



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 28th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Human Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Ministry of Human Services

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Hon. Naresh Bhardwaj, Associate Minister – Services for Persons with Disabilities

Hon. Sandra Jansen, Associate Minister – Family and Community Safety

Brenda Lee Doyle, Assistant Deputy Minister, Disability Services

Karen Ferguson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Early Childhood and Community Supports

Mark Hattori, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child and Family Services

Carol Ann Kushlyk, Senior Financial Officer

Donna Ludvigsen, Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment and Financial Supports

David Morhart, Deputy Minister

Susan Taylor, Assistant Deputy Minister, Family Violence Prevention and Homeless Supports

3:30 p.m.

Wednesday, April 9, 2014

[Ms Olesen in the chair]

**Ministry of Human Services
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. Because this meeting is very time specific, I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Human Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2015.

I'd ask that we go around the table and introduce ourselves for the record, and when we come to you, Mr. Minister, if you would introduce your staff. I'll start with myself. My name is Cathy Olesen, MLA for Sherwood Park and chair of this committee.

Mrs. Forsyth: Hi. I'm Heather Forsyth, deputy chair, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Towle: Kerry Towle, MLA, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. McAllister: Bruce McAllister, MLA, Chestermere-Rocky View.

Ms Notley: Rachel Notley, Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Jansen: Sandra Jansen, MLA for Calgary-North West and Associate Minister of Family and Community Safety.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Naresh Bhardwaj, MLA, Edmonton-Ellerslie, Associate Minister of Services for Persons with Disabilities.

Mr. Bhullar: Manmeet Bhullar. I'm the Minister of Human Services. Joining me today is our deputy minister, David Morhart.

Madam Chair, would you like me to introduce the people in the gallery now?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Mr. Bhullar: Okay. In the gallery we have senior financial officer Carol Ann Kushlyk; our ADMs Susan Taylor, Brenda Lee Doyle, Mark Hattori, Donna Ludvigsen, Karen Ferguson; our chief delivery officer for the ministry, Lori Cooper; Kathy Telfer, our director of communications; and Debbie Carter, our executive director of finance.

Dr. Swann: Good afternoon and welcome. David Swann, Calgary-Mountain View.

The Chair: Thank you.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, and we'd ask that BlackBerrys and iPhones be turned off or set to silent or vibrate and not placed on the table as sometimes they do interfere with the recording.

Hon. members, as you know, the Assembly approved amendments to the standing orders that impact consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Human Services, I would like to review briefly the standing orders governing the speaking rotation.

As provided for in Standing Order 59.01(6), the rotation is as follows. The minister may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition, the Wildrose, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party, the Alberta

Liberals, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the fourth party, the New Democrats, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes private members of the government caucus and the minister may speak. For the time remaining, we will follow the same rotation to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes.

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times are limited to 10 minutes at any one time. A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. For the final rotation, with speaking times of five minutes, once again a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a maximum total of 10 minutes. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Human Services. With the concurrence of the committee, I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate. Ministry officials may be present, and at the direction of the minister officials from the ministry may address the committee. Members' staff may be present and, space permitting, may sit at the table or behind their members along the committee room wall. Members have priority for seating 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 we will adjourn. Otherwise, we will adjourn at 6:30.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock will continue to run.

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

Vote on the estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on April 16, 2014.

About amendments. An amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the total estimate to be voted on by its full amount. Vote on an amendment is deferred until Committee of Supply on April 16, 2014. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. Twenty copies of amendments must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

With that, we will move on.

Mr. Minister, if you would provide your opening remarks. Welcome.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I am pleased to provide an overview of the Human Services 2014 budget and business plan. This year our ministry will invest \$4.1 billion to keep children healthy and safe, build stronger families and communities, and deliver better services for vulnerable Albertans. This is an increase of \$213 million, or 5.5 per cent. That does not include funding dedicated to helping Albertans affected by the 2013 floods, which was \$68 million last year and budgeted at \$7.6 million for 2014-15.

As Alberta continues to grow faster than any province in Canada, a key focus of our ministry is to address the root causes of children coming into care. That includes reducing homelessness, family violence, sexual abuse, mental health issues, FASD, and poverty. With this focus in mind, a number of our programs are receiving significant increases. Through Budget 2014 we will honour our commitment to provide predictable, ongoing funding for contracted agencies to retain qualified staff.

Human Services is a complex ministry, and substantive work has gone into integrating and aligning the ministry since its creation in 2011 to improve outcomes for Albertans.

The Alberta Supports contact centre responds to more than 23,000 inquiries per month. The four Alberta Supports centres that opened in July of 2013 – Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, St. Paul, and Fort McMurray – respond to more than 1,200 inquiries per month. In 2012-13 91,000 Albertans, parents and children, visited parent link centres. Alberta Works income support programs helped over 34,000 low-income Albertans, and our family violence info line and bullying helpline received over 2,500 calls.

Our mission is to create conditions for safe and supportive homes and communities so Albertans have opportunities to realize their full potential. The ministry business plan reflects the collaborative and person-centred approach to our work. Goal 1 in our business plan is keeping children healthy and safe, goal 2 is building stronger families and communities, and goal 3 is delivering better services for vulnerable Albertans.

Our strategic priorities in Budget 2014 reflect Human Services investments in early childhood development; the five-point plan to improve child intervention; tackling child sexual abuse; poverty reduction; the 10-year plan to end homelessness; prevention of family violence and bullying; fostering inclusion for people with disabilities. The foundational pieces that guide our work include the Alberta social policy framework, the Children First Act, integration of services, and strengthening aboriginal relationships.

There are a number of factors that were considered as the budget was built. High population growth, increasing diversity of our population, and more demand for services are impacting our budget and the work we do for Albertans. Alberta's population is expected to grow 2.9 per cent this year, the fastest of any province in Canada. The number of children in our province under 14 years old will increase by 14 per cent in the next five years. This increases demand for early childhood development, child intervention, and child care. We also know that people are living longer. However, this will mean increased caseloads for AISH, persons with developmental disabilities, public guardianship, and public trusteeship over the long term.

Continued international and interprovincial migration is accounting for over 60 per cent of Alberta's population growth. As a result, we have more new Albertans looking for employment, housing, and other community supports upon arrival. A booming economy is great for our province, but it does increase the costs of providing services and keeping quality staff for both agency partners and for our ministry. Rising inflation can put pressure on low-income Albertans as the prices of housing, food, transportation, and other essential goods and services rise.

3:40

Alberta created 85 per cent of all the new jobs in Canada last year, and we continue to have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, at 4.3 per cent. However, with more parents working and going to school outside of the home, the demand for child care continues to increase.

Our efforts to integrate and increase awareness about our services through albertasupports.ca has increased uptake in

services as well. Calls to Alberta Supports increased 3.2 per cent last year, and the number of families accessing parent link centres increased by 16 per cent.

The budget for child intervention is \$728 million, an increase of \$42 million. This budget includes services to support the development and well-being of Alberta's children and families while keeping children protected and safe from abuse.

We have more than 7,500 children in government care and 10,600 open child intervention files. Preserving and supporting family well-being early on is key to preventing crisis and the need for more intrusive services later on. As of December 2013 we helped facilitate over 2,000 family preservations and nearly 1,200 family reunifications last year.

As mentioned in the Speech from the Throne, we will extend support for young adults in care by two years, from 22 to 24. This is a really important step for helping our young people transition into a strong, independent life.

The budget increase is also directed towards supporting more children to move into permanent, stable, and loving homes; preventing child sexual abuse; band designate program funding and piloting the designate or liaison program for other cultural communities; mental health supports to address the need of children in care; helping contracted agencies with wage costs to attract and retain quality staff; implementing the five-point plan.

Albertans must have confidence that we're doing everything possible to protect and nurture Alberta's vulnerable children. This involves addressing complex social issues such as poverty, addictions, homelessness, mental health, sexual abuse, and family violence.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, you have two minutes left.

Mr. Bhullar: Wow.

Early intervention services. In this year's budget early intervention services will see an increase of \$14 million. This includes increases for parents in high-needs communities through additional parent link centres, which are expanding from 46 to 50; enhancing home visitation and parenting education for families at risk of neglect and abuse, again to help children stay out of our child intervention system; and funding to regional child family service organizations to help families struggling with addictions, mental health, family violence, and poverty.

Our child care budget this year is \$288 million, which is an increase of \$18 million from the '13-14 forecast. This supports parents to access quality child care services that promote early childhood development and well-being, including, obviously, the subsidies for low- and middle-income families to help with the cost of child care, full subsidies which are available to families with an income of less than \$50,000. On average last year about 25,000 children received a subsidy.

We also have an increase in the oil sands northern allowance to help families access child care spaces in Fort McMurray and continued investment in accreditation programs. We've got almost a hundred thousand regulated child care spaces, 98,000 to be precise, and 97 per cent of those child care programs are participating in accreditation. The ministry provides funding for wage top-ups to nearly 12,000 child care staff, which is up to \$6.62 per hour, to help operators retain and attract qualified employees.

The Chair: We thank you for your presentation.

Mr. Bhullar: All right.

The Chair: We were joined by a couple of MLAs, so I'd like to read in for the record that MLA Blake Pedersen, MLA Jeff Wilson, MLA Christine Cusanelli, and MLA Alana DeLong have joined us as well.

At this point we'll move on to our first rotation for the Wildrose. Who will be presenting, and how did you want to proceed?

Mrs. Towle: It'll be me, and we could go back and forth to start if that's okay.

The Chair: Okay. Whenever you're ready.

Mrs. Towle: Okay. Thank you. First of all, Minister, I'd like to thank you and your staff for being here today. I know that you're incredibly busy, and I appreciate the opportunity to have the chance to go through the budget with you, and I appreciate the opportunity for your staff to be here as well.

I just want to quickly say that if I do end up accidentally cutting you off or anything, it's not out of disrespect. It truly is just a matter of time, wanting to go on to the next question. So please don't take it in any way other than it's intended.

I just want to start off with goal 1 on page 54 of the Human Services business plan, that talks about the five-point plan. I'm just wondering: what is the status of the five-point plan?

Mr. Bhullar: We have several different components of this plan. First of all, to deal with past recommendations and past reviews, I appointed the implementation oversight committee. That's ongoing work. The first report that they sent me was on Monday of this past week, and they will continue to send me reports every two months. I've asked them to be very precise or as precise as possible in reports, so it's much more action-oriented as opposed to ideas-focused, just because I think there have been a lot of reports. That's the first piece.

The round-table we've conducted. The round-table's report, or what we heard document, is online for submission now. Further, we're continuing to make a series of initiatives to enhance the child intervention system. For example, we're starting to look at different options and ways that we can better support the training and education of our front-line workers. This requires a lot of collaboration with postsecondaries as well as professionals that are working in the field today. That's a very important piece for me. The addressing of root causes is incredibly important, and I think that if you look throughout the budget of Human Services, we're trying to address root causes throughout, right? Whether it be homelessness, whether it be child abuse, neglect, root causes are key. That will be an ongoing battle. That'll be an ongoing set of work that we'll have to do.

The next is data and information sharing. Data and information sharing, I think, are absolutely critical, and quite frankly Canadian provinces and Canada as a whole do not report as much information as other jurisdictions do. For example, in the U.S. they have 38 states that prescribe to a national standard of releasing information. In Canada this was tried a number of years ago, but it didn't get anywhere. I want to reinvigorate that effort. The sharing of data will allow for better decision-making and better practice, in my opinion. It allows for us to deal with root causes better. It'll also allow for us to look at ways that we can better change our practice. That's something that I'm working on very actively right now with my colleagues in other jurisdictions. I'll be bringing forth some individual changes on my end to make it mandatory for us to regularly release data and information.

Mrs. Towle: Okay. Thank you very much.

I want to move on to page 112 of the budget, item 3.5, protection of sexually exploited children. Goal 1 of your business plan is keeping children healthy and safe. The funding for protection of sexually exploited children has increased by 3 per cent, and I can appreciate that. Can you give us a projected number of sexually exploited children Human Services cases that you anticipate dealing with in 2014?

3:50

Mr. Bhullar: I can get you the numbers for last year, and hopefully they'll provide us with some indication of some of the numbers that we're dealing with. I can say that one of the issues that I have found to be quite, I'll call it, surprising is that, you know, I visited, for example, a group home just recently where a 14-year-old was working the streets. It's unfortunate that some families aren't using this type of legislation to work with them. We're investing about \$23 million across the government for supports and services for victims of child sexual abuse, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation.

The number for last year is 120, the number for '11-12 was 135, and the number for 2010-2011 was 124 distinct children. I believe that some children may involve repeated use of the protection of the legislation, but this is distinct children, so 120 children in '12-13.

Mrs. Towle: Since the PCHIP legislation was brought forward by the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, how many children has the ministry apprehended in total, and how many children were actually apprehended under the legislation last year? Is that the 120? How many safe beds are currently available, and how many safe houses are in place under this legislation?

Mr. Bhullar: The number of children that were apprehended under this legislation is the 120.

Mrs. Towle: For last year?

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah, for last year.

Mrs. Towle: How many in total since the legislation came in?

Mr. Bhullar: I can get you that number.

Mrs. Towle: Sure. You can just provide it in writing. That would be great.

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah. We can provide you with the number.

Mrs. Towle: How many safe beds are currently available?

Mr. Bhullar: That number is something we'll provide you as well.

Mrs. Towle: Okay. And how many safe houses are in place right now under this legislation?

Mr. Bhullar: Same with that. We'll provide you with that number.

Mrs. Towle: Okay. What happens with sexually exploited children? Does this budget allow for follow-up support like psychologists, social workers, or is that handled by other segments of the social system, or is it under your ministry?

Mr. Bhullar: That's a good question. One of the elements that we see is that our ministry has to work very, very closely with many

other ministries. Whether it be sexually exploited children or children that have experienced other types of trauma, they can come into our system through the child intervention system. That's one route that they can come into our system with. I recently made the announcement of providing more supports for mental health immediately upon coming into the child intervention system.

But there are many other routes that sexually exploited children or children that have experienced other types of trauma may access services with. It may be directly through the health care system. Some families, in fact, prefer to just use private insurance plans and go and access private mental health supports themselves. So there are a wide range, I would say, of ways that people access supports after suffering trauma such as sexual exploitation.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you, Minister.

I want to move to the round-table and, again, item 3.2 on the budget. What was the cost of the round-table discussion that was held in January, and what will be the cost of the independent panel that you're intending to put forward with regard to the reviews of deaths of children in care? I understand that there is no delegated First Nations representative yet. Are you prepared to commit that there would be a First Nations representative on that panel?

Mr. Bhullar: I'll start with that question first. I actually have approached a very well-esteemed, well-regarded individual from the First Nations community to be a part of this panel. They have a challenge in that they also serve on a federal panel. Let's just say that they were in town recently for that big federal panel. They had to get two different types of approval. The first approval they have to get is from the federal Ethics Commissioner, and the second type of approval is from the Privy Council. We've actually been trying to get that approval for them for weeks and weeks now, and I sincerely hope that we get that very soon because he's an individual that I think will add incredible value, incredible perspective to our implementation team. That's the first piece.

The second piece on the cost of the round-table. The facility and equipment rental – this was a lot of the cost around, you know, having access to the live web, having access for media and so on to listen in – was about \$48,000. The cost of putting the report together, the facilitation, securing speakers and so on was about \$40,000. The food was nearly \$16,000. The travel for participants that we covered was \$16,000.

Mrs. Towle: Great. Thank you very much.

Mr. Bhullar: We did file reviews in preparation for this as well. There was about a \$10,000 cost for serious incident file reviews to provide people with some context.

And you had a third question?

Mrs. Towle: No. Actually, I think you were able to answer it with the independent panel on the First Nations representative. Thank you very much for that.

The death of children in care report. I appreciate that in January you revealed all deaths of children in care since 1999. What was the cost of the four-year legal battle with the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Calgary Herald* to keep that information out of the public domain? What was the cost of that to Alberta taxpayers?

Mr. Bhullar: I wouldn't know that off the top of my head, so that's something that we can endeavour to provide to you.

Mrs. Towle: That would be fantastic. With that endeavour and the cost of that going to Alberta taxpayers, it is my understanding that you have committed that yearly now you will report all deaths of children in care. Does that add an extra workload to your staff, and if so, is there additional cost to do that, and when would the report be expected?

Mr. Bhullar: I have made a commitment to have public release of this information and data, and I presume that there would be some additional cost if we have to present it in certain ways. There could be, you know, an additional staff member or so. My endeavour to release more data, period, is something that will require manpower, to compile that data, make sure that we're compiling the right type of data on the front end. I wouldn't say that there are specific dollar figures attached to this. It will be manpower resources that we have within our policy shops, and we may need some more manpower within that policy shop to help facilitate that.

With respect to when we do the release, that is something we're working on right now to make sure that we do a regular release of information, of data from our child intervention system. It's not just about children that have passed away; it's about children that may have had a serious injury. It's also about the other underlying factors of, you know, why kids are coming into care in the first place. I think we need to really get a better read on this so that we can help address some of these issues more.

Mrs. Towle: If we keep going on the same thread with regard to First Nations children, social services received a federal funding transfer of \$1.47 billion from the federal government. How much of that federal funding is being allocated to social services?

Mr. Bhullar: I can endeavour to get you that information, the specific number I mean. We have a variety of different protocol agreements with the federal government. Those protocol agreements, in my opinion, from what I've seen, in some cases don't compare to the level of funding that we end up providing. If anything, we end up adding and topping up those numbers quite significantly to support First Nations, aboriginal children. There are different arrangements with First Nations and aboriginal communities like our designated First Nations authorities. These authorities are supported by the federal government, but we can and do top up the services that they receive as well.

Mrs. Towle: Of the \$1.47 billion, how much of that money is actually allocated to First Nations child intervention services?

Mr. Bhullar: I'll get you specifics on that.

Mrs. Towle: Okay. What is the ratio between on-reserve funding and off-reserve funding?

Mr. Bhullar: Again, I'll provide you with follow-up on that.

Mrs. Towle: What is the status of the partnership that was signed with the hon. ministers Prentice and Tarchuk in 2007?

Mr. Bhullar: I'm sorry. Which agreement?

Mrs. Towle: There was a partnership that was signed with the hon. ministers Prentice and Tarchuk in 2007. What's the status of that today?

Mr. Bhullar: I'll ask Mark, our ADM for child intervention, to provide some remarks on that.

4:00

Mr. Hattori: The funding, that was the agreement from the federal government and the provincial government, was for early intervention services on-reserve. The federal government has just recently completed an evaluation of that program. We do not have a copy of that as of yet, so the funding is still in place for the 17 existing delegated First Nations agencies in the province.

Mrs. Towle: Do you know the status of the partnership that was signed with hon. Minister Prentice and Minister Tarchuk in 2007?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, it'd be ongoing.

Mrs. Towle: Yeah.

In terms of the goals for aboriginal foster care and kinship care placements within aboriginal families right now you have 39 per cent versus a goal of 50 per cent. The government has increased the gap for 2014-2015 by 16 per cent, to 55 per cent. How do you plan on bridging that gap?

Mr. Bhullar: You know, this is something that I actually discussed with treaty chiefs from across Alberta, the Assembly of Treaty Chiefs, just a couple of weeks ago. One of the biggest things we need is to recruit more and more foster placements and kinship care placements from First Nations communities. One chief, for example, provided me an example of how he has over half a dozen children that he is looking after but how others in his community, he feels, aren't stepping up the same. A big part of this is providing the tools and the resources to get people to understand that we all need this together. We need people to step up and become foster parents and kinship care placements. It's very, very important.

Mrs. Towle: Right now we have the permanency placement supports. Do those families that actually adopt the child receive a payment ongoing until the child is 18?

Mr. Bhullar: Yes, they do.

One other piece on your previous question, something that I just forgot to mention, was band designates. What we do with band designates is that they are individuals that are designated from specific bands, and they help connect us, children's services, with the specific band, the Nation, to help find kinship care placements for these children and provide support for children in the first place so that we can prevent them from coming into care. So this is a really important, vital tool that I think, again, will help us reach more and more community members and get people to step up and become foster parents and kinship care providers.

Mrs. Towle: What we saw – sorry. Go ahead.

Mr. Bhullar: I was going to ask Mark to speak about the funding arrangement as well, the supports for permanency.

Mrs. Towle: Maybe while he's coming forward – because this is around the same vein. What we saw with the report on seven-year-old Jack was that, clearly, the permanency plan for that specific child certainly was ill equipped, and it maybe didn't have enough resources. What I'm noticing from your budget is that it's only gone up by 1 per cent. How does that align with your need for more foster care families? Is it a matter of not having enough families or not providing enough supports?

Mr. Bhullar: You see, permanency means a few different things, right? Permanency means that if we feel that a child needs to come into permanent care of the government, then you endeavour

to find that child permanent care as soon as possible. Something that's very interesting to note, though, in this area is that there have actually been some reversals of permanent guardianship orders recently. What's happened is that a mom or a dad – it may have taken them three years or four years – has got their stuff together, and they say: I'm ready, I'm back, and I want my child. You know, although the science says that children need permanency as soon as possible, we're starting to see the overturning of some of these PGOs, permanent guardianship orders, so that once people have proven themselves to have taken care of whatever issues brought the kids into care in the first place, now they're able to step up and say: I want my child back.

Permanency is incredibly important, but at the same time I'm starting to see this, and it's something that I don't think we've seen before. It's something very interesting to note.

Mr. Hattori: Just in regard to the amount of funding support under the supports for permanency program, which applies to private guardianship applications and adoption applications made under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, they receive a financial benefit called the basic maintenance rate, which is consistent with the foster care and kinship care rates. That amount per day per child depends on the age of the child. It goes from categories of zero to one, two to five, six to eight, nine to 11, 12 to 15, and 16 to 17 years old, until they reach the age of majority. That range is \$23.03 at zero to one to \$35.12 for 16- to 17-year-olds and everything in between.

Mrs. Towle: That goes no matter what their income? Are they income tested at all?

Mr. Hattori: No, they're not income tested.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you.

If we could move on to sexual violence prevention services on page 113, item 12.3. This budget increased significantly, which is great to hear. It increased by 53 per cent. It currently stands at \$2.87 million. Item 2.3 of the Human Services business plan indicates that you'll work with communities to develop a co-ordinated provincial response to support Albertans impacted by sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation. What is the co-ordinated response, and what is the line item in the budget that co-ordinates with that response?

Mr. Bhullar: We have a significant increase in this budget, and it represents a few different things. First of all, more spaces will be funded for women's shelters, taking the total up to 710, so there's money for that. There is money for additional supports to sexual assault centres. There is money for the implementation of the framework and action plan, which will promote prevention of sexual abuse. Then there's family and community safety, a \$20 million fund. I'm going to ask Associate Minister Jansen to supplement this.

Mrs. Towle: Actually, can we just wait on that? I have a whole series of questions I'd like to do on that \$20 million if that's okay with you.

Mr. Bhullar: Okay.

Mrs. Towle: That would be great. Last year the government decided not to fund Little Warriors ranch. Little Warriors' mandate is to provide a safe and secure place of treatment and healing aimed at the mind, body, heart, and spirit of child victims and their families. I understand the reasoning behind why the

government decided to do that. Well, I shouldn't say that I understand it. I understand that you have a reason for doing that, but it doesn't seem to be in line with your commitment about child sexual assault, child sexual abuse. It seems to me that the government would want to look at alternatives to what currently is going on but also look at other new initiatives and at least talk to them in the sense of being a part of the process that they're going to bring forward to help Alberta children who've been sexually assaulted.

Ms Jansen: I'd be happy to take this question. Certainly, as we mentioned before, we've invested more than \$23 million across government for support of services for victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. I can tell you that when it comes to Little Warriors specifically, they have the proposed development of a residential treatment centre to help victims of child sexual abuse. There are a significant number of sexual abuse services providers within the province who certainly are concerned about the residential treatment model that they are proposing. Their ask is a significant one. I believe it's somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$5 million. We certainly want to ask a lot of questions before we devote those kinds of resources to one particular model.

We know that children need the support. Children who have been sexually abused need the support of family and friends in a healthy healing model. Thus, the concern about the residential treatment model which a number of experts have told us about is that it takes them out of that safe community environment with nonoffending family members and people in the community and isolates them from that. So we're asking a lot of questions.

4:10

Certainly, as you know, in the last six months we have had two round-table discussions with approximately 24 of the service providers who provide sexual assault services right across the province. Little Warriors has been at both of those meetings and has had an opportunity for input. They've certainly had a chance to sit at the table and discuss services right across the province. They will continue to sit at the table as we develop our sexual violence framework. As for specific funding we certainly are still looking at having discussions with Little Warriors.

Mrs. Towle: I can appreciate that answer. However, Minister Hancock, who was the Human Services minister at the time, originally actually approved funding for exactly that model and then last year, after the fact, pulled the funding back. So I'm not sure that that reconciles exactly with what you're saying.

Ms Jansen: Just for confirmation, you were saying that Minister Hancock approved funding for Little Warriors?

Mrs. Towle: Minister Hancock had funding in line for Little Warriors, in place under this model – it wasn't \$5 million; it was a few hundred thousand dollars – and at the last minute he pulled that funding. So I'm just not sure if that reconciles. I know their ask is huge. I can understand that it's a different and new model and that you absolutely have to make sure you weigh all your options, but it does seem to me that we would want to have your involvement in whatever services they're going to apply there, especially if it's going to pertain to children.

Ms Jansen: Well, certainly, we have been very involved with discussions with Little Warriors.

I would refer this query to our ADM in this area to add to what I've said.

Ms Taylor: Good afternoon. We're not aware of funding that Minister Hancock had apparently identified for Little Warriors. As the minister has indicated, we began to bring together stakeholders across the province because we needed to look at the provincial scope in terms of services that were being provided and gaps, so that's what we're in the process of doing. Certainly, we'll look at that as part of our sexual violence framework.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you so much for the clarification.

Mr. Bhullar: Just for the record I personally would like to say that, you know, as somebody that has helped many people on a personal basis that have dealt with this issue, I applaud the work that Little Warriors does. I applaud the work that they're doing in terms of awareness. When it comes to the work that they propose to do on the healing side, we'll have the conversation with all the experts and see where they stand. But what they're doing on the awareness side is absolutely – good on them. I support it.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you very much, Minister.

When we're talking about the minister's office itself, can you tell me what the total increase in the number of staff in the office of the minister and the associate ministers is for this fiscal year?

Mr. Bhullar: Sure. The budget for my office, the minister's office, is \$673,000. At present I have six people working in the office. With the sheer volume of casework that we have, requests from MLAs from across the aisle, from every party to look into specific files and so on, it's likely that we're a bit understaffed at present. We have two associate ministers, and the total budget for both of our associate ministers is \$673,000.

Mrs. Towle: The Alberta College of Social Workers has said that they're having incredible difficulty with juggling their own caseloads, as I'm sure you can appreciate as the minister. I'm sure you can't disagree with that. On page 116 of the government estimates there's an increase of only two FTEs, but you just mentioned that the minister and the associate ministers have six people. So are we off-loading staff from the front line to make sure that the bureaucracy gets bigger, or how does that work?

Mr. Bhullar: No, we're not, actually. What I'm endeavouring to do is to look at our systems and to change our systems so that our people are spending more time with children. Some of that is moving to models like signs of safety, which are strength-based models where, quite frankly, we work in a collaborative fashion with families, with extended families, with family friends, with whomever has an interest in the well-being of a child, and we prevent, you know, and reduce the time that our workers are spending doing paperwork and going to court. These are important shifts in our models that have to take place.

Mrs. Towle: What is the average caseload right now for a social worker and for a caseworker?

Mr. Bhullar: I'll ask Mark to provide some further information on that, but I think it's very difficult to provide averages for a few reasons. Some of them are because of the complexity of cases. There are some cases where social workers are required to spend incredible amounts of time with a specific family or child. In other cases there may be a whole series of work that has to go on because of regular court challenges by parents, so they end up spending more time doing that process.

I'll ask Mark to supplement.

Mr. Hattori: We're working with the front-line staff and the union on workload ranges because, to the minister's point, depending on the complexity of the case that they're dealing with, the capacity to deal with that case is different for each worker. We've divided it up and have been working with the front-line staff and the union on five basic categories, breaking up the work into intake and screening activities, safety assessment activities, detailed assessments, case management, and then generalist types of social work or casework activities. The ranges in each of those five categories go from four to eight cases in the safety assessment, on the low side, to 15 to 23 on the case management side.

Mrs. Towle: Just so you know, some of the stories that we're hearing are from caseworkers and social workers who are coming forward to us saying that it's not 15 to 23, that they have 30 to 40 to 50 cases that they're managing, actually, and they're completely burned out. Your numbers, while I appreciate them, are not jibing with what we're hearing on the front lines. How many more social workers will you be hiring in this fiscal year?

Mr. Bhullar: I don't know what anecdotal numbers you were provided with. What I can say is that we are looking to see how we can strengthen the practice so that people are spending more time with kids and more kids are staying in supportive homes with families, so that we support families more as opposed to taking them into care. That's a shift, I believe, in practice.

I am a strong believer in the signs of safety program. I believe this program is going to reduce the amount of time that our staff is spending in courts, the amount of time that our staff has to spend doing paperwork, and will focus on the outcomes. That's a priority for me, to implement signs of safety across this province. From there we will make assessments and will support our front lines to make sure that they are able to spend time where it's most needed.

Mrs. Towle: You just finished mentioning, though, that your caseload within your own office is increasing, that you're understaffed, and you think you're going to need more people in your own office.

Mr. Bhullar: I'm not even staffed up to what I have budget for.

Mrs. Towle: Right. I think that social workers would say that the front-line workers are not staffed up for what they need to do, to actually do their jobs the way that they should be doing their jobs. Yet, at the same time, they're providing incredible service and are put in very difficult positions each and every day. A lot of our children are safe because of the work they do on the front lines. It would seem to me that the majority of our resources should be going to the front-line services versus others.

Mr. Bhullar: Absolutely. And they are. You're absolutely right. The majority of our resources are going straight to the front lines. Actually, if you take a look at our budget, the vast majority of our dollars go directly to the front lines. If I look at child intervention alone, the vast majority of the funds go directly to the front lines and to the agencies that we work with that are providing front-line support. In addition to that, there is the funding that goes to our families that are providing front-line support. In principle we agree with you. As I said, as we look at the practice, if changes need to be made, changes will be made. The focus is on setting quality standards that help ensure that children are getting the attention that they need. That's where we want to be.

4:20

Mrs. Towle: On page 56 of the business plan, performance measure 2(c), percentage of participants employed after leaving income support, the current number sits at 59 per cent, but the target for the 2014-2015 year is 65 per cent. How do you expect to achieve this target when, according to the operational budget, page 112, line item 2.9, training for work, is being cut by approximately \$11 million, 20 per cent? It seems like a pretty important goal, to get people employed. After leaving the income supports program, they just don't seem to connect.

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah. You know, on the surface they wouldn't seem to connect, but the issue is that we're currently in negotiations with the federal government on the labour market agreement, which has expired. Once a labour market agreement is signed, we'll be able to account for those dollars and have those dollars back in the budget. Today the labour market agreement actually takes over \$50 million out of my budget for employment supports, income supports – over \$50 million – but you see a shortfall that's a lot less than that. That's because we're increasing spending in the area. The work that we need to do is much, much more targeted. There are a lot of folks that were unemployed as a result of the recession that we've been able to help bring back into the labour force a lot more easily. Now, we have a great number of folks that have multiple barriers to full employment, so they require additional work. Once that agreement with the federal government is signed, the number will be back up.

Mrs. Towle: What programming areas and specific line items within your operating budget have undergone the results-based budgeting review?

Mr. Bhullar: I'm going to ask Carol Ann to provide some additional information on that.

Mrs. Towle: If she could also at the same time let me know how much money was saved in these areas as a result of the results-based budgeting.

Mr. Bhullar: That might be something that we need to provide some further details on. Results-based budgeting is about saving money and better aligning systems to support Albertans.

Mrs. Towle: Yeah.

Ms Kushlyk: The programs that were undertaken in the past year for RBB were supports for disabilities, early childhood development, and health benefits. That was cycle 1. Cycle 2 is income and housing supports and individual capacity to act. Intervention will be cycle 3; that would be protecting Albertans.

In cycle 1 there were quite a few programs that were undertaken, and supports for disabilities was the biggest one, where there was a lot of outcome, and health benefits as well, and that was transferred to the Health department as a result of making a more comprehensive and streamlined process for Albertans to achieve those health benefits.

For cycle 2 about \$2.6 billion of programs will be looked at, and a lot of that will be taking place in partnership with Municipal Affairs; Health; Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour; and Treasury Board and Finance.

Cycle 3 will be upcoming at the end of November 2014, and Justice and Solicitor General will be leading that particular cycle.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you very much for that.

Have you been able to identify any actual savings?

Mr. Bhullar: You know, with results-based budgeting there are actual savings that take place in one department but also a lot of savings through processes, quite frankly, through better aligning systems so that people's time is spent more efficiently so that they can spend more time with clients. Results-based budgeting is about process changes as much as it is about changes to potential funding and financial . . .

Mrs. Towle: That's a fair comment, but are you able to provide a dollar amount of how much results-based budgeting was able to see savings in?

Mr. Bhullar: I think that because of the crossministry work that takes place with results-based budgeting, that might be a bit difficult, but we can endeavour to look at that. We're still implementing a lot of the changes, right? We're still implementing changes that might not see a lot of the results immediately.

Mrs. Towle: Okay. That kind of goes in the face of what the previous Premier had stated when she was elected in 2012 and for the last two years. She thought Albertans would see it in the first year if I recall from her comments.

Priority initiative 2.1. The plan to eliminate child poverty was promised two years ago. This initiative calls for the ministry to develop a plan to do this. How can the goal of eliminating child poverty be achieved if there's no strategy two years into the five-year plan? On top of that, how much has been spent so far on achieving this goal? What is the estimated spending for the next three years? Actually, will you be able to hit the goal of eliminating child poverty within the five years?

Mr. Bhullar: Child poverty is by everyone's account a very significant issue, and it's also an incredibly complicated issue. You can't really effectively reduce child poverty without reducing poverty overall. There are many different metrics involved in evaluating child poverty. When you look at families, there are issues such as access to child care, issues of transportation, access to the supports they need in terms of things like housing but also supports they need in terms of personal supports, whether that be mental health supports or health supports or career counselling supports. So it is a very complicated issue that requires a strategic plan, and we are working on that at present to see how we can build a strategic plan around that.

Alberta has one of the lowest rates of poverty in Canada. I would say from reading that about 8 per cent of Albertans and 10 per cent of children under the age of 18 live in low-income situations and about 3 per cent of seniors. There's absolutely no question that poverty is much higher in one-parent families, compared to two-parent families. Approximately 6.7 per cent of children residing in two-parent families but well over 20 per cent of children residing in single-parent families live in low-income situations.

So poverty is something that has different effects on men and women and single-parent households. It's something that is going to require a lot of significant alignment to work on. There is a lot that we're providing today; for example, income supports. Income supports provide financial assistance to Albertans that don't have the resources. There is our child care subsidy, which provides financial assistance to help . . .

Mrs. Towle: I can appreciate all of that, Minister. Please don't take it the wrong way that I interrupt you, and I apologize for that. However, those are almost exactly the same comments that Minister Hancock made last year in this exact same scenario. At that point in time, in 2012, it was this government who committed

to eliminating overall poverty in 10 years. It was this government who committed to ending child poverty in five years. So I guess what I'm asking is: how much has been spent so far on achieving this goal? Are you going to be able to eliminate child poverty within the five years? This means you have three years left to do that.

Mr. Bhullar: With respect to how much is being spent, I mean, we're spending about \$700 million on income and employment supports. We are spending nearly \$300 million on child care. We are spending almost a billion dollars on the assured income for the severely handicapped. So these are all spending items that are going to support folks that are living in low-income situations and are dealing with poverty in some capacity or another. We're spending, you know, nearly the \$4.1 billion budget that Human Services has. About \$3 billion of that is going to support people in some sort of scenario where there are issues of means.

4:30

Mrs. Towle: So will your government be able to meet its goal of ending child poverty within the five years?

Mr. Bhullar: Within five years of what?

Mrs. Towle: Within the five years from 2012. You're two years into a five-year goal. Are you going to be able to eliminate child poverty?

Mr. Bhullar: We're going to continue to work every single day to help Albertans, to help them make better lives for themselves by a lot of what we do.

Mrs. Towle: I can appreciate that answer, and I understand that. However, there's not a single performance measure on the government at all on how you establish if you've met the goal of ending child poverty. There's not a single performance measure on your ministry at all to even show that you're actually gaining success. So how do you reconcile that there are no performance measures related to this lofty goal?

Mr. Bhullar: You know, one of the strongest performance measures I've seen is the fact that Alberta creates 85 per cent of the new jobs across Canada. I mean, we live in a robust place, where there's tremendous opportunity for Albertans. Can it be better for people? Absolutely. Will we make it better for people? Absolutely. If you have specific ideas to put on the table, we'd more than welcome them as we come up with our new plan.

Mrs. Towle: I'm happy to have been at the table in 2012, when you made the goal and committed to Albertans that that was what you were going to do. Yet what we see today is more and more people in shelters, fewer and fewer resources going to help those children, more and more young people suffering from addictions, suffering from bullying, suffering from abuse. We see more and more child exploitation. You just mentioned that \$3 billion is going towards achieving this goal, but what are the metrics that you can show Albertans that you are actually using taxpayer money to end child poverty? There have to be metrics. You have to have measurable outcomes. You put them on every single department that works underneath you. Surely, we could hold ourselves to the same standard.

Mr. Bhullar: You spoke earlier of metrics. You know what we'll do? We'll send you a copy of all the different metrics we have. You spoke earlier of the metrics that we had for folks that are receiving our employment services and employment training.

Those are metrics. Those are all metrics that are in some way or another leading to people being more independent and having a better life for themselves.

As I've said, you know, this is an incredibly complicated area that requires the insights of many, so if you have specific ideas here, we'd more than welcome them.

Mrs. Towle: I think everyone at this table agrees that this is a very complicated issue. But I also think everyone at this table understands that more and more children are going into care, more and more children are going into homeless shelters, more and more young people are suffering from mental health and addictions, which all lead to child poverty. We also know that Alberta has one of the higher dropout rates of young people leaving school. Yes, there are a lot of opportunities, sure, but we do have a problem with the number of young people who are in poverty and the number of young families who live within poverty.

I'm just questioning you on a goal that your government set. It wasn't my goal; it was a goal where the government said to Albertans in 2012 that they would eliminate child poverty in five years and eliminate overall poverty in 10.

Mr. Bhullar: So you wouldn't support the goal of reducing child poverty?

Mrs. Towle: I do support the goal. I'm just wondering how you're measuring that you're doing it.

Mr. Bhullar: You made some assumptions there that are not factually correct. There are fewer children coming into care. There are actually fewer children coming into care. There are fewer children in care today. The shelter use and so on: since we've created the plan to end homelessness, 8,800 people have been housed. These are significant goals. These are significant achievements. We're the only province to have a 10-year plan to end homelessness. Member Fritz at the table is the one that kicked that off. These are significant achievements that we've made. It's not fair to say that more and more are going into those scenarios.

We live in a very robust place, and with that come challenges. One of the challenges that we are facing – and we all know this; we all see this – is our vacancy rate. This is leading to challenges when it comes to poverty. There's absolutely no question about this. When you have a hundred thousand new people that are jumping into your province every single year because of the jobs and opportunities that are being created, we have this push and pull. It is, you know, an issue of supply and demand, and it is a challenge. Nobody is saying that it's not a challenge. But to say that all things are going backwards is factually incorrect.

Mrs. Towle: I actually didn't say that. I've given you kudos for upping some areas of your budget.

What year did Member Fritz bring forward the 10-year homelessness plan?

Mr. Bhullar: In 2009, I believe it was.

Mrs. Towle: So we're already halfway into ending everything in 10 years, and you're going to be able to meet that goal and show measurable outcomes, that you can do that?

Mr. Bhullar: We have very measurable outcomes today. We have very measurable outcomes. Eighty-eight hundred people – 8,800 people – are now housed that weren't at that time. The challenge is . . .

Mrs. Fritz: It'll never end.

Mr. Bhullar: Exactly. The challenge is that there's a new stream of folks that are coming into the province regularly, and when it comes to our housing first model and the wraparound support services that we provide, not everybody, unfortunately – you know, one of the toughest things to understand for all of us is that not everybody is ready to accept the help that is made available to them, so not everybody that is provided this help ends up sustaining and staying on the path even though there's help provided to them. That's a big challenge that we face. That's part of the human challenges that people face.

Mrs. Towle: How many resources or what is the dollar amount of the resources that are going into supporting people in rural Alberta who have no access to housing, no access to affordable housing, no access to shelters? What is the dollar amount that you're allocating to rural Alberta?

Mr. Bhullar: Rural Alberta is – I'm starting to have discussions. I've heard from rural communities about some of the challenges they're starting to see, they're starting to face. This is something that I myself – and the federal government also has stepped up, and we're starting to see how we can best support rural communities because their challenges when it comes to homelessness are different than the major urban centres. This is something that I see on the radar as something that needs support in addressing, and it's something that we will look at.

Right now there are seven centres: Calgary, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, and Lethbridge. These are the centres that have subscribed to the 10-year plan to end homelessness. What I'm seeing and hearing is that we need to engage with even smaller centres that are finding that they have challenges with respect to homelessness.

Mrs. Towle: If we could talk about AISH a little bit. If we go over to AISH, you have a fairly substantial increase in AISH. What is that increase due to?

Mr. Bhullar: Caseload. We're receiving about 50 applications per day in AISH. Before the increase in the AISH rate I believe we were receiving – I've got the number right in front of me – a far lower number of new applications, and now we're receiving 50 new applications a day for AISH.

Mrs. Towle: Was there an increase in staffing to deal with the increased workload?

Mr. Bhullar: There are increases to our assessment team, and there are, actually, changes in the system to better provide quicker turnaround. For example, prior to the 2010 increase the AISH program experienced a 5 per cent annual caseload growth. In April 2012, when the benefit changed, we started to receive about 15,000 applications per year, so we're looking at an 88 per cent increase. In 2014, as I said, we're predicting to continue this 40 to 50 applications a day. The current wait time for AISH applications has gone down to about 15 weeks, and we want to continue to do more work on that and bring that down. The target would be 12 weeks.

Mrs. Towle: I can appreciate that the caseload must be massive. I know what I see even in my MLA constituency office, and as a person who took care of someone on AISH for a small period of time, I can appreciate that that's a difficult process.

What I'm not quite clear on, though, is that when you take a look at your full-time equivalent employment on page 116 of the budget, the 2013-14 budget was 6,816 FTEs, and this year you're saying that you're only going to have a two-person increase. Yet you've already said that you need to hire a few more people for your office, and obviously you're going to have some staffing issues in AISH. Your caseworkers are overburdened. So I'm not really sure. How does that jibe with what you're saying now? If the caseload is going up 88 per cent, it would seem to me that you need some supports there, but you only have the two-FTE increase.

4:40

Mr. Bhullar: Well, some of this work is also done from realigning within departments. There may be other areas where there's less need. Where there's movement, there's alignment with respect to – the deputy will provide some information about this – movement from part-times to full-times and reverse.

I'll ask the deputy to provide some more information on this.

Mr. Morhart: Thank you, Minister. There's a lot of flow in the FTEs throughout the year. This is our projection into the new year. As the minister described, there are combinations of full-time/part-time transfers in and out. There are some net changes that happen as well. So what you see in an overall number is a combination of many factors.

Mrs. Towle: You said that there was a realignment. In what areas was there a realignment?

Mr. Bhullar: There's continuous movement of staff within departments. It's incredibly possible that when there's a priority that comes up, staff from one area will move on a project basis to another area to work for a certain period of time. I mean, I think that's a fairly normal course of business.

Mrs. Towle: We know that with the closure of Michener Centre – and I'm hoping that this government will reconsider that decision – a lot of those clients would move on to AISH and go into different living circumstances. Some will go into long-term care, some will go into continuing care, and some will go into group home facilities. Last year the budget to do that was \$10 million. However, with that centre closing, who are the agencies that the government are using to deliver this program? Who will you be using for those agencies?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, \$10 million has been allocated to build capacity right across the province. As we're moving with the Michener transition, we are absolutely respecting the needs of the individual. First and foremost, we want to make sure that an appropriate home has been found for them. The second thing we're absolutely concentrating on is that an appropriate care plan has been established. The third thing we're looking at is that they will get equal or better care.

Mrs. Towle: No offence, but Mr. Oberle said all of this last year. I'm just asking: what are the agencies you're going to be using?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, the agencies are right across the province. To answer that question specifically, I'm telling you that it depends on the needs of the individual, where they want to choose. If they want to move to Edmonton, the service providers in Edmonton will be looking after that. The vast majority of the transfers from Michener are going to be in central Alberta. Service providers who are in central Alberta go and visit – it's not as simple as us assigning individuals to agencies.

Mrs. Towle: Oh, I agree.

Mr. Bhardwaj: It's not that at all. It is about meeting the needs of the individuals, which means that the individuals go and talk to the service providers and take a look at what they have to offer. It goes back and forth. If that's the service provider which meets the needs of that particular individual, that's the service provider which is chosen by the family to care for their loved one, not the government.

Mrs. Towle: It's my understanding in talking to the service providers in central Alberta that they're having a very difficult time meeting the needs of the clients of Michener. They're not able to meet the needs of the clients of Michener because they're very unique and difficult. They are not able to take those clients, so you're looking broader, to Edmonton and other areas. In talking with the families of the clients at Michener, they're finding this process incredibly difficult and are not able to stay in their home of central Alberta.

As someone having taken care of someone who passed away at 35 from very difficult and complex needs, I can appreciate that it shouldn't be the government deciding where they live. They should be able to choose where they want to live. My understanding, though – and correct me if I'm wrong – is that if they fall under the office of the public guardian, the office of the public guardian is the one who makes the decision and that a number of those clients are being told that they have to be transferred to Edmonton. Is that correct?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, what happens is that, once again, whoever is appointed to take care of that individual are the people that our transition team gets in contact with. As an example, like I iterated earlier, no one is going to move until an appropriate home has been established. When we're talking to the families, that takes absolute priority over anything else.

Of course, you know, before you cut me off, Minister Oberle committed to that, and we're absolutely committed to that. Those four things I talked about: we're totally committed to that. No one is going to move until an appropriate care plan has been established. Anecdotal information is good to have, but I think it's appropriate that we're dealing with the individuals because, first and foremost, it's our job to look after those individuals.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this time, before I move on to the Alberta Liberals rotation, I would like to read into the record some MLAs that have joined us since we started. We have MLAs Notley, Sandhu, Fenske, Fritz, Jablonski, Jeneroux, Dorward, VanderBurg, Leskiw, and McAllister, just for those who don't know that you snuck in.

Mr. McAllister: Hey, McAllister was here on time, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Okay. Dr. Swann, how did you want to proceed?

Dr. Swann: Back and forth. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Minister and all the staff, for joining us today. I want to put a little context around my questions, and I hope you'll bear with me a few moments, Madam Chair. It won't be specifically budgetary, but you'll see the relevance to the questions that follow. These questions early on are based on the 2013 corporate survey, which I raised at the

round-table, and some concerns I have about the staff well-being and the work environment.

The most recent corporate survey, for 2013, showed a staff engagement measure of 43 per cent, which is down slightly from 48 per cent the year before. Some of the other highlights include the question: would you recommend the government of Alberta as a good place to work? Fifty-seven per cent indicated that they would. "Overall, you feel valued as a [government of Alberta] employee": 48 per cent said that, yes, they feel valued as an employee.

I guess it raises questions about not only the quality of life for the workplace, maybe the recruitment process, the retention process, but that people are coming and going, not feeling valued at a number of levels. I hope you have a plan for trying to address this. It obviously is going to affect front-line work capacity, performance.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, we know that Alberta's public servants provide essential, critical support to the health, the safety, the security of our children. We as a department but the government as a whole needs to continuously support a culture that supports the employees to do their best. One of the things that I've talked about and that I want to stress as much as possible is that when something in our public service goes wrong, everybody around these tables is ready to jump up and blame everyone for something that went wrong. You have tremendous, wonderful people, that are human beings at the end of the day, that deal with incredibly difficult situations on a daily basis, and we jump on them when something happens. We jump on them in the public. We jump on them in every different way. We forget that that has an effect on a culture.

You know, I look at the child intervention system alone. Imagine the fear and the burden on your shoulders when you're making decisions that affect children, their well-being, and their families, and if you end up making a decision that in hindsight wasn't the best one, there's tremendous pressure on your shoulders. One of the things that I think really needs to evolve in our culture is that we need to move from a culture of fear to one of empowerment.

Dr. Swann: How will you do that?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, one of the ways that we do that is by supporting people in training and education. That's something that I've said is a priority for me. We need to give them opportunities to speak when there are critical incidents that take place. We need to allow them an opportunity to speak up without fear so that they can all tell their story and see how they can learn from it and see how they can prevent some things from happening in the future. You know, this is one part of what I think needs to happen.

I'm going to ask our deputy.

4:50

Dr. Swann: Could I just have a quick follow-up? Maybe the deputy wants to respond as well. I hope that in the process you're having the ability to capture front-line employee comments on management, because the message I get is that there's also a contribution on the management style, the issues related to, yes, the work stress but also the challenges of management that may not appreciate some of what's going on in the front lines. If you're not hearing from the front lines, if you're only hearing from management, then you're not going to get at some of the root issues that are undermining people's well-being and their sense of fear.

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah, that's a valid comment. It's important to hear from the front line and their thoughts, and I'm going to ask the deputy minister some specific information on some of the programs.

Dr. Swann: How would you do that so they feel safe giving you that kind of honest feedback? I guess that is the question.

Mr. Morhart: Well, first of all, I thank the member for a very important question. Our staff are, first and foremost, the ones that deliver these services and important supports to Albertans. The survey's intent is to provide an opportunity to provide feedback, so it's a measure at a point in time, and everyone will understand that. We have a lot of efforts that we've been undertaking in the last number of years, since we were formed as a ministry, to reach out to staff: working-together-better sessions, looking at how we do some training, retraining, as the minister has mentioned. I have a blog as a deputy and also an Ask David site, which is meant to provide staff both an opportunity for confidential questions but also an opportunity to share their views across the department. We enable that. It's a way for staff to provide input.

I know that you referenced a number of the scores from the survey, and I'd certainly welcome the opportunity to talk with you broadly about more of the scores that are out there. We score among the highest in government where they feel valued for the types of work that they do and the supports that they get from colleagues, and those are things that we're quite proud of because they're very proud of the work that they do and the efforts that they take on.

There are many aspects to the survey, and as an executive we take all of these results seriously, and we talk very openly with staff about them.

Dr. Swann: I just want to question that last statement, that you rate highest among government departments, because the overall feeling of being valued as a government employee is 48 per cent, and all of government of Alberta employees is 49 per cent.

Mr. Morhart: I was referring to a different score for a different question. It was about the value of the work that they do as opposed to that particularly worded question.

Dr. Swann: Okay. I'd like to shift to PDD if I could. Last year the overall budget for support for persons with disabilities increased modestly, but one individual program, community access supports, was initially budgeted to be reduced from \$97 million, roughly, down to \$55 million. It was then bumped up this year to \$79.8 million.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Right.

Dr. Swann: Clearly, the government learned something from that communication and all the protests that evolved around that. First, what was your thinking around this? Help us understand how you were going to go from \$98 million to \$55 million, and then you jumped up to \$80 million. What was your thinking around those budget changes?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, community access, hon. member, is an absolutely critical component of our ministry, especially when we're looking after the most vulnerable. This government is absolutely committed to improving the quality of life for all individuals, and when we're taking a look at the individual and the individual plans, as an example, we take a look at their needs, their goals, their aspirations. The budget you see right now in front

of you takes all of that into consideration as we're moving forward.

But a critical component also, when we look at this, is our employment first strategy and our encouragement of individuals to make sure that they engage in meaningful employment. As you well know, 13 per cent of Albertans fall under the category of disabilities of some sort or another. We know for a fact that not every one of them is going to be able to work, but they should be provided the opportunity if they're willing to work.

So if you look at item 6.4, the employment supports system, if you look at the increase from 2012, as you alluded to in item 6.5, there's a significant increase in the budget there. I think that in order for people to have a really good quality of life, they want to be engaged in meaningful employment. When they go out, they have the opportunity to meet people. They have the opportunity to develop some skills.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

I see what you are referring to here. You've talked about perhaps a \$2 million increase in 6.4 and another \$2 million increase in 6.5.

Mr. Bhardwaj: I think you're looking at a \$10 million increase, hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Okay. That flies in the face of last year cutting \$98 million for employment programs. How do you reconcile that in terms of your encouraging employment when you've cut \$98 million from the previous year?

Mr. Bhardwaj: I don't see a \$98 million cut, hon. member.

Dr. Swann: All the different employment programs that you've listed here add up to \$98 million.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, if you look at the budget which is today and look at, you know, the community access you talked about – you talked about the employment supports, and it is an increase in budget overall, both in community access as well as in employment support systems.

Dr. Swann: Let me just refer to 2.2, 2.6, 2.7, and 2.9.

Mr. Bhardwaj: I'm looking at the disabilities section when we're looking at the disabilities. I'm looking at items 6.4, 6.5, and 6.6. That's the disabilities section you're talking about, specifically PDD. That's what you're talking to me about. Specific terms on PDD, hon. member: that's what I'm talking about. When we're talking about improving the lives of the 10,700 people we serve in PDD, that's the budget you're discussing with me.

Dr. Swann: Okay. So there's no cross-referencing? None of the general employment programs apply to people with PDD?

Mr. Bhullar: They do apply, but I think that before we get too far ahead, what you're referring to here, these reductions that you're referring to, are the labour market agreement with the federal government. We are absolutely confident that we will have a new labour market agreement with the federal government. We can't account for those dollars in the budget. Our investment in this area has actually gone up.

Dr. Swann: In PDD?

Mr. Bhullar: In employment supports. The numbers you were listing were employment support areas.

Dr. Swann: General employment supports: a \$98 million cut.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, I don't see where you're getting \$98 million there.

Dr. Swann: If you add up all those reductions, they come to \$98 million, or a 10 per cent reduction in the various employment programs that you had provided in the previous year.

Mr. Bhullar: No, sir. What I see is about \$7 million. As I said, that's because of the labour market agreement with the federal government. I don't know what we're looking at here, but maybe we can exchange some notes afterwards.

Dr. Swann: Okay. What do you expect from the federal government in terms of the funding for employment programs? How much do you expect?

Mr. Bhullar: They're ongoing negotiations, and the word "expectation" is always a bit scary when you come to ongoing negotiations. What I will say is that we're supported to the tune of about \$58 million presently, and we're hoping that we'll have something close to that when we finalize this agreement, which, hopefully, will be done very, very soon. It's very important to note that we have committed to continuing on with the programs in the meantime. We are supporting those programs with our own dollars in the meantime, until the final agreement is signed, just because we feel it's essential that the learners get the supports.

Dr. Swann: So you made major cuts to employment programs without knowing what you're going to get from the federal government? That doesn't make a lot of sense.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, we haven't made major cuts. I think we're looking at something different here. I'm looking at page 112 of our operational budget.

Dr. Swann: Since 2013 there's been \$98 million cut from employment programs. Your budget plus the previous budget add up to \$98 million of cuts to employment programs. We'll go back to it, then.

Mr. Bhardwaj: What I see under Persons with Developmental Disabilities – Employment Supports, if you look at the 2012-2013 budget and you look at our budget of today, which is looking at \$30,978,000, is an increase of approximately \$10 million simply because of the fact we're talking about providing the opportunities for the individuals and providing the supports needed to have that quality of life for those individuals.

5:00

Dr. Swann: You're talking about PDD?

Mr. Bhardwaj: That's what you were asking me.

Dr. Swann: Yes. Can you comment now on how much of the budget for PDD goes to front-line services?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Ninety-four per cent of the budget, give or take, in total is our statutory obligation.

Dr. Swann: Ninety-four per cent of your budget in PDD goes to front-line services?

Mr. Bhardwaj: For the most part, yeah. And I can provide you with specific numbers item by item because we've got an ADM

here who can provide that. The vast majority of our budget is for that. If you need more details, we can always provide that to you.

Dr. Swann: I would appreciate that.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Okay.

Mr. Bhullar: Do you want us to do that right now? We can do that.

Dr. Swann: No, that's fine. You can send it to me. Thanks.

Shifting to child poverty, what is the difficulty of defining child poverty? Where is the difficulty here?

The Chair: Dr. Swann, there are five minutes left.

Dr. Swann: Saved by the bell.

The Chair: No, you have five minutes.

Dr. Swann: Oh, five minutes left.

Mr. Bhullar: I think it's a question of defining child poverty in the context of overall poverty. That's a challenge. Number two, are you able to support children and everything they need to tackle poverty? For example, if a child who's living with a family in poverty can't afford adequate care in a certain area, can you just supplement that care for the child or do you provide it for the whole family? So it's looking at the entire window of poverty, looking at the entire lens of poverty.

There's incredible work that we are doing and we continue to do and are going to do more of in the early childhood development area. These are some of the programs that typically a family in poverty may not have access to, may not be able to afford, may not be able to get the child engaged in. That, I think, is some of the most important early development work that needs to take place, especially for children that come from low-income homes.

Dr. Swann: Well, why not include it as a family poverty issue, then? We have a market-basket measure of poverty. We have a low-income cut-off measure. Children who are living with inadequate means to meet their basic needs need to be supplied with those. That's what it comes down to.

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah. So then the question is, as we discussed when we met: what are the specific factors, then, for supports that we need to provide those children, right? Housing? They need to be housed appropriately. You have . . .

Dr. Swann: Nutritious food.

Mr. Bhullar: Nutritious food. You have opportunities to learn and grow, whether that be early childhood development from kindergarten forward. Issues of transportation don't so much affect children as they do their parents.

Dr. Swann: Then I guess I would go back to one of the previous questions about: how are we going to measure? If you haven't got any kind of measure, how can we ever hold ourselves accountable for making progress?

Mr. Bhullar: We have measurement in a lot of different areas that are quite specific measurements. For example, today we have measurements in early childhood development. We know that there are probably 27 per cent of kids that come into kindergarten that are not totally ready to go. So we have measurements for that.

We have measurement even further that says: here are areas where we're seeing it more prevalent than other areas. Those are areas that we are then targeting with our early childhood development initiatives like our parent link centres and our outreach services for our parent link centres. I announced four of them in two satellite locations back in January. We have a lot of measurement. We have a lot of different measurement in a lot of different areas. What we need to do now is start compiling a lot of that measurement under this overall umbrella of child poverty.

Dr. Swann: Well, there are two or three key measures that you could easily bring together and help us all to know whether we're making headway or not. One of them would be a market-basket measure to see that they're getting adequate income to buy a healthy food basket. Another would be to recognize whether they are going to school hungry. Some of these would be very basic, and we could hold ourselves accountable.

At the present time it appears you're trying to avoid taking responsibility for it by putting out what the indicators are so that we can hold ourselves accountable for making progress on those. You've been in power for 43 years, and we don't have a definition, and we don't have any indicators that would tell us whether we're making progress.

Mr. Bhullar: I haven't been alive for 43 years, so I'd ask you to retract that statement, sir.

Dr. Swann: Your government has been in for 43.

Mr. Bhullar: No, my government has been around for a lot less than that.

The bottom line is that there are a variety of different pieces. There are a variety of different pieces that need to be taken into account when you look at child poverty. Income is one of them. What we are saying is that with some families, if we're not making progress on some fronts, let's not avoid it completely and start making progress on other fronts like early childhood development. You'll see that I'm coming forth with some innovative new programs in this area that specifically target folks where we have this continuous cycle of underemployment, this continuous cycle of unemployment, or, you know, just underachievement of their potential. Those measures that you mentioned are measures that we do look at and incorporate today.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Right now would be a really good time for a five-minute break. If we could be back in our seats within about four minutes, then we'll move on to the New Democrats.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 5:07 p.m. to 5:12 p.m.]

The Chair: Okay. I'd like to call this meeting back to order. At this time we will move on to the New Democrats.

MLA Notley, how would you like to proceed?

Ms Notley: I think we'll try going back and forth. I'll begin with the same kind of apology that the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake did by saying that I'm not interrupting you because I don't want to hear you; it's that I have so many questions, and we've probably explored it as far as we need to in terms of the information that we're getting. We'll see how far I go. Hopefully, I'll have a chance to ask some more questions further on.

I just want to really quickly follow up on a point that the Member for Calgary-Mountain View raised because that had occurred to me almost immediately when you were discussing it

previously. Why not put in your performance measures the number of children living in a family that earns under the LICO? Why should that not be in your performance measures? Your government – your government – ran on a child poverty elimination strategy. Why would we not see the number of Alberta children living in families below the LICO and then track whether we're able to reduce that? Would that be something we can see in the next budget?

Mr. Bhullar: That's something I can definitely give some thought to.

Ms Notley: Okay. Excellent. That would be really helpful.

In terms of strategies, of course, you're right that we can talk about poverty until, you know – if all it takes to not act is to list all the various challenges, then we can all feel really good about not acting because we all know there are many challenges. You and I have talked about this before. One of the most significant improvements, in terms of the record of child poverty, that has been brought about in public policy in the last couple of decades is the child benefit model, that we've seen implemented in Ontario and that a number of antipoverty groups have advocated for and premised research on here in Alberta. In Ontario the child benefit is about \$1,310 per year per child who is eligible. Would the government consider that? That is a substantive move to ending child poverty. It's had that outcome in Ontario, not ending it but significantly and meaningfully reducing it.

The third question. We're the only province in the country that does not have a provincially funded school lunch program. Would you consider dealing with that? These are things that the research is absolutely conclusive on in terms of bringing about measurable decreases to child poverty. Would you consider either of those two?

Mr. Bhullar: I'd be curious to know from you what sort of actual progress that has made in Ontario in the reduction of child poverty.

Ms Notley: It's made quite a significant reduction because it simply raised the income of the families of the children, so they had more money to spend on things like food and rent and winter boots.

Dr. Swann: Child care.

Ms Notley: Well, child care is, of course, a whole other issue, which hopefully I'll get a chance to talk to.

So it has. By all means, research it. I didn't bring that information with me, but there is quite a bit of very compelling and convincing information out there. The social workers and the Social Planning Council and, I think, vision Calgary: a lot of these groups that do nothing but focus on antipoverty efforts have done research which shows clearly that that is probably the single biggest action government could take in a short time to bring about meaningful change.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, there will be a variety of different things that we will look at in addressing issues of child poverty.

Ms Notley: All right. Well, as I said, it would be helpful. You know, it's tick tock in terms of the promise you made in the last election.

Income support. My calculation shows that in item 2 – just to clarify, various and sundry strategies to assist people in getting off income support. Whether you're looking at 2.2, income support to

learners; 2.6, career development services; 2.7, basic skills and academic upgrading; 2.9, training for work; 2.10, workforce partnerships, collectively we're looking at a little over \$40 million as a cut there. That's the number I've got for what you've taken out there, obviously not a great move forward in reducing poverty.

Now, I understand the issue of the federal government funding, but I have two questions. First of all, this government got a \$1 billion windfall from the federal government for Health. A little over two-thirds of that was dedicated to Health. Why would you not take the rest of that to make sure that you don't have a \$40 million drop in the kinds of programs that make such a big impact on reducing poverty for the families within which the children for whom you promised to eliminate poverty reside? Why would you not take some of that money to make sure that there's no deficit in section 2?

Mr. Bhullar: With respect to section 2, as discussed earlier, we are continuing all of our programs as they are today because we have the expectation that we will reach a deal that will provide us with the funding from the federal government. We've made that commitment to our partners; for example, postsecondaries that are providing some of the training and education. This is something that we have great confidence that we will reach a deal and that we'll be able to continue to support our programs. That's why we're not changing our programs as they are today.

Ms Notley: Well, I guess I have a concern because, you know, as taxpayers, as voters all we can do is look at the budget. That's sort of one of the things that we use to hold you accountable, and your budget says that that's not what's going to happen. I appreciate that you're making assumptions and all that kind of stuff, but it would seem to me that it would make more sense to actually put the money into it, and then when and if you get the money elsewhere, you allocate it accordingly. I'm concerned that what we actually have in front of us is a budget which demonstrates between a 10 and 50 per cent cut in some of these major programs. You can sort of say, "Wink, wink, nudge, nudge; that's not really what we plan to do," but that, I would suggest, is not responsible budgeting. It would be better to have the money in there and then take your federal money and put it elsewhere when it shows up. As the Health issue demonstrates very clearly, you can do whatever you want with federal money.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, I won't get into the jurisdiction of my colleague the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, but what I will say is that I am operating the department on the basis that we will receive that funding. There are no reductions in the programs that you have discussed, and we're going to continue to support Albertans. There are significant challenges in helping some of our population that's unemployed to get employed. There are some significant labour barriers. It could be simple things like basic education, literacy. There are a lot of different parts to this puzzle, and we're committed to working on them.

5:20

Ms Notley: So just to make sure that I'm understanding your answer correctly, what you are telling me, definitively, is that next year, when we're here in this budget, we're going to see a 2014-15 forecast for those line items that I just outlined which is no different than what we see right now in the 2013-14 forecast. Is that what you're telling me, that even though it's in there as a reduction, you are giving me your word right now that we will see no reduction and that next year the budget line item will show that there was actually no reduction there?

Mr. Bhullar: The 2013-14 forecast is \$706,144,000, and the 2014-15 estimate is \$699 million. We intend on supporting our learners as we have been supporting our learners in years previous.

Ms Notley: Fair enough, but that wasn't what I asked. What I asked was – for lines 2.2 and 2.6 and 2.7 and 2.9 and 2.10 each of those items will appear to be exactly as what is currently listed as the 2013-14 forecast. That's what we're going to see you've spent. I want to know: is there a cut or not? This is the only way we can know. That's what these budget discussions are for.

Mr. Bhullar: Fair enough. I can say that as soon as we get the money from the feds, the money will be put in this.

Ms Notley: If you don't get the money from the feds, you won't move it from somewhere else?

Mr. Bhullar: Sorry? Say that again?

Ms Notley: So then the quid pro quo is: because you're not prepared to guarantee those line items, if you don't get the money from the feds, you're not prepared to move it in there from somewhere else.

Mr. Bhullar: I can say that as of right now my plan is to continue to support our employment and income support programs as we have been in years previous.

Ms Notley: Well, I don't mean to be particularly combative, but for the sake of people who are trying to actually understand what this budget says, if you're not prepared to guarantee that those line items that I identified will appear next year in the forecast section as they currently appear in the '13-14 forecast section, then we have to assume that we've got a cut.

Mr. Bhullar: We have to assume that an agreement that was signed just very recently by our minister of jobs and the federal minister of human resources, Mr. Kenney, is going to lead to an actual deal very soon, and those funds are going to continue to support Alberta workers. The point is to help people get employed. They may have some variances in programs. They may have some new requirements. Some of these things with respect to programs might alter somewhat, but the intention is to continue to support employees.

Ms Notley: I'm sure everyone wants to continue to support everyone as well as we possibly can to bring about all the greatest outcomes we possibly can, but that's where the dollars are always helpful for us.

I'd like to go to AISH really quickly. How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have eight minutes.

Ms Notley: Okay. Thanks.

Go to AISH really quickly. You said that you're getting 50 applications a day?

Mr. Bhullar: I'm told that's what our average is per day.

Ms Notley: So that means you're getting about 18,000 applications a year.

Mr. Bhullar: I can have someone provide specifics on this, but the average is about 50 a day.

Ms Notley: It's about 50 a day. And you've got an 88 per cent increase in your applications?

Mr. Bhullar: The increase has been 88 per cent over the last number of years.

Ms Notley: Okay. Over the last number of years. How many applications were there last year?

Mr. Bhullar: Last year I believe there were about 15,000. Donna, can you provide specifics?

Ms Ludvigsen: That's correct.

Ms Notley: Okay. So about a 20 per cent increase in applications at this point is what we're looking at; 15,000 to 18,000 would be about a 20 per cent increase.

Mr. Bhullar: We're very early into 2014 as well, though, right now.

Ms Notley: The reason I ask is that last year it was reported that there was about a 25-week wait for somebody who was applying for benefits. What's the current wait time from the time they contact your office to the time they receive benefits?

Mr. Bhullar: I want to go back for one second. It appears that the average was 40 to 50 a day.

Ms Notley: Forty to 50 a day. I see.

Mr. Bhullar: The wait time as it sits right now is approximately 15 weeks, which has gone down from years previous, and the target is 12. Of course, if someone is approved, the benefit kicks in from the moment their application was completed.

Ms Notley: Right. Now, with those people who were waiting those 15 weeks, we were told in the past that they were receiving income from some other thing. Mostly, I guess, it was income support.

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah.

Ms Notley: All right. Well, I guess if you're looking at a reduction from 25 to 15 weeks, we're probably not looking at a particularly large increased demand for income support.

What is the current wait time for appeals?

Mr. Bhullar: The current wait time for appeals is a bit too long for my liking, to be very honest with you. Since we had the increase in AISH, we had an increase in applications, and we've had an increase in approvals and rejections, obviously, and now we're finding more people go to an appeal. Four to five months is the wait for appeals.

Ms Notley: How many people are appealing at this point?

Mr. Bhullar: There are 1,700 appeals across the province.

Ms Notley: Right now that are outstanding. How many appeals per year?

Mr. Bhullar: I will ask Donna to provide that number. What I can say is that we recently had a training session for citizens' panels, so I'm hoping that we'll clear up some of this backlog within the next number of months.

Ms Notley: If you've got your four- to five-month wait, I'm assuming you must have about 3,400 to 3,700 appeals per year.

Ms Ludvigsen: Donna Ludvigsen, employment and financial supports.

Because of the sudden demand in appeals what we had for previous years is not reflective of what we've got right now. What we do know is that of the individuals that are applying for AISH, the department is denying eligibility for a certain proportion of them.

Ms Notley: What proportion is that?

Ms Ludvigsen: It's about 50 per cent.

Ms Notley: So half of the applications are being denied right now?

Ms Ludvigsen: That's correct.

Ms Notley: And then there's a four- to five-month wait. What is the overturn rate?

Ms Ludvigsen: The Citizens' Appeal Panel is upholding the decision of the department in 65 per cent of the cases, so 35 per cent of them are reversed.

Ms Notley: To what extent is the Citizens' Appeal Panel appealed? Are people going to judicial review? Is that the only thing they can do after that?

Ms Ludvigsen: Yes. That's correct.

Ms Notley: I presume, of course, that they're not even remotely eligible for legal aid for that. Oh, what a system.

Okay. You're rejecting half, and your little internal panel is upholding about 65 per cent of those rejections, so you've got about 9,000 rejections a year.

Ms Ludvigsen: Uh-huh.

Ms Notley: Wow. Okay.

Mr. Bhullar: The vast majority of the rejections are on medical grounds.

Ms Notley: What do you do in a case where the application is with respect to a mental health problem and it is clear to your panel members that the person is not equipped to represent themselves?

Ms Ludvigsen: There are supports available to individuals, and we do make the referrals. They don't need legal representation to come to the appeal panel. Some prefer to do that, but the question is really about medical eligibility.

Ms Notley: Right. I understand that. I've done this. I'm a lawyer. I used to do this, and I understand the complexity of these cases, hence my concern about people who are applying who have mental health issues and understanding their inability to practise this kind of law. What kind of assistance do they get?

Ms Ludvigsen: We provide referrals to community agencies that can assist them, that can provide them with support, and individuals applying for AISH . . .

Ms Notley: Like representation support?

Ms Ludvigsen: No.

Ms Notley: No. Okay. All right.

Mr. Bhullar: But they would be eligible for representative support.

Ms Notley: No, they wouldn't be. They wouldn't be. I hate to break it to you.

Mr. Bhullar: Pro bono law?

Ms Notley: No, no. Have you not been reading the paper?

Mr. Bhullar: Why not pro bono?

5:30

Ms Notley: Pro bono is like finding a unicorn in, you know, the tar sands. Pro bono is not something that people can rely on.

Mr. Bhullar: Okay.

Ms Notley: Someone with mental health issues is not going to be able to secure pro bono legal representation.

What percentage of your folks who appear at the citizens' appeal board appear with lawyers?

Ms Ludvigsen: I don't have that information, but we can certainly get that for you.

Ms Notley: I'd appreciate that. Thanks.

I don't really want to break my rhythm and do this right now. Unfortunately, as per an announcement by our leader about two weeks ago, I have a notice of amendment that I need to distribute.

The Chair: Please proceed because you've got about a minute and 20 seconds left.

Ms Notley: This a notice of amendment to the Human Services budget, basically moving that

the estimates of the associate minister's office under reference 1.2 at page 112 of the 2014-15 main estimates of the Ministry of Human Services be reduced by \$673,000 so that the amount to be voted at page 111 for operational is \$4,088,295,000.

That is in service of eliminating the associate minister positions.

The Chair: You have 42 seconds left if you'd like to proceed.

Ms Notley: Do I? Okay. I just needed to get that on the record as per a previous commitment made by our caucus. There we go. That is there for further debate.

PDD. There is so much I have to ask on this. I'm going to start quickly. The Alberta Disability Workers Association did a survey and found that about half of those who responded to the survey did not receive the full 10 per cent increase from the salaries that were provided. I guess we'll follow up on that next time around.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

Next we have the PC caucus, who have agreed to take turns and split up the time. We will start with MLA Jablonski.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are you going to go back and forth?

Mrs. Jablonski: Yeah. I've got three questions, so after each question I would appreciate it if the minister could answer.

As we probably all know, Michener Centre is in Red Deer-North, and the people who live there and most of the people who

work there are my constituents. We always knew that Michener would be closed; we just didn't think that it would close with 125 residents being forced to move. Minister, I was there when the promise was made that no one would be forced to leave Michener. Michener has been the only home that many of our residents have ever known. Some have lived there for over 40 years. Some family members believe that forced relocation of their loved ones will create extreme stress and anxiety and could lead to premature death. I have seen the care given to our residents at Michener, and I know that the care they receive is among the very best in the world.

Line 6.8 on page 113 of the government estimates shows that the 2013-14 forecast is \$72 million and the estimate for 2014-15 is \$67.5 million. The difference is approximately \$5 million. You have previously stated that there is \$10 million in the capital budget to build capacity right across the province.

The average age of Michener residents is 64 years. Minister, why would you remove these seniors from their homes, many of whom have lived there for three or four decades, spend \$10 million for new group homes and projects across the province and save \$5 million when you could simply have waited a few more years for natural attrition as you did for the 17 people in Youngstown and for the 12 people at Eric Cormack Centre? Why would you decide to close Michener now and cause the extreme anxiety and stress that the families are feeling?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, thank you very much, hon. member. I certainly appreciate your passion, and I'm happy to respond. As you well know, Michener was opened in 1923. It was a state-of-the-art facility at that time. Over the last several decades the social values of this province and even the nation have changed. The demographics of this province have changed. And the best practices, if we look right across the world, indicate that people live much more meaningful lives when they're included in the communities. We're simply responding to the best practices. We're one of the last jurisdictions to move people out of institutions and provide them with inclusive, caring environments in the communities. This is the reason we're moving ahead with the transition.

When you're talking about care which is provided to the residents of Michener, I can absolutely appreciate where you're coming from. Every single one of them is someone's loved one. It's our absolute responsibility to make sure, as we're going through the transition process, first and foremost, that an appropriate home has been identified for them, found for them in consultation with their families.

Two, we need to make sure that appropriate care planning – you talked about the type of care they would be getting in the community. We're absolutely committed to making sure that they get equal or better care in the community. We have to absolutely make sure that an appropriate care plan has been established before the move goes on. Then, of course, we need to make sure that everyone who's involved with the transition agrees with that plan.

You're talking about the capacity and spending \$10 million. As we're building capacity around the province, first and foremost, it's the choice of the individual and their family where they would like to live. I can tell you that a lot of the families who haven't seen their relatives for years are now becoming closer than ever because their relative is moving perhaps very, very close to where they live. So this is absolutely positive.

We know that their needs are going to change as they age, so another thing that we're absolutely keeping in mind as we're

building capacity is: can that capacity accommodate their changing needs?

I can tell you that we absolutely are keeping all of those things in mind as we're going ahead with that.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Minister. I have to tell you that best practices don't compute with me, and they don't compute with the 64-year-old residents who have been there all their lives. They only know that they are receiving what is considered some of the best care in the world. So there is no better care. There is comparable care, I'm sure, in our community. I would totally agree with that. But this is hard on the residents who cannot understand why they have to move when they're already receiving probably some of the best care in the world.

My second question is about the 50 seniors in continuing care who will be moved to seniors' continuing care facilities. I've been told by some of the best experts in the field that looking after seniors with disabilities, compared to looking after seniors with Alzheimer's or seniors who just need extra care, is completely different. It's a completely different area of care, a completely different skill set. It's very difficult to include seniors with disabilities and Alzheimer's with seniors with disabilities but not Alzheimer's.

I don't know how much it's going to cost to put somebody who needs all this extra care into a continuing care facility compared to regular seniors who need care. I don't know how much it's going to cost extra to do that, and I don't know which care facilities are able to take in people that have all these extra needs. So can you tell me: what are the continuing care facilities that are willing to have a place for these people who need extra care?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Hon. member, it's not about which continuing care facilities are wanting to take them; it's about which continuing care facilities are able to meet their needs. When we're working with the individuals – and I'm going to go back to what I stated earlier – it's not where we want to place them. So far we have five people who will be moving into long-term care facilities, but it's not us who are deciding that this individual is going to go here, here, and here. I want to be absolutely clear that it's about meeting the needs of that particular individual, talking to the families. If they can get equal or better care – as you mentioned, they may or may not be able to get better care – well, at that time they're not moving to a long-term care facility or any other facility because this is only done in consultation with families, with their loved ones, with the individuals, taking a look at their daily plans. What are their plans? What is their care plan now? What is some of the care that could be provided where they're going to be moved?

5:40

Mrs. Jablonski: Minister, I'd still like to know what continuing care facilities have the ability to look after these seniors with these extra needs, so you can let me know later if you'd like.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Yeah, we can provide you . . .

Mrs. Jablonski: I know that I've talked to a number of excellent care facilities that we have – for example, we have Michener extended care and Bethany care in Red Deer – and they've told me that there are extra costs and that extra skills and expertise are required and that it's not easy. So you can let me know later what continuing care facilities are able to take these seniors that we could have just left at Michener for another few years?

Minister, I've had many discussions with the families, the caregivers, and the members of AUPE, and they've all agreed that

we could close the north side of Michener if we could keep some of the beds on the south side open. As you probably know, the majority of the 300 acres of Michener services are on the beautiful north side. What a gift it is to have families, union members, and residents agree to close the largest part of Michener and only ask that we keep some of the beds that are already in place open on the south side for a few more years. Minister, would you consider closing down the north side and leaving some of the south side beds open so that those who have lived there all their lives and call this home can continue to live there until they die, just as we promised?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Hon. member, specific to the north and south sides, as we're moving ahead with the transition, as I mentioned earlier, first and foremost, we're keeping the needs of the individuals – I have had the opportunity to visit the Michener, both the north side and the south side, and I can specifically talk about the buildings you're talking about, you know, whether it's the Terrace or the Cedar or the Tamarack building, which are on the south side. When we compare that facility to some of the new capacity we're building, there's absolutely no comparison. By far it is a much superior facility, where the needs of the individual are going to be met.

You mentioned Youngstown. I had the opportunity to visit one of the group homes where we have three individuals moved from Youngstown. You know, I'm no expert, but at first glance – we were celebrating this individual's 60th birthday – all of the people who were there looked fresh, they looked engaged, they looked really wanting to be out in the community. You know, this is what this transition is all about: making sure that we're working with the families, working with the individuals to improve the lives of those individuals.

Mrs. Jablonski: Minister, you're seeing this through the eyes of a human being who doesn't have disabilities, a human being that can easily make a transition from one place to another. These are people who have lived there for over 40 years. They want to live and die there. We're taking that away from them. I have to say that I still don't understand why, and I can't explain it to their families. But I want to thank you very much for your answers.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this time we'll go to MLA DeLong.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. I first became an MLA back in 2001. I came from the computer industry. I was not a social worker. I was a computer programmer, a computer company owner, and a consultant. I found my job as an MLA stimulating, fantastic. Every day was a great day to go to work until I had my first parent come in who had had their child removed, and this has continued to be the one thing in my job which just totally emotionally overwhelms me. I have all the time been working on this issue. I did, you know, come from the computer industry, but at the same time I did come from Bowness. Bowness is a very mixed area, and it's mostly economically mixed, so some of my friends were on income supports. You know, that's how that community works. It's a totally integrated community.

When parents started to come in, it was quite upsetting for me that a mother might have her children taken away from her or a father might have his child taken away from him. I did work for several years in terms of supporting the nonprofits in Bowness that provide services. I managed to get one of the organizations to

provide supports for new moms, especially for single new moms. Generally, I worked on getting supports for those young families.

At one point what I did was that I decided that I would actually talk to the lawyers who represent these families. They're not some of those rich lawyers, you know, down in the high towers. They're the low-rent ones, who use government funds, generally, or don't . . .

Mrs. Towle: Pro bono.

Ms DeLong: Pro bono. So I approached them and asked them: what's the matter with our system? They were excellent assistants. They wrote a white paper in terms of how we can improve the system so that parents get supports rather than having their children taken away.

You can understand, you know, the social workers. If they don't have an alternative, if there is no real alternative to helping out that family, then out of concern for the child they would take the child away. I guess one of the things, as I was looking into this, was the discrepancy between the amount of money that could be provided to the family to support that child staying in the family versus, when the child was put into care, the amount of money that was provided by the government then. I do very much believe – you know, I am a mom, so I know the kind of attachment that a parent has naturally to their child. I do know, you know, how close that bond is and how, generally, people do their best. They might have some real disadvantages in life, but they do their best.

The first question. If you are actually trying to provide those supports to the parents, it is a less expensive way of doing it. Even without increasing your budget – okay? – it seems to me that if you are working to keep those families together, you actually end up with more money, and you can actually invest more money into supporting those families. So I guess the first question is: will you be redirecting funds to supporting families, and will you have, essentially, more money to invest in that? If you support those families, you don't have to take as many children away. That's my first question.

The second question. I mentioned that . . .

5:50

The Chair: You've got two minutes left.

Ms DeLong: Oh, my goodness. The other thing is that the nonprofits generally do that work within my constituency, and they're supported mostly by FCSS. I'm wondering whether or not you will be actually moving money over that way. I know that you kept FCSS flat. Do you have another way of supporting that?

The other thing is that when it comes to kinship care, I'm wondering what your position is on that. I know that sometimes what was happening in the past was that the kin, the grandma or the grandpa or the aunt or uncle or whatever, were essentially being analyzed as to whether or not – how do we put this? They were being put through the wringer in terms of saying: "Are you an absolutely first-class, you know, trained in this, that, and the other thing to be able to look after the children, or are you a family member? We will assume that unless there is some other reason, you are a good parent."

So those are my questions.

Mr. Bhullar: Some very, very good comments and questions on your part. Let me start off by saying that I agree that removing a child needs to be the absolute last resort. We have to change practices to strengthen families a lot more. The priority needs to be on keeping children in safe environments with family as much as possible.

Now, coming from, you know, a background where I, myself, never heard of a mom or a dad doing some pretty outrageous things to a little child, it's really hard for us to understand that there are some cases where you just cannot conceive that any reasonable human being – any human being; they don't even have to be reasonable – would do the types of things that they do, but it happens. It happens more in our society than any of us care to admit. They're some of the most outrageous things imaginable. [A timer sounded]

We'll continue that next time.

The Chair: You bet. Thank you.

At this point we will move on to the Wildrose for the 10-minute cycle. Who would like to take this?

Mrs. Towle: Me. Thanks.

The Chair: Okay.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Five and five?

Mrs. Towle: Back and forth.

The Chair: Back and forth.

Mrs. Towle: I just want to reiterate the hon. Member for Red Deer-North. Those of us who've lived around Red Deer our whole lives, grown up with Michener and understand the special needs there, are pretty passionate about it. I can tell you from my own perspective – I've been to Michener. My aunt was a resident at Michener. My brother died of Huntington's disease, and Huntington's disease was not even a quarter of what the clients at Michener face.

I can understand best practices. But there are best practices, and then there is just being a compassionate human being. In this case we promised them they could stay there. There are not facilities that can take care of them, so I beg the government to keep the promise. If you have to do anything, do something with the north site, just like the member said, and let's just respect these families. If we're talking about respect, let's just do that. But I'll leave that one. Red Deer-North said it far better than I ever could.

I want to talk about PDD and the PDD boards. Last year saw us go through this whole process, and we saw the budget come out. Shortly after the budget came out and shortly after estimates, PDD received a \$42 million cut. I guess what I'm asking the minister is: is he prepared to go on record that in this fiscal year PDD will not receive cuts, that this budget will be maintained as it is?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, right now we have an increase in the budget. That is our budget right now. I had the opportunity to travel the province and meet 173 service providers and some direct operations. Every single one of them asked that question: is money going to be there? Well, the money is in the budget right now, and we're moving ahead with that.

Mrs. Towle: I can appreciate that, but it was in the budget last year, too, and then shortly thereafter the money was taken away. It would be nice if we could keep our word on that as well.

How many agencies have signed their contracts?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Ninety-nine per cent of the agencies so far have signed on to the outcome-based contract.

Mrs. Towle: Which is how many?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, out of 173, almost all of them.

Mrs. Towle: Okay. Now, PDD-funded agencies struggle to hire and retain qualified people, but they provide the desperate front-line staff supports for these individuals, for people with developmental disabilities. You clearly state that you care about vulnerable Albertans.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Absolutely.

Mrs. Towle: If we do care, then professionally educated and trained people with appropriate expertise need to be paid their value to respond to the people with these challenges, including many who are medically fragile, with complex needs. Where in the Human Services budget is the commitment to increase the wages for the two outcomes so that the wages will close the documented 70 per cent gap between pay for equivalent government positions so that vulnerable Albertans and their families can count on some sort of consistency in the support they get provided? These agencies have been promised equity in pay year after year after year, but it never actually comes through, and I believe that last year that was even delayed until April 1 of this year. When are we actually going to see it?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, I'm going to ask the minister to comment on the main, and then I will supplement.

Mr. Bhullar: We have money allocated in this year's budget, and we're working with the workforce alliance. After the budget is passed, we'll work with the workforce alliance to determine specific percentages for specific, different fields, whether it be child intervention, PDD and disability services, homelessness, et cetera. That's something that will take place after the budget is passed, working with the workforce alliance.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Hon. member, I'll just supplement that. You talked about a skilled workforce. Having the pay commitment, which is being made, is one component of it. I met with the workforce alliance. Having a skilled workforce is equally important, and right now we're looking at a number of different strategies when we're talking to our postsecondary institutions: what can we do to make sure that we have an appropriately skilled workforce taking care of our most vulnerable?

Mrs. Towle: I can appreciate that. The wage increase has been promised every year. Last year we saw that delayed a year, then we saw it come not in the form of a wage increase; we actually saw that in the form of a one-time grant. Families are asking for continuity with their workers. What determines the quality of care often is the wage that we can provide them, and employers, especially in rural Alberta, are finding it more and more difficult. For example, in my own riding, in Bentley, Rimbey, Innisfail, and Sylvan Lake the private facilities that are offering those services can't hire people because there is not enough of a wage for them to actually go out there.

Even if you're talking about skilled workers, the most recent compromised increase was 5 per cent. For people with a master's degree, that are already underpaid, that equals a dollar-an-hour increase, so they move from \$20 an hour to \$21 an hour. This is less than \$45,000 annually. It kind of makes it difficult to encourage people to come into public service if we're not going to pay them fairly, don't you think?

Mr. Bhullar: In 2012 I believe there was a 5 per cent increase, a lump sum payment of \$1,500 specific to the PDD area. Last year

they received a 10 per cent actual increase, and this year, as I said, we will wait for the budget to pass and then work on the specifics with the workforce alliance.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Just also to supplement that answer as well, you're talking about individuals having various backgrounds and a master's degree. You know, I really want to take this opportunity to commend each and every one of them because a lot of these people do it because of their passion and compassion.

Mrs. Towle: I think that we can all agree that our front-line service workers are absolutely doing the best job.

Mr. Bhardwaj: They're absolutely special people.

Mrs. Towle: However, even their wage increases are being delayed a year, and they're not actual wage increases. They end up being one-time grants, which is what we saw last year.

PDD keeps stating that it's goal is having PDD department employees get to know better the individuals who receive the supports. That seems like an expensive use of our resources. Every hour that an employee in a PDD government office spends getting to know the individual takes away a resource from the supports. PDD is a funder. It doesn't need to know the individual. It's a funder of the funding to the agency. It's the agency's role to understand the person and make sure that they're providing the supports that are required.

I'm not saying that PDD should not be involved in the process and understand the assessments and the requirements of the person, but it seems to me that what we really need to do is get the resources to the individuals who are unable to join the workforce and who are in many ways falling through the cracks. You just have to wonder: why do we have a process where the PDD government office needs to get to know the individual when you have agencies that are providing the front-line service?

6:00

Mr. Bhardwaj: You know, we have 173 service providers in the province, who are doing a phenomenal job. I think it's absolutely critical – and I'm really going around the province and stressing this fact as well – that the individuals who are receiving the service build a relationship with the government that's equally important as their relationship with the service provider. I want them to feel confident that if there are issues or challenges, the government is there to look after the needs of the individuals. This is where having that relationship, that ease of talking to the individuals is absolutely critical.

Mrs. Towle: To be clear, though, you have that relationship with the agencies, or you certainly should have, and if the agency is having difficulty with the client, that should be reported back, and there should be some sort of performance measure that says that you're able to do that. The PDD government office doesn't need to talk to every single individual client to get to know them better. They need to understand what the resources are that they need and make sure that they're funded appropriately. But we can come back to that.

I would like to move on to AISH.
How much time do I have?

The Chair: A minute.

Mrs. Towle: Just really quickly, I'd like to move on to AISH.
Sorry, Minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Part of your previous assessment on the wages is incorrect. There was a 10 per cent increase. There was a lump sum payment in 2012, but there were actually increases in the percentages last year. The statement that you made was not entirely . . .

Mrs. Towle: The statement that I made came directly from a worker in PDD.

Mr. Bhullar: Sure.

Mrs. Towle: It's her question, so I'll provide that information back to her, and that's great.

Mr. Bhullar: Fair enough. Fair enough. Thank you. But there was a 10 per cent actual increase to the employees.

Mrs. Towle: I'd like to talk about AISH, go back to AISH really quickly because some of the comments you made to the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona are quite alarming. If we're refusing 50 per cent of the applications, which is 9,000 applications, and it's taking 15 weeks to process an application and upwards of I believe you said 5 months to process an appeal, once again, this goes back to my previous comment that it seems that you don't have enough front-line resources going to help the staff in the beginning, that are working very hard.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this time we'll move on to the Alberta Liberals.

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Madam Chair. One of the messages I'm hearing from child care workers is that they're spending more and more and more time in front of a computer and less and less and less time in front of their clients, partly because of the demands of the new IT system and the outcome-based service delivery model. Can you tell us the average proportion of time being spent in front of a computer for data entry as opposed to individual contact?

Mr. Bhullar: I'm going to ask Mark to provide some insight into that.

Dr. Swann: And how it's changed.

Mr. Bhullar: While he's coming up, I will say that these are exactly the types of things, hon. member, that I'm looking to get a better assessment of so that we can start ensuring that people are spending more time where they need to, and that's with the children.

Mr. Hattori: We don't have an exact percentage or breakdown of time in front of a computer, a time and motion study, but what we do have is that commitment, exactly to the minister's point. The initiatives and practices like signs of safety do ask that you build a solid foundation for a relationship with the people that you're trying to help. In order to do that, you have to, obviously, take time away from any administrative duties. It is exactly that. As we get and implement signs of safety and practice initiatives, we are taking a look at the information technology system to say: what can we modify so that, in fact, does happen, that you have more face time with people?

Dr. Swann: So you can't give me any idea whether that's increased or decreased or is the same as it was?

Mr. Hattori: I don't have that breakdown. No, I don't.

Mr. Bhullar: I think it would vary per worker as well, per their case files and the types of case files that they specifically have, but the overall commitment to reviewing the processes and the procedures is there. That's exactly where we're at right now, making sure that processes and procedures – and one of the ways to do this is to reduce as much as possible the time that we're spending in court. So how do you do that? You work more with families, with other loved ones to find solutions outside of courts. There is, of course, a time when court is the only option. But working as much as possible with the families directly, even in some really difficult situations – it's not always easy to get people around the tables to have those types of discussions and dialogues. I want to focus on that to keep people out of court, to keep people in situations where we're supporting kids in homes.

Dr. Swann: Can you give us any indication of the turnover rate among your staff, the average length of employment, the number of degreed social workers you have working with you?

Mr. Bhullar: I'll ask Mark to provide some comments on that. I know that within child intervention – there's no question that child intervention is one of the most difficult areas to work in. You don't get a phone call to respond to a really happy family that's involved in something really positive, and they just want to show the government, right? You get calls because mom and dad got into a really nasty fight. You get calls because a doctor at a hospital says that this child has come in here with some sort of injuries that don't seem to be of natural causes. You know, as one nurse told me, she had to call child intervention because she discovered that a mom was feeding her own daughter her own human waste.

So there's no question that these are some of the most difficult situations to work in, and I can understand why for some people it's difficult to remain in there, but I'll ask Mark to supplement with any specifics he may have, and the rest we'll provide to you.

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much. Did you want to supplement?

Mr. Hattori: We will get you that information.

Dr. Swann: Jumping to FCSS. FCSS funding has largely remained flat since 2009. This is a jointly funded program with municipalities that, to me, is the essence of prevention, early intervention, and trying to provide people, before they crash, with very cost-effective services. I guess I'm disappointed, as many municipalities are, that this has not been beefed up. What is your commitment to preventative social services?

Mr. Bhullar: Our commitment to preventative social services is quite significant. I mean, first of all, I won't shy away from the fact that, yes, it is staying flat. It's stayed flat. There are great programs and great initiatives that are supported there.

Dr. Swann: But the population has increased very substantially, as you have indicated, and the inflation rate has increased significantly since 2009. What do you expect them to do with such a . . .

Mr. Bhullar: And so has our funding for prevention and early intervention. It's gone up over \$61 million this year; for example, \$12.5 million for increased outreach to parents in high-need communities through our parent link centres and other community networks; enhanced home visitation supports to families at risk of abuse and neglect; supporting early wraparound supports for families who are struggling, including things like the very well-

run Alberta Vulnerable Infant Response Team. I mean, these are the types of teams that help prevent children coming into care. It's a wraparound support team that works with high-risk families early on, when an infant is born, with the aim to support that family so that we don't have to take them into care. That's a model that I'd love to see for all of our system and not just infants, right?

Dr. Swann: I guess we're talking about different levels of prevention, and the FCSS is primary prevention. It's actually getting to families the supports they need before they even have to call social services. It's providing them with the educational opportunities, skills training, that sort of thing, actually, especially for people in poverty.

6:10

Mr. Bhullar: But that is exactly the type of thing that our parent link centres are trying to do with the \$12.5 million increase there, you know, the \$19 million increase in the homeless program area, the \$600,000 increase for the advancing futures bursaries. So we're making a wide-ranging, \$61 million increase in this area of prevention and early intervention.

Dr. Swann: Is there an overlap, then, with FCSS that needs to be addressed? Are you saying that they're trying to do things that you're trying to do and that you don't feel that the investment is appropriate in FCSS, and you're going to take it in-house? Is that basically the decision of the department?

Mr. Bhullar: No. Those are your words; they're not mine. What I am saying is that it is not accurate to say that we're not focusing on prevention and early intervention. That is a very significant focus of ours. FCSS does some great work throughout the province. In many rural communities, you know, they're one of the few sources, so this is an area where I hope that in future years we'll be able to provide additional supports, but by no means does that reflect our commitment to prevention and early intervention. We're doing a lot of prevention and early intervention work directly as well.

Dr. Swann: The early childhood mapping program shows that we're behind the rest of the country in terms of early childhood skills development, behavioural problems, learning problems, emotional problems. This past year they reported that almost a third of our children have some delay and difficulty in some of those key areas. I guess it means that we're going to have to do more, and I guess I will hope that you're going to be advocating for a much bigger share of investment and prevention in the coming budget.

Can I shift to child care and what the government is planning to do to help child care facilities to attract and retain workers and address the compensation disparities in the sector between government-run child care delivery and private child care delivery?

Mr. Bhullar: I'm going to ask Karen to supplement some of what I'm going to say. While she's coming up, I'll say that, I mean, we provide a series of different incentives today for people to attract new workers, attract workers that may have left the field, and supplement their incomes. Up to six dollars and I think it's 22 cents an hour, you know, of their income is supplemented by the government. We want them to continue their education. As they continue their education, as they get higher levels of certification, we supplement the income more; we provide more. The aim is to have well-run, accredited programs that actually provide a lot of

benefit for the children's actual development, not just looking after children for a certain number of hours.

Dr. Swann: Yes, absolutely. Unfortunately, we're only supplying about a third of the needs of Alberta children for child care, and that's a significant issue around poverty reduction, in my view, too, that I hope you'll examine.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move on to the New Democrats.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much. Not a lot of time. I have a few questions I want to follow up on really quickly. Child care spaces: you reported 98,000, I believe. I'm wondering if you could quickly tell me two breakdowns on that. First, I think you break them down zero to three, four to six, and after school. Maybe they're zero to 18 months and then 18 months to six and then after school. However you break it down, what are the numbers by those three categories, and then where are they found, daycare, family day home? If there's another category, let me know. I'm wondering if you could provide me with those up-to-date numbers.

Mr. Bhullar: Sure. I'm going to ask Karen to provide some of the specifics on the numbers.

Ms Notley: Okay. While she's gathering her stuff, I'll ask you another question. Going back to – I guess I just want to talk briefly on Michener. I agree with everything everyone else has said. Yeah. I don't know how you move people who have been somewhere for 40 years, who are that fragile. I'm, you know, aware of how change impacts people with different forms of autism, and many of those people whose primary diagnosis may not be autistic will actually also have that. It is troubling to me that we are doing this.

That being said, last year we were told that about 50 of those folks would be in long-term care and about 30 would be characterized as medically fragile, and then subsequently we were told that only 11 were characterized as medically fragile. So my question is: how many of the medically fragile people have been moved thus far and to where?

Ms Ferguson: Hi. Karen Ferguson, early childhood and community supports. I'll answer the child care questions. As of December 2013 we had a total of 98,829 spaces. I can break those down for you: licensed daycare, 35,966; approved family day homes, 11,223; licensed group family child care, 30; licensed innovative child care, 512; licensed out of school care, 32,939; and licensed preschool, 18,159.

You also wanted them broken down into the ages: infants less than 12 months, 1,458 spaces; infants 12 months to under 19 months, 3,737 spaces; children 19 months to under 36 months, 12,637; children 36 months to under 54 months, 28,044; kindergarten children 54 months and over, 15,862 spaces; children attending school, grades 1 to 6 – this would be our out of school care – 25,353 spaces; and then family day homes that take all of the ranges, 11,735.

Ms Notley: Have you done any work to calculate demand, and if so, how is that done?

Ms Ferguson: What we do is monitor the availability of spaces. Every quarter we check how many spaces and what the enrolment is. On average it's about 81 per cent enrolment provincially. We also do a survey every quarter with child care programs to get

vacancies, and we then give that information to our contact centres so that parents can phone and say: "I'm looking for this type of child care. My child is this age. Where can I find spaces?"

Ms Notley: Can I interrupt you?

Ms Ferguson: Sure.

Ms Notley: Thank you. This is really helpful information.

What are your enrolment numbers for the group up to 54 months?

Ms Ferguson: I don't have that. I can get that for you.

Ms Notley: Could you get me the breakdown of enrolment percentage . . .

Ms Ferguson: Sorry; is that 54 months and under? Is that what you're asking for?

Ms Notley: Yeah. Each of your categories under 54 months.

Ms Ferguson: Oh, sure.

Ms Notley: Yeah. You don't have to add them all up. But just on the basis of those categories.

Ms Ferguson: Certainly.

Ms Notley: Certainly, my understanding is that that's where most families are struggling – right? – not the after school care but the young child care.

Ms Ferguson: Okay.

Mr. Bhullar: You want the enrolment numbers for that?

Ms Notley: The enrolment percentage, yeah.

Mr. Bhullar: For that age group.

Ms Notley: Yeah.

Ms Ferguson: We can get that.

Ms Notley: Great. Thank you very much for that. That was helpful.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Do you want me to answer the original question?

Ms Notley: Yes. How many of them have moved and to where?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Okay. As we're planning the transition strategy, our transition team meets with the individuals . . .

Ms Notley: I understand your process. I'm looking just for how many have moved and to where.

Mr. Bhardwaj: I'm going to ask Brenda Lee to give you specific numbers. But I can tell you how many have moved in March and how many are going to be moving in April and exactly where they're moving to. Brenda Lee has got all of that information, and we can certainly provide that for you.

Ms Notley: Sure.

Ms Doyle: Good afternoon. Brenda Lee Doyle, disability services. A number of people have moved out in the Red Deer area. We've

had one in September to Red Deer, another to Edmonton in the same month. Again three more went to Edmonton in November.

The people at Michener have a range of needs. Not all are medically fragile.

Ms Notley: I'm just asking about the medical fragile folks.

Ms Doyle: This doesn't break down in terms of the medically fragile, but I can certainly provide that for you.

Ms Notley: Have any of them moved? Do you know?

Ms Doyle: Yes, some of the medically fragile certainly have. We had in December a medically fragile person who went to a long-term care facility in Calgary. Then we also had another individual who went to Fort Macleod, who had been medically fragile. We had another person who went out to Bow Island, who would be medically fragile. We've had two other individuals who moved to long-term care AHS, who would be in Grande Prairie and Lacombe. There are a number of other people, a total of 20, who have moved out right now.

6:20

Ms Notley: A total of 20. Thank you. That was going to be my next question.

Ms Doyle: Great.

Ms Notley: Okay. I could ask you questions for hours, but I have about three minutes, I think. With respect to the SIS I assume they are all completed. However, my understanding in talking to people in the community is that many of them actually have significant concerns about their SIS. Last summer, when we did the travelling road show – we didn't, but the previous minister did it, and I tagged along periodically, much to his joy, I'm sure – many, many very desperate families would say, "I had the SIS, and it was a disaster, and it didn't reflect." He would repeatedly say: "Oh, don't worry. There's an opportunity to appeal, and we'll review, and we'll do all this stuff."

However, everyone that I talked to has not yet had an actual review of their SIS. We're still on round 1 of the SIS. No appeals have been heard, and I'm hearing that there's a sort of internal, fuzzy process where, well, if you say that you're not happy, there's no actual formal process for filing an appeal, but there are lots of meetings you can have with PDD staff, who will kind of massage you and question you over and over about whether you really want to appeal. So we don't really have a clear process, we don't have a clear tracking of appeals, and a lot of people are not actually having their SIS reviewed. What have you got to say about that?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, 95 per cent of the people have been assessed for SIS. SIS is just a tool, which is used . . .

Ms Notley: I know, but I'm just talking about the review process.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, you've got to let me finish. You can't just cut me off.

Ms Notley: Okay. But don't describe SIS to me, because I've got about two minutes.

Mr. Bhardwaj: It's a tool which is used to assess the needs of the individual.

Ms Notley: I know.

Mr. Bhardwaj: So when I travelled the province, people have indicated that there are challenges with SIS. There are some questions which are uncomfortable, and I acknowledge that fact, that yes, it is there.

What are we doing about it? We're absolutely making sure that as we're starting to talk to the families, we take those concerns which they have raised into consideration when we re-engage with them. You talk about an appeal process.

Ms Notley: But we were told that there would actually be appeals and a formal review process.

Mr. Bhardwaj: And absolutely there is an appeal process. Individuals who want to appeal absolutely have the opportunity to appeal. I've met with a family in St. Albert, as an example, who have appealed. We're sending the individual – in fact, the MLA from St. Albert is going to be part of it as well. We encourage people. I have read a complete assessment. Yes, there are questions which are uncomfortable. I think we're absolutely looking after that.

You talk about the specific appeal process.

Ms Notley: Yeah, and where it is.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Absolutely there is an appeal process.

Ms Notley: Is it written down somewhere? Is there a website people can go to?

Mr. Bhardwaj: People can appeal if they're finding that what SIS is describing . . .

Ms Notley: I know. Are there rules and stuff?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Absolutely there are. Absolutely.

Ms Notley: Where are they written down? I'm told of at least 20 appeals that were done last summer, and they've heard not a word.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Well, what the status is on the exact number of appeals, exactly how many people have appealed: I can ask the department to provide you with that specific information. But I can tell you that there is absolutely a process in place, and if people are appealing, we're absolutely making sure that their needs are met.

The Chair: Thank you.

Back to the PC caucus. MLA Jeneroux.

Mr. Jeneroux: Perfect. So we have how long?

The Chair: We have five minutes.

Mr. Jeneroux: Five minutes. Okay. I know there's somebody after me, so this will kind of be a bit of a drive-by. I'm inclined to just open up the dialogue about how effective the Youth Secretariat has been, but I know it's rather common knowledge, so I'll refrain.

I do want to really stress a point that was brought up earlier about Little Warriors. I'm encouraged to hear that the dialogue is continuing, and asking a lot of questions is a good start. Regardless of beliefs they are doing a lot of work out there at that ranch, and it's something that a lot of passionate, everyday Albertans are really supporting. The more that the government can continue that dialogue is something I'd definitely support.

However, my question is really based on child care. I went down this road with Minister Hancock last year. We talked a lot

about accreditation of facilities, and he was saying that 97 per cent have achieved accreditation. I'm hoping that that number is either the same or higher. However, in my area there's a lot of growth, and we are extremely desperate for child care facilities.

I'll give you a quick story before I hand it over to you. Last night I was at a community meeting where there was a mom who has gone and started this child care facility. She's opened it up in a church. A church has opened their doors to be able to do this. It's called Global Aware Care. They're trying to find other businesses to open up. I'm hoping that if there are none, which I understand there are not, there's opportunity somewhere down the road to look at perhaps providing incentives for businesses to open up particular child care facilities within their business as opposed to always relying on the same, the YMCAs and the others. You know, wouldn't it be great to drop off the kids at the place where you go to work? Right now business is booming, so why would they do that? Hoping that there's something that we can kind of do to continue that but also ensuring that if that's not the answer, then at least something is the answer to increase more child care spaces in the province.

Mr. Bhullar: You know, we've got a very young population in Alberta, and the youthfulness of our population, I guess, continues to increase. People are having kids. So this is definitely an issue that requires some innovative thought. Operators tell me that it's a viable and worthwhile endeavour for them to be involved in. Those that are running it as a for-profit venture are telling me that it's actually a worthwhile initiative for them to be involved in. There are many that are running it as a not-for-profit venture as well, just like what you've described.

I'd like to see what the barriers are that are preventing people from going into this business. We've got a great number of students that are graduating from programs every year that are interested in this. We have a great market, you know, a great customer base that continues to grow. So I'd like to see what the barriers are of why people are not expanding and growing these businesses or starting these businesses. That's something that I

want to sort of get my head around and see what we can figure out.

I think a number of years ago the government did have a program to incent people to create new child care spots. It was, I believe, \$1,200 per spot that was created, and that was meant to help with capital costs, and so on. That was incredibly successful. They far surpassed the target. The target was 12,000, and they ended up creating over, I believe, about 20,000 new child care spaces with that program. I remember that specifically in my constituency or close to my constituency there were some child care spots that were increased.

I see that this is an issue. I think it's also partly an issue just like with our schools. We have enough schools in the province, they say, but in the wrong places. I'm beginning to think that maybe that's also an issue here because, as was mentioned earlier, our programs are running at an 81 per cent utilization rate right now, so there's a 19 per cent vacancy in our programs. My question is: where is that vacancy, and how can we better connect people to find the open spots? But, again, you know, when our cities are growing as much as they are, they may have vacancy in downtown in one city, but everyone lives and works on the south side of the city, so that can pose some significant challenges. That's something that we need to do some further work on to see how we can bridge those gaps, for sure.

The Chair: At this time I must advise that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded.

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank all our ministers for all the great work that you do and all of the department staff. You've got a very complicated, sensitive, diverse, and difficult ministry. Thank you very much.

At this point I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on April 15, 2014, to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 6:30 p.m.]

