



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Community and Social Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 3, 2020
9 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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* substitution for Nathan Neudorf

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Community and Social Services

Hon. Rajan Sawhney, Minister

Chi Loo, Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Services

Shannon Marchand, Deputy Minister

9 a.m.

Tuesday, March 3, 2020

[Ms Goodridge in the chair]

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

Ms Goodridge: Wonderful. Seeing it is now 9 a.m., I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everybody here today. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have all MLAs introduce themselves for the record. Minister, can you please introduce the officials that are at the table with you. My name is Laila Goodridge. I am the MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche, the chair of this committee, and I look to my right to continue introductions.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, Edmonton-City Centre, serving as deputy chair.

Mr. Neudorf: Nathan Neudorf, MLA for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Guthrie: Peter Guthrie, Airdrie-Cochrane.

Mr. Rutherford: Brad Rutherford, Leduc-Beaumont.

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

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

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

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Jeremy Nixon, Calgary-Klein.

Mr. Amery: Mickey Amery, Calgary-Cross.

Mrs. Sawhney: Good morning. I'm Rajan Sawhney, MLA for Calgary-North East, Minister of Community and Social Services. To my left I have ADM Mr. Chi Loo. To my right I have Deputy Minister Shannon Marchand. To his right is senior financial officer Olin Lovely and ADM Jason Chance.

Member Irwin: Janis Irwin, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Ms Pancholi: Good morning. Rakhi Pancholi, Edmonton-Whitemud.

The Chair: Wonderful.

Please note that the microphones are being operated by *Hansard* and that the committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. I would just ask that everyone set their cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of this meeting. As well, I want to make note of some intermittent Internet issues that are happening across the building, so if your Internet goes down, that is probably why.

For the speaking order and time reviews, hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for the consideration of the main estimates. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation while the speaking time limits are set out in Standing Order 59.02(1). In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of these comments we will begin a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus.

The rotation of speaking times will then alternate between the Official Opposition and the government caucus, with individual speaking times being set to five minutes, which, when combined with the minister's time, makes it a 10-minute block. 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 a question regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or e-mail to either myself or the committee clerk.

A total of six hours has been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services. The scheduled end time for our meeting this morning is noon. The committee will then continue our consideration of the ministry's estimates at 3:30 this afternoon. With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? Hearing none, we will be having a break.

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials that are seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone that is in the back on the left side of the gallery. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Just to note, attendees in the gallery may not approach the table at any point in time. 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 the six hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allocated in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the three-hour clock will continue to run; however, the timer for the speaking block will be paused.

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 will occur in Committee of Supply on March 19, 2020. 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 the committee members and staff.

I just want to flip back quickly as I didn't note the following substitutions: Mr. Shepherd will be substituting as deputy chair for Ms Sigurdson, and Mr. Turton will be substituting for Ms Glasgo for a portion of the meeting.

I now will invite the Minister of Community and Social Services to begin her opening remarks. Minister, you have 10 minutes.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you. Once again, good morning, everyone. I'm pleased to provide an overview of Community and Social Services' 2020 budget. Budget 2020 continues our focus on creating jobs, growing our economy, and making sure services are there for people who need them. We are taking action now to get spending under control so we can achieve better results for Albertans now and into the future. Our plan is working. Alberta is on track to balance the budget by 2022-23. As you know, there is no change to total funding for health, education, and social services. We are refocusing how dollars are spent to make sure services get to the people they are meant to serve.

Funding for Community and Social Services is maintained at \$3.9 billion as we continue to support the well-being of vulnerable Albertans, including children and adults with disabilities, people who are looking for work, Albertans affected by homelessness, and

survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. Budget 2020 will help us strengthen partnerships with civil society organizations and communities, which will increase the stability, participation, and inclusion of Albertans.

Caseload and cost pressures present a challenge for program sustainability. I have been transparent with our stakeholders about these challenges, and I value their input into solutions that will make programs more sustainable. As we review programs to improve the way we deliver services and achieve better results for Albertans, we are committed to ensuring supports continue to be there for Alberta's most vulnerable families now and in the future. An important element I have been discussing with the community is how we ensure clients have access to the services they need and that they remain available in the future. We are making investments to demonstrate our commitment to protecting Alberta's most vulnerable. We are committed to getting spending under control so these vital programs remain sustainable now and for future generations.

As I've already mentioned, we face significant caseload and cost pressures, and that is why we're looking closely at all of our programs to address these challenges. We're focused on achieving better results for Albertans, and that means improving the way we deliver services and ensuring services are getting to the people who need them the most. The fact that we have maintained the ministry's budget as we review programs is indicative of the care and attention that we are giving to this work. Stakeholder engagement is dynamic and continuous, and we are taking the time that's necessary to get this right. Decisions stemming from reviews will be made thoughtfully, compassionately, and based on data and facts and, of course, engagement.

In regard to disability services Budget 2020 includes \$1.36 billion to support the inclusion, well-being, and employment of Albertans with disabilities, including nearly 13,000 adults accessing the persons with developmental disabilities, or PDD, program; more than 15,000 children receiving family support for children with disabilities; Albertans getting support from 12 fetal alcohol spectrum disorder service networks across the province; and people with mobility challenges who receive support from the residential access modification program, or RAMP, to modify their homes. We're keeping our promises to Albertans with disabilities in Budget 2020 with \$1.5 million to establish four new family resource centres in St. Paul, Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat, and Edmonton; by maintaining funding for RAMP, which increased by 30 per cent in Budget 2019; and also by investing \$500,000 to create a partnership with civil society and the registered disability savings plan action group to help Albertans with disabilities open RDSPs and access a Canada disability savings grant and bond.

Funding for family support for children with disabilities, or FSCD, and the PDD supports to Albertans are both increased as the programs face significant caseload and cost pressures. From 2015 to 2019 the FSCD caseload rose 30 per cent, and the PDD caseload increased by 14 per cent. The rate of growth is a major challenge to sustaining these programs. Priority for disability services is being given to those with critical and urgent needs while we continue to work with the community on solutions.

9:10

I am committed to transparency. Our government inherited the wait-list for PDD, and we have made this information public at the request of the disability community. I understand that the community would like to see family support for children with disabilities data as well. I am exploring options for increased transparency for this information, and I do plan to release data later

this month. Having accurate data will help us work together to address these caseload pressures.

I have and I will continue to work together and engage with the disability community through the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities, the Disability Advisory Forum, the service provider partnership committee, the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, and the family support for children with disabilities provincial and regional advisory committees.

My department officials and I have met with hundreds of key stakeholders, families, and clients across the province since Budget 2019 to discuss shared priorities and challenges. We've had frank and collaborative discussions with the disability community, advocates for low-income Albertans, and organizations supporting Albertans impacted by homelessness, family violence, and sexual assault. I will continue to meet and engage with all of our valued stakeholders and more, including clients, families, civil society organizations, and municipalities moving forward. I'm confident, I'm optimistic that we will develop innovative solutions and changes that achieve the goal we share, to ensure vulnerable Albertans get the services and supports they need.

In regard to AISH, we're committed to supporting Albertans with permanent disabilities to meet their basic needs. Funding for assured income for the severely handicapped is \$1.29 billion, nearly one-third of the ministry's total budget. This is the highest budget in the program's history. More than 68,000 people are receiving AISH as of January 2020. AISH benefits are the highest amongst the provinces, and I do know how important this program is to the Albertans who depend on it. Again, caseload and cost pressures do present a challenge for program sustainability within AISH. Since 2010 the number of people receiving AISH has grown by 70 per cent, and the comparable budget for AISH benefits has more than doubled. The AISH caseload growth rate is more than three times the growth rate of Alberta's population, and we're taking a close look at AISH and other core programs to ensure they are sustainable, once again, now and for future generations.

Turning to employment and income support, we are investing \$938 million in programs that help Albertans get back to work and assist people with significant barriers to employment to meet their basic needs. The core and supplemental benefit rates for income support, which increased in January 2019, are being maintained. Our income support programs will continue to be funded according to demand, and as the economy improves and more jobs are created, the income support expected to work caseload is projected to be lower.

I'm pleased that Budget 2020 will support more Albertans with disabilities to get jobs this year. Specifically, an additional \$5 million will be invested to build on successful partnerships that provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Across the province our Alberta Supports centres will continue to connect Albertans to employment and social services in communities.

In regard to domestic and sexual violence, our government is committed to addressing domestic and sexual violence and ensuring that survivors do get the help that they need. Funding is maintained for women's shelters in Budget 2020, including 30 women's emergency shelters and 13 second-stage shelters. We are keeping our promises to survivors of sexual assault, increasing funding for sexual assault services by \$1.2 million, for a total of \$11.5 million in 2020-21. This additional funding will go towards police and court support for survivors and regional expansion of services. As well, \$600,000 in additional funding will support implementation of the Disclosure to Protect Against Domestic Violence (Clare's Law) Act.

In regard to homeless supports Budget 2020 maintains overall grant funding to shelters and to community organizations, ensuring

that homeless Albertans are safe and supported, including housing first programs.

In addition, our government is committing \$7 million in the 2020 capital plan for the Red Deer integrated emergency shelter addition, which will support approximately 160 new shelter spaces. This will help address the urgent need for a larger, more functional shelter space to accommodate increased demand during peak times. We will continue to work with shelters and other homeless-serving organizations to address challenges and to prioritize services for people with the most critical needs.

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

For the next hour that follows, the members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. The timer will be set to three 20-minute intervals so that members are aware of the time. As mentioned previously, 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, and discussion must flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether speaking time is combined or not.

Are you guys planning to share time?

Ms Renaud: Sure.

Mrs. Sawhney: No.

The Chair: All right. The minister said no.

Marie Renaud, you have 10 minutes.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I want to thank everyone who's here today, and I also want to thank the families and people with disabilities that have tuned in to watch and will see what's happening.

I just want to maybe make a point for people that don't understand. By combining our time, we're able to go back and forth and actually get answers and do that live and clarify and dig down. The decision to do that is a political one, and it's not one based on transparency, so let's just start there. This is the only opportunity that people have to ask questions about a budget that will determine their future for the year. That is really disappointing, but I understand why you don't want to communicate.

So let's start. Basically, if I understand this, I'm going to ask questions for – what? – 20 minutes.

The Chair: Ten.

Ms Renaud: Ten minutes, and then you're going to answer questions. Okay.

Let's go. Thank you, everyone, for being here. Let's talk about Budget 2020, which also actually serves as the Q3 update for Budget 2019. It states on page 132 that "in 2019-20, spending was \$63 million less than budget reflecting a change to benefits payment." Can the minister shed light on the decision-making process that led to this outcome, and what was the motivation? How was that decision advised? I certainly hope that you're writing these questions down so that we get answers.

My next supplemental is: as you were making this decision, was there any government-wide effort to examine spending in-year? Was there any exercise in what was commonly known as an in-year savings exercise? Did the Treasury Board or the Minister of Finance issue any directives or direction to your ministry, after tabling Budget 2019, to find additional spending reductions in-year?

Are you aware, Minister Sawhney, that this change to AISH benefit payment dates took the community by surprise? I'm quite sure you are aware because I've seen some of the e-mails that were addressed to both of us. Nobody was expecting it. Who was the

originator? Did it come from within your department? From Treasury Board and Finance? From Executive Council?

I'd also like to ask about the decision-making process that led to this outcome. Was the final decision to change the timing of benefit payments made by you, or did you take this issue to Treasury Board for approval? Did you take this issue to cabinet? I want to understand where the decision was made, whether it was a ministerial decision or a corporate decision.

I'd also like to ask some questions about the decision-making process that led your government to present a reduced budget in 2019-20 as a result of your change to the timing of the AISH payments. To be clear, as part of the budget process, you would have received a memorandum from the Minister of Finance asking for 2019-2020 actuals, and as the minister responsible for Community and Social Services you would have formally affixed your signature to a response memorandum. That would have included your ministry expense forecasts, I'm assuming. My first question is this: did your budget memorandum include a reduction in expenses in the amount of \$63 million related to AISH payments, or did Treasury Board and Finance make a corporate adjustment after your submission?

9:20

The government of Alberta employs an accrual method for accounting for expense, and AISH payments are statutory benefits. According to public-sector accounting standards and the Fiscal Planning and Transparency Act the timing of statutory benefit payments should not impact overall expense in a given year. However, Budget 2020 did the opposite. By all indications, you made a decision to inappropriately book a reduction in expense to artificially decrease the deficit. My question is this: how are you justifying, from an accounting perspective, the decision to reduce expense in 2019-2020? Did anyone in your ministry or did anyone from Treasury Board and Finance or anyone from the office of the Controller raise concerns at any level that your decision to reduce expense in 2019-2020 was offside with public-sector accounting standards or the Fiscal Planning and Transparency Act? Given the broad public speculation that your decision on AISH payments was an inappropriate attempt to reduce the deficit in 2019-2020, did you ask your officials for any advice on the proper accounting treatment for this issue? If yes, what was that advice? If not, why did you not ask for that advice?

As you are no doubt aware, on February 12, 2020, after your public announcement on AISH, the Public Accounts Committee of the Legislature met with Treasury Board and Finance and the office of the Auditor General, where the accounting treatment for changes to AISH payment was discussed at length. At that meeting the office of the Auditor General stated that a change in benefit payment dates would not alter expense for fiscal 2019-2020. However, Budget 2020 did just that. My first question is this: why are your ministry expenses in 2019-2020, as presented in Budget 2020, offside with the advice of the Auditor General of Alberta? The Auditor General stated at the meeting of Public Accounts that the timing of AISH benefit payments should not alter expense explicitly because the government employs an accrual method of accounting and AISH payments are statutory in nature. Do you agree with the self-evident observation from the Auditor General's office?

At the same meeting of Public Accounts the MLA for Airdrie-Cochrane, a member of the government caucus, stated that changing the timing of AISH benefit payments should not decrease expense because, while it changes cash flow, it is "still accrued in the previous time period." Hence, the expense was still accrued in 2019-2020. Can you explain to your government colleague MLA

Guthrie why you believe that the AISH expense should not be accrued in fiscal 2019-2020?

I'd like to move away from the accounting treatment of the timing of AISH benefit payments and get to the policy rationale. It is fair to say that every single expert I've spoken to thinks that your change was poorly thought out. Simply put, there is a universal agreement that the policy costs of your decision far outweigh the policy benefits. My question is this: did your ministry engage in rigorous cost-benefit analysis of this policy change prior to the decision being taken? What was the nature of the cost-benefit analysis? Can you share that with this committee? Can you tell us more about the approach, the methodology, the data sets that were used, and of course what were the findings?

At the meeting of Public Accounts that I mentioned earlier, the Deputy Minister of Finance offered that for a decision of this nature the policy work and analysis underlying it would have to have been rigorous. Minister, in your view, did you undertake a rigorous analysis? If not, what adjective would you use to describe the level of sophistication for this analysis? Given the seriousness of this issue and the impact on the lives of AISH recipients, will you as the minister responsible commit to tabling the analysis provided to you when you made the decisions to change the AISH benefit payment dates?

I just want to stop before I go on to my next question. I just want to reiterate to members of this committee that while a change in the payment date on its surface may not look like a big deal – it's a few days – people used to get paid before the end of the month so that they could buy their bus passes, make sure that their rent was paid on time. Many Albertans have arrangements with AISH so that there is a direct payment made to their landlord or property manager because they have difficulty budgeting, let alone paying bills.

For this change, although I think it was a little line at the bottom of a letter sent to them, they didn't get a lot of notice, and as a result we're seeing what happened. We're seeing it happen in real time right now. People have not received their payments on time. People are being fined and assessed fees, late-payment fees. People are frightened. People are confused. People are worried. People are not getting their medical services card on time, Minister. What that means for them: even if it's a few days late, that means they don't have coverage for a few days. As you can imagine, for someone running out of a medication like an anticonvulsant, a lapse of a few days is a big deal. It's a life-changing big deal.

As your ministry engaged in the policy analysis of this potential change to AISH benefit payment dates – I'm assuming there was something – did your ministry consult with or seek advice from Treasury Board and Finance, the office of the Controller, and, again, the policy co-ordination office in Executive Council? If you did, what was their advice?

The Chair: All right. Next up we've got 10 minutes for the minister. I just want to remind everybody that all discussion must go through the chair and not directly to other members of this committee. Thank you.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, and thank you for all of those questions. First of all, I'm going to start off by saying that I do recognize that this policy, where we had a change in the payment dates, has caused stress and anxiety amongst our AISH and income support clients. Any kind of change, I know, is always something that is uncomfortable. I have said many times that we are committed to helping our clients transition through this process to the best of our ability. I have indicated that clients should phone their caseworkers, and they can also get in touch with the disability

advocate's office as well to get additional support. My ministry is here, definitely, to assist in that transition process.

In regard to why this decision was made – I mean, there's lots of information that probably is not readily apparent and readily available to the public at large, so I'll share some of that information with you. First of all, I've spoken about the uptick in the month of January in terms of emergency benefits that are distributed to our vulnerable clients. That was a concern to me when I saw those numbers. I had asked my officials: what is happening here? They talked a little bit about the schedule at that time and how there was a 41-day lag between payments at that time that resulted in, essentially, clients running out of money and having to go to the food bank and having to access more emergency supports to get them through until the next payment came through.

I know that the easy answer would be: well, just change that one date. But when I looked at the payment schedule – I mean, the previous payment schedule was designed so that payments went out on the fourth-last business day of the month. Even before any changes were made, I can tell you, I can attest, I can confirm that my department received calls all the time – all the time – from clients asking: "When is my payment coming in?" or "When is my cheque going to come in?" or "When am I going to see these funds in my bank account?" Look, I'll read out the dates of the previous schedule: Tuesday, January 28; Tuesday, February 25; Thursday, March 26; Monday, April 27; Tuesday, May 26. Like, the dates are everywhere in terms of when they fall within the month. The days of the week are everywhere. There was no consistency here.

This was a pre-existing issue already in the department. We had clients who were confused about when their payments were going to come in. Yes, the schedule is published, but as we know, not all clients are necessarily looking at the schedule at all times. Part of the effort was: how can we alleviate this particular situation, and how can we provide more consistency and predictability to our clients? One of the options that came forward was moving the date to the first of the month. So that is part of the policy rationale.

In addition, you know, the dollar amount of emergency supports that Community and Social Services provides on a monthly basis for emergency benefits is almost \$700,000 a month, and that includes evictions, that includes, again, emergency supports for shelter and clothing, and that adds up. Like, what does that add up to in a year? It's almost 8 and a half million dollars. When you're looking at program reviews and you're trying to find dollars that you can reallocate to those people who really, really need those services, this is part of the exercise: to understand what we can do as a department, as a ministry to bring those numbers down and make sure that we are doing our best for our vulnerable clients and also ensuring that the dollars are used so that they do get to the people who do need them the most.

9:30

There were a number of questions about the accounting treatment and the perspective of the Auditor General and what happened within the Public Accounts Committee. I am going to defer some of those questions to my officials to answer, and then I will come back and address some of the remaining questions.

Mr. Chi Loo, if you could just address some of the Auditor General questions, please, I'd appreciate that.

Mr. Loo: Madam Chair, the references to PCAP – on the record, I'm not a professional accountant, but on my staff I have three professional CPAs working for me. As well, we've been in contact with members of Treasury Board and Finance, folks who are professional accountants, as well. On the particular section of PCAP, as far as our interpretation is concerned, we are aligning the

payment where it is due. The payment for April is a liability that's not established until April 1 comes along. In the past years we made the payment in March. We charged that in March. We're just aligning the payment to the right, appropriate period. In terms of the opinion of exact – you know, there may be different opinions, but that will come to fruition when the financial statements of the government of Alberta will be produced for this year here. But as it relates to what we are talking about today, the budget for '20-21, yes, that is in the forecast column. That's an indication of how we'll be treating that, and we have been consulting in terms of Treasury Board and Finance as well.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you.

I think that some of the other questions were asked about analyses and cost benefit. I think I have spoken to some of the cost benefits in terms of the dollar value of emergency support services and benefits that are given out typically anyhow, irrespective of this date change. To add to that, I mean, this was something that we discussed internally within the ministry and within the department. We talked about the impacts on clients extensively and how we would support clients throughout that transition. We also did, obviously, talk to Treasury Board and Finance to talk about, again, the impacts and the benefits to clients as well.

Now I just want to touch on the member's remarks about clients losing access to their medical benefits. I would just caution against making statements that are not accurate. Like, that is not true. All clients still do have access to their medical benefits, and they can certainly get their medication. The member knows that that's true. The system access remains even if the card is out of date. Pharmacists are aware of who their clients are, and they can certainly confirm eligibility in the system as well to ensure that medications and benefits are dispensed as required by clients. I do want to make that clear.

If anybody is listening and they're worried that they haven't received their medical card, please know that you still have access to your medical benefits and your medicine. That's very, very important for you to know. This kind of information, which creates unnecessary fear, is not helpful.

Again, going back to the policy of the payment deferral date, I also want to say that as part of the review that I am doing of the ministry and all the programs, we have looked at how we distribute grants across the whole spectrum of programs that we administer. This was one policy. I know that we can talk about this later with FCSS. I mean, there is a change in how we disburse that grant funding as well. In addition, we have also looked at working on multiyear grants as part of looking at our overall ministry's cash management process and how we can do things better because, quite frankly, I have a \$3.9 billion budget, and I intend to use every single cent of that budget to make sure that it goes directly to vulnerable Albertans. So we will look at ways to do things differently, at ways to look at our processes and procedures to ensure that we can free up those additional dollars that might be stuck in red tape or in other processes to make sure that they're getting to those individuals who are experiencing homelessness, that they're getting to those victims who are experiencing domestic violence.

In regard to the payments that have gone out, I do want to say that I know that we have heard some concerns from clients who did not get their payments on time. To that I want to say that this typically happens every month anyhow, irrespective of this date change. It can happen for a variety of different reasons, so if anybody is hearing from folks or from their constituents or from families or friends that they didn't get their payments, I just want to say that, again, this does typically happen every month anyhow. If

banking or personal information has changed, it could result in the payment not going through to their account. If they have not fulfilled their reporting requirements under the income support program, that can also impact payments not going through.

I can tell you, because I have the numbers here, provided by my staff, that almost 120,000 payments went out last week as planned. Again, in these situations where clients have not received . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

On to the second of our 20-minute blocks and back to Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just before I continue the line of questioning, I wanted to make a comment. Let's just start with the medical services card. It's an antiquated system. I fully agree that often it's actually a paper card that people have to wait for. I don't know if there are plans to change that system-wide, but as it stands, it's sort of the way the system works for a lot of people.

You talked about pharmacists. You know: don't worry about your medication because pharmacists have got you. Yes, in a lot of cases pharmacists will keep a copy of the old medical services card on hand in case there is a lapse, but that is not the case for everyone. So my question to the minister is: what communication did you send out to pharmacists and other providers to ensure that even one person wouldn't fall through the cracks? I'd like to know that.

I also don't think it's a fair assessment to – even if you sent out 120,000 payments on time, that's still not everybody, and I would suggest that missing a few thousand people or watching a few thousand people struggle is still a problem. So instead of pointing fingers and accusing people of spreading fear, I would encourage you to actually listen, because if you listen, I think you'll find some answers there about how to make this better.

Going back to my AISH questions very briefly, as you are likely aware, we've written to the Auditor General asking that he formally investigate this matter. We've asked for an immediate audit into the financial statements to determine whether Budget 2020 has misrepresented the deficit, and we've asked for a performance audit into the analysis and decision-making process that led to this discussion. So will you commit openly – well, I'm not even going to ask that because you're not going to respond.

I mean, that leads me to my other question, Madam Chair. With this exchange going the way it is, how am I going to confirm whether or not any documents will be shared with the committee? That's sort of up in the air. There are a lot of questions that I'd like to ask to get some clarity about from the officials from that department. With this new method of, you know, really not speaking to each other, I don't know how that's going to happen. Maybe that's something to think about.

I'm going to move on quickly and talk about service dogs because I didn't really have a chance to talk about them during the last estimates, which were only about four months ago. It seems like an eternity. I think we can all agree that service dogs are essential to people for a lot of different reasons. They make life a whole lot easier in many cases. We have had a service dog pilot program, which was initially announced and started in 2017. I think there's an annual budget of between \$250,000 and \$300,000, so certainly not a huge amount but a very significant investment because there really was not much before.

9:40

In that time there have been a number of things that were done. There was a process put in place for people who train their own dogs to be assessed to provide a pathway to licensing so that they could enjoy sort of the freedom and movement of other dogs and

other dog teams. There was a process in place for organizations not accredited with ADI, let's say, for them to also assist the service dog teams. My understanding was that the goal of this pilot project was to ultimately invest where you could make the biggest difference, and obviously the biggest, the best measure of that is: how many more active service teams are out there in Alberta doing the work?

When I look back at where the grants were assigned, there's not a lot of clarity. I know that you're aware of this, Minister. I did send an e-mail to your chief of staff – I'm assuming that you read it, too – just asking for more clarity because there isn't much on the website in terms of who applies for grants. When do they apply for grants? What are the criteria or the metrics for success for these grant applicants? I think it is very important. There aren't a lot of providers in the province that do this very specialized work, so it would be actually good to know that.

What we did find – and let me just back up a little bit. I think that with a service dog it can take a very long time for that team to be at a place where they're functioning at a hundred per cent. It can take between a year and two years to raise that dog, to train that dog, to work with that team, to place that team, and to monitor that team. So when you are selecting grant recipients, it's very important to ensure that the organization has the experience, the expertise to do that. Now, again, this pilot was a way to allow organizations that are not accredited to do some of that work, so it stands to reason that your ministry would take extra time to ensure that you do your homework, like checking the references of the organization. How many teams have been placed? What is their success? Are there any concerns that have been levied against the organization?

It looks to me that the grants have been divided, or that there are some not-for-profit organizations and there are some for-profit businesses. Now, one of the organizations that has received the most funding since it began, actually close to 30 per cent of the funding, only opened their doors in I think it was late 2018. This is a new company. This is a company that, at the time that they opened, had no experience training and placing dogs as a company, as an organization, yet they got almost 30 per cent of the funding. I actually met with this organization to find out more about what they did and who they were and where they came from, where they had worked, what their experiences had been. You know, I had a few questions. I would assume that your ministry did as well if you did your homework.

So I'd really like to know, I think it's important for Albertans to understand: what are the criteria for companies and nonprofit organization to receive funding to provide assistance to Albertans who need service dogs? I'd also like to know how many service dogs have been placed. I would also like to know how many of the service dogs, out of the number of service teams that have now been approved as a result of this pilot, were actually from organizations that were funded versus organizations that were simply placed on the qualified list? I think there is a discrepancy.

Now, one of things that concerned me about this organization was that they had not placed any teams in their capacity as a new organization that received almost 30 per cent of the grant funding, yet they also received grant funding from another initiative which is meant to support people with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. So an organization that has no experience placing teams, an organization that has no experience supporting people with FASD is now receiving a very large grant to do so. I would question why that is. Who is the one person that is making these decisions? Why are you not allowing Albertans to see the metrics that you use to measure successful grant applicants? That's concerning to me.

It's concerning to me, when I think about that same organization that received almost 30 per cent of the funding, that they charge

between \$25,000 and \$40,000 per dog. Now, a nonprofit organization that's, say, been around for a couple of decades, fund raises: they charge \$1 for a dog. I don't really understand the difference, why you would direct 30 per cent of funding in a very tiny pot for service dog teams to a company that looks to make a profit versus a nonprofit organization that has a track record, a reputation for success in the community; also, diverting funds from FASD initiatives that are absolutely vital and oversubscribed all the time. So I look forward to hearing more about that. I suspect that there is likely more to this, about the relationship of the owner of the company, but again I'll wait to hear from your ministry to find out more about that.

I'm going to move on, and I'm going to move to one of the comments that you made during your opening remarks about civil society groups, I think it was. Let's talk about that. Let me just find the page here. Under key objective 3.5, under outcome 3 – and that was in the business plan – it states that your government will “create a Premier's Charities Council to advise government on how best to assist efforts of civil society groups in helping to make Alberta a more compassionate society.” My questions are these. Is this a reannouncement?

The Chair: All right. That concludes the second of our three 20-minute slots.

On to the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes. Thank you. First of all, I'm just going to comment on the remarks that more listening is required from AISH clients, from income support clients. I think what I'm going to say is that I have done a tremendous amount of engagement with a number of stakeholders. I've spoken to AISH clients. I have family members who are AISH clients, as a matter of fact.

In regard to the medical card I do agree that it is antiquated, and it is something that should be looked at. We should make it a little bit easier, and I know that there are ways to use technology just to make these processes a little bit easier. That's just one example of, you know, things that are within the AISH program that could be looked at just to make things easier for clients. I have spoken to a number of AISH recipients, and the medical card has come up.

I've spoken to folks who say that they have problems finding a dentist in their community. I was in Cold Lake, and one of the AISH recipients said that there was maybe only one or two dentists within that community that served AISH clients, and when they went into their clinics, they often felt that perhaps there was a stigma attached to them. This is something I hear from AISH and income support clients as well. It's not just, you know, for medical services or for dental services but even when trying to rent property. I've heard clients say that when their landlords find out that they are AISH recipients or income support recipients, sometimes again there's a stigma. There's a lack of comfort. They don't want to rent their properties to these vulnerable clients.

So when these comments are made that I need to listen more and I need to be more empathetic and I need to understand the challenges that these vulnerable folks face – I've had those conversations, and I will never be so arrogant to say that I understand completely what their lives are like, but I'm very, very sensitive to and cognizant of some of these challenges. Certainly, as we go forward and we potentially introduce any policy changes, these conversations will stay in my mind and I will take them definitely under consideration.

I just also wanted to remark – and perhaps the chair can weigh in on this as well – that I don't believe that this is a new process, is it, where we don't combine time? I know the member had commented

on that. I believe that this is a documented process. Anybody can use this process. Can you confirm, please?

The Chair: Yes, Minister. The standing orders permit to either split time or have blocked time, so this is perfectly acceptable.

9:50

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. It's in the standing orders. There's precedent for this. It's not a sneaky little manoeuvre that anybody is trying to do like this. It's in the standing orders, and it's a legitimate way to share information and to answer questions. So, please, I would caution against making it sound like this is somehow inappropriate or somehow we are withholding information. That is absolutely not true. I'm extremely transparent and open and honest about what I need to share about my ministry.

Now, in regard to service dogs we are doing our level best to improve access to qualified service dogs in Alberta. Our government is making sure that people with disabilities get full and open access to qualified service dogs, and Albertans who have trained their own service dogs can get them qualified in Alberta as well. Currently we have 11 approved organizations that are now training and testing dogs, and we're always accepting applications from new service dog organizations who are wanting to become providers.

I know that Member Renaud had talked about an organization and that she had concerns with it. I obviously don't know what this organization is, and I would request perhaps more information, if she could send that to us, because when I hear things like that – and, of course, this is hearsay – it does raise a concern. Certainly, we do want to be as open as possible in terms of the who, the when, the where, the criteria, and I think there are opportunities to provide that transparency and clarity on our website as well.

In terms of the current process used for these grant recipients or potential grant recipients, I am going to defer to my officials to talk about that process in more detail.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. Thank you. Shannon Marchand, deputy minister. You know, there are three types of service dog organizations that we will approve: the producer organizations that raise and train and place service dogs that meet the requirements of the Service Dogs Act and regulations; trainers, so organizations that provide advanced or upgraded public access training to service dogs; as well as assessors, which are organizations approved by government to conduct the service dog qualification assessment. In terms of eligibility, all schools accredited by Assistance Dogs International as well as candidate schools can be included on the qualified list. The organizations must follow the Alberta training standard.

In terms of how that application process works, the organization would begin by connecting with the service dog assessment team. They would then complete an application, and the application package entails a number of pieces: an application form, standards and ethics, a variety of required documents, a qualification manual, guidance notes, on-site review procedures, and an annual statement of compliance form, which would then be submitted to our department staff for review. Ultimately, an on-site review does happen with the team. There may be interviews scheduled with staff and volunteers, and then that will ultimately come to a recommendation about placement on the qualified list.

It is indeed possible – if an organization is unsuccessful, they get a report detailing areas that require improvement – that if those improvements are made, then they can still reapply to be placed on the qualified list.

The available grants: you know, there are grants available to organizations as well.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you, Shannon.

I just want to say that the number of service dogs qualified in 2019 is consistent with the previous year, and 117 service dogs were qualified from January to December of '18. As the member mentioned, the ministry's 2020 budget for service dogs is \$300,000. Yes. I'm just verifying that as well.

I also want to say in regard to service dogs that to be considered a qualified service dog in Alberta, a dog must come from one of Alberta's qualified service dog organizations, pass an assessment administered by a qualified organization, or come from a school certified by Assistance Dogs International, ADI.

Again in regard to service dogs I'll end off by saying that our department is going to continue to meet with stakeholders to provide education and awareness regarding public access rights for qualified service dogs and their owners. I would again encourage Member Renaud to send me some more information about that particular organization that she has concerns with, and we will dig into that a little bit further.

Okay. I hope that I was able to answer the majority of the questions on service dogs.

I also want to touch on a comment made that there has been a diversion of FASD funds. I'd like some more clarity around that because that is not the case. The FASD funds are intact. We've maintained that funding. We know that they provide a very invaluable, important service to very vulnerable children and adults. I just want to reiterate that the funding for the networks has remained intact.

Okay. The final question. I know that the member did not get to finish her question, but it was around the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society. This is something that I personally take a great deal of pride in, putting this group of individuals together who are going to help us build some capacity within our civil society sector, help create social enterprises, help some of these not-for-profit organizations develop alternate ways to increase revenues.

What I want to say – and I know this through my volunteer background and through my stakeholder engagement – is that people want to help others. There's a tremendous desire within our communities for individuals to want to be able to help others, either through volunteerism or through monetary methods or through mentoring, but quite often the opportunities are not quite as readily observable, and this will be one of the tasks of this particular council.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we move on to our next 20-minute block, which will be from the government caucus.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Just to clarify about the FASD funding, it comes from open data, the blue book. Actually, total funding provided in 2019-20 reached \$140,499; of this funding, \$102,667 listed in the blue book as coming from the FASD strategic plan instead of the provincial disability supports initiative. Maybe you could clarify that and get back to me. That would be great.

I'm going to move on to the government estimates on page 52. I'm going to start going through these line items. It's unfortunate that we can't go back and forth. I'm just going to ask you some questions, and for people watching, I'm going to explain what these lines are and what my concerns are, and hopefully we will get some clarity from this.

In the government estimates, if you look at the first section under operating expenses, we have the appeals panels, which is line 1.5. That has been reduced. I think it was reduced not by a lot, but it was still reduced. My question is: how many total appeals for 2019-2020 – and I would like these separated, please – for AISH, persons with developmental disabilities, income support, and FASD?

What are the 2021 projections for the number of appeals in each of these programming areas? I'm assuming – I could be wrong – that there is a plan to address appeals. I think the department officials probably have a fairly good idea of what they can anticipate at any given time, what the averages are for appeals. I'd like to know what those projections are.

What changes is your ministry introducing to support this reduction to essential oversight? As you know, appeals: there are a number of levels of things, so people are able to request I think it's an administrative appeal – they can have another staff member look at the file or the decision that was made – and then there's a more formal appeal, where we have people, whether they're experts or people from the community, that are assigned to sit on these appeal panels. It's sort of that final backstop for the community to weigh in objectively to see: was this decision made in the best interests of all parties? I'd like to see that.

Moving on to the next part, I'm going to focus quite a bit of time on this because it looks like this is the area that's bearing the brunt of the cuts. Now, I would like to address the comments made by the minister at the beginning that there were no cuts made to this particular area. Fair enough. There may have not been cuts made to the overall spending in the overall required investment, but what you did was move things around.

10:00

So I think we can all agree that the pot is there and that it was assigned in a certain way, and now monies have been moved around. I hope that we can get some clarity further on. For example, for the Premier's new charity council there's \$7 million that you've assigned. Did that come from somewhere else, or are those new dollars? This ministry is making decisions about this pot of money, where it goes, and where it goes matters to Albertans because that's where they're going to feel this on the ground. That's why something like these budget estimates are so important, because they need to understand what's coming. All of these changes aren't going to happen today or next week. They're going to happen in the next year. So our job, all of us, every MLA in this room, is to do our very best for our constituents to provide as much clarity as possible, and that's why it's important to get answers to these questions.

Income support comes in two envelopes, so income support for people expected to work, income support for people that have significant barriers to work. Often a good percentage of the people that have barriers to employment are not yet on AISH. For whatever reason they're not able to qualify for AISH, but the barriers are significant, whether it's a chronic mental illness, some other type of illness, a disability. There are just any number of things, reasons that would lead someone to be eligible for this particular program. As you can imagine, it is very important to understand what is happening here.

Line 2.2 has been reduced by \$48.6 million in 2020-21. That's pretty significant. At the beginning you said that you did not cut this budget, but you did cut this line item. In your projections in the out-years that will continue. That's a big deal. It's actually a big deal. So I think the devil, again, is in the details, as always, and this is going to be about who's eligible, but I also think that this is going to be about the supplementals. I hear you say again and again – and fair enough – that you're not cutting core benefits, but you are

cutting something. You are changing something, and I think you have to admit that, that although the overall budget is not reduced, something is going on and something is happening. I think it is your right and your officials' right to change where the allocations go, but I think Albertans deserve some clarity. They need to know: what is changing? What is changing? Is eligibility changing? How is it changing? Are the supplementals changing?

If someone qualifies for core benefits on income supports but they get a \$97 transportation top-up because they have some significant problems and some significant health-related concerns and barriers but suddenly that money is not there and they're told that it's going to be reassessed monthly, you need to tell people that. You need to be honest. You say that you're honest and transparent. I appreciate that. Take this opportunity to do that. You're cutting. Where are you cutting? Who are you cutting? When will this happen? How are you deciding who's losing what? Albertans need to know this information. You saw the chaos and the confusion when you changed payment dates. This is going to hurt. We need some answers, and it's not me that needs answers, because I'm not impacted by this, but it's the thousands of people with disabilities, thousands of people, low-income Albertans that rely on this, that need some clarity.

My questions are these. How many Albertans received income supports expected to work in calendar year 2019? How many are you reporting in 2019? The AG report and the special report of the Auditor General came out in December 2019, and I believe the Public Accounts Committee will be looking at that later this year. They identified that 34,449 people relied on those benefits, and that was a backward-looking audit, so I'm assuming those numbers have changed. I would like to know: what are the numbers on that particular line item? These benefits are being reduced by almost 10 per cent. Roughly translated, just using these AG numbers alone – and, again, they're backward-facing numbers – that means over 3,000 people are going to be impacted. That's a lot of people.

We've shed over 50,000 jobs since your government was elected. We know the rate of unemployment is rising, currently at 7.3 per cent. You yourself said this about income supports four months ago, when we sat here in this room.

In terms of income and employment support caseloads, particularly expected to work, I mean, these caseloads are very closely linked to the economy and unemployment, so as our unemployment rates increase, we are going to see more clients . . . accessing these supports.

That's what you said. So we know we are facing this problem. We know that people are struggling right now. We know people are unemployed, yet you're reducing benefits for people, the very people that you're describing – that's over 3,000 people – just using a backwards-facing estimate. That's a lot of people.

What investment will you make to facilitate employment of this group? I understand that you're investing in family-managed support hubs, which is actually great. They're so long overdue. I'm very thankful that those supports will be there, and I will ask more questions about that. But I also see that you're investing heavily in employment for people with disabilities, as was in your platform document. Now, the scope of that is quite narrow, and I will ask more questions about that as well.

Going back to income support, according to an Alberta Works document dated November 2019 – and I have that; it's a schedule of what the core benefits are and then what all the supplementals are – regarding the financial benefit summary, people on income supports are eligible for things like employment training and transition supports. That allows people on income support to participate in employment preparation programs, training, or to seek or maintain employment. These are very specific supports, and

I think the amount that is assigned per person on this caseload is \$511 per adult per calendar year. How much was spent total using this code in the last year? How much are you projecting going forward?

The Chair: And on to the minister for your 10-minute response.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you. I'm just going to backtrack a little bit because one of the questions that was asked previously is: how did we inform pharmacies and other organizations about these date changes? We did send out a notification to all pharmacists within the province that this date change was happening so that they would be aware, and we also sent out notifications to landlord associations and several other organizations well in advance to advise of these date changes.

Okay. Now I will move on to the questions about the appeals. There were a number of questions asked. If I do miss anything, please let me know, and I'll get you those numbers. Let's start with the reduction in the amount for the appeals panel. It was mainly due to staffing and some administrative costs. In terms of the numbers, to date for 2019-2020 for AISH we had 1,027 appeals, for income and employment support we had 264, for PDD we had 12 appeals, and for FSCD we had three appeals. If there's more information required in terms of numbers or anything more specific, please ask again, and I can give you that information.

Now, in regard to the income support program, yes, there is a reduction of \$49 million, but to be asking with such an emphatic tone: "Like, what are you cutting? Like, be honest, be transparent." Look, these forecasts are built on the state of the economy and what we project the unemployment rate to be looking like. Treasury Board and Finance has predicted a decrease in 2020 in the unemployment rate from 6.9 to 6.7 per cent, and that's how these projections are put together. I can tell you that the GOA has a robust and rigorous process for forecasting these key economic indicators, including employment growth, so that's how these numbers have been derived. Certainly, this is a legislated benefit, and if anybody is entitled to this benefit, they will receive this benefit. There is no question of us withholding these benefits from people who are deserving of them and who are legally entitled to them. I hope that answers a little of the question around the forecast around ETW.

10:10

As I mentioned, the core and supplemental benefit rates, which increased in January 2019, are being maintained. Once again, the unemployment rate is expected to decrease this year, so that's why we expect the ETW caseload to decrease as the economy improves and jobs are created. We're also incorporating recommendations from the Auditor General's report. The report recommended that the ministry improve its processes to focus on assisting ETW clients to re-enter the workforce sooner, so there are going to be a lot of efforts made with regard to that last point. We are going to have more intensive case management with our clients to ensure that they have every opportunity and every resource at their disposal to enter the workforce again.

Again, we do also have increased funding – let me just confirm this in the budget – in line 2.4, career and employment services, because we recognize that we need more investment in this area. We need to provide more monies to people who are out there looking for work. I mean, we hear this all the time. People are at their wits' end. They truly, truly are. I hear it every day, and that's why this was something that was very important to me, that we provide more funding in this area to get people retrained, to get people thinking more about what kinds of opportunities are out there for all of those individuals who worked in certain areas, like

the oil and gas workers who worked out in the fields for so many years and now find themselves without a job and without any hope of finding employment in that sector any time soon.

Like, we need to be able to find ways to get these people retrained in this digital economy to get them back to work. If you look at the demographics for ETW, a lot of these clients are male, and they're in their mid-fifties. Imagine that. Imagine being in that position. I mean, a lot of people don't even have to imagine it; they are in that position. We need to be able to find out how we can get resources to these individuals to give them some hope so that they can find a place back in the economy and find some jobs. That's why we have increased funding in line 2.4. It is in fact a \$3 million increase, and that translates to 4.6 per cent.

I also want to say, because this isn't readily observable either, so I'll just put this out there, that in the ETW and BFE lines there is a reduction in each of those lines of \$4.5 million, which relates to the low-income transit pass program. Those funds have been moved from these line items down into line 6.3. I just wanted to confirm that. Part of that reduction in those lines is attributed to that move of those funds.

A question was: what is the current expected to work caseload? It's about 39,000 individuals at this point. Again, with the work that we're planning to do with income support case management and this additional investment in employment and career services, we are really optimistic that we will see a decrease in those numbers this year.

Of course, we know how hard this government is working to revitalize the economy, to create jobs. Every day we've got, you know, members of our government talking to stakeholders and talking to people in the business community and talking about the need to bring investment back into this province. Those efforts will be fruitful, and we will see more job opportunities available for vulnerable Albertans.

I hope that I was able to answer the questions around the forecasting. I do also want to point out, just to reiterate how much rigour and thought and effort goes into these forecasts, that the MacKinnon panel report stated that

the Alberta government is good at forecasting. Over the last 10 years, the government has ranked either #1 or #2 (out of the 13 professional forecasting organizations covering Alberta) on forecasting the core indicators of real GDP, employment growth and the unemployment rate.

Again, that just speaks to the rigour, but I don't want this to be all about numbers either. We know that there are lots of vulnerable clients out there who really, really want to get back into the workforce. I'm just going to say once again that I'm very transparent and open and honest about the efforts that we're making within the ministry to really, really focus on that vulnerable cohort.

Okay. I did mention that these are legislated obligations, so if somebody is eligible for income support, they will get it. We haven't changed anything. There are no changes in supplemental benefits or the core rate.

All right. Again, I had talked about more intensive case management, and that means that there is going to be a more regular review to ensure Albertans receive the benefits that they're eligible for. I think this is something that has lapsed in the last several years, maybe even more, this adherence to policy within our income support program. I have directed the department to make sure that within our 52 offices across the province we are adhering to policy as closely as possible, because policy is there for a reason.

Why do we have rules and regulations? They are there. They are guiding principles to help our front-line workers understand what they need to follow to ensure that vulnerable Albertans are getting the very best help. This policy has to be followed consistently

throughout the province, and I can tell you that it hasn't been done in certain cases. Certainly, I'm happy to elaborate on that a little bit more later on this afternoon. But this is something that has been communicated very clearly, and it's something that's also appreciated.

Imagine you're a front-line worker and that you have policy, but you're not really sure or you've been informed in the past: "You know what? Ignore that piece of policy. We're going to do things like this because this is the way that it's always been done, and we don't want to ruffle any feathers, right?" It creates a situation of uncertainty for those front-line workers.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for that response.

Now, with that, we move on to the government caucus, and I believe it's Mr. Guthrie. I just need to ask again: are you planning to share time with the minister or continue with straight time?

Mr. Guthrie: Straight time.

The Chair: Wonderful. Mr. Guthrie, you have the floor.

Mr. Guthrie: Well, thank you. Minister, you know, I would like to start by saying that all the interactions that I as well as my office have had with you and your ministry have all been very positive and supportive, and thank you very much for the work that you're doing.

Regarding the back-and-forth thing, you know, versus block responses, I would like to say that, yeah, you're right. According to Standing Order 59 a block response is actually the norm, but the minister and the member may agree to back and forth.

Ms Pancholi: No. That's not true. It's not the norm.

Mr. Guthrie: Yeah, it is.

You know, going back and forth is a separate agreement that is agreed to outside of that, and that depends on, I guess, whether or not the minister feels that they can actually get out a response. I feel strongly that if the opposition was more respectful – as you can see here, they're not – with their dialogue, then perhaps a back and forth may be considered, but that, of course, is just a matter of my own opinion. That said, the block response allows you to respond uninterrupted and provide fulsome responses, so I'm perfectly okay with that.

[Mr. Shepherd in the chair]

Let's get to it, I guess. I've got a series of seven different questions here. First off, what is the strategic direction that you are providing for the Ministry of Community and Social Services and its programs? Taking that a bit further, looking into the future, how do you hope that these programs will support Albertans, say, you know, 30 years down the road, 30 years from today?

I guess from you personally: what has helped you to understand Community and Social Services, the programs that they offer, and how can those support, you know, stability, participation, and inclusion for Albertans?

Are you doing okay?

10:20

Mrs. Sawhney: Yeah. Is that all right?

Mr. Guthrie: I'm still going. I just want to make sure that you're catching it all.

Mrs. Sawhney: We're good. I don't need notes to speak to this. Well, first of all . . .

Mr. Guthrie: I've got a few more here, actually.

Mrs. Sawhney: Oh. Do you have a few more?

Mr. Guthrie: Yeah.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay.

Mr. Guthrie: Then Budget 2020 provides a \$63 million, or 1.6 per cent, increase compared to the 2019-2020 budget. Can the ministry meet its commitment to provide services for Alberta's most vulnerable with this budget?

Further to that, on page 133 of the fiscal plan it outlines how the ministry spending has significantly outpaced population and inflation. With caseload growth being a key cost driver, how does the ministry plan to address that spending?

Furthermore, what are the core principles that are guiding the ministry's reviews and decision-making to get spending under control and improve how services are delivered?

Then, finally, the last question here: how does the ministry's 2020 budget support the government's platform commitments?

[Ms Goodridge in the chair]

Before I close, once again I just want to say thank you for all the great work that you and your ministry are doing. It's certainly appreciated by me and my staff and the people of Airdrie-Cochrane and all of Alberta.

Thank you very much.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you. Thank you for those questions.

The Chair: All right. Minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Once again, thank you for those questions. I think I'll start with the first set of questions. You know, I've been thinking about this for a long time, almost since the moment that I was sworn in, in terms of: what is a strategic direction that we need to go in? A few months back I had a meeting with a gentleman who is quite well known in the disability community, and we had a lengthy conversation about the issues that are facing Albertans. At that time he had asked me: what is your vision for the ministry? He said that it was time that I shared it with Albertans and with him. With that statement I do agree.

I'm going to talk a little bit about my vision. I know vision statements can often be tricky. I've had experience writing them before. If they're crafted too quickly, they can ring hollow and superficial, but if too much time elapses, they can sound reactive and one dimensional.

First of all, what is the definition of vision? The definition of vision is the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom. Let's begin with wisdom. Wisdom means understanding that there is indeed still a long way to go in ensuring inclusion and participation in society, and we all recognize this. Government has a role not only in promoting these conditions but fostering, inculcating, and enforcing when required. This, however, begins with generating greater empathy in others of the experiences of those who are differently abled. This means being able to walk in their shoes for some time, being able to see their world view from their eyes, and being able to anticipate the complexities, nuances, and challenges of navigating through everyday life when one is differently abled. This generation of greater empathy . . .

Member Irwin: Point of order. We're just curious, under 23(h), (i), and (j) of the standing orders, about the relevance of this to the

budget documents. I'm not hearing a reference to any specific budget documents.

The Chair: Minister, could you make sure that you are referencing the budget?

Mrs. Sawhney: You bet. I was just talking about my vision. I was answering the question of the member.

Mr. Amery: Madam Chair, 23(h), (i), or (j) has nothing to do with relevance.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Well, then, no point of order, but please do stay on topic. Thank you.

Mrs. Sawhney: I was just remarking that this generation of greater empathy must start in government with elected public servants and with the public service. I'm committed to doing this, and this is reflected in our platform commitment of making the government of Alberta a leader in inclusive employment, and of course we are going to be spending about \$5 million in this area to ensure we have more inclusive employment opportunities. This was also mentioned in our platform, that Albertans who have disabilities desire to live a full life with dignity, and the United Conservatives believe that the government should do more to help Albertans with disabilities achieve this goal. This is, again, reflected in our budget.

Wisdom also means understanding that our current state of affairs or system as it now stands, with rising caseload pressures and costs per case, is not sustainable. To quote the fiscal plan, A Plan for Jobs and the Economy 2020-23, page 133:

Spending increases for the ministry over the past four years have significantly outpaced population growth and inflation, with caseload growth as the key cost driver. From 2015 to 2019, caseloads increased by 17 per cent for [AISH], 14 per cent for [PDD], and 30 per cent for [FSCD] . . . AISH [benefits] continue to be much higher than other provinces. Our fiscal reality puts programs and services under significant pressure.

In regard to the second question – how do I hope that these programs will be supporting Albertans 30 years from today? – I will say this. Failure to act on sustainability questions will hurt everyone, including current clients of these programs, but particularly future clients through reduced quality and quantity of services. Failure to act is not only irresponsible but also a show of cowardice. We know that resources are finite now and that they've always been finite, and it can feel like there's never enough to achieve all of these outcomes we want. Finite resources, however, are a universal truth, and it's not just true of government budgets. It's true of households, of companies, of organizations. We are at a crossroads right now, where critical decisions must be made, and we must find better ways to allocate these finite resources.

Wisdom also means that we must respect Nothing about Us without Us to the best of our abilities. Engagement, face-to-face conversations, and open dialogue are how we come to the best understanding of best solutions with compassion and the aforementioned empathy that I spoke of. It is important to remember that as elected stewards of taxpayer dollars we are endowed with the responsibility to make difficult, difficult decisions, decisions that are in the best interests of all Albertans.

Finally, I'm going to say that wisdom also demands that we provide hope and optimism to those who are struggling, to those who feel marginalized, and to those who feel that they're always on the outside looking in. This is where imagination comes in. This is where I will leverage all resources at my disposal – a department of dedicated experts, a government caucus full of MLAs who out of

dedication ran to improve the lives of Albertans, access to research, think tanks, civil society, especially the newly created Premier's council for civil society – to find ways to enhance capacity in society to care for the most vulnerable, to find solutions to our most pressing social issues.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services has a flat budget for the next three years, but it is also set at a historically high level of almost \$4 billion. I will ensure that every cent is used in the best interests of the vulnerable population that I have the privilege of serving.

Finally, if I had to summarize in one sentence the vision of the ministry as we support disabled Albertans, it will be that through empathy, goodwill, and open dialogue about our shared challenges we will strive for optimal solutions that create enhanced social inclusion of all Albertans so that they can live lives with dignity and equal opportunities.

I think that has addressed the first three questions that you had asked in terms of the strategic direction and how we are really, really focused on sustainability, not just for the next 30 years but even beyond.

Now, there was another question that you had asked, around Budget 2020 and the 1.6 per cent increase as compared to the 2019-20 forecast.

10:30

Again, I will say that with a maintained budget of \$3.9 billion our ministry continues its important work to support Alberta's most vulnerable, and that includes children and adults with disabilities, people looking for work, Albertans affected by homelessness, and survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. Ninety per cent of the ministry's expenditures flow to individuals and organizations directly in the form of benefits or contracts or grants for social services. Again, AISH and income support: these are legislated benefits, and if you're eligible, you will get them. Budget 2020 is the largest budget in the ministry's history, and it makes investments to ensure that these supports continue to be available for Alberta's most vulnerable.

I have spoken extensively about caseload and cost pressures and the challenges that they present in terms of program sustainability, and in response to that, we continue to review our core programs to find those opportunities to better deliver services and to achieve better results for Albertans.

In regard to page 133 of the fiscal plan and how it outlines ministry spending in terms of how it has outpaced population growth, we know that overspending and debt from previous governments present a challenge to the sustainability of core social services. We know – I know that everybody knows this; everybody in government knows this – that we can't keep going as we are. We do need to improve the way that we deliver services to achieve better results for Albertans while being fiscally responsible.

This is why I had talked extensively about comprehensive reviews last time we were here, and it was only four months ago. It wasn't that long ago. At that time I had talked about making very concerted efforts to undertake this review, and we are continuing to review these programs, and we're committed to changes that lead to program sustainability. Ultimately, we have to get it right. That takes time. It takes patience. It takes perseverance. It takes extensive engagement with our stakeholder community, and I'm happy to speak about the level and the magnitude of the engagement that's occurred not only by myself but also with my department staff. It's going to take some real resolve and also looking at data, right?

That's the other aspect of this. There's the engagement. there's listening to the voices of people who are the recipients of these

programs, but it's also ensuring that we take the next step and we make data-driven decisions. That is one of the reasons why I was very – I will actually use the word – adamant. I was adamant about making sure that we share the PDD wait-list data with the public, because I think that's the only way that we can come up with the best solutions.

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

There are five minutes remaining with the government caucus. Mr. Guthrie.

Mr. Guthrie: Yeah. Well, thank you very much for those answers. I appreciate it. I guess, you know, I just have one final question. It would pertain also to page 133 of the fiscal plan, sort of an extension of what you were talking about there earlier. Alberta's core benefit is \$1,685 per month. I notice that Quebec's is at \$1,295, so we're about \$400 more. Saskatchewan's is similar, and it goes down from there. Would you be able to just expand on how we compare to these other provinces with the services that we provide and sort of how Alberta is contributing to supporting the most vulnerable in our province? Then I'll pass it on after that.

Mrs. Sawhney: Chair, how much time do I have to answer this question?

The Chair: Three minutes and 50 seconds.

Mrs. Sawhney: Three minutes. Okay.

Yes, I'm happy to talk about the AISH program. First of all, you are correct. Alberta does provide the highest benefit as compared to other provinces, and you can see we're almost \$400 higher than the next jurisdiction, which is Quebec. I think the AISH program in many ways is a solid program. There's a lot to be proud of in this program in terms of how it supports vulnerable Albertans. Is it a perfect program? Absolutely not. I've already talked about, you know, one small example, the medical cards – right? – and the fact that we need to do better in that regard, and that was mentioned by Member Renaud as well. There are opportunities to make this program a little bit free of some of the red tape that exists and also maybe to potentially look at some other aspects of policy to see how we can do better to serve vulnerable Albertans.

AISH does provide financial and health benefits for eligible Albertans with a permanent medical condition that prevents them from earning a living. There are more than 68,000 Albertans that receive AISH as of January 2020. In terms of the eligibility criteria, an individual must have an impairment of mental or physical functioning, the applicant's impairment must cause a substantial limitation in the person's ability to earn a living, it must be determined that the applicant's impairment is likely to continue to affect them permanently, and no remedial therapy is available.

Now, we talk about the core rate quite a bit – I think there has been a lot of discussion around that – but what we don't talk about as much are some of the other aspects of the AISH program, and that includes the health benefits. There are very comprehensive health benefits that are available to AISH clients, and in addition to that, there are supplemental benefits as well. I think – and let me know if I'm wrong – the Ministry of Health provides \$250 million for these health benefits. Does that sound right, Chi? I can confirm that number. So there is that aspect as well. In terms of supplemental benefits I don't know the exact numbers right now, but these benefits are also available to AISH recipients. It includes things like child care. There are additional supplemental values for AISH clients who have children. They get an additional monthly benefit for that.

We also have – you know what? I'm just going to read out some of these supplemental benefits here that are also available to AISH clients, because I think it's important for Albertans to know that these are also part of the program. It is a robust program. There is child care, daycare, licensed family daycare, children's school expenses, employment and training supports, escaping abuse, establishing a new residence, infant care, moving codes, remote community codes. Some of these supplemental benefits are also similar in the income support program, and I think that really speaks about the different levels of supports that are in this program.

But, like I said, there is room for getting rid of red tape and really looking at the data as well to understand: who is accessing what supports? Do we need to reimagine, reconfigure? Are some supports not being used at all?

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

With that, we will be having a very quick five-minute break. We are setting the timer. We will begin promptly in five minutes, so I ask everyone to be back on time.

[The committee adjourned from 10:38 a.m. to 10:43 a.m.]

The Chair: All right. With that, we are back to the consideration of the estimates for Community and Social Services. Just a quick reminder to the committee that we are now in 10-minute blocks, so five minutes of questions and five minutes of answers.

With that, we are back to the Official Opposition and Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm going to resume with income support and continue on my questions. Before I do so, I just wanted to address a couple of comments that you made earlier. You talked about how unemployment will get better – that's great; I hope it does – but the reality is here and now. You talked about unemployment. You described, you know, an average person or a lot of people on income support as 50-year-old males. Certainly, they do make up a portion of the group of people that rely on income support, as do women, as do single parents, as do people with disabilities, and let me remind you that people with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed as their nondisabled peers. I think that if you're going to apply some statistics to this particular group, you need to maybe have a caveat.

I'm going to go back to my questions about income support. Good casework facilitates progress, and that's an essential investment. The December 2019 AG report about income support noted that income support employed approximately 580 program staff. How many FTEs currently work in income support? Now, let me remind people that in the last budget estimates we were discussing the fact that your department eliminated over 220 jobs, and in this budget your department is going to eliminate 136 jobs. That's significant.

I will also remind the minister that when I repeatedly asked questions about the change to the AISH and income support payment schedule, "What are people supposed to do?" your comment to them was to call their caseworker. Well, I'm assuming that some of these positions being eliminated are indeed caseworkers who were incredibly overworked already. I don't know about you, but I've phoned Alberta Works a number of times, and it's almost impossible to get through, and most times I can't leave a message even in the lineup because it's full.

During the last estimates I believe the minister stated that there were 52 Alberta Works and Alberta Supports centres across Alberta. I believe I heard the minister reiterate that number just a few minutes ago, but when I went online, I counted only 49, so I would like to know if some have been put together. Are some

virtual? What is the difference? You say that there are 52 centres. I count 49. What's the difference?

How many FTEs, specifically, work in Alberta Works, Alberta Supports centres across Alberta? I would like to know the actual number, and again I would like to know the number of actual centres. In the last publicly available data, which is the CSS business plan and the annual report, I have noted that the number of times Albertans were served by Alberta Supports centres online, in person, and by telephone was 674,500 times. I don't imagine that number is going down, so how many FTEs specifically are tasked with managing this enormous workload? What is the average amount of time between calling for assistance to an income support centre and receiving assistance or making an appointment? Are there targets? Are there periods of time that staff are required to either respond in writing, by telephone, or to schedule a meeting? Again, I would remind you that we're talking about thousands and thousands of people that are indeed actually trying to call their caseworkers.

I'm going to move on a little bit to line 2.3, which is income support to people with barriers to full employment. That has also decreased by over \$14 million. There are a number of supplementary benefits. I just want to highlight for committee members; let's be real about what amount we're talking about. Monthly core benefits for people that are expected to work: the maximum core for a single person is \$745 a month. Imagine living on \$745 a month. For barriers to employment, the total monthly income support is \$866 of core benefits. Now, imagine living on \$866 a month. I understand that there are supplementals, but it appears there are also problems with people that were previously eligible for supplementals and are not now. Now, I've heard you say a number of times that nothing has changed, that if you're eligible, you'll get it. Okay. Which is it? You've reduced this budget by tens of millions of dollars, but everybody will get what they need. Which is it? If you could explain that to us, I'd be most appreciative.

There are a number of special supplementary benefits such as medical, extraordinary transportation. Let's say that someone is unable to walk to a bus stop or sit on a bus. Special diet . . .

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister now for five minutes.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you. Well, first of all, I do want to talk about the staff numbers. I think the question was: how many staff members do we have working in element 2, employment and income support? We have more than 1,300. We have 1,336 employees. That will be our 2019-20 FTEs. I also want to take this moment to say that I really do value the incredible work that my ministry staff, department, front-line workers do every day to make life better for Albertans.

I've heard this member say before that she's tried calling the Alberta Supports offices multiple times and has never gotten through. I don't know. I don't believe that that is a typical experience. I think, you know, there's always room for improvement, absolutely, but of course I'm going to ask our clients that if they have questions or concerns about their benefits, they should talk to their caseworkers. That's what caseworkers are there to do. They're there to help. I do recognize that perhaps we can make the process a little bit better, perhaps a lot better, and we're working on that with our ongoing review.

10:50

I do want to say that I've spent a lot of time at the Alberta Supports offices with our front-line workers, and I see how hard

they're working. I was in Calgary; I think it was the Heritage location. I've been there, you know, at least a couple of times, and I've spent hours with the front-line workers there. I see the dedication, I see how much time they spend with their clients, and I see how much they care about their clients. I was talking to FSCD workers, and I just marvelled at their level of commitment and their knowledge of their clients in terms of how far they were willing to go, putting in their own time to make sure that the vulnerable clients were getting the supports that they actually need.

In terms of reductions to the public service I had mentioned last time that that reduction was going to be accomplished through attrition, and that is also the case this time around. We will redeploy staff to the front lines, where we do need more support, to make sure that, you know, vulnerable Albertans get good, thoughtful care. As we continue to review our programs, we'll make thoughtful and responsible changes because, ultimately, we do want to improve service delivery, and we do want to achieve better outcomes for Albertans. I think this is something that's very nonpartisan. Everybody could agree that in our Alberta Supports offices these are the outcomes that we're looking for. All staffing decisions will indeed be made with the utmost care and compassion.

We have and will continue to consult with many Albertans outside of the department, including clients, self-advocates, experts, academics, and civil society organizations, about our programs and services.

Now, I know that there was a remark about the core benefits: \$745 in income support for a single client; \$866 for BFE. These rates were there with the previous government as well. I would say that if there was tremendous appetite to change these significantly, I mean, certainly it wasn't demonstrated by the previous government.

The other thing that we also have to consider, you know, is somebody who's earning minimum wage and is working full-time. I don't know exactly what their after-tax income is, but I'm guessing it's maybe around \$1,200. We don't want to be putting together a system where the benefits that we give in income support and employment are more than what somebody is earning at minimum wage working full-time, right? That is a system that creates disincentivization. Although I agree that these rates – it's difficult, it's tough, but the idea is to get clients off income support, to give them resources and tools and skills to get them off income support and into the workforce. I'm not without compassion, without empathy for the challenges that are faced by these clients. I truly am not, which is why I've been very, very careful about not introducing any kind of policy changes without having extensive stakeholder engagement, understanding these programs inside out, and really, really looking at the data to try to determine how we can get better outcomes.

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

Now we are on to the government caucus. I believe we are with Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I do very much appreciate how much work you've placed into this ministry. Thank you for coming to Lethbridge and meeting with so many of my constituents, spending time there. I want to just highlight how much time and effort you've personally put in to meet with people to discuss their personal circumstances, how much consideration and thoughtfulness you put into the decisions that you make, realizing that even though you are seeking to guide a ministry and have to look at the overall context in terms of the province and the budget and the place that we find ourselves in

fiscally, you have taken considerable time, effort, and emotional will to meet the individuals within that. So thank you very much for that. I think it speaks to your character and how much you care about your position, your role, and the people of this province.

I'd like to start on page 28 of the ministry's business plan, where it says that Community and Social Services will "review programs, including legislation, regulation, policy and procedures." If you could comment on: what is the status of these reviews? I know that you spoke to that a little bit earlier. I would ask if you could just continue those thoughts. A supplemental: what is the expected outcome of these program reviews? As you look forward, whatever you're able to speak to over this coming budget term as well as the outlier years.

The final question on that is: what is Community and Social Services doing to make sure that it is listening to Albertans who rely on its programs and services and also to those who provide these services?

Those are the questions that I would like to start on.

I would also like to share some of my time and cede that over to Member Orr.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, and thank you for the work you do, Minister. I guess I have two questions. Specifically, first of all, focused somewhat more on my riding reality, in rural and small centres under 15,000 services are often challenging to deliver, sometimes nonexistent, and sometimes the professional people that are needed are hard to find. I would really appreciate it if you could comment on sort of the theme of centralized versus decentralized decision-making. Local people actually often see the needs and the real nuances of a community and where services can be effectively delivered, so I think the ability to make local decisions, the freedom to make local decisions, I guess, is something I'm hoping to hear from you and the liberty also to adjust or redirect efforts in ways that are needed. I mean, if they go through a whole big system, sometimes it takes so long that they don't get addressed in appropriate ways. That would be my first area of concern.

My second one. I go to estimates, page 57, the statement of operations, and I notice that there's a revenue line there for services on First Nations reserves. I'd like you to clarify. I'm assuming that that's a transfer from the federal government. I don't really know, but I assume that's where it would have to come from. I guess my question with regard to that is that while I see the revenue piece there, I don't see itemized anywhere the expense side of the delivery of services to First Nations, particularly on reserves since that's the revenue line. I think it's important for our First Nations people that we actually spend it all. I guess I'm also interested: do we spend more than what we get from the federal government as a provincial contribution?

I guess the part that interests me, too, is that I know that many First Nations people are also able to access many of the services that your department delivers in the communities around which they live. Specifically in my riding, Ponoka is right next door to Maskwacis, and I know that many folks are able to access services from your department just integrated into the community. The difference there of specifically how that on-reserve funding is spent: how does it benefit First Nations, and how are those services provided? I guess I'm going to assume that it's salted into all the divisions of your ministry. I don't really know. So some clear commentary on that would be really helpful for me to understand in my particular community.

Also, I haven't heard anyone ask yet. I would appreciate some comments on the Premier's council on persons with disabilities. [A timer sounded] How often has that met, and is that . . .

The Chair: Mr. Orr, time is now . . .

Mr. Orr: The bell went. Sorry. I didn't hear it.

The Chair: No worries.
To the minister now.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Member Neudorf and Member Orr, for those questions. I think I'll start by answering Member Orr's questions first, and I'm going to ask my officials as well to provide more substantiation.

11:00

First of all, in terms of local decision-making as it pertains to social services, we do have a regional structure set up that speaks to the local conditions in your constituency or to the varying constituencies across the province, but I know it's not perfect. I mean, you will attest to that as well, that there are services and supports that probably are not readily available to your constituents, and that speaks to the need for better collaboration.

That is why we were really particular about maintaining supports for FCSS. Those organizations are embedded in your communities as well, and we need to make sure that we co-ordinate a little bit better with them to ensure that we address the gaps wherever they exist. I know there's duplication. Like, I've had a very high-level look at this, and duplication does exist. We need to address that but also: who is getting left behind in terms of not getting the services that they need? That is something that our new Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society will also take a look at to see what organizations are across the province and how we can better connect them and make sure that those gaps are addressed.

In regard to your question around indigenous supports I'm going to get Shannon to talk about that a little bit further.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. Thank you, Minister. Shannon Marchand, deputy minister. What that line reflects is a cost-sharing agreement we have with Indigenous Services Canada and the government of Alberta where Indigenous Services Canada will reimburse Alberta for eligible costs related to Albertans who are ordinarily resident on-reserve but who have come off-reserve to access or receive services.

Where the expenditure is: as you rightly sort of anticipated, it's broken down in the budget lines, right? It's the expenditure in the various eligible programs. But in terms of our cost estimate for 2021 we're estimating just slightly in excess of \$40 million associated with AISH, about \$2 million associated with family support for children with disabilities, and about \$6.8 million associated with women's emergency shelters. Those would be found back in those budget lines.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. You also had a question about the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. I know they have met at least three times – I might not be quite accurate on that – and I know that they have been fruitful meetings as well. We have two MLAs on this council as well, and their role is to provide advice to me as minister and to the Premier about the concerns that are pervasive within the disability community. I was speaking to the chair last week, actually, and spoke a little bit about Budget 2020 and some of the work that we need to do together, and he was very optimistic about being able to bring forward some policy ideas and just some more communication about what we're hearing in the disability community.

It's the policy ideas that I'm more interested in. I talked about empathy in my vision statement, empathy starting with government, with elected officials, and I think they will be doing

some work with the ministries and with departments in terms about talking more about the concerns and the needs of the disability community.

Okay. I actually forgot to mention this. One of the projects that they're working on right now is that they're doing some consulting and meeting with stakeholders around employment issues for Albertans with disabilities, because that is a platform commitment. Of course, their voice is very, very important, and it's going to inform some of the decisions that we're going to make in regard to these programs. I'm happy to discuss that more with you further as well.

Now, in the remaining time – I don't know how much time we have – I'll move on to Mr. Neudorf's question. The first one was in regard to the program review, including legislation and regulation and policy and procedures: what is the status of these reviews? Again, caseload and cost pressures do present a challenge for program sustainability. I've already talked about the numbers in terms of what we're seeing in terms of growth, and I've talked many, many times that we need to look closely at all of our programs to address our fiscal challenges. We must take the care and time to give these decisions the proper attention that they deserve.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now back to the Official Opposition, and is that still Ms Renaud? Wonderful.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Just going back to income support for people expected to work or for people with barriers to full employment, again their core benefits – and these are the maximum core benefits for a single adult: for ETW \$745; for barriers \$866. Now, as you've mentioned a few times, Minister, there are indeed a number of supplemental benefits to augment the core benefits, some of those being medical; extraordinary transportation – someone who's unable to take the bus, walk to the bus; obviously, people living outside of rural centres have mobility problems; that's an issue – special diet, whether people are diabetic, pregnant, celiac, perhaps; transportation to day programs; medical supplies, let's say test strips, available to those who need them.

According to your press secretary, in the *Edmonton Journal*, February 6, 2020: "The amount that an individual receives may change on a month-to-month basis as the benefit can vary . . . on an individual's needs and assessment." I would submit to you that this sounds like someone will have to re-prove that there's a need on some kind of schedule. I don't know what that schedule would be, but it sort of seems counterintuitive to your discussion about the need to remove red tape. I would suggest that if somebody has got an illness that's serious enough to warrant the supplemental, going back and proving it monthly is likely not the best use of staff time considering that you are eliminating, you know, hundreds of positions. Maybe that's just me. If it's possible, I would really like to know.

You've obviously made massive cuts to income supports. You're going to get there somehow. You just seem unwilling to explain to us how you're going to do that. Income supports for barriers to full employment have been decreased by millions. You said so yourself. It's right in the documents. I would like to know what the plan is to get there. What are the reduction targets? I understand that you're consulting people, but what are those targets? What are we talking about in terms of people and money? Are the reductions going to come from supplementals, or are they going to come from numbers on core benefits?

The other question I have for the caseworkers, the front-line caseworkers – and they are outstanding, by the way, the front-line

caseworkers. They're completely overwhelmed with the numbers. Their caseloads are massive. They have been for a while. But this is a highly skilled workforce, and I certainly do appreciate them.

I would like to know what your department is doing to prepare for, let's say, a natural disaster – we know that climate change is really having an impact on the frequency and severity of weather events – or possible pandemics. What are the plans for your department in terms of emergency management? Now, I know that Municipal Affairs is certainly responsible for a great deal, but they've made a pretty significant cut to that department that manages emergencies. I would like to know: in Community and Social Services, what is the plan? Obviously, the first place that we, you know, tend to feel it is the human resource part of it: people get sick, people self-isolate, people can't go to work, benefits don't get out, people don't get phone calls answered. You can imagine all of the scenarios that go on, and that doesn't even include evacuation or continuity of work or anything like that. I'm just talking about the human resource part. If possible, I would like to ask your officials to share with us: what is the emergency plan?

We know that there's a very real likelihood that a pandemic will be a problem. I'm not fearmongering in any way. I have always believed that it's important to manage emergencies well, and that requires planning and investment. I see a huge cut in Municipal Affairs to the department that manages emergencies, so I would like to know what you're doing to protect your workers, to ensure they have the equipment and tools they need to manage this. What is the plan? If you could submit that, I would be most appreciative.

The other thing I would – maybe I can expand that to persons with developmental disabilities as well as FSCD. Of course, managing any kind of emergency is challenging. It requires a lot of planning, so I'd like to know: what kind of oversight, what kind of direction, what kind of support are you giving to your contractors, to your service providers, and to your little units of families within family-managed supports? As you know – I'm sure that you've worked in business; you understand that business continuity – planning for emergencies is vital to be successful, to reduce the harm, so I'd like to know what's happening there.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

Now on to the minister for five minutes of response.

11:10

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. I just want to go back to a question that was asked before about employment training and transition supports. For 2018-19 about 27,648 ETTS payments were made to income support and AISH clients totalling about \$6 million. That was 27,648 ETTS payments that were made to income support and AISH clients, which totalled \$6 million. That's for employment training and transition supports.

All right. In regard to income support – in terms of the natural disaster and our readiness I am going to defer that to the officials because there has been extensive discussion around that. It's not fearmongering; I agree. We do need to be ready, and that work has been done. I'll let Shannon speak to that.

In terms of income support and some of the supplemental benefits, I'd like to take a moment to talk about the medical transportation benefits because I know that that was something that came out in the media, and there were a lot of concerns about that. In that particular case, medical substantiation is required to be eligible for that particular supplemental benefit. I was speaking before about policy adherence and clarification, and it appeared that in this particular case policy was not being adhered to in many cases, and medical substantiation was not available on these files. This was something that caseworkers were instructed to do as part

of the review, to make sure that we are following the rules because, again, you know, when you're getting benefits that are not substantiated, I mean, those are valuable resources and dollars that could potentially be used for somebody else who might need them more. That's what happened there.

In regard to the transportation benefit it was being issued at \$97 for the bus pass. Now, the actual cost of a low-income transit pass: I think that in Edmonton it's around \$37. That benefit should be issued at the actual cost of the bus pass. Again, that was just adhering to policy and also clarifying that policy. It's always been in place.

It's not about red tape; it's just about fairness and consistency and making sure that we don't have differential treatment across a region. If somebody in northern Alberta is following the policy but in southern Alberta it's not being followed, that's not fair. That's a reason that we have these policies in place. If substantiation was on the file, then the benefits were not impacted because that's what you require. All right. I think that speaks to the question around income support and supplemental benefits. Are we introducing red tape? Absolutely not. We're just trying to be a bit more clear and concise, equitable and fair.

I will now ask Deputy Minister Shannon Marchand to talk about our readiness for natural disasters and pandemics.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. Thank you, Minister. We've been following the protocols established within the government of Alberta, working to prepare and make sure our business continuity plan is fully in place, and that's thinking about how, in the event our workforce or the agencies that provide services were not there – that's really the core question: you know, what would be open? What would be closed? What's a priority? What's an emergency? We've been doing that work and have been developing the plans with, obviously, a really significant focus on the critical operations that we need to be able to maintain in terms of services, particularly providing services to individuals with disabilities.

That business continuity plan operates in conjunction with our facility emergency response plans. Those are sort of a separate but related part of our infrastructure, where if for some reason something happens in a facility where it has to be closed down in terms of generally an emergency response, which could be sort of a natural thing like a flood – or it could be a bomb scare, any of those types of things – then there's a set of protocols in place. The two of them work together in terms of how you respond to the specific emergency incident and then how you continue and resume business if there is an interruption, an extended interruption.

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

Now we're on to MLA Amery, I believe.

Mr. Amery: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister and to your officials, for being here today. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to go over some of these estimates with you. I know that you've been working very hard over the past year in this area, and some of the issues that you deal with are some of the most sensitive things that this government has to deal with. Certainly, dealing with some of our most vulnerable is no easy task, so I applaud you for those efforts.

Minister, you're well aware – and we've had a very, very good personal working relationship, given that we represent constituencies in northeast Calgary, and I think that based on the geographic location of our constituencies, there are certain things that we share in terms of the demographics of the population. I say this because – I don't need to get into the particulars, but I think that you understand that there are unique challenges in our respective

constituencies, as there are everywhere else in the province, certainly. But I speak on behalf of the residents of Calgary-Cross, and I'm hoping to get some clarification from you so that I can deliver those messages to my constituents and certainly for the benefit of the rest of the members here.

Having said that, we have heard a lot of discussion recently, in particular from members of the opposition, about how this government is cutting AISH, essentially, yet when I look through your business plan, I look through the fiscal plan, I see what appears to be a little bit of a different story. I note that prior to this you indicated in your comments that you had engaged with stakeholders as well, and I certainly applaud that because I think that it ensures that the decisions you are making are hopefully well grounded after consultation and are the least intrusive and the most impactful.

Having said that, referring back to your fiscal and your business plans, Minister, I note that in the statement of operations it seems to indicate what appears to be an upward trend for AISH, and similarly your fiscal plan appears to confirm this same trend. For further clarity, I see that in the statement of operations you have an actual budget expenditure in 2018-2019 of \$1.142 billion and then \$1.285 billion beginning in your tenure. As the years progress, you'll see what appears to be steady, constant increases in funding. So I wanted to give you an opportunity to discuss that and provide us with some comments and clarification as to where this current government sees AISH spending. What is your department's commitment to that? Is it actually increasing? Is it being cut? I wanted you to clarify that so that I could deliver the appropriate message to my constituents.

In addition to that, Minister, I wanted to direct your attention to page 134 of the fiscal plan. There I see a \$76 million increase in funding to the AISH program as compared to the 2019-2020 forecast. If you're looking, I can sort of point that out to you. It's \$1.290 billion in your estimate for 2020-2021 as compared to a \$1.214 billion forecast for 2019-2020.

I wanted to have you comment on something other than the financial benefits, however. I wanted you to discuss with us what your ministry is doing to support Albertans who rely on AISH that is over and above the financial benefits that your department provides.

In the interest of time I wanted you to comment on what your department is doing to support employment of Albertans with disabilities and whether you have any existing or upcoming initiatives to help improve these employment opportunities for those Albertans. I would also like for you to comment on what I've heard in the past, this government's commitment to becoming a leader in employing Albertans with disabilities. What is the status of that initiative? What is happening now, and can you provide us with some information as to how you plan for the future?

11:20

The Chair: Wonderful.

Back to the minister for five minutes of response.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you for those questions. Yes, we do have almost neighbouring constituencies. I actually grew up in your constituency, so I know it inside out.

I don't know how I'll be able to answer all of your questions, but I'm going to start with AISH. Now, AISH, when it was originally legislated in I believe it was 1979, the intention was to provide a benefit to those individuals who had permanent and severe disabilities who are not able to work, and that benefit was supposed to be analogous to what the seniors' benefit was, to provide a benefit or something like a pension that gives enough money for the

basic necessities, for food, shelter, transportation, and medical benefits. That was the very original intention of this legislation many years back.

Over time we've seen the program evolve, and rightfully so, in some directions in terms of wanting to provide opportunities and incentives to people with disabilities to get back into the workforce or to at least work a little bit. We see that in the income exemptions that are part of this program. We've also seen that our understanding of disabilities has also evolved. We are seeing more people who are diagnosed with autism and – I'll put it in quotes – invisible disabilities. We are seeing autoimmune disorders on the rise as well and that all of this is contributing to caseload pressures.

You know, in my discussions with AISH clients I've heard a lot of concerns about wanting to see more employment opportunities because there sometimes is a stigma amongst employers who are not willing to see beyond the disability to actually see the ability that the person possesses. As we're looking at this AISH program and as we're trying to find ways to ensure sustainability and to find ways to improve it – because it is robust. I mean, we've got 68,000 clients. There's almost a \$1.3 billion budget amount that is allocated to this, and you can see that, as you mentioned, in the statement of operations. It is a robust program, but there is some room for improvement.

I'll give you an example. As part of my stakeholder engagement I was in Lloydminster last summer, and I sat down with our front-line workers. They talked extensively about this program and how we can improve it and reduce red tape and improve the client experience – that's very important – but they brought to light something that I would consider is an unintended consequence, and that is the income exemption levels. The income exemption levels are set right now that for a single client, you can earn up to \$1,072 without having your core benefit impacted. If it's a family, that exemption rate is, I think, around \$2,600. I don't know the exact number.

There are situations where – this is what the caseworker told me. She had a couple of cases where you have a family where you have two AISH recipients who are also earning up to the exemption. What she told me – and it stuck in my mind – was that there were some families who are receiving AISH benefits, who are earning up to the exemption level, who are earning actually more than what she and her husband earned working full-time. I would argue that that is an element of the program that needs to be revisited because I don't think that was the original intention of this program. When I say that the program isn't perfect, this is one of those aspects that I think needs to be looked at.

When I went back, certainly the data does indicate that there are families that fall within this category, where you have two AISH recipients who are earning to the maximum exemption and also receiving the core benefit. I think one of the things that we need to examine is: how can we help these families with employment supports to get them engaged more in the workforce, to get them engaged more in the job market? If they're already at that point where they're earning to the exemption and above, maybe there are some resources and tools and skills that we can help out with to get them taking even the next steps.

To address to your question of how Community and Social Services is supporting the employment of Albertans with disabilities, my ministry invests more than \$35 million into supporting employment for people with disabilities.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we move back to the Official Opposition, and it is Member Irwin that is up.

Member Irwin: Thank you, and thank you to the officials for being here today. You know, I have to say that it is frustrating that we can't go back and forth because this is about vulnerable Albertans, and it's about my neighbours. I was involved in the last CSS estimates, and it was nice to be able to engage in a conversation and get some answers.

As the status of women critic I want to touch on a few issues of concern to me. The total funding for women's shelters – this is line 5.3 – has not increased, and, in fact, we see that it remains the same at a total of \$51 million. This is on page 52. We know that the need is dire. I've spoken to women who've accessed shelters. I've had the opportunity to tour shelters – in fact, my colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud and I just did – including one that serves many women and children in my own riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. My first question is: why are we not seeing an increase in funding when we know that the need is there? We know that the numbers of women and children accessing shelters are increasing. We can see this on page 29 of your business plan.

My next question is: if a new shelter opened, what would be the process and criteria to obtain operating funding? Would there be new dollars invested? You've got the numbers for how many women and children were admitted to shelters, but a really important indicator is how many women and children were turned away from shelters. These numbers would paint a more fulsome picture of just how dire, just how serious a situation it is, so I do wonder if you've got those numbers, and if you could provide them, that would be fantastic.

We can't look at issues in silos. We know that lack of affordable housing – I know this is not directly in your portfolio, but I'll get to why I'm speaking about this – is a big issue. In Seniors and Housing estimates yesterday we asked about the \$53 million cut to affordable housing, and the minister noted the expansion of shelters, which, of course, connects to your portfolio, like the Herb Jamieson Centre in my riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. But, of course, this will just help men. It's a homeless shelter; it's not an investment in affordable housing. There's a need for families, there's a need for single mothers, and so many others. When it comes to women fleeing violence, for instance, the need is dire. Shelter space is not adequate. They need long-term housing. They need affordable housing.

We supported Clare's law, but you know that in our comment our caveat was that it's meaningless without robust supports. In fact, we heard the same thing from stakeholders as well, that without supports for women fleeing domestic violence, including investments in affordable housing, in child care – the list goes on – without that, Clare's law is meaningless and so, too, are your commitments to addressing domestic violence.

You've got \$600,000 allocated to, quote, partner with Justice and Solicitor General to address Clare's law. This is on page 28 of your business plan. I want to know – and again, we supported you and we commended you on that, but we've got a lot of questions here. We want to know: what's that money going to be used for? Are there direct supports for those, not just women but primarily women, fleeing domestic violence? I'd like you to be specific because we both know how important this issue is. Will that \$600,000 – it wasn't quite clear to me – allocation come from the \$1.2 million increase to sexual assault services? I'm assuming that those aren't merged and that those are two separate items.

Next one, we know that human trafficking is an issue that your government has identified as a priority. On page 31 of the business plan you've noted that you're going to be working “with communities and other ministries to advocate and raise awareness for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking.” Now, I don't see any metrics on this. The statement,

again, is lovely, but without metrics what does this mean? What specific actions will you be taking to address those three areas: domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking? Again, I've seen some funding for sexual assault, but I'm not seeing any direct line items for human trafficking. Will there be funding from your ministry to address this?

11:30

I think that related to this is the issue of sex work. We know that the SNUG program is one that was formed in 2005, and it formed following the formation of a provincial task force that looked at the killing of multiple sex trade workers, particularly in the Edmonton area. It assisted clients with street checks, with collecting DNA, with reporting bad dates, and the list goes on. They provided incredible services. These are folks – I live just a block south of the 118 Avenue area, so I see it every day. I see sex workers. I see the struggles that many of them are facing. I'd like you to commit to providing funding to those folks as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Irwin.

Now on to the minister for five minutes of response.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you for all of those questions, and I will do my level best to get through all of them. I prefer this format because it allows me to answer questions in a fulsome manner. I felt in our previous estimates session that I wasn't able to actually answer the questions before another question was asked on top of it. Having said that, this isn't the only place, the only venue that you can ask me questions. I'm happy to talk to you outside of estimates and go over these numbers as well. I have an open-door policy. I've always had an open-door policy, and that will continue.

In regard to the funding for women's shelters I agree it is a dire situation. I'm happy that we were able to maintain this funding. It was a platform commitment. I have a flat budget of \$3.9 billion, and out of that, this is dedicated funding between now and the end of the mandate, absolutely, \$51.3 million. I know you were talking about some of the metrics that are in the business plan and: do we measure the number of turnaways? I know that ACWS had put out that report that had actually quantified the number of turnaways. I do commend them for their work. I do have some issues about those numbers because I think they are not actually unique turnaways. I think they may have double-counted vulnerable women who may have called multiple times, so those numbers may potentially be overstated. Agreed, we need to do better work in making sure we have accurate tracking of what those numbers look like.

Going back to the funding, there is never enough money. There never is enough money to make sure that everybody is cared for, that we're capturing anybody who might fall through the cracks, and that's why I'm very proud of our new council, the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society, because one of their tasks is going to be to determine how we can develop capacity in some of these not-for-profit organizations so that they can find different sources of revenues, look at social enterprises. Being overly reliant on government, particularly in times of fiscal restraint and capacity, can result in situations where, you know, we might have individuals that are not being served to the level that they deserve. I know that this particular council is going to be doing some work in this area to ensure – we even map out our not-for-profit organizations that might be engaging in duplication of work. That is an effort that will be under way this year to help address that.

The \$600,000 is coming out of element 6.3, and that is essentially for the Disclosure to Protect Against Domestic Violence (Clare's Law) Act, phase 2. That is to ensure that we can put together the second round of consultations and have the appropriate

stakeholders at the table, and it also accounts for some – I believe Justice is also doing some work on their database, but I think their funds are not included in this. It's essentially for the next round of engagement and for regulation design and implementation and, as my deputy minister has reminded me, implementation of supports as well.

In human trafficking Justice is a lead on that. The budget in terms of next steps and how that's going to unfold: that resides within Justice, and we can get some more information on that.

I think I have answered most of your questions. I hope I didn't miss anything. I know your comments on affordable housing – I'm very proud that this government was able to deliver on its platform commitment of providing capital funding for Herb Jamieson. I've been there a couple of times. The building is dilapidated. We definitely needed to do something. Somebody told me something recently, and what they said was that homeless shelters are like an emergency department. People come into emergency. They don't expect to stay there. They get triaged, and then they get moved into other departments of the hospital. That's how I view this homeless shelter as well. It's not a place to stay. People will come, and they will get assessed and triaged and helped and move on to the next level of supports in society.

Again, you know, we always want more. We have finite resources. I wish there was more for affordable housing, but we really have to figure out how we can all work together, get rid of those silos, and collaborate.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Next up we're back to the government caucus. I believe it's Mr. Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Yes. Chair, I appreciate you recognizing me. Minister, thank you for being here and to your staff as well. I just want to comment that as I've gotten to know you over these last 10 or 11 months, I know you're a very compassionate person and that you're doing what you can within your ministry to help people who are vulnerable and understanding as well that there are fiscal constraints. We can't continue to live beyond our means. It will eventually lead to a worse situation down the road. The way that the government is presenting the budget, I think that they are doing what they can to make sure that vulnerable people are protected, and you can see that in these budgets as well as we work to grow the economy and increase those revenue sources for future generations.

I wanted to thank you and your ministry for the support as well for some of the programs in my constituency: the Beaumont indoor playground, the family violence prevention team, and the Boys' and Girls' Club of Leduc as well. These are important services, so I appreciate that support.

As I get into some of these questions that I have here, your ministry's estimates show a decrease in funding for income support, expected to work or working, compared to the 2019-20 forecast. Could you please explain why you are planning to spend less in this program? If you could discuss the caseload increase over the last couple of years and what you expect the caseload increase to be and then maybe be able to go over some of the criteria around getting accepted into income support.

Also, on page 30 of your business plan it states that the 2020-21 target is 66 per cent of participants who will be employed after leaving the income support program. We know from 2018-19 that the employment rate was 64 per cent after leaving the program. I was wondering if you could go over the plan and the specifics of how we're going to meet that metric of an increase of about 2 per

cent and getting it to a 66 per cent target and what kinds of training programs might be offered or what your vision is on that.

Maybe if you can comment, and maybe your staff know as well: how much do people accept wanting to be retrained into new professions? Just what is the overall impression of folks if the line of work that they had, just due to the economy, is not available or the industry is moving elsewhere? How receptive are folks to retraining, and how do you go over picking what kind of retraining they might be offered? What kind of consultation happens with people on that? That would be good to know as well.

Also, some income support clients have reported a reduction in payments as their files are reviewed and it is determined that they are no longer eligible for the transportation supplemental benefit. I was wondering if you could explain what sort of program review is under way regarding that in income support.

Also, performance metric 2(a) on page 30 shows the percentage of participants employed after leaving income support to go up by 4 per cent. If we're even projecting further for the 2022-23 projection of having it go up 4 per cent from 2018-19, again, not only talk about the increase for next year, how we're going to get that 2 per cent increase, but could you explain how we're going to reach that 4 per cent increase as well going forward into the later years of this term? What kind of external factors do you expect could impact that increase? I guess those external factors could really be a broad range of concerns in the economy, some of the things that were brought up earlier by the opposition – it could be pandemics; it could be oil prices – just to give you some leeway on answering that in a broader way. It would be appreciated.

11:40

That really sums up my questions. Really, it's just trying to touch on how we are going to meet those goals, that first 2 per cent increase and then the 4 per cent, and then what kind of plan the ministry is going to have on, really, retraining folks or helping them find employment in what they're currently trained for, just so we can get a better idea so that when we're talking to people in our community, we can explain what to expect from income support moving forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rutherford.

Now on to the minister for five minutes of response.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you for those questions. I'll just start at the beginning, your questions in regard to the decrease in funding for income support, expected to work, compared to the forecast. We had touched on this earlier, but I think it's worth while repeating some of these messages. As the economy improves and more Albertans get back to work, the caseload is expected to decrease. Certainly, if we look at the assumptions as supplied by Treasury Board and Finance, we are seeing a reduction in the unemployment rate from 6.9 to 6.7 per cent for next year, and the caseload follows closely with the unemployment rate. That's why we see a reduction in that line.

I also want to state very emphatically that this program will be funded according to demand, and all eligible Albertans will continue to receive the support to meet their basic needs. We will assist people who are able to work to get jobs.

We're also incorporating recommendations from the Auditor General's report. I had mentioned this earlier. The report did recommend that the ministry improve its processes to focus on assisting ETW clients to re-enter the workforce sooner. That's directly from the Auditor General. What that means is more intensive case management with our clients to make sure that they're connected to the appropriate resources.

Another element of this line includes the transfer of funding for the low-income transit in Calgary and Edmonton out of this line into element 6.3. I had mentioned that earlier.

Another aspect which I haven't mentioned today – it's going to address a little bit of your question about ability, willingness to re-enter the workforce – is that a core element of this program is mutual responsibility. Clients who are able to work are expected to actively seek employment and participate in job search programs and activities. We do regularly review files to ensure Albertans receive benefits that they're eligible for based on their current situation and needs, and of course we do have a responsibility to all Albertans to ensure that we manage the income support program appropriately.

I'm just going to talk about income support eligibility as well. Eligibility requires that you are looking for work; you're working, but you're not earning enough; you're unable to work for a short time, so that's more relevant to the BFE program; you need help to access training to find a job; or you're unable to work due to chronic health problems, and that is particular to the BFE program.

I'm going to ask Shannon, actually, to talk a little bit more about your question around how willing or able some of these clients are to accept retraining, redevelopment, and skills development.

Mr. Marchand: Thank you, Minister. I think that for people who've lost their jobs, it is a bit of a process – right? – especially if a job that they've been in sort of disappeared, particularly if it was a job that was associated with relatively high earnings and the options that are available in terms of their next employment is not necessarily so high. So I think, you know, people try to wait to a degree, right? They hope they can continue to work in the job that they were trained to do or where they have experience. They sort of over a period of time will reach their own conclusions about when they have to make a shift in their expectations, and then that may involve retraining. It may be that there are jobs available, but they are just different jobs that pay differently than what they previously did. So individuals sort of reach those decisions for themselves.

In terms of the support that we provide, a significant part of our effort is around career and employment information and support services for people who've lost jobs. How do they access the labour market, prepare to be successful in job interviews, get their resumés ready, find that sort of hidden labour market, connect to different types of jobs that use the same transferable skills they have? Then we work closely with both Advanced Education and Labour and Immigration, who have more training programs, the retraining types of programs. We make referrals to them and work closely with our colleagues in those ministries to support individuals to access those programs and get the services they're looking for.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you.

Chair, do I have time to tell a story?

The Chair: You have two seconds, one second.

Mrs. Sawhney: Next time.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I believe it's Ms Pancholi from the Official Opposition next.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister as well as the officials for being here today. I'd also like to share my disappointment that we're not sharing time today. Contrary to some of the – I won't say it's information – storytelling that occurred from one of the members on the other side, it actually is not the norm to not share time. Prior to this government it actually hadn't happened since 2013, and in fact, more importantly, I sat in

on these estimates on the last budget, where the minister was willing to share time. I think the fact that we're not sharing time right now is worthy of note.

I do want to ask a question. It is a matter that took place with respect to the Ministry of Children's Services, but it does have a direct impact on your ministry. This was a decision in the last budget to remove financial supports for former foster children aged 22 to 24. Prior to last budget these former foster children were eligible for these supports up until the age of 24. The decision was made to lower that eligibility age to 22. The basis for that decision, as we were told by the Minister of Children's Services, was because these former foster children were going to be eligible for supports delivered through your ministry, Community and Social Services, now. The Minister of Children's Services had also indicated that there was going to be a lengthy review of the almost 500 former foster children's files and that each of those files would be reviewed to see which programs they would be eligible for under your ministry.

I'm not asking for any personal information related to the review of these files, certainly not looking for any names or details with respect to personal information at all, but I'm wondering, Minister, if you can tell me – I am looking at your budget lines with respect to employment and income support, AISH, as well as PDD – whether that review of those individual files resulted in any of those former foster children now being eligible for any of the programs delivered under your ministry. And how many? I'll ask that question as well.

We are a little pressed for time, so I'll move on to say that my next question relates to the northern allowance. I'm not sure if it would fall under any of your budget lines. I don't see it allocated. My question is on whether or not the northern allowance is a grant that is delivered through your ministry and, if so, which budget line item it falls under and whether or not any changes occurred with respect to the delivery of the northern allowance to any employees either of the ministry or support workers who deliver services in northern Alberta, particularly areas like Driftpile. I'm sure a couple of the members here today would be interested in that question as to whether or not that allowance is still delivered.

I know I'm rushing through quite quickly. We do have a short amount of time. I'd like to quickly jump to page 31 of your business plan, which mentions that \$7 million will be allocated to a civil society fund to support cost-sharing programs delivered by community groups. As I mentioned, I did sit in on the budget discussions last time around, and there was a good discussion and some great questions asked by members on both sides with respect to the definition of civil society. I think it's fair to say that we didn't get a very clear definition last time around as to what civil society means, who it captures, who it does not capture. I'm wondering, Minister, if you could possibly take another stab at it this time around.

Also with respect to this particular fund, that \$7 million, can you please let us know, Minister, or maybe your officials can let us know: are these new dollars, the \$7 million, and if so, where are they allocated from? When will we see terms of reference for this civil society fund or business plans with performance metrics and a description of oversight for how this fund will be distributed, who will be receiving it, all those questions? As well, related to that, in 2019 there were 37 family and community safety program grants, that were assigned for projects that focused on prevention of sexual violence, trafficking, building family resilience. Have these grants been replaced by the Premier's charity council?

11:50

Because I'm speaking at a record pace, I'll just throw in one more question, which is with respect to the Clare's law implementation. There was a note that part of that \$600,000 would be going to the implementation of supports within Justice, and I'm just asking for some clarification of the comment from the deputy minister with respect to what kind of supports. Are those supports specifically within Justice, or are they supports that are also outside of that with respect to delivery, front-line, to women who are accessing or seeking disclosure under Clare's law? Just some clarification with respect to what those supports will be and how they're delivered and plans for future supports.

I think that just about hits my time. [A timer sounded] There we go.

The Chair: Fantastic, Ms Pancholi.

Now on to the minister for your five minutes of deliberation.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Member Pancholi, for your questions. I acknowledge your disappointment in this format, but I will articulate again that I thought that this format was more beneficial for me to be able to answer the questions more fully, and I will reiterate that this isn't the only venue or the only mechanism where we can talk about these estimates. Again, open-door policy: I'm happy to answer your questions outside of this as well.

In regard to the changes in the supports and financial assistance agreements, I know that four months back, when we did estimates, I had mentioned that I was working very closely with the Minister of Children's Services to make sure that these very vulnerable individuals were taken care of and that we were able to assess what other programs within my ministry they were eligible for. I've just confirmed with Deputy Minister Shannon Marchand here that staff is working closely on the ground to make sure that we are connecting these individuals, these young people, with supports. That work is under way.

In regard to your question about the northern allowance, I actually don't know, so we're looking into that. I will confirm that for you.

Civil society. This is a question I've heard before, and I think I did touch on it in estimates last time. The civil society definition that we're using right now is not-for-profit organizations, faith-based organizations, companies, corporations, almost everything outside of government. That's definitely a very wide net that we're casting to try to engage more of these organizations to help, for government to work closely with them, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, to find ways to develop capacity.

In regard to the \$7 million, these are not new dollars; they are from within our existing budget. The council has just been put together. In terms of terms of reference and the business plan, we've just put the council members together right now, and that work is under way. The work of this council in terms of how it will inform capacity building and encourage social enterprises: that work will help inform how these funds will be used in order to address some of the very pressing social issues that we are experiencing here in Alberta.

I am going to get Shannon to address the other question that you had in regard to . . .

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. About the funding for Clare's law implementation.

Mrs. Sawhney: Right.

Mr. Marchand: Allow me to just circle back to the northern allowance. The northern allowance for employees does still exist. It's covered by Public Service Commission directives. But to the minister's comment, we'll confirm if we have employees who are actually receiving it, because I'm not certain what the answer to that question is.

With regard to the Clare's law implementation, the \$600,000 is not intended to be transferred to Justice or for Justice programs; it is expected to be for services for people who come forward with disclosure. What exactly those services will look like is going to be dependent on the next phase of engagement, which will help to determine the regulation to enable the act and the operations of the act. That's funding that has been earmarked for that purpose.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. I'm not sure how much time we have, Chair.

The Chair: One minute.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. We've confirmed the northern allowance. Thank you for that.

I think I'm just going to talk a little bit more about civil society and the new Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society and some of the members that are going to be sitting on this council and some of the work that we hope to do. We know that there are over 26,000 not-for-profit organizations in Alberta, and they employ – I'm not sure if I have the numbers right – over a hundred thousand people in this sector. I think that when we look at all these organizations, there is duplication in terms of the clients that they're serving, in terms of the regions that they're serving. I know that in some of my discussions there was also commentary around opportunities for rationalization as well. Again, there are so many people and organizations who want to do more, who want to help more, and they're not really connected to the opportunities. I think we need to make more of a concerted effort, particularly in the northern communities.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Next up we are going back to the government caucus, and it'll be Mr. Rutherford. Just as a warning, you have just under four minutes.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Chair. Minister, given that we have just under four minutes, I have one additional question. On getting that metric up from 64 to 66 per cent, I was wondering if you could comment on the willingness of people to move from their jurisdiction to find work in other places. How do you find people – like, I understand that most people don't want to leave where they are, where they're familiar. Is that one of the challenges? Are there incentives? How do people view that? I'm not trying to suggest that it has to be that way. I'm just trying to get an insight, from your perspective, on the challenges ahead. Then with the last few minutes if you wanted to jump into that story that you were about to share.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you for that question. I won't have very definitive answers around that. You know, I had mentioned

earlier that with our income support caseload we do have a demographic of middle-aged men. It's quite a sizable demographic. That doesn't detract from the other demographics within our caseload. Of course women are important. Of course young people are important. But for that particular demographic, you know, there were a lot of oil and gas workers who worked out in the fields and who are out of jobs. I mean, I've heard that anecdotally, and I've looked at the data as well. I think mobility has not been quite as much of an issue for them because they were already mobile in their previous positions.

The story I was going to tell was that when I had gone over to meet a stakeholder – I believe it was Prospect. They were telling me a little bit about their employment programs. They talked about this particular cohort of people. They related one story in particular to me about a gentleman who was working in the oil and gas fields, and basically his body was destroyed. He wasn't able to actually work in any other sort of manual labour type, intensive kind of occupation. But the challenge was that he had no digital skills, and when you don't know how to use computers, I mean, it can be very, very intimidating. So he required some intensive support to introduce him to computers and how to have an e-mail account and how to send e-mails and how to write a resumé. He was part of an employment program. It took time, but eventually he did get there, and I think he applied for a position. I don't remember what the position was. It wasn't a typical office position, but it was employment nonetheless.

I think there are cases that we hear about – there is a willingness. People do want to work. They do want to have that meaning and purpose in their lives, and they do want to be able to achieve that certain level of dignity and opportunity. I think it's my responsibility as minister who's overseeing some of these employment programs to really foster that same sense of optimism and hope and those values into these programs to get these people thinking differently, thinking about how they can find their niche in the workforce.

That was a story I wanted to tell because I felt that it was a real illustration of how we have to cater our employment programs to these unique demographics.

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

I would like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet back here this afternoon at 3:30 to continue discussing the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services. I also want to give everybody a heads-up that this room will be secured, so if anyone wants to leave anything, you are welcome to do so. And, as a little side note, there will also be a francophone flag raising happening just outside if any members want to come and join.

Thank you. This meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

