



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Fourth Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Community and Social Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, April 16, 2018
7 p.m.

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The 29th Legislature
Fourth Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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

Drever, Deborah, Calgary-Bow (NDP)
Ellis, Mike, Calgary-West (UCP)
Hinkley, Bruce, Wetaskiwin-Camrose (NDP)
Horne, Trevor A.R., Spruce Grove-St. Albert (NDP)
Luff, Robyn, Calgary-East (NDP)
McKitrick, Annie, Sherwood Park (NDP)
McPherson, Karen M., Calgary-Mackay-Nose Hill (AP)
Miller, Barb, Red Deer-South (NDP)
Orr, Ronald, Lacombe-Ponoka (UCP)
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
Shepherd, David, Edmonton-Centre (NDP)
Swann, Dr. David, Calgary-Mountain View (AL)
Westhead, Cameron, Banff-Cochrane (NDP)*
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UCP)

* substitution for Barb Miller

Also in Attendance

Aheer, Leela Sharon, Chestermere-Rocky View (UCP)
Cooper, Nathan, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (UCP)
Fraser, Rick, Calgary-South East (AP)

Support Staff

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

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

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

7 p.m.

Monday, April 16, 2018

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

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

The Chair: Good evening. I would like to call the 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, 2019.

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 at the table. I'm Nicole Goehring, MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs and the chair of this committee. We'll start to my right.

Mr. Smith: Mark Smith, MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon and vice-chair.

Mrs. Aheer: Leela Aheer, Chestermere-Rocky View.

Mr. Cooper: Nathan Cooper, the MLA for the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Ellis: Mike Ellis, MLA, Calgary-West.

Mr. Orr: Ron Orr, MLA, Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Sabir: Irfan Sabir, Minister of Community and Social Services. I have Cynthia Farmer, ADM, delivery services; Aaron Neumeyer, ADM; Shannon Marchand, deputy minister; and Mahmud Dhala, senior financial officer.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, MLA, Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, MLA for St. Albert.

Drever: Deborah Drever, MLA for Calgary-Bow.

Ms McKittrick: Bonsoir. Annie McKittrick, députée for Sherwood Park.

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

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

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

Mr. Westhead: Cameron Westhead, MLA for Banff-Cochrane.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. Westhead for Ms Miller.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* and that the committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates, including 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 to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Official

Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes members of the third party, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes 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 then reduced to five minutes, as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

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 rotations that follow, with speaking times of up to five minutes, a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a total of 10 minutes.

Discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not the speaking time is 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 the chair or 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 the break? Thank you.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate; however, only a committee member or an official substitute may introduce an amendment during a 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, have access to a microphone in the gallery area. Ministry officials are reminded to introduce themselves prior to responding to a question or questions. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery should not approach the table. Members' staff may be present and seated along the committee room wall. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. The scheduled end time of today's meeting is 10 p.m.

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

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

The vote on the estimates and any amendments is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on April 19, 2018.

Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk, and 20 copies of the amendment must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

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

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair. I'm pleased to be here to present my ministry's 2018 estimates and answer any questions that members may have. Budget 2018 supports a recovery that is built to last, one that will benefit all Albertans. My ministry's budget demonstrates our government's commitment to continue to protect and improve vital public services to ensure Albertans get the support they need. When faced with a choice, our government chose to invest in Albertans, not make reckless cuts that would hurt persons with disabilities, Albertans in need of financial assistance, and Albertans facing homelessness, family violence, or sexual violence. This budget provides stability and shows that we won't turn our backs on the people of this province.

We are providing stable and predictable funding for services and support to make life better for all Albertans. Instead of having to worry about cuts to services, Albertans will see in this budget that we have continued to invest in and protect the services they depend on. We have increased funding to AISH and PDD. We are investing in capital maintenance for women's shelters. We have invested \$1 million in the new office of the disability advocate. We have increased funding for sexual assault centres across this province. We have maintained our \$15 million increase to women's shelters and \$25 million increase to family and community support services. We are providing stable funding for homelessness and family violence. We are also helping Albertans in need through financial assistance in career and employment supports.

We are committed to supporting the path to balance with prudent spending and finding savings that do not affect front-line services. Nearly 90 per cent of the ministry's expenses are for grants to individuals and organizations or client-related contracts and benefits. Our staffing costs make up less than 9 per cent of our 2018 budget. Our staff-to-management ratio is more than 16 to 1. We are directing our investments and resources to the front lines, where they make the biggest difference in Albertans' lives.

Our government is committed to supporting inclusion and ensuring that Albertans with disabilities have every opportunity to live a life of meaningful engagement and participation. We are listening to and working with the disability community on all issues that matter to them. We have repealed the PDD safety standards and ended the supports intensity scale. We have made appointments to fill all vacancies on the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. We have made changes to increase access to service dogs for persons with disabilities, and we are improving worker and client safety in the sector.

This year we are doing a review of the PDD program to improve services and address concerns related to access, outcomes, and family engagement. The review will guide further improvements to the PDD program and ensure that Albertans with disabilities get the best supports possible. I have been visiting communities to hear from persons with disabilities, advocates, families, workers, and service providers. We have launched an online survey to hear further feedback from the community on how the review should look, and I look forward to reading Albertans' suggestions.

While this work continues, I'm proud to say that Budget 2018 provides a \$129 million increase to help more Albertans access the PDD and family support for children with disabilities programs. As a result of this investment we will support approximately 1,000 more children with disabilities and their families and nearly 500 more adults with developmental disabilities.

We have also maintained stable funding to support 12 FASD service networks across Alberta, that assist Albertans.

7:10

In addition, Budget 2018 includes \$1 million to fund the new office of the advocate for persons with disabilities. The advocate

will represent the rights, interests, and viewpoints of Albertans with disabilities. In advance of establishing the office and recruiting an advocate, a survey was launched to hear from the community to help guide our recruitment this spring, and we heard from over 1,300 Albertans on what the priorities of this office should be. This will be the first advocate for persons with disabilities in Alberta's history, and we are very excited to move forward with this recruitment this spring.

Turning to AISH, assured income for the severely handicapped, another vital program that supports Albertans, through Budget 2018 nearly 62,000 Albertans will receive financial and health benefits through AISH to help them meet their daily needs. That's 3,000 more Albertans than last year. Budget 2018 ensures that AISH continues to be one of the most comprehensive programs of its kind in Canada. We are committed to improving AISH through our action plan and through Bill 5, An Act to Strengthen Financial Stability for Persons with Disabilities. If passed, the amended legislation will allow Albertans with disabilities to save for their futures and still be eligible for AISH.

Through our employment and income support programs we are continuing to provide assistance to Albertans, including career counselling and job-planning services. We are seeing positive signs in our economy, including unemployment at a two-year low, an economy that is growing faster than any other province at 4.5 per cent last year, and 90,000 new full-time jobs in 2017. As we have seen in previous downturns, there is a lag between the unemployment rate and income support caseloads. Positive signs in the economy take time to be reflected. Despite this, we see signs of stabilization for the income support caseload this year. This budget shows that we are on Albertans' side, protecting the services they need.

With respect to homelessness and outreach services Alberta is the recognized leader in Canada for our approach to prevent and reduce homelessness. Budget 2018 reinforces our action on homelessness with funding to support the operation of more than 100 new, permanent supportive housing spaces. Homeless and outreach support services will help our communities to house about 1,600 Albertans this year. We will also continue to provide funding for 28 adult homeless shelters, 30 women's emergency shelters, 12 second-stage women's shelters, and counselling and treatment for Albertans fleeing family violence. We have maintained our \$15 million increase to women's shelters, and our capital budget in 2018 includes \$1.1 million of capital grants to women's shelters. Specific details of this funding will be announced later this year.

Budget 2018 also protects and strengthens supports for community partners who provide critical support services to people and families across the province, including family violence and bullying prevention; FCSS programming; sexual violence awareness, prevention, and supports; and promotion of healthy relationships.

Budget 2018 maintains a funding increase of \$25 million for family and community support services, for a total of \$101 million. Three hundred seventeen communities and Métis settlements will again receive stable, predictable funding for programs that meet the unique local needs of their communities. We are also investing more than \$18 million into support and services for Albertans affected by family violence, bullying, and sexual violence. This funding goes towards annual family violence program grants, victim support outreach, safe visitation sites, bullying prevention, and sexual assault centres. On March 7 I was pleased to announce new funding for Alberta sexual assault centres. This funding will support enhanced services for survivors across the province.

When our government was elected, times were tough in our province.

The collapse in oil prices put Alberta in a very difficult spot. We refused to make a bad situation worse with reckless cuts that would have hurt Albertans. We took action to protect and support jobs and by building new roads, hospitals, and schools. I know we made the right decision in supporting Alberta's communities. We remain focused on providing and protecting services Albertans rely on while ensuring that our economy and our economic recovery are built for all Albertans and built to last.

Thank you. I will be pleased to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Mr. Cooper, would you like the timer set for 20-minute intervals so that you're aware of time, or would you prefer to let the full hour run without interruption?

Mr. Cooper: Twenty-minute intervals would be great. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of the rotation if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time.

Are you wanting to combine your time?

Mr. Cooper: If the minister is agreeable.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Sabir: Sure.

The Chair: Just a reminder that the discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking time is combined.

Mr. Cooper, go ahead.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister and his staff, thank you for joining us this evening. Thank you, Minister, for your broad and extensive, comprehensive opening remarks. I'm sure it's greatly appreciated by everyone around the table. I'd also like to thank your ministry staff for being here this evening. It turns out that this ministry is complex, and you all deal with a lot of very complex issues on a day in, day out basis. I appreciate your service to our province and the people that you assist.

Minister, you opened your remarks this evening with some comments around the PDD review, that you announced in January 2018. I'd like to know, just before we get into some of the details around that – and perhaps I missed it, but which line item will it be coming specifically out of in your budget?

Mr. Sabir: It will be 4.1.

Mr. Cooper: Excellent. Thank you.

Program planning and delivery: is that the one?

Mr. Sabir: Yes.

Mr. Cooper: Excellent. Minister, the PDD review was announced last January, and I certainly have heard from a bunch of stakeholders who are a little unsure about what the review is going to look like. You've committed a reasonable number of dollars to that, and I'm looking to get a bit of a sense, from your perspective, of the scope, as it appears there's no clear scope, and timelines. The cost: I understand what you've committed. But can you shed some light on what the scope of the review is going to look like and how you intend to be engaging families in the review?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Member. As you indicated, we announced that on the 19th of January this year. At the time we announced it, we identified three broad areas where we have heard concerns. One was access, another one was family engagement, and the third one was the outcome for those who are receiving services from this program. But, at the same time, over the period of the last almost three years what I have learned from this community: Nothing about Us without Us. So we didn't clearly identify the scope. Rather, we said and we committed that we will work with the community to identify the scope with this year's issues. That's what we will include in the scope of this review . . .

Mr. Cooper: Right. And have you determined what the scope is going to be or how long . . .

Mr. Sabir: Since then I have been going around. I have met many organizations, stakeholders, self-advocates, individuals, and we have also sent out a survey that is open till the 18th of this month. Once we have the survey results back, we will analyze that feedback, and then we will share the scope of this.

Mr. Cooper: The survey closes in two days, Minister?

Mr. Sabir: Yes.

Mr. Cooper: What is the anticipated timeline postsurvey that it's going to take you to be able to announce the scope?

7:20

Mr. Sabir: I think we are looking at the responses, and we are gathering the feedback. That was not the only mechanism that we gathered feedback from. Like, we have direct e-mail as well. People could send e-mails. We will make sure that we get the scope out as soon as practical.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. So the scope is going to be announced as soon as practical. What's a reasonable timeline for the review to be completed, then? When will the entire review be wrapped up? Do you have any goals or targets around this particular issue?

Mr. Sabir: I think, certainly, we want to move as quickly as we can on this review, as we have done in the past three months. We reached out to a lot of stakeholders and individuals and advocates. Our desire is to complete that as soon as possible, but at the same time the survey will be much community driven as well. We want to take the time necessary to get this right as well so that Albertans who want to participate in this review process, who have a vested interest in the outcome of this review, have the time to meaningfully participate and engage in the process as well.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. So as soon as possible or practical. You know, it's been since January. There are a number of areas where the ministry is not acting quickly, particularly around the disability advocate. I've heard from a bunch of stakeholders that are concerned that we're only a year away from an election and that this review may or may not be completed prior to the next general election. Can you provide stakeholders any form of assurance that your department will have this task completed?

Mr. Sabir: We have every intention of completing this review well before that, but at the same time PDD is a very complex program which provides from a few hours of respite to 24/7, intensive, home-based supports and everything in between. Disabilities vary; individuals' goals vary. There are 12,000 individuals on this program. It is important that we allow the community sufficient

time and various diverse means to participate meaningfully. So we will work with the community to get this right.

Mr. Cooper: Speaking of meaningful participation, then, how do the cognitively impaired take a survey like the one that's online? How are you getting input from actual clients?

Mr. Sabir: I think we will work with organizations who work with these individuals, for them to facilitate their participation. We will work with advocates. We will work with organizations. We will work with representative groups like ACDS, Inclusion Alberta, self-advocacy . . .

Mr. Cooper: Do you think that having a disability advocate already appointed would have helped with that process?

Mr. Sabir: The disability advocate will have the role that is set out in the legislation, and I'm very proud of my government's work on this. We will be the first government and first province to have this advocate office set up. We also reached out to the community on that, on how they want this advocate to work for them. We had a survey that was out for three weeks or so, and we got 1,400 responses to that survey, which goes to show that the community wants to participate in these decisions. This is important for us, that we work with them and allow them opportunities for meaningful participation.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. Children with autism qualify for support funding through family support for children with disabilities, FSCD. Once they turn 18, as you know, they need to requalify for support funding through PDD. One of those current criteria for PDD funding is an IQ below 70. Many emerging adults with autism who have an IQ over 70 but who have significant adaptive function challenges struggle with the transition to adulthood. They would greatly benefit from funding supports during this critical transition time. Do you anticipate this as the type of consideration that will be made during the PDD review?

Mr. Sabir: Certainly, we talked about access to the program. That criteria you have outlined, the IQ criteria: that's one of the major components of that access. I have heard about this from the community, and certainly that's something that can be discussed through this review.

Mr. Cooper: Families who hope to qualify for PDD funding for an autistic or emerging adult require a psychological assessment as part of the process. These assessments are often expensive and a cost that is a barrier for many families to access funding. Do you anticipate that PDD will support or consider supporting these families to obtain these assessments, or do you anticipate these to be included in the scope of the PDD review?

Mr. Sabir: I think these will all be the questions for consideration at this review. Personally, instead of, I guess, talking about what the outcome will be, I would leave it for the community to have a discussion around these issues and come up with recommendations for improvement to this program.

Mr. Cooper: So you think that it might be included in the review, but you can't provide any assurances to families with autistic children or emerging adults that it will be included in the review. Is that what I hear you saying?

Mr. Sabir: No, that's not what I am saying. What I am saying is that this review from start to finish will be guided by the community participation. That's why we didn't set the scope. We left it for the

community to weigh in on the scope. So we will work with the community on all issues that matter to them.

Mr. Cooper: Is there a desired structure that the ministry has for the PDD review, or are you just going to wait and see what happens?

Mr. Sabir: Again, scope and process both were left open for the community to weigh in.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. Has the department allotted any funding for supporting Albertans that are transitioning from FSCD to AISH or PDD at age 18 and from AISH/PDD to the federal system at age 65? Does your ministry have any current funding allocations for this task specifically?

Mr. Sabir: I think, both in the program planning and delivery, that's one of the critical tasks that is undertaken by the staff. Once the individual turns 16, they do have transition support to make sure that they have a seamless transition on to the next program. Certainly, that's what the department undertakes as part of their routine practice.

Mr. Cooper: I hear you say: a seamless transition. Would you say that that's a performance measure that is a goal of the department? I've heard from a number of individuals who would not describe the transition as seamless. Is this the type of outcome that you think you should be measuring?

Mr. Sabir: We are measuring certain outcomes that are included in that. As I explained earlier, this program is pretty much tailored to individual needs, and pretty much every individual's service plan is different from others'. We'll work with families, individuals, their natural support system, and, based on their desired goal, with service providers to make sure that services are responding to the needs of the individual. For different individuals that transition experience may be different, but from the department's end our goal is to make sure that Albertans get the services they need.

Mr. Cooper: What are the specific outcomes that you're tracking, that you just referenced, with respect to this program?

Mr. Sabir: If you look at the ministry's strategic plan, it will have performance measure 3(a), "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. Last year, '16-17, we were at 90 per cent. We are hoping to improve that in the '18-19 survey.

7:30

Second is the satisfaction of families and guardians of adults with developmental disabilities with persons with developmental disabilities funded services. That is also tracked as a measure. Measures 3(a) and 3(b) would be the two measures that I would direct you to look at.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you.

Minister, what's the wait-list for PDD services right now? I understand that there are a variety of factors that affect the wait-list, but I think it's important that this matrix is tracked nonetheless. Last year you were unable to provide a number, but the year before that I understand that it was 413, and the year before that it was 360. What is the current wait-list?

Mr. Sabir: The wait-list has been a function of this program for a number of reasons. Certainly, funding is one. Availability of

services, choice of service providers, whether they want to go with family managed and choice of employees: all those things factor into it. As I said, I indicated in this review that once we look at this, we will be looking at access issues, and the wait-list is certainly something that will fall under that one.

Mr. Cooper: What's the number on the wait-list now?

Mr. Sabir: It's around 200.

Mr. Cooper: Around 200, or it's 200?

Mr. Sabir: It's 210 or more, give or take.

It's also possible that the same individual is waiting for more than one service, and it's also possible that some individuals are getting one service and waiting for another.

Mr. Cooper: So how many individuals would you anticipate are on the wait-list?

Mr. Sabir: I gave the number, right?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah. But then you told me that it's possible they might be on the list more than once, so I assume that the number is less than 210.

Mr. Sabir: That 210 is the number who are awaiting service.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. I'd like to talk briefly about the increased costs to service providers. As you know, Minister, government contracts do the majority of the heavy lifting in terms of front-line services that are provided to individuals that your ministry assists.

The costs have risen significantly due to government policy changes such as – you're very familiar with the minimum wage increase. That was close to a 50 per cent increase in the minimum wage, or it certainly will be when you're done with it. The carbon tax: I've heard from a number of organizations that either provide services to PDD clients or have some interaction with the department that have been significantly and negatively impacted by your government's decisions to implement the single-largest tax increase in Alberta's history. And, of course, the changes to labour legislation regarding staff overtime, mandatory holiday pay. I've heard from a number of stakeholders that feel like they have been pushed to the brink by your government, and many of them feel like the only options that they have are being noncompliant with the legislation or cutting back services to the vulnerable populations that they serve or shutting down altogether.

Now, I know that there has been some outreach with respect to some minimum wage costs that the department has identified, but have you provided or do you intend to provide any other additional funds that they need to offset their rising costs? If you do intend to do that, where is it reflected in the budget? As you know, Minister, the Official Opposition asked for an exemption for these types of organizations. However, for whatever reason the government chose not to accept that exemption, and now the costs are really coming home to these organizations. Where in the budget is it reflected that you will be offsetting some of these costs?

Mr. Sabir: That's a long question.

Mr. Cooper: It's a good one, though.

Mr. Sabir: It has many nuances. I will try to unpack it one by one.

With respect to the minimum wage, as you indicated, last year we worked with our service providers, our partners to assess the impact of that on our partners and to work with them, and we

amended those agreements. With respect to those costs this year, if I speak specifically to PDD services, Budget 2018 will account for those cost pressures going forward to make sure that service providers are able to deliver the quality services that Albertans deserve and rely on.

The second was with respect to the carbon levy. The plan talks generally about how two-thirds of Albertans will get the rebates. Especially with the Albertans my ministry deals with, most of them will be below that income cut-off and will . . .

Mr. Cooper: Right, but no organization will get a rebate.

Mr. Sabir: . . . benefit directly from those rebates. Also, those rebates are not clawed back from income support or AISH programs because they are not reportable incomes. So they will come out ahead on that.

In terms of organizations there are programs, energy efficiency audit programs. There are organizational grants that they can access and the business, nonprofit, institutional energy savings program. There are a suite of programs that they can benefit from.

With respect to the bill on labour changes, Bill 17, we will work with our providers to identify those cost pressures. At the same time, we do believe that those Albertans who are working there also deserve fair treatment and that those Albertans deserve the same rights that any other Canadian enjoys in other provinces. As we have done on all issues relating to the sector, we will work with our partners and providers to make sure that we are providing Albertans with the supports they need in the best way possible.

Mr. Cooper: Just for clarity's sake, how many organizations will get a rebate from the carbon tax?

Mr. Sabir: Organizations do have programs, as I said. That would be more of a question for the Minister of Environment and Parks if you want to get into the details of the climate leadership plan.

Mr. Cooper: But how many will get a rebate?

Mr. Sabir: Like, that would be a question for Environment and Parks if you want to discuss their climate leadership plan. But for nonprofit organizations I do know that there is the energy efficiency program, the audit program, and their organizational review program that they can benefit from.

Mr. Cooper: It's a rhetorical question. Zero organizations will get a rebate from the government, though. None of them will actually get money back. They might be able to study some issues around their building or something like that, but none of them actually get a rebate back from the carbon tax.

Mr. Sabir: That's how energy efficiency programs are designed, so that they can understand their energy use and they will be able to save in the long term, benefiting from the programs government is offering.

Mr. Cooper: We've heard from a number of stakeholders about the lack of flexibility in their contracts in terms of their ability to be able to use funds that they're given effectively and to move from one line item to another in their budget according to their needs and as their needs change throughout the fiscal year. This is a core challenge for them in their ability to budget, particularly when halfway through the year your government might make a significant change to, say, increase the carbon tax or change labour legislation or increase the minimum wage. Do you anticipate allowing service providers any additional flexibility in their contracts to be able to have more ability to be able to budget?

7:40

Mr. Sabir: We have worked with service providers on all issues that matter to them. At the point when I became minister, since this department was formed by bringing a few departments together, there were different contract templates that were being used. Then we worked especially with PDD providers, if that is what you're referring to, for almost one year to develop this new contract template, and it was the result of collaborative work with ACDS and others interested. There is flexibility that is built into those contracts. But if there is something that needs to be worked on, we are always open to working with our partners to make sure that they have the right resources and right tools to deliver the services that Albertans rely on.

Mr. Cooper: Many PDD service providers employ overnight staff, as you are familiar with, and for the majority of this time for many of those workers that includes monitoring a sleeping client, and they had traditionally received slightly less than those who are engaging with clients throughout the day. Recent changes to the labour laws for overnight staff have become a challenge for service providers. Has your budget taken this change, that your government made, that has a negative impact on service providers, into consideration, and will you be assisting organizations with this change that you imposed upon them?

Mr. Sabir: These are the changes that are designed to make sure that Albertans enjoy the same rights that every other Canadian enjoys. Since those changes are coming into effect this year – and some may come into effect June 1 – we are absolutely committed to working with our partners to make sure that we understand the cost pressures and that we are providing them with the resources they need to deliver the services.

Mr. Cooper: On page 30 of your business plan you state: "Increased investments have been made to disability programs in Alberta to ensure individuals have access to the supports they need." Will some of these monies be going towards supporting organizations such as Inclusion Alberta that facilitate job and postsecondary opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities in order to have those individuals be meaningfully included in communities? How much specifically will be going to facilitating these opportunities, and what is the line item that that falls under?

Mr. Sabir: Inclusion Alberta is certainly one of the important organizations that has worked for a long time to make sure that Albertans with disabilities are included in the life of the province. In fact, just last week I was at their annual conference, and I was able to announce funding for inclusive postsecondary education for two more postsecondary institutions. Line item 4.2 will include that kind of expense.

Mr. Cooper: Under performance measure 1(d) on page 31 of the business plan income support caseloads have continued to rise in recent years. For the category of people expected to work, caseloads rose from 29,111 in 2016 to 34,375 in 2017. In your 2017-18 budget under line item 2.2, income support to people expected to work or working, you budgeted \$355 million but are forecasting to spend \$394 million. Your 2018-2019 estimate is \$386 million. Are you expected to be over budget this year again, and what matrix are you using to calculate and predict this funding?

Mr. Sabir: I think we use previous-year data, and we use the trends from previous downturns in the economy. As we all know, due to the sharp decline in the price of the commodity, we saw job losses

in Alberta. As government we chose to stand with Albertans, and we added money to make sure that Albertans have the supports they need during these tough economic times. As you can see, we have decreased the funding a little bit from the forecast for 2017-18, and the reason for that is that we are expecting that the caseload, which has now stabilized, will decrease during this time by at least 4.3 per cent.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. In a similar vein, on page 31 of your business plan, performance measure 1(g), "average time between AISH application completion and eligibility decision (in weeks)," we see that the number has fallen from 6.6 weeks in 2016 to 4.7 weeks in 2017. I'm curious to know what the statistics are for the average time between the eligibility decision and when the applicants actually start receiving the services. Are you able to provide me with that?

Mr. Sabir: The time between once they are eligible and receiving the benefits?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: I'm advised that it's four to six weeks, but when they get it, it's retroactive to the date they became eligible.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. With respect to your 4 per cent decrease to \$386 million in your estimates for 2018-19, performance indicator 1(d) shows that the average annual income support caseload for the categories of expected to work, barriers to full-time employment, and total caseload has increased from last year. I hear you saying that you're hoping for a 4 per cent reduction. You've talked at length about the downturn in commodity prices and other economic issues. The Finance minister in his Budget Address and your government's Speech from the Throne said that the good times were back and that everything is up, up, up. I think you've heard the minister speak at significant length in the House about this. Yet, by your own estimates, there's only going to be a 4 per cent change in caseload and costs. Is everything up, up, up actually only a 4 per cent change?

Mr. Sabir: Last year we saw our economy grow by 4.5 per cent, and there were 90,000 full-time jobs created. We have certainly seen all the indicators going up, which include retail sales, GDP. All the economic indicators were up, but there's usually a lag between that recovery and the time the people on this caseload will get back into the job market. That's what we have seen in previous downturns, and that's the lag we are seeing here. We are hoping that with continuous positive growth in the economy we will see this caseload go down.

Mr. Cooper: So with the good news on the horizon that the Finance minister continues to speak about, we'll only see a small change to the number of cases that your ministry faces. That's what I hear you saying.

Mr. Sabir: As I said, there is a lag between that recovery and this group of individuals getting back into the market. We are committed to supporting them with whatever they need to get back into the market. You may have heard the Finance minister saying that we are working on a recovery that is built to last and that benefits everyone or reaches everyone.

7:50

Mr. Cooper: Okay. I'd like to move to page 32 of your business plan, key strategy 2.1, "maintain and manage reliable access to qualified service dogs for Albertans with disabilities and mental

health issues.” It differs from key strategy 2.2 on page 30 of last year’s business plan: “improve access to qualified service dogs for Albertans with disabilities and mental health issues.” Does your ministry not feel that this program continues to require further improvement given the change to your key strategy?

Mr. Sabir: I think our programs are designed to make sure that they respond to the needs of Albertans. On this particular issue, when we became government, there were pretty much only one and a half schools that were training these dogs. We worked on that, and now there are five more new schools that are on that prequalified list. We are working with our community partners, these schools, to make sure that Albertans can have access to these animals, which are very important to them, and so that Alberta can keep pace with the demand.

Mr. Cooper: As you’ve mentioned, last year you provided six groups that train dogs with grant funding to build capacity in order to apply to be on a qualified list of service dog training. How many service dogs have been trained in the past year, and have all six of these groups now been approved on the qualified list?

Mr. Sabir: Including, I guess, the existing one, it’s eight groups that are on the qualified list, and 45 dogs have been qualified by those since January.

Mr. Cooper: Forty-five dogs were qualified last year by the six groups?

Mr. Sabir: Since this January 45 service dogs have been qualified by Alberta’s eight approved service dog organizations.

Mr. Cooper: Is there a current wait-list for service animals?

Mr. Sabir: There is always a demand for these animals, but having those organizations certainly helps to address those wait-times. Also, training these dogs sometimes takes time as well.

Mr. Cooper: Do you know how many individuals are on the wait-list for a service animal in the province of Alberta?

Mr. Sabir: I can undertake to provide that information.

Mr. Cooper: But at this time you’re unsure?

Mr. Sabir: Yes.

Mr. Cooper: Do you know what analysis has been done on the value of a service dog, not in terms of the costs of training but the value to those receiving service animals, and how does that impact both quality of life as well as costs associated or not associated with those individuals?

Mr. Sabir: I think that there are many research studies on those who rely on these animals for support. They are an important source of emotional support for them, support in daily living. When we were making these changes, I was part of those consultations as well and heard directly from the individuals, those who rely on these supports. Certainly, these are important supports for those who rely on them.

Mr. Cooper: But at this time your department doesn’t track or measure any of those outcomes. Is that correct?

Mr. Sabir: Any of those outcomes: what difference it makes?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: For someone who relies on that, it makes a whole lot of difference from daily living to emotional support. That’s what Albertans describe to us. That’s why there was a demand, that’s why there was a desire to have more schools, and that’s why we took action.

Mr. Cooper: This year key strategy 1.1 on page 30 of your business plan is to “work collaboratively with partners to maintain equitable and effective financial supports systems for the stability of low-income Albertans.” It differs from last year’s business plan key strategy 2.5 on page 30: “renew the financial supports system to be more equitable and effective to improve the quality of life for low-income Albertans.” What measures has your ministry undertaken to review the financial supports systems that would account for the change in wording of this key strategy?

Mr. Sabir: I think we have taken a number of steps. First and foremost, we have added stable and predictable funding to all these programs to make sure that Albertans have the supports they need during these tough times. Second, if you look at, for instance, the AISH program, there is an AISH action plan which describes and outlines many improvements that we will be making going forward to that program as well. Same thing with other programs like the PDD program: we have taken a number of steps to improve those programs, and we are still reviewing that program. There is Bill 5, An Act to Strengthen Financial Security for Persons with Disabilities, for those on AISH programs. There are a number of different steps that we have taken to make sure that these programs respond to the needs of Albertans.

Mr. Cooper: Excellent.

I’d like to move to the budget, line item 5.3 on page 64 of your budget, funding for women’s shelters, an increase from \$49 million to \$51.3 million. If I can, I’d specifically like to speak briefly about women in rural areas fleeing family violence. First of all, I’d like to thank you for your support in this particular area. I think it’s incredibly important that we support women who are fleeing violent situations or experiencing any form of family violence.

As you know, Minister, in rural Alberta there are some unique challenges that women face with respect to transportation, with respect to access for services. Also, they experience some challenges in remaining anonymous in smaller communities, which can make fleeing violence particularly difficult for them. Do you know how much of these funds will be designated to providing rural women who don’t have the options of public transportation or financial assistance to access other particular forms of transportation? How much of the increase and how much of the total budget will be allocated to women in rural Alberta?

Mr. Sabir: I think that as government we believe that every Albertan deserves to live safely in their communities, and no one should have to suffer violence or survive alone. That was the reason that soon after we became government, we added \$15 million to this program area. This program area provides funding to 710 beds in 30 women’s emergency shelters throughout the province and 163 units in 12 second-stage women’s shelters. That increased funding also went to hiring more case workers, more outreach workers, and more trauma workers to make sure that we are proactively reaching out to the women throughout this province so that they have access to counselling and treatment and other services that they need when fleeing family violence.

Mr. Cooper: Are there specific programs with respect to rural Alberta and women fleeing violence, in particular with the

transportation needs that they may or may not have, or is it only the general overview that you've provided?

Mr. Sabir: I think these shelters are available throughout the province. There are 30 shelters, and as I indicated, there is outreach support available through these shelters, too. With respect to financial assistance with, like, transportation or something, our income support programs do provide that to women fleeing violence.

8:00

Mr. Cooper: Well, I can tell you that for any individual fleeing family violence, it's always a challenging and difficult task. I certainly know, from people that I have had the opportunity to interact with in rural Alberta, that there seem to be additional challenges for them. If there are ways that you can support rural Alberta and your department can consider the unique challenges that rural Albertan women face, I think that certainly they would be well served and, in turn, our province would be well served if we could do that.

One of the other big concerns that I have, Minister, with respect to women fleeing family violence: we've heard from a number of stakeholders that income support workers are asking for proof of violence in order to grant the additional \$1,000 that from time to time can be applied for by women fleeing violent situations. I'd like to know what sort of assurances you can provide that your ministry is treating every woman that is fleeing family violence with as much respect as they should be receiving given that I've heard on more than one occasion of women being asked to provide proof of violence in order to receive this additional resource.

Mr. Sabir: I think that the public service in Alberta is required to adhere to the values of respect, and if there are ever any concerns where any Albertan seeking government support feels not respected or not treated with dignity, we always take these concerns very seriously. We do look at those individual instances to make sure that all . . .

Mr. Cooper: So you would agree that women having to provide proof of violence is not an appropriate step if they're fleeing from violence?

Mr. Sabir: I think that when they are providing these services, they need something for accountability purposes as well – “okay; this is the case” – so that they can provide the appropriate supports. There are many supports . . .

Mr. Cooper: What do you think that accountability would look like?

Mr. Sabir: . . . not just proof of violence. Like, we provide through Alberta support centres many different services. There are 34 different services. Sometimes asking those questions doesn't mean that we doubt that they're being violated or anything. It's just that whatever supports they need and whatever supports available are provided to them; that's only to ensure that. Two years ago there was safer spaces legislation, brought forward by the Member for Calgary-Bow, and we actually opened ways to make sure that those who are fleeing violence have the supports they need.

Mr. Cooper: If a woman, Minister, was abused financially or mentally, what sort of proof of violence – reasonable steps of accountability, I think, are your words from this evening. What do you think would be a reasonable proof of accountability if someone was being abused by a spouse mentally?

Mr. Sabir: I think it's more about knowing the circumstances that some individual is going through to make sure that the government is there to support them. It's actually having the right information to provide them the proper supports. That, I guess, will be the accountability, that no one in Alberta is suffering from this violence alone, and there are government support and services that are there to help them.

Mr. Cooper: What I hear you say is that there are supports available to support them. However, they're going to have to prove that they are actually fleeing violence; they're going to have to in some way, shape, or form – the government doesn't open from a position of believing those situations.

Mr. Sabir: No. I think you have taken it a bit too far. We are not a court of law asking them to prove something to us. It's just a statement, a verbal statement, of the survivor. The interaction between staff and the survivor is to make sure that staff understand their need and are in a position to assess their need and offer the services that are available through government.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. To be clear, I want to just highlight that the reason for the line of questioning is not me efforting to take it too far but that individuals have reached out to me who have expressed concern about this particular situation. It is my hope as well that everyone in the public service will be treating situations like this as appropriately and respectfully as possible.

Mr. Sabir: I think that if there is some specific case coming out of your constituency, we will certainly be willing to look into it, but I am not aware of such a requirement as proof of violence.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. I'd like to move on, if we can, Minister, to line item 4.7 on page 64 of the budget. You've allotted \$1 million for the disability advocate's office. We, all of us, continue to have no details on the office, what the exact role is going to be overseeing. Can you help me understand a little bit more about what this million dollars is going to include, when you finally anticipate acting on what is a good idea, and when we can anticipate seeing the disability advocate's office filled?

Mr. Sabir: Our government is committed to supporting Alberta's disability community and to listening to their ideas about addressing the challenges and creating meaningful changes to systems and supports. Alberta, in fact, will be the first jurisdiction in the country to have a formal advocate specifically dedicated to persons with disabilities. What we have done so far: in this budget, as you can see, we have allocated funds to set up that office. Meanwhile we have worked with the community. The survey closed on March 31, where we have 1,300 individuals who participated in that survey.

Mr. Cooper: That survey was on the PDD review?

Mr. Sabir: No. On the advocate.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. Sorry.

Mr. Sabir: The PDD service review survey is still open, till April 18.

Mr. Cooper: Tomorrow. Okay.

Mr. Sabir: The survey for the advocate: that closed on March 31, and we gathered 1,300-plus responses. We are analyzing those responses and finalizing the job posting. In a matter of days we will

have the posting up, and we will see an advocate office up and running this spring.

Mr. Cooper: When do anticipate that? Like, what's the timeline for that to happen?

Mr. Sabir: This spring.

Mr. Cooper: We're still in the winter, I think you'll agree with me, given the outside conditions. What does "this spring" mean, sir? Like, what's the timeline?

Mr. Sabir: I think it's in a matter of days. The job posting will be out. It's a public service hiring, so we will follow those procedures. We have money allocated, we have space allocated in our offices, and as soon as practicable we will have this office up and running.

Mr. Cooper: What do you think is practical?

Mr. Sabir: I think we will have the posting fairly soon, and after that, it's a public service hiring, whatever that procedure is.

Mr. Cooper: Does your ministry's office have anything to do with the actual advocate that's hired?

Mr. Sabir: It's a public service hiring, so there's a public service secretariat who is responsible for hiring.

Mr. Cooper: Does your ministry's office have the final sign-off on who's hired?

Mr. Sabir: We will be part of, certainly, that process.

Mr. Cooper: So the person who's going to potentially say bad things – or good things – about you, you also get to sign-off on.

Mr. Sabir: I think we will post a job posting. It's not about what they think of me; it's about whether they can do the job as the community wants them to do it. That job posting will outline what skills we will be looking for in the advocate.

8:10

Mr. Cooper: But, at the end of the day, you will sign off on the person that's hired, who may in the future want to say things that aren't positive about you or the department.

Mr. Sabir: I think we will hire an advocate that will have the required, requisite qualities to do the work as outlined in the legislation. What we heard from the community: that feedback will be reflected in the job posting, and anyone who's qualified to do that will go through a public service hiring process.

Mr. Cooper: I'm certain that the public service is going to do a great job hiring someone.

Mr. Sabir: We will get the best person who is qualified to reflect, to represent the voices and interests of individuals with disabilities.

Mr. Cooper: I'm certain that the public service is going to do a great job of hiring someone, but at the end of the day the public service is going to make a recommendation to you. You can correct me if I'm wrong, but just for clarity's sake, at the end of the day, the public service will make a recommendation to you that you will ultimately say yes or no to.

Mr. Sabir: It's an order in council appointment. At the end of the day, it will be going through a cabinet process, so cabinet will sign off on that.

Mr. Cooper: So cabinet will ultimately decide who may or may not criticize them in the future, and they also have the ability to . . .

Mr. Sabir: Cabinet will get a recommendation from that process for who will be able to represent the interests and voices of Albertans with disabilities and be able to do the work as outlined in the legislation.

Mr. Cooper: I'd like, Minister, for you to provide some additional content on what is practical with respect to actually getting this person appointed. You're going to have some ability to influence cabinet and the order in council. What's a reasonable timeline? June 1? July 1? May 1? August 1?

Mr. Sabir: I think I can give you one timeline that I'm quite certain about, that it won't take us 44 years to have a disability advocate. That's one thing.

The second thing . . .

Mr. Cooper: I've seen your government move quite quickly on things that are . . .

The Chair: Excuse me.

Mr. Sabir: I can provide you a bit more.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt . . .

Mr. Sabir: We have combined the times.

The Chair: Minister, I hesitate to interrupt, but I would just like to remind both the member and the minister to please go through the chair to avoid interruptions and perhaps the tone in this meeting. Thank you.

Mr. Cooper: Through the chair to you, sir, what is a reasonable timeline? May? June? July? I've seen on a number of occasions your government move quite quickly in areas that may or may not benefit them, but in this particular area they have not moved quickly at all. So I think it's reasonable that the community would like to know what the timeline for this to happen is, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Minister.

Mr. Sabir: I think that on this particular file I will put my record against previous governments' records any time. They brought in the safety standards regulation without consulting the community, and throughout Alberta everybody was against that regulation. We worked with the community, reviewed it, repealed it. They brought in a supports intensity scale and pushed 11,000 individuals through that scale. Nobody liked it; people even said that it was disrespectful. We moved on that. We repealed it. On service dogs, they never did anything. There were only one and a half schools. We worked with the community. We moved forward with that. Now we have eight providers on that one. On the Premier's council for persons with disabilities, for the last six, seven years they never had a full slate on council. We worked with the community, and now we have a full Premier's council. That didn't happen under the previous government's watch.

They had 44 years to bring forward this advocate. They never moved on it. We moved on it, and we are working with the

community to make sure that we get this right. We will take the needed and necessary time to make sure that we get this right.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your expediency on this. I know the community is waiting as well for it.

With respect to performance measure 3(b), satisfaction of families, guardians of adults with developmental disabilities with PDD funding, I want to briefly, in the time that we have left, speak specifically about the fatality report that found there were failings that contributed to the death of Camrose mental health worker Valerie Wolski. Have all of the recommendations been implemented that were made through the justice following the inquiry into this fatality?

Mr. Sabir: We are talking about the Wolski fatality inquiry, right?

Mr. Cooper: Correct.

Mr. Sabir: We have taken a number of steps on those recommendations with a view to making sure that those who are supporting these individuals . . .

Mr. Cooper: Through you, Chair, to the minister: have all seven recommendations been implemented?

Mr. Sabir: We have combined time, so I will take time to explain to you what work has been done. There is work that has been done on all seven recommendations, and I can explain to you what work has been done.

The first recommendation. We have implemented a new PDD information-sharing and protection of privacy policy that specifies the use of a separate health and safety file for a client as well as a general information-sharing requirement for PDD staff, service providers, individuals, and families and a new contract schedule A, that requires the PDD program to share all information about a client's history.

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

For the next 20 minutes I would like to invite Mr. Fraser from the third-party opposition and the minister to speak. Mr. Fraser, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister's?

Mr. Fraser: Yes, please, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Minister?
Go ahead.

Mr. Fraser: Good evening, Minister and to your staff. I know that it's a very difficult and challenging file, and I certainly appreciate all the work that your office does.

You know, there are constituents that are facing difficulties in continuing to access AISH and other programs in your ministry when they come from other provinces. This can be a burden on health care. It can be a burden on the people that certainly need these things. Does your government have a plan to streamline the process for somebody who is seeking disability services from province to province when there are physicians and other health care practitioners alike where these people have been approved? Again, many people come to Alberta to start a family and a life. They see opportunity here. How do we streamline that a little bit better out of your office?

Mr. Sabir: I think that these disability programs vary from province to province. We have heard about concerns with respect to the AISH program, and that is why we brought in that AISH

action plan. That action plan will do essentially three things. There are 16 things, but they can be categorized in three major themes.

One is with respect to access. We are finalizing a new application form. Instead of having a three-prong application, there will be one application. With that, we are also preparing a guide on how to fill in that application. That will give clear guidance to individuals and physicians on how to fill out that form. The second thing we are looking at is that we are also trying to have better measures to measure the different processing times from the submission of the application to the commencement of the benefits. There are a number of things that are included in that AISH action plan that will make sure that this program is accessible and that this program is transparent and that Albertans can see how this program is working.

Mr. Fraser: Right. Again, when we repatriate patients of a medical nature, a trauma or something like that, there's a clear line of sight between physicians from one province or jurisdiction to get them back to Alberta. The care seems to be seamless. When we're dealing with people with disabilities, people with mental and physical trauma, are you working with other provinces to come up with a standard for those disability supports right across the board so that people aren't suffering every time they have to move for work or whatever it might be with their caregivers and that sort of thing?

Mr. Sabir: At this point I think all provinces have different programs. They differ from province to province. In Alberta the AISH program we have is the most generous in the country, and it has its own legislation, that was there from the previous government. We haven't made any legislative changes to that program, but what we are doing is simplifying the application so that Albertans don't have to fill in the same information on different forms. We are making it more accessible, and we are making it transparent, but as such there is no crossjurisdictional work across Canada that's going to harmonize our program. There is no such work-in-progress at this time.

8:20

Mr. Fraser: Okay. All right. I hate to belabour the point, but when it comes to streamlining the new form, do you have a timeline?

Mr. Sabir: We are testing the new form in the Edmonton region, and it will be available fairly soon throughout the province.

Mr. Fraser: Okay. On page 31 it talks about an increase in AISH caseloads. What is your ministry doing to address the increase to AISH caseloads?

Mr. Sabir: What are we doing?

Mr. Fraser: Yeah. Sorry. What is your government doing to address the increase in AISH caseloads?

Mr. Sabir: We have provided stable and predictable funding to address increasing caseloads. It's a statutorily mandated benefit. When Albertans fulfill those requirements set out in legislation, it's the obligation of the government to provide those supports, and so far we have increased funding to this program to make sure that Albertans who qualify do get these benefits.

Mr. Fraser: Right. It would be fair to say that it takes a lot of courage for a lot of people that are applying for AISH to step up to the plate and ask for help, to make sure that they have dignity. You know, with dignity and in wanting them to plan their life and plan their finances around that, to have stability in AISH and the payments related to AISH, would it be fair to say that we shouldn't

be using AISH payments or increasing AISH as a political football or political stumps in terms of using it for our political benefit? Has your government studied how much it would cost per year to have AISH funding tied to inflation and remove that political football altogether?

Mr. Sabir: I think AISH benefits do provide important support for almost more than 58,000 Albertans. Since we became government, as you know, there were tough times, but despite that, we chose to support Albertans who are relying on AISH with predictable funding.

We are always open to listening to Albertans on how to improve these programs; hence, that AISH action plan. But, at the same time, we are taking a number of other steps that also help us prevent and reduce vulnerability within our province; for instance, improved funding for family and community support services, low-income transit passes in Calgary and Edmonton – we are piloting this – the Alberta child benefit, the school nutrition program, the wage increase, and those carbon levy rebates. Those are all things there to make sure that Albertans have the supports they need.

Mr. Fraser: Right. When we talk about those supports, would it also be fair to say – we’ve heard about the carbon tax, we’ve heard about the minimum wage, and we’ve heard this over and over again. These people that are helping vulnerable Albertans throughout the province: we’ve heard from them directly. Would it be fair to say – would you agree? – that some of those things were unintended burdens from some of your policies? Again, how are you going to address that?

I think it’s to the bigger piece. It’s not intended to goad you or to get into it back and forth again. I think it’s an important file, and I think that they’re just questions that people are asking. So what is the government doing to track the overall success of the programs in your department, whether they work, whether they don’t work? Again, going back to your trial of the form here in Edmonton, how are you measuring this outside of the advocate not being there yet to give feedback? Where in your department do you look at this and have an overview of what works and what doesn’t work?

Mr. Sabir: I think we work with our community partners on all issues that matter to them, and the business plan includes some measures of satisfaction with those supports.

I think there were questions that started with some other premise around the minimum wage, I believe.

Mr. Fraser: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. That was a campaign platform promise. Personally, I have worked at minimum wage, and there are 300,000-plus Albertans who are in that minimum wage category. As government we believe that everybody needs to get paid fairly so that they can put food on the table and have a roof over their head. In terms of delivery we have worked with our community agencies and partners to assess the impact of that cost pressure, and we provided them the resources they need to deliver services.

Mr. Fraser: Right. The minimum wage. I don’t disagree that people need a living wage, but when we talk about the carbon tax and talk about these communities and the people delivering the programs, I guess the question is: with the programs being provided, whether it’s PDD, AISH, low income, women fleeing violence, those sorts of things, if you found an agency has started to have to turn away people because of the carbon tax, would you revisit the carbon tax for these groups, and would you change course, or would you just stay the course for whatever reason? I

guess that’s the question. Would you change course if you found that people had to start turning away the most vulnerable people in our province?

Mr. Sabir: I think that if you have questions more specifically related to the climate leadership plan, you can direct them to the Minister of Environment and Parks.

With respect to its impact on the population we serve – for instance, there are almost 60,000 Albertans on AISH and almost 50,000 Albertans on income supports, those caseloads. As you may know, two-thirds of Albertans below a certain cut-off of income do get rebates, so actually those rebates have a positive impact on those who are getting services from this ministry. With respect to organizations there are supports available, energy audits available, energy efficiency programs available that they can access to address those costs.

But, in short, my department is absolutely committed to working with our community partners to understand their cost pressures and provide them with the resources they need to deliver efficient services.

Mr. Fraser: Right. Thank you for that, Minister.

I guess that in the absence of an advocate you are the advocate right now for these folks that fall under your department. Have you had a conversation with the minister of environment that this is causing a burden? Have you advocated for these folks that are the most vulnerable, saying: hey, perhaps we need to revisit the climate leadership plan when it comes to the nonprofit sector, that delivers services? If you haven’t, why wouldn’t you do that if you see that this is maybe an unnecessary burden? Now, this is not a conviction of anything. It’s just a matter of: when we see that something isn’t working, is your ministry willing to advocate and say: hey, maybe we need to change course to make sure that we are not turning away these people?

Mr. Sabir: I think we believe in the science of climate change, and as government we believe it’s the responsibility of the government to take action on the environment. It’s tied to many other things as well, including having the approval of the Trans Mountain pipeline, two pipelines to get Alberta resources to market. But when it comes to assessing how a nonprofit delivers services, we will work with them – and we have worked with them – on all issues. That’s why there are programs like the nonprofit energy efficiency transition. There are business, nonprofit, and institutional energy savings programs. So there are a suite of programs through that carbon levy that are available to organizations, and we will work with them to make sure that they are aware of these opportunities and that they have access to these funds to address these pressures.

Mr. Fraser: Has your department looked at the overall costs? Has there been a costing of what would happen if these folks providing these programs and services were exempt from the carbon tax? What would that mean for the overall budget? Would it be attainable?

8:30

Just for the record, sir, I believe that climate change is a serious issue that we’re facing and we need to deal with it, but I don’t think that’s the question put before us, whether I believe it or not or whether the Alberta Party believes it. I mean, we need action on climate change, but the question is: if we have to turn away people, will your office advocate for these folks and say, “Look, maybe we need to revisit this”? That’s the question. Would you be willing to revisit it with these nonprofit groups, as a part of your business plan, to make sure that these people get the services that they deserve?

Mr. Sabir: As I indicated in an earlier answer, the Albertans we serve are more likely than not – you know, all cases are below that income cut-off, where they are eligible for the rebates. So, in fact, this . . .

Mr. Fraser: But not the not-for-profit groups delivering the services.

Mr. Sabir: . . . climate leadership has a positive impact on these Albertans.

With respect to nonprofits there are programs that they can avail themselves of such as the NEET program, the nonprofit energy efficiency transition. There are energy savings programs, and there are rebates available. There are grants available to them through Energy Efficiency Alberta, where they can address some of these cost pressures.

Mr. Fraser: Thank you.

Key strategy 1.2 on page 30 of the business plan speaks to the prevention of family violence, sexual violence, and bullying. What specific measures in your budget are targeted at these prevention measures?

Mr. Sabir: We have taken a number of steps to address family violence and sexual violence. With respect to family violence we increased this funding by \$15 million, and the 2018 budget maintains that funding to address family violence. That budget will help us hire more caseworkers, outreach workers, and trauma workers to make sure that those who are fleeing violence have the resources and services they need.

The second thing. With respect to sexual violence, on March 7 we worked with the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services. They presented us with a business case for \$8.1 million through Justice, CSS, and Health, so we have provided \$8.1 million so that they can provide the services that they need.

Similarly, for bullying, we are providing services and maintaining those funds in this Budget 2018, and we are working with our partners across communities through family and community support program grants. Over three years we have provided almost \$29 million to that end as well. It's a priority for the government to make sure that all Albertans live in safe communities and that no one suffers through violence.

Mr. Fraser: And I have no doubt that you and your department are working hard to solve these things and work with these groups.

How do you measure the performance of these programs and this one in particular? Who is measuring this and making sure that the outcomes are based on science, that we're helping people, and that we're kind of evolving the program? Have you seen an increase or a decrease in sexual violence issues in Alberta? Again, how are we measuring that? What are the outcomes?

Mr. Sabir: I think that in terms of performance measures I would direct you to 1(b). There are new performance indicators. Here we are also looking at 1(b), incidence of family violence. What we heard from the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services is that they're seeing an increased demand for their services. There are a number of factors for that increase. One was that when we became government, we funded the I Believe You campaign. That was a very successful campaign, and we've funded that for the last three years. There was increased awareness through their activities, and there were other social media campaigns that were adding to that awareness, so they saw a huge increase. We work with them to make sure that those individuals are getting the supports they need.

Mr. Fraser: Based on 1(b), it looks like the data comes from Statistics Canada and talks about the incidence. I guess, again, I want to drive it down to the idea of the programs that you and/or the program providers are providing. What are the outcomes for people that battle courageously against sexual violence, family violence, bullying, and that sort of thing, to make sure that they are healthy people after the fact? We know that with things like this, I mean, there's a huge mental health impact that may go on for years. Again, it's to make sure that there's less recidivism and that sort of thing.

Mr. Sabir: That's data which is more about the reported cases. There are 11 sexual assault centres. We do work with them, and we do get reporting from them. They do publish their results as well. Usually, when we provide them the grants, we do also require certain reporting measures tied to those grants, so that's how we see how many individuals are helped and how many people stayed on that counselling, for how long, and those things.

Mr. Fraser: Sorry. This might have been asked earlier, Minister, but how many PDD applicants are waiting for a decision right now?

Mr. Sabir: There are around 208, 210. They are waiting for the services. We have added a significant amount of money to this program, but a wait-list has been a function of this program for a long time. There are a number of factors, aside from funding, that go into it. It's availability of services, the service provider of choice, things like that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I hesitate to interrupt, but the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has expired.

At this point I would like to call the five-minute break, and we will be reconvening at 8:43.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 8:37 p.m. to 8:43 p.m.]

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. I would like to call this meeting back to order. Please take your seats.

For the next 20 minutes I would like to invite Dr. Swann and the minister to speak. Dr. Swann, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Dr. Swann: Happy to do so. Thank you.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Minister, staff, thank you for being here. I look forward to a constructive exchange, as always.

I'm taking a guess, but I'm estimating that most of your department budget is salaries. I guess I'm wondering how you're doing with respect to staff retention. I know that you've had annual corporate surveys, up until the last couple of years, that have suggested a fairly high turnover and some concerns about the stress levels in your difficult work environment. Can you comment at all about whether you're doing annual surveys anymore and about how you're doing with respect to staff retention and staff morale?

Mr. Sabir: I think I will defer that to my deputy minister, who is responsible for the administration.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. Thank you for the question. Our current vacancy rate in the ministry is about 8 per cent.

Dr. Swann: The current vacancy?

Mr. Marchand: The vacancy is about 8 per cent. That has come down. It's something we monitor closely to look at vacancy rates and other factors around workplace health. We completed the APS corporate employee survey two years ago, and the next one will be occurring in, I believe, June. It's coming up this spring. We're very focused on a range of activities across the ministry to try to ensure that we're addressing the concerns that have been raised in those surveys. It's a priority for our executive team and management in the department.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd just like to remind ministry officials to introduce themselves prior to speaking.

Mr. Marchand: Oh, I'm sorry.

The Chair: That's okay. Thank you.

Dr. Swann: So will the survey be based on the previous questions, or will you be changing the survey so that it's difficult to compare year to year?

Mr. Marchand: No. If I may continue – sorry, Minister – the Public Service Commission is responsible for the survey. Their interest is to have a survey instrument that is comparable from one year to the next, so I don't anticipate that there will be significant changes to it.

Dr. Swann: Well, my congratulations to the department for keeping that up because it's not always good news, and I dare say that there are not a lot of the ministries that actually do that to assess the well-being of staff and some of the areas that need to be improved.

I want to just ask a question about AISH and the transition after age 65. I've had lots of concerns expressed over the years on the difficult transition from AISH as people turn 65. What kind of changes or transition supports or facilitation have you made to make that transition easier?

Mr. Sabir: As you know, AISH is a program that takes into account income from different sources, and when they turn 65, they have other income coming from the federal government that kicks in. We do provide clients notice of that change a year in advance and do work with them to make sure that they understand the change and that they apply for the benefits they are entitled to in a timely fashion.

Dr. Swann: Has there been any change? Have you had constructive suggestions about how to do this better than I've heard that you are?

Mr. Sabir: Yes. We are working with the Alberta Minister of Health and the Minister of Seniors and Housing to make sure that that transition is a seamless experience for Albertans who are transitioning.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Well, we talk about income with respect to minimum wage. You've decided that a living wage is important for people across the board. Presumably, that's somewhat related to the cost of living. But you haven't increased the cost of living with the reimbursement for AISH. Why is that?

Mr. Sabir: I think that with minimum wage there's a different set of Albertans who rely on that. AISH is a support program; it has different objectives. They are not directly comparable. With respect to AISH we make sure that from all income sources an individual gets \$1,588, and there are health benefits that go with that program as well.

Dr. Swann: So, through the chair, what is the poverty line in Alberta today?

Mr. Sabir: What is the poverty line in Alberta today?

Dr. Swann: And how does it compare to what you're providing for AISH recipients?

Mr. Sabir: I think there are two different measures, a low-income cut-off and . . .

Dr. Swann: Either one. How does our current . . .

Mr. Sabir: . . . low-income measures. The poverty line is around \$1,700. One of them is around \$1,700.

Dr. Swann: For an individual?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah.

Dr. Swann: Okay. And you're at \$1,588?

Mr. Sabir: That \$1,588 is the cash benefit that is given to an individual, but AISH also provides other benefits, health-related benefits that may not be available in general to Albertans. There is \$243 million that has been set aside in the Health budget for those benefits.

Dr. Swann: Okay. And do you have an update on the poverty line or the low-income cut-off for Alberta today?

8:50

Mr. Sabir: The low-income cut-off is \$1,699.

Dr. Swann: That's in what year?

Mr. Sabir: At present it's . . .

Dr. Swann: That's 2018?

Mr. Sabir: I can double-check that.

Dr. Swann: Well, I'm interested in that.

Mr. Sabir: It's actually not \$1,700. It \$1,699, the LICO cut-off, and the low-income measure is \$1,661.

Dr. Swann: How does that relate to the other support that you provide for people, which is for employment and income support? What is your base income for people who are on income support, and how does that compare to the low-income cut-off?

Mr. Sabir: That's significantly below these measures. These have been the rates that were set by the previous government. Over the period of the last three years there was a huge increase in caseload growth, and we have maintained stable funding to these programs. But to that we have also added a new Alberta child benefit, a school nutrition program. Family and community support services: we have increased funds to that. There are a number of other steps that we have taken to reduce the incidence of poverty. Action on Poverty

is a web portal that we launched a few months ago that lists the details of these actions that we have taken to address poverty.

Dr. Swann: Again, what is the difference between the low-income cut-off and your current income support? Can you tell me the number?

Mr. Sabir: Like, expected to work: a single individual gets \$627.

Dr. Swann: Six hundred and one seven . . .

Mr. Sabir: Six hundred and twenty-seven.

Dr. Swann: So \$627 monthly?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah.

And barriers to full employment: \$731.

Dr. Swann: So it's about half of the low-income cut-off.

Mr. Sabir: As I said, we have taken a number of steps to address poverty, and the portal Action on Poverty lists the details of the action we have taken to address poverty in Alberta.

Dr. Swann: How would you evaluate that in the sense of how effective that program is for people who are needing income support?

Mr. Sabir: The income support program?

Dr. Swann: Yeah. Do you have any ability to evaluate how your current program is working for them at that income?

Mr. Sabir: I think it helps them to meet their basic needs. There is a measure under performance measures 2(a) and 2(b) which measures that. At the same time, these programs not only provide that income supplement. They also have transportation benefits; they also have medical benefits. With that they also have a lot of programs that they can enrol themselves in to get their skills upgraded, get the training that's needed to get back into the market.

Dr. Swann: Do you have an evaluation program for that income support program? Do you have any consistent . . .

Mr. Sabir: These are the measures.

Dr. Swann: What are the measures?

Mr. Sabir: Performance measures 2(a) and 2(b).

Dr. Swann: What do they measure? I don't see them here.

Mr. Sabir: It's part of the business plan.

Dr. Swann: Okay.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. For the assured income for the severely handicapped people, the AISH program, they measure a quality-of-life index, which is essentially four equally weighted components based on whether the program is meeting their basic needs, helping them manage health issues, whether they're able to live independently, or whether they are able to participate in the community. That's for the AISH program. Those who are receiving income support without obtaining employment could be transitioned into the training programs, internship programs, and they can also get support from other sources.

Dr. Swann: Okay. What are the results of that evaluation? Is it improving, is it worsening, is it staying the same year to year? I haven't had a chance to look at that.

Mr. Sabir: These programs are there to provide temporary assistance while they are looking for jobs, so the measure there is the percentage of participants employed after leaving the income support program. Last year the actual was that 59 per cent of those who participated in these programs were able to find employment.

Dr. Swann: Oh, good.

When do you start clawing back that income? How much can they earn before they have some clawed back? I know it's about \$300 for AISH. What is it for income supports?

Mr. Sabir: For AISH the first \$225 is fully exempt.

Dr. Swann: Yeah. And for the income supports?

Mr. Sabir: For income support I can, I guess, provide that exact . . .

Dr. Swann: I'm interested to know whether you're encouraging employment or you're discouraging employment by clawing back.

Mr. Sabir: I've got the answers for you. Income support recipients can increase their total monthly income while working. They keep all their wages and only a portion of their earnings are taken into account when their financial benefits are calculated. Expected to work and barriers to full employment: for single parents the first \$230 of net employment income is exempt plus 25 per cent of any amount over \$230; for couples the first \$115 of net employment income is exempt plus 25 per cent of any income over \$115; for singles the first \$230 of net employment income is exempt plus 25 per cent of any amount over \$230; for independent children attending school the net employment income is 100 per cent exempt; if not attending school, the first \$350 is exempt plus 25 per cent.

Dr. Swann: Sure. Thank you. That gives me an idea.

How does that compare to other provinces, the clawback rate? Do you know? Do you have any idea how we compare to others and to what extent that's a stimulus for employment and to what extent it's a discouragement to get employed?

Mr. Sabir: We can look into it, but we are hoping that it is likely to be similar. Where these programs are set up they are providing enough to get by. Coupled with the training and support, they are designed to encourage them to seek employment income.

Dr. Swann: You've already admitted that it's half of the low-income cut-off that they're getting paid. It's pretty minimal income.

Mr. Sabir: At the same time, it's not an income; it's a support so that they get by while they are looking for work.

Dr. Swann: Now, some of these people are not expected to work, though, you said.

Mr. Sabir: Some of them are not expected to work. Their rate is higher than for those expected to work, and they do have other health benefits and access to . . .

Dr. Swann: I hope we're evaluating it. That's all I'm saying. I hope we're evaluating it to see whether the program is a disincentive or an incentive for them to move on. That's all I'm suggesting.

The other question I have is about FCSS. It's a shared program with the municipalities. Is it still 80-20?

Mr. Sabir: It is 80-20.

Dr. Swann: The municipalities are sharing in the funding at 20 per cent. Who does the evaluation of the agencies that are participating in FCSS?

Mr. Sabir: Let me put it this way. These programs are different throughout the province, and the flexibility built into this program allows them to identify local priorities. Each project will be different. Municipalities will be evaluating based on what the project is.

Dr. Swann: The municipalities do the evaluation of FCSS programs?

Mr. Sabir: They do the evaluation, and there are reporting requirements attached to the government grants, so they do report back.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Who in your department evaluates the evaluation to see whether it's a worthwhile investment?

Mr. Sabir: It's the family and community supports services department.

Dr. Swann: Oh, I see.

Mr. Sabir: There's an executive director who oversees that department and is responsible for working with the communities.

Dr. Swann: If your department doesn't agree with the criteria that the municipalities are using to evaluate, how do you deal with that?

Mr. Sabir: I think we work collaboratively with them. The flexibility this program offers is that these are the priorities that are identified locally. As part of the program requirement they are required to provide some accountability to make sure that the intended results are achieved.

Dr. Swann: Okay. With respect to the opioid crisis and the addictions and mental health issues, what is your role in and out of correction centres?

Mr. Sabir: I think that is mostly dealt with by Health and Justice. We work with anyone who requires those supports but will direct them to appropriate services.

9:00

Dr. Swann: So they may be under employment and income support, they may be under homeless and outreach, they may be under . . .

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. But those services will be delivered by Health; if its correctional, then Justice.

Dr. Swann: If it's in corrections, it'll be them. But even if it's outside . . .

Mr. Sabir: Correctional services will be within the purview of the Justice ministry, so they will be responsible for those services. But if someone which we interact with is in need of any government services – like, an Alberta Supports centre, for instance, provides 34 different services, which are not all in CSS. They may refer you to different services depending on the needs.

Dr. Swann: I'm trying to be clear on whether you cover any services in the correction institutions, or is it entirely outside of the correction services that you provide supports?

Mr. Sabir: I do not provide any services in correction institutions.

Dr. Swann: Do you provide drug costs for people who need, for example, Suboxone or substitute opioids?

Mr. Sabir: That will be Health.

Dr. Swann: That's Health.

Do you provide access to job training for these people?

Mr. Sabir: Any Albertan can access job-training programs. I think the only interaction that I will have with addiction treatment will be those who are in our programs, and if they go to a residential treatment centre, we might cover their lodging cost, which is set in the regulation at around \$40.

Dr. Swann: Can you comment a little bit on the training of your staff for dealing with people with mental health and addictions?

Mr. Sabir: Mental health is within the purview of the Minister of Health, so my staff get training for the job, for services they're supposed to deliver. But specific mental health training will be within the purview of . . .

Dr. Swann: You don't have that in your purview?

Mr. Sabir: No.

Dr. Swann: What about indigenous? What is your training and capacity to deal with the indigenous community? What proportion of your clients are indigenous?

Mr. Sabir: I think there are certain points of interaction with indigenous communities.

One thing about mental health – I want to correct myself. Within the PDD department we have mandated a new mental health first aid training for our staff to identify those issues and direct them to or provide them proper supports.

Dr. Swann: Oh, good. Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: In terms of interaction with indigenous communities, that will be one area where we work with women's shelters, on-reserve women's shelters. We have a fee-for-service arrangement with respect to other services if we provide AISH. Under ARA, administrative reform arrangement, we will get reimbursed. That's the level of interaction we have.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Ms Renaud: Yes, please.

The Chair: Minister, combined time?

Mr. Sabir: Sure.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Great. Well, thank you to everyone that's here today. I'd like to get started. We know that there are a lot of factors that go into the creation of estimates, and particularly in an area like Community and Social Services it would include projections for things like intake, deferred intake numbers, people leaving the province, people coming into the province, turning 18, people who might be needing less support, and so on. I'm wondering if you can

give us some indication about how your ministry accounts for these fluctuations. How do you calculate these numbers, and where can we find that information?

Mr. Sabir: Our government is committed to a GBA approach, which helps us to break down the impact of our services on the population we serve. However, accounting for the data like those factors you just noted is complicated, and it is, at the same time, essential in ensuring that our programming responds to the needs of Albertans, needs that can change many times throughout the year. So we analyze caseload and other program data to ensure that we have the best available information throughout the fiscal year as we work to project trends and allocate available funding.

An example of this is our expected-to-work caseload. We know that as the economy improves and the unemployment rate drops, this caseload will also drop. We also know through analysis that that caseload will not drop as quickly as the unemployment rate improves. This is because our expected-to-work clients are often those with the least skills, are harder to place, and unfortunately are not the first to benefit from the economic recovery.

We are continuing to build our data analytic capacity within our ministry and to enhance this kind of analysis to support evidence-based decision-making and budgeting.

Ms Renaud: Great.

I'm just going to talk a little bit about the line in the estimates that talks about direct operations under disability supports. First of all, like all of us, I am a huge supporter of community living. I think that people with disabilities absolutely belong in the community, and I'm thrilled that you believe that as well. It is my understanding that line item 4.3, persons with developmental disabilities, direct operations, includes community access and community living supports that are provided by the province. A good example of that would be supports from Michener Centre. Can you tell me what is causing this budget estimate to trend downwards? How many people does this funding support across the province?

Mr. Sabir: As you indicated, direct operations refers to facilities directly operated by the government. The most familiar will be Michener Centre. We also have two other facilities that are SS graduated supports and one other facility that provides these supports. Altogether it's 2 per cent of the PDD clients. This reduction is not a cut in the funding; rather, it's a decrease in the number of individuals needing those services and a corresponding decrease in the staff resources. We don't do any more intakes, but at the same time we do provide individuals with an option if they choose to stay there because they have lived there all their lives. We don't want to disrupt their service, but as government we are absolutely committed to their full inclusion in the community as best we can. That's the current practice.

Ms Renaud: Okay. We know, obviously, that there are very significant differences between urban and rural supports for people with disabilities in terms of availability, range of supports – for example, accessible transportation – inclusive employment, the range of service providers people can choose from, and the availability of qualified staff. Can you tell us a little bit about the activities your ministry is undertaking to promote the viability and strengths of the supports in the rural areas?

Mr. Sabir: I think it's an important question. We have worked with the community on a number of issues, pretty much every issue that matters to them. We believe that Albertans should be able to access service anywhere in the province. However, we do know that that's not the case, and access sometimes is an issue because of all those

factors that you have identified. As we continue to work with our providers to make sure that Albertans get timely access, at the same time the review we announced will be an opportunity to explore access issues in further detail. That's how we can ensure that Albertans are getting the supports throughout this province.

Ms Renaud: Okay. One of the things you noted earlier today, which is great, I think: for the first time in many years that I can remember, the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities finally has a full complement of members, which is great because we have people from all over Alberta. My question is: specifically where in the budget estimates can we find the expenses for where the costs for this council are housed? I was having a little bit of trouble locating where that was.

9:10

Mr. Sabir: I think it will be in 4.1, program planning and delivery.

Ms Renaud: Okay. How about the secretariat that supports the council? Also in 4.1?

Mr. Sabir: That also falls in program planning and delivery because the staff is provided support through this line item.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Key strategy 2.1 states that the ministry will "maintain and manage reliable access to qualified service dogs for Albertans with disabilities and mental health issues." This activity was initially begun as a pilot project. Can you tell us if this is still a pilot or if it is a long-term program or project and where that is located within the estimates?

Mr. Sabir: As government we are absolutely committed to responding to the needs of Albertans, and as long as that's something that's needed by the community, we will be able to work with the partners and provide this support. At this point, as I earlier indicated, there are eight different schools, and since January they have trained 45 dogs. That line item will be provincial disability supports initiatives, line 4.5.

Ms Renaud: So this will be a permanent program going forward, whether it's looking at, like, assessing self-trained dogs or owner-trained dogs. Is that correct?

Mr. Sabir: The new regulation certainly provides for that. There are provisions in the new regulation where self-trained, owner-trained dogs can get assessed. We also have provided funds, set aside funds. If cost is an issue, we will help those owners with the costs.

Ms Renaud: Just to follow up a little bit, can you explain, I guess, just elaborate – and I know the opposition asked a question about service dogs earlier – about how particularly these changes are improving access to service dogs?

Mr. Sabir: As I indicated earlier, there were only one and a half organizations, pretty much, in the province who were able to train these dogs, and now we have created a qualified list of organizations that can provide service dogs in Alberta. So far, there are eight organizations on that list, and we expect to see more. We will be open to working with more organizations. We do know that there is a demand for these dogs in Alberta. Increasing the number of schools and testing means for more dogs for people who need them is certainly what we heard from the community. Since January, as I said, 45 service dogs have been qualified by these eight new approved schools.

We have heard from these individuals directly. There is research that these animals provide very important emotional and day-to-day support for these individuals who rely on them. From their health outcomes, from their community inclusion, like, from all those angles, these are very vital services that Albertans have asked us to work on, and that's what we did.

Ms Renaud: Can you tell us about the evaluation that was done, I guess, after the initial phase of the pilot project, the service dog pilot?

Mr. Sabir: Those regulations set out the qualifications, and once you train a dog, the person or organization who was training the dog is required to do the follow-ups to make sure that the dog is serving the needs of the individual.

Ms Renaud: I'm going to switch to budget line 4.2, where the bulk of supports for people with developmental disabilities is housed. That would include contracts with community service providers all across Alberta in addition to the contracts for family-managed supports. Can you tell us how many additional people you're projecting, just, I guess, based on trends or last year's information, will receive service in 2018-2019, and can you provide us with some details on what else is going into this increase or what is causing this increase?

Mr. Sabir: As government we are committed to protecting and improving the services that Albertans with disabilities depend on. Budget 2018 increases will help us support more than 12,000 adults with developmental disabilities. That's approximately 450-plus additional people that will get help. We will continue to work with those individuals, and we will make sure that they have the supports they need to be meaningfully included in the community.

Ms Renaud: Okay. You mentioned early on that the ministry was using the gender-based analysis plus lens as you develop policies, legislation, programs, which is incredible because that means that you're applying the lens of disability and inclusion to all of the decisions or the activities that you're undertaking. I'm wondering if you could elaborate a little bit for us about how the ministry will use this GBA plus lens when developing tools to review the PDD program, for example, or other things run under this ministry such as the office of the public guardian or AISH, things like that.

Mr. Sabir: I think that as government we use that GBA plus on all substantive policy and program decisions that we make. We are working with Status of Women on this approach. The ministry has been working on a centre of responsibility to support the development of relevant GBA resources, goals, and training.

With respect to the PDD review I think we will certainly have that lens applied to that review, and that will include engagement activities that are designed to be accessible and inclusive to all Albertans who want to participate. Engagement location, for instance, will be chosen to meet the needs of those who wish to participate and will represent all regions of the province. Engagement location will be accessible by public transportation, and where that's not possible, specific arrangements will be considered so that people have the opportunity to participate. Engagement will be developed to ensure that diverse perspectives are captured during the process and taken into account to represent the broad range of views.

Finally, as recommendations are developed and considered as a result of the review, the GBA plus lens will then again be applied to show that we understand the benefits and values as we work to improve the PDD program. I think this is similar to the work with

AISH, where we use the GBA plus lens to assess and develop new policies. We are committed as government to make sure that we are using GBA plus analysis in all of our policy- and decision-making.

In terms of the public trustee office I'm sure that that's a policy that government is using. That office has now moved to Justice and Solicitor General, so I think it will be more appropriate to direct that to them.

Ms Renaud: Okay.

Sorry. How much time is left, Chair?

The Chair: Four minutes, 50 seconds.

Ms Renaud: I'm going to turn it over to MLA Shepherd really quick because I know he won't get time for questions.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you. Through the chair, thank you, Minister and your staff, for being here today. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you a bit. Certainly, your ministry has quite an impact in my constituency. I often say that I represent some of the folks who are doing the best in Edmonton and also some who are not doing so well, right down to the street level. I certainly appreciate some of the work your ministry is doing in my area and, in particular, that you've avoided some of the extreme cuts that had been brought in by previous governments and that, frankly, I think, created and exacerbated a lot of the issues that we're dealing with in parts of my constituency. I've appreciated that we've seen some increased support for a number of areas, and I do see that this year we've got a significant increase in your budget, nearly \$150 million, I think. Can you give us a sense of where this extra funding is coming in, what it's for?

9:20

Mr. Sabir: Budget 2018 provides stable and predictable funding for the critical services that Albertans rely on and that my ministry provides. This will include services to children with disabilities, adults with disabilities; services with respect to family violence, sexual violence; homelessness, those who are at risk of homelessness; Albertans who are temporarily out of work and those who are facing barriers to full employment; similarly, community-based programs around prevention and early intervention through FSCD and the community support program grants. We do partner across this province with many communities and many organizations to ensure that all Albertans have the opportunity for meaningful participation in the life of the province. This is pretty much the reason for the increase in this budget, and it will help us maintain the critical services that we provide. Our priority is to protect vital public services, and that stable and predictable funding will ensure that.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Minister. Certainly, I think one of the most important things is what I'm hearing from my municipal partners that I speak with and a lot of the organizations that are working in my constituency on the issue of homelessness in particular, that the most essential work we need to be doing in that is additional supportive housing with wraparound services. Within the realm of that, within this budget increase – I know that you were in my constituency last June – there was an announcement of some additional funding for supportive housing in Edmonton and indeed across the province. Within this budget and, I guess, with these increased dollars, are we seeing an increase in supportive housing, and can you give me a sense of where that's being distributed?

Mr. Sabir: This budget will maintain stable funding for the homeless in outreach support services, with \$195 million. Certainly, it will

help us address homelessness across this province. We are adding 100 new units of permanent supportive housing, that are scheduled to open in 2018-19, and that is on top of over 150 new units that opened in '17-18. We are looking forward to sharing those details in the coming months.

Mr. Shepherd: Okay. Well, thank you, Minister. Along those lines, I know that certainly within the city of Edmonton there are a number of partners that are involved in addressing this issue. Of course, you have the city themselves and a wide web of social agencies that sort of stepped up during periods when government was not really doing its due diligence at the table. Within that, there can be some conflict, and certainly we have a number of groups that are asking about different projects and different levels of assistance. Within the priorities and the plans that you're laying out in your business plan, how are you ensuring that they are aligning with the plans and the needs of the city?

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would now like to invite the Official Opposition and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes. Mr. Cooper, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Cooper: If the minister is agreeable.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Sabir: Sure. We'll give it another try.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Cooper: Team work makes the dream work, sir. Thank you.

Through you, Chair, to the minister, on page 31 of the business plan, key strategy 1.4: "in partnership with other social service-based ministries, improve information-sharing practices within government and with service agencies to support the stability and safety of Albertans." I'd like to just speak briefly. The ministry is tasked with supporting Albertans in need, yet in 2016 Rachael Longridge, a 21-year-old recently graduated nurse, became Edmonton's 41st homicide victim at the hands of her mother, who was in the midst of a psychotic episode.

This story has deeply shaken all of us and has highlighted the systemic problems that allowed a dangerously unstable woman in desperate need of medical intervention to slip through the cracks as her young children did everything within their power to help her, without any supports. Our mental health system and our justice system and intervention system and, potentially, your department failed this family. Given that Christine Longridge had a long and well-documented history of mental illness and other concerns in the days and weeks leading up to her killing her daughter and who came into contact with police forces once and went to the ER twice, one of which times they refused to admit her, how is it possible that individuals like this can slip through the cracks? This government has said that they won't be doing a fatality inquiry into Rachael's death. Do you know why this is?

Mr. Sabir: Any death of an Albertan in such circumstances certainly is very unfortunate. Most of the issues you identified, whether there is a fatality inquiry, will fall within the purview of the Justice minister and, similarly, within health supports in Health. But for us as a department, we take domestic violence seriously, and we have a number of resources to support survivors of domestic violence, adding funding to women's shelters so that there is capacity. There is increased outreach service. There is counselling

service available. We have given almost \$29 million through family and community support program grants to address some of these issues. At the same time, we added \$25 million to the FCSS programming as well to make sure that communities have the support and have the resources to identify and address these issues.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Minister.

Through you, Chair, to the minister, I would suggest that a fatality of such significance is more than a little unfortunate. Perhaps it's understated.

Mr. Sabir: And I totally agree with that.

Mr. Cooper: I think I'd specifically like to ask one additional question around this horrific and very, very tragic accident. One of your ministry's key strategies, 1.4, is to improve information-sharing practices within the government and service agencies. Can you elaborate on the need for this? My concern is that perhaps if departments were sharing information better, whether it's your department or Health or Justice, you will understand – and I think Dr. Swann was making the point – that this multiministry approach to these complex needs is what's important. We've seen time and time again, unfortunately, significant harm caused to Albertans because of a lack of or a breakdown in this communication.

I mean, you were the minister of child and family services when we all had significant discussion around the death of a child in care, much of which was a breakdown in communication. And your ministry is equally responsible for this. Do you think better communication may have impacted what happened in the Rachael Longridge case? Clearly, there was a breakdown in communication which led to her mother slipping through the cracks. What do you think could be learned from a situation like this with respect to information sharing? Why do you think it is that your government has chosen not to have an inquiry into this? Perhaps we could all learn from it.

Mr. Sabir: I think no Albertan should ever have to go through such horrible circumstances, and there is certainly more work that can be done, and there are certainly lessons that can be learned from that. We do have our Family Violence Death Review Committee as well, who look at those issues. But your particular concern with respect to why a fatality inquiry wasn't held: that would be a question, I guess, that you should direct to the Minister of Justice. She will be better able to address that one.

9:30

Mr. Cooper: Thank you.

Through you, Chair, to the minister: perhaps he might ask her on all of our behalf.

Minister, you provided the Alberta Rural Development Network with funding to address rural homelessness by gathering data to understand the extent of the problem and help formulate a strategy to address this. Where is this reflected in your budget? Can you please share the results of this data collection? And what initiatives have you specifically implemented to address rural homelessness?

Mr. Sabir: I think one of the many social deficits that we inherited from the previous government was a lack of social housing. What we have done is that we have maintained stable and predictable funding to our homelessness initiatives, but we do know that the focus has remained on the seven major cities. I have worked with the ARDN. I have met with some other organizations from rural communities. We are certainly working with them. But as our 10-year plan is coming to an end, going forward certainly that is one thing that we will look at, how we can make sure that Albertans

regardless of their geographic location are able to access government services throughout the province.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, through you to the minister, last year you stated that it would be premature for you to speculate on the ongoing plan going forward on fetal alcohol syndrome based on the fact that the past year was the final of the 10 years of the strategic plan for the disorder. Funding for initiatives to address FASD have decreased slightly from last year. Can you explain why the funding has decreased following the conclusion of the strategic plan? Given that the previous strategic plan has now been completed, will your ministry be renewing the existing FASD strategy, or will you be implementing a new one? What are the timeline, budget, and scope of the new plan? And what conclusions were drawn from the previous 10-year strategy?

Mr. Sabir: The decrease in budget is very minimal, \$2,000, and that is due to the reduction in employers' contributions to the public service pension plan. So there is absolutely no decrease or cut to this area. We are working with these networks across the province to develop community-based solutions, raise awareness, and address these issues. That 10-year evaluation is wrapping up, so it's not public yet. We are hoping to see that soon.

Mr. Cooper: So you don't have any plans for the strategic plan, going forward, for the next 10 years?

Mr. Sabir: The report is wrapping up, so we will have that report shortly, and based on that, we will be able to talk about the initiative going forward. But for now we have maintained that funding to this network.

Mr. Cooper: What does the word "shortly" mean?

The Chair: Thank you. The time allotted for this portion of the rotation has expired.

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

Ms McPherson: Yes, if that's acceptable to you.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah.

Ms McPherson: Great. Thanks very much.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms McPherson: I have quite a bit of stuff to get through in 10 minutes, so I may interrupt you during your answers. It's not to be rude. I just want to make sure that I get everything in.

Mr. Sabir: How about, then, you take your five minutes, and I will take my five minutes?

The Chair: Okay. Five minutes.

Ms McPherson: I don't agree.

The Chair: The minister has just indicated that that's what he would like to do.

Ms McPherson: And if I don't agree?

The Chair: It's up to the minister.

Ms McPherson: Okay. All right. Great. Outcome 1 speaks to stability: "Albertans are safe and achieve housing and financial stability." AISH, assured income for the severely handicapped, has some limitations to it right now. The single exemption for AISH recipients is \$800. The rate was established in 2012, when the minimum wage was \$9.75 an hour. So the calculation for the exemption works out to \$800. If the recipient is earning between \$800 and \$1,500, my understanding is that half of their earnings are exempt. If they're earning over \$1,500, my understanding is that they're not receiving support then.

Now, the minimum wage, of course, has increased quite a bit, and it's going to be \$15 an hour in October. If the rate was adjusted to accommodate \$15 an hour, that would mean AISH recipients could earn up to \$500 more a month than they're currently able to, and they would be able to help meet the outcomes of stability as stated in outcome 1. It's a similar situation for families, where right now it's \$1,950. If that rate was calculated based on \$15 an hour, it looks like it would work out to \$2,990 a month, and that would certainly make a huge difference for families and individuals who are receiving AISH right now.

The second thing that I want to ask about is trauma-informed care. Right now both the Education and the Health ministries on their websites talk about trauma-informed care and how important that is in treating the people in the health care system as well as understanding how to educate people who have experienced trauma. Of course, Community and Social Services deals with a number of people who've experienced trauma, and that's expressed in a number of different ways, one of them being homelessness. Certainly, people who have survived domestic violence, child abuse and people who have survived sexual assault are all at the effect of trauma. Creating more positive outcomes for those people certainly is predicated on understanding trauma-informed care.

My first question around that is: is there a filter of trauma-informed care throughout your ministry, and if there is not right now, are there plans to do that in the future? Do you understand what the impacts would be on the costs associated with treating – I know you don't deal in treatment directly – people through that lens of trauma-informed care, specifically male sexual assault survivors? My understanding right now, from people that I've spoken with, is that it's very challenging to connect with the kinds of resources that are needed for men who have experienced sexual assault, either currently or in their past, to find the kind of treatment that is appropriate for what they've experienced. Is that part of the GBA plus filter that all of the ministries are using?

Then the last thing that I want to get through has to do with the report on the public fatality inquiry into Betty Anne Gagnon's death. Reading through it was very difficult, and I feel a little teary just thinking about it right now. The woman experienced a very traumatizing death. The report made 13 recommendations, so I want to ask some questions about the recommendations and how they relate to the ministry budget. It's so important that we work to prevent this kind of a tragedy from happening to any vulnerable people in the future.

Outcome 3 on page 32 states: "Inclusion – Alberta's communities are supportive, safe, inclusive and engaged." Recommendation 1 of the report talks about "stable and adequate funding for programs that support individuals with ... disabilities [by] focusing on personalized and individualized support" and that funding has to "reduce the wait times in a meaningful way."

9:40

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Ms McPherson: Is that five minutes?

The Chair: That is.

Ms McPherson: That was way too quick. Can I have another five?

The Chair: Not at this point.
Minister, go ahead.

Mr. Sabir: Okay. Thank you, Member. I will try to touch on all your questions. In terms of the minimum wage in comparison with AISH, the minimum wage is designed to help a different set of Albertans who are working and not able to put food on the table or a roof over their heads. There are 300,000-plus Albertans who it will benefit. AISH, on the other hand, is a guaranteed income program which makes sure that income from all sources doesn't fall below \$15,088. That's the cash benefit part of this program. It also provides them with extensive medical benefits, and if they have mobility needs, it provides them with that as well. There is \$243 million set aside in the Health budget to provide AISH recipients with those benefits.

The second thing. With respect to trauma-informed care we do use that lens when we deal with domestic violence, sexual assault survivors and when we provide homeless individuals with wraparound support. With respect to male sexual assault survivors certainly then you do GBA analysis. That's something that you will look at because that's not usually the case. Mostly what we have seen through the reports, what we have seen through the numbers coming from sexual assault centres, for the most part, is that women are the survivors, but those supports are still open to those male survivors. That's not an area that we have focused too much on, but we can certainly work with our sexual assault service partners to see how we could support male sexual assault survivors.

With respect to the Betty Anne inquiry certainly our thoughts are with Betty Anne's family and friends, who continue to grieve this loss. No one – no one – should ever have to go through the unspeakable abuse that she did. It is clear that the system was not set up to support Betty Anne and that it failed her when she needed it most. As government we are absolutely committed to enhancing the oversight and protection of people receiving services through the PDD program to make sure that we can avoid similar incidents happening in the future.

Since 2009, when Betty Anne died, there have been a number of changes. For instance, there is new mandatory training for staff, including mental health first aid training, which requires all PDD case managers to take that training. We have a new file closure policy, that if on the receiving end somebody doesn't answer the phone, we don't close the file. Rather, we will escalate that and make sure that they are safe.

The third thing is that back in 2009, when you were moving from one region to another, you had to reapply for those services while today there are policies in place that will make sure that the transition is seamless and that somebody in the receiving region is responsible for that file and that they're co-ordinating those services in a seamless way.

With that, we will also be launching a new phone line next month to ensure that Albertans have a place to call. That's not just for individuals with intellectual disabilities. If Albertans see any Albertan in need of supports, they can report that, and on the department side we will have trained staff to deal with that.

With respect to funding we have maintained stable funding to this program, but there are still issues. There is still room where we can do more work, and through the PDD review we will make sure that we are undertaking that work with respect to access to this program, with respect to family engagement with this program, with respect to outcomes of this program. Now when we do the service planning,

we do it in collaboration with the family members, which means that the needs of the families are taken into that service planning.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

At this time I would like to invite Dr. Starke and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes. Dr. Starke, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister's?

Dr. Starke: If that's acceptable to the minister.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Dr. Starke: Well, thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I'll start by apologizing if some of the questions I ask are a repetition from beforehand. I unfortunately was unable to attend the whole meeting. I will tell you that most of my questions are related to the PDD file, and they flow from meetings that I have held with a number of folks in our constituency that have concerns, and I'm hoping that you can perhaps give me some answers on some of the questions they had. Again, if these questions have been asked before, I do apologize.

I guess, to start with, the supports intensity scale. I'll tell you that I applaud your decision to eliminate SIS. I absolutely agree that SIS was a degrading means of evaluating the needs of PDD, persons with developmental disabilities. SIS was an expensive program. I'd like to know: what did it cost the government to administer SIS before, how much is being saved because SIS has been eliminated, and where are those funds now being spent?

Mr. Sabir: I think the licence for SIS was obtained well before we began government, somewhere around 2011, 2012. After that, they had staff there who were trained to administer that thing, and that was part of the intake process where we have other functional assessments and assessment of the individual needs and all that. I wouldn't be able to speak to that cost that was initially incurred back in 2011 or 2012.

Dr. Starke: Agreed. I guess, Minister, what I was asking about is an annual operational cost for administering, you know, the tests. Yes, there was an initial licensing fee. That's correct. It was in place before you became government. But the annual fee.

Mr. Sabir: It was the same individuals who were doing that intake within the existing staffing resources. They were co-ordinating that test along with other assessments like functional assessments and other needs assessments. That is still the same staff who is involved in our case management.

Dr. Starke: Okay. So, basically, you're saying that eliminating SIS hasn't resulted in any cost savings for the department.

Mr. Sabir: Eliminating SIS resulted in relief to those who were put through that process.

Dr. Starke: Hundred per cent agree with you, sir.

I guess I'm just wondering, Chair, if there were cost savings. I'm taking it but I'm not hearing directly that there were no cost savings. Is that correct?

Mr. Sabir: I can confer with my deputy minister as well, but my understanding is that the staff resources stayed the same because it was part of the assessment for eligibility for PDD programs.

Dr. Starke: Okay. Minister, my second question is a more general question from parents. The parents that I spoke with find that they're very frustrated that there does not appear to be an overarching strategy or framework or plan for the entire group of

services or basket of services for persons with developmental disabilities. Now, I understand that you're undertaking a review right now and that you've extended the deadline for input to that review. When is that strategy or that plan scheduled to be rolled out, and what can you tell me as far as, you know, when you expect to have that information out and make it public?

Mr. Sabir: Information with respect to the scope and process of the review?

Dr. Starke: Correct.

Mr. Sabir: I think the concern you raise is one that I have heard, too, and the reason for that is that PDD provides a range of services which include from a few hours of respite to intensive home support and everything in between. Disabilities vary. Individual goals and needs vary. With different organizations their philosophy of service varies. I have heard that concern, and that review will certainly help us explore that, but from a department standpoint the goal of this program is social inclusion, to help people integrate meaningfully in their community life.

9:50

Dr. Starke: Okay.

Mr. Sabir: This survey on the scope and process will close on the 18th of April.

Dr. Starke: Right.

Mr. Sabir: Whatever results we are getting in, we have the staff working on it, so we will be able to roll that out as soon as practical.

Dr. Starke: Do you have a target date or as soon as practical?

Mr. Sabir: As soon as practical.

Dr. Starke: Okay. Minister, another concern that I hear from parents is on the transition, the transition point when someone with a developmental disability reaches the age of 18 and passes into what they call adult land, which I thought was an interesting phrase. There is a tremendous amount of anxiety amongst families as to what happens at that transition point. Are you working with various organizations and are you working through the family support for children with disabilities to try to reduce that overall level of anxiety? You know, I talk to parents, for example, of children who are 14, 15, 16 years old, so they're still a few years away, yet they have tremendous anxiety about that transition point. What's being done to try to reduce that level of stress?

Mr. Sabir: Certainly, that's a very good question, and staff at FSCD, family support for children with disabilities, start that process at age 16. Again, that process can vary from individual to individual and family to family, depending on their needs, depending on availability of the service provider, depending on the choice of the provider. Then once you reach 18, you are in adult land, and you have more control and autonomy. Staff has to respect the individual autonomy, too. In FSCD parents are primarily the decision drivers. The nature of the programs also changes. Having said that, we are committed to working with individuals and their families to make sure that that transition is seamless. There are certainly improvements that can be made, and through this review we will certainly look at that if that's the issue raised by the community.

Dr. Starke: Okay. Another issue that's raised by many advocates in my area is a concern that increases in funding are only going to

increase funding to the overriding bureaucracy of the delivery model and that, in fact, the funding is not working its way down to either families or individual recipients of the assistance from your department, Minister. Do you track what percentage of overall dollars spent are actually eventually delivered to either families or recipients? If so, is that something that you would track in your business plan going forward, and if so, what is that number?

Mr. Sabir: Yes, we do track that. I have that information available here. I do know that \$950 million is community-contracted service providers or through family managed; \$47 million is the government direct supports. And 83.3 per cent is being directed to front-line staffing costs, and the supervisory costs are 6 per cent.

Dr. Starke: Okay. So 83 per cent is going to the staff that deliver the supports. Is that correct?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah, the front line.

Dr. Starke: Okay.

Mr. Sabir: And 6 per cent is supervisory.

Dr. Starke: Is administrative. Okay.

Minister, just a couple of quick ones. The Department of Education apparently has been working on an inclusive education policy framework for over two years, but it seems to have stalled. Have you had any communication with your colleague the Minister of Education on where that stands?

Mr. Sabir: I think that in all government policies we are taking GBA plus analysis, which will require us to make sure that we are assessing the impact of the changes that we are making to public policy, and that will certainly include a lens towards inclusive education in terms of those individuals who have disabilities. We will make sure that we provide those individuals with the right support to be meaningfully included in the education system.

Dr. Starke: Okay. And I'll ask your colleague the Minister of Education this question as well. I'll follow up with that.

Mr. Sabir: Sure.

Dr. Starke: Minister, in the few seconds I have remaining, I just wanted to, you know, say that there remains a great deal of concern in the PDD community as far as what appears to be a lack of co-ordination of programs and supports that are being provided – and this was something that came up a number of times during the course of my meetings with the families I met with – and also concern with regard to the lack at this point of the advocate that was called for. We'd like to see that position filled as soon as possible.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this point I would like to call on Mr. Shepherd from the government caucus to speak for the remainder of the meeting. Are you wanting to combine your time?

Mr. Shepherd: Please, if I could and if the minister is willing.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you. Thank you, Minister. Through the chair, I will just continue with the question I was asking, I guess, before we got cut off the last time. I was just talking about sort of the awareness I have that here within my constituency there's quite a bit of work that's being co-ordinated between social agencies, the

work of your department, and the work with the city of Edmonton and, certainly, recognizing that there is a great effect on a number of the communities in how some of these decisions are made. I imagine this is also true of some other municipalities and communities around the province that you're interacting with in terms of the investments that you make through your ministry in a number of areas. That being the case, within the priorities and the plans that you've laid out in your business plan, how are you ensuring that they align with the plans and needs of each of the municipalities where you're investing dollars?

Mr. Sabir: I think that's a very important question. While generally the budget will provide many different vital services that Albertans rely on, if we talk about the issues particular to the homelessness area and how we are co-ordinating that, we work with our different community partners, municipalities to make sure that our priorities and their priorities are aligned. We do have a table set up through Seniors and Housing – and Community and Social Services is part of that as well – that will also ensure that there is well co-ordinated, well-thought-out planning with all the relevant parties, relevant stakeholders, including different orders of government and community agencies, that are present.

In the two big cities we have that collaboration on affordable housing, so that will help us do a co-ordinated planning process that will help us with that. Even in other areas we do have community-based organizations; we do have other partners who work in that area. We do work with them regularly to make sure that our goals are aligned, our priorities are aligned, and we are not replicating each other's efforts.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. Thank you, Minister.

We talked a little bit earlier about the increase in your budget. Again, I certainly support the funding you provided, that you've maintained that stable and predictable funding and that you've increased the supports in areas like homelessness. I'm wondering: along with the increase and the maintenance, are you taking any steps to manage costs and find any savings within your ministry without impacting those front-line services?

Mr. Sabir: Yes. Absolutely. Like every other ministry, we are absolutely committed to taking steps to manage costs and find savings without impacting front-line services. We are doing that in a number of ways. We are filling only the most critical front-line positions. We are containing the budget for supplies and services. We are limiting discretionary spending, including, like, conferences, advertising, publications, travel, hospitality, those things. As I mentioned in my opening remarks as well, our staff-to-management ratio is 1 to 16, so that goes to show that we are focusing on filling only the front-line positions. We will continue to look for efficiencies wherever we can find savings without impacting the services . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded.

I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on Tuesday, April 17, 2018, at 3:30 p.m. to consider the estimates for the Ministry of Status of Women.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

