



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Labour and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 10, 2021
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 30-2-8

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Ministry of Labour and Immigration

Hon. Jason C. Copping, Minister

Michele Evans, Assistant Deputy Minister, Workforce Strategies

7 p.m.

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

[Mr. Neudorf in the chair]

**Ministry of Labour and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Labour and Immigration for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. My name is Nathan Neudorf, the MLA for Lethbridge-East and the chair of this committee. We will begin starting to my right.

Ms Rosin: Miranda Rosin, MLA for Banff-Kananaskis.

Mr. Turton: Evening, everyone. Searle Turton, MLA for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Good evening. Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Ms Gray: Christina Gray, MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Nielsen: Good evening, everyone. Chris Nielsen, MLA for Edmonton-Decore.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Now we'll go to the members participating virtually. When I call your name, please introduce yourself for the record. Mrs. Pitt.

Mrs. Pitt: Angela Pitt, MLA, Airdrie-East.

The Chair: Mr. Rowswell.

Mr. Rowswell: Garth Rowswell, MLA, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

The Chair: Mr. Walker.

Mr. Walker: Good evening. Jordan Walker, MLA, Sherwood Park.

The Chair: Mr. Loyola.

Member Loyola: Good evening, everybody. Rod Loyola, MLA for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Due to the current landscape we are in, all ministry staff will be participating in the estimates debate virtually. Minister, please introduce yourself, and I would ask you to also introduce the officials around your table. If they are called on to speak, would they please introduce themselves at that time for the record.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Chair. Jason Copping, Minister of Labour and Immigration, MLA for Calgary-Varsity. With me I have Shawn McLeod, deputy minister; Sonya Johnston, assistant deputy minister, financial services; Michele Evans, assistant deputy minister, workforce strategies; Lenore Neudorf, assistant deputy minister, strategy and policy; Myles Morris, assistant deputy minister, safe, fair, and healthy workplaces; and Andre Rivest, acting executive director, financial services.

The Chair: Thank you very much. For the record, Ms Neudorf is my favourite.

I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: Member Rod Loyola as deputy chair for Ms Goehring, Mr. Turton for Mr. Reid, Mr. Toor for Mr. Barnes, and Mrs. Pitt for Mr. van Dijken.

Before we begin, I would note that in accordance with the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health, attendees at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants. In addition, as indicated in the February 25, 2021, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper, I would remind everyone of committee room protocols in line with health guidelines, which require members to wear masks in committee rooms and while seated except when speaking, at which time they may choose not to wear a face covering.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating virtually are asked to turn on their camera while speaking and please mute their microphone when not speaking. To be placed on the speakers list, virtual participants should e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please wave or otherwise signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Speaking rotation and time limits. Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of three hours has been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Labour and Immigration. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of his comments a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus. Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but time may be combined between the member and the minister. The rotation of speaking time will then follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and the government caucus, with individual speaking times set to five minutes for both the member and the ministry. These times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block.

One final note. Please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking times are combined. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send an e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? Seeing none, we will establish that break time nearer to the time that it happens.

Ministry officials at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit, appropriately distanced, at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will

be dealt with as they arise; however, the speaking block time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the ministry in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 17, 2021. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk, and as a courtesy an electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the meeting clerk for distribution to committee members.

I will now invite the Minister of Labour and Immigration to begin with his opening remarks. You have 10 minutes. And I will try to indicate – because of the virtual access at one minute I will raise my hand so that you have some signal of the time. With that, Minister, you have 10 minutes

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm here today to discuss Labour and Immigration's 2021-22 budget estimates and '21-24 business plan. We've already introduced the staff with me today. I'd like to start my comments by indicating that Budget 2021 is focused on protecting Albertans' lives and livelihoods as we face one of the most difficult times in our history. The last year has been a time of great uncertainty as a pandemic swept our province and threatened our health and our economy. In response to this dual threat our government has adopted an approach that strikes a balance between the actions necessary to limit the spread of the disease and the need to keep our economy functioning. Budget 2021 continues this approach with a focus on health care and on jobs. We're increasing spending in health care and allocating funds to fight the pandemic.

We are also investing in economic recovery through the Alberta recovery plan. To do this, Alberta's government has developed key sector strategies and is diversifying our economy. We will increase spending in our capital plan, which will create jobs, and invest in new and existing training programs for Albertans to develop their skills and get back to work. In addition to protecting lives and livelihoods, Budget 2021 continues Alberta government's focus on spending responsibly. We must be fiscally responsible so we can provide funding to meet the challenges of the pandemic while laying the groundwork for Alberta's economic recovery once the pandemic subsides. For Alberta's government fiscal accountability means aligning our spending with that of other provinces and keeping our net debt-to-GDP ratio below 30 per cent. The Labour and Immigration budget is very much in line with our general government approach.

First, I would like to talk about how we are supporting lives and livelihoods during this pandemic. In fiscal '20-21 the Ministry of Labour and Immigration is forecasting an additional \$506 million over and above its budgeted \$210 million to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. I'll speak briefly to three programs that we delivered over and above our normal programming through these difficult times.

The first of these programs is the emergency isolation support program. As a government we were quick to provide financial support to Albertans who lost their income as a result of a requirement for mandatory self-isolation due to COVID-19. The temporary one-time funding was provided to Albertans to ensure they could continue to take care of themselves and their families while they had to self-isolate and had no income. The emergency income support bridged the short period until the government of Canada supports became available on April 6. A total of

approximately \$108 million was provided to over 94,000 Albertans, and \$64 million was attributed to the '20-21 fiscal year.

The second such program is the Workers' Compensation Board premium support. It was a temporary program that waived 50 per cent of 2020 Workers' Compensation Board premiums for small and medium-sized private-sector employers. This is forecasted to be a \$280 million program, which provided financial flexibility and support when businesses needed it the most. Just under \$210 million was allocated for this fiscal year. This helped provide immediate relief to more than 180,000 medium-sized private-sector businesses.

7:10

Finally, the critical worker benefit program. Recently I was happy to join the Premier to announce this program, which recognizes more than 300,000 critical workers for their work during the second wave of the pandemic. Alberta's government is distributing up to \$465 million in funds in this fiscal year to provide a one-time payment of \$1,200 to eligible workers. This includes up to \$118 million funded by the province and up to \$347 million in federal funding. These funds will go right into the pockets of eligible hard-working Albertans and will provide a helpful boost to our front-line workers and our economy as we move forward in 2021.

The critical worker benefit is a recognition of everything our critical workers have done and continue to do to support our province during the pandemic, and as the pandemic continues, Alberta's government will continue to be there for Albertans every step of the way. At Labour and Immigration we are continuing to assess the needs of all of our worker support programs and adjust our funding as needed to protect the lives and livelihoods of Albertans in the present times.

There are two other programs I would like to touch on that protect lives and livelihoods. The first is the coal workforce transition program. This program supports workers in the coal industry as we transition into lower carbon electricity generation. Specifically, we are increasing the budget for the coal workforce transition program for 2021-22. This increase will ensure support for the workers whose jobs will be affected this year by the transition from coal-fired electrical generation to less carbon-intensive energy sources. Funds from the coal workforce transition program will help our crews as they seek new employment, retrain, relocate for a job, or retire. The increase in funds for '21-22 is coming from funding allocated to the coal workforce transition program in future years. We are simply reallocating funding to this fiscal year to make sure our coal workers have the support they need when they need it.

Alberta's government continues to work with coal-fired electricity generators to ensure workers can access the needed programs and supports as the province transitions to less carbon-intensive energy sources. Making smart investments in training programs that focus on getting Albertans back to work is part of how we are protecting Albertans' livelihoods while being fiscally responsible.

This leads me to the next program I'd like to highlight, the Alberta jobs now program. Alberta's government is planning to invest just under \$200 million to create the Alberta jobs now program to support hiring unemployed Albertans into thousands of jobs. This program will help reduce the cost of hiring and training unemployed Albertans and encourage employers to create jobs for Albertans. This draws upon \$185 million of federal funding and remains subject to final federal approval. The Alberta jobs now program provides Albertans with opportunities to find new work and get important job training that will prepare them for the future. We are very excited about this program as a way of getting

Albertans back to work and supporting our economy. This is in addition to our regular programming to help Albertans integrate into the workforce. In protecting lives and livelihoods, our ministry has increased spending in '20-21 by over 200 per cent and is increasing spending in the '21-22 budget by \$122 million, an increase of over 55 per cent.

But in addition to supporting lives and livelihoods, we are also ensuring the long-term sustainability of our programs. Labour and Immigration is removing red tape, streamlining services, and making them easier to access and more efficient. The change between our '20-21 budget to the '21-22 estimate is a 4 per cent decrease when it comes to our core operations. This has been accomplished through finding efficiencies. I'd like to stress that we are maintaining services that Alberta relies upon.

We have been through a lot together over the last year, and through it all Albertans have displayed courage and resilience. The community and entrepreneurial spirit of the province has been evident, and we have protected our vulnerable and kept our economy running. We will likely be facing uncertainty for some time, but what remains the same is our government's commitment to supporting Albertans.

As we enter the second year of the pandemic in our province, Alberta's government remains focused on protecting Albertans' lives and livelihoods. Labour and Immigration's budget and business plan contributes to this goal by focusing on training programs that prepare Albertans for the jobs of the future and by finding efficiencies without reducing the services that Albertans rely upon. We are committed to using our funds wisely so that we can focus our resources on getting Albertans back to work, protecting their rights, and keeping them safe while on the job, and that starts with investing in Albertans so that they can get jobs and support economic recovery.

Although the last year has been difficult, there are reasons for hope, and with Budget 2021 we are making investments that will help forge towards better times and a brighter economic future.

Thank you for your time, Chair, and I will welcome questions now.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

I will just take one quick moment. Mr. Toor, would you please introduce yourself for the record?

Mr. Toor: Hello, everyone. Devinder Toor, MLA, Calgary-Falconsridge.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. The timer will be set for 20-minute intervals. So that you are aware of the time, again, I will hold up my hand with one minute left of your speaking time if you happen to hit that maximum.

Ms Gray, are you hoping to share time or do block time?

Ms Gray: I would prefer to share time if the minister is amenable.

The Chair: Minister, are you happy to share time?

Mr. Copping: I'd be happy to share time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With that, we will start. Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. Thank you to the minister and his officials who are here to answer questions. It is appreciated. As always, estimates goes by very, very quickly. I will try to be brief

with my questions and thank the minister for being brief with his answers. I will try not to interrupt because of feedback, but if I have heard an answer, I may need to move on to another topic. I apologize. I'm not trying to be rude. I just need to get through lots of material here in these estimates.

I'd like to start by talking about the COVID-19 pandemic that we've been in for the past year. Looking back at last year's estimates, we were just on the cusp of all of this beginning in the province. I want to talk about a few different aspects of that but, firstly, specifically the important role that labour and occupational health and safety plays in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. We talked at last year's estimates about learning from the previous SARS outbreak, the report from Ontario, and the importance of labour working in lockstep with the pandemic response.

I have to say that I was very disappointed because initial COVID-related materials, especially workplace-focused materials, really didn't seem to incorporate the legislation, the responsibilities that employers must do, things like assess work sites for hazards when we were dealing with this new COVID-19 hazard.

I'd really just like to start with a broad question to the minister. In the initial days of the response, in the initial months of the response it did not seem like labour had a strong voice at the table. The materials that were coming out did not reflect the internal responsibility system. They did not reflect employers' responsibilities to keep workers safe. In fact, early materials didn't even refer to workers for weeks, months into the pandemic. I would love to hear you speak a little bit more about labour's role in the response, if you had a strong seat at the table, and when a public inquiry into the government's response is undertaken, whether we will have learned from the SARS report that we spoke of a year ago or if we will be seeing that we would have had more health care workers and other workers kept safe had labour had a stronger role.

The Chair: I will just interject to allow *Hansard* time to change the microphones to eliminate feedback. If I do that, it's not to take time, but it just helps them.

Minister, you may respond.

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you for the question. As you may recall, we had this conversation during the debate throughout I think it was over six months ago, in the spring, during government COVID response. You know, occupational health and safety has been very involved, working hand in glove with Alberta Health Services, where we can co-ordinate. I fully appreciate the role that workplaces and workers play. At the end of the day, as you know, our occupational health and safety system is based on workers and employers taking responsibility for health and safety, identifying the risks, and then looking for ways to mitigate those risks. That was the approach that we took as occupational health and safety.

The pandemic, you know, was new to many when it started out, so we relied on advice from Alberta Health Services and our chief medical officer of health on how to address that. That advice was put out through our website.

Then we also worked with numerous industries, as you may recall, to put out best practices in the workplaces and shared them, not only through our portals that we had set up through now the jobs, the economy ministry but also through occupational health and safety. We had a portal set up sharing best practices that deal with this. We also, throughout the pandemic, shared information across ministries, across the province and federally about what our learnings were, and that came back, too, and we were able to publish that within our work sites.

7:20

You know, occupational health and safety has played a role in terms of working with businesses and working with workers to ensure that we got the information out to the work sites so that we could protect workers. We put this out also on the website. Also, we changed how we did inspections. As we recall, before and especially initially we trained up inspectors to go out to work sites, particularly in the health care industries, to do specific inspections, and then throughout the pandemic we also focused on those areas which were at the highest risk for COVID-19.

For example, after the first wave, when we began reopening, we targeted those businesses and workplaces that were opening up in each stage to make sure that they understood what were the safe ways to operate, the same way we did with schools, where we highlighted schools, when they started opening up in September with the pandemic. Then we continued to target those areas throughout the pandemic, doing inspections and re-inspections and ensuring that we were working with our sister agencies, including AHS and other agencies, Municipal Affairs, and providing advice to both workers and to employers so that they had the information that they need so they could operate effectively.

I would like to say that when you take a look at how well Alberta workplaces . . .

The Chair: Minister. Thank you, Minister.

Ms Gray wanted to re-engage.

Ms Gray: Yes. Thank you, Minister. I was very interested in what you were sharing, but because of shortness of time I just wanted to interrupt. I appreciate the recognition that this is such a serious workplace issue. I mean, currently WCB has accepted almost 7,000 workplace claims, like, the number of workers exposed in the workplace and who then got ill. That number strikes me as high. I don't know how it compares crossjurisdictionally. I just know that's 7,000 Albertans and Alberta workers that we know of so far, and it continues.

Speaking specifically about one of the most serious outbreaks that we saw at our meat-packing plants, we saw an outbreak take place at Cargill, where nearly half the workforce, a total of over 1,500 cases, were linked to the plant. Two workers died. The father of a plant worker passed away from COVID-19. It did become the largest outbreak in North America. Looking at the situation that took place at Cargill, especially in the early days, there was communication from the workers that they did not feel safe. There was communication from the union, UFCW, that they were concerned. In fact, requests to close the plant were made. During similar time frames telephone town halls were being hosted to tell the workers it was safe. My question to you, Minister, is that from your office you had the ability to intervene to perhaps facilitate conversations that needed to happen between the union and the employer, perhaps send someone in to mediate. Did you consider taking earlier action to support Cargill and the workers at Cargill to make sure their workplace was safe, and do you have any regrets for how that Cargill situation was handled?

The Chair: Sorry. Thank you, Ms Gray. I appreciate the brevity of your topic. Please tie that in to the business plan and estimates. I understand the correlation, but if you wouldn't mind.

Minister, up to you to respond.

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you for the question. I want to go back, just one last comment, to the previous question because I was going to close. When we talk about workers and work sites and we take a look at a high level – and I recognize there are WCB claims out

there – when we take a look at the number of outbreaks that we've had at work sites in the province versus the number of work sites, the number is far less than 2 per cent of work sites, which shows a testament to, broadly speaking and in a general sense – and there are a few exceptions – how well workers and employers worked together to be able to identify the risks and address those risks with the support of occupational health and safety and AHS, and it was largely successful. The vast, vast, vast majority of those outbreaks were addressed quickly and did not expand beyond very small numbers.

Now, I do appreciate your comments in regards to Cargill. I can tell you that occupational health and safety was involved through that. Prior to that outbreak they inspected numerous times and inspected after that. That was early on in the pandemic. Occupational health and safety, when we were taking a look at what was going on within the plant, the measures, as I understand it, were in place. What had occurred there were concerns that were also going on not necessarily within the plant but also impacts – and this was also commented on by the chief medical officer of health shortly thereafter – that were happening outside the plant. We learned from that in terms of measures, not only to be within the plant and within the work site but that stuff actually happens around the work site and within the community. Measures were put in place to address that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Minister. Even to this day I would suggest that I continue to hear from workers that they feel that their voices are not being heard in ongoing outbreaks, as in the recent situation in Olymel. I will leave it at that comment and ask a question that's a little bit more related to the data. With COVID-19 and what we're seeing with the accepted claims at WCB, does your department have an estimate on what the impact will be on our lost-time claim rates and how this will impact some of those important measures that we track to measure what's happening in our workplaces and with injury statistics, just as an example, certainly because there's been so much workplace transmission?

The Chair: Minister, do you wish to respond?

Mr. Copping: I'm just looking at our lost-time claim rates. Generally speaking, initially, the lost-time claim rates were down simply because there was a decrease in other workplace injuries throughout the pandemic. The lost-time claim rate for '19-20, which is not going to cover the entire period that we're looking at, is 1.5. We don't have the final lost-time claim rates for this year, but what I can commit to is to get back to you on that. When we looked at this issue several months ago – this was just in the fall – what we were seeing was that even though there were more lost-time claims associated with COVID, there were fewer associated with other injuries. So the overall rate actually didn't go up. Same with from a cost standpoint: the costs were actually down at that point in time. But I can get back to you in terms of details on that.

Ms Gray: Fair enough. I appreciate that. Thank you, Minister.

From the fiscal plan, page 176, schedule 6, operating expense, I'd like to just spend a moment breaking down the line that is attributed to Labour and Immigration for COVID-19 and recovery plans. As I was just doing a deep dive on the budget, I wanted to make sure I understood where each of these numbers was coming from. Starting with \$114 million in 2019-20, I imagine that's almost entirely emergency isolation support, but I believe \$114 million is slightly higher than emergency support isolation, so there's a little

bit of something else. Then if you could also just break down that \$511 million in the Budget 2020-21 forecast for me.

The Chair: To the minister to respond.

Mr. Copping: I'll just be a moment. The first number, the \$114 million, is a combination of the isolation support, and there's also some associated with the workers' compensation claims program. Then when you get to the \$511 million, it includes, again, emergency isolation support, Workers' Compensation Board premium support, the critical worker benefit, and then the Alberta jobs now program.

7:30

The Chair: Thank you.
Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you. So then the 2021-22 would be primarily that Alberta jobs now line item, I would think. Great segue; let's talk about Alberta jobs now. My question to you to start is – I was very confused going through the fiscal plan because it's quite clear the federal government announced \$185 million for this program on December 16, but throughout the fiscal plan and the highlights sheet it says \$136 million over three years for the Alberta jobs now program. Why is the government talking about \$136 million when the federal government has given us \$185 million? Secondly, why are we advertising it over three years when the program was supposed to be 80 per cent spent this year, with maybe a little next year? I'm just super confused why the government is putting out lower numbers.

The Chair: The minister to respond.

Mr. Copping: Sorry, Chair. I'll get used to not responding directly. Member Gray and I are used to going across the aisle in QP. It's awfully way quicker.

That's a great question. So the \$136 million that Treasury Board and Finance refers to: they're talking about next year's budget, that year and two years after that, so they talk about \$136 million. In my opening remarks I made a comment that the Alberta jobs now program really is just under \$200 million, \$198 million to be precise. We're using \$185 million from federal programming, and then we are topping that up with provincial dollars for the administration of the program. The intention is to start that this fiscal year, and then it's \$136 million of total spending next fiscal year and the two after that.

The Chair: Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you. I'm confused, Minister, because when I look at your expense by vote, it shows clearly \$62 million in this current fiscal year, of which we have 20 days left, and then it shows \$127.5 million in 2021-22, which would lead me to believe that the provincial government is actually adding \$4.5 million to this program. You're indicating that there is more on top of that. In which line item would we find that additional money?

Mr. Copping: The multiyear plan. Unfortunately, it's buried in the workforce strategies line item, but there is money associated with this in '22-23 and '23-24.

Ms Gray: Okay. But it's just that there's no way to see that through the budget at the moment, correct?

Mr. Copping: That's correct.

Ms Gray: Okay. Now, in the government press release for this program for \$185 million it's really clear that the federal government intended for these funds to "[build] on the strong delivery networks already in place in Alberta", with the priority to get every dollar out the door quickly, but the program hasn't been announced at this point. Will you be using the delivery networks that you currently have, the strong roster of training programs that you have in your arsenal of training for work, which we've discussed in the past, or are you spinning up an entirely new program rather than using the existing LMDA programs that you have at your disposal?

Mr. Copping: We are creating a new program, the AGNP, for this. We didn't use our existing – as you may recall, the announcement came out in December. The ability to actually leverage all those dollars quickly was challenging, particularly given that we were in the middle of the second wave. We wanted to line up our program as we come out of the second wave and then we start seeing an uptake in employment so we can actually use these dollars more efficiently and, in essence, get more bang for the buck from this program.

Ms Gray: How many FTEs will be involved in administering the Alberta jobs now program, do you anticipate?

Mr. Copping: There will be approximately five employees.

The Chair: Minister, can you say that again?

Ms Gray: Minister, did you say five?

Mr. Copping: Sixty-five.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. That makes a little bit more sense, and I appreciate the clarification. Of the 65 employees, how many will be new versus reallocated from other programs? While I note that in the fiscal plan tables it shows that labour will have a net increase of 10 employees, there's obviously a lot of movement happening within the department. Of those 65, what programs will they be coming from to this new role of administering the Alberta jobs now program?

Mr. Copping: They're predominantly all new employees associated with that.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Minister. Which of your employees are losing their jobs to make room for these 65 new?

The Chair: That's the end of the first 20 minutes.
On to the second 20 minutes.

Mr. Copping: You know, the question, "Which employees are losing their jobs?" – as part of identifying operational efficiencies and also because of a hiring freeze, positions have not been filled and most of it's through attrition, so saying that people are losing their jobs to replace them is actually incorrect. They're not losing their jobs.

Ms Gray: Thank you. Okay. So you are making the commitment that none of the employees inside of the Labour and Immigration ministry will be losing their jobs over the next fiscal year?

Mr. Copping: When you take a look at the high level, you know, most of the jobs are for efficiency. As we talked about before, for example, when we made changes to the FPO and the MPO, there were job losses there, so saying that nobody lost their jobs, that's not actually – people losing their jobs for people to come into this

program: that's not the case. Most of our jobs, the open positions that we have, are through attrition with the exception of the MPO and FPO, where we made changes to those programs and 20 jobs were eliminated.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you. Along the same lines of the Alberta jobs now, making the most of our labour market development agreement money, I noted that in your expense by vote for the spending on skills and training support, you were \$4 million under your budget this year during a time of record unemployment and quite a bit of need for workers to get support to reattach to the labour market. Why did you underspend the skills and training support? At the same time as you are touting new spending on jobs and training, why wouldn't you have spent your full budget in this very critical year?

Mr. Copping: We actually spent that \$4 million on training and retraining, but we didn't do it through our department; \$3 million went to the ag worker training program delivered by Agriculture and Forestry, and \$1 million funding went to the driver training program delivered by Transportation. All that funding was actually used for training, that \$4 million. It was just delivered by other departments. They identified a need for it. You know how the training program works; we do this on RFPs, and we release this throughout the year. They had a need to do that and identified a way to deliver that, and we provided them with the funding.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Minister. I'm thrilled to hear that the money got spent on jobs training because I think that's incredibly important right now, and it's certainly an area that the government needs to be focused on.

Speaking of that type of training, when thinking about the new Alberta jobs now program, I wanted to talk to you about how similar or dissimilar it might be from the Canada-Alberta job grant, which directly provides employers money to train employees. Specifically, I have in my hand right now the workforce development agreement 2019-2020 annual report, but the one stat I couldn't find in this report was the breakdown of how much of CAJG was used for employers hiring new employees, that 100 per cent of training costs covered when you hire new, which you and I have discussed before and has disappointingly underperformed. I was hoping that perhaps there might have been an uptake of the use of the program for new employees.

7:40

Mr. Copping: My apologies. I don't have that stat for you right now. We can get that to you. I do know that we have been pushing this within the department out to employers, saying that you can get 100 per cent, especially now, given the impact that we had in terms of the incredibly high unemployment associated with the downturn of the economy and COVID-19, but I don't have that stat for you right now.

Ms Gray: Would you be able to speak to: has there been significantly more uptake? My experience with CAJG was, both through my time in that seat and through estimates with you the last two years, that the uptake is quite low, so my question to follow up is just: will the Alberta jobs now be modelled after a similar CAJG model, where it's if you hire someone, we will provide 100 per cent of the training funds? And do you think – I'll just leave the question at that to start.

Mr. Copping: It's more similar to the Canada-Alberta job grant than other programs, but it's not going to be exactly the same. We'll be announcing it, hopefully, in the very near future.

Ms Gray: Perfect. I don't mean to supersede your announcement. We're very eager to have this program roll out.

If it's modelled more closely after CAJG, then I will just tell you now that I have concerns that, I mean, if the money is intended to create new jobs, we've already seen programs where someone getting 100 per cent of training fees when they create a new job – it goes vastly underutilized. I would not want to see the \$185 million from the federal government mostly get used to upscale and retrain existing employees rather than creating those new jobs.

I will leave that as a thought to you, and I will ask you a question, and you can respond to both. The question is that in your current budget you have \$62 million to get out the door before March 31, in roughly 20 days. I asked the Finance minister, and he said that you would be announcing things soon. I will just ask: will you be able to get that \$62 million out the door, into employers' hands, and creating jobs?

The Chair: To the minister.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Chair. On the first issue the program will be different enough, so you don't need to be concerned about that particular concern. I just wanted to share that with you.

In regard to, you know, what we put in the budget for this year, \$62 million, we're looking to implement it in the very near future and move forward with the program.

The Chair: Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you. Very excited to see this program roll out and the money benefit Albertans.

The delay reminds me of the critical worker benefit, which I would like to talk a little bit about. That is a program that was announced by the federal government – money from the federal government required some matching dollars from the province – but the implementation was delayed by nine months, and that delay of getting that money out the door had costs in our economy and for jobs in our province. Now, I will tell you that my office, my colleagues are inundated by concerns from workers who do not qualify for the critical worker benefit. I've seen even your colleagues ask you about some of the workers who do not qualify. Understanding that there is a fixed pool of money but also understanding from my many contacts with workers and in the labour movement that they were not consulted on the program design, my question to you would be: how many inquiry calls is the department fielding, how many e-mails to that CWB e-mail address, how many calls to the phone number, and how have you staffed up to handle that volume?

Mr. Copping: We have staffed up to handle the volume. In terms of the exact volume I'll have to get back to you on – oh, just a second. Actually, we have someone here who can speak to you on that issue in terms of the volume.

Ms Evans: Hi. Michele Evans, ADM for workforce strategies. I would just like to advise the minister that we've had 6,930 calls to date on our call centre for the critical worker benefit program.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you. Yeah, that's a lot of calls.

May I ask: how many FTEs are involved with administering the critical worker benefit? As well, if you can tell me: how long does it take to review and process each application? And are you seeing

very many applications from people who, in the end, do not qualify and are having to be denied?

Mr. Copping: So we have eight employees working on the critical worker benefit program at this point in time, and we also have an additional number of employees on contract associated with that. What number would that be? Okay. We'll just need one minute for that.

Just so you know, the six number is an annual number. Because it is a short-term program, that's over an annual basis, so it's actually far more, that number. Yeah. Sorry. My apologies. It's eight actual employees, six on an FTE basis, and we have some contractors as well that are assisting with the program.

In regard to the number of applications that we've had, maybe I could ask just to report on the number of applications that we've had on the program, please.

Ms Evans: Again, Minister, Michele Evans, ADM for workforce strategies. We've had at this point in time 9,284 applications from employers for the program. I, unfortunately, don't have the stats with me right now on approvals and denials. We're still in the process of actively processing those applications.

Mr. Copping: If I may add. As you recall, the applications are only for private-sector employers. As you know, this program provides a benefit to not-for-profits and public and quasi-public organizations, including Alberta Health Services. The funds for those employees are funded directly to the organization. They do not have to apply. It's being funded through the line departments that have a relationship with these organizations. So this is just a small portion of the overall program.

The Chair: Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you. I would be interested to know how many contract employees are involved in this, if you are able to find that number for me. I will also, just for the purposes of the record – certainly, I've heard from taxi drivers, Uber drivers, those who were working in so many different essential services, and I've also heard very strongly from employers, quite a few strongly worded letters that I've been copied on and that you have received as well, Minister, concerned about how difficult the application process is as well as the timing, because for many companies it's their year-end as well, essentially putting that administrative burden onto employers. Have you heard that feedback? Is there anything that you can potentially do at this point to make a change to the program to relieve that stress on employers or to adjust the program to include more of those front-line workers?

Mr. Copping: With regard to employers, we received some feedback early on in regard to our process, especially when employers were putting in a large number of employees. We modified our program so that they can do an upload of all the data, to be able to do that. So we have addressed that issue. That fix is in place and has been in place for a number of weeks now. We got it in place basically within the first week of the program.

In regard to employees, I thank all workers who continue to work throughout the pandemic. They've come to work. They've done an incredible job. You know, this is why we called it a critical worker benefit, because it was for essential workers. You know, all workers, more than 80 per cent of the workforce, were designated as essential workers.

7:50

I know you appreciate that there is limited funding. As a result of that, we chose to recognize and create a category called critical workers, you know, those who provided supports in health care, provided services to the most vulnerable, particularly individuals with disabilities, nurses, and then some in the private sector who were supporting our food distribution and medicine supply chains, grocery store clerks, and those low-income workers working at pharmacies. But we thank all the workers who continue to do the work. We made these choices, like all provinces made choices across the country, in terms of who would receive the benefit, and we made similar choices in this regard.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Minister.

Why did it take nine months for this program to be designed, developed, and rolled out? Honestly, it looked like Alberta was planning to not use the money until public pressure mounted, and you then chose to.

Secondly, on line 8 of the expense by vote, it shows you expect to get nearly 99 per cent of the money out the door before the end of the fiscal, which is in three weeks. Are you on track for that?

Mr. Copping: I want to come back to one of your questions earlier because I do have the numbers there. We have, for CWB – and, actually, I'm going to confirm that number because it's way off from one I got beforehand. We'll just ask to confirm that, because it's way more than eight, which actually kind of makes more sense. But now we'll actually confirm that number, and I'll get back to you then.

My apologies. I got sidetracked with that. Can you repeat the question, please?

Ms Gray: Absolutely. Why did it take nine months for this program to be developed and rolled out when it was intended to support workers? I mean, it was originally announced during the first wave by the federal government. Most provinces were able to get that money out the door by the summertime. Our program was vastly different. So it's just about how long it took.

Then, secondly, line 8 of expenses by vote shows that you expect to get nearly 99 per cent of the money out the door before the end of fiscal, in three weeks, and I just wanted to ask if you were on track for that.

The Chair: Minister, are you making the announcement tomorrow?

Mr. Copping: In terms of the \$175 million, we are on track for that to be spent by year-end in that regard.

In terms of the length of time, we wanted to design a program that worked for Alberta. This program is complicated; I appreciate that. We are delivering it through multiple departments, and then we had to set up also our own delivery system for the private sector. But we did deliver it. We are getting the money out the door, and we will get the money out the door by the end of the year. There is some small amount for '21-22, but the \$175 million, the vast majority of it, will be spent by the end of this fiscal year, and we are on track for doing that right now.

Ms Gray: Did you get confirmation on that contractor number? I think that was the piece.

Mr. Copping: We will get back to you on that, and it will be tonight. We just want to confirm the number because it looks a little off.

Ms Gray: Okay. Then I'd like to talk just a little bit about your business plan. Very disappointed to see how much the business plan had been cut down. That being said, I understand that that's happened to ministries across the board under direction by Treasury Board and Finance. But that lowering of transparency as well as the removing of performance measures, which we know the Auditor General uses to evaluate performance, is counter to this government's words about transparency, accountability, and whatnot.

Within the Labour business plan there have been significant changes, sections that have been removed, including what used to be outcome 3, the ability "to attract, retain and unleash the entrepreneurial drive of newcomers," as well as the performance indicators around AINP. I noticed that. I did want to ask, because in comparing last year's business plan to this for what is now outcome 2, previously outcome 4, which is the performance indicator on occupational health and safety, it appears that the 2018 lost-time claim rate has changed from what was printed in the previous report. Did the dates change perhaps or how that measure is counted? Would that explain the difference?

The Chair: The minister.

Mr. Copping: Well, thanks. I appreciate that the plan has changed. We have combined a number of objectives into one. You commented on the attraction and retention, particularly in regard to newcomers. That's still very much a part of our plan, and it's part of our recovery strategy.

You know, one of the purposes of trying to have a more succinct business plan is so that we could focus on key elements, which are lives and livelihoods, getting Albertans back to work, and doing that through a focus on jobs and a focus on reduction in red tape. We have that in there. A key element of our plan, which is outlined in this plan, is newcomers, attracting more newcomers, not only to create jobs for themselves but to create jobs for other Albertans, and we have identified those streams. That's identified in our plan and still remains a critical component of what we're doing.

In regard to your specific question, my understanding is that it is not uncommon where WCB will restate past numbers when they actually look at this. They'll look at the numbers that they did before, and they'll come back and they'll restate that. My understanding is that that's what happened here.

The Chair: You're in your final 20 minutes.

Ms Gray: The final 20-minute block. Thank you.

Thank you, Minister. I was able to join the Treasury Board and Finance estimates for a while. I heard the language around how this can make us more focused, but if you don't track it and if you don't measure it, if you don't try to improve it, things fall off the side. That would be my perspective on that.

One of the pieces that is no longer a performance measure was the Alberta Labour Relations Board and their hearing times. In 2018-19 the days from acceptance of application to hearing was at 58. You had set a target for yourself of 69 days for the Labour Relations Board. Did you meet last year's goal of taking longer?

Mr. Copping: That wasn't part of this year's plan, so I don't actually have that data with me. I appreciate, you know, that with changes to the plan, we've changed some of the metrics, and we have fewer metrics. For example, for ALRB, we picked the target in terms of 85 per cent in terms of completing the hearings within 90 days. We couldn't put all the metrics in, but I can tell you that we continue to monitor the metrics. I don't have that particular metric with me, but we can get back to you on that.

Ms Gray: All right. Thank you. That appears to prove the point, that if you remove things from the business plan, they fall off in importance.

That being said, we were talking about the importance of newcomers and the immigration system. Immigration is a big part of your portfolio, so I'd like to just jump into that for our final block of time, because I have a lot of questions for you. There's a lot happening right now in the immigration space. Specifically, I'd like to talk about that the federal government is essentially increasing immigration at the moment. They have reduced their minimum CRS scores, those comprehensive ranking systems, bringing in more people both for the economic boost and many other good reasons.

You spoke highly about the importance of immigration as well as making sure that there's strong settlement and integration funding, but I note that as part of the response to COVID-19, the AINP allotments have been slashed. Although Alberta has done that, the federal government choosing to increase immigration as well as lower some of the barriers to permanent residency is going to continue to happen. I was hoping you could speak to cutting the numbers of AINP and what impacts that is having. When I look at the website, I see that you're still needing to process applications from August, which, to my mind, reminds me of a time when we had all sorts of issues with people expiring in queue and whatnot.

How are you making sure that AINP is an effective system for Alberta? Right now do you believe that the best thing to do is to reduce our immigration levels?

8:00

Mr. Copping: I'm going to ask officials to respond in terms of the current number of applications.

But before we get there, I do want to speak to our government's decision last year to limit the number of certificates under the AINP. As you know, typically we have three main streams of – this is outside the two new streams we just announced, but previously we had three main streams where newcomers would come into Alberta under AINP. One of those streams was associated with the Alberta express entry. As part of Alberta express entry – that's when the Alberta government would identify certain professions to say: we're going to welcome them through the federal express entry program and welcome them into Alberta.

We chose not to do that last year. That was roughly 2,000 positions. But the reason for that is that there is a tremendous amount of research demonstrating that when newcomers, who are often the most vulnerable in our society, arrive during an economic downturn, they have a harder time finding jobs, and that could impact them for their entire careers. So we took a pause to not exercise our ability to bring in, use those certificates last year. Really, what that is about is so we can focus on newcomers who are already here, some struggling to find work, matching the influx of newcomers into Alberta with the realities of our labour market. We made that choice for newcomers because it's incredibly difficult to find jobs. But we anticipate being able to increase those numbers in the future.

Now, in regard to the current number of applications we have, I'll ask Michele to respond.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Minister. Michele Evans, ADM, workforce strategies. I have statistics as of February 25, 2021. The AINP has nominated 628 individuals. Our processing times: the data that I have is that as of January 22, 2021, we have received in 2020 5,675 applications: 1,291 of those are online; 4,384 of those are on paper.

In 2021 we have received 601 applications, 598 of those again online, three on paper.

Then just to speak to processing times as well, Alberta opportunity stream: we are processing at this point in time about seven months. That is slightly outside of our three- to six-month service standard. We're working on that diligently. The Alberta express entry stream: we are processing within a one-month period. That is within our one- to three-month service standard expectation. Again, the self-employed farmer stream: six months is our standard processing time we see there, and that's within our service standard as well.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much for those statistics. It's appreciated.

One of the impacts that we've seen during the pandemic is an increased need to support Alberta's temporary foreign workers. Pairing that with the government adjusting their immigration strategy in the face of all the constraints we're under, we anticipate the federal government will be granting more residency to temporary workers to reach their immigration goals. But for that strategy to be successful, these workers are going to need support delivery, and early delivery of those supports is going to be really key to their success. So my question is: what funding in Budget 2021 will be made available to adjust to this change in federal immigration policy? I note that that line item – there is a small decrease in the settlement and integration line. Will the department have the resources to respond flexibly?

Mr. Copping: As you indicated, in settlement and integration, line item 2.1, we provide supports for TFWs. We have the TFW advisory office as part of that line item. Plus, we actually do an intake of, again, request for proposals, an intake of programs to provide supports in this line. So there's enough flexibility to be able to respond to the needs of newcomers, and as you say, we have maintained funding in that line element.

The Chair: Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you. I am concerned just that if federal immigration policy is changing and the line item is being maintained, there could be gaps. We know provincial funding has often been prioritized to fill the gaps left by federal programs and funding. There is a significant gap right now in Alberta when it comes to high-level language training, the type that helps not with initial settlement but with newcomer integration. My question is: if there's any funding in Budget 2021 that will help with this particular gap, are you or your ministry working to solve this gap?

Mr. Copping: Our funding primarily focuses on Alberta settlement and integration, English as a second language, the drop-in centres, ESL assessment centres, and then the temporary foreign worker support services generally. Some of the English as a second language drop-in centres may be able to assist in that regard, and the ESL assessment centres, obviously, will do the initial assessment. That's where we historically have done that funding and will continue to do so.

The Chair: Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you. Minister, then I will just use this opportunity to really pass on what I'm hearing from our settlement services community, which is that there's a dire need for more high-level language training to help with that newcomer integration, not just

the basic ESL and lowest level but getting in and helping people even with more skills for better integration.

We have just passed March 2, the one-year anniversary of your fairness for newcomers office. I am hearing from constituents and from colleagues that there's a level of frustration with the fairness for newcomers office because it really just walks people through an existing process and then sends them off to their professional regulatory organization. Can you explain how the fairness for newcomers plan has made any improvements to the credential recognition or any of those pieces that it should be helping people with? What I'm hearing from people who've tried to go to it for help is that they are just redirected back to others and that there is no real assistance. I'd be pleased to hear an update from you.

The Chair: The minister.

Mr. Copping: Thank you. There are two things you're talking about there, and I want to break them apart. First, in regard to the fairness for newcomers office, we just set up the office, as you say, a year ago. The first year has been actually setting baselines, working with all the professional regulatory bodies, looking at what they have. As you recall, the act that we passed made a requirement that the processes be put in place, that the organizations would be able to give an answer within six months, that they'd be able to be consistent, that there would also be a process in regard to: if there is a dispute, they have an appeal process. All these mechanisms have been in place. The first year has been working with, like, all the professional organizations to collect the baseline data, the number of newcomers that are coming to them. Do they have their processes in place?

The next step. Actually, often when you're doing a change like this, the work starts. There's a ton of work right up front. It starts slow. You're getting all the baselines. You're making all the connections, understanding where everyone is. Then the next step, which the plan is to get into this year, is to start working with organizations to say: "Okay. How do we speed up your timelines? Not only are you compliant, but how do we make it better? How do you reduce the barriers while maintaining safety at the same time?" That work is starting now. I appreciate that, you know, some newcomers are saying: we wanted to see this already. But it is coming, and that work is accelerating.

Regarding the fairness for newcomers plan it was not only just the Fair Practices office, but it was also looking at other things in terms of: how do we provide microlending to newcomers who come in who, you know, need to take courses to get their accreditation? We have moved forward in this regard, providing more availability for people to be able to get loans. We launched in November 2020 a three-year microlending pilot with the Bredin Centre for Career Advancement and Servus Credit Union, and this will ensure that newcomers can access funds they need to upgrade their skills. In addition, we're extending our current agreement, that we talked about before, with Windmill Microlending. We're extending it a third year to provide 270 more loans. So we are moving ahead on various elements of our fairness for newcomers plans.

8:10

Another element that I'd just like to point out we've done some work on is: how do you – the nirvana is that before someone comes to Canada to apply, that they actually know what they're getting into, that they know who to reach out to, that they can actually, ideally, start the accreditation process ahead of time. Now, part of that – and we've made first steps in that regard as part of our fairness for newcomers plan – was actually to provide that information to newcomers. We've done that on the AINP stream.

We, again, put that on the website. Then we're also currently working with the federal government to be able to get that information out there. Those are just three examples of some of the things we're doing.

I do appreciate, because I heard the same thing, saying, you know: I called the FPO, and we're not seeing change fast enough. I feel that, and I hear that, but it's coming. It takes time to set the baseline, but now we're going to start making headway this year.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Minister.

I wanted to jump back just a little bit. We were talking about the AINP program. I found some news articles around the international graduate entrepreneur immigration stream and the foreign graduate start-up visa stream launch. Did you put out press releases when these were launched? I kind of found out that they had opened after the fact. Was it quietly launched that these new immigration streams were a part – and is this what you would call the Alberta advantage immigration strategy, or is there a larger strategy that is still to be launched?

Mr. Copping: Those two were soft launched. There was an announcement in regard to the first last November. The second was soft launched in January, if I got my dates right. We still have the Alberta advantage immigration strategy, which we did consultation on. We haven't launched that in its entirety yet. Part of it was because of COVID. We've delayed that. We still intend to actually launch it more fulsome. We still have two other streams we want to do, but the reality is that we wanted to get these two entrepreneurs, both the graduate program within Alberta and the foreign graduate program, up and running so that people can actually understand it and start using it. There will be a bigger launch coming, and we'll do that as part of the overall Alberta advantage immigration strategy, but given COVID at this point in time it's just challenging to do that.

Ms Gray: Understood, Minister. You know, a year ago, at the last estimates you said: I'm looking forward to launching in the near future our Alberta advantage immigration strategy. I feel that you probably are still looking forward to that, so I will watch for that announcement soon.

I'm going to change to a completely different topic because I want to make sure that I ask. Stakeholders are asking me if I have any information on a regular basis around the regulations for Bill 32, the regulations that follow the legislation that was passed – I guess we're coming up on a year ago – the Restoring Balance in Alberta's Workplaces Act, 2020. Would you be able to provide an update on where that process is? I've also been hearing that the delays in these regulations are related to employer push-back because of the high burden of administration that could be involved.

Mr. Copping: I think you're referring to the Labour Relations Code changes. The changes in regard to construction labour relations were made, and I'm going to get my – several weeks ago they came into effect. Changes in regard to a number of the other items related to union transparency and union dues: we're going to be in our second round of consultation, and that should come out within weeks. There will be a second round of consultation and then, with the intent of regulation this spring, those being in effect. There are also a couple of other changes associated with that that we were delaying simply because the board wanted time to be able to understand the processes they put in place. For example, in regard to picket line changes, that change will also, once the board has finalized that, become in effect this spring as well.

Ms Gray: The board certainly has had quite a bit of change in the last few years, so I can understand them needing time to adjust. Okay. I'll let you know that stakeholders are anxious about those regulations.

I'm going to be cut off by the clock in a moment, I think, so I'm just going to read out some questions, and perhaps we can discuss them in the next block. Can you update me on the staffing levels in occupational health and safety, specifically the ratio of officers per hundred thousand workers as well as the number of inspections, reinspections, and investigations that you've seen so far? There we go.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Gray. I appreciate that. This concludes the first portion of questions for the Official Opposition.

We will now move to government caucus for 20 minutes of questions from members. Mr. Turton, you may begin with speaking up to 10 minutes.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, do I have your permission to go back and forth?

Mr. Copping: Yes, you do.

Mr. Turton: Okay. Excellent. Well, first of all, thank you very much for coming out here tonight. I appreciate your answers to Member Gray across. Obviously, I have a lot of time spent in the labour movement as a 20-year member with local 1325 and not only just being a part of the union but being elected to senior positions. I know I have been reaching out to a lot of my ex-colleagues, getting their perspective about many of the issues that are affecting, obviously, them.

I guess, to kind of kick-start us off, I want to start my questions on page 80 of the business plan. It says under the performance metrics of 2(a) that we see that the lost-time injury rate has seen an increase since 2017. Now, as I mentioned, spending considerable time out on industrial construction sites and serving on job safety boards and committees and for years being responsible for the safety of the people that worked under me – I mean, this is obviously extremely important. Obviously, we want to make sure that Alberta workplaces are safe, that workers can go out, earn money, earn for their families, and obviously make it home.

I guess my first question to you, Minister, is: can you please elaborate on the effective prevention programs and on the labour legislation that you plan to implement to help reduce the rate of occurrence? I don't think anyone would look at those numbers and say that by them going up, that's a positive thing, but I know that there are programs in place that you're working on that can help make Albertans, you know, have safer workplaces that they can operate and work at. Just your thoughts, Minister.

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you very much for the question. As you correctly point out, health and safety is critically important. You know, we need to have a system so that people can go home after their workday and their workday is safe and they can go back to their families. We have a number of programs that will be continuing to run to be able to drive those numbers of the lost-time injury rate down.

I'll start off, just before we talk about the programs: as part of the big changes that we made last fall, we were looking at changes we made to the Occupational Health and Safety Act, which was really all about streamlining the act, providing the ability for workers and employers to work together to spend their time identifying the risks, and then addressing those risks in the workplace because, at the end of the day, the primary responsibility is with employers and workers working together to make sure that their workplace is safe. Then we

come in as occupational health and safety with a number of programs to assist them in doing this, and I want to highlight a few of them.

One example, for example, is our certificate of recognition program. Now, this program is a partnership between Labour and Immigration, industry, and the Workers' Compensation Board. It's a voluntary program which builds on effective health and safety management systems so that workplace injuries and illnesses are reduced. There are currently over 10,400 CORs held by Alberta employers, representing more than 40 per cent of Alberta workplaces. Studies have shown that the COR certification is associated with lower injury rates, so we continue to try to get more employers and employees involved in the COR program. This is a very rigorous program which actually looks at the processes that are in place at the work site and then also how they're going to improve their performance. There's an evaluation, and then every three years there's a recertification on that.

8:20

Another program that our department does is new employer visits. Every month Labour and Immigration contacts new WCB account holders to provide occupational health and safety and employment standards information. What this program really is about is educating new employers about the occupational health and safety rules but also the importance of having a focus on health and safety. Then, where applicable, health and safety committees work together with employees to identify risks and then mitigate those risks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, you know, we've had a number of virtual meetings arranged at the employer's convenience, but I can tell you that in 2020-21 there were more than 1,400 new employer contacts.

Another initiative that the Alberta government introduced in 2019 but we continue to work on to this day is trying to use evidence-based priorities for the OH system to identify basically those areas where there are high lost-time injuries. The three priority areas that were identified include musculoskeletal disorders due to repetitive use – slips, trips, and falls, and I'm sure you're familiar with that in your workplaces – and then psychosocial hazards, including workplace violence and harassment. There are three working groups that were established to work through these issues and identify best practices and guidelines so that employers and employees can work together to reduce them. The slips, trips, and falls working group released eight resources related to winter cold hazards for slips, trips, and falls, and in spring 2021 additional video presentations or resources and the psychosocial hazards and musculoskeletal disorders campaigns will be released. That's coming soon.

We're also piloting an emerging issues project, and this process identifies and assesses emerging occupational health and safety issues, the associated risk in the Alberta OHS system, and determines the best course of action. Actions related to emerging issues can range from resources development, proactive inspections, program surveillance, and research or stakeholder consultations.

This just provides a few of the programs that we have in place to be able to reduce the long-term injury, and we're continuing to develop more programs as we move forward. This is very dynamic because it is constant process improvement, identifying: where are the issues, and then how do we bring the stakeholders together to be able to develop, whether it be videos, whether it be training sessions, education to be able to reduce them? At the end of the day, we want these numbers to go down. We want people to go home safe at the end of their workday.

Mr. Turton: Absolutely. Thank you very much for your response, Minister. I realize that even though you're not in the room here with us and you're in the next room, when you started talking about putting forth constructive solutions to keep workers safe here in Alberta, you can almost see your grin from this room. I appreciate the enthusiasm that you have, Minister, especially on this file, because I know I've worked with you on a number of these initiatives.

Unfortunately, we know that as safe as many work sites are across the province, workers still get hurt. I can honestly speak of many conversations I've had with family members, friends, and colleagues, and many residents of Spruce Grove and Stony Plain. Unfortunately, there are instances that we know of where incidents happen at work and they do get hurt, but we also know that there's an Appeals Commission for Alberta workers that are taking issue with the Workers' Compensation Board.

My next question is really going to talk about the next part of that process. On page 80 of the business plan, objective 3.4, it's to "provide timely, fair and efficient appeal services" that are obviously "independent of the Workers' Compensation Board through the Appeals Commission" for Alberta workers. Obviously, I understand the importance of having that independent appeals process to be able to allow workers to, you know, escalate their own individual cases and make sure that they can be compensated appropriately. Minister, I guess my first question on this point is: can you please explain the process of an Appeals Commission and how it actually benefits Alberta workers that are forced to go down this path?

Mr. Copping: Great. Well, thanks again so much for this question. As you know, the Appeals Commission is a quasi-judicial tribunal that is the final level of appeal for workers' compensation matters in the province. The workers and employers who disagree with the WCB decision can appeal to the Appeals Commission. Now, it's committed to efficient processes that recognize the importance of natural justice and procedural timelines; for example, the right to representation and the right to know the case to be heard. Timely decision-making is supported by performance targets and a decision timeline policy. The quality of decisions is measured by the performance targets relating to the percentage of Appeals Commission decisions reviewed and either upheld or overturned by the courts, the Ombudsman, or the Appeals Commission's internal reconsideration process. Now, the Appeals Commission operates free of influence from the WCB and is arm's length from the government, but it really provides an independent final stop for employees and employers who may disagree about the application of the WCB and this important insurance program.

The Chair: Mr. Turton.

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Mr. Chair. You know, obviously, this is such an important part of this process because for many workers that are going down there, we want to make sure that we have consistency, that we have reliability. Many times it's like reaching into a hat, pulling out a rabbit, wondering: what are you going to get? We want to make sure that workers know exactly the steps that they have to do to go down this process. Given the funding restraints of the government as a whole, I was wondering: how will the ministry ensure that this independent commission will be working effectively and fairly, be supported so that it's sustainable in the long term and workers don't have to worry that this valuable tool might be taken away and that it's something that they can depend on?

Mr. Copping: Well, great question. Thank you. We made a step in that direction towards changes we made last fall, when we made changes to the workers' compensation system. Two of those changes are that we eliminated the FPO and the MPO. What we had beforehand were three separate offices, independent offices, that dealt with issues in terms of whether or not a claim should be upheld or not be upheld. We looked around the country. All other provinces had only the one Appeals Commission, one independent office to do that, so what we did is that we combined the key core functions from the medical panels office and the Fair Practices office, those core functions, into the Appeals Commission. We made the appeals commissioner, in essence, at the high level responsible for the overall process.

This does two things. The first thing it does is that it reduces the overall cost associated with the appeals process, but also what it does is that – because the appeals commissioner, at the end of the day, now is actually able to look at the entire appeals process, including how to integrate the decisions from medical panels into the overall process, we're looking to streamline that. In addition, we are currently undertaking a review of the entire process, basically from stem to stern, in terms of, you know, once there's a dispute from a claim and then how does that get assessed, adjudicated, including the medical panel process all the way to the end, and that is currently being undertaken. But the reason for that is that we want to reduce the time. We want to maintain fairness but reduce the time.

Quite frankly, the longer that these cases drag out, it's bad for the employee because they don't have certainty in terms of what benefits they're going to get. It also tends to be that the longer someone is hurt and doesn't get back into the workplace, then not only is there increased cost, but they're not back getting the work done that they need to get done. You can also slip into other issues in regard to depression, and it spirals out of control. So we're also undertaking a process to be able to say: what are the best practices out there that we can get adjudication done quickly, always fairly but done quickly? But, really, our target and our approach is: how do we get that employee – you know, address the issues that they have and get them back to work. These changes that we made in the last legislation will assist that, and we're continuing to look at the process to improve it.

The Chair: Mr. Turton.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Minister. I'm thankful that you mentioned the term "mental health." Obviously, as has already been referenced, I know, by MLA Gray, I mean, COVID-19 and the effects of the pandemic have wide-ranging repercussions, and mental health is so big. For many of the workers that are going down this path, you know, due to an accident, obviously we want to make sure that the mental aspect is looked after. They're under a great deal of stress, and so are their families. So I'm very thankful for the work that you've been doing on this.

I guess my next question has to do with the Alberta Labour Relations Board. Obviously, in my time at local 1325 this was something that came up quite a bit. I know in the last year alone that there have been hundreds of rulings by the Alberta Labour Relations Board, and, I mean, it affects thousands of workers and hundreds of companies right across the province.

8:30

You know, really, my question revolves about key objective 3.3 on the business plan. It talks about providing "efficient, timely, effective and consistent services through the Alberta Labour Relations Board." Again, back to my prior point about just giving

that line of sight, the consistency for Albertans and for workers so that they can actually know the system, the process, and there's no surprises, my first question about this is: how does the department work with the Alberta Labour Relations Board to provide those effective and efficient services to Albertans? Again, being that system and that process that they can depend on so there are no surprises: obviously, I know this is a key part of your ministry.

The Chair: The minister.

Mr. Copping: Great. Thanks again for the question. As you know, the Alberta Labour Relations Board is an independent and impartial tribunal, and it's really responsible for the day-to-day application and interpretation of Alberta's labour code and our bargaining laws. They process applications, hold hearings, adjudicate disputes, actively encourage dispute resolution, and make major policy decisions within their bailiwick. While the Alberta Labour Relations Board falls under the jurisdiction of the ministry of labour, it truly is an arm's-length tribunal and maintains its independence from the department.

That said, we did make a change in Bill 32 to help drive effective and efficient services, and maybe it seemed like a small change, but it was an important change to me. We made a change in the preamble. We added one small word, which is the term "expedient," to the preamble so that it now reads that – and I'm paraphrasing, but I'll quote the one part of it – the Alberta Labour Relations Board will provide "fair, equitable and expedient resolution of matters." This is important because it signals not only to the Alberta Labour Relations Board through the legislation but also the labour community that the board needs to continue to drive – and they've been working on this, and I've seen this – to have efficient hearings and use a number of tools at their disposal to reduce not only the amount of time in the hearing so they get to the nub of the issue if they can't resolve it ahead of time – and the board's been really good at prehearing conferences – and then have a quick decision after so that we can get justice out.

Then we also continue to have a series of metrics that they report to us in terms of, you know, the time to hearings that we talked about earlier and also the percentage of hearings written within 90 days. It's up to the board to put its processes in place because they're independent, but we can provide some direction through the legislation, which we did in the most recent change that we did this fall.

The Chair: Mr. Turton.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you, Minister. I guess just a quick supplemental popped into my head when you talked about the collaboration that you have with these arm's-length agencies. I guess I was hoping to get a little bit more feedback about how you and your ministry, obviously, ensure effective and productive collaboration with this group while maintaining its independence to be able to do the amazing work that it has to do. I know, again, because it is so high – it's ranked right on your key objectives about making sure that there are effective, you know, conversations back and forth. I guess I was just hoping to get a little bit better perspective about how you can help promote that productive collaboration between your ministry and the Alberta Labour Relations Board.

Mr. Copping: I think a great example is the changes that we made to the Labour Relations Code when we actually added to the preamble in Bill 32. You know, we did consultation ahead of time in terms of what the issues were because the way that – and then we can actually make changes to the code from what we're hearing

from the community in terms of not only what's working for the laws that apply to the community broadly in terms of labour relations functions but actually how the board actually operates and the processes that they have. Then we actually change the laws to do that, so I think it's a broader consultation process that we use and then change through the act and then ongoing reports in regard to how the board is functioning, whether it be a labour relations board or the Appeals Commission.

Again, at the end of the day these are arm's-length bodies. Our job is to set the legislation, set the regulation for them to operate, and then their job is to operate at a distance and make independent quasi-judicial decisions, but by ongoing consultation with the community we can identify issues and then make changes to be able to improve the efficiency.

Mr. Turton: Thank you again, Minister, for at least, you know, highlighting the arm's-length part of the conversation. I know that's an extremely important part for workers here in Alberta.

I guess my last question I have is that on page 80 of the business plan your ministry mentions \$4 million being allocated to the Alberta Labour Relations Board. I guess my question has to deal with, you know, how do you actually highlight how this amount was determined? Like, was there a consultation? I guess a further question I have is: is this an appropriate amount of money to be allocated towards the board? Maybe just kind of describe it in terms of your thoughts on the funding perspective.

The Chair: Minister, you'll have to be quick as a rabbit. You've got 20 seconds.

Mr. Copping: The board does tons of work, and we've also increased their workload. If you actually compare from previous years and what they're doing, you know, we're always looking for – like with any of our boards, we're looking for operational efficiencies in terms of that, but at the same time we need to recognize that workflow changes . . .

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt, Minister.

We will now have a very short five-minute break. I apologize for not giving advance warning of that. We will have five minutes, and then we will resume with a 10-minute block for the Official Opposition. If you can reconvene at exactly 8:41, that would be appreciated.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 8:36 p.m. to 8:41 p.m.]

The Chair: Thank you very much for being back promptly.

We will now begin a 10-minute block where any member may speak up to five minutes maximum. Ms Gray, is it coming back to you?

Ms Gray: Yes, please.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Ms Gray: Thank you. Minister, when we last spoke, I shouted some OH and S stats questions to you. I'm wondering if you've had a moment to look those up.

Mr. Copping: I did. Thank you, Member Gray. In regard to the number of OH and S officers, technical staff, and partnership consultants and in terms of the officers for 2020-21 there are 148 officers. And just to give you a frame of reference, in '17-18 there were 140, 142 in 2018-19, 115 in 2019-20, and 148 in '20-21.

Ms Gray: So going back down in the wrong direction but 148. Okay. Thank you very much. Were you able to find the number of inspections, re-inspections, and investigations?

Mr. Copping: For 2020-21 the number of inspections was 12,746 and 2,718. That is as of February 9, 2021.

Ms Gray: Understood. Okay. Was that complete, Minister? No. I'll turn it back.

Mr. Copping: In '19-20 there were 9,624 inspections and 2,921 re-inspections.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you for that update on the stats, Minister.

I note in your budget, your line item 3.2, for occupational health and safety, is getting a cut of 7.6 per cent and employment standards a cut by over 15 per cent, 16.7 per cent. You've mentioned the number of OH and S officers potentially decreasing that ratio that we were talking about. Within those departments if you could elaborate on the spending reductions in each of those two line items, particularly during a pandemic, when health and safety as well as minimum employment standards and protecting workers have been incredibly important, I'd like to better understand those cuts.

Mr. Copping: Happy to do so. Again, our approach is looking for operational efficiencies where we can maintain the service at the front line even though we're reducing our spend. You can't do a direct relation necessarily of spend to the service. I can tell you that we are maintaining our front-line employees, those who are doing the inspections, the investigations, et cetera. A lot of our changes in both these cases – I'll get to some detail in regard to the health and safety. For the most part if you look at our budget, in a lot of our budget items you'll see some decreases. Almost all of those decreases are associated with what we are calling operational efficiencies. That includes reductions in wages when we have individuals, for example, in that shop who leave that we're not backfilling.

We're also, you know, often looking at changes to supply and services, some of them related to travel in that we're not doing as much travel anymore. When we talk about operational efficiencies, for the most part that's what that type of stuff is. But, again, our focus is on providing same or better service.

Now, when it comes to the OHS system, one other thing is that there are a couple of other items that were projects that came to an end. For example, the CORs IT project or the farm health and safety producer grant: those things also came to an end. So that provides for some of that reduction as well.

Ms Gray: I think you might have just answered one of my future questions, which is the funding to AgSafe. I think that you just said that. It was scheduled to end in 2020, but that has not been renewed. Labour is no longer providing that. I see you shaking your head. I will accept that as an answer.

Under the topic of occupational health and safety I found your three-year OHS code review plan. I know it took some time to get it sorted out. I have two questions on this plan. First, year 1 of the OHS code review is scheduled to end March 2021. Can we anticipate that first batch of changes to be implemented? I'm curious about that consultation piece. The advisory council, I hope, was involved through that.

Maybe I'll just stop there. I'll let you answer that. Then I'll ask a second question.

Mr. Copping: I'm just pulling up my year 1. We are actually going out with a consultation package in the very, very near future. We've

done initial working groups with a number of the items that have working groups associated with them. Some of the items are associated with the changes that we made in the legislation, so we're going out with a consultation package very shortly, within weeks, to have more input.

As you know, there are a number of working groups. They'll provide a bunch of input in terms of what it should look like. Historically we've gone out with that input saying: hey, this is what we think we're doing. We get further input to say: is this right? Then we go back and make the changes. We may not get the changes done by March 31 of this year, but we're going to start the consultation very shortly. We were held up a little bit with COVID-19, making it a little more challenging to get through this. But those items are on our list in terms of consultation, and that will be coming out soon.

Ms Gray: Minister, I note that part 29, workplace hazardous materials information system, is in the third year. Those WHMIS pieces of the occupational health and safety code, if I recall, are incredibly important to a number of different industries and businesses, especially when it comes to standardization with other jurisdictions. I suppose I will just make a comment. Are you at all concerned that this item is in the third year?

I will also just make a comment that I see you're consulting on the violence and harassment pieces. I will be very curious to see the outcome and the impact it will have on Alberta workers.

Mr. Copping: Two things. When we actually looked at this list, we looked at this list through a number of lenses of what we were going to do first. High priority is that stuff where there was higher concern with this, plus items that were impacted by changes to the Occupational Health and Safety Act. That made the first bucket.

The things on the lower bucket from the assessment were from stakeholders saying that this is – I'm not saying that it's not important; don't get me wrong – of less concern to change now. I can tell you that our approach to the change is looking at how we update these to make sure the standards are correct. As you know, CSA standards change on a regular basis, so we want to make sure that they're updated.

We're also looking through the lens of red tape reduction, but red tape reduction also includes standardization. As you know, if one standard applies in Saskatchewan and one in Alberta and you have an individual who gets trained differently and then they forget which jurisdiction they are in and they do something wrong, you actually create greater risk than having it standardized. So that is a lens that we're taking a look at it through and also an opportunity to provide opportunities where it makes sense. In some of this it doesn't make sense.

8:50

It makes sense where employers and employees can identify other ways to reach the same outcome but without the same approach. We can only apply flexibility. Our intent is to go and do that. I can say that even though we've highlighted it, part 27, violence and harassment, that one we're not going to go out with quite yet. We've got a little more work to do on it. That will still be coming out in '21 but not in the first package.

Ms Gray: Interesting.

The Chair: Twenty seconds, Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Then, with only 20 seconds left, I will say that on the occupational health and safety system prevention initiative for

Alberta, my next question will just be around how that work adjusted with COVID-19, because the report was vague.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Gray, and thank you, Minister.

We will now move to the government caucus. Mr. Rowswell, you have up to five minutes.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you very much, and thank you for your presence here, Minister. On page 79 key objective 1.4 identifies the ministry's intention to support job creators. I know you've talked about and touched on parts of this already, but I'd just like to have you expand a bit on how job creators will be supported, maybe with an emphasis on rural versus urban if there's a difference. If there's not, then that's fine. I'd just like you to expand on that part of it.

The Chair: To the minister.

Mr. Copping: Well, thanks so much. You're right. The first item that we did to be able to support job creators is changing our legislation, you know, to reduce red tape, to reduce the cost of employment while at the same time maintaining protections for workers, to actually make workplaces safer and enable employers to do that. Changes we made to employment standards, changes we made to occupational health and safety: all of that goes towards reduction in red tape and to make it easier for employers to hire and employ Albertans.

I'm actually very excited – and we talked about this before – about the Alberta jobs now program and to be making an announcement in the near future, because that's another program that will help not only employers hire Albertans who are unemployed but also, you know, help defray the cost of bringing new people on and training them or providing the skills that they need to do that. That's going to be available to employers across the province.

The other thing I'll also highlight is that one of the programs we have is the Canada-Alberta job grant, which provides funding for employers to train employees. We actually made some changes during COVID-19 to make it easier, particularly for smaller businesses, to access that program. Again, that's another help for employers.

In regard to rural versus urban one of the things on the immigration side that we're doing is the rural entrepreneur stream. That's still in the hopper, and we will be looking forward to announcing it this upcoming year. Really, that's about to bring rural entrepreneurs to buy businesses in rural Alberta or open businesses in rural Alberta to create jobs for themselves and others.

We're also looking at — again, we're going to have to watch the timing of this given COVID-19 — the rural renewal stream, which is part of our Alberta advantage immigration strategy. That stream is targeting, for example, veterinarians. We actually have a shortage of veterinarians in Alberta. Even though we're working very hard with the Minister of Advanced Education to be able to ensure we can train vets here, you know, we can't train them fast enough. We have a shortage coming, so the rural renewal immigration stream can bring people like vets into rural Alberta. That's going to be critical for our growth in our ag sector. As you know, veterinarians play such a key role in our food supply chain.

Mr. Rowswell: Has the recognition of the credentials for the vets specifically been a problem, to get that recognition of their credentials?

Mr. Copping: Our fairness for newcomers office is working with the vets association. I can tell you that I've had ongoing

conversations with them, including the University of Calgary, to say: can we use them as a potential pilot when we launch our rural renewal program? We recognize that, you know, if you are going to invite newcomers in, vets from other countries, then ideally you want to identify a clear path to getting accreditation. To invite someone in and have them spin their wheels for years and years without being able to work doesn't make any sense. It's working with everyone involved to say not only, "How do we attract vets from other countries?" but "How do we make the fastest pass to accreditation?" We're in ongoing conversations on that.

Inviting newcomers is like when you hire someone new to your organization. You want to be welcoming. You really measure that on not only if they stay and they feel like they're productive, but they're being productive and they're productive as quickly as possible. You measure that. We need to look at our immigration system the same way. I think there's an opportunity to do this and a great opportunity with the Alberta rural renewal program.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Great. That's good to hear.

On page 77 of the ministry business plan it states:

The ministry also collaborates with Advanced Education, Community and Social Services, and Indigenous Relations to deliver career supports and training programs to develop and retain talent to support Alberta's economy.

Can you provide examples of these partnerships, like, how you are partnering with these various ministries?

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you very much for the question. You know, we work quite closely with these ministries. One of the first things we work with them on is that funding comes through a number of grants from the federal government. We talked about some of the funding that we use within Labour and Immigration to fund the Canada-Alberta job grant, for example, the program that I mentioned. We receive funding. It's Labour and Immigration that is responsible for negotiation with the federal government. This funding is shared with Advanced Education, with Indigenous Relations, and with Community and Social Services, really, to provide employment opportunities for different target groups to get all Albertans working.

Our department for the most part focuses on those who are closer to the job market, to be able to train and retrain. We do have some programs for indigenous people, but Indigenous Relations also runs programs for indigenous people, to provide skill sets. Sometimes those are further removed from the job market, so they need core skill sets initially in terms of, you know, how to work, and then they can get technical skill sets for the particular job moving forward. So we work very closely with Indigenous Relations on that.

Community and Social Services: similarly, they have some individuals who are further away from the job market and need upgrading and skill sets, so they'll provide service on that. Then we will come in after and provide that. Similarly with Advanced Education in terms of supports for individuals who are going through school.

We support all Albertans in terms of getting to work. We target different groups, and we ensure that our training programs that we provide in all four ministries don't compete with each other, that we work collaboratively, and that we're complementary as well.

Mr. Rowswell: That's good.

I'm on the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, and they've just gone through a strategic planning process. They want to narrow down what they are focusing on, and one of them was employment. I don't know if that's come up in your discussions or not, but that's part of their strategic plan, to make sure that disabled people can participate in the workforce.

On page 80 of the business plan key objective 2.3 mentions collaborative "work with employers and employees to promote compliance with employment standards." The ministry will do so by providing support and "timely complaint resolution, effective enforcement and assistance to vulnerable workers." Can the minister elaborate on the kinds of assistance that you'll be providing to vulnerable workers? Maybe you can describe what a vulnerable worker is.

9:00

Mr. Copping: Thanks so much for the question. Vulnerable workers include, you know, young workers and foreign workers. Our department plays a role in educating them and their employers about rights and responsibilities, restrictions while working in Alberta, and resolving disputes regarding unfair, unsafe, or unhealthy working conditions. We also provide supports to temporary foreign workers through the temporary foreign worker advisory office.

These supports include referrals to other jurisdictions or partners where there is suspected human trafficking or labour trafficking and assisting with work permit applications to the federal government. We also collaborate with other federal, provincial, and municipal and community partners during investigations and inspections to support these vulnerable workers, primarily youth and foreign workers who are caught in, you know, whether it be human trafficking or labour trafficking, to get the support and the services that they need to get out and then help them, perhaps even working with the federal government to get them another job with another employer.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you.

How much time have I got left?

The Chair: About five seconds.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. I'll stop there, then.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rowswell.

Now to Mr. Nielsen for a 10-minute block.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Hopefully, the minister is still willing to go back and forth.

Mr. Copping: Happy to do so.

Mr. Nielsen: Great. Obviously, in the last block, talking about one of my favourite subjects, red tape, I of course noticed on page 78, right near the bottom there, that it seems to be a standard line throughout every single ministry about: "As part of this ongoing review, the ministry is committed to making life easier for hard-working Albertans and job creators by reducing regulatory requirements by one-third by 2023, and eliminating administrative burden through more efficient processes." I did notice that that was exactly word for word throughout every single ministry's opening remarks.

Through the discussions that I've heard here this evening, there were just a couple of loose kinds of questions that I've seen come up outside of the ones that I do want to ask. One of them revolves around, of course, the labour board, specifically looking at metrics on page 80, around 3(b), and maybe a little bit of the lack of metrics. The reason I ask this, Minister, is that from personal experience I've seen very, very large corporations, you know, again using my own life experience, where my colleagues and I did go on strike and the employer was able to get a hearing with the labour board within 24 hours. Yet I know that the union, UFCW, has never been able to get a meeting within 24 hours. So I'm just kind of wondering what kind

of red tape you're looking at through this, to try to maybe equalize that a little bit.

The Chair: Mr. Minister.

Mr. Copping: Thanks for the question. As I indicated, you know, we have measures in place. Even though in the business plan we have one measure associated with targets in regard to the timeliness of decisions, so 90 days and a target of 85 per cent, we still monitor other measures, including the time to get a hearing. Not only this, but we include more measures in our annual report so that, you know, people can see how we're doing.

In relation to, you know, the performance of the Alberta Labour Relations Board, as I indicated earlier in our conversations tonight, they are a quasi-judicial body, so they operate at arm's length. We did put changes in the preamble. One of the principles is expedient processes to resolve disputes. We look to the board to continue to be able to improve on their ability to have hearings in an expedient manner and also get decisions out quickly but also fairly.

Mr. Nielsen: Thanks, Minister.

One of the other things you have brought up that you were working on – Member Gray had talked about things like the WHMIS program and standardizing across the provinces and whatnot. I guess what I'm wondering is that I know that in the beginning the government had kind of reduced some red tape, crossing fingers a little bit, hoping that other provinces would follow suit. What has been the response from other provinces with regard to the work that you're trying to do to standardize? Are you finding it to be amicable, or are they pushing back? What are you finding there?

Mr. Copping: Actually, it is quite amicable. I sit on a group of federal and provincial ministers who are responsible for occupational health and safety. We had a meeting two weeks ago, where we actually identified a number of items that we want to standardize across the entire country. We have a working group focused on that because there is a recognition that having standardization is important. As I indicated before, having two different sets of rules and employees working across different jurisdictions: that actually can create a hazard. So having standardized rules across is helpful. In our code review – and you'll see when we roll this out in terms of our consultation coming – we are making mention of standards that are across the country, and we're moving towards that because we think that that is safer and really reduces red tape for employers.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Minister.

Those were kind of my loose-end questions here. Now I'm getting back here, back onto page 80 here, performance metric 3(a) for red tape reduction. You had mentioned in your very opening remarks – and I just want to quickly clarify – a number, I believe a 4 per cent reduction. Was that in reference to this past year, or is that just the reference made here on 3(a), which was actually 3.6 per cent?

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Copping: Yes. The reference to the 4 per cent was actually that if you took the core budget for Labour and Immigration next year and you compared it to this year, it's a 4 per cent reduction overall. That's what that refers to. It's hard to see this in the budget numbers because, you know, we had special programs last year which were above and beyond our \$210 million, and then we have special programs in the upcoming fiscal year, again, which are above and

beyond our typical programming like the Alberta jobs now program, for example, that's in place. I wanted to be able to provide some comparison in terms of that when we take the COVID stuff out and you just look at our core budget, it's about a 4 per cent reduction. Again, we're achieving that through operational efficiencies but still maintaining the services that we provide.

Mr. Nielsen: As you are aware and with the budget, there was a slight reduction within the ministry of red tape. It was in last year's budget projected to be about \$13 million over the course of the term. It's down to about \$10.3 million. With each ministry, obviously, there are some responsibilities with red tape reduction. I'm just wondering: how many staff or, I guess, staff hours have been dedicated to the policy of red tape reduction within the ministry? How much has been dedicated there?

Mr. Copping: I don't think we have it broken down that way. You know, my understanding is that we haven't identified staff per se to just do red tape. This is part of our day-to-day job. It's like health and safety; it's part of your day-to-day job in terms of your operation. We haven't dedicated staff per se full-time just doing red tape reduction. I can tell you that we are working towards our regulatory account reduction as well as reducing the red tape for employers, and we'll continue to do so.

Mr. Nielsen: So there hasn't been any kind of budget, I guess, established specifically for red tape reduction within the Ministry of Labour and Immigration?

The Chair: He answered no.

Mr. Nielsen: Okay. Sorry. I just wanted to make sure that there wasn't something else coming there. Thanks.

I guess that leads into my next one. On page 80, you know, and I guess also referencing the red tape reduction annual report that was tabled, specifically around page 8, there was a baseline count of 670,977 different regulatory requirements across government. Under your performance metrics in 3(a) I noted that there was no baseline count referenced like there is in some other ministries. I'm just wondering if you know what the baseline count has been in the Ministry of Labour and Immigration.

9:10

Mr. Copping: For Labour and Immigration, the baseline count is 24,625. However, that doesn't include all of the ABCs, so that includes the Labour Relations Board and the Appeals Commission, and they're finalizing their counts right now.

Mr. Nielsen: Okay. So, based on that, obviously, in 2019-2020 you had reduced by 3.6 per cent. Is there a number for 2020-21, or is that coming?

Mr. Copping: The most up-to-date information we have as of December 31, 2020, is 6.55 per cent.

Mr. Nielsen: Okay. Perfect. I guess that now jumps me over to the critical worker . . .

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Nielsen. That's the end of your time.

We will now go back to government caucus. Mr. Toor, you have up to five minutes.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Chair. Can you hear me? Hello.

The Chair: We can hear you.

Mr. Toor: Okay. Thank you.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you for all the work you're doing. Thank you to your department. A lot of information. I want to start with page 79 of the ministry's business plan. If you look at key objective 1.6, it outlines the ministry's focus to ensure Alberta's professional regulatory bodies adhere to the principles in the Fair Registration Practices Act and continue to implement the fairness for newcomers plan. Can the minister please elaborate on how the office will work closely with the professional regulatory organizations?

Mr. Copping: Thank you so much, Member Toor, for the question. As you know, the fair registration practices office was set up a year ago, and they commenced their work working with professional organizations, and really for the past year it's been creating baseline data, understanding, as you may recall, that under the act there were a number of requirements, one of which was including that they needed to have a decision, once all the information was provided, within six months. The decision was either yes or no, but also, if it wasn't that, then here's what you need to do to get accredited. As you know, we had heard from a number of newcomers that they would go, they'd make applications, they'd get the runaround, and they weren't sure what they were able to do. This addressed that. Plus, there needed to be a clear appeal process, and their systems need to be efficient and fair.

The past year the fairness for newcomers offices have been working with the PROs, understanding how many newcomers are applying, how long it is taking them to respond, and do they actually have a fair and efficient appeals process? They've done that now. The next year what they were going to be focusing on is saying: okay; how do we improve these processes and make them more efficient, and then how do we continue to reduce barriers for newcomers coming? At the end of the day, we invite these newcomers to come to Canada. We invite them because of the skill sets that they have, because we want them to apply their skill sets. Now we need to make it easy for them to do that with a clear path forward, still maintaining – and this is up to the PROs – the safety and the high standards that Albertans have come to expect and Canadians have come to expect from them.

At the same time, because we're inviting them for their skills, we need to make it easier for them to be able to find a path forward, get recognized, and then get to work, because, at the end of the day, you know, by having newcomers get to work, it not only creates jobs for themselves, but it creates jobs for other Albertans.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Minister.

Looking at page 77 of the business plan, it identifies that the ministry delivered programs and services to help newcomers settle and integrate in order to contribute to the Alberta economy, including prearrival settlement services, offering skills upgrading to underemployed foreign professionals, and providing access to bridge financing for certification exams and assessing foreign credentials received outside of Canada through the international qualification assessment services to allow new Albertans to fully participate in Alberta's economy, utilizing their education, knowledge, skills, and experience. Can you please advise and update on these efforts in the past year?

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you so much for the question again. I'd like to maybe touch on just a couple of key elements of our fairness for newcomers plan. As you know, we ran on a platform of making it easier for newcomers to come to Alberta and welcoming them, and this is going to be a cornerstone for our economic recovery. One commitment that we made as part of our plan is in regard to prearrival services because the ideal, as I mentioned earlier, is that

before someone even – you know, once they apply but before they come to Alberta, they can even start the process for getting their accreditation and their qualifications. But to do that, they need to know what this is, what to expect when they get here, so we have provided prearrival information to provincial nominees of the AINP prior to their arrival to Alberta.

We're also in the process of partnering with the federal government so that to individuals who are coming through federal programs who are coming to Alberta, we can provide the same information. Now, this early contact will support these individuals to have a smoother transition once they get here to Alberta and ultimately help them settle in our communities more effectively and get to work faster. That's on the prearrival services.

When we talk about skills upgrading for underemployed foreign professionals, we've also done some work in this regard. You know, through this fiscal year our partners will implement the Alberta settlement and integration program funded project proposals – and these were approved in March 2021 – to address newcomer unemployment through training in occupation-specific language skills, workplace culture, intercultural communications, sector-specific training such as information technology, health care, and supply chain management. That's in line item 2.1 of our program. The services for skilled unemployed professionals were also procured under the training for work program, with a focus on foreign-trained professionals impacted by the downturn in the energy sector.

We've also provided bridge financing for certification exams. As indicated earlier, we've expanded the ability for newcomers to access microloans. In November 2020 a microloans pilot program was delivered by Servus Credit Union and by Bredin centre for learning to offer low-interest loans to immigrant professionals who need bridge financing to upgrade their skills and to pay for certification exams. There's been a target of 450 loans over three years, from 2020-23, that has been set for the pilot. We also extended our agreement with Windmill Microlending to be able to continue to do that great work that they're doing there.

The last thing I just want to talk to is in regard to international qualification assessment service. You know, we run a service through the Alberta government, and we reduced our processing times for all applicants as a result of a pause on the immigration applications implemented in 2019. Then we reduced the time from 23 now to six weeks. The processing time for immigration applicants has been reduced from 24 to 14 weeks. By changing our processes and highlighting those newcomers who are coming to Alberta, Alberta applicants requesting an assessment for employer hiring purposes will be expedited and processed in five business days. Alberta applicants requesting an assessment for obtaining professional licences are now processed in 15 days. We've done a tremendous amount of work to try to support newcomers coming to Alberta and under IQAS for those who are coming here to reduce the times so they can actually get that one piece of information, as you know, which is so critically important on the path to certification.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Minister, and thank you for all the great work you're doing. I can certainly say that the newcomers will appreciate that.

My next question. I think that if you look at page 164, line item 2.6, in the estimates document, it refers to labour support and is described as support for Alberta employers and their employees to gain the skills they need to succeed in the workforce, including through the Canada-Alberta job grant. Can you please discuss any recent changes to this job grant to help businesses access the

training they need during the, I guess, challenging economic environment?

9:20

The Chair: Minister, you have about one minute and 30 seconds.

Mr. Copping: That's a great question. We've already talked about the Canada-Alberta job grant, so I won't have to describe what it is. During COVID-19 we made some changes to make it more accessible. Eligible training now includes employed family members of eligible employers. Business owners with four or fewer employees, including all owners, are now eligible for training, and training is no longer required to be incremental, meaning that training that is required for the job is now eligible for funding. We made it more wide open so training can be provided to more people and keep people working through this pandemic.

Mr. Toor: Thank you.

How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Chair: You have about 50 seconds.

Mr. Toor: Okay. I'll try to read one question.

Did you say 15 or 50? Now I think it's 15.

The Chair: Yeah. Four-zero.

Mr. Toor: Okay. Thanks.

I think I'll leave it. I can try, but I can leave it.

The Chair: Fair enough.

We will move on to the opposition caucus. Mr. Nielsen again, or back to Ms Gray?

Mr. Nielsen: Yeah. Just one quick question to the minister, and then I'll pass the remaining time over to MLA Gray. Minister, what kind of resources or funding is available from the ministry of red tape reduction which the Ministry of Labour and Immigration can access to move forward on its efforts with red tape reduction?

Mr. Copping: The ministry of red tape reduction: basically, they don't provide funding, but what they do provide is that they go out, there are a number of round-tables that are held, they collate a number of ideas that we're getting in from all Albertans and Alberta employers, and then they provide that to a ministry such as Labour and Immigration, which we can then assess.

Mr. Nielsen: Maybe, then, just one other quick follow-up: is it possible to get a list of some of the groups that have been consulted with regard to red tape reduction and the advice that they've given to the ministry of labour?

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. We have consulted, you know, widely. Not only ourselves received submissions directly, but we received submissions through the minister of red tape reduction.

The Chair: Okay. Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. I would like to talk just a little bit more about the Appeals Commission and what's happening with the Fair Practices office and the MPO, jumping off some of the questions MLA Turton was asking. In talking about what the appeals commissioner, looking at the whole process – Minister, you talked about: this is going to do two great things. But I would like to submit that it's going to do one not so great thing, and that is that

there were certainly some issues that we heard, from the in-depth consultations we did, around trust and the institutional neutrality being maintained between the advisory role and the adjudicative role. Now they're combined; they both report through that single commissioner. The separation and the independence were a cause for concern during the consultations. My question to you is: because of the potential to negatively impact public trust, how are you going to make sure that that institutional neutrality is kept in place? Are there mechanisms? Is there something you can do to fix that?

Mr. Copping: As I understand it, there was a concern associated with that, but that's because the advisory services were under the WCB, right? I appreciate, you know, that the WCB was the same organization that was making the decision. Now, the Appeals Commission is independent. It is separate, so instead of taking – those advisory services are no longer in the WCB. We put them to the Appeals Commission. I think that addresses the problem because it is an independent body. It is separate from the WCB. It's not under the same board. It's under a separate appeals commissioner. It is a quasi-judicial body designed to make decisions, and now they are responsible.

I think the original concern that was flagged when the original assessment was done, because some of these advisory services weren't under the Appeals Commission but, rather, under the WCB – we didn't put them back there on purpose. I recollect – it may be a little fuzzy now because it was only four months ago, but lots has happened since then. I think that the original panel didn't suggest that we set up three separate offices, right? I might have that wrong. But I do know that when we looked at other jurisdictions, they do not have three separate offices; they have one in an appeals commission, and it is independent. I believe that that will address the concerns.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Minister. I'm speaking more to the concern about the advisory role from that Fair Practices office and then the adjudicative role in the appeals commissioner and the lawyers and the judges – I don't know what comparison to make, but that particular place. Really, I'm hearing you say that that kind of protection or neutrality isn't on your radar at this moment, so I would suggest that you consider that and the impact it may have on the system.

I'm going to jump topics because we're into those last couple of blocks, where we're trying to get through and make sure we've asked everything we wanted to get onto the record. At our last estimates we discussed at length the importance of OHS officers being able to check valid apprenticeship or trade certifications, both to improve worker safety, increase compliance, and save government from having to send two different workers out to a work site to check different aspects. At the time you weren't certain what was happening with that change, and you were going to take a look into it. Are OHS officers still not checking trade tickets while they're on sites?

Mr. Copping: My understanding is that they are not.

Ms Gray: Do you have a good reason for that? It seems to me that for safety reasons, for compliance reasons, for efficiency reasons, and for the fact that other jurisdictions have moved in that direction, it is only a detrimental decision to not have OHS officers able to also do that when they happen to be on-site. If you could explain to me why they are not, I would appreciate it.

Mr. Copping: My understanding – and this is a high level of understanding in terms of our conversation with Advanced

Education, who actually is responsible for many of the trade certificates. Two things: one is that they have people who are involved in this, and then, secondly, from an occupational health and safety standpoint, my understanding is that, you know, the time that it took to actually continue to look at all these things at the same time that they are there versus the issues with compliance or lack of compliance – and then they can spend their time on other things which are higher risk. It was more valuable. Then the decision was made that we wouldn't continue to spend our time on that basis.

Ms Gray: Okay. I appreciate the explanation. It leaves me curious, but I will leave that there.

I wrote down a note. You said that you are undertaking a review involving the Appeals Commission. I just wanted to emphasize: will your review be talking to workers and users of the system to gather their input? They are a difficult group to pin down and engage fulsomely in consultation, but their voices are critically important within that system.

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. Our focus is on an internal review of all the people within the system, so it's looking at it from stem to stern in terms of the people who are coming in, and then what are the choke points in the system?

Ms Gray: All right. Thank you.

Within the Alberta jobs now program, which I realize you will be announcing in the near future, we certainly hope, have you considered youth unemployment rates? Unfortunately, right now we're seeing that 1 in 4 youth are looking for work. Will Alberta jobs now speak to that demographic as well?

Mr. Copping: We appreciate, fully appreciate, the impact that COVID-19 and the recession in Alberta have had on youth, and, you know, we are targeting our Alberta jobs now for all individuals who are unemployed.

Ms Gray: Thank you for that.

Again a bit of a topic shift; I apologize for the whiplash. The employee labour relations support program: I'm curious about this new program, that was initiated by your government, and how many requests for information via the website and calls that line continues to get.

Mr. Copping: I have that. Just one second. To date we've had 46 e-mails, one Alberta Connects inquiry, and 56 phone calls.

9:30

The Chair: Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. So when you're talking about operational efficiency, I understand that this work is being undertaken by labour staff who are doing other things as well, because that's an incredibly low amount of use for this particular support line.

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Copping: That is correct. We don't have a separate staff. This is an individual who does this, and then they have other work in addition to this.

The Chair: Ms Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you.

The Chair: You have about 36 seconds.

Ms Gray: Thirty-six seconds. Then I will just ask: off your expense vote by program I'm noticing a nearly 20 per cent reduction in the policy and labour market information. Can you tell me what is changing within that line item?

Mr. Copping: Again, this has to do with operational efficiencies, which includes . . .

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt, Minister. You will have to save that for the next block.

We will now go back to government caucus. Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair, through you to the minister. Minister, I want to commend you on the great job you and your department do. Tonight there's been lots of good information, lots of back and forth, and at this late hour you must feel like you're a rabbit.

Anyhow, page 79 of the business plan includes performance measure 1(b), outcomes for training for work program clients. In 2019 75.1 per cent of clients reported that they are either employed or in further education or training after leaving a skills training program. Minister, can you please provide some examples of skills programs offered to Albertans through the training for work program, and what specific jobs or occupations is your ministry targeting?

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Copping: Thanks so much for the question. You know, training for work is a tremendous program. Really, the design of this program is that we put out requests for proposals, and we have organizations apply that see a need in the labour market to provide training to individuals to fill that need. Quite frankly, they don't get paid unless 70 per cent of their graduates either go to another course or actually find a job. We found that this has been very effective in terms of addressing labour market need although, in fairness, it takes some time to run the RFP process, and it takes time to set up and find service providers who can fill the need.

In terms of what the training for work program applies to, it is a range of occupations. For example, the tech industry training in Calgary and Edmonton is focused on roles and cyber security, web, software development, cloud technology, and business analysis. We've had training for work programs run in supply chain training, which occurred in Red Deer, Lethbridge, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, and Edmonton. We also provide generally, you know, targeted wraparound supports such as resumé building, career planning, and training targeted to unemployed engineers and oil and gas workers in Calgary so they can then pursue new careers in new industries. We also do that as part of our overall program offering.

As our labour market needs change, so too do the applications we have when we do requests for proposals for training for work. This provides us some flexibility in terms of – as the needs change, so too do our programs, and there's flexibility within the program funding.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

On page 79 key objective 1.5 outlines the ministry's focus to "support economic growth, job creation and diversification by launching the new AINP streams to attract job-creating entrepreneurs and specialized skills and talent to support Alberta's economy." Minister, could you please provide more information on the specialized skills and talent you're hoping to attract?

Mr. Copping: Well, one of the big ones is entrepreneurs. Three of our streams are entrepreneur based, what we are looking for. Two of the streams – and we talked about them earlier. We've launched already, you know, entrepreneur streams for foreign students who come to Alberta, to our tremendous postsecondary education institutions, and graduate and now want to set up a business here. That's one of the streams.

Another stream is foreign students who graduate from colleges and universities outside of Canada – and we're targeting particularly the U.S. – who want to come to Canada and come to Alberta and create a business and be entrepreneurs and not only create jobs for themselves but create jobs for other Albertans. These two are launched.

The third stream, which I mentioned earlier, is a rural entrepreneur stream, which we haven't launched yet but will be doing in the not-too-distant future, and that is newcomers who want to come to rural Alberta and either buy a business that's already existing or invest and start up a new business. I had the pleasure of touring this fall a number of constituencies outside of Calgary and Edmonton, meeting with newcomers who set up businesses. Almost every single one of them: not only did they create a business for themselves and their families, but they created a business for other Albertans. Truly, these entrepreneurs are what will form a core component of our Alberta recovery plan.

The fourth one that I mentioned, the fourth stream, is in regard to the rural renewal stream. That's, really, where there's a shortage of a particular occupation or occupations. We're looking to collaborate, quite frankly, with economic development authorities and rural municipalities and regions where there's a shortage identified by them in the area. Then we bring in those particular sectors and grant them an ability to be able to be involved in the process of selecting who we bring in through, in essence, our AINP, this new stream, and that we can target.

In addition to that, what we also will be looking at in the future is recognizing that as we come out of COVID and we have economic recovery, then we can use the Alberta express entry stream more and identify those occupations where there are shortages and then invite them to come to our province. They'll be able to fill the gaps. Even at the end of the day, we take a look at – for example, in the tech industry we have not a lot of programs like training for work, which are training or retraining Albertans already here to work in the tech industry. One thing we've heard from the tech industry as well is that what they need is senior-level tech workers who can actually guide and train and mentor Albertans who are already here, but we don't have enough of those to be able to grow faster. It's an opportunity as our economy starts to rebound to bring those individuals and those types of sectors into Alberta. It's some of those types of key positions that are actually holding back Alberta companies from growing and growing faster and being able to employ more Albertans. That's another key sector that we're looking at, and we'll be able to pull that lever, hopefully, later this year as we get economic recovery.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Minister, could you please advise how much money the ministry has allocated to the training for work program?

Mr. Copping: We have allocated \$25.9 million to the training for work program, which, as I indicated before, serves unemployed or marginally employed Albertans, including those who are receiving unemployment insurance and provincial income support and are deemed able to work. It's delivered through third-party services,

and the training is offered across the province and is aligned with regional labour market demand because it's done on an RFP basis.

Just a little more background: there are five different categories under the training for work program. We have immigrant bridging, integrated training, self-employment, transition to employment services, and workplace training. The training for work is included in the skills and training support line in Labour and Immigration's '21-22 estimates.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, if it's all right with you, I'd like to cede my time to my colleague Ms Rosin.

The Chair: Ms Rosin.

Ms Rosin: Sorry; my glasses came off when I took my mask off. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: Two minutes.

Ms Rosin: Two minutes. Okay. Well, Minister, I'll be fairly quick, then. Something that we talked a lot about in the campaign and that we heard resoundingly from small businesses, primarily restaurant owners and coffee shops, was the need to reform and look at the occupational health and safety codes in Alberta. We heard resoundingly that there was an abundance of red tape, and it was causing significant difficulties to these small-business owners, who wanted to keep their employees safe and operate in a safe environment but were really struggling to abide by all of the regulations. On page 79 key objective 2.1 of your business plan advises that your ministry will "review the Occupational Health and Safety Codes to improve health and safety outcomes while enabling innovation, competitiveness and streamlining regulatory requirements." I'm wondering if you can just please provide more information regarding this review and what's being contained in it and the timeline of when you expect that review to be complete.

Thank you.

The Chair: Minister.

9:40

Mr. Copping: Thanks so much for the question. We put out a plan to review all elements of the code over a three-year period. On the first tranche we will do a consultation starting in two weeks, and our focus has been: how do we reduce the red tape? First off, how do we ensure safety and make it easily understandable? Then how do we reduce red tape, how do we standardize to actually improve safety and reduce red tape at the same time when you do it across different jurisdictions, and how do we actually also allow, where possible, flexibility so that the safety outcomes will be achieved but you can do it in different ways that both employers and employees working together can identify and do that? We're starting consultation on the first tranche of a number of the sections of the code in the coming weeks, and we hope to have that implemented – once we get the feedback on that and then make those changes over the coming months, then we'll start with the . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Sorry to interrupt.

From red tape to white rabbits to Ms Gray. Oh, Mr. Nielsen.

Mr. Nielsen: That's okay. Thanks, Chair. I appreciate it. Minister, I just wanted to pop back over to the critical worker benefit, which, you know, quite frankly, has been widely criticized as onerous. I know that right after it launched – I'm holding a PowerPoint of 19 pages on how to be able to navigate through it, and we have heard

some feedback around it not being equitable for employees within the same employer. We'll see in the retail sector where you'll have an employer that's saying: well, I have employees that are qualifying for the program over here as a cashier, yet over in this store in this other jurisdiction we have an employee who's a cashier who's not qualifying for that. I guess that when I look at that, noting the fact that it was nine months or so before it was developed as well, for a program that seems, quite frankly, a little bit red tape heavy, I'm just wondering: how much money was spent in developing this program, which, as we also know, ended up with a data breach as well?

Mr. Copping: We'll have to get you the exact number in terms of the – there was some money that was invested in terms of leveraging Service Alberta and sort of writing the new code for the project. I don't have that exact number with me at this point in time. What I can tell you, though, is that, you know, we worked hard to try to minimize the administrative costs associated with the program. We chose a program design which, quite frankly, was more complicated whereby for those who were eligible to receive it, particularly through the quasi-public, not-for-profit organizations that do fantastic work in our health system, community and social services, education system, children's services, we deliver through departments so we wouldn't have to set up separate infrastructure.

Now, for the delivery to the private sector, we did have separate infrastructure, so there was a cost – and I'll get back to you – that was associated with that. But, again, I want to come back to the whole notion that, you know, in terms of equity, there were guidelines that were put out by the federal government in terms of that. Generally speaking, it would target lower wage workers, so I appreciate that within some organizations higher wage workers aren't eligible and lower wage workers are. I can tell you that when we took a look at other jurisdictions that were doing this, they had very different definitions about lower wage. Ours: we set the bar at \$25 an hour for the private sector, which is quite a bit higher than you'll find in other jurisdictions, and we had to make choices in regard to who was involved.

We thank all the workers because, as you know, well over 80 per cent of workers continue to work. They were essential, deemed providing essential services during the pandemic, so we fully appreciate all the work that they did. There's limited money within the overall program envelope that was provided by the federal government, and the government of Alberta also kicked in \$118 million to this. We thank all the workers who do the work, but we chose, you know, those who were in health care, those who were providing services to the most vulnerable, social services, education, as well as grocery store clerks and others who were providing support to our food supply chains and our medical supply chains as well.

The Chair: Mr. Nielsen.

Mr. Nielsen: Thanks, Chair. I think the takeaway comment, though, of course, was, you know, from the employers that have been making comments on this. They're saying that their employee over in this jurisdiction, say, for instance, Edmonton, a cashier, and another one down in, say, Lethbridge, also a cashier, both doing the same job, both making the same wage: the one in Edmonton qualified and the one in Lethbridge didn't. Hopefully, you'll be able to take away from that.

One of the other questions that I did have around this development – again, as I mentioned, it seemed a little bit red tape heavy. Was there any consultation with the red tape reduction ministry in the development of this?

Mr. Copping: We did not consult specifically with the ministry on this although we always have conversations with my cabinet colleagues when we actually move forward with programs of this type. Actually, we did pull down the number that we actually spent from an IT perspective, which is \$252,000, to be able to, from a capital standpoint, set up for the program.

Let me provide one more comment in regard to employees. You know, we fully appreciate that if an employee is a grocery clerk, supporting the food supply chain, they'll be eligible. I understand that others who are not supporting the food supply chain or are in food retail would not be eligible, so that may be a reason for the difference. If you've got something specific and you think that it's being applied incorrectly, please feel free to raise it with my office.

Mr. Nielsen: Thanks, Minister.

I guess that around the critical worker benefit there is some understanding that there are some contractors working within that program. I'm just wondering how many contractors there are specifically working on that.

Mr. Copping: We have full-time staff and contractors working on that. I wanted to confirm the numbers because there was some discussion here whether they're exact, so I don't want to give the wrong number, but we can actually provide that to you and Member Gray in the near future.

Mr. Nielsen: Perfect.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have three minutes, 40 seconds.

Mr. Nielsen: I can probably get this last question in here. When we're looking, as was brought up earlier, at our youth unemployment, I guess, more specifically, what's being done to try to alleviate that? What other kinds of red tape reductions are you looking at in order to achieve reducing youth unemployment?

Mr. Copping: I think that generally, when we talk about, you know, red tape reduction, it is that as we reduce the cost to employers of hiring employees, you will generate job opportunities that you wouldn't otherwise have. A lot of the changes that we're working on on the red tape reduction side in terms of to reduce the overall cost and changes that we made last year in terms of the number of the acts that we passed in the Legislature in dealing with employment standards and even occupational health and safety, which will actually improve not only health and safety outcomes but also reduce the burden on employers, that will help create more opportunities than otherwise would be placed.

In terms of work that our department is doing in terms of supporting Albertans generally and getting back to work, again, as I indicated to Member Gray, the Alberta jobs now program will be a tremendous tool to be able to get Albertans back to work, including youth. Also, through our training for work programs and our LMP grant program we have programs that are specifically targeted for youth. I want to give you a couple of examples. For example, our LMP grant is a grant with FutureCite Inc. We have a project with GenXYZ Thrives!, and it was a full-day Zoom event with keynote presenters, panel sessions, and breakfast to target particularly youth and next gen on how best to proceed, find a job, and connect with employers.

We also did put out a grant for another group of youth, indigenous youth, for Treaty 7 partners. This was again looking at: how do we connect youth with employers, promote opportunities for them to find work, and then facilitate employment success?

9:50

These are just a couple of examples that we're using. We have some of our broader programs which youth can apply to, and then we also target within either our labour market programming or our training for work programs so that we can target specific groups and try to get them back to work.

The Chair: Mr. Nielsen.

Mr. Nielsen: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Minister, I guess I can't help but ask here at this point: how much interaction does your ministry have with the red tape reduction ministry? I guess the reason I'm asking why is, you know, comments upon comments upon comments about the amount of money that we're spending on the ministry for red tape reduction, but it doesn't look like there's a whole lot of interaction there. Perhaps you could tell us: is there interaction there, or are we really just spending \$10.3 million where something could actually and already is happening just within the ministry itself?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nielsen.

We will now enter our final set with government caucus. Mr. Walker, I believe that you are up.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister Copping, for being here today for estimates. It's been a great discussion back and forth with the opposition and government members. I also want to say hello to your staff who are with us today. As you know, I formerly worked in labour, before I flipped over to become an MLA. I greatly enjoyed my time there, and I would be remiss if I didn't also directly say hello to one of my former bosses, Myles Morris. It's great that he's there with you, providing great support. Myles is also a constituent, so that's amazing.

In the time remaining here, Minister, through the chair, what I'm going to try to do is, quite simply, with the time constraints, pull a rabbit, a gopher, or a platypus, if you will, out of the hat to ask these critical questions. I want to say first, Minister, how happy I am and pleased I am as a former immigration official at IQAS and AINP with the great work you have done with the fairness for newcomers action plan – we're very excited about that – as well as the Fair Registration Practices Act, which, of course, supports that great work. I have dealt with so many constituents, newcomers who have seen tremendous barriers reduced for their credential recognition processes and working more effectively with PROs through the fairness for newcomers office. Thank you so much for all that amazing work.

When we're talking about reducing red tape, as Mr. Nielsen had brought up, Chair, I would again turn him to the great work, and the minister talked about it earlier, the incredible work on the immigration file that the minister has done.

But my comments and questions today, Minister, will be focused on the Alberta jobs now program. There's a lot of excitement around that, so, Minister, I would like to turn you to page 79 of the business plan under outcome 1, key objective 1.1. It mentions that the Alberta jobs now program will reduce the hiring cost for job creators. I see your ministry is a critical part of the Alberta recovery plan. It is a hopeful, optimistic message to build record infrastructure, diversify our economy, and create good-paying jobs for Albertans. I know how important the immigration strategy is, too, as well as the labour that is linked in to the ARP. So on the Alberta jobs now plan, Minister, can you please provide details as to how the Alberta jobs now program will operate?

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you so much for the question. I am really excited about the program, and I am excited to announce it. As indicated, we're waiting for the final sign-off from the federal government. I look forward to announcing it in the next few weeks.

You know, I can say, as I hinted already earlier, that the program will be more like the Canada-Alberta jobs grant in terms of providing support to employers to train employees to do that. It's not so much like that that it's going to not be used. I think this will be very well used. I look forward to being able to announce and being able to provide you and all Albertans all the details about how this program is going to work in the coming weeks.

The Chair: Mr. Walker.

Mr. Walker: Yes. Thank you, Chair. I'm very excited to see that rollout coming, Minister. We're all super excited.

Speaking of the rollout, Minister, through the chair, how will you guys ensure a successful rollout of the program? Will it be more soft launch, or is it going to be a larger, more focused media blitz?

Mr. Copping: Once we get there, it will not be a soft launch. There will be an announcement. We are working already to set up an online application portal to try to deliver this as efficiently and as effectively as possible, with detailed guidelines and checklists for employers to apply so that, you know, sector employees actually know about the program as well. We'll set up a program phone line and a website and do various online marketing promotions so that not only unemployed Albertans will understand and know about the program, but employers will know about it and then be able to take advantage of it. We think this has tremendous potential to get Albertans back to work and reduce the cost to employers for hiring them and at the same time provide Albertans with the skills they need to get back into the workforce and then continue working into the future.

You know, we're optimistic about this program. We're optimistic about the plans that our government has for the Alberta economic recovery plan in not only increasing jobs in the energy sector but also diversification and plans for diversification in other sectors, including the great announcement that we had on the tech sector earlier this week.

The Chair: Mr. Walker.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your response. We know that Alberta is an entrepreneurial province. It is the entrepreneurial heartland of Canada. Henry and Martha know that the dignity of work is something to be highly valued. We know how much Albertans who are, unfortunately, unemployed right now really want to get back to work, and I'm confident that the Alberta jobs now program will assist that. So thank you for those thoughtful responses.

I want to now – I have a little time – get into the numbers of the Alberta jobs now program. Under initiatives supporting key objectives on page 79 of the business plan, it mentions that \$127.5 million is allocated to the Alberta jobs now program. Minister, can you describe the measures that were considered while determining the budget for this program?

Mr. Copping: You know, in designing this program, we – the total program is just under \$200 million, as I indicated in my opening remarks, and that \$200 million is spread over a number of years. We're leveraging 185 million federal dollars associated with this program. We're taking a look at this. In terms of launching it, we wanted to time it with, like, first of all, coming out of the second wave and then our economic recovery moving up so that employers

can take advantage of this and not only reduce the cost to employ Albertans but create long-lasting jobs that Albertans can get hired into and then stay working at. All of this went into our calculation in terms of how we're going to allocate the funds over the very . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, Minister, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on March 15, 2021, at 7 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned. Have a good rabbit.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

