



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Community and Social Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, April 6, 2017
9 a.m.

Transcript No. 29-3-4

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (ND), Chair
Smith, Mark W., Drayton Valley-Devon (W), Deputy Chair

Aheer, Leela Sharon, Chestermere-Rocky View (W)
Drever, Deborah, Calgary-Bow (ND)
Gill, Prab, Calgary-Greenway (PC)*
Hinkley, Bruce, Wetaskiwin-Camrose (ND)
Horne, Trevor A.R., Spruce Grove-St. Albert (ND)
Jansen, Sandra, Calgary-North West (ND)
Luff, Robyn, Calgary-East (ND)
McKittrick, Annie, Sherwood Park (ND)
Miller, Barb, Red Deer-South (ND)
Pitt, Angela D., Airdrie (W)
Rodney, Dave, Calgary-Lougheed (PC)
Shepherd, David, Edmonton-Centre (ND)
Swann, Dr. David, Calgary-Mountain View (AL)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (W)

* substitution for Dave Rodney

Support Staff

Robert H. Reynolds, QC	Clerk
Shannon Dean	Law Clerk and Director of House Services
Trafton Koenig	Parliamentary Counsel
Stephanie LeBlanc	Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Manager of Research and Committee Services
Sarah Amato	Research Officer
Nancy Robert	Research Officer
Corinne Dacyshyn	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Karen Sawchuk	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications and Broadcast Services
Jeanette Dotimas	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Community and Social Services
Hon. Irfan Sabir, Minister

9 a.m.

Thursday, April 6, 2017

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

**Ministry of Community and Social Services
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Good morning. I would like to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2018.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have all MLAs introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials that are joining you today at the table. I'm Nicole Goehring, MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs and the chair of this committee. We'll continue, starting to my right.

Mr. Yao: Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mrs. Pitt: Angela Pitt, Airdrie.

Mr. Gill: Prab Gill, Calgary-Greenway.

Mr. Sabir: I'm Minister Irfan Sabir. I have Carol Ann Kushlyk, Susan Taylor, and David Morhart, my deputy minister. I also have Darrell Dancause, Roxanne Gerbrandt, John Cabral, Aaron Neumeyer, and Kevin Inkster. I also have staff from my ministry.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, Edmonton-Centre.

Ms McKittrick: Annie McKittrick, MLA, Sherwood Park.

Ms Jansen: Sandra Jansen, Calgary-North West.

Mr. Horne: Trevor Horne, MLA for Spruce Grove-St. Albert.

Drever: Good morning. Deborah Drever, MLA for Calgary-Bow.

Ms Miller: Good morning. Barb Miller, MLA, Red Deer-South.

Mr. Hinkley: Good morning. Bruce Hinkley, MLA, Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Ms Luff: Robyn Luff, MLA for Calgary-East.

Mrs. Aheer: I'd like to introduce my assistant, Cody Johnston. I'm Leela Sharon Aheer, Chestermere-Rocky View.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. Gill for Mr. Rodney.

Please note that the microphones are being operated by *Hansard*, and the committee proceedings are being audio and video live streamed. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent during the duration of this meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with the consideration of main estimates for the Ministry of Community and Social 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 or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may make opening comments not exceeding 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party, 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 just outlined to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

The speaking rotation is set out in the standing orders, and members wishing to participate must be present during the appropriate portion of the meeting.

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times for the first rotation 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 times for a maximum total of 10 minutes. Discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking time has been combined. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their rotation if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or speak directly with either myself or the committee clerk about this process.

A total of three hours has been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services. With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having this break? Hearing no opposition to this, we will have the five-minute break at the midpoint.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate. However, only a committee member or an official substitute for a committee member may introduce an amendment during the committee's review of the estimates.

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon by the minister, have access to a microphone in the gallery area. Ministry officials are asked to identify themselves for the record prior to responding to a question. We have pages available to make deliveries should any notes or other materials need to pass between staff and the gallery and the table. Members' staff may be present and seated along the committee room wall. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table; however, 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. Today we will adjourn at 12 o'clock p.m.

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

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

The vote on estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on April 19, 2017.

If there are 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 estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is deferred until Committee of Supply convenes on April 19, 2017. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are being moved. Twenty copies of

amendments, including the original, must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

I'll now invite the Minister of Community and Social Services to begin with his opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, everyone. As you heard on March 16, Budget 2017 is about investing in things that make life better and more affordable for Albertans. Our government is in the corner of everyday Albertans. We are focused on creating and supporting new jobs and protecting the public services that Albertans need.

As Albertans get back on their feet from the economic downturn, our government has made the choice to not make reckless cuts that hurt families. We have made the choice that Albertans cannot afford to wait for the price of oil to rise to get their needs met. We have made the choice to protect and improve the things that make a positive difference in the lives of Albertans. We are committed to prudent, thoughtful spending and using every tax dollar wisely. However, we will not balance the budget on the backs of Albertans who need our help the most.

In 2017-18 the new Ministry of Community and Social Services will provide stable, predictable funding for the services that make life better for Albertans. That includes children and adults with disabilities, Albertans experiencing family and sexual violence, Albertans experiencing or at risk of homelessness, Albertans who have lost their jobs and need support to get back to work, and Albertans benefiting from prevention and early intervention programs designed and delivered by communities.

The ministry's Alberta Supports centres, AISH offices, and Alberta Works centres help to deliver and connect Albertans to a range of ministry, government, and community programs that support their unique needs. Our Alberta Supports contact centre is responding to an average of more than 17,600 phone calls per month from Albertans seeking assistance.

Over the past three years there have been caseload increases in many of our key programs, including a significant increase in PDD, in AISH, and in family support for children with disabilities, and a significant increase in the expected-to-work income support caseload due to the economic downturn. When compared to Budget 2016, ministry funding increases in Budget 2017 are targeted to support these increased caseload pressures. Our budget ensures that these critical services will continue to be there for Albertans when they need them as our communities continue to grow.

This year for the first time the Speech from the Throne included a government focus on improving safety, inclusion, and timely access to services for persons with disabilities. As Albertans recover from the economic downturn, our government has made the choice to not make reckless cuts that hurt families. We have made the choice to protect and improve the things that make a positive difference in the lives of Albertans.

9:10

As we move forward we will build on our collaboration with the community over the past year, in which we made a number of positive changes. This past year we have repealed the PDD safety standards regulation and amended the exemption regulation under the Safety Codes Act. We have ended supports intensity scale assessment. We have made clear that we will not competitively tender contracts for existing front-line PDD services and supports. We have worked with agencies to develop a new PDD contract template, and we have established a new division in the department to specifically support Albertans with disabilities: the disability, inclusion, and accessibility division.

One common thread in this work that I have heard loud and clear is: Nothing about Us without Us. That guides our work going forward. In 2017-18 we will make improvements to the AISH program based on the Auditor General's recommendations. We will increase Albertans' access to qualified service dogs, and we will continue working with the PDD community on issues that matter to them. We will also work closely with contracted service providers and families to better understand their cost pressures and develop solutions that ensure Albertans continue receiving the critical support and services they need. We support the work of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and the family support for children with disabilities provincial parent advisory committee. We are committed to listening to and working with the disability community on matters that are important to them. I look forward to working with our partners and advocates to build a province that works for Albertans of all abilities.

Another priority for our ministry in 2017-18 includes improving Albertans' access to integrated services through Alberta Supports centres, where Albertans can call collect or come in to get help.

We will also continue working on crossgovernment approaches that prevent and reduce poverty.

We are maintaining investment in communities to prevent family violence, sexual violence, and bullying.

We are also focused on helping homeless Albertans and providing supports that help them to remain housed by investing \$5.5 million in up to 200 new permanent supportive housing units, an additional \$2.5 million to address additional caseload pressures within Alberta's housing first system.

We are committed to making decisions based on evidence and good understanding of current and future service delivery needs so that we can continue to improve our services and achieve better results for Albertans. We have established a new corporate analytics officer position to provide leadership on getting more reliable and accurate data on all of our social programs and services going forward.

Our government is committed to being fiscally responsible. We will continue to reduce discretionary spending where possible.

Albertans see a bright future ahead as our province emerges from the economic downturn and rebuilds from last spring's devastating wildfires. There are green shoots in our economy. Jobs are coming back. Our government will maintain its focus on making life better and more affordable. We will not cut and run from our responsibilities to families, as some would have us do. We will continue to support services and programs that enrich Albertans' lives and help them reach their full potential. Together with our thousands of staff and partners across the province, our ministry will help to build strong families and inclusive, supportive communities for all Albertans.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to the discussion this morning.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Mrs. Pitt, would you like the timer to be set for 20 minutes so that you're aware of time, or would you prefer to let the full hour flow?

Mrs. Pitt: Just let it run.

The Chair: Okay. Are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mrs. Pitt: Please.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead. Thank you.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you so much. Thank you so much for being here today. You may wonder why I'm here instead of the shadow minister for Community and Social Services, and that is essentially because this government is incompetent and has double-booked him during the final phase of the Child Intervention Panel.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt; however, I'm just concerned that the tone of this meeting has or will soon be deteriorating. Alberta's standing orders entrust in the Speaker the power to preserve order and decorum, and I would encourage the member to be respectful in your communication.

Mrs. Pitt: I would actually expect the same from the government and this committee, but I'm just pointing out and making a point that this government has booked two very, very important things at the same time that have very much to do with one another.

The Chair: Thank you. Please keep your comments to the estimates that we're here to discuss.

Mrs. Pitt: All right. I also want to note an *Edmonton Journal* article that I was actually shocked to come across last night. It was the government announcing an overhaul to the AISH system. Now, we had prepared questions for this morning on AISH given the information that we've had since the budget came out with the business plan, and I find this extremely disrespectful not only to myself but to other opposition members.

Mr. Sabir: You mean that overhauling the system is disrespectful to you?

Mrs. Pitt: You know what? These are changes that we've called for, and they're great changes. I don't want to discount that. I applaud you for making these changes. Thank you very much. But the night before estimates? And this was apparently given to one journalist. There was no press release. There was no time to prepare in advance.

The other question that I have for you is: what are your AISH budget numbers based on? You announced an overhaul of the system just last night. This is not in your business plan. Are we wasting our time here today?

Mr. Sabir: AISH is an important program that provides services to more than 55,000 Albertans. There was a report last year by the Auditor General that asked us to make some changes. There was work in progress, and that work was completed, so that's why it was released. But we have announced that we will make changes in light of the recommendations that the Auditor General provided. There was nothing disrespectful about it. We accepted the report, and we said that we will make changes. We have accepted every recommendation, and that essentially outlines for Albertans what changes we will make in light of those recommendations.

Mrs. Pitt: Will that be reflected in this budget? It certainly seems like the one journalist who got this information last night – and there wasn't even a press release to anyone else. Either it was a mistake last night . . .

Mr. Sabir: This budget includes \$70 million plus for AISH clients, so certainly that will help us deal with the cost per case and caseload growth in the AISH program. That will help us to provide Albertans with the supports they need.

Mrs. Pitt: But does it account for the overhaul of the AISH program? Does your budget reflect that? Your business plan doesn't mention anything there.

Mr. Sabir: The budget reflects what we will need in order to provide these services over the coming year, and certainly that accounts for that overhaul as well.

Mrs. Pitt: I ask you again: are we discussing an actual budget here that is reflecting the announcement that you made last night?

Mr. Sabir: That's what I thought we were discussing, the estimates, and not scheduling and other things.

Mrs. Pitt: So, Minister, does this budget reflect the AISH overhaul that you announced last night?

Mr. Sabir: This budget includes over \$1 billion, which is a \$70.2 million increase from the previous budget, to support the people who are in need of services from the AISH program. That's what this budget reflects. Reviewing that system includes some process changes that will improve the efficiency of that program, that will improve the processes within that program, and that will improve the reporting of that program.

Mrs. Pitt: So the monies reflected in this budget reflect the overhauling of the AISH system?

Mr. Sabir: It's about how we will do things about this program. If you go through that plan, it's more about the processes that . . .

Mrs. Pitt: Where can I find that?

Mr. Sabir: It's a public document available online, the AISH plan.
9:20

Mrs. Pitt: Where can I find the AISH plan that was just put online, I think, this morning from the announcement last night? Where can I find that reflected in this budget?

Mr. Sabir: That AISH plan was released publicly, so you can find that online on the ministry's website. The things contained in it relate more to process than how we deliver services. That will include, for instance, simplifying the application, monitoring application timelines, reporting on the efficiency of the program. It's about how we do things. It's not about what it will cost. It's just within the existing budget . . .

Mrs. Pitt: Sorry, Minister. With all due respect, there's no cost to the overhaul in the AISH system?

Mr. Sabir: If there are costs, the budget has been increased by \$70.2 million that will help us address those costs as well.

Mrs. Pitt: So the monies that are to go to AISH recipients and the cost to overhaul the AISH program are in the same line item?

Mr. Sabir: The AISH program has a . . .

Mrs. Pitt: Will this reflect the way monies are to be given to vulnerable persons?

Mr. Sabir: This increase will certainly help us address the caseload pressures and cost per case, and there is a program planning and delivery line item, 3.1. Within that, we will use those resources to help improve these processes.

Mrs. Pitt: When did you begin to overhaul the AISH program?

Mr. Sabir: It's a process of continuous improvements. Even before the Auditor General's report officials were working on the website to make it more user friendly, with everyday-Albertan kind of

language so that they can understand, so there was work in progress. Then the Auditor General's report came out. We accepted all the changes that were recommended by him, and we started working on the recommendations made by the Auditor General.

Mrs. Pitt: It was great that, you know, persons could actually access it via the website after the Auditor General's report came out, so there were some good changes made there. There are great changes in the overhaul of this system. We've certainly called for this. The Auditor General has called for this. Those are great, and I support that.

Again, it makes the opposition's job of holding this government to account difficult when announcements are made the night before a budget estimate meeting with no press release. I have some serious concerns for the accountability of this government because of what happened last night, and I hope that you understand that, because the public does not deserve this kind of treatment. Certainly, the opposition doesn't deserve this kind of treatment.

Mr. Sabir: The public was expecting us to release a formal response to the Auditor General's report, and that's exactly what we did.

Mrs. Pitt: In the middle of the night?

Mr. Sabir: That plan provides the information that the public needs.

Mrs. Pitt: It's extremely unacceptable, Minister, I thought.

Can you walk us through a month-by-month status report of what you've accomplished in the AISH program?

Mr. Sabir: It's a public document, so you can read it for yourself. That's why I released it. It gives the timeline.

Mrs. Pitt: With all due respect, Minister, I have you here now.

Mr. Sabir: We are talking about the budget here.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt. Member, if you could please keep the conversation directed to the main estimates and point to a budget line where this can be discussed.

Mrs. Pitt: Well, it's just difficult because there's new information that was released in the middle of the night.

The Chair: Today we're here to talk about estimates and the budget plan.

Mrs. Pitt: I would like to know where the monies for the overhaul in the AISH system are reflected in the budget. They are not included in the business plan, and if this is something, as you've said, that has been ongoing for quite a while, why is it not in the business plan?

Mr. Sabir: Line items 3.1, 3.2. Line 3.1 is about program planning and delivery. That will address the process change. Line 3.2 is the money that Albertans will receive in terms of support, and I have said that. That will help us address caseload and cost per case.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, what . . .

Mr. Sabir: If you look at the business plan, if you will let me finish, key strategy 2.5: "Renew the financial supports system to be more equitable and effective to improve the quality of life for low-income Albertans." That plan is doing exactly that.

Mrs. Pitt: Renew and overhaul. Interesting.

Minister, can you please explain to me in detail what all is included in line item 3.1?

Mr. Sabir: Which item?

Mrs. Pitt: Can you break down 3.1, program planning and delivery?

Mr. Sabir: Sure. Primarily, program planning and delivery contains the staff that provide the financial and personal support to AISH clients, and there are 30 AISH offices across this province. It also includes, like, other staff that support the program such as information technology, human resources, strategic planning, policy and quality assurance. That's what line 3.1 is about, and that's where most of the changes in terms of process will relate to, that have staff processing these applications. That's where that money will come from.

Mrs. Pitt: How many additional applications will be processed?

Mr. Sabir: Increases to the AISH program have historically been 3 to 4 per cent. Last year there were around 2,600 applications, so whoever will apply, staff will process.

Mrs. Pitt: Sorry; 2,600 was the application number from last year?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah.

Mrs. Pitt: And you expect a 4 per cent increase in applications?

Mr. Sabir: A 3 to 4 per cent increase. That's the historical increase in this program in terms of caseload.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Minister, I have a process . . .

Mr. Sabir: I just want to correct that. It was 2,600 per month, not per year.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. That would make more sense.

Will there still be applications denied after the increase is implemented? Will there still be a wait-list for AISH applications?

Mr. Sabir: Will there be applications denied? If somebody doesn't meet the criteria, the application should be denied. But if somebody meets the criteria, it's an adjudicative function left to the people on the front line who are making those decisions.

Mrs. Pitt: Will there be a wait-list?

Mr. Sabir: Will there be a wait-list? When people apply, it certainly takes some time, but once they are approved, their benefits are just issued.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Minister, we requested a FOIP that asked for the total number of applicants who've applied for AISH more than once, the conditions cited. We were denied the request by your department because, and I'll read it to you: we deny your request to produce a report as it would unreasonably interfere with the operations of the public body. That is interesting because this information is now on your website today and not given to the opposition by a FOIP request because it was too difficult. But I see that it's not. You're just not willing to work with the opposition again.

Mr. Sabir: I guess that the way FOIP works, I do not make decisions on FOIP requests. It's still the public body's decision. If

you disagree with it, there are other avenues you can pursue if you think you are unfairly treated.

Mrs. Pitt: Well, I was, and I'm just pointing out to you right now that we were denied in a FOIP request . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, can you please keep your questions directed to the budget and the business plan? I appreciate that you have questions. This, unfortunately, is not the venue to do that. We are here to discuss the budget and the business plan.

Mrs. Pitt: I know, but this pertains to the number of AISH applications.

The Chair: If you could tie it to a budget line or to the business plan.

Mrs. Pitt: Absolutely. Line item 3.1.

Okay. Well, let's move on, then. On page 8 of your AISH action plan, what does a 94 per cent target for AISH staff to complete training entail? Why only 94 per cent?

Mr. Sabir: You're asking a question about the AISH plan?

Mrs. Pitt: Yeah. Page 8 of your AISH action plan.

9:30

Mr. Sabir: Page 8 talks about staff training and what it does in response to concerns regarding staff training, that 94 per cent of the staff had taken those modules about AISH regulations, act, authority, policy. That's the training number that we are hoping to get to 100 per cent, that 100 per cent of the staff is trained in all these areas.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, why would only 94 per cent of your staff be trained and not 100 per cent?

Mr. Sabir: A hundred per cent will be trained. It's the process we started, a new training module, so it takes time to get them trained. That's why I'm saying . . .

Mrs. Pitt: So why is your target 94 per cent and not 100 per cent?

Mr. Sabir: It's not the target. It's the number that have already been trained. There is no target in this one. The target is always 100 per cent, that everyone who is dealing with these clients knows the basics of all these acts, regulations, and policies.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Thank you.

What does that program look like? Is this an online document? Is this a one-on-one training day program? What does this look like, and is this effective?

Mr. Sabir: The training is available online as well as in person. It's a strategy that was launched in 2015. It was well before the Auditor General's report, and seven modules as part of that were developed that are available to staff. We are developing the targets – that document will set the targets as well – for the completion of the required training and making it basically mandatory and then mandatory reporting of that training. By September 2017 the ministry will also improve its training strategy to include the development of new training to incorporate changes resulting from any review of legislation and policies and the development of a service delivery practice framework, review of job descriptions and minimum recruitment standards for the front-line staff dealing with AISH, and the development of orientation guides and standards, the development of resources and tools to support decision-making and day-to-day service delivery like checklists, info guides, those kinds of things.

Mrs. Pitt: How much will that cost, Minister, and where can I find it in the budget?

Mr. Sabir: Those will be costs that will be absorbed in 3.1, program planning and delivery.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, the increase in line item 3.1: it seems to entail a lot of items, a lot of expenses in there, including a major overhaul. Will we be debating this in supplementary supply in less than a year? Have you fully accounted for all of these changes in this budget, or will we be coming back debating you, asking for more money?

Mr. Sabir: The forecasts I have are based on the previous trends of the budget. That's the best estimate that officials came up with, and that's the number now under discussion.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Minister, let's move on. Key strategy 2.4 is to "improve access to integrated services through Alberta Supports' Call, Click and Come-in channels." Can you very briefly tell me about this service and what budget line item it falls under?

Mr. Sabir: Key strategy 2.4. We have Alberta Works centres across the province. As we move towards integrated service delivery, the idea was that those Alberta Works centres will be upgraded or converted into Alberta Supports centres, which are different in that Alberta Works centres were more focused on employment, retraining, those kinds of supports, while Alberta Supports centres will provide all the services offered by Human Services, including, I guess, some services from Health, some services from Children's Services – for instance, child subsidy information around those programs – and seniors' benefits. So far we have 32 Alberta Supports centres across the province. There are 21 more Alberta Works centres that will be transitioned to become Alberta Supports centres over time.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you.

Minister, some of our constituency assistants have been advised by Alberta Works personnel that when the new government was elected, policies were changed so that the department staff can only provide the constituency offices with general information. Now, while we've heard that other constituency offices still directly receive information about the AISH files in question, will you please clarify with me the supports in place for constituency assistants who are approached about AISH clients?

Mr. Sabir: All constituency assistants have access to one dedicated person in all ministries, and my ministry is no exception. They should be getting all the information they need with respect to any service offered by my ministry through that person. I don't know why they would go directly to an Alberta Works centre when they have a dedicated person sitting within my ministry.

Mrs. Pitt: Would you be able to pass around that information? Perhaps it's just a disconnect or misunderstanding. There have just been some problems.

Mr. Sabir: I'm surprised to hear that. That's the first time I ever heard in two years that you don't have information from my designated person in my ministry. Every other MLA sitting here can tell me if they don't have one.

Mrs. Pitt: Oh, probably the government MLAs for sure.

Mr. Sabir: No. That's for everyone.

Mrs. Pitt: There are some discrepancies.

Mr. Sabir: That's not for government MLAs. It's the ministry staff that serve all 87 constituencies.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Minister, line item 1.5, strategic services, shows a significant increase of \$1.2 million. Now, I understand legal services, policy, community engagement, planning, quality assurance, operational engagement, and strategy fall under this line item. What specifically is that extra \$1.24 million?

Mr. Sabir: Strategic services, 1.5?

Mrs. Pitt: Yes.

Mr. Sabir: It's comprised of services which include legal services, strategic planning, policy, quality assurance, strategic knowledge, technology, and 1.2 million inquiries. It consists of a \$720,000 increase to address information and knowledge management and project management. An example of that will include microfilm conversion, information management planning, training, business intelligence strategy, and a \$651,000 increase for the transfer of staff due to the ministry's reorganization. There is some decrease as well due to the management employees pension plan and a general, government-wide reduction in supplies and services. That decrease accounts for \$133,000. There is another decrease of \$108,000 – that's the transfer of legal services to Justice and Solicitor General – and a \$72,000 increase in legal services to allow for staffing needs, to allow legal services to operate more efficiently. So all of them, reduction plus increase, come in around \$1.2 million.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you.

How many FTEs do you have?

Mr. Sabir: All together or in this particular area?

Mrs. Pitt: In this particular area.

Mr. Sabir: Fifty-nine point five.

Mrs. Pitt: How many of those are communications staff?

Mr. Sabir: Communications is not included in that. It's a separate line item.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Minister, line 5, your homeless and outreach support services. Last year I asked you whether the budget will be increasing for homeless shelters to reflect the carbon tax, and you said that that's a question for this year. So we're here, and I can see an increase of almost \$6 million for homeless support services. How much is this covering the carbon tax?

9:40

Mr. Sabir: The way homeless programs are delivered is through community-based organizations. How community-based organizations manage their budget expenses is for them to decide. What we do: we provide money that follows the client. For instance, in Calgary the Calgary Homeless Foundation is the CBO that provides. They have a table where all the service providers sit, and when a client walks through – it doesn't matter which agency he comes in through – it's decided through that table what services he needs, and those are the services we provide. How CBOs manage the budget or expenses they have is for them to decide. Our job is to provide services to Albertans, and that's the money that goes to Albertans who are looking for the housing needs.

Mrs. Pitt: So is there an actual increase to the persons receiving the services, or because of the increase in taxes that they are paying from the carbon tax, is it sort of a wash at the end of the day? That's what I'm getting at.

Mr. Sabir: If you're asking me what a nonprofit pays in their electricity costs, I don't know.

Mrs. Pitt: That's unfortunate because they, obviously, will have increased costs, and if you are providing them with monies or supports, perhaps it would be prudent of your department and your government to be aware of that when implementing the largest tax hike in Alberta's history.

Mr. Sabir: We are contracting for services – right? – and we are providing those services to make sure that Albertans looking for the supports they need have the supports they need. That's why there is an increase in that line item.

Mrs. Pitt: So this will maybe go to paying the tax and not actually supporting vulnerable Albertans?

Mr. Sabir: The government works with them. The climate leadership plan provides many incentives to these nonprofits, to those individuals, but those will be, I guess, more of a discussion of those specific programs that are available to a nonprofit. For instance, tax audits are available. Energy efficiency programs are available. Rebates are available. That's something that falls within Environment and Parks. If you're looking for specific questions around what supports are available to them in terms of the carbon leadership plan, that's the forum where you should ask those questions.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Well, one sort of has to do with the other in this department.

We'll move on. Under line item 5 how much goes to rent subsidies or housing first initiatives rather than to homeless shelters directly?

Mr. Sabir: Under what line item?

Mrs. Pitt: Item 5.

Mr. Sabir: What goes to homeless shelters?

Mrs. Pitt: Yes. What is rent subsidies and housing first initiatives, and what is homeless shelters directly? I'm just trying to figure out the housing component, because we have a Seniors and Housing ministry and homeless shelters in your ministry.

Mr. Sabir: Homeless shelters is a different line item. That's 5.2, and that will be the program, operational dollars provided directly to the shelters. We fund nearly 3,300 spaces in 26 facilities across this province.

Mrs. Pitt: So this is only for the shelters and not subsidies and housing first initiatives?

Mr. Sabir: The housing first program is listed under 5.4.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you.

Line item 5.2, homeless shelters, shows an increase of almost \$3 million this year. Is this to fund brand new homeless shelters, existing shelters? Exactly how are these funds to be used?

Mr. Sabir: That increase reflects the possible case increase, the additional resources to the shelters to meet the needs of the people

who are walking through those shelters' doors. So that increase is to provide them the services they need.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, on page 31 of your business plan you list complexity as one of the three key risks for your ministry. What are you doing to mitigate these risks?

Mr. Sabir: What that really reflects is that we provide a range of services, and within any given program not all Albertans' needs are the same who are requiring government services. With developments in how we provide support, with developments in medical science, with developments in different technologies as to how people are assessed, diagnosed, all those things, cases do become complex. They require additional services and more complex services. So that's what is identified as a pressure that may affect our budget.

How are we mitigating that? We are working with our partners who are the experts in the field. And when those new developments, best practices come forward, we work with them to make sure that we are delivering our services in the best interests of Albertans and in the best and most efficient way possible.

I also referred in my speaking notes to a new position that incorporates an analyst officer position. That will also help us track how we deliver those services.

Mrs. Pitt: Can you tell me a little bit more about the analyst position? What do they do?

Mr. Sabir: They will look into, basically, how services are delivered, what are the best practices, how we should be improving our services. His job is to basically analyze all services.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, in January of this year the ministry of human services was split into two ministries, including this one, as you know. So far it's been a positive change to split the ministry of human services into two separate ministries. Do you agree?

Mr. Sabir: Yes, I do.

Mrs. Pitt: What additional improvements have been made since the change?

Mr. Sabir: I think a couple of things it does is that it allows me to focus more singularly on the issues that I have at hand. For instance, a person with disabilities: that's a complex area. Homelessness and income support are complex areas. That allows me to focus more singularly on these areas. At the same time, the amount of work that was going into children's services also needed the attention of a minister who was singularly focused on that area. It's certainly a positive change.

What improvements have been made? Was that the question?

Mrs. Pitt: Uh-huh.

Mr. Sabir: Improvement in these programs is a continuous process. For instance, the AISH plan is an improvement to that program. We have made progress on that one. In terms of disabilities we work with the service providers to finalize a contract, the service agreement, with them. That's an improvement.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. And we get to spend twice the amount of time together.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. I'm not . . .

Mrs. Pitt: I know you enjoy this so much.

Minister, on page 28 of your business plan you note that "the unemployment rate for Albertans aged 15-24 is in the double-digits and remains higher than the rate for adults over the age of 25." Studies show that increasing the minimum wage disproportionately affects those with fewer skills and little to no job experience, which describes most young people. Now, your government introduced the minimum wage, so how are you helping young people with little to no experience find jobs that will pay them at least \$12.20 an hour?

9:50

Mr. Sabir: Minimum wage is very important as far as Albertans that are served by my ministry are concerned. These are the people, for the most part, who are entering the job markets and getting those jobs. So minimum wage certainly helps them to put food on the table.

Personally, I worked as a minimum wage worker, so I do know that any increase in the minimum wage does make a lot of difference in the lives of those who are earning minimum wage. Saying that from 15 to 24 you don't have any skills to be paid even \$12.20: I find that a little bit rich. I came here with a master's degree in economics. As a newcomer I was not able to get a job at that level. But saying that I had no skills to even sell myself at \$12.20: I find that disrespectful to me personally.

As far as how we are supporting people who are looking for jobs, employment and income supports has career and employment services, and we have a lot of training that's available through these programs. We have apprenticeships available through other ministries such as Advanced Education and the Ministry of Labour. We have budgeted \$55 million for career and employment supports in Alberta. We received a total of \$43 million in 2016 from the federal government, and the province allocated \$15.9 million to provide those employment supports. So with those supports through Alberta Works centres, people can get career and employment counselling services, job search resources, workshops to assist them to get job readiness skills, to plan their career, and to get the training that they need to get into the job market. So there are supports available through our employment and income supports programs through Alberta Works centres, through Alberta Supports centres that will prepare them for jobs and the job market.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, how are your skills training programs different from those offered by the Labour ministry?

Mr. Sabir: For my programs, I outlined what we are providing. Essentially, my programs do two things. One, they provide people with the supports they need for their daily living: food, rent, those kinds of supports. At the same time, it depends on what kind of support the person needs, and based on that, there are programs that are available through my ministry, and there are programs that are available through Labour and the Ministry of Advanced Education. For instance, in Advanced Education, for the most part, it's an apprenticeship program, which is more hands-on training for people taking some courses. So they are different, but essentially they are all directed at making sure that Albertans get the skills they need to get into the job market. In my ministry's case we are dealing with, I guess, the more vulnerable people while Labour will deal with those who are closer to the job market. It's a different set of Albertans that we are dealing with. Like, mine are more the people who are struggling even in their day-to-day lives.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, what percentage of young people are receiving services from your ministry for job skills training support?

Mr. Sabir: I don't know if we break it down by age, but it also depends on what you consider young.

Mrs. Pitt: Between the ages of 15 and 24.

Mr. Sabir: We can certainly look into it and provide that answer.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, for your skills upgrading programs, are there any requirements to be able to receive supports for skills upgrading, any barriers to entry?

Mr. Sabir: I wouldn't say that there are any barriers to entry, but every program certainly does have some criteria that you need to meet in order to get into them. It's just the same with any other program that you want to enter. You have some basic prerequisites, and if you meet this, this, and this, you are eligible.

Mrs. Pitt: What are those, just generally?

Mr. Sabir: For instance, if you are out of the job market, if you're over 18: those will be the criteria to get into that skill training. It will vary from individual to individual, but essentially when one person walks in, there is a needs assessment, and based on their particular circumstances, a career consultant will advise them, in consultation with them, on what kind of training would be most beneficial for them.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, I want to ask some questions about PDD. Under performance measure 2(a), satisfaction of families with PDD services, why is the target for 2017-18 listed as n/a?

Mr. Sabir: Which one?

Mrs. Pitt: Performance measure 2(a).

Mr. Sabir: Satisfaction of families/guardians of persons with developmental disabilities: it's a biennial survey.

Mrs. Pitt: Has it never been done before?

Mr. Sabir: What's the question? Can you please repeat it?

Mrs. Pitt: Why is the target for 2017-18 for satisfaction of families with PDD services listed as n/a? Why is there no performance measure?

Mr. Sabir: The reason is that that survey is a biennial survey. It's conducted every two years. It was done last year, and it will be now done in 2018.

Mrs. Pitt: I see. Why every two years, not every year?

Mr. Sabir: Why every two years, not every year? We do track, like, concerns and progress on these programs internally, but that was the public-facing measure that was in the business plans.

Mrs. Pitt: Line item 4, persons with disabilities supports: can you explain why last year's forecast was \$39 million higher?

Mr. Sabir: It's a statutory program. When people walk in and they qualify, meet the criteria, government has an obligation to provide. It was higher because more people were needing those services, and we provided those services.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, line item 4.2, PDD supports to Albertans. Given the removal of SIS, a method for the government to individualize support requirements, what alternative funding approach have you put in place?

Mr. Sabir: The supports intensity scale was one of the many tools that were used to assess the needs of people who have developmental disabilities. Even prior to the supports intensity scale there was functional assessment that was done. At this point we are using that functional assessment and in-person interviews. When you apply, you also get to sit with the front-line staff, who assess the need. It's more of an individualized assessment based on the needs of the individual who is applying for that.

We are in touch and we will continue to work with the community to make sure that we are supporting them in a respectful manner and that the program remains responsive to the needs of those who are relying on these supports.

10:00

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, is line item 4.2 the line item responsible for providing funding to caregivers for PDD clients?

Mr. Sabir: Line item 4.2 is the program support dollars that go for individual services to contracted service providers.

Mrs. Pitt: How many community service providers do you currently have under contract under this line item?

Mr. Sabir: In the PDD program we have 181 contracts.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, we've heard that with respect to the administration of this program, PDD regional staff are often hard to get a hold of and are continuously rotating. How will this budget address these concerns?

Mr. Sabir: I think this budget addresses it by adding more supports. When staff are better supported, they are likely to stay longer. At the same time, we are increasing staff resources in terms of staff supports, so that will make sure that staff stays longer.

Mrs. Pitt: Have you done a review of the staffing practices within PDD?

Mr. Sabir: I think my senior staff works with the regions each and every day, and there are supports available to staff. We are working very closely with the regions to make sure that the services are delivered in the most efficient manner possible and, at the same time, that the staff are supported.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, last year you launched a PQR process for community providers to bid on service contracts. The question is: does this process allow service providers from outside the province to bid on client care?

Mr. Sabir: I guess that on the PQR process the one thing I have said before and I will say again is that it's not a process to auction any front-line services that are provided to persons with developmental disabilities.

Second, on what that PQR process does, prequalified lists: my ministry was doing much of the sole-sourcing because of the nature of the services we provide. In some cases we are procuring it from a nonprofit. Under the trade agreements we are okay to do that. But in other cases where a service provider is a for-profit organization, you can't sole-source. So that was one exemption available under the internal trade agreements, that you create a list of the qualified providers. Albertans can see who we are contracting our services from, and it also provides a resource for Albertans who are looking for services so that they can see who the service providers are out there. That list was a measure to add transparency in our contracting practices. As such, it doesn't affect the services of individuals with

developmental disabilities. It doesn't remove the choice from those persons, who they want their services from.

So that's the basic, minimum threshold that a service provider has to meet in order to contract with the government for provision of services.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, how many contract providers are outside of the province or outside of the country?

Mr. Sabir: There is no one outside the country – that's for sure – and it's my understanding that on the PQR list most of the providers were our existing service providers and that they are within the province. If it's otherwise, I will certainly look into it and confirm whether somebody from outside of the province was on that list.

Mrs. Pitt: Well, you just said that most of them are from within the province, so how many are outside of the province?

Mr. Sabir: It's my understanding that pretty much everyone is from within the province, but if that is not the case, I will look into it, and I will update you on that if there is anyone who is not from the province. It's my understanding that on the PQR list there were mostly people who were providing the services already in this domain. Those are the providers that are on that list. But if that's not the case, I will certainly provide you with . . .

Mrs. Pitt: When can I expect an answer for that?

Mr. Sabir: In due course.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, for line item 4.3, PDD direct operations, can you explain what is funded under this line item?

Mr. Sabir: Did you say 4.3?

Mrs. Pitt: Yes.

Mr. Sabir: Okay. That's the line item that deals with the facilities that are owned and operated by the provincial government to provide services for adults with developmental disabilities. An example would be where overnight staff and residential services are provided, such as the Michener Centre. The Michener Centre will be the most familiar example. So direct operations in facilities that are owned and operated by the province.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, how do you monitor quality of care for contracted providers?

Mr. Sabir: There are many different ways that we monitor the quality of care. We certainly do those surveys that I identified. Internally the office here works closely with the regions to make sure that the services are delivered, and then there are requirements built in within the service agreement where the service providers are supposed to provide to the department certain information with respect to the provision of services, standard of services, and all that.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, in line item 4.4, family support for children with disabilities, this line item shows a \$3 million decrease from last year's forecast. Why is that?

Mr. Sabir: There was one-time funding that was only provided in '16-17 that was \$3 million. That was only one-time funding in last year's budget, so that's the reason for that decrease. Within the existing dollars available we are hoping that we will be able to maintain the services that families need. There will be no cut to services to the families. That was a one-time increase that we got last year.

Mrs. Pitt: What was that one-time increase for?

Mr. Sabir: Mostly for counselling, respite, child care, behavioural supports, developmental supports.

Mrs. Pitt: So services will not be affected by losing that \$3 million funding in this year?

Mr. Sabir: Services will not be affected. We will work with the parents closely to make sure that we spend our dollars wisely and make sure that they get the supports they need.

Mrs. Pitt: Do you have fewer clients, then?

Mr. Sabir: No, we don't have fewer clients. We have seen growth in this program. We haven't seen a decrease. It's a steady increase. At this point we have 13,400 families in this program, and 71 per cent of them have developmental disabilities, 19 per cent mental health, 75 per cent are under the age of 13, and 36 per cent are children who later go on to PDD.

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, what efficiencies have you found in this area so that you could decrease the budget by \$3 million yet see an increase in clients?

10:10

Mr. Sabir: I think these programs also work in the broader context of the supports we provide in general to the families. For instance, there was increased support for FCSS programming. The FCSS program also provides many services that are available to these families across the province. Those other investments also help us to reduce pressure on some of the program areas.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. How do families request funding? Are they required to bid through Alberta purchase system?

Mr. Sabir: As I said, there is no bidding in those services. When they are diagnosed, when their needs are identified, oftentimes through medical practitioners' offices they are referred to our department. Sometimes they get referrals through community agencies. Information is available online as well. Once they know of these services, they will apply to our department, there will be an assessment made, and services will be provided to them.

Mrs. Pitt: How do you monitor success?

Mr. Sabir: Basically, these services are monitored through the outcome plans. Once you do the assessment with the family, they identify certain outcomes. Based on their individualized plan, if they are able to achieve that outcome, if they are able to be included in the community, if they are getting better results in their outcome plan: that's how we monitor that. It's also a biennial survey. Performance measure 1(b) is: "Percentage of families accessing the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program who indicate the services provided had a positive impact on their family." It's a biennial survey, and the last survey showed that 90 per cent of the families were satisfied with the services they received.

Mrs. Pitt: That's a good number, Minister.

The line entitled Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons on page 65: where precisely does this revenue come from?

Mr. Sabir: Page 65 is the financial statement. You're looking at the financial statement of the ministry?

Mrs. Pitt: Yes.

Mr. Sabir: Under Revenue, where does that rehabilitation money come from? That's what your question is?

Mrs. Pitt: Yes.

Mr. Sabir: Okay. It's a federal transfer.

Mrs. Pitt: Oh. Now, this year and last year it provides exactly half of the revenue it provided in year '15-16. Why is that?

Mr. Sabir: It's a timing difference. At that point the agreement wasn't signed.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay.

Mr. Sabir: It's a federal transfer, and at that point we didn't have that agreement in place.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Is that also what falls under Other Revenue on the same page? The revenue is significantly less this year and last year than it was in '15-16.

Mr. Sabir: It's also mostly federal transfers, and it also includes a program that was . . .

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt; however, the time allotted for this portion has expired.

I would now like to invite Mr. Gill from the third-party opposition and the minister to speak for the next 20 minutes. Mr. Gill are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Gill: Sure.

The Chair: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Gill: Good morning. Thank you, Minister, for being here. As you know, I served on the AISH board for two years, and I still have your thank-you letter for serving on the AISH board for Alberta Works. AISH is very close to my heart, that department, because, on the first hand, I've seen when people apply and how they go through the staff, you know, the first responders, and then they get rejected. They go through the appeal process, and I think the staff in the appeals process, everybody who works in AISH, is doing a great job. It's just, like, sometimes they get frustrated at the loopholes in the system. There's nothing to blame on the staff or the appeals board. I think everybody is doing a great job.

I was kind of shocked when the major announcement came. It just caught me off guard. Where's the transparency in this ministry's budget when such a major announcement is made the evening before budget estimates for such a significant initiative, affecting, like, a \$1 billion program? Don't you think, Minister, that you find that it's disrespectful to the opposition? I mean, at the end of the day, we're all here on behalf of Albertans, and I think, whether we're of different political stripes or not, everybody would agree that we want the best for Albertans here. Don't you find it very disrespectful towards the opposition members and our staff members and researchers scrutinizing this budget in good faith? I mean, how would you feel if you were on the opposition side, bringing in a major announcement not even 12 hours before estimates?

Mr. Sabir: I think that report was released in November.

Mr. Gill: October or November. Sure.

Mr. Sabir: October or November.

I guess I was not sure if the opposition was following it that closely. I didn't get any questions during this last month of session

on what was going on with that report. I was working on it. It was complete, and it was time to release it to all Albertans to see what we are doing on this program. As you identified, it's an important program. It's a big support system, and I took the needed time, more than what I initially thought it might take, to make sure that we got this right, and that's the plan that will help us improve this program. I was hoping that everyone would be happy with that.

Mr. Gill: I hope that your recommendations, when they come into play, will, you know, make the system more efficient.

You're saying that it wasn't intentionally released last night?

Mr. Sabir: At least, I would say that it didn't enter my mind that it would be something that the opposition would perceive this way. I was more, I guess, excited to release it as soon as it was complete.

The Chair: I would just like to take a moment to thank the member for your question and the minister for your answers, but I'd just like to remind everyone that we're here today to talk about the consideration of the Department of Community and Social Services estimates for 2017-2018. Let's all try to keep our comments to the topic at hand. I know that all members of this committee and, indeed, any member of the public tuning in today are absolutely eager to hear us review what has been referred to us, the 2017-2018 estimates. As that is what this committee is supposed to be dealing with, I would like to remind all members to do so.

Mr. Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, what is the specific cost of implementing the AISH action plan in the budget? I'm sure you must have a breakdown of that.

Mr. Sabir: Basically, with the AISH program, if we go to line items 3.1 and 3.2 – there are only two line items – we have increased AISH by \$71 million over the last year's budget. Program planning and delivery will be the area where most improvements are being made. It was about how we process these applications. We know that there were long-standing issues within this program with respect to its application, that it was a two-step process for when you will get general eligibility, financial eligibility.

10:20

Mr. Gill: I'm very much familiar with that.

Mr. Sabir: You would know that.

Mr. Gill: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: It's just using that program planning in a way, those resources in a way – we are able to merge those processes into more efficient processes. We will use the existing resources which we use for program planning and delivery to make sure that the processes are simplified and are more accessible to Albertans who are wanting to get the support.

Mr. Gill: So, Minister, you're saying that there will be no cost increase with the AISH action plan, the one that got released yesterday?

Mr. Sabir: This will help us improve how we process the applications.

Mr. Gill: No. I'm just talking about the budget from a budgetary point of view. This AISH action plan: is it going to impact the budget? Yes or no?

Mr. Sabir: Whatever the changes that are proposed to be made in terms of process contained within that document, that will be absorbed within the existing budget around program planning and delivery.

Mr. Gill: We won't need extra?

Mr. Sabir: It's just about doing things differently.

Mr. Gill: And making it more efficient, right?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah.

Mr. Gill: I agree with that. Thank you very much, and I appreciate that. As I said, like the Member for Airdrie, we don't want to go into supplementary supply six months from now and, you know, say, "The AISH action plan cost us X number," right? Thank you, Minister, for answering that.

Mr. Sabir: We want improvement but don't want to pay for it.

Mr. Gill: It's great to hear that.

On page 31 of the business plan under performance indicator 2(a), the number of Albertans on AISH, the expected to work category was 19,000 in 2015 and 29,000 in 2016, a difference of 10,000 and a marked difference from previous years, when the numbers did not differentiate by this much. What's the reason for such a spike in the year 2016, Minister?

Mr. Sabir: The primary reason for that caseload growth in that area is the economy. That program is tied with the employment rate and all that. We saw that due to the decrease in the global oil prices, by no fault of our government. We don't control that.

Mr. Gill: Absolutely.

Mr. Sabir: Due to that, there were job losses, and people were wanting more supports from this program. That's the reason for this increase in, basically, that employment support category number.

Mr. Gill: Did the same number increase during 2008, kind of like that, when we had a recession?

Mr. Sabir: It was similar.

Mr. Gill: It was a similar per cent? What is the anticipated number for 2017? Are you expecting to rise in a similar fashion, like, another 10,000, next year?

Mr. Sabir: We are seeing green shoots in the economy, but judging from the trends back in 2008 or those recessions, usually there is a lag when the market catches up and people get back to work. We are hoping that over time going forward with the economy and getting better with positive growth, that number will slowly and gradually come down.

Mr. Gill: If the number increases – hopefully, you know, the economy gets better. I think we will all want that so we can have people back to work. If the economy doesn't recover, you know, the way you're estimating, do we have the extra, additional funds in the budget for that?

Mr. Sabir: That's the information we have available at this point from independent institutions like the Conference Board of Canada, TD Bank: all things are pointing towards positive growth. That's the estimate we came up with, with the best information that was available at this point.

Mr. Gill: That's great. Hopefully, you know, the economy recovers.

I attended one of the meetings. I was a substitute for Ric McIver on the child intervention panel. Many groups and social agencies have expressed concern about the lack of department training and experience in dealing with different cultural sensitivities with ethnic communities, especially when it comes to the child intervention panel, indigenous groups, and other cultural communities. What steps is your ministry taking to address these concerns, and where is it addressed in the business plan and the department budget?

Mr. Sabir: I think that whenever we train our staff, we do look into those concerns: how we are delivering those services, whether our services are responding to the needs of diverse communities, whether our staff represents that diversity. These are the things that are always taken into account to make sure that services remain relevant.

In child intervention, certainly, the Minister of Children's Services will be able to speak to that. That was different, where it's overrepresented by indigenous children. But here in these services we are not facing that kind of disproportionate overrepresentation of one particular group. The thing in common to those who we are providing services to is that they are going through tough times, and they need government support; for instance, employment and income support programs. Like, these are the people who lost their jobs. That was the common kind of factor, common theme.

Mr. Gill: Okay. Minister, on page 66 of government estimates, under consolidation amounts between ministries, revenue shows negative \$6 million from Service Alberta. Can you please explain what's going on here, why it's negative?

Mr. Sabir: That line item relates to certain contracts for services that Service Alberta had in place. When those contracts are transferred to the ministry, essentially that line item deals with that. It is the capital assets that are required by Service Alberta and now transferred to Community and Social Services.

Mr. Gill: So negative means, like, social services owes that money to Service Alberta in this budget, or are they about to receive it? I'm not an accountant, so I would like more clarification on that, please.

Mr. Sabir: It's the transfer from Service Alberta that will now be shown in my books.

Mr. Gill: No, no. Like, why is it showing negative? I'm not understanding.

Mr. Sabir: It's money owed to Service Alberta.

Mr. Gill: From your department?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah.

Mr. Gill: That's what I was asking, and that's what I thought, but I just wanted clarification on that.

Page 65 of government estimates shows that labour market development has dropped to \$41 million in the upcoming fiscal year from \$48 million in 2015-2016. What's the reason for spending \$7 million less on labour market development, especially when we all know, you know, that we're at close to 10 per cent unemployment or even higher in some parts of the province?

10:30

Mr. Sabir: These are the programs that were funded through federal programs, labour market agreements, and it's those federal

transfers that are decreasing, phasing out. That's the reason for the decrease in it. It's not us decreasing anything from these programs; it's the federal transfers that have decreased.

Mr. Gill: If federal transfers are going to decrease, do you think it's going to impact our department to train and retrain Albertans? If it's going to impact, how are we going to pick up the tab? How is the Alberta government planning to pick up the tab for that, you know, come up with \$7 million? That's the shortfall coming from . . .

Mr. Sabir: That has decreased within my Community and Social Services ministry, but the program – some dollars have been transferred, a similar amount, I believe, to the Ministry of Labour.

Mr. Gill: Okay. So that \$7 million eventually will come from Labour?

Mr. Sabir: Uh-huh.

Mr. Gill: Okay.

Mr. Sabir: We are working with Labour and Advanced Ed on that one. That's the program funded by the federal government. They reside in my ministry, Labour, and Advanced Education. So that's just an internal reallocation. That doesn't affect the nature of the program.

Mr. Gill: I understand. I just want to make sure that – you know what? – our government is there when Albertans need us the most. When the federal government is saying, "Your funding is cut short by \$7 million," at least the money is coming from somewhere in the Alberta government, and I wanted to know that. Thank you very much for that.

Mr. Sabir: Sure thing. Albertans can count on that.

Mr. Gill: Well, thank you.

Line item 2.1 on page 60 of government estimates, under employment and income support, has decreased by \$2 million, and line 2.4, career and employment services, is decreasing by \$4 million. Why the funding drop for both of these line items?

Mr. Sabir: A couple of things in that one. One is that some reductions were achieved due to MEPP, the management employees pension plan. Some reduction is due to that, and there was another initiative from the federal government that was a targeted initiative for older workers. That funding is running out, so that explains the decrease in that budget line item.

Mr. Gill: Like, each one is contingent upon the unemployment rate – right? – these two. You're going to make sure that if you know something that I don't – you're thinking that the unemployment rate is going to drop drastically?

Mr. Sabir: Do you want more specific numbers?

Mr. Gill: Okay.

Mr. Sabir: So \$1.2 million is the decrease due to the Canada-Alberta job fund, that federal transfer.

Mr. Gill: One point two million?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. I'm talking about these estimates compared to the budget last year.

Mr. Gill: That's right.

Mr. Sabir: The targeted initiative for older workers runs out on March 31, and that's \$1.9 million.

Mr. Gill: Okay. You know, Minister, the police are reporting that family violence has spiked in these challenging economic times. How does this budget support the families and individuals in crisis?

Mr. Sabir: I think family violence is an important issue, and we believe that no one – no one – should have to go through that. When those unfortunate incidents happen, there needs to be supports available, not only from this ministry. I can point to many initiatives that are directed at that. Within my budget we have increased funding . . .

Mr. Gill: So we have increased funding?

Mr. Sabir: . . . last year by \$15 million . . .

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt; however . . .

Mr. Sabir: . . . to women's shelters to provide that support.

Mr. Gill: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Minister, the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has expired.

Mr. Sabir: I will request analysis.

The Chair: At this point I would like to now call a five-minute break. I will be setting a timer, and we will resume once the timer goes off.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 10:35 a.m. to 10:41 a.m.]

The Chair: I'd like to call this meeting back to order.

For the next 20 minutes I would now like to invite members from government caucus and the minister to speak. Mr. Shepherd, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes, I would if it's good with the minister.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you very much. All right. Well, thank you, Minister, for being here today to talk through some of these items. I think your ministry is one of the ones that both myself and my staff are interacting with, probably, most often. Being here in sort of the heart of Edmonton, we certainly have a number of people who are involved in a number of the aspects of your ministry. We certainly deal with quite a few people who are receiving AISH. We have a number of people within the community who are amongst the PDD community.

Certainly, the issue of housing and homelessness is one that's very salient here in Edmonton. I've been very fortunate in being able to be involved somewhat with the city of Edmonton and their work in addressing homelessness and poverty here in the city, working on the stewardship round-table with EndPovertyEdmonton and having the opportunity to work with them. So I do appreciate this opportunity to dig into some of these issues and talk through some of this with you.

I wanted to start out, then, by taking a look at – I guess, if we can go over to AISH again, looking at line 3.2 of the estimates, we see that there's an increase of about \$69.5 million for the AISH program compared to Budget 2016. Certainly, as I said, I have a number of people within my constituency who are dealing with

AISH or applying for AISH. It's certainly something that my staff has had to help folks out with a lot, so I appreciate seeing the new action plan as well, some of those changes. I think that's going to make some of that burden considerably lighter. But looking again at line 3.2, I just want to get a sense of: how is this money being used as part of the new structure you've set up for AISH to try to address the concerns and the stresses on the system?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Member. As you identified, the government estimates indicate a \$69.5 million increase for the AISH program. This shows that we are committed to taking action to make sure that this program is more accessible and responsive to the needs of Albertans. That is why we have been working on this program. We have publicly released an action plan as well that is in response to the Auditor General's reports, but it also contains improvements in this program overall. This action plan essentially outlines the steps over the period until the end of 2017, the steps we will take to improve the accessibility and responsiveness of the program in order to meet the needs of Albertans. This plan addresses strategies to improve access, it streamlines the eligibility process, and during this time we will also develop the measures which will better communicate how this program is responding to the needs of Albertans.

Mr. Shepherd: You mentioned improving the eligibility process. What sort of changes have been made that are going to make that easier? Again, as I said, that's one area where I know that my staff has had to spend a lot of time sort of helping people through that application process.

Mr. Sabir: We do know that there were long-standing issues with this program in terms of its application. The application process was two steps. Basically, first people were getting their general eligibility assessed, then financial eligibility and medical eligibility. The idea is that we combine these steps to make sure that the application itself is user friendly, and to that end we will be preparing the guideline documents, essentially what each question in the application is looking for, what information is being looked for. It will explain the tests they have to meet to be eligible in more user-friendly, everyday, common-person language. That process will help us make the application more user friendly without any repetition of information through different application processes.

Mr. Shepherd: Okay. So for greater clarity it sounds like a switch to more of a plain-English approach. I think that would certainly be helpful and beneficial.

Moving on to performance measure 2(c) on page 30 of the business plan . . .

Mr. Sabir: Average annual caseload?

Mr. Shepherd: No, assured income for the severely handicapped quality of life index. It shows that the government is interested in increasing the quality of life for Albertans on AISH. I know myself that a number of the people that we work with who are applying for AISH are people who have some developmental challenges, who are dealing with those sorts of difficulties. In what way, I guess, are you making the changes, then, to support this part of it here? If you'd give me a sense of sort of how we are measuring this quality of life index, that would be helpful as well.

Mr. Sabir: I think that previously the quality of life index used to measure the program efficiency in three areas, and now we have been measuring this in four key areas: whether their basic needs are met, whether they're supported in an independent living situation,

whether their health care issues are dealt with, and whether they are able to participate and be involved in their local community. These are the four things that are measured through this index.

There are plans in that AISH plan document where we will be developing some additional measures, essentially, to track the timelines from the time an Albertan walks into the office, their eligibility is determined, medical eligibility is determined, documents are received, and the application is complete to when the benefits are issued. So we will be adding more measures to make sure that Albertans can see how this program is delivering services.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. Well, I'm glad to hear you're expanding that and looking for, I guess, more points of contact and information so we can get a bit more detail on sort of the effects that the AISH program is having and ensuring that it's providing a good quality of life.

What are you using to collect this data? Is this done through survey? Is this done by interviews with the clients or just by reviewing the applications?

Mr. Sabir: The data in 2(c)?

Mr. Shepherd: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: That's through surveys, but for the other measures that I indicated, those will be through the department.

Mr. Shepherd: Okay. So it's through the service workers sort of talking with the clients to get a sense of how things are going for them in these different respects?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah.

Mr. Shepherd: Okay. Thank you. It's helpful to clarify on that point.

I'd like to talk, then, a little bit about homelessness in general. We were looking at this back in section 5 in the budget, talking about homelessness and the supports that are available for that. If I understood correctly, there is an increase in this budget this year specifically for support services, wraparound services, to accompany folks who are moving from, say, chronic homelessness, who may have complex needs, to help support some of our partners and agencies who are providing them with housing, to fund additional support services. Is that correct?

10:50

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. Overall, it's a 3.3 per cent increase in this area of close to \$6 million. As government we remain committed to helping house Albertans, not just housing them but providing them with the supports, wraparound supports, that are needed for them to be successful. We work with our community partners and agencies collaboratively to make sure that everyone has a safe place to call home and live with dignity. In this we provide direct funding to emergency shelters, to women's shelters, and we partner with seven agencies across the province in seven major centres to make sure that this issue is addressed properly.

We have also looked into the issue of rural homelessness, and we are working with ARDN, the Alberta Rural Development Network, to get the information we need in terms of rural homelessness. This area provides a range of supports for those who are facing homelessness, and we work quite closely with the Minister of Seniors and Housing. Through that, we are also making significant capital investments in affordable social housing. All these efforts, we hope, will be able to address this issue more effectively.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you.

I'm glad that you mentioned collaborating with the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. As I said, I know that as I'm working with some of the folks in the city of Edmonton, some of the agencies, what I hear over and over is that we're dealing with people with complex needs and that addressing, particularly, chronic homelessness here in Edmonton is something that crosses a number of ministries. In this, then, I appreciate that.

You're providing this additional funding for support services. Are you also working, then, with Health and Children's Services, some of the others, to collaborate on addressing sort of the full range of needs that are going to be helping in addressing this?

Mr. Sabir: Certainly, for my programs, for instance the AISH program, there is an additional close to \$250 million that has been allocated in the Health budget to provide health supports. Similarly, for complex and mental health needs there is a budget allocated within Health so that people who qualify through our programs will get the services they need. At the same time, we are making significant investments in terms of supportive housing, and that budget, that capital budget, is usually allocated through Seniors and Housing. We are working on that closely with the Minister of Seniors and Housing to make sure that people with complex needs do have a safe place to call home, and we are delivering wraparound services so that their needs are met.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. That's good to hear. Thank you, Minister.

Moving on, then, if we go back to key strategy 1.1, here we're talking about: "Work with families, service providers and stakeholders to ensure safety and inclusion for people with disabilities." Of course, we know that people with disabilities are in situations just like everyone else, but they may find themselves in situations where they're dealing with issues of family violence or sexual violence, bullying. They may be encountering other things like that that may be placing them in danger. What supports or what things have you put in place to try to help provide that protection in this budget?

Mr. Sabir: I think, first and foremost, the most important thing that we heard loud and clear from persons with disabilities is: Nothing about Us without Us. On any issue that relates to people with disabilities, it's our approach that we work with them because they are the ones who are living through those issues every day. We work with them to make sure that their voices are heard and that any response we come up with is reflective of their needs. Over the period of the last two years that's exactly what I have done.

For instance, there were safety standards brought forward in 2014, early 2015 by the previous government, and when I became the minister, that was the issue that we heard loud and clear from everyone across this province: these are too restrictive; they are disrespectful. We worked with them, and we repealed those standards. During that consultation what was very clear and obvious to us was that safety is not about just one set of standards that applies to everyone. Rather, it's that collaborative relationship, working with them each and every day to make sure that their needs are met, that they are safe, and that they are included in the communities. Our approach is that we are working with them to make sure that their needs are met, that they are safe, and that they are included in community life.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. As you mentioned, yeah, there have been some changes. Of course, there was the PDD report that came out this past October. I know that's something you've been working closely on and looking at moving towards. Are there, then, sort of funds in the budget going towards starting to implement some of those aspects as you continue to study and move forward on those?

Mr. Sabir: We have been working with other departments, other ministries within the government, and we are also working with our community partners to make sure that we put policies in place that ensure their safety and their inclusion in community life. We have taken a number of steps. For instance, under those previous regulations those PDD homes were considered as care facilities under the safety standards. I worked with the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and we have put in place a permanent exemption so that PDD homes will not be treated as care facilities. Rather, they will be treated as homes, as any other Albertan's home. That will ensure that they are not treated differently and that they are included in community life.

Another recommendation – there are many recommendations – was that we withdraw Standata. That was another document issued by the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Similarly, we are working with ACDS, the Alberta Council of Disability Services. We are working with them as well to make sure that enough safeguards are in place that can ensure their safety in a respectful manner. It's a work-in-progress, and it's work that kind of continues pretty much on a daily basis.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. Well, thank you, Minister, and I certainly appreciate the progress that's being made on that and that that continues to be at the top of your priority list.

I think we're coming close to the time, but I'll see if maybe I can get one more question in quickly before we have to move on. More generally, then, sort of in terms of safety with the public, looking at issues of, again, family violence, sexual violence, and bullying, I know that you have increased support for women's shelters, and that's been a big, big help for many in the province. I just met with former mayor Jan Reimer the other day, and she was speaking again of how happy she's been with the increased investment in that area.

They're also willing to collaborate with you, as you mentioned, with communities, with some of the other ministries to address some of these root causes and to promote healthy relationships sort of across the lifespan. Based on that, can you give us a sense of the status of the family safety and community supports program grants? How is the funding for that in this budget, and where do you see the direction of that going?

11:00

Mr. Sabir: That will be under line item 6. As you identified, under line item 5.3 we increased the budget last year by \$15 million. In line item 6 we increased it last year by \$25 million for FCSS dollars. Those are also the programs that are tailored by the community to address their specific needs. So that's certainly helping us, more resources and directing our efforts more towards the prevention of these issues. At the same time, there are government-wide many other initiatives that are helping people who survive these situations. For instance, the member from . . .

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt, Minister. However, the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has expired.

I would now like to invite members from the Official Opposition to speak with the minister for the next 10 minutes. Mrs. Aheer, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mrs. Aheer: Yes, please, Chair, if that's all right with the minister.

Mr. Sabir: Sure.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mrs. Aheer: I would just like to start with a statement. For me personally – and I think most of you know this about me – this is

very, very close to my heart as a parent of a child with special needs and especially one that is entering into the AISH program right now and with my own personal journey in that. I was just unbelievably disappointed to find out that if somebody was able, hopefully, to advocate – and you talk about collaboration so much, Minister. But to find out that a program that I would have questions about and that, I have to say, impacts my family at a very, very deep level would not have rolled out at a point in time where I would have personally had a moment to view the changes that were coming forward and to be able to ask you about those and adequately ask you about those, especially because people know of my advocacy for special needs. You can quite imagine that a lot of people ask all the time about these.

As I'd like to also say, I mean, the changes were necessary – and thank you for making them – but if I could please suggest that in the future, if collaboration is your goal, you please use us in the opposition and everybody else here that is dedicated to the well-being of Albertans, that we be included in these discussions and that we have an opportunity to see these things so that when we're bringing questions to you, we legitimately have the background to do so appropriately. So thank you.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you.

Mrs. Aheer: I wanted to say . . .

Mr. Sabir: If I could briefly comment. I certainly respect the advocacy and recognize your passion for that, but I want to say that I have met with the shadow minister, as you call them, or critic, as we call them, the MLA for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, just basically to ask if he has any suggestions with respect to any program whatsoever. I met with him and the Wildrose Opposition House Leader just to get input.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you. I appreciate that, sir. I do. I really do. I'm just talking about in this specific instance. It's very hard to know what to ask if we don't know what's happening. So in future I would certainly appreciate that from the minister, but as well for those of us who are trying to work with you collaboratively to make sure that – AISH is a major issue, as you know, and that's the whole reason that the rollout needed to happen. If you want legitimate questions and critique in a way that, hopefully, will move this ahead in a way that is positive for everybody, we need to actually have access to that information, not in the way of just a public announcement or a rollout but with the compassion and consideration for all of us who are here to help out with this situation. This is not a partisan issue.

Mr. Sabir: We can move to the question, but as I said, I have met with my Official Opposition critic just for that.

Mrs. Aheer: Yes. I'm going to that. I'm just responding to your comments. Thank you.

If I might, broadly through 3.1, I have a couple of questions with regard to overpayment and underpayment and what is included in this because the way that the breakdown is in the budget – there is none. There are just very, very broad sections. So I need some clarity on how the breakdowns are happening for the AISH process. Minister, you speak about transparency, and like I said, I have to say that there's a bit of smoke and mirrors here, so I just need some clarity to make sure that I understand the breakdown of how this is working.

For example, if we're talking about overpayments and underpayments and what is included, if a person forgets to tell that their

situation has changed, what does the government do to make sure that this does not happen? You have statements within the AISH program that if an overpayment or underpayment happens, they can make this application. I mean, I just went through the website while I was sitting here. I'm assuming that changes have been made in order to make that more accessible. I don't see it. Maybe you could direct me to the website that I'm supposed to look at. What does the government do to help make sure that this does not happen in the first place, and what is the oversight, as we quite often have people who rely on others to do the paperwork and organize and advocate on their behalf? Can you please answer that and also please give me the line item as to where that is?

Mr. Sabir: Sure. In terms of process, it would be line item 3.1 for how we administer this program. The changes outlined in the plan are that we will simplify the application process and not only simplify the application process, but we will also prepare guideline documents.

By way of example, if you look at CIC, the government of Canada's website, for some immigration forms they have guideline documents relating to every question in the application. That's what they are needing in this question.

Mrs. Aheer: Sorry. How does that relate to this?

Mr. Sabir: How it relates to it? I am talking about that we will simplify the application process for AISH and prepare guidelines so that they can see what's asked in every question.

The second thing is that in terms of overpayments and underpayments there are program dollars, and when we administer the application, with that application there is an undertaking. There are certain obligations. Yes, we do due diligence. We have access to tax information, and the AISH worker is in touch with the recipient of the service to make sure that information is updated. But there are certain obligations. It's a program that also requires them to provide whether their circumstances change. So we work collaboratively with them.

Mrs. Aheer: Sorry. Just to follow up on that, within that line item do you have a breakdown of what dollars flow through to make sure that AISH workers have the ability to walk a family or an adult, an autistic person, for example, and their advocate, should they have one, through this process? I mean, as far as I can see, there was already an opportunity – and I think you state it in here – to have shorter forms. Were they published? Again, how are you advocating from the ministry in order to help these people make sure that this doesn't happen? I understand they have an obligation, but what is your obligation to make sure that that efficiency is there so that we're not backtracking this way?

Mr. Sabir: If I understood your question correctly, you're more specifically asking about overpayments and underpayments.

Mrs. Aheer: Specifically.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. So the program planning dollars are about administering the programs.

Mrs. Aheer: I'm sorry. Say that again.

Mr. Sabir: Program planning and delivery, 3.1.

Mrs. Aheer: Right.

Mr. Sabir: That's where all the AISH workers and the 30 AISH offices fall.

Mrs. Aheer: Do you have a breakdown for that specifically and what the cost of that is and what dollars are going specifically into this part of the advocacy?

Mr. Sabir: We don't have a separate staffperson. Any AISH office you walk into will be able to administer this program, provide you an application, sign the paperwork, and help you with the paperwork.

Overpayments and underpayments only occur where we don't have the information. That's where AISH caseworkers are working with individuals to make sure that everyone is getting the right supports.

Mrs. Aheer: How many AISH workers do you have?

Mr. Sabir: In this area? Full-time 287 across this province.

Mrs. Aheer: There are 287 workers, and how many applicants do you have?

Mr. Sabir: It was 2,600 per month last year.

Mrs. Aheer: Just in adults? Can you tell me the breakdown of that from youths to adults? Well, I mean, AISH specifically would be adults, but younger ones and . . .

11:10

Mr. Sabir: AISH is a program that's all adults.

Mrs. Aheer: Right. But do you have the breakdown in age groups, or is it just 18-plus? There are different needs for young people coming into the program.

Mr. Sabir: They're 18-plus, and at 65 they move to other programs, old age security.

Mrs. Aheer: Okay. Does AISH provide help, then, to vulnerable people with developmental disabilities to file their income tax or benefit returns with respect to the carbon tax? I have a letter, that I actually just got, and many, many letters from people who are really being dinged for the carbon tax, and the rebate isn't beginning to cover at all any of those situations. There are many people who would require a lot of help. I find it very complex myself. What kind of supports have you put in to make sure that people are filing those appropriately and making sure that that's taken care of? Obviously, you say that the workers are there to help them out with their overpayments and underpayments. Now we have this new piece, a very complex piece, added as well. Can you please give us some idea of supports and what line item that is and how that's broken down?

Mr. Sabir: Do we provide help with the filing of tax information? Not directly from the ministry, but there are always resources available in the community, and if anybody walks in, then through our AISH office or Alberta Supports centres we always identify those resources for them to get the help they need.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the minister. However, the time allotted for this portion of the rotation has expired.

I would now like to invite Mr. Gill from the third-party opposition and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes. Mr. Gill, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Gill: Sure.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. The business plan notes that the prevalence of disability increases with age. I would like to know: what is the number of Alberta citizens who identify as having a disability?

Mr. Sabir: I was looking at those numbers, and Stats Canada published them. I would certainly be able to provide you that number. Just one moment. They're 2012 numbers from Stats Canada.

Mr. Gill: Oh. Is it 2012? It hasn't been updated?

Mr. Sabir: No. I can provide you the number of families who are on our FSCD program, and that's around 13,400. Stats Canada in 2012 predicted that there are 31,000 individuals, zero to 18, with disabilities in Alberta, but not all of them are accessing these programs. According to 2012 numbers there are 436,000 people above 18 who have some kind of disability.

Mr. Gill: Wow. Is that number increasing as the population ages, or is there, like, a decline in the trend?

Mr. Sabir: I think our studies suggest that as you grow older, that becomes more of an issue. With age, your abilities do deteriorate.

Mr. Gill: Okay. That's fine.

What is the department doing to address this number in the long term? Are we increasing help or increasing the programs or bringing new programs or bringing new funding?

Mr. Sabir: I think there are a couple of ways that I can address this question. One is that we do have programs for persons with disabilities, be that AISH, be that PDD, but at the same time the department is always looking for the social determinants of disabilities. We are working with community partners, agencies, researchers to find, basically, those social determinants of what leads to disabilities. We do have some stats. For instance, it could be by birth. It could be related to injuries and that kind of thing.

We are always looking at it to make sure that we can also have a more proactive approach to this as well and, wherever we can, avoid it. For instance, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder: the government provides supports to 12 networks across this province to raise awareness that if you drink alcohol during your pregnancy, that can have an effect on your children, and that may not be curable. There are a number of steps that we are taking to make sure that we have prevention in place as well.

Mr. Gill: I appreciate that. Thank you, Minister.

At this time last year it was indicated that the wait-list for PDD services was 413. The year before it was 360. Can you please give me or share with us the number today? Like, what is the number today, and what is the wait time for service?

Mr. Sabir: A couple of things that I want to indicate with respect to the wait-list. You said before that it was 300-something, and then it went up to 400-something.

Mr. Gill: That's right.

Mr. Sabir: We have added \$39 million to PDD, and the wait-list is not always just an issue of resources, like money resources.

Mr. Gill: No. I understand.

Mr. Sabir: Sometimes it depends on the needs of the individual. You may approve somebody for services, but you have to wait until you find the right service provider. Sometimes it comes down to that family or that individual's guardian having worked with

someone, some provider that they want to get services from. They may not have capacity, so that increases that, too. Geographically it's quite possible that some services that are available in Calgary may not be available in . . .

Mr. Gill: Red Deer, for sure.

Mr. Sabir: . . . Red Deer or even in Edmonton.

There are a number of factors that add to that wait-list in essentially every instance because these services are for the most part delivered by our nonprofit partners. We work with them to make sure that people can get the services in a timely manner. It's a complex mix, why these are created. A solution to that is that we work with the family, with the partners in the community to make sure that they get services in a timely manner.

Mr. Gill: Okay. On page 65 of government estimates, under the statement of operations, the revenue for rehabilitation of disabled persons has decreased by half, actually, from \$50 million to \$25 million. Can you please explain to me the decrease in funding, the reason for that?

Mr. Sabir: I explained that it's an agreement with the federal government for rehabilitation of disabled Albertans, and it was not signed at the time of Budget 2016. There is no change to this agreement from last year. At the time of preparing those estimates, that agreement was not in place because it's a federal transfer. Once it's in place, it will be shown in the books.

Mr. Gill: Okay. Thank you very much.

We were talking about, like, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder earlier. Funding for fetal alcohol is remaining constant at \$23.9 million, but if I'm not mistaken, this was the last year of a 10-year strategic plan for this disorder. Is your ministry's plan to renew the existing FASD strategy or implement a new one? If so, what's the timing, what's the budget, and what's the scope of it? If you can please explain that.

11:20

Mr. Sabir: Okay. We are in the 10th year. Within this plan there were five-year, seven-year, and 10-year marks for the evaluation of this plan. Certainly, it's that network of supports with advancement in medical science that have helped us to address this issue, raise awareness about this issue. But the decision going forward: I think it would be premature for me to speculate before seeing the 10-year evaluation. But I can assure you of this much. Whatever path we take will be in consultation with those who have been in this area supporting and providing services to these families. It will be a collaborative process for the benefit of all Albertans.

Mr. Gill: We have, like, close to \$24 million, \$23.9 million. I'm assuming that the money won't go down from that level, at least. If not, can it get increased?

Mr. Sabir: We are maintaining the funding for these networks. I look forward to the 10-year evaluation. That will help to inform the decision going forward.

Mr. Gill: Okay. Perfect. Thank you.

Page 29 of the business plan notes that "a performance measure to demonstrate the effectiveness of housing supports to, and promote stability for, Albertans at risk of homelessness is under development." What will these performance measures actually measure?

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt. However, the time allotted for this portion has expired.

As there is no independent or other member present, I would now like to invite members from the government caucus and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes. Ms McKitrick, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Ms McKitrick: I do.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms McKitrick: Thank you. Minister, first of all, I really wanted to thank you and your staff for the work that you're doing for vulnerable Albertans and also for how you're helping our constituency offices in dealing with that population. I know that my own constituency staff have brought many cases to your staff, and they really have benefited from their expertise and their work, so I wanted to thank you because I know that it's a very challenging group of Albertans to work with.

I'm really also thankful for the work that you've been doing around homelessness – it's an area that I'm particularly interested in – and for how you've demonstrated that homelessness is not just in the big cities but also in rural areas and for the work that your ministry has done and the funding that you've given to groups like the Alberta Rural Development Network. That has enabled them to get even more funding from the federal government, so I wanted to thank you for that.

I'm interested to know: where has the ministry supported shelters outside of the major urban areas of Lethbridge, Red Deer, Edmonton, and Medicine Hat? I guess Medicine Hat is not considered major here. But in the work that you've done around rural homelessness, I know you've done some really innovative things, including on First Nations.

Mr. Sabir: I think the Speaker won't be happy to hear that Medicine Hat is not considered a major centre.

Ms McKitrick: Well, I mean, Sherwood Park is, I guess – I'm not sure if it's in a major urban area.

Mr. Sabir: As you identified, historically the focus of intervention around homelessness has been these seven major cities. There was a report from the Interagency Council on Homelessness. I believe it was 2014, around that time. The government had asked them to look into this issue. What they found was that there is not enough data, basically, to make any informed decisions about the nature of intervention into rural homelessness.

I personally come from a rural background, was raised in a very small village, and when I think about that, it's a bit difficult to picture the nature of homelessness in those smaller villages because everybody knows each other.

But we do know that there are housing shortages across this province. There was no investment made. The investment through the Ministry of Seniors and Housing: we are addressing, in general, housing throughout this province, and in that, some rural proposals have come forward, too.

The second thing with the Alberta Rural Development Network: I guess the purpose of that grant is to get that basic information, to get that data so we can understand the extent of the problem and then are able to come up with a strategy to address that one. It's a work-in-progress, and certainly if you have any information, any insight, all MLAs present here are welcome to share that with me.

Ms McKitrick: Thank you for addressing it in the plan for your ministry. I'm not the only MLA who really appreciates this work.

In the same light, you know, we often think of shelters as being very urban based. I know that we have a shelter in Strathcona county, and I wanted to thank you, too, for the funding that you continue to give to the shelter in Strathcona county.

Through my contacts with them I understand also that fleeing abuse is not something that just happens in the big municipalities, but it happens throughout Alberta in rural areas. I was just wondering if you could tell us in the business plan about the work that is ongoing in the ministry around supporting families that are fleeing abuse in the rural areas.

Mr. Sabir: I think, as you identified, we increased funding for women's shelters, and that funding will help those shelters to do two things. One, it will help them hire more outreach workers so that the efforts are not just contained to the cities, but they can reach out to the people at a broader level when they are facing those issues. That's one. The second thing: we do have a helpline, basically, where Albertans can get information.

The third main initiative in that regard is the funding increase that we did last year for FCSS. What FCSS programs do is that they respond to the local needs of the community. It's a partnership between municipalities and the government. These programs allow them, with flexibility, to identify the needs of their particular community and then put in place measures of a preventative nature. That's another thing.

In terms of domestic violence I can also point out other initiatives of the government. For instance, the Member for Calgary-Bow last year brought forward a piece of legislation that will help those in the situation of abuse to break a lease and move towards safety. Under that program we were looking into numbers a week ago – I was with the member at an event – and 154 people have benefited from that program alone.

In this session we also brought forward a piece of legislation that, if approved, will help the victims and survivors of violence in bringing forward their claims to civil court, through civil procedures.

So there are a number of steps that we are taking that are directed at preventing domestic violence and providing the supports to survivors when they have to go through that unfortunate situation.

11:30

There were also grants, almost 115 grants, through the family and community safety program that were directed at the programs addressing the issues of domestic violence, sexual violence, and the like. So there are a number of steps that we are taking to make sure that Alberta is a safe place for everyone.

Ms McKittrick: Good. Thank you, Minister.

I wanted to move on to another item that was recently announced around service dogs. I know that it's been a passion of a number of MLAs, and we've had a visit by a number of service dogs in the Legislative Assembly. I definitely know that in my own riding I have a number of constituents who have service dogs. I was interested to know how the actions that you're taking to make improvements will facilitate people having service dogs that are trained. Also, where is the funding for the service dog pilot in the estimates?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you for the important question. We do know and there is evidence out there in literature and through people's experiences that these dogs not only help people with disabilities with their day-to-day affairs, but they're also providing them psychological, emotional support.

This issue had been ignored previously. I started working on it almost a year ago. We went out in the community and talked to

service dog advocates. I personally met with advocates asking for more service dogs. So based on that consultation, based on that identified need, we brought forward these changes. These changes will do three things. Previously the ADI accredited schools . . .

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt; however, the time allotted for this portion has expired.

I would now like to invite members of the Official Opposition and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes. Mrs. Aheer, are you wanting to combine your time?

Mrs. Aheer: If I may cede my time to Mr. Yao.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Yao, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Yao: Yes, please.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much. Line item 7.1 shows the exact same funding formula for administrative and capacity support for the 2013 Alberta flooding. What work is still ongoing in this regard, and how long does your ministry expect to have expenses related to this flood? How long do we anticipate supporting this issue, and what are the issues?

Mr. Sabir: That was the allocation from the 2013 flooding, and it was used, in particular, for members of First Nations to obtain training for repair jobs after the flooding situation. Yes, that has been constant. I think the original timeline was 2014-15 for when that money should have been spent, but then it was extended till the '17-18 fiscal year. We'll see during this year in flood-prone zones if there are any supports that people need, and we can allocate that funding for those identified needs.

Mr. Yao: So to clarify, that money was used specifically for indigenous communities affected by the flood, to provide them with training on reconstruction and those other supports?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. It was specifically used for people to get training to deal with a situation like flooding.

Mr. Yao: Again, for how long do you anticipate this going on? How many more years?

Mr. Sabir: Initially it was for 2014-15, and then it was extended, because of the need for repairs, to '17-18. We will work with indigenous communities in flood-prone areas to see if there is a need for this to be spent.

Mr. Yao: I hope you can provide the same support for indigenous areas in areas affected by fire or threat of.

Mr. Sabir: Certainly.

Mr. Yao: You know that emergency preparedness is a key risk to achieving the ministry's ability to achieve the outcomes in your business plan. What are you doing to mitigate the risk of natural disasters compromising your ministry's goals?

Mr. Sabir: In terms of emergency preparedness specifically within my ministry, we provide emergency social services in the event of natural disasters. Speaking of the most recent, the Fort McMurray wildfire, we were responsible for the distribution of emergency support, those debit cards for evacuees, and basically setting up those temporary evacuation centres throughout this province. We also

provide transitional accommodation benefits so that when people are forced to move out of their home and they look for a new residence, a new place, they have the supports. That's within my area.

More specifically, what we are doing to mitigate those things: there are initiatives through Infrastructure. They are looking into flood mitigation in Calgary and southern Alberta. There are initiatives through the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. They are looking at how to deal with and prepare for these future events and avoid these future events. Those events will fall more squarely within those ministries.

Mr. Yao: Where is emergency preparedness in a line item in this budget? Or would this be something more under Municipal Affairs?

Mr. Sabir: No. Municipal Affairs was responsible for the Provincial Operations Centre, but emergency social services were coordinated through corporate services within my ministry. The money was given through Treasury Board. Emergency preparedness is budgeted in Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Yao: Sorry. To clarify, did you say 1.6?

Mr. Sabir: That's corporate services, which provides the administration of emergency social services. For instance, when we distributed those debit cards and we set up those evacuation centres, the strategic planning was done through that line item, that budget.

Mr. Yao: Is your ministry still dealing with the aftermath of the Fort McMurray fire?

Mr. Sabir: There are a number of things that are still ongoing. It's not fully recovered, and I'm pretty sure that you will know way better than I do, being from that community. Certainly, there are a number of things that we are dealing with as well as they come through the Alberta Supports centre or Alberta Works centre. If there is job loss, certainly, we are providing supports through Alberta Supports and Alberta Works centres. If there are additional psychosocial supports, they are provided through health services. There is still ongoing work, and we are trying to provide all the supports needed and necessary for the people who were affected by the wildfire.

Mr. Yao: I appreciate the fact that you expect me to know these things, but unless someone actually comes to me, I don't have all the details and whatnot, unlike the minister and his fine cohort of professionals. You would have more access to that information.

Again, additional supports: recognizing the sheer quantity of people affected in Fort McMurray, are you addressing that? The second question is: how are you supporting existing services in that region currently? There are certainly some arm's-length or nongovernmental groups that support these things. How are you supporting all these various groups?

11:40

Mr. Sabir: We are working with those groups. I visited Fort Mac after the fire, and I met with many of those groups. Issues around housing needs were dealt with through the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. Issues of job loss, temporary job loss were dealt with through Alberta Works and Alberta Supports centres. There were supports that were made available through FCSS programs as well. Those dollars were also used to address the more immediate need in Fort McMurray and surrounding regions. So there are a number of initiatives that are available to people from Fort McMurray.

Mr. Yao: Just to clarify, all these line items would be under 1.6 as well?

Mr. Sabir: No. They are throughout the budget. For instance, line item 2, employment and income support: those supports are available there. Line item 6.2 is FCSS. Line item 6 in general: that's available throughout the province. Last year we provided 115 grants throughout the province through community and safety program grants. These are the services that are available throughout Alberta and certainly available in Fort McMurray as well.

Mr. Yao: I couldn't help but notice that the 2013 Alberta flooding gets its own line item while other natural disasters don't. For example, Slave Lake is not here, yet when we talk to citizens from there, they continue to talk about the issues; they are still recovering. What supports are there for Slave Lake, or are they, again, just mixed in here? What makes Calgary special? Is it because you're from there?

Mr. Sabir: That can be one.

That line item is worded "Alberta flooding," but that was a program to train First Nations in home repair and building. It's just the program that's named Alberta flooding. In the most recent case of Fort Mac I was responsible for setting up evacuation centres, distributing those debit cards. We spent way over a hundred million dollars on those debit cards. Every support was made available in a timely fashion in the face of that fire as well. It's not that they didn't get the supports.

Mr. Yao: Does Slave Lake continue to get supports, then, to this day? What kind of supports are provided?

Mr. Sabir: All these programs are statutorily mandated programs. They are available in Slave Lake as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this point I would now like to invite the member from the third-party opposition, Mr. Gill, to speak with the minister for the next 10 minutes. Mr. Gill, are you wanting to combine your time?

Mr. Gill: Sure.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I was wondering: why is Alberta Works not mentioned in the business plan? Did I miss it, or is it worded differently?

Mr. Sabir: Alberta Works is mentioned, I guess, everywhere.

Mr. Gill: Is it? Maybe I missed it.

Mr. Smith: You missed it.

Mr. Gill: Did I? Okay. That's what I'm saying. Maybe I missed it.

Mr. Sabir: What I would suggest is that you missed it.

Mr. Gill: Okay. That's fine.

Mr. Sabir: The business plan is focused on providing supports in the face of the downturn to all Albertans, and that's essentially what Alberta Works does.

Mr. Gill: Like, we need that more than ever.

What were the call volumes and wait times in 2016 compared to 2015 due to the state of the economy of our province?

Mr. Sabir: With respect to the emergency . . .

Mr. Gill: Yeah. Alberta Works: like, the total number of calls.

Mr. Sabir: I do have numbers for the 24/7 centre.

Mr. Gill: Minister, can you please give me, like, the total number?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. That's what I'm looking for. Before it was just extended hours service, and in the face of the increasing volume we increased it to 24/7. It's averaging about 25,900 calls per month for Alberta Supports centre, Alberta Works centre.

Mr. Gill: So 25,000?

Mr. Sabir: It was 17,000.

Mr. Gill: Before?

Mr. Sabir: Before.

Mr. Gill: So almost, like, 9,000.

Mr. Sabir: Also, on our monthly caseload facts and figures, I've been advised by my officials that table 4 breaks it down even by average.

Mr. Gill: Oh, is that right? Okay.

Mr. Sabir: That's publicly available information.

Mr. Gill: Perfect. Thank you.

Can you please tell me: what are the target wait times for 2017-18, and how is this goal being reflected in this year's budget?

Mr. Sabir: Target wait times for what?

Mr. Gill: For getting the services, getting the benefits from Alberta Works for this year.

Mr. Sabir: For Alberta Works benefits there is no wait time.

Mr. Gill: I know that the majority of them are, like, emergency services.

Mr. Sabir: You go in and you get services. The majority of the time it's the same day.

Mr. Gill: What I was trying to ask: due to the increase in volumes will the wait times get impacted?

Mr. Sabir: In the face of increased volumes we did do three things. One, we extended the hours of operation in high-volume centres. Then we also moved staff around from less busy centres to more busy centres.

Mr. Gill: Kind of moved the resources around?

Mr. Sabir: Moved the resources around and made sure that people are getting the services they need. On a given day, for instance in the first week, there may be higher volumes, but after that, once that benefit is set up, you don't really have to visit on a monthly basis.

Mr. Gill: Understood.

Can you, like, just give me an idea: which urban centre was busier? Was it the Calgary region or the Edmonton region?

Mr. Sabir: I think both Calgary and Edmonton.

Mr. Gill: They were both almost the same for requests?

Mr. Sabir: Calgary, I guess, saw slightly more increase than other centres. That information is also available on that monthly report.

Mr. Gill: Okay. That's fine. Thank you.

We were talking about the performance measure that actually measures the supports for homelessness. It was performance indicator 1(a) on page 29 of the business plan. My question, when I ran out of time last time, was: what will this performance measure actually measure?

Mr. Sabir: That homelessness initiative is around the housing first program. It was started under the previous government. I guess that the philosophy is to provide a person with a home and then provide them with the supports they need to keep them housed, essentially.

Mr. Gill: That's right.

Mr. Sabir: In that area how they measure it: if you're housed successfully for one year after getting those supports, that's what is reported and measured.

For performance indicator 1(a), are you talking about incidence of low income as a percentage of population?

Mr. Gill: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: That's something that Stats Canada does, so it's essentially reporting on poverty. We have taken a number of steps to address that. For instance, Alberta didn't have a child tax benefit. We created that. We improved the employment tax credit for working families. So we are taking a number of steps on that front to reduce the incidence of poverty.

11:50

Mr. Gill: Thank you. Since you mentioned the former government, I thought I'd ask you about that, too. The former government's 10-year plan to end homelessness was, I think, a well-recognized success. What are the most recent stats for this plan? I think those stats on the website are a bit dated. Can you please provide us with the most recent stats?

Mr. Sabir: The 10-year plan certainly has achieved some success, but unfortunately we still have homelessness in our province.

Mr. Gill: Of course. It's an ongoing issue.

Mr. Sabir: There is more that can be done, and there is more that needs to be done. The last biannual count – they do it every October – shows that there's an overall decrease in the number of homeless people in Alberta. There can be a number of factors for that as well, which may include the Alberta child benefit enhancement to families, tax credits. Also, major investments that were ignored previously in social housing can contribute to that as well. We are seeing some positive signs, but unfortunately there is still homelessness.

Mr. Gill: The number is decreasing. That's good news. Thank you, Minister.

The budget for family and community safety, line 6.3 on page 60, has fallen from \$26 million in 2015-16 to \$18.6 million in '17-18. Can you please explain the decrease?

Mr. Sabir: What happened was that in 2015 the previous government cut this program. When we became government, we were provided by Treasury Board with one-time funding to deal with that impact. We restored it, provided that funding for the ongoing projects, but now it's maintained pretty much at \$18 million.

Mr. Gill: So when you were in government, it was at \$26 million?

Mr. Sabir: That was one-time funding that was provided to this program because previously it was reduced to \$5 million, from \$20 million to \$5 million. After that, there was more that has been combined in this line item. I can give you the details.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this point, as there is no independent or other party member present, I would now like to invite members from the government caucus to speak for the remainder of the meeting with the minister. Mr. Shepherd, are you wanting to combine your time?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes, please. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: All right. Minister, last time I was talking with you, we were talking a little bit about your collaboration with some of the other ministries. One of the things I was looking at here was – and I think Mr. Gill was talking about this earlier – the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder initiatives. I know that's one area where you've made some real investments. It's something I hear about quite regularly from some of the service providers within Edmonton-Centre. They talk a lot about wanting to increase education for people on that. I do have a niece that's on the spectrum with FASD, and I know the challenges she has faced. I think that if we can find any way of preventing these sorts of things from happening, it would just provide such a better life for both the children and the parents.

In terms of your approach here within the initiatives, would this also include, then, funding for education, and are you collaborating on that with the Minister of Education or the Minister of Advanced Education?

Mr. Sabir: Within this one, essentially, funding is provided to the centres that not only provide counselling and other services, but they are also responsible in working to raise awareness in this area. It's a very important question, but if I may, I want to finish the answer I was providing to my colleague around service dogs, those changes that were left when I was cut off by the chair.

Mr. Shepherd: Certainly.

Mr. Sabir: With these changes we have done three things to the service dog regulation. One, it leaves ADI schools, Assistance Dogs International accredited schools, still there. They will still be operating, and dogs that are trained by them will get certified by the ministry and will have access rights under the legislation.

The second thing it does. We are working with six dog entities, those who train dogs, six groups. We have provided them some grant funding. They will build the capacity, and within six months, by August, they will apply to be on the qualified list of the government, so they can train the dogs going forward. Those dogs trained by the providers on the qualified list will have those access rights.

Within that, those schools will also be able to test the owner-trained dogs. If a dog is trained by an owner, they will be able to test that dog to see whether that dog meets the standards and is safe. It's a balance between the needs of the individual and public safety at large. Owners will be able to work with those schools, and we will provide supports to those owners as well to get their dogs

certified. It's our hope that this change will address the demand for service dogs and will improve access to service dogs and access for these individuals with disabilities in general to the community and community living.

In terms of FASD, those networks of support, I would say that Alberta is leading in this area of research and awareness. This fall we will be hosting a best-in-Canada conference here in Alberta. These efforts certainly will help us bring these issues to the stage and have a more open, public discussion around the consequences of these disabilities and how they can be avoided.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. Thank you.

We're coming down to just a few short minutes left. I was just wondering, Minister. In terms of going back to talk about homeless shelters and that, I know there have been some shelters that have been set up on reserves such as Maskwacis. Can you just tell me: are those included, then, in the funding on line 5.2?

Mr. Sabir: Some shelters on reserves are under 5.3. There are five shelters. They're women's shelters, and we have fee-for-service arrangements with those shelters.

Other than that, we provide support to 25 shelters throughout the province, 3,200 spaces at our homeless shelters.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. Thank you.

One last question, and we'll see if we can get this in quickly. I see that there was a sizable increase in the budget for appeals panels. Is that to sort of just help you with some of the backlog from AISH?

Mr. Sabir: A couple of things. One, we inherited a lot of vacancies on those appeal panels, so we filled those vacancies. The second thing: that reflects the cost of training them, providing them honoraria, providing them expenses.

Mr. Shepherd: So filling vacancies that were left. That should in itself, then, help deal with some of the backlogs and pressures.

Mr. Sabir: Also, the training will certainly help with the backlog.

Mr. Shepherd: Okay. Excellent. Thank you.

Well, thank you, Minister. I appreciate the information. As I said, your ministry is one that I think is incredibly important, not just for myself having a very urban constituency but, as we've heard from others, for some important work happening in some of the rural constituencies. Thank you to you and your staff for being here to answer some questions on this today and for the effort that you're putting in to keep these programs going.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you very much, and thank you to all members who participated in the discussion today.

The Chair: Thank you to everyone. I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded.

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next Monday, April 10, 2017, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Health.

Thank you again to everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

