compared to other jurisdictions where I have worked, how few employers understand their legal obligation to adjust the employment circumstances for someone who is either injured or becomes disabled through no act of the employer but just simply through illness. The employer is obliged to change and amend their work situation so that that person can remain employed. In the most highly educated and highly unionized sector in this province employers barely understand it. It's not asserted at all through the Workers' Compensation Board. It would seem to me that if this government and the Workers' Compensation Board were to start compelling employers to meet their legal obligations with respect to accommodating disabled employees, you would have a great deal more success at keeping disabled workers in the workforce productive and not costing Albertans through other means. So I would like to see a much greater emphasis on that work there.

Then the final question is with respect to the training programs. I know the Auditor General had made recommendations that the mechanism of auditing training programs be improved significantly.

You essentially said, I think, that most of that \$48 million will go there, so we might be looking at a \$20 million increase in training for Albertans who find themselves unemployed. There was talk of a new process being ready in March with respect to audit. I think it was in the budget document in your response to the Auditor General's report. I'm just wondering what the status of that is and how we can be sure that that will in fact meet the Auditor General's concerns.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much for the questions. Going back, I'm going to try to quickly go through your questions in the order that you brought them up. I don't think the exchange that we had with the member from southern Alberta was meant to link education and safety together. I think we're talking about two different things. I responded on one side to some of the safety issues on farms and the larger corporate farms and the various communities that are out across Alberta, but then we also talked about education. It wasn't meant to link the two together.

We recognize that we've got certain communities whose educational levels are quite low, especially amongst the Mennonite communities that have recently come into the province of Alberta, different from the community in La Crête, where they've been established for quite a number of years and they've taken a very aggressive approach to education. We still have new arrivals of Mennonites in this province that do not believe in a higher level of education. It was not meant to link their level of education with their abilities to deal with safety. I think we're talking about two different issues there, so to link both of them together was certainly not part of at least my discussion that I had there.

Under line 2.2.4 the funding agreement was much lower than anticipated. The new funding was provided by the labour market agreement, and that was not available until the fiscal mid-year. We weren't able to spend money that was not there, so we didn't spend the full year's allocation in 2008-09. We certainly anticipate to spend the full allocation in this upcoming year for 2009-10.

Then when it comes to working with the individuals from the disabled community, we're working very, very closely with employers. We fully expect that we're going to be spending our full \$14.8 million on that.

We are working with Albertans with disabilities in overcoming barriers to education and, responding to your question, barriers to employment. We tend to provide services on a very individual need because we recognize that various disabled individuals are quite different from each other. We do address workplace accommodations and employment. We address things like training and educational challenges. We provide assistive technology that an individual may need. Those are all part of the package that we do, working with those with disabilities. So we work with those with disabilities to try to move them into the workforce, and then we'll work with the employers themselves to be able to hire disabled individuals and actually, you know, make use of their talents and skills.

We've got some extremely good success stories in the province of Alberta. We've moved a long way with the disabled community. Nonetheless, there's still a lot of work to do, but we're very aggressive in recognizing the fact that they can be valuable contributors to Alberta's economy.

Under the Auditor General's comments he did make some recommendations, and I believe we've addressed the recommendations that he has made when it comes to education if there's a need to collect refunds and all of those kinds of things when we work with individual clients and if there's a need for accountability there in how we were able to follow up on some of the issues we've moved forward with. I'm not sure if that's the question that you were alluding to.

Ms Notley: No. It was in your response to the Auditor General. In the 2009 fiscal plan you referred to a new evaluation process that was to be ready by March '09. Perhaps you could provide a copy to us if it's available and advise if it's not yet completed.

Mr. Goudreau: Okay. Yeah. We can do that.

The Chair: Mr. Marz.

Mr. Marz: Yeah. In the spirit of co-operation, to allow as many questions as possible, I'll try to be brief. Mr. Minister, much has been said tonight about the unemployment estimates and the current levels of 45,000 as opposed to the estimate of 15,000, but this is the time of year when typically unemployment rates are much higher. I've worked in this province – I think I got my first job when I was 12 years old as a school janitor – and have been earning money for probably 50 years. So I've seen highs and lows and ups and downs and recessions. I haven't seen a depression yet, but I've seen some recessions, and I was always able to get a job. Do you expect, due to this 2009-2010 budget and the amount of money this government is committing to transportation and infrastructure projects around the province, that the employment numbers will increase due to the amount of money that we're spending and on a year average get closer to that 15,000?

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much for the question. Just to put things a little bit in perspective, our unemployment levels last month were basically the same kinds of numbers that we were talking about in 2002, and at that particular time, when we go back to 2002 – and that's going back seven years – very few Albertans were concerned. You know, things were humming along quite well. Even at 5.8 per cent, although our numbers are climbing, 5.8 per cent is still considered a pretty even labour market in a lot of respects. So we're just starting to see a surplus of individuals. At 5 per cent that's sort of an equal labour market, and anything below 5 per cent becomes a tight labour market.

Mr. Marz: If my memory serves me correctly, prior to 2005 typically our unemployment numbers were always higher than Saskatchewan's by a bit, a percentage point or something like that. Ever since I've been up here – correct me if I'm wrong – I believe that we were always second or third in Canada but pretty good numbers.

9:20

Mr. Goudreau: Sure. I don't have the Saskatchewan numbers at my fingertips as of, you know, four or five years ago, but you are right. Alberta unemployment numbers were the lowest in the country only in the last few years. Otherwise, we're always below somebody or fairly equal to another province.

Mr. Marz: Basically, the last five years have been the anomaly, not now.

Mr. Goudreau: That's right. But when we look at just the individual ministries and what we've done, certainly, the minister of finance has indicated that for every \$1 billion being spent in infrastructure, that potentially can keep 11,600 people working. You do the math in terms of the abilities of being able to bring on additional people.

We are experiencing spring breakup, and that's typically a time of the year where people are asked to stay off work sites more than being asked to move onto work sites. Our own small amount here

was an increase in the numbers of positions under the STEP program, for instance. We've added additional dollars to the budget in the STEP program, and that's going to allow more community organizations, more municipalities to hire a few more students. We anticipate increased activity in the spring – there's no doubt about that – as infrastructure ramps up.

That's occurring not only in our own government infrastructure but all of the infrastructures. At lunchtime I was talking to an individual who owns and operates his own construction business. Things have slowed down for him, but he's just signed a new contract to build well over 200 homes in a community next to Calgary. He's anticipating quite a ramp-up of needed individuals.

I talked to the Shell people. They're saying that although they've slowed down in hiring, when we look at their particular projects, they anticipate a ramping up of individuals.

So what are the numbers going to do? You know, hopefully, the numbers are not going to drop as dramatically as they have been over the last three months. I anticipate that they may level off here for the spring and into the summer.

Mr. Marz: Thank you. I'll cede the floor to my anxious colleague over here.

Dr. Taft: Great. Thanks. I'll whip through a few questions here, and you can answer maybe in writing or something. I think we need to talk briefly about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit off-reserve employment issues. I'm looking at page 89 of the business plan, and your department has targets of performance measures: 73,000 this year, 74,000 next year, 75,000 the following. The other performance measures are either ranks or percentages, so what I'm asking you is to tell me at a later date, in writing: what do those numbers convert to as a percentage participation rate in the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit labour force? And at what rank in the country does that put us for that standard? Pretty straightforward. Okay?

Mr. Goudreau: I don't know whether we've got access to other provinces or other jurisdictions.

Dr. Taft: Well, you do for your other performance measures.

I want to echo also the concerns from the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in the conversation about farm safety. That was very much focused on children. You know, I've been hammering away on the paid farm workforce, and I know there's a very big, sophisticated, billion-dollar farm industry in the county of Lethbridge and in Little Bow. Those are big operations with big payrolls, and a lot of those people are exempt from labour standards. I think that's wrong, and that's what we're talking about here.

I'm looking now at page 92 of the business plan. Strategy 4.1 here talks about: "build upon the success of the Work Safe Alberta strategy to achieve a further 25 per cent reduction in disabling injury, lost-time claim and fatality rates." My question to you: does that goal also apply to farms? You don't know. Okay. Well, you can let me know.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, you've asked for me to respond later, so that's why I'm not answering.

Dr. Taft: All right. That's 4.1 on page 92.

Page 93 of the business plan, goal 5: "Alberta's labour relations laws are administered in a fair and equitable manner." I have to repeat to you something that was raised in the Assembly the other day. When it comes to paid farm workers' rights to organize, this province has been singled out by the Supreme Court of Canada for

violating the Charter. If you're going to meet goal 5 of your business plan, you'd better give farm workers the right to unionize. If they choose to, great; if they don't, great. But don't take away their rights and then tell me that you're administering the law in a fair and equitable manner.

Mr. Goudreau: You identified in session the other day that nobody could appeal decisions of the Supreme Court. We did get confirmation that Ontario was granted the right to appeal the decision that was made, and they are going to be heard again – that's right – which is contrary to what you indicated in the House.

Dr. Taft: Okay. When you send me the information, I'll stand to be corrected.

I'm on page 150 of the budget here, particularly vote 2, the whole kit and caboodle on employment. I'm concerned that this is a make-believe budget. I just don't believe the numbers, and I feel like I can't support a budget that has, for example, a line item this year for people expected to work or working that's exactly the same as last year. Career development services are down. Basic skills and academic upgrading are down. I just don't buy this, and I would urge your department to consider working on some, you know, what I've called sensitivity analysis. There's got to be a way of figuring out: for every thousand increase or decrease in the unemployment rolls or some other rate – pick your per cent – what's the impact on some of these lines here?

Mr. Goudreau: We have that.

Dr. Taft: Okay, then, I'd like to see that.

Mr. Goudreau: I would reiterate: please add \$48 million to those numbers.

Dr. Taft: Yeah. I'm still concerned that it's a make-believe budget.

Finally, WCB. I'd be curious to know, in the year we're discussing right now, '09-10, if WCB will be paying any performance awards, any bonuses, okay? Actually, I found it a bit confusing. The discussion tonight has been confusing. We're talking about Budget 2009, WCB. Will there be bonuses paid?

Mr. Goudreau: Maybe if I could get clarity. Are you talking about WCB or the Appeals Commission?

Dr. Taft: Why don't we cover both?

Mr. Goudreau: You know, the question was on the Appeals Commission.

Dr. Taft: Yeah. I said WCB, but I just want to be clear. Maybe it was just me. There seemed to be a bit of confusion about which fiscal year we were discussing and which agency.

Mr. Goudreau: We were initially talking about the Labour Relations Board and the workers' compensation appeals.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Now I'm actually referring to . . .

Mr. Goudreau: WCB itself.

Dr. Taft: Yeah, WCB itself. It's in the notes of the report for last year.

I think, Mr. Chairman, I'll stop if somebody wants to get 30 seconds in.

The Chair: You've got three minutes left, Kevin, if you want to keep asking questions.

Dr. Taft: If you want to answer, you go ahead.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, I can answer some of them. You know, I guess when it comes to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, we are working very closely with those particular communities.

Dr. Taft: But I want to see your performance measures for them in the same way that they're printed for other people.

Mr. Goudreau: Okay. That's right. We can do that. And then, you know, I'll commit to responding to the other questions in writing.

Dr. Taft: Super. That's great.

The Chair: We've got two minutes and 18 seconds. Next up on the speakers list is Mr. Allred.

Mr. Allred: Mr. Chair, in view of the time I would suggest that it's not worth trying to even get a question out, but with your permission I'd move adjournment.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, everybody, and I advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business is concluded. Thank you, everyone.

I'd like to remind the committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on Monday, April 20, 2009, to consider the estimates of the Department of Transportation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(2)(a) this meeting is adjourned. Thank you very much.

[The committee adjourned at 9:30 p.m.]

