



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Children's Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, March 5, 2020
9 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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* substitution for Mickey Amery

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Children's Services

Hon. Rebecca Schulz, Minister

Gloria Iatridis, Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Innovation and Indigenous Connections

Jon Reeves, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child Intervention

9 a.m.

Thursday, March 5, 2020

[Mr. Neudorf in the chair]

**Ministry of Children's Services
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Acting Chair: Good morning. I would like to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Children's 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, please introduce the officials that are joining you at the table. My name is Nathan Neudorf, the MLA for Lethbridge-East and acting chair of this committee. I look to my right to continue introductions.

Ms Sigurdson: Lori Sigurdson, Edmonton-Riverview.

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

Mr. Guthrie: Peter Guthrie, Airdrie-Cochrane.

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

Mr. Rutherford: Brad Rutherford, Leduc-Beaumont.

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

Mr. Walker: Jordan Walker, Sherwood Park.

Ms Issik: Whitney Issik, Calgary-Glenmore.

Ms Schulz: To introduce my senior colleagues here today: I have Jon Reeves, the assistant deputy minister of child intervention; Darlene Bouwsema, deputy minister; Mark Hattori, assistant deputy minister of the family and community resiliency division; and as well Gloria Iatridis – now I always mess this one up – policy, innovation, and indigenous connections division. Is that right?

Ms Iatridis: Very good. Yes.

Ms Schulz: I am good.

And I am the Minister of Children's Services.

Mr. Feehan: Hi. Richard Feehan, Edmonton-Rutherford.

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

Ms Sweet: Good morning. Heather Sweet, Edmonton-Manning.

The Acting Chair: I would like to note the following substitutions for the record: Mr. Walker is substituting for Ms Glasgo, Ms Issik is substituting for Mr. Amery, Mr. Rowswell will be substituting for Ms Goodridge, and I have been designated as acting chair.

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

Speaking order and time. Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for 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 the Executive Council acting on the

minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address this committee. At the conclusion of these comments we 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 time 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, take in 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 any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or e-mail to either the chair or the committee clerk.

A total of three hours has been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Children's Services. The scheduled end time for today's meeting is 12 o'clock p.m. With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having this break? Seeing none, one will be called at the midpoint.

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area. Pages are able to deliver notes and other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. 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 three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock will continue to run; however, the speaking block time 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 committee members and staff.

I now invite the Minister of Children's Services to begin her opening remarks. Minister, you have 10 minutes.

Ms Schulz: Thank you so much, and good morning, everybody. I am here today to present Children's Services' 2020-2023 business plan and the 2020-2021 budget estimates. In addition to the officials I've already introduced here this morning, I would also like to introduce in the gallery Tiffany Schell, our senior financial officer.

I'll take a few minutes of my time this morning to speak to the Children's Services business plan, which identifies three ministry outcomes and corresponding business objectives for the next three years. The first is that children and youth are protected. Children's Services continues to strengthen the child intervention system to ensure healthy development of children, youth, and families, with the ultimate goal of reducing the number of children in care.

Our second objective is that the growth and development of children are supported through accessible, affordable, and quality child care. The ministry is committed to supporting families to engage in their communities, including the ability to pursue postsecondary education and take part in the workforce. To do this,

Children's Services is maintaining access to affordable, quality child care programs and promoting culturally appropriate, community-based early childhood services, parenting resources, and supports.

Our third objective is to support the well-being, resiliency, and cultural connections in communities across the province. This includes our work to ensure children, youth, and families can access a continuum of government- and community-based prevention and early intervention services.

I'm confident that the 2020 budget for Children's Services supports the desired outcomes and objectives for the ministry.

Budget 2020 honours our commitments to Albertans, charting a path back to balance through targeted reductions and thoughtful reallocations while protecting essential services for our most vulnerable citizens. The 2020 consolidated Children's Services estimates include \$1.6 billion in funding, a \$76 million increase from 2019. This increase will allow us to protect essential programs that support the safety and well-being of the children, youth, and families we serve. In order to maintain our funding levels, we have carefully examined and considered every dollar to ensure services and supports are there for those who need them most, and we're delivering on several savings measures that were announced in the last budget.

Our province continues to grow, and we see a corresponding increase in the number of children who need services and supports through our ministry. Right now there are about 58,000 more children in Alberta than there were just six years ago. The cost of delivering services continues to rise, and the complexity of cases we're seeing has increased. Cost pressures are an ongoing reality for Children's Services. Across the ministry we continue to work hard to reduce duplication, streamline processes, work more efficiently to reduce the impact on front-line services, and by working with my colleagues across government and other community partners, I'm confident that we will be able to continue providing families with the supports and services they need.

Children's Services' voted operating expense includes an increase of \$14.4 million, or 1.7 per cent, for child intervention. Our ministry responds to approximately 52,000 reports of child maltreatment, neglect, or abuse each year. As of December 2019 there were approximately 11,000 children receiving child intervention services in Alberta. Every single dollar we direct to support caseload growth is a dollar that is invested in helping a child in need. Additionally, indigenous children continue to be overrepresented in child intervention, at 69 per cent of in-care caseloads, despite representing only 10 per cent of the general population. As I've said a number of times – and I will say it again here – that is unacceptable.

We continue to shift our policies to prioritize keeping kids connected to their culture, to their community, and to address issues proactively. Budget 2020 includes a \$13.5 million increase to support kinship and foster caregiver supports, mostly attributed to an increased support for kinship care placements and caregiver training. We recognize that kinship care is unique and requires specialized training, not just for caregivers but also for front-line staff and workers, and we're seeing results. In 2019-20 there were more children in temporary care with a kinship placement than foster placement. But these challenges cannot be solved exclusively by government funding. They require strong partnerships with indigenous communities, and we work hard to build those every day.

Our government has begun a transformation in child care to create a reliable and predictable system based on the principles of quality, affordability, and access to care that works for all families, not just a select few. We need to ensure a variety of child care

options are available to meet the diverse needs of families across this province and that the lowest income families are supported with subsidies that provide their children with quality programs.

In fact, Children's Services recently launched a new online subsidy application to make it easier for parents to apply for those subsidies. In 2018 staff received almost a hundred thousand paper submissions and documents relating to subsidy applications and an estimated 87,000 calls from parents needing support or assistance with that application. That is a lot of paper and it's a lot of phone calls and an enormous amount of staff time spent processing submissions. This simple online tool frees up valuable time for staff and will save taxpayers about \$1 million a year.

We are also committed to directing government funding where it's needed most, which is supporting front-line child care professionals who work directly with children. To do this, we are bringing licensing and accreditation together into one single process. We are keeping the best elements of the accreditation program – wage top-ups and professional development supports for all certified child care staff in licensed daycare, out of school care programs, and approved family day homes – while eliminating cumbersome and somewhat subjective processes.

9:10

When 95 per cent of licensed child care providers are also accredited, accreditation has lost some of its value and was no longer the bar of quality for parents. By continuing to pay wage top-ups that are among the most generous in the country, child care centres can train and retain professional and dedicated staff. Child care programs that were participating in accreditation have worked very hard to embed the standards into their everyday programming, and those are simply not going to disappear. As always, high safety standards will be maintained through licensing and enforcement, as they currently are.

About our plan for the early learning and child care centre pilot program, I will be clear again that the terms of the pilot have not changed since they were introduced. ELCC centre funding for phase 1 programs was, however, extended to the end of June 2020. This means grant funding for the third year of the pilot still ends March 31, and a new grant will cover the additional three months from April 1 to the end of June. We are reviewing pilot data and feedback from parents and child care centres to determine a path forward that best meets the needs of families across the province and are negotiating with the federal government on a funding model that supports the diverse needs of Alberta families. We remain responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars and stay focused on the needs of parents, with the pillars of affordability, quality, and accessibility guiding our decisions.

Children's Services is also focusing resources on prevention services that strengthen families and communities to prevent the need for costlier intervention services later on. The voted estimates for early intervention services and supports are \$95.8 million. Last fall we announced our plan to co-ordinate prevention and early intervention programs to improve consistency in our approach and to use taxpayer dollars more efficiently and effectively. For too long there has been a patchwork of inconsistent services that has been very difficult for families to navigate. Contracts were layered on top on contracts, and the system sometimes required navigators. If Albertans need navigators to get the supports they need, we felt we had to change the system. We've received almost 400 proposals, and evaluation teams have started the review process of those proposals. We expect the new family resource network model to save taxpayers about \$12 million by reducing duplication, and we'll be launching it later this month.

The final program in our voted estimates is policy, innovation, and indigenous connections. This is the second year this area has been identified as its own program line to help increase transparency of our ministry estimates. Their work has been incredibly important to me over the past 10 months as I continue to build relationships with First Nations and Métis communities and as the federal government implements Bill C-92. We remain committed to a path of reconciliation and shared prosperities with the indigenous peoples of Alberta, on- and off-reserve, ensuring children and youth are safe and supported.

As announced last year, we're on track to introduce the Alberta child and family benefit in July. Consolidating these two programs removes unnecessary administration and will direct more support to lower income families with children. The new program is estimated to deliver approximately \$276 million in benefits to more than 190,000 Alberta families in 2020-2021, putting more money in the pockets of those who truly need it the most. This is a nonvoted expense in the Children's Services budget estimates.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide a brief overview of the 2020 Children's Services budget estimates. Before I close, it is really important to me to thank not only my officials who are here today but the front-line staff of this ministry, who deliver these programs, services, and supports, as they are making a real and positive difference in the lives of vulnerable children, youth, and families across Alberta.

As many of you know, it's also Social Work Week in our province. I know we have a few social workers in the room as well, so I do want to say thank you for the dedication that you provide to vulnerable families across Alberta. I know this work is emotionally draining and challenging, so thank you.

The Acting Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. The timer will be set for three 20-minute intervals so that members are aware of the time. Member Pancholi, do you wish to combine your time with the minister's?

Ms Pancholi: I would like to. Minister, would you like to share time?

Ms Schulz: Sure.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

The Acting Chair: Please proceed.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you very much.

First of all, thank you to the minister for your opening comments. That was very helpful. I'd also like to express my thanks to all the senior officials and all of the staff that I know are not here but are working very hard behind the scenes. Having been a public servant for eight years within a ministry that serves children – I did that under Alberta Education – I know how dedicated the people who work in those ministries are to serving children and to making the best public policy possible, so thank you very much for your hard work. Thank you, Minister, for your comments.

I'd like to dig in. I know I talk fast. It is one of my strengths and weaknesses, but I will try to keep pace here. Minister, I'm just going to off the top – I think I did this last time – express my apologies. Again, if I do interrupt you, it's not because I want to be rude, but I do have a lot of questions, and, of course, we do have time limits here. As much as possible I will try not to, but if I do, it's only because I need to move on to some further questions.

I will begin with the overall budget. Minister, you opened with your comments – and I note that you have mentioned at previous

times, as has the Premier – about the fact that the Children's Services budget overall has increased. I note that you're using the figure of a \$76 million increase, or 4.9 per cent increase; however, there are a few comments that I'd like to make about that increase. One is that it appears that you're comparing the 2020 budget estimates to the forecast, or what you actually intend to spend in the 2019 budget year, which hasn't wrapped up entirely yet, and I note that in almost all the of the key program areas of the budget – child intervention, child care, early intervention services – actually the forecast is lower than what was budgeted in 2019. So to compare those two is actually a little bit, I think, unfortunate because it means that there was money set aside for some of the programming within all of those areas that was actually not delivered or not spent.

We can get into that further, but when I look at the comparison between the Budget 2019 numbers and the Budget 2020 numbers, it's actually only an overall increase of about \$50 million. Now, again, \$50 million is still an increase, and I do note that. However, I do appreciate that the minister has been very thoughtful and has mentioned that it's important to focus on the voted and nonvoted amounts to look at the total budget. I think that's important because what we see is that primarily the increase in the overall Children's Services budget comes as a result of an increase in nonvoted expenses. In particular it looks like Children's Services is now primarily responsible for the delivery of the Alberta child and family benefit, where in previous years, when it was the Alberta child benefit and the Alberta family employment tax credit, the delivery of those two combined was split between Treasury Board and Finance and Children's Services.

Looking at both the Children's Services budget for 2020 as well as the Treasury Board and Finance budget, it appears that actually the majority of the increase in the Children's Services budget is actually as a result of a transfer from the Treasury Board and Finance budget to the Children's Services budget. Just for some context I note that in, for example, 2019 budget, \$179 million of the previous Alberta child benefit came out of Children's Services, \$161 million from the Alberta family employment tax credit came from Treasury Board and Finance for a combined total of \$340 million. Under the 2020 estimates now \$230 million will come out of the Children's Services budget for the Alberta child and family benefit, \$45 million for the child benefit, and Treasury Board and Finance will still distribute \$40 million under the Alberta family employment tax credit. That actually totals \$315 million.

I point this out because I think it's important for Albertans to know that while the Children's Services overall budget has increased, it has not increased because there's more money being delivered in those key program areas; it's been increased because there was a move from one ministry's budget over to another. In fact – again, we'll get down into it, I'm sure, a little bit more – there's actually less being spent in all of the key program areas. The budgets are lower than Budget 2019 in the key areas of child intervention, child care, and early intervention services for children and youth.

Now, I note the minister prefaced her comments today – and I think we've got statistics to support that – that we do know that the number of children in care receiving services has increased. We know that the population of children has increased. We know that cost pressures have increased. I guess my question off the top, Minister, is: is there actually any new money that's being put into direct programming that is going to meet those cost pressures and those increasing numbers of children requiring services and the increased number of children in our province?

9:20

Ms Schulz: Thank you for the questions. You did touch on a number of different pieces. First of all, you're correct. The

estimates are published on a voted basis, which excludes the ACB, ACFB, and that is included in the consolidated figures on a consolidated basis. Our budget has increased since Budget 2019, and, most importantly, on a voted and consolidated basis our government has invested more in each year than the previous NDP government.

Then when we look at the ACFB, the Alberta child and family benefit, this was designed – it was a consolidation of two different programs, so it certainly doesn't work exactly the same, which is where that is no longer an apples-to-apples comparison; however, it does target those most in need and save up to \$400,000 in administrative costs by bringing those two programs together, and 190,000 families will be benefited by that program. Again, this is a year of transitioning for that program, so I think, as we discussed last year, because it is based on our work with the Canada Revenue Agency and administered through the tax system, it doesn't take effect until July of this year. So that means that it is a bit of a transition year.

We also can specifically point to the fact that, absolutely, cost pressures are going up. That's why 63 per cent of our budget supports child intervention, which is the legislated responsibility of my ministry, to support those children, youth, and families who are most in need. That area saw an increase of 1.7 per cent, but we have also – and I think we've said this a number of times before – reviewed every single program and service within the ministry to ensure that all of our supports are in fact going to those who are most vulnerable, and that's actually across the board when we look at if it's okay. You did touch on each individual ministry. We saw an increase of 1.7 per cent in child intervention. That is to support those most in need, and I can speak a little bit more to where some of those funds were targeted later on.

Ms Pancholi: If you don't mind, Minister, I will ask specific questions about that, about child intervention.

Ms Schulz: Sure.

Ms Pancholi: It's just that I don't want to cut you off, but I do have specific questions about that as well.

Ms Schulz: Yeah. I mean, this is the thing. We were elected to get our budget back on track. We heard a lot from Albertans about the reckless spending of the former government, so I don't apologize for looking for efficiencies in our budget to ensure that every single program, service, and dollar spent is being invested in the people who truly need it the most. In cases where we saw indications or heard from our community partners that programs weren't working, we're going to take their advice and we're going to try something new. An example of that is our family resource networks. We've also increased targeted subsidies through child care to low-income families and invested more in advancing futures.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. I will get into that. I just want to go back and say, again, we are now – this is the second budget that has been tabled by you as minister and under this government. Now we're at the point where we are actually comparing your budget to your own previous budget. I mean, I appreciate that it is a very popular talking point to talk about what the previous government did, but at this point you actually have now tabled two budgets for Albertans to look at, and now we, Albertans, actually have a comparison point to look at your current budget compared to your last budget.

At this point what is clear in all of those areas – again, I realize that you're focusing on what you've actually spent in all of those areas, the forecast rather than the budget, but we are talking about

a ministry where we've all acknowledged that the need, the complexity, the cost pressures, and the number of children have increased. So to not spend the dollars that you had allocated: it's certainly not the case that there were not children or services that could be delivered, that that money could be spent on and spent wisely and efficiently and effectively. I don't disagree that that is very important. But really at this point we are comparing your 2020 budget to the 2019 budget, and in all of those key areas it has gone down at a time when you've acknowledged that the need and cost pressures and complexity have gone up. I think that it's important, while we frame this discussion today, that we are comparing what's currently before us to what was tabled by you previously as a minister.

I want to go back to the child and family benefit because you have noted that there is going to be \$230 million, or that's what's allocated in the 2020 estimates for the Alberta child and family benefit. I recognize, Minister, that you said, of course, that due to the payment dates there is still some carry-over from the previous Alberta child benefit and the employment tax credit. That's why we still see, I'm guessing, those line items in the budgets for both Treasury Board and for Children's Services. But if you look at the combined totals – again, I think the minister has gone on record, and I think most would agree that child benefits are a key poverty reduction tool. It's been recognized as a key element for raising families and children out of poverty. I imagine that is why the minister has also been focusing on the child and family benefit as a poverty reduction tool.

However, again, looking at the 2020 estimates, even if you combine what's carried over from the previous benefit model and then what's invested in 2020 for the child and family benefit, it totals about \$315 million. I'm reaching that by adding the Alberta child benefit and the Alberta child and family benefit from the Children's Services budget and also including the Alberta family employment tax credit, which is in the budget for Treasury Board and Finance, and that's at \$40 million. Totalled together that equals about \$315 million that's being spent or is intended to be spent in the upcoming fiscal year on child benefits. However, that is about \$25 million less than what was budgeted for in 2019 estimates. Again, while the minister has recognized that child benefits are a key poverty reduction tool, it actually has been cut by \$25 million.

I want to go over as well the focus on – I think it's great, actually, that the child and family benefit will increase benefits to those families under \$25,000 annual income. Those are very needy families indeed, and I understand that under the new child and family benefit those families will receive more. However, I think it's also important for Albertans to realize that the thresholds have changed, and as a result of that, there's actually a number of 165,000 – I want to make sure I have my numbers right here; yeah – who will now actually receive lower benefits than they did before under the previous model, and 55,000 Albertans will now no longer receive any benefit. I want to be clear about what we're talking about here because we're talking about families and children from households that still have incredibly low incomes.

The University of Calgary School of Public Policy did an analysis of the child and family benefit and indicated that a family – a single parent, a single mom with one child at \$25,000 – as soon as they hit the \$25,000 income, which, let's be clear, is very low, all of a sudden will see a drop-off in their benefit significantly. A family of four at the poverty line of \$40,000 annual income a year – that's two parents, two children – are going to receive \$500 less per year in benefits. While I don't disagree with the idea of putting more of a benefit at the lower income, there are still a significant number of Alberta families and children who are very close to the poverty line who are now going to receive nothing or far less.

I'm wondering, Minister, if you can – as we talked about, there's still some carry-over from the previous model into this fiscal year. I appreciate that this might be a calculation that your officials might have to do and get back to us. Could you tell me: for a single mom with one child with a \$26,000 annual income, how much would that mom in this fiscal year receive, which would be calculated under the old benefit model, and how much would that same mom with that same income on July 1 under the new Alberta child and family benefit receive as a benefit? Again, I appreciate that I'm asking a specific question that you might not be able to answer right now, but I would appreciate that because I think it's important to outline that there are families who are in need who will receive less when we've already recognized that a child benefit is a key poverty reduction tool.

I'll leave that with you, Minister. I don't expect you to be able to answer that right off the top.

Ms Schulz: Actually, we can.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Great.

Ms Schulz: But first, you identified a number of other questions that I want to be clear on. I know you've mentioned that this is the second budget we've tabled. As you can appreciate, given the timing of the election and the dates when the last budget was tabled in 2019, two-thirds of that budget was already spent under contracts and grants that were determined by the former government. Not only did we honour those commitments; we also covered a \$6 million shortfall that was left unfunded by the former NDP government and we increased our budget forecast to address those increased caseload pressures not only in this budget year but in each of the budget out-years.

9:30

I also want to start by saying that more money doesn't always necessarily mean better services for young, vulnerable youth and families in Alberta, and we've heard that as well from our community partners who here in Alberta offer many of those services. I'm also encouraged by the fact that our community partners are working together to find innovative ways to support children, youth, and families across this province and find ways of reducing administrative costs aligned with best practices and research and do better for kids in this province. We also still have the very real reality of a fiscal disaster left by the former government.

I want to now get into your specific question. While we are getting our province's finances back on track, we have very much maintained our focus on supporting vulnerable kids, youth, and families. However, I know that the member likes to talk about their talking points, and one of the talking points of the NDP is about how one specific program reduced child poverty by half. It was actually some news I had seen last week as a reminder that – let's walk through the number of programs that actually are targeted that would have had an impact on that rate, knowing also that Alberta had the lowest child poverty rate in Canada for the last number of years largely due to a strong economy and job opportunities so that parents could provide for their families.

But let's walk through this because I know the NDP likes to say that this one program is the one driving factor that reduced . . .

Ms Pancholi: Sorry, Minister. I have not said anything today about there being one program.

Ms Schulz: Not today but in the past.

Ms Pancholi: Right now we talked about child benefits as one tool to reduce child poverty.

Ms Schulz: Let's go through. Would you like the example? I'm happy to provide it here; for example, a single mom with two children – oh, you've asked for one child – who accesses licensed child care and makes \$30,000 per year. We have this example where we look at the amount of benefits that they would receive on a monthly basis. From the federal government we have GST, \$75 a month; Canada workers' benefit, \$61 a month; Canada child benefit, \$1,128 a month; a tax refund of \$259 a month; totalling \$1,523 in supports. When it comes to provincial benefits: the child care subsidy, \$1,092 a month; ACFB, \$219 a month under the current model; which is a total of \$1,311 per month in supports from the provincial government. The total is \$2,834 monthly. That is 15 per cent more for that single mom with two kids under this new model than under the previous.

Ms Pancholi: Sorry, Minister. My question specifically was not about all those other factors. I'm curious as to how much, under the Alberta child benefit plan that's still carried over, that parent would make.

Ms Schulz: Yeah. Fifteen per cent more now under the new . . .

Ms Pancholi: No. What is the dollar figure for that? What would they receive? What benefit would they be eligible for under the Alberta child benefit and the Alberta family employment tax credit, which is the carry-over from the previous model, and how much would they receive under the Alberta child and family benefit on July 1? I realize that there are many different factors that go in. I'm just looking at that dollar figure.

Ms Schulz: Yeah. Sure. We can do the math. It is \$219 for a single mom with two children making \$30,000 per year. That is 15 per cent more now than under the previous. I don't have a calculator at my desk, but we can definitely divide that for you.

Ms Pancholi: Can we just commit to perhaps providing that information in writing?

Ms Schulz: Yeah.

Ms Pancholi: That would be appreciated. Thank you.

I don't want to belabour the point, but I do want to highlight again – and I appreciate that it was different governments before – that in previous business plans under other governments, including, by the way, previous Conservative governments, reducing child poverty was actually outlined in the business plan as a key objective and a key target. I'm curious as to why that is not a key objective as part of your – and I appreciate that Children's Services isn't solely responsible for that, but there are a number of things. You know, keeping children healthy and safe is not the sole responsibility of any ministry, right? It is shared jointly across. Certainly, when we see mentions of things such as human trafficking and domestic violence, Children's Services recognizes it has a role in that but is not solely responsible for it. I'm just wondering: did your ministry consider, did you consider putting in targeted measures to reduce child poverty as part of your strategies?

The Acting Chair: Just to let you know that that's the first 20-minute block. Please proceed.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

The Acting Chair: I would remind both the member and the minister to direct comments through the chair.

Ms Pancholi: It's just so hard to turn around.

The Acting Chair: That's fine. Thank you.

Ms Pancholi: I'll just leave that. I just have that question for you, if you've considered doing that, Minister. My question was about any targeted strategies around child poverty, whether or not you considered putting that in your business plan.

Ms Schulz: Well, I guess what it comes down to is the mandate of each individual ministry. As you can appreciate, the largest portion of our mandate is to support children in need, who are at risk of neglect or maltreatment, through the child intervention system. We have made a targeted, prudent reallocation to those most in need. Subsidies are for the lowest income families, so those would be the supports through the ACFB, through the child care subsidies. I am pleased to say that between the fall budget and this budget we have redirected an additional \$21 million to support child care subsidies for low-income families. We are reallocating funding within our ministry to do exactly that.

But it's also, as you mentioned, working with our ministry colleagues across the board in Health, Mental Health and Addictions, Community and Social Services, and others, Justice as well. We also recognize that while Children's Services is responsible for prevention, early intervention, child intervention, and child care, we aren't necessarily responsible for a number of the programs that address many of the other factors that may bring kids into care or address some of those other needs. That's why our government is committing to work together in ways that, we've been told by community partners, have not happened before, seeing everybody come together at the table to tackle some of those bigger issues around how to support families better and in a more coordinated way through crossministry work.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister.

I just want to move on, in the interests of time, to child intervention although we could probably talk about this one for, I'm sure, three hours alone. Again, I've already mentioned and the minister prefaced her comments with the increasing number of children receiving services, the increasing complexity, and increasing cost pressures. Again, I'm looking at Budget 2019, which allocated \$868 million to child intervention, which covers a number of services, of course, within child intervention and a number of programs. Regardless of the forecast that was spent, the current budget is actually \$4 million less than the 2019 budget.

Again, considering those increasing cost pressures and the increasing number of children in care and the fact that we have had a Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention, which outlines a number of things and actions that need to be taken, this is not necessarily an area where efficiencies are really – I have not heard that that's the problem in this area of the ministry, that it's about inefficiently delivering services. The increasing complexity, the number of kids has gone up: I'm wondering if the minister can just indicate why and how, in this area of the budget, which is probably the most significant to impacting the most vulnerable children, this minister can justify \$4 million less than budgeted last year.

Ms Schulz: As you can appreciate, the forecast, given that it's based on the money that was actually spent, is a far more accurate number to use, and it's a more current number to use when we're comparing last year's budget to this. We have addressed caseload pressures within the ministry. Much of that is due to the reallocation

of staff or vacant positions throughout the ministry to ensure that we can continue filling front-line positions, because we know that those are hugely important positions that have the largest impact on the outcomes of children, youth, and families across this province. We also . . .

Ms Pancholi: Can we get into that – sorry – since you brought it up? Just because it is going to be one of the questions and it's right there, let's talk about it right now, caseload pressures and vacancies. I'm jumping around a little bit, but just in the interests of time I want to try to get to it. Obviously, historically, far preceding your government, far preceding the former NDP government, staffing has been a challenge within Children's Services. I'm wondering if you can give an update. I note that there's no decrease in FTEs assigned to this ministry but also no increase, again, in an area where we know complexity and demand on the ministry's services would go up. I'm curious as to why there's no increase in FTEs.

I'm wondering, Minister, if you can give an assessment of the current vacancies, particularly in front-line services – caseworkers, assessors, those kinds of areas; I'm just rattling off things here – as well as caseloads, current caseloads for front-line workers, particularly intake assessors, caseworkers.

9:40

Ms Schulz: Sure.

Ms Pancholi: I know it's all over.

Ms Schulz: Do you want me to answer your first question as well?

Ms Pancholi: Sure. Yeah.

Ms Schulz: Okay. Going back to child intervention, this is where we have addressed those caseload pressures through a number of ways. We increased funding for kinship and for foster care parents. We have increased dollars for supports for permanency.

One thing I'm also really proud of – you know, you've said that efficiency doesn't result in better care for kids and families, but one area where we made a large investment following Budget 2019 was \$11 million extra for group homes. Why this matters is because given that group home per diem rates were left underfunded, what would happen is that – there were a couple of instances where group homes had reached out to the ministry, saying: "This work is incredibly difficult. We can't staff it. The per diems aren't enough. We're getting out of this work." Government would then come in at the last minute, usually at an increased rate, spending more money and creating disruption for our community partners.

So what we did, knowing that if an agency is about to withdraw their services, that's when we get to a position where the ministry very much has limited options – those would be, you know, making capital investments or any potential demands by one particular agency that are over and above what we would typically pay or finding alternate and potentially individual placements for impacted children, again, at a higher cost or maybe not the right fit for a placement for some of these really vulnerable kids and families. Proactively managing the anticipated issues then became much more difficult, so I increased the funding for group homes by \$11 million to address that so that they could then plan and adequately staff to support some of the most complex cases.

Through the chair, that's actually a great example, and it actually was from some of the feedback that I received from your colleague MLA Sweet in terms of how there are ways that we can look at the overall system to actually find efficiencies and – not in a bad way; in fact, in positive way – save money but streamline service

provision and empower our community partners to do their work better with more predictability from government.

Then when it comes to staffing . . .

Ms Pancholi: Sorry, Minister. My apologies. I do want to come back to my caseload question, but because you brought up group homes, I did want to ask a specific question about that because I've spoken with stakeholders as well who raised the rates for group care specifically with me and indicated that while they acknowledge that there was an increase to sort of level the playing field with respect to the rates for group homes, the question that they believe was at a critical point is whether or not the government is intending to renegotiate and retender the contracts for group homes and whether or not that is part of your intended plan for this fiscal year. Increasing the rates really was just simply levelling the playing field in some respects. There's a great deal of urgency, they believe, in actually retendering those contracts, which I believe have been in place since 2006. That's just a direct question, Minister, as to whether or not that is part of your intention for this fiscal year.

Ms Schulz: This is something that we're working towards, and it's something that we heard. It's part of our four-year procurement plan. It is something that we heard from stakeholders through partners such as Align. A number of their fiscal pressures – and they identified this. They said that under the former government a number of the changes made under the ministry of labour regarding overtime and minimum wage had actually cost our group care sector \$80 million in unintended costs. They really found it difficult to navigate because in their view ministries were working in silos and it was very much an unintended cost burdened by those community partners who are serving the most vulnerable people in our province. That's why we have heard them.

Anywhere we can ensure that we have longer term, transparent processes for funding, more predictability for our community partners, as in what we've done through the family resource network, that's a path that we would like to go down. That is absolutely part of our four-year procurement cycle. The next one will be coming up, and we'll continue to work with our community partners on that.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister.

If we can go back, then, to the questions that I'd asked about the staffing within the ministry and the vacancies, why there's no increase in FTEs, as well as just on the caseloads right now to front-line workers.

Ms Schulz: Yeah. As I've said, we continue to redirect our support services to the front line. Between 40 and 50 staff are reallocated. More staff are returning from leaves than leaving the ministry, which is the first time in a very long time that this has happened. As you can appreciate, with the very difficult nature of this work burnout and fatigue are very real challenges for our front-line caseworkers given that it's emotionally challenging and the unpredictability in terms of the fact that this is not a 9-to-5 position. It's 365 days a year, and you can't really predict when a crisis may happen. So that is very encouraging, and this is the first time that we've seen that in a number of years.

However, we continue to fill all of our vacancies in our front-line positions, knowing that those are the most important positions in the ministry but also having to target some of our recruitment because as you can also appreciate, these are unique roles with very unique skill sets. It's a match of attracting people to the job but then ensuring that we're also getting high-quality front-line caseworkers in those positions to do this very important work.

So we have been working on recruitment with postsecondary institutions that provide social work education to promote child intervention as a career choice. Just a couple of months ago I was at Mount Royal University and seeing some of the innovative things that they are doing in terms of simulation labs to put students through casework scenarios. Specifically, the day that I was there, it was around intake, and I've often said that the intake worker has probably the most difficult job in the ministry. Seeing how social workers are being trained to do this work is hugely encouraging. All the front-line employees with social education are required to be registered with the Alberta College of Social Workers. Employees are made aware of this requirement when they're hired.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. Sorry, Minister. I don't mean to cut you off. I appreciate everything you're saying. Right now I have a ton of questions. I'm just wondering if you have the numbers of vacancies, the vacancy rate within the ministry, and the caseload averages.

Ms Schulz: They're all filled.

Ms Pancholi: So there are currently no vacancies?

Ms Schulz: No. Well, there are vacancies, but they're all being filled. So as you can appreciate, it's not a given . . .

Ms Pancholi: No. I appreciate that you intend to fill them. I appreciate that you intend to fill them, but how many are currently vacant, and for how long? I mean, this is the challenge. What I'm hearing, Minister, is that there is a difficulty in finding people qualified, and that speaks to the issue you talked about, working with the postsecondary institutions to get more social workers. So there's a challenge around that.

But I'm also hearing that even when there are qualified individuals, there is a holdup or a delay in filling some vacancies. I'll just put this out there, Minister. This is something I've heard, that currently all front-line vacancies, before they're filled, need to go through an approval process at a higher level by either the minister's office or below. Again, this is what I'm hearing, and I'm wondering if you can comment on that.

Ms Schulz: Sure. My deputy has assured me that there is no delay, that we have now shortened the time, and that these jobs are posted as soon as they become vacant. However, it is important to note that the ministry is working to recruit staff and changing recruitment standards. Changes were made previously to allow recruitment of new graduates from related social work diploma programs in addition to related degree programs, and then the ministry provides one year of training for all front-line staff who are coming into those roles to ensure that they're ready to go when they start.

Ms Pancholi: So you don't have an idea of how many of the current FTEs are vacant?

Ms Schulz: It changes every single week because, as you can appreciate, people leave or come.

Ms Pancholi: On average: is that something you can commit to providing?

Mr. Reeves: I'll approve, on average, 10 to 20 staffing actions per week.

Ms Schulz: Ten to 20 a week.

Ms Pancholi: Ten to 20 vacancies per week?

Ms Schulz: Staffing actions.

Ms Pancholi: Staffing actions, meaning that you're posting a position, that you might be interviewing? No?

Ms Schulz: It could be internal movement as well. As we've said, those 40 to 50 positions that are being reallocated: people and positions being moved to support front-line work.

9:50

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Thank you.

Caseload averages: do you have a sense of that? I know it varies region to region. I have heard that it can be up to 25 to 30 for assessors right now – that's what I've been hearing – particularly around the Edmonton area. I'm hearing that assessors have a very high caseload right now. I'm wondering if you could provide an average.

Ms Schulz: Well, overall, just a couple of months ago we did review where our caseload pressures were, and they were consistent. While there's not a ton of data, they were consistent with averages in other jurisdictions. However, we also recognize that some offices have seen an increase. I think we spoke before – so I don't need to belabour it – about the example of Lethbridge. We had a shortage of workers there. However, there were some staff in the Edmonton region who had capacity, so we sent a team down to support. Again, it fluctuates, changes weekly, but we also do have a process that we're going through – and I know we talked about this as well – a review of our workload/caseload pressures. That is still ongoing, and I think it will be done in the next couple of months.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

I'll just ask one more question. Just on the staff retention and recruitment, I note that the business plan has highlighted and that the fiscal plan highlights that there are strategies that are being employed to try to improve retention. Minister, can you advise as to whether or not the ministry is considering contracting out more front-line work to outside agencies or outside contractors rather than bringing in staff to meet the challenges of hiring staff? Is that one of the strategies you're considering?

Ms Schulz: No, not at this time. Alberta is unique in terms of the number of community organizations that are already doing a lot of that work, so that's allowed us to really work with our community partners to support families and vulnerable families.

Ms Pancholi: So you are still focusing on trying to bring staff into the ministry?

Ms Schulz: Absolutely, we are.

I also want to be clear on something you said. My office absolutely does not approve the hiring of ministry staff. That is done by my deputy and the Public Service Commission, which I think is a very important point of correction.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

Ms Schulz: Also, we have your number on the specific example around a single mom making \$26,000 per year with one child. Under the previous program, under the ACB, she would be making \$1,955; under the new model, \$1,888, so a \$68 reduction.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate that.

Ms Schulz: And that's per year. Sorry.

Ms Pancholi: Oh. Yeah. Thank you.

I'm just going to move on a little bit. As you're aware – I know you're aware, Minister – after the previous budget the decision was made to reduce the eligibility for support and financial assistance agreements, and that eligibility age went down from 24 to 22. I understand – and correct me if I'm wrong – that the support for those financial agreements comes out of line item 2.2 in the budget, which is around child intervention. Is that true? I'd originally thought it might be under 4.2, youth in transition, but would it be correct that it is through 2.2, child intervention services?

Ms Schulz: Yeah, it is.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Minister, I realize that the effective date of that will be coming up shortly, at the end of this month. How much do you anticipate that lowering the eligibility rate will save the ministry under this line item?

Ms Schulz: Well, as I've said before, we know what that reduction will save our ministry specifically. However, I do want to point out, before providing that, that that's not necessarily a reduction to government overall.

Ms Pancholi: I am looking specifically at the saving to the Children's Services budget.

Ms Schulz: Yeah. That would be \$14.3 million. However, there is funding to support the transition. As I've mentioned before, caseworkers within the ministry – this review is twofold. One is to review each and every one of the cases of the young people who are transitioning out of this program and working with community partners and the office of the Child and Youth Advocate on that front. That is an important piece. But also, then, the second piece is to ensure that our policy is not only equitable across the province – we had, again, those discrepancies due to regional service delivery. So we have the policy side being worked on but also the transition of these young people.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I appreciate it.

I was actually going to ask about the review, those individuals, up to 500 young people, who were affected by that change. You had indicated that, yes, each of those individual young people would have their files reviewed to see whether or not they can transition over to other supports. I'm wondering, Minister – and I'm not asking for personal information; by no means would I ever do that – if you're going to make available or make available to the members of the Assembly the outcome of that review with respect to the numbers of young people who were deemed to no longer be eligible, how many of them did successfully transition to supports in other ministries as well as whether those supports are comparable to what they were receiving under the supports and financial assistance agreements.

Ms Schulz: That would be a bit – potentially, obviously, we would have to ensure that we can maintain the privacy of young adults transitioning out of care. We will not cease supporting these young adults until they are all transitioned, whether that is not necessarily into a government program. It could be just ensuring that they have natural supports and that they are transitioned out. Also, we have advancing futures, which a number of the young adults are in fact qualifying for. We increased that funding by \$3.5 million over the last two years to ensure that young adults who are transitioning out of care also have the supports that they need to enter postsecondary, to complete high school, and all of the related costs that accompany that circumstance, and that continues on up to 24 years.

I would say that last week, when my department met with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate, they had remarked that they had expected their office to be overwhelmed with requests from young people and that that has not happened. He feels that we have done good work to ensure transitions. But, again, that's also part of the policy piece that has to work moving forward. Instead of waiting until the last six months before a young adult turns 24, no matter at what age that transition takes place, we have to make sure that we are making that transition smooth, that we are starting sooner, and that we are working very hard to find natural supports in that young adult's life.

Ms Pancholi: Minister, you referenced natural supports a number of times, and I'm wondering whether or not there have been any decisions to make some exemptions for some of the young people who would have been most immediately affected by the decision to lower the eligibility age by the end of this month. Have there been any exceptions made whereby if one of these young people was not eligible for either AISH, PDD, income supports, or advancing futures, there would be ongoing financial support from the ministry for any of those young people?

Ms Schulz: Yeah. As I just said, actually, when I referenced the \$14.3 million and then said that there would be additional funding to help with those transitions, that's exactly what I meant, that in these cases we will remain in a position where we are supporting these young people until that transition takes place.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister.

The Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act regulation is up for expiry at the end of this year, December 2020. I'm wondering. There are a number of provisions within that regulation, not just specific to this. Are you intending to make any changes within – well, section 6 of that regulation specifically applies to what we call support and financial assistance agreements, and it outlines right now that those agreements can be made up until the age of 24. Are you planning on amending that? Are you also planning on amending the items that young people are eligible for under this regulation for these supports?

Ms Schulz: I understand that the regulations have been changed to address this specific change, but we don't anticipate opening up the regulation.

Ms Pancholi: Sorry. The regulation has already been changed?

Ms Schulz: Yeah.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. I just checked the regulation the other day, and it was not.

Ms Schulz: It won't be posted until the date that it takes effect.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. So it will not take effect until . . .

Ms Schulz: April 1.

Ms Pancholi: April 1. Thank you.

Just with respect to the review of the regulation that is coming up, that is wholesale, back when I was in education, regulatory review was a big part of my job. I'm curious as to whether or not you will be engaging in a fulsome consultation process and with whom on the review of that regulation.

Ms Schulz: We haven't made those decisions yet, but I'm happy to share that once we have information.

If you wouldn't mind speaking to specific lines in the budget estimates, that would be great.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. Actually, that's a great segue. I had questions about where some work that I know the ministry does and, I think, is doing and, hopefully, is doing actually does fall within the specific budget line.

10:00

I want to go to the recommendations and action plan under the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention, which the minister has repeatedly indicated that she continues to support. I'm wondering if you can point me in the direction, Minister, of where in the budget line, because it's not always clear, some of the commitments that were made under that action plan are actually being actioned.

For example, previous business plans had indicated and allocated dollars to support the implementation of Jordan's principle. You know, that's a key action, action 6, I believe, under the ministerial panel. Can you tell me under what budget line the continued work under Jordan's principle falls?

Ms Schulz: You know, it's not necessarily as simple because the work of the panel included – and many of those recommendations have already been embedded into the policies and the practice of the ministry, so that funding would actually be under many lines of our budget. It's part of how we do our work, and it's included in our overall budget.

When it comes to Jordan's principle, we continue to be committed to the MOU signed on Jordan's principle. The MOU commits the parties to establish a joint committee to co-ordinate and respond to requests for services under Jordan's principle and will be accountable for a series of commitments and deliverables. Alberta works with the First Nations Health Consortium and Indigenous Services Canada and meets quarterly to discuss matters related to Jordan's principle. Under the MOU terms of reference are currently being developed to better support information sharing and data analysis between Alberta, ISC, and the First Nations Health Consortium.

Children's Services transitioned the lead for Jordan's principle to Health in 2019 as the majority of Jordan's principle inquiries and claims were health-related, but our ministry continues to be a source of information for Health and ISC to support service navigation for this and for inquiries related to child and family services.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. There are a number of specific action items within the – and I appreciate it; it is hard to sort of isolate where one line item is coming from. I appreciate that that's not the way the work goes, but there are some concrete things such as, for example, youth suicide prevention. That was a big part of the action plan, an ongoing support. I'm wondering if you have any targeted items and where that would fall. I would imagine that would fall under line item 4 of the budget. But what kind of specific ongoing support are you doing – and I'll say for two – for youth suicide prevention as well as in the area of increasing mental health and addictions services for children and youth and whether or not there is actively work being done, for example, with the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, concrete, I guess, strategies, and where those would fall within the budget and if there are allocated funds dedicated to those two issues?

Ms Schulz: Okay. Absolutely. Children's Services does provide grant funding in alignment with the youth suicide prevention action plan to support evidenced, informed actions that build community capacity, provide supports focused on recovery and growth, and reduce youth suicide in the province. This has been co-led by

Children's Services and Health. Last year we provided 16 grants to community organizations to support the five outcome areas of the action plan. Examples of this and the funding for this would be included under 4.1 in early intervention and early childhood development. That will be \$1.3 million in funding to support the delivery of front-line services, also to support children and youth, which, again, can't be separated from that work.

Some of the examples of the contracts and grants were: funding to Three Eagle Wellness to provide suicide prevention training to youth in multiple First Nations communities, and 45 students from indigenous communities have enrolled in these programs; funding for youth culture camps targeted at indigenous youth, Métis youth living on-settlement, and Métis urban youth to reconnect with their culture; funding to the Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association to pilot suicide prevention programs and strengthen protective factors for indigenous youth in urban centres.

We spoke last year about the two graphic novels that were rolled out to provide more tangible resources for young people to engage youth with Métis and First Nations culturally relevant supports, I would say, to engage them in conversations about suicide prevention. Also, the mental health grant program, about \$1 million, improves access to mental health specialists and supports for children, youth, and families currently or previously involved with child intervention.

Two examples are specifically for that: Native Counselling Services of Alberta – we fund a 13-week, trauma-informed program to assess a child's neurodevelopmental capacity and give caregivers recommendations and referrals to community-based programs and supports – as well as the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, which provides access to mental health specialists for assessment.

Ms Pancholi: I'm sorry, Minister. Were these past grants, or are these ongoing?

Ms Schulz: These are ongoing.

Ms Pancholi: These are ongoing. Thank you. I appreciate that there's probably a long list, and I do really actually want to hear them all. Is it possible for you to table that just so we can move on with some questions? I do want to hear all of them.

Ms Schulz: That's actually the end of the list.

Ms Pancholi: Oh, good. For once my timing was good. I'm sorry. I'm just going to go back to a couple of other actions within the plan. The action plan also included recommendations, which were accepted by government, to amend the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act to strengthen, for example, the role of the band designate. Are there any plans – I don't see any specific strategies in the business plan – around amending the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act? Is that something that's on the radar for this year?

Ms Schulz: That's actually an excellent question because it was something that was brought up yesterday as I was meeting with a number of First Nations chiefs from across the province. That's something where there is a recognition of that role but also understanding that Bill C-92 has created a significant amount of uncertainty within the child intervention system not only for us as a provincial government.

You know, I said quite frankly yesterday to leaders of First Nations communities and organizations that we share the same questions that we've heard repeatedly from Alberta First Nations and Métis organizations involving the fact that there was no

implementation plan for Bill C-92, really, no plan for funding. So many questions from First Nations were around whether there's funding for governance, the lawyers, obviously, to put laws into place for basic things. Again, we've talked about this a little bit, so I won't go on at length, but there is real need for funding.

When we look at kinship care, what is the biggest barrier to kinship care? It is safe and adequate housing on-reserve, which, again, a lot of people are looking to the federal government to identify some of those things. Even yesterday we heard that First Nations don't want the province having this conversation over here when we're also committed to coming together as three levels of government to find a path forward, which I am very truly committed to.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. You actually mentioned kinship care, and I realize that it's a very complex issue, but one of the issues within the action plan was obviously increasing supports, training, and availability of kinship care providers. But I also note – and I'm just looking for clarification – that on page 131 of the fiscal plan it mentions that savings were achieved through lower kinship expenses. I'm wondering if you can talk about how those lower expenses were achieved, and how much was saved, and also speak to the plans to review – it's been ongoing – kinship supports, and if you can provide an update as to where that work is at.

Ms Schulz: Yeah. Again, I just want to clarify, to finish answering the last question, that we will continue to fund band designates and work with First Nations on what will make sense moving forward.

When we look at, again, kinship care – it also came up yesterday, so it's all fresh in my mind – kinship caregivers and foster caregivers receive the same basic daily maintenance for each child in their home, based on the age of the child. Then, in addition, foster caregivers receive compensation according to their level of training and specialized skills. On the other hand, kinship caregivers are supported with a support plan that is specific to the child in their care.

As this work is continuing, and – again, it is also part of the C-92 discussions, which, you know, there is some agreement that these two things are not mutually exclusive. Part of why it's so difficult is because it's really trying to understand: what are the unique challenges? They're going to be different for every single kinship care family, given the nature of the family connection.

When we're looking at foster caregivers, again, keeping in mind that they receive the same basic rates, foster caregivers also require a certain level of training to manage complex skills that are based on the complex needs of a child. That's where it's a little bit difficult, especially when I think that a lot of the focus has been: are you going to change the rates? Well, I don't think that changing the rates is the immediate work. The immediate work is to understand: what are the needs of families? What is the policy that takes those unique circumstances into account? How does Bill C-92 impact the work that we are doing both off- and on-reserve to support families?

10:10

I also want to say that when we look at kinship care – and there was, two years ago, a flip in terms of the fact that there were more kinship care families than foster families providing services to vulnerable youth, and we've continued to see that number grow, which is, I mean, it's usually powerful because it suggests that the policy and practice changes that were brought in by the former government following the all-party panel on child intervention are being followed and that front-line caseworkers are embracing this and going to any length to keep a child connected with their families and communities.

I have to tell this one story. I'm not going to cry this year, but, you know, just in case I thought I'd better preface that. There is this amazing story of a front-line caseworker who worked so incredibly hard to find a family connection with a child who was not previously connected to his First Nation. I will save you the details, but eight years later – eight years later – that child is connected with his community. He is living with his uncle and will, based on all of the research and everything we know about well-being and resiliency, lead a far more successful life, and so . . .

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. I don't want to cut you off. I really don't, but in the interest of time here, do you have the figure as to how much was saved with respect to kinship expenses and what those savings were?

Ms Schulz: Well, essentially we have lower foster care expenses, but then more was moved towards kinship.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. I know that we're running out of time, so I'm going to move on to the very hot-button issue of child care.

I want to go back really quickly to the decision after Budget 2019 to cut the benefit contribution grant and staff attraction incentive. Can you just really quickly let me know about how much was saved by that cut? What were the savings to the ministry? As well as how it was calculated that – and I've heard this put out by the minister. Well, first the minister stated that she didn't believe it would have an impact on children and families in child care, and then it was stated that the expected impact would be on average about \$14 per child per month. I'm going to say – and I'm sure the minister has heard the same thing I have – that that has actually not held up. I mean, I've heard from centres who have increased their fees by \$200 a month, anywhere from \$25 to \$200 a month, as a result of this cut. I'm going to ask about how much was saved by the ministry by cutting that and how you concluded that \$14 a month would be the average impact when that has not been the case at all.

Ms Schulz: Sure. When we look at the benefit contribution grant, this was a reduction of ministry investment of \$18.4 million, and the ministry took that by calculating the number of spaces and the amount that we pay in the top-up and the percentage that we pay because, as you can appreciate, as with any other employer in the province, an employer is responsible for paying these benefit contribution grants. The ministry was providing a small amount to supplement that based on the amount of the top-ups. This is red tape reduction, but it also has enabled us to ensure that accreditation levels will stay at the exact same level that they are right now but also enabled us to invest \$21 million more to support subsidies for low-income families.

Ms Pancholi: Mr. Chair, do you know how much time I have?

The Acting Chair: You have one minute.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. I'm just going to jump in really quickly. Minister, can you confirm whether or not the northern allowance funding that is being provided to child care workers in the Wood Buffalo area is being maintained, and if not, how much will that save the ministry to stop paying it?

Ms Schulz: That is being reduced. That is not being maintained. We are supporting child care professionals through wage top-ups and professional development funding. The circumstances that existed in that community that necessitated that grant are no longer still the case, and that was a bustling economy and extremely high labour demands. This will save \$4 million a year.

Ms Pancholi: Minister, I mean, I'm sure that the member across will probably weigh in on that, that the cost of living is still quite high in these areas, and I know from providers in that area that it's extremely difficult for them to still attract and retain staff and child care workers who are often working two jobs. I'm going to ask you, just as a minister, can you confirm whether or not the removal of the northern allowance for child care workers is an indication that the government . . .

The Acting Chair: Sorry to interrupt. That concludes the first hour of questions.

We now move to the government side for their 20-minute block. Mr. Yao, please proceed.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much, Chair. To the minister and your team, I want to thank you all for coming out and providing Albertans with answers to all these very serious questions. Children's Services is a very difficult ministry, and we all like to think that this is a nonpartisan issue and that both sides of the House want the best for our children. I guess the only difference is the amount of debt that we wish to incur on this generation of children. To that effect, yeah, that's what I recognize. I think that everyone wants the best for these. Again, you're challenged with a huge debt, that we have to try and reduce in order to make things sustainable. To that effect, you've had to make a lot of hard decisions, including those that do affect my community. I recognize the duress that you're under, and I do stand by you one hundred per cent in those decisions, as hard as they may be, to be clear.

That said, Minister, the work that the former government – the former NDP government and our colleagues, when we were in Her Majesty's Official Opposition, did work together on the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention. Again, that demonstrated a bipartisan example of working together to achieve the best results for our children. I'm wondering if you can please provide us with an update on this very important work, because it would be valuable to Albertans to know that every time a government is reset, a lot of the hard work that was done by previous groups, our predecessors, if you will, does not go to waste and is actioned if there are good results from these discussions, from these panels. I'm wondering if you can provide us with any input into this very real issue on child intervention, please.

Ms Schulz: That's a good question. I would say that I do appreciate your support on some of the difficult decisions we've made. Ultimately, when we look at, as I've said before, every single program, service that we provide to vulnerable kids, youth, and families across the province, we want to make sure that it is having the biggest impact but that it's also serving the intended purpose, which is things like the northern allowance but also some of our prevention and early intervention funding changes. I do appreciate your words in that respect.

When it comes to the recommendations of the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention, that work was hugely important, and there are a lot of things that were done by the former government that I very much respect. A lot of that was around the well-being and resiliency framework, something that I am wholeheartedly in support of and we are now implementing.

Also, when it comes to the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention, that continues to drive policy and practice within the ministry, but it's also something that I speak to when I do meet with our First Nations and Métis partners about the importance of hearing their voices and also the voices of those with lived experience. But also that, you know, my – I have been very clear that I am committed to hearing feedback on an ongoing basis and

not necessarily having to wait for another panel, challenging, whether that's our community partners or First Nations and Métis leadership or those working in child and family services: if there are places where there are questions about whether those policies and practice shifts are in fact being implemented within the ministry work, don't be afraid to reach out, because that was very good work done and much of that has been embedded in the policy and practice within the ministry.

That doesn't mean the work is done. Transformative change continues, but updates to CYFEA have been made, reviewing the spectrum of supports for kinship caregivers and developing that made-in-Alberta solution that reflects feedback from the panel and better supports caregivers and children across Alberta. That work, as I said, is ongoing, but it has been somewhat wrapped up in our conversations around Bill C-92 and what the path forward does look like on that front.

10:20

It doesn't mean that we're stopping the work to better identify what the specific needs are and the different needs are between foster and kinship care providers, what that training looks like, and how we work with the Alberta Foster and Kinship Association, who I met with a couple of months ago and, I believe, I'm meeting with again probably in the next few months.

But also supporting our staff development with a focus on holistic learning and ensuring that staff and contracted agencies have the cultural understanding that they require for the populations we serve: that's something that I continue to hear almost every time I meet with our First Nations and Métis partners, whether it's prevention and early intervention or child intervention, that the cultural training continues. The ministry has worked hard to make sure that these are developed in partnership with indigenous partners. We have some specific training now that is targeted to both Cree and Blackfoot cultures so that front-line staff are prepared and can approach this work with a culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate lens.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much, Minister.

Now, I know you've received some correspondence from constituents right across the province, including my own, regarding some of the changes that were made to the benefit contribution grant, the kin care subsidy, and the stay-at-home subsidy. You know, when I look at this programming, in particular the kin care really flags me as something because I have a friend who deals with that, and they were very, very happy with the changes made to kin care.

Now, to that effect, it's good to see that you're managing to address some of the issues within. You're in the difficult position where you have to challenge some of these things. Even though the title of the programming and the intent of the programming are noble and good, unfortunately there are always going to be some that may not be as gracious when they're applying for these programs, as a friend of mine identified. To that effect, I want to expand on this, Chair, a little bit, if you could give me some latitude, because I was challenged by a member of the opposition the other day on some comments I made in community services that are related to this. The challenge was that there isn't abuse in the system, and I do contradict that. In any system there are always going to be some that, unfortunately, abuse or may not have the most sincere reasoning behind things.

The Acting Chair: If you could just make sure you bring that back to estimates and proceed with the question as quickly as possible. Thank you.

Mr. Yao: Certainly. To that effect, I guess I'll just continue on, then. Again, the intentions of the programming are noble, but sometimes the rules need to be clarified, and unfortunately we have to add that certain amount of red tape to ensure that we are affecting the most vulnerable. That is your objective, that is your task, and that is a difficult one. I'm wondering if you can explain where these changes are respectively made within the child care budget and why those decisions were made, so that I can share that with my constituents and with members across the way. We know that you have access to a lot of information, recognize a lot of the issues that have been identified, and you look to try to overcome those challenges so that we can impact these citizens in the most positive fashion and manner and give them the supports that they require. I'm wondering again if you can expand on these changes that were made to the benefit contribution grant, the kin care subsidy, and the stay-at-home subsidy, please.

Ms Schulz: Okay. That is a long list, but I can absolutely address those, and if I miss anything at the end, just remind me to go back. The line item for child care is 3.1, and I'm happy to walk through each one of those changes. The benefit contribution grant helped offset the cost of the mandatory employer payroll contributions, such as CPP, employment insurance, Workers' Compensation Board premiums as well as vacation pay and stat holiday pay under the Employment Standards Code, associated with accreditation funding. The BCG was paid at a set rate of 16 per cent based on the accreditation wage top-ups and staff attraction incentive allowance payments, not on the overall wage of a front-line child care worker.

I do understand that this change may have been challenging for some programs, but by our calculations, if programs should have chosen to increase parent fees to make up the difference, it would be only by \$14 per month, which is a relatively small amount, not out of line with other increases that programs may implement from one year to another to address business costs. Certainly, as a parent of two children in child care I remember getting lists about my rates going up because of changes made to, well, carbon tax, minimum wage, and also labour changes around holiday pay. I remember having my child care costs increase by a few hundred dollars in that respect. In comparison to that, this is a relatively small increase, but it did allow us to redirect more funding to support low-income families who needed to access subsidies for child care.

Moving on to the stay-at-home and kin child care subsidies, again, these are never easy decisions, but we did have to go through each and every program and service within the ministry to determine whether or not they were supporting those who were most vulnerable. The stay-at-home subsidy was available to stay-at-home parents, families with a child in preschool where one parent stays home or works or attends school for less than 20 hours a week. Preschools provide early learning and school readiness programming for a maximum of four hours per day, with children attending two or three days per week. We want to focus our subsidy funding on helping families most in need and those who require child care to go to school or take part in the workforce by gaining employment full-time or part-time, as the case may be.

With the kin child care subsidy, it was very difficult to ensure that funding was actually going to the caregiver of the child because there were no checks and balances. There was no ability to ensure that the payments were going to a child care provider. Parents would receive up to \$400 a month if they were using this care, and then the intention was for them to pay a family member to provide that care for their children. We wanted to redirect funding to address caseload growth in subsidy within licensed and approved settings, where there is more oversight and legislated standards related to the care and safety of children.

I also wanted to note, as it impacts some of the specific needs of unique communities, that obviously with the reduction of the northern grant, there is still funding. When we talk about quality, affordability, and accessibility, I think accessibility is a topic that isn't focused on quite as much as the other two but is quite as important. Accessibility means a couple of different things. The first thing is inclusion, ensuring that all child care centres have access to supports for inclusion for children who may have more significant needs, whether that be a physical need, a developmental need. If it's a behavioural challenge, the training that we do provide through professional development to child care workers to address that also helps us support children through a continuum, not just supporting children who have a very significant need but also addressing some of those behavioural challenges that may come as a result of things going on at home or sometimes of those families who may be at risk of being a little bit more vulnerable. There is funding for that.

But then there's also funding for addressing gaps, whether that's atypical hours, as we call them, extended hours child care for shift workers. That will all be maintained, and much of that is negotiated through our relationship with the federal government as we are currently renegotiating those bilateral agreements for child care funding ongoing right now.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much.

Ms Schulz: Oh, sorry. I should also clarify. There was \$15.9 million in savings that we were able to then redirect to other areas.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much. It sounds like your ministry is starting to take a bit of a broader view and looking at programming not just on its own but in combination with the other programming that is available and the supports that are available to again ensure that people aren't, say, double-dipping or anything per se or things like that or make sure that they are getting the supports that they require. Is that fair to say?

10:30

Ms Schulz: Yeah. We wanted to make sure that every program and service that we offer – one of the things we heard in terms of the feedback on the \$25-a-day pilot was that it didn't track need or income or employment and, in that sense, was perhaps not fair in supporting parents equally across the province. So as we looked through every single program and service we offered – and child care subsidies were no different – we wanted to make sure that through the subsidy program, while somewhat complex, we know that the funding is going towards parents who need these supports to enter postsecondary or enter the workforce. The more parents we can help through that program, I think, the better, which is why, as I said through the fall budget and the budget last week, we've been able to invest an additional \$21 million to support those low-income families.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much, Minister.

If we can get more into the nitty-gritty of the numbers, I notice that on page 45 of your estimates, in kinship and foster care support, there's a 13 and a half million dollar increase from the 2019-20 forecast to the '20-21 estimate. If I could just ask a couple of questions here. What is the increase, and how exactly will it impact these kinship families here in Alberta?

Secondly, you flagged something for me. Being on the Fair Deal Panel, we are looking at equalities or inequalities in funding formulas from the federal government to all the various provinces. These funding supports that you get federally, that you mentioned earlier: is that on a per capita basis? Is it equally distributed, in your

mind, from province to province? Are we getting our fair share? I don't know if you can answer that or not.

Then, stepping away from the numbers a little bit, in regard to kinship and foster care, can you explain to me the differences between the two programs, the caregivers in those two particular programs? I need some clarity on that, please.

Ms Schulz: Sure. I'll start with the first question. Then I'll speak to the bilateral agreements a little later on. The simple response for that line item funding is that this \$13.5 million, or 6.4 per cent, increase represents a \$9.3 million increase to support kinship caregivers accessing all support available to them, because kinship care is the preferred placement for children in care. This is part of those policy shifts that we've addressed, knowing that kids will have better outcomes if they're connected to their families, their communities, and their culture. It typically does cost less than other placement options.

There is also a \$4.2 million increase due to investments to address caseload growth and protect front-line services and support Alberta's most vulnerable children, youth, and families. The number of children in kinship care has increased by 16 per cent over the past year, and we now support 2,400 kinship caregivers and 1,700 foster caregivers. This, again, supports our goal of keeping kids connected, as I said, to their culture, extended families, and communities and results in better outcomes.

I've also touched on this already, but working towards a made-in-Alberta kinship program is something that reflects the feedback from the all-party panel and is something that we're also looking at in the greater context of the work that we're doing with First Nations and Métis partners around Bill C-92. We do recognize that kinship is unique and that it requires specialized training, not just for caregivers but also for workers involved with kinship families.

Over the last year the assessment and support for kinship caregiving pilot has been in 16 regional and delegated First Nation agency sites across the province. This new way to assess and support kinship caregivers is intended to replace the home assessment report and the safe home assessment for kinship caregivers. This is connected to the amended kinship-first policy, implemented in 2014, that emphasizes the importance of placing children with kin immediately upon removal from their own home whenever it is safe to do so. It aligns with the child intervention practice framework and principles, practice strategies for lifelong connections, foundations of caregiver support, family finding, and signs of safety. The pilot has been extended and expanded to December 2020 to allow for some more fulsome evaluation of the model as well as the process.

In addition to supporting and managing the kinship assessment, the ministry is also strengthening kinship in a number of other ways. That's reducing financial hardship for kinship families by streamlining approval processes to cover basic expenses – again, that's something where we talk about red tape, that it just creates additional stress for families that are already in very difficult situations – creating kinship-specific curriculum for kinship care providers . . .

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

We are now at approximately the midway point, and we will be taking a five-minute break, returning at approximately 10:41 and returning with time for the Official Opposition.

[The committee adjourned from 10:35 a.m. to 10:40 a.m.]

The Acting Chair: All right. We will resume again, with representation from the Official Opposition. Ms Pancholi, please feel free to start.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister. Those five-minute breaks go by fast.

Okay. I just wanted to go back quickly, Minister, to the issue of the northern allowance. You have confirmed that it will be cut for child care workers in the Wood Buffalo region, and I am concerned about that. I have spoken to providers in that area who are very concerned about the ability to retain. They already have struggles retaining and attracting staff, who generally work more than one job, and I think that's going to have a significant impact on them, without a doubt.

I also wanted to ask you, Minister, whether or not you can confirm as minister: is the removal of the northern allowance for child care workers an indicator of the government of Alberta's intention to remove the northern allowance in other collective agreements? So can you confirm that that's not the intention?

Ms Schulz: I can't speak to that. I can speak to the change that I've made in our ministry in response to the specific grant. Just to give a little bit more context – and we kind of got cut off the last time – the northern allowance was in response to a heated economy in one part of the province. We are committed, obviously, to get our province back on track, create jobs, grow the economy, bring investment back to Alberta, but given where we're at right now, the intent and the need for this specific program were no longer necessary. Costs for workers in this area are now in line with costs across the province. However, there are different factors that create some of these struggles for child care centres in different communities. As I briefly said, some of that work will be ongoing, and there will be funding for unique community supports through the accessibility portion of the funding. That's part of our discussion, moving forward, with the federal government as well.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

I'm just going to move on to the recent decision to remove accreditation from child care. The minister has confirmed already that top-ups and PD money for existing accredited programs will continue for this fiscal year as well as that it will now be provided to staff or centres that are just licensed, that are not accredited. Can you confirm how many licensed providers will now be receiving the top-up, roughly how much the overall cost of that will be? Can you confirm: of the licensed but not accredited providers that will now receive the top-up, how many of those licensed providers were in the preaccreditation process, how many of them had not ever applied to be accredited, and how many of them might have recently or in the past applied for accreditation but have not been approved? If you don't have those figures at hand . . .

Ms Schulz: We have many of those. When we look at accreditation, if we want to talk about the certified staff, about 17,700 out of 18,140, or 97.6 per cent, will now receive these top-ups. The 95 per cent is daycare and family day homes when we talk about the number of licensed centres who are also accredited, and 90 per cent is when you add out of school care.

Ms Pancholi: Yes. Just back to the numbers, though, how many more new centres and/or staff are going to receive the top-up than before, just the licensed portion that were not accredited in any of those programs? And then how many of those centres had failed their approved accreditation, were in the preaccreditation process, which I know exists, and how many of those had never applied for accreditation?

Ms Schulz: We can't speak to how many of them have never applied for accreditation, but about 4 per cent, or 91 centres, were in preaccreditation. All of them will receive a top-up now. We have

increased, \$8.2 million, staff supports, but then also we want to be clear that, moving forward, we are reviewing the licensing requirements for child care centres. Those consultations will be happening this spring.

Essentially, the way that it's being framed, I want to be very clear: we are bringing these two programs together to eliminate red tape, and this is something that we heard loud and clear. Centres were sometimes – it was taking one to two years to become accredited.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. Those were not my specific questions. I do understand some of that context, but my questions – I appreciate that perhaps you don't have those numbers. If you could commit to getting those numbers, about which of the licensed centres were in each of those phases . . .

Ms Schulz: Sure. I can actually read them out for you.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

Ms Schulz: These that I'll provide are as of 2019 and then effective April 1. As of 2019 in the daycare program we had 980 accredited and preaccredited, and again the preaccredited is about 4 per cent; family day home, 60; the out-of-school care program, 966; and as of April 1 all programs, the daycare program, 1,037.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. That's a breakdown of, I guess, how many licensed programs are out there.

I guess I was curious. I'm aware that there are some licensed centres that have – on one, actually, I spoke to somebody who is in licensing who said that it had recently applied for accreditation, was not approved for accreditation but now, it seems, will receive the top-ups, going forward, from April 1. Would that be correct? I mean, you're not making any distinction between the licensed centres, whether they had been approved, were not approved. It's all licensed centres. Is that fair?

Ms Schulz: Well, ultimately, I would say this. We do need to talk a little bit about what had happened, what had been happening with accreditation, to provide context for that. In the case of one provider that we spoke to, they had said – and they gave a specific example, and we heard it from a number of providers – that with the outside agencies that had been doing this work, this process had grown incredibly subjective.

Ms Pancholi: Minister, I'm not trying to be combative. I'm just trying to get an answer as to whether or not – is there any distinction? Are all licensed programs now going to get the top-up?

Ms Schulz: With the intention of not fearmongering the public and ensuring that there is a consistent understanding of how these programs work, I truly believe that context is important so that parents understand the changes that are being made.

Ms Pancholi: I appreciate that, and in another context you can give that context – you've got that platform to do that – but right now my question is: is there any distinction being made between the licensed programs that were not accredited? They're all receiving the top-up?

Ms Schulz: They will receive the top-up.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

Okay. Going back – it was part of the business plan last year; it's part of the business plan this year – you've mentioned repeatedly, of course, that the child care licensing regulation is going to be

reviewed. I'm wondering, I'm curious about the timing and why the decision to cancel accreditation when the review is happening right now. Wouldn't it have been an easier transition and provided some assurances to the public – because you've said that there's a need for context here, and there's a lot of concern right now about what it means to have the accreditation standards removed. So why was accreditation cancelled now? How much is that saving in terms of the budget? What were the savings to the ministry by cancelling accreditation now? Why not review the licensing regulation and make the transition to incorporate what you believe is valuable or what the public believes is valuable from the accreditation standards into the licensing reg at that time and phase out accreditation?

Why do this first and create, frankly – I actually don't disagree with you about the process of accreditation being cumbersome and that there were significant opportunities to streamline that. But I think that by doing this before actually incorporating higher standards of early childhood education, which is what accreditation is, versus licensing, which is about safety and compliance and ratios, important things as well – why not remove accreditation at the same time as reviewing the regulation so that there was some alignment between the standards and the process?

Ms Schulz: Well, I'm glad that you did acknowledge that there is a difference. You know, you talk a lot about providing assurances to parents. I think it is very important to me that parents understand that the safety of a child care centre is already done through the licensing program. Some of these extras through accreditation are hugely important but also recognizing that a number of these practices have been embedded into the work. Quality also includes things like the program – in some places it's a curriculum – staff, professional development.

10:50

The curriculum that was developed under the former government as part of the pilot program will continue to be offered, but instead of to a select few, 122 centres, any program across the province will be able to have access to supports like that. Professional development staff have been maintained, and I can tell you that I believe in the professionals that provide this important work. We have incredible postsecondary institutions that are doing great work to train and educate early childhood educators across this province. So to those that say that without accreditation child care quality will suffer, I would say that they are discounting the professionalism and the commitment that child care workers across this province bring to their work every single day.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister, but what that does create is ...

The Acting Chair: Thank you. That concludes that time.

Back to you, Mr. Yao. Please proceed.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Chair.

On the indigenous aspect of your portfolio, I noticed in your business plan, in performance indicator 1(d), that there is a growing number of indigenous children that are being placed in kinship or foster care with indigenous families. I'm just kind of curious if you can speak to any of the changes that may be contributing in this area in a positive manner.

Again, back to federal support, the federal government has always stated that First Nations are their responsibility. To that effect, just provincially we do inherit a lot of the aspects to support First Nations, whether it's education or in social services. I'm wondering if you can also talk about any support we get from the federal government to support this program, if there is any, and how

that might compare to other provinces. If you can't speak to that, you can certainly table that, but I'd just like to understand more about indigenous supports in these regards, please.

Ms Schulz: Sure. I'll answer both of those questions. When we talk about the changes that have been taking place over the past five fiscal years, there has been an upward trend in the proportion of indigenous children in kinship or foster care who are placed with an indigenous care provider. This reflects the ministry's increased focus on maintaining family, cultural, and community connections for children and youth who are in care.

We continue to strengthen the cultural training for Children's Services staff through the ministry. The indigenous learning initiative – if I say the acronym ILI, that's what I'm talking about – is co-ordinated by the Public Service Commission for all government employees. But then due to the unique nature of Children's Services work – and I know I talked about this a little bit in the fall – our ministry developed the indigenous cultural understanding framework, that goes beyond the basic training, due to the nature of the work that's done by front-line workers in Children's Services.

ICUF, which is the acronym for the indigenous cultural understanding framework, provides a consistent and co-ordinated approach to indigenous training to staff in the ministry. All training is developed – and I touched on it a little earlier, so this is just a little bit more detail – with indigenous leaders and communities. It's helping the ministry better align with where we want to go, the rights of indigenous people, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action, which we take very seriously. It will help address recommendations from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate and the Auditor General that have been brought forward in the past around enhancing cultural awareness among staff.

If you want the numbers, to date almost 80 per cent of Children's Services staff have completed the foundational training; 1,466 child intervention staff have participated in a half-day training entitled Colonization, Historical Trauma, and Healing; 195 staff have completed training in one of two four-day cultural understanding trainings as well. One of those is based in Cree cultural teachings, and the other is based in Blackfoot cultural teachings. These numbers have increased even since the fall because we had a training, I believe, just in December. Those numbers are a 10 per cent increase over the numbers that I provided in estimates in the fall.

Then you mentioned the numbers on how we work with the federal government, and this, again, is somewhat tied in with the work being done on C-92 and reminds me that I didn't get to answer your other question about child care and the federal government, so I'll answer that as well. We provide services to children in need. There are also delegated First Nations agencies that provide services to indigenous vulnerable kids and their families. Of our budget, we do bill back for services provided on-reserve, and that number is \$43.5 million, that we received back for providing those services on-reserve.

Also, when we do talk about federal funding, some of the things that did come up – and I briefly touched on it earlier – were about the need. If we're looking at moving forward on Bill C-92 – and we have been actively involved in those discussions with First Nations and Métis leadership and partners across the province in starting those conversations – we have to bring these things up. The first time I met with Minister Miller, in December, the questions that I proposed to him – and I recognize he was new to the role at the time. I am encouraged by the transparency and honesty that he has

provided in some of our early discussions, a much different approach than what we had heard at first.

But there is a need to address the fact that every community is different, that every First Nation, every Métis organization has different needs to support vulnerable people. As I mentioned, when it comes to kinship care, things like adequate housing, I did hear one woman yesterday say: we would love to take more of our children, but do we have safe drinking water, and do we have adequate housing? So the federal government does have to begin to address: what does it look like, prenatal health care, more supports?

I'm so proud of the work that our government is doing. We have been working with Associate Minister Luan in terms of: what does the investment in addictions and mental health look like? How are we prioritizing, maybe, some of our most vulnerable people? That's something that we're working at across ministries. But the federal government does have – I think people are waiting to see what comes out of that. They have said that they're looking at how they may fund some of those early intervention services that are really, truly around infrastructure and basic health care needs, specifically, for young parents and families.

Then, just to touch again on the bilateral agreement for child care, that is based . . .

The Acting Chair: Sorry, Minister, to interrupt. It needs to go back to Member Yao.

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate the information you provided. I just want to congratulate you on your knowledge of the file. Over the course of the very short time you've been working on that, you've definitely demonstrated you've been studying it. I also want to thank you very much for breaking down the silos, that we've always discussed doing. In our private discussions you've mentioned how you have been working with the other ministries to address issues, to streamline funding, to make sure that we do address the most vulnerable. Again, I do respect and appreciate all your hard work in this file, you and your team, so thank you very much.

Ms Schulz: Thank you.

Mr. Yao: With that, I would like to give the rest of my time to Member Guthrie.

Mr. Guthrie: Yeah. I'll just, you know, extend on that. I've had a lot of communication with you and your ministry over the last several weeks, especially regarding parent link and some misinformation that was out there. You guys were just so helpful in helping me understand what was going on and then also communicating that to the communities in Cochrane and Airdrie. So thank you very much for that.

Just jumping into this, I guess, on page 45 of the estimates, under Operating Expense for ministry support services, there's a line item, strategic services. That's line 1.3. You can see a reduction here from the 2019 budget. It looks like, you know, about a 50 per cent reduction from budget, and you're planning on maintaining that in '20-21. Can you just explain that change and how you realized these savings and, yeah, just elaborate a little bit more on that?

Ms Schulz: Sure. This is, in that line item, a \$500,000 reduction for that specific line item, and it reflects one of the reallocations that we made of resources to support child intervention, those supports that go to help Alberta's most vulnerable children, youth, and families. That is part of our government commitment to prioritize front-line services that are going to have the biggest impact on the Albertans we serve. That was a reallocation of funding. The savings

realized in strategic services have primarily gone to child intervention.

11:00

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. On that same page, under policy, innovation and indigenous connections, you know, the budget was \$9 million. The forecast is about a hundred thousand over that, and then your estimate for the upcoming year is probably another \$600,000 above that. I guess, can you explain the increase but then also maybe give me a little bit of background into what this particular division does?

Ms Schulz: As I said in my opening remarks, the policy . . .

The Acting Chair: Sorry to interrupt, Minister. I apologize for the previous interruption in these 10-minute blocks.

It is now five minutes continuous time for any individual. Back to Member Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister. I just want to follow up on the conversation about accreditation. I understand what you're saying with respect to the fact that accreditation standards are high and that the centres that are currently accredited do great work and have highly educated staff. But I think that by removing accreditation from any enforceable standards or monitoring, the way they were before, it creates what was a problem for so many years before in child care, which is a buyer-beware system. As a parent who has accessed child care, I think the concern is that parents had some assurances when they saw that a centre was accredited. They understood what that meant. There was some quality, not just in terms of the safety but in terms of the programming and the delivery of that programming. Without that assurance it's very difficult, particularly when parents have troubles in terms of accessing space. Wait-lists are high – there are areas that are low – and affordability; they don't often have a lot of choice, so knowing that a centre is accredited means a lot to parents. I just wanted to comment on that.

I want to move on to child care subsidies because the minister has spoken at length and mentioned a few times about the increase in child care subsidies that have been put into that. She's been very clear about stating that she believes that supports from government should go to, as she puts it, quote, those most in need, end quote. I assume that means putting more money into child care subsidies. I imagine it will be similar to the approach that the government has taken with respect to the Alberta child and family benefit, which is to perhaps put more money into lower income subsidies. I guess I'm asking, first of all: is there a change to the current subsidy model, and if there is a change, can you outline what the new income thresholds are and whether it's still a full subsidy, a partial subsidy, and how parents are eligible within those ranges of subsidy levels?

Ms Schulz: Well, we're still working through some of those. There have been no changes yet. As you can appreciate, we are in negotiations with the federal government right now to determine what in fact the levels of the bilateral agreement will be. What can we expect? What have other provinces done? No decisions have been made and no changes have been made to that as of yet.

I do also just want to point out, to your last question, that one of the things, when asking parents about accreditation, because they had almost become one process, many parents felt that they thought that they were licensing, and when you ask many parents, or when we asked many parents as we travelled the province what the most important thing was in terms of a quality child care centre, almost all of them said: the workers, the feeling you get when you walk in, and the supports that workers provide. When we asked child care

operators and child care workers, “What does accreditation mean to you?” they said, “It’s how we get our wage top-up, and it’s a lot of work.” I just do want to be clear that quality still comes from being able to attract and retain high-quality staff, and that’s why those wage top-ups and the professional development funding are so important.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. I will just comment that the quality of the workers is also reflected in the standards of the programming that they’re expected to deliver, right? When there is a high standard of curriculum or expectation in early childhood education, yes, you’re going to attract workers who can deliver on that. That’s how you get, you know, educators who have that higher level of education, who aren’t just looking at, you know, supervision or babysitting but are actually looking and delivering, and that’s because the standards for that curriculum are set.

Actually, just quickly back to accreditation for a second, is there an expectation then that – there are supposed to be revisions to the child care licensing regulation coming forward. Are you anticipating that existing staff within the ministry will be responsible for enforcing whatever that is? So licensing will potentially expand to include different standards than they currently do, and that current staff will be expected to be the ones to monitor and supervise and do that licensing. Will there be more staff brought on? Will there be additional training or . . .

Ms Schulz: This is part of the work that our licensing staff does. If the regulations have changes, just as in any case, the front-line workers would then be equipped with the new regulations to do that work moving forward.

Ms Pancholi: So do you anticipate more resources being assigned?

Ms Schulz: That will not be likely necessary, but we will be rolling out that program after consultation, and I do encourage you or anybody else who wants to take part to take part in those consultations this spring.

Ms Pancholi: I would appreciate being involved in those consultations, Minister. The opportunity to do so as a parent and perhaps also as a member of the opposition would be appreciated.

Ms Schulz: Now, back to – if you ask questions about specific line items.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. Yeah, absolutely. On the subsidy, I hear that there are no changes to the current process, but that does sound like it is under review. Would that be correct to say?

Ms Schulz: It’s one of the things that we’re looking at as we have those negotiations with the federal government.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. And on that note, the note of the negotiations with the federal government, currently we do know and it’s reflected in the budget – and this is an outcome of the three-year bilateral agreement – that \$46 million is continuing in this fiscal year to be coming from the federal government. Do you anticipate any of that money for this fiscal year? Is that still allocated solely to year three of the – so none of those dollars will be going to increase subsidies.

Ms Schulz: No. Well, the terms of the pilot have remained the same, so the third year of the pilot will continue to run its course as it was intended.

Ms Pancholi: But the federal dollars will still be going towards . . .

Ms Schulz: Yes.

Ms Pancholi: . . . that third year of the program.

I note that with the mandate of the new minister – not so new anymore, I suppose – at the federal level, the mandate letter included a lot of emphasis on out of school care; before and after school care. Do you see that as being part of that bilateral agreement? Do you believe that that will be the focus of those dollars? Do you have any understanding of how that mandate letter is being interpreted as it impacts the bilateral agreement?

Ms Schulz: We’re continuing to have discussions with the federal government about what that looks like.

Ms Pancholi: Okay.

Ms Schulz: As I understand it, we want to renegotiate a bilateral agreement, but then the additional investments for out of school care will have maybe a slightly different focus. Those details have yet to be determined.

Ms Pancholi: Okay.

Ms Schulz: But I do appreciate the federal minister’s forthrightness on those details and look forward to having a little bit more information on that. We did have a meeting back in January with all of the federal, provincial, territorial ministers as well as the federal minister’s office, and they want to roll this into kind of a one-government approach with input from the provinces. So I’m encouraged by the federal government’s indication that they really, truly want to remain committed to the spirit of maintaining each individual province’s ability to target that money in a way that has the biggest impact on families in each respective province.

Ms Pancholi: So, Minister, then, going back to the child care subsidies, which is page 45 of the budget, line 3.1, it does reflect a \$16 million reduction overall in child care subsidies. We’ve already talked about the cuts to the kinship care and stay-at-home subsidy, which I believe would have fallen under . . .

Ms Schulz: That would be that reduction.

Ms Pancholi: That’s the totality of the reduction. So at this time, in the 2020 budget going forward, there are no increased dollars going into the remaining subsidies, which is just the low-income subsidies. There are no additional dollars going into that.

Ms Schulz: No. In the last budget we included an \$8.1 million increase to go directly for low-income subsidies, and in this budget we targeted \$13 million, to total \$21 million additional in subsidies for low-income families, with those two budgets combined.

Ms Pancholi: When you say additional for low-income families, is that because you are changing how much they’ll receive or because you’re expecting more applications?

Ms Schulz: It’s because of caseload pressures.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Yeah. I do note that with respect to child care overall – and I’ll find my line here in the business plan. It does talk about, of course, that increasing – here we go. Where am I going? Key objective 2.1 on page 22 of the business plan: “Improve access to child care by supporting initiatives that encourage affordability and quality in the child care system.” Would I be correct to say, Minister, that when you interpret encouraging affordability, your focus with respect to that is on low-income subsidies?

11:10

Ms Schulz: What we've said – and this is the case with every area of my ministry – is that instead of picking and choosing winners and losers and recognizing that in the \$25-a-day pilot only one-third of those parents were actually low-income parents on subsidy that were receiving those spaces at \$25 a day, we could do a better job of ensuring that parents all across this province, no matter where they live, no matter what centre they choose, have access to low-income subsidies to help them access child care.

Ms Pancholi: Minister, you've repeatedly stated that the ELCC program did not serve or only served, you just said, 35 per cent of low income, which is interesting because you've also been very critical of the fact that the ELCC program did not actually collect that income. I'm wondering, How did you reach that conclusion about how much everybody was . . .

Ms Schulz: We had to do quite a bit of digging.

The Acting Chair: Order. Please, if you can direct your comments through the chair and not talk over one another, I would appreciate that.

Ms Schulz: We actually did quite a bit of digging because the centres were not asked to provide any of that. Because the government provides child care subsidies for low-income families directly to the centre, we were able to track the number of children that we provide subsidy to.

The Acting Chair: Thank you. That concludes that 10-minute block.

Back to Mr. Guthrie.

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. I guess I had just finished the question. You hadn't quite started yet. It was on the policy, innovation, and indigenous connections: to provide some background into what goes on in that area as well as the increase that you're expecting for the upcoming '20-21 year.

Ms Schulz: Okay. In the policy, innovation, and indigenous connections unit specifically, given the dedication of my work to build relationships with First Nations and Métis communities, we meet with First Nations and Métis leadership, just yesterday being at the AOTC meeting in Calgary, and we rely on our ADM, her leadership as well as her team, to help make those connections. Gloria herself is very well known in many of those rooms, and she builds strong, ongoing connections with our First Nations communities. That is hugely important given the complexity of the work that we're doing with C-92.

But when we look at that specific line item, to answer your question about the dollar amount, this represents a realignment of funding for staff. The ministry has taken measures to ensure that money and staffing spent by each division is represented in the division's budget in order to be accountable and transparent with Albertans. PIIC, as we call this area, had been chronically underfunded for a number of years, and the number in this budget finally reflects that the staff and expenses being spent are a part of that appropriate division. We made that change in last year's budget to increase transparency about where that money was being spent.

Then there's also an FTE transferred into that area, and that was for peer support. The peer support program provides confidential emotional and social support for employees related to personal or work-related stresses. We spoke earlier about the very, very challenging nature of this front-line work. The program currently has 32 volunteer peer supporters, and then the last training occurred

in November, where three more employees became trained. The next training is scheduled for late spring, and our goal is to reach and maintain approximately 100 trained volunteers to offer those services. Close to 50 ministry employees received formal peer support assistance through this program, and to date there have been 5,226 visits to the peer support Internet pages within the ministry, suggesting that these are things that employees want to access, given that we know we have issues with things like burnout or compassion fatigue, workload pressures, organizational or job-related changes, mental health issues, direct trauma in the workplace, again as a response to the challenging nature of this work.

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. That's great to hear.

I know, actually, that with MLA Pancholi you went through a lot of the series of questions that I had here. I'm asking you just to refer to it again. On schedule 21, the full-time equivalents, I won't ask you to rehash everything again. The only thing that I was curious about – I mean, we have 2,769 full-time equivalents, and that's being held. The only thing I think that was missed, maybe, and if you could just break down that number: where are those staff?

Ms Schulz: Sure. Yeah, I can absolutely provide that. I'll keep it short because I've covered a lot of that. We have 87 regional offices across the province, and the number of staff in Children's Services remains stable at 2,994. About 72 per cent of Children's Services workforce is front-line, and that includes our wage staff, part-time positions. Child intervention specifically has 2,027 front-line positions, with family and community resiliency having 83. Those published FTEs are reported in the government of Alberta fiscal plan tables.

We also in Children's Services have the lowest manager to bargaining unit staff ratio in government at 1 to 13. For front-line child intervention service delivery, that ratio is 1 to 16. We do have a significant number of front-line staff, and we continue to reallocate positions. As I've said, so far 40 to 50 positions have been reallocated to support front-line work, but we will continue to do that as we move forward.

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. Thank you.

You know, at the outset I made some comments about some misinformation that was out there. There's been some fearmongering and stuff that's gone on centring around red tape reduction. Your ministry has been working on reducing red tape, and every ministry actually has been given this mandate to do that. I was just wondering if the minister can explain some of the regulatory burdens or the red tape reduction work that you've been doing with the front-line workers while ensuring the best possible outcomes, of course, for Albertans.

Ms Schulz: That's a great question. We've already talked quite a bit about the changes to bringing accreditation and licensing together in one program. That certainly will reduce red tape. I know, just to give one example, that one centre, who has been operating multiple child care centres in a number of communities for decades, said that still to this day, despite the fact that they have been doing this incredible work and have very much a commitment to excellent programming, a play-based curriculum, through the pilot then were asked to now implement another curriculum and explain how the two curriculums, that were very similar in nature, would work together, with more than 200 hours still of accreditation, between 200 and 250, each year even though they have been long-time, high-quality early childhood centres for child care. That was one example.

We've talked a little bit about the family resource network. Through that, one of the things that we heard from our community partners was the amount of red tape and uncertainty that came along with waiting for annual grants, where there was really no transparency or review of whether or not those contracts and grants were tied to specific outcomes or directions of the ministry.

And I do recognize – we've talked a lot about it – that change is difficult and it's always going to be difficult, but we have to look at every single program and service we offer to determine if it's in fact serving those who need it the most. Clearly, prevention and early intervention services: we've not reduced the number of kids coming into care. We have this exceptional well-being and resiliency framework that was introduced by the former minister and the former government, and it is good. It is good-quality research; it is based on best practices and brain science. We owe it to kids, especially our most vulnerable kids, to make sure that they're accessing high-quality services that are consistent across the province. But through this process, which is difficult, yes – it's also transparent – once proponents have made it through this process, they will have three years of consistent funding. Ultimately, the goal is to have better, consistent services across the province, based on cultural needs or linguistic needs, for the next three years.

11:20

When we go to child care as well, the online subsidy application for child care that I mentioned: when I looked at the original subsidy program, I couldn't have easily filled out a subsidy application. It requires printers and fax machines – you think about the transportation that it would take if you don't have a printer at home – and 87,000 calls to the ministry for help in any given year is a lot. So when we launched that subsidy application website, the parents who were there had been through the old system of subsidy application and were then able to walk through an online model of a subsidy application form, with quick Qs and As, the most common Qs and As asked by families who are applying for subsidy, built right into the website, and within 10 minutes you have an indication that you are tentatively approved for a subsidy and this will be the amount. This is a huge reduction in red tape not just for families but also for those 87,000 calls coming to government. This frees up front-line government workers.

Also, that is a huge thing that we heard from child care centre operators. In addition to the paperwork that they fill out for accreditation, they were also filling out a ton of paperwork to help families with subsidy.

The Acting Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back to you, Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister.

Minister, I'd like to look at page 22 of the business plan, performance measure 2(a), which looks at the percentage change in the number of licensed and approved child care spaces. I'm just curious. I'm looking sort of at the targets, and it appears that the ministry targets a decrease in the growth of space. Like, 2020-2021 is targeted at 4 per cent growth. I do note and the business plan notes as well that there was a 5 per cent increase in the number of spaces in 2018-2019. I could postulate as to why that is, potentially with the ELCC program, but we do know that spaces increased by 7,000 because of that program. Why is the minister projecting, going forward, that there'll be a decrease in the growth of new spaces? Do you anticipate a decreased demand for child care?

Ms Schulz: I'm just going to take it back to the beginning, so I'm using the December numbers to explain this. First of all, there are

about 2,912 active programs licensed and approved in Alberta. There are approximately 138,000 licensed and approved child care spaces in Alberta. We can break that down into all of the different types – and I won't do that in the interest of time – but the child population of Alberta is 726,270. When we look at our licensed spaces, we are only at 75 per cent capacity in those licensed spaces, so we know from the data that there is still space within our current centres.

We also know that some of the ELCC centres that were targeting space creation were unable to hit some of their targets for completing those spaces due to a number of factors. Downtown Edmonton is a great example where we've seen a number of ELCC centres come into the market, if you will, and then centres who have been providing excellent quality licensed child care for, in one case, more than three decades saying: well, there is an oversaturation now because of the choices made through the ELCC pilot. We know that there is going to be a little bit of disruption in terms of the spaces, just as there was when the ELCC centre was brought in place. That's no different – you know, looking at the chair, it's something that we heard in Lethbridge, that there was a major disruption in terms of the number of spaces.

We know that we still have space in terms of the number of spaces and the number of parents. There is, if you want to call it that, vacancy. We are only at 75 per cent filled in terms of the licensed child care spaces here, so we will continue to support space creation in new centres. This is happening all of the time. We meet with lots of new centres that are creating spaces. Also, again going back to that accessibility portion, that's one of the things that we want to work with communities on because we do recognize that unlike what happened with downtown Edmonton, we have better work to do in areas that we call hot spots across the province.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. I do agree that there are definitely areas that require more space development. I don't disagree that we know that there are spaces that are open, but I think, perhaps, one of the challenges: it speaks to the other objective within the business plan, which is about affordability. One of the reasons, even while there might be spaces available, why families don't put their children in child care, don't go back to work, don't go back to school is because they can't afford child care. I think that's part of the challenge because we know that the wait lists at a lot of the centres, including ELCCs, are actually quite enormous.

I know that myself as a parent. I tried to register my child in the local child care centre which is closest to my house, wasn't an ELCC. They told me to not even bother because there was no way I was going to get in. Part of the combination is the affordability and the space, right? Even if there are empty spaces, it's because parents can't afford it. Now, I understand that you're going to be, it looks like, reviewing the child care subsidy and perhaps putting more money into low income.

But we also know, I believe, according to StatsCan data, that about 1.8 per cent of Alberta families with children are below the \$50,000 threshold, which is currently the threshold for full subsidy; 20 per cent fall within the \$50,000 to \$100,000 household income rate. I'm not sure of the exact data, but there are a significant number that fall above that, obviously, between \$100,000 to \$250,000. My question is: what measures and strategies is your ministry taking to make child care more affordable for the middle class? That's a nebulous term, but really to be able to afford \$1,200 per child per month – even for many average Albertans that's difficult to afford. I paid \$2,300 a month for my two children in child care for a number of years. That's just simply out of the realm of not just low-income but most average, middle-income Albertans. Are there any strategies your government is taking to actually

increase affordability for that group of Albertans, which I have heard from significantly and, I'm sure, you have as well, Minister?

Ms Schulz: Well, I would say that two of the ways that the government supports – I mean, obviously, every province does different things to support affordability when it comes to child care, and we learned that through some of the findings of the bilateral agreements and some of the approaches that different provinces had taken.

The number one thing we do to support affordability but also maintain a high-quality workforce, again, is the wage top-ups, because that enables child care centres to retain and hire good, high-quality staff but not necessarily pass those additional costs on to parents. We also know, though, that the low-income subsidy: currently the subsidy model – and I can appreciate that the former minister had said once in her estimates that it was incredibly complex, and it is – is that parents receiving, I think, up to \$104,000 a year, depending on different permutations, could potentially access subsidy. I do believe that we have kept investments – and increased caseload investments for low-income subsidies are hugely important. As I said, the top-ups are important in terms of what the government controls, but one of the things that I want to hear more about from child care centres is what some of their cost drivers are and why that might be.

However, I just do want to provide a reminder that in addition to the child care subsidies, in addition to the programs that I mentioned earlier, the programs and subsidies that support low-income families, there are also child care tax credits that all families can access through their federal government taxes as well. I again just want to point out that there is, for example, the federal child care income tax deduction, and that's one that I didn't speak to necessarily before.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that.

I am asking specifically: what is the province doing with respect to increasing affordability? As I know, we're both parents with children in child care. The reality is, as we already know – we've discussed accreditation – that 90 to 95 per cent, depending on the data, of centres already were receiving those top-ups, yet child care fees are still very high and very unaffordable, so continuing to provide top-ups does not actually make child care more affordable.

I think you've spoken to a number of child care centres, as have I, both private, nonprofit. Actually, my own child care centre is a private centre. We've discussed the fact that the bulk of their costs still remain wages – right? – which is the reality there. A lot of them are not making a lot of extra dollars. Again, the top-up is important, absolutely, for qualified staff, but ultimately that has not worked to bring down costs for child care fees and still remains out of reach for so many families. I didn't really have a question there. That was just a statement.

11:30

In terms of a question – I've got a minute left – I do want to ask whether or not there is transition funding that is being provided to any of the existing ELCC programs, either for those that have, perhaps, a high percentage of families who are on subsidy or those who might not be viable absent the ELCC grant going forward. We may not get the full answer right now, but I'm asking maybe for the next round. Would you be able to tell me how much in transition funding is being provided? How many centres are eligible on the basis of high number, percentage of subsidy, and how many were eligible on the basis of maybe not being able to be viable absent the grant? If you could tell me how many of those centres, I would

appreciate that information, and how long that transitional funding, if it's being provided, is being provided for.

Ms Schulz: Yes. I believe I answered that already in terms of the fact that that additional grant is going to be provided to continue the funding to those first 22 centres to the end of June to address . . .

Ms Pancholi: So nothing beyond June, then?

Ms Schulz: Not at this point as we're still in our negotiations with the federal government. As you can appreciate, that creates a little bit more complexity than just making . . .

The Acting Chair: Thank you, Minister. Sorry to interrupt. Please, back to the government. Mr. Rowswell.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you. Just to follow up on what MLA Guthrie was talking about with regard to red tape, I know that can be frustrating for people using it, but it also can be frustrating for the workers that are managing it as well. I'm just wondering if you can provide any feedback on what some of the front-line workers have talked about and if it's helping them at all.

Ms Schulz: Yeah. You know, I actually heard from a child care centre two days ago who said: wow, we've worked in this accredited centre for so long. I mean, again, I have seen the child care centre directors walking around with six inches of printed out paperwork, the sheer number of hours going into that. I can tell you that we have heard some very positive feedback. Some of them said: "Wow, we still get our wage top-ups. We feel like you recognize the valuable contribution front-line workers play."

Again, the other day I did provide some quotes from child care workers, who also said – let me just find those here. One of them was from Sue Tomney, the CEO of the YW in Calgary, who said: it's time now that we can dedicate to working with our children versus working in the backroom getting ready for an audit. Anita Turna with the Alberta Association of Child Care Operators said: the priority of our members has always been the quality of care they provide to families; not having to do the paperwork associated with accreditation frees up educators and allows them to focus on the children in their care and will help eliminate educator burnout.

Another child care administrator in downtown Calgary said: discarding this bureaucratic organization comes with immense gratitude not just from myself but from many private and nonprofit operators in the province. And another in downtown Edmonton said: I'm so excited this is over; our accreditation is up for renewal in April, and I started doing the paperwork in January.

That was one area. Again, the supports with the subsidy – right? – I'm thinking of a child care centre director who is really trying to balance worker care, ensuring that there are care ratios, ensuring that front-line staff are able to access breaks but then also trying to jump through all of the hoops of accreditation and then try to help parents access a very complex subsidy process. Those are the two on child care that will make a very, very real difference for front-line workers in that area.

There are also lots of other areas where we have been working on red tape. One is the adoptions review as a result of a private member's motion that came forward last spring. We're continuing to do that. We've had some advice come through the red tape reduction online portal and website that we were looking at to review the legislation and regulations around there. The regulations for adoption expire in October of 2020, so we are looking to see changes as a result of Albertans' feedback in that area.

In child intervention the case connect app launched in February 2019. That's a mobile app that's helping child intervention workers

track case information as they are in a home with a family. The impact that that has is that instead of doing front-line work and then coming back and having to enter all of the paperwork, caseworkers can provide that information directly into the app. It also ensures that there is a seamless transition of data, which ultimately helps ensure more consistent supports for kids who may be in care.

We also a couple weeks ago introduced a new funding formula for child advocacy centres. Again, similar to prevention and early intervention, we saw a number of contracts and grants over the last number of years where, really, there was no equity or transparency in terms of how those numbers were provided. Recognizing that child advocacy centres do incredibly important work to support children who have been sexually abused and have very truly been through things that many of us could never imagine and providing them those unique services in a way that does not create additional trauma for these children and allows them access to the services they need was hugely important.

While that meant a reduction for some centres, all centres were very encouraged by the transparency, three years of consistent funding, because previous to that, without the bridge funding that I provided them in advance of last fall's budget, one centre may not have been able to continue to operate. Three years of consistent funding reduces red tape and enables our community partners to do the great work that they do and know that we value them and the relationship and the work that they do for vulnerable kids and families.

I think I've talked through all of that even without my notes. Yeah. Did I cover – oh, right. Just to summarize all of that, to date 10 red tape reduction submissions have been received on adoptions. I will also say that the concerns in . . .

The Acting Chair: Sorry to interrupt. You've completed your five-minute time period.

Ms Schulz: Sure. Thank you.

The Acting Chair: Back to Mr. Rowswell.

Mr. Rowswell: She can't answer my questions then?

The Acting Chair: She can answer your questions, but you have to ask.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Fair enough. Okay.

Well, I appreciate the depth of knowledge that you've got of your file, and it sure helps us that aren't quite as deep on this. Item 4.1, early intervention and early childhood development: what falls under that? What are the things that fall under that section?

Ms Schulz: Okay. This was previously the prevention and early intervention contracts and grants, approximately 300 stakeholders across the province, 450 specific contracts. These included things like home visitation, mentoring grants, addiction and mental health grants, and others to support well-being and resiliency. Funding under the old model included one-time grants. Sometimes those grants were being used to fill specific gaps. As I've said already today, some were brought in in the 1990s and hadn't been reviewed to align with current science, research, and best practices, which we now have in the well-being and resiliency framework.

Last year all proponents were invited to submit proposals to advise us on how their resources, expertise, and experiences fit within this new proposed model. Using the expression of interest as an approach, you know, versus a typical RFP procurement was really important because it allowed for a fair and transparent process but also didn't maybe punish or was still fair to all service

providers regardless if they were maybe a small nonprofit in a rural community. We wanted to make sure that it was question-and-answer based and that everybody had an equitable opportunity to apply and to articulate what their strengths were in these areas.

It will allow us to create a better network of supports, which would again negate the need for the system navigators, make it far more simple for families, also knowing that if a family moves or requires a different type of service, it's far easier to transition. Also, there's an expectation that the level of service and the quality of service will be the same and that it will all be based on the well-being and resiliency framework and best practices that we know have the greatest impact on the resiliency of young people.

11:40

Since that EOI closed in January, regional teams across the province have been reviewing those evaluations. There were almost 400 proposal submissions, totalling more than \$240 million. There will absolutely be difficult decisions to make, but I have said time and time again that my focus is to ensure that we now know what the standard is, and it is the well-being and resiliency framework. It is excellent work that was introduced, again, last February, one year ago – no; it's March now so just over a year ago – by the former government. I expect nothing less for vulnerable kids and families in this province, so we do have high standards. I won't apologize for that.

Right now the work that is happening is a review to ensure that there is consistent coverage not only from a location base across the province but also to make sure that specific cultural needs or, as I've said, specific language needs are also being addressed and then ensure that those smaller centres, the spokes, if you will, are connected with those hubs so that we're ready to move forward and provide those services in the new fiscal year.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Great.

I think I might just go to the child advocacy centres section. Could you please point out to me where I would find the money allocated within your budget?

Ms Schulz: That would be in line 2.2.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay.

The Acting Chair: I hate to interrupt. That concludes that 10-minute block.

Back to you, Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister. I'll just carry on, actually, a little bit on the family resource networks and line item 4.1. Actually, just for clarification purposes, Minister, I have received a lot of correspondence from stakeholders, from organizations, from individuals who were confused a lot by the process that rolled out in the fall. Again, I actually value and appreciate your comments with respect to the well-being and resiliency framework, and stakeholders seem to universally agree that that was a good model and that to roll it out was important.

I actually will also concede that I think there are some organizations who do believe that there was a need to review how those early prevention services were delivered. But, again, I actually feel that this is consistent with the approach that's been taken with accreditation. The process that was rolled out created a significant amount of anxiety, and I will not attribute that to the opposition. I believe that was generated genuinely from stakeholders and families and parents who reached out and who were very concerned.

One of the areas where there's lack of clarification – and it persists, I believe, within this budget, because I received correspondence after this budget was released. Originally when the EOI was issued, I believe a letter from the minister indicated to stakeholders that the goal was to reduce spending on early intervention from \$77 million to \$57 million, but then later on we saw statements in the media, and you repeated it today, Minister, that actually the goal was to reduce it from \$77 million to \$65 million, or by \$12 million. Then I see, you know, that in the business plan, page 24, it indicates that \$30 million is allocated to support families through child intervention services through family resource networks. Can you clarify?

Then, Minister, you've indicated that 400 applications have been received for \$240 million. Obviously, I'm not assuming that all of that money would be allocated, but what is the budget for the services that are being delivered through family resource networks?

Ms Schulz: When it comes to the savings, this is where the negotiations still have to happen. I recognize that we've had quite a bit of interest, but interest doesn't necessarily mean that every organization – first of all, the requirements were to be aligned with the well-being and resiliency framework, demonstrating that they had an understanding and alignment. The other was the willingness to create those community connections with other service providers so that vulnerable kids and families had access to more of a wraparound service and a dedicated network of service providers, and the other was organizational capacity to move forward in this direction.

That's where our estimate is about \$12 million in savings. However, we still have to make sure that there is coverage. Without using specific examples because I don't have any off the top of my head, you know, we want to make sure that there is coverage across the province and that there are very much supports for indigenous populations as well as newcomer populations. There are some centres that were offering special language-based programming as well.

That's where we'll see how this process unfolds. We will focus more on doing this work correctly than trying to necessarily just hit one target. Originally, we were spending \$77.5 million. Subtracting the \$12 million, what we're expecting to invest is \$65.5 million.

Ms Pancholi: So for clarification, then, what does the key objective on page 24 of the business plan refer to when it says that "\$30.0 million is allocated to support families and mitigate the need for child intervention services... through Family Resource Networks"? What is that specific \$30 million then for?

Ms Schulz: That is a combination of a number of different things. Again, as I was just explaining a couple of answers ago, it's for things like the parent link centres, the home visitation, the community-based preventative work. We're going to continue to work in those areas and allocate that funding for supports for vulnerable young people. That essentially covers that. The business plan identifies a subset of the family resource network.

Ms Pancholi: At the conclusion of the process for the expression of interest – and I believe decisions will be announced shortly within a couple of weeks – will the total amount that has been allocated through that process be made available?

Ms Schulz: Of course.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. I do want to go back to that process. Again, I think my concern with the way – and it's not my concern; it's the concerns that I've been hearing from stakeholders – relate to the

way that things were rolled out. Again, the framework is good, and perhaps even the new model will be very useful and good. It remains to be seen. I think a lot of people do think that the basics of it could be good. However, it is now also meant to apply to deliver services to a much broader range of children, right? It's now meant to deliver services from zero to 18 as opposed to most of the organizations that were previously receiving funding and grants delivering it directly in early childhood or early prevention, really. Again, it is a smaller pot of money that is being applied to a much wider range of children. Not to denigrate the fact that children over the age of 5 or 6 also can require those services and would benefit from them, but for some communities it means that they have to spread those dollars over a larger population. I mean, decisions are coming out in a couple of weeks, and most of these organizations have been told officially that their contracts are over at the end of March.

I'm wondering if you have kept track or if the ministry has kept track of the number of organizations that did not apply that were previously receiving funding, the number of staff or FTEs or contracted positions that those organizations had and now basically people are out of work. They've lost those positions. They've lost those jobs. Some of them may get hired back, but a lot of these organizations have incurred costs because they don't know whether or not they're going to get these contracts back, so they had to lay off people who had sometimes been with them for many years. Severance pay is important. They had leases to pay, and they didn't know whether or not they would have a program to require a facility. There have been costs that have been incurred by organizations because of the uncertainty created by this process. I'm wondering if the ministry has kept track of that information. For any of those organizations that then are eligible for funding under the family resource network, will any of this go to mitigate those costs that they already incurred as a result of this process?

11:50

Ms Schulz: Well, that's actually an interesting question. There was a lot of overlap that was happening in this area already between the parent link centres, the community resource centres, the family resource centres. They all did zero to six. However, decades ago the belief was to provide universal services for all kids zero to six. We can have the most impact if we support those kids who are truly in a vulnerable situation and reduce some of the duplication that exists within communities.

I do want to say that we don't make those business decisions for those organizations. I think that this process has identified a need for very clear outcomes in terms of alignment with well-being and resiliency and creating a network to ensure that we're providing vulnerable supports. I actually heard from an operator last week who was horrified that MLA Pancholi brought her PLC up in the House and that she is in fact looking forward to the family resource network. You know, when I say fearmongering, that's what I mean. That feedback did come through.

Ms Pancholi: Through the chair, thank you, Minister. To be clear, I was citing information that was in newspaper articles – right? – and those were direct quotes from newspaper articles.

I have 40 seconds left. Can you comment on how many jobs were lost or how many costs were incurred by organizations who may have had to cancel appointments or leases because of uncertainty?

Ms Schulz: These organizations are able to use up to 25 per cent of their grants for those types of costs. Again, we don't make those decisions for organizations. Many of those organizations also receive funding from a number of other sources and provide a

variety of other services as well. That's where they may be able to maximize their resources and take advantage of economies of scale from that perspective. But given that we've not made those decisions yet, I certainly wouldn't be in a position to give any numbers.

Ms Pancholi: So you're not going to be tracking that information or providing that. Thank you.

The Acting Chair: Thank you.

Back to government caucus. Mr. Nixon.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here and for your depth of knowledge on this issue. Thank you for the much-needed reform within this system. I don't think you could talk to a front-line community organization or caseworker that wouldn't be able to identify several opportunities and needs to be able to get better value within this ministry and better value for the children that we serve. Thank you for your heart and passion for the work that you do.

I've got just a couple of quick questions. I don't have a ton of time. Page 45 of your estimates, line item 2.2: I understand that supports and financial assistance agreements fall under this line item. I also know that, unfortunately, due to the opposition using vulnerable youth as political pawns to incite fear and spread misinformation, there was a great deal of panic that was caused following the previous estimates. We know that transition is scary no matter what age you are: 18, 22, 24. It's important that it's done well, that youth feel that they have some control in that as well. My concern comes out of any sort of sudden transition for vulnerable youth because it can be scary, and it creates stress. Although we will support youth who are transitioning, it's important that they know that, that they know that we're there to support them.

Following some of the earlier questions by Member Pancholi about youth being transitioned, I'm wondering about the question that she talked about, possible extension for youth. You mentioned that we're able and willing to do that, which is exciting, and I think it's important. I'm wondering if you can further talk about how that has been communicated to these young folks and their caseworkers to make sure that that fear and, you know, the stress that can be created from that aren't there?

Ms Schulz: Well, that's a really good question. That's maybe more specifically drilling down into how these support services are provided. Oftentimes the most important person in this situation is the front-line caseworker who is working with these young people to transition them out of child intervention and into their adult life, whatever those supports may look like in individual cases. That's where our ministry – I believe it was around 30 front-line staff and management – was going through each and every single individual case to determine what the impact would be, what that transition was going to look like, working with other community organizations. You know, we've talked about this a lot with organizations such as Bent Arrow, for example, in Edmonton doing exceptional work to support young people and their families to navigate these transitions. Again, it's tough to call it an extension or a specific thing. It's more so supporting each individual young person based on their needs moving forward.

As I said earlier, I was really encouraged to get the feedback we did from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate. I am encouraged that many of these young people are now learning about advancing futures and taking advantage of things like advancing futures. I think, you know, that was actually the case in a couple of these cases, that these young adults thought, "Oh my goodness, I'm

losing my program," but, in fact, they were part of advancing futures, which we have actually increased funding to.

It's so incredibly important to make sure that we provide the social and emotional supports that these young people need. I know you have worked in the sector, so you know that more than anybody. That is one of the key pieces that makes advancing futures so unique, and it is unique in this country. We're going to continue to provide supports for that program as well and work with each of these individual young adults as they transition out of the supports and financial assistance agreements.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Awesome. Yeah. I think we can see how irresponsible it is to create undue fear for these folks, so thank you for your efforts in making sure that they know they're supported and they're cared for and helping them transition to successful adult lives. Thank you for that.

Switching gears a little bit here, we also know the importance of indigenous programs, culturally appropriate programs. At my youth shelter I think about 65 per cent of the youth that we worked with were indigenous youth, and I've also had recent opportunities to tour organizations like the Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth and see the amazing success that they've had in helping aboriginal, indigenous youth within our school systems and greatly improving the graduation rate. You've already talked a bit about this today, and I've heard you, obviously, speaking of Bill C-92. I'm wondering about how that factors into your budget planning for child intervention, what implications this legislation could have for future Children's Services budgets, and then what you've heard from the federal government on the rollout of this legislation?

Ms Schulz: Well, that's actually such a difficult question. It's a question I got yesterday, and I was as frank as I will be today. Again, given that so little information came out of the federal government – we've asked to delay the implementation of Bill C-92 until we had a little bit more certainty because of the confusion that this was causing for local First Nations and Métis organizations, who felt that, largely, they were not consulted with before this bill was implemented. As much as I would love to be able to say, "This is what it's going to look like, and here's the certainty," I mean, the federal government will be responsible for funding federal legislation. The implementation plan: that is being worked on through the federal government. Many of our First Nations and Métis partners have made requests of the federal government for funding.

We have to look at what that would look like. It's not as simple as saying: "Here's a Children's Services budget. We bill back X amount to the federal government, and now if we divide the remainder of the budget, this would support indigenous children and families and this would support nonindigenous families." I mean, you would know this, too, that it's more based on the complexity of the cases and the individual circumstances. A lot of our large contracts and grants, both through prevention and early intervention as well as child intervention, go to support urban indigenous organizations such as the ones that you've mentioned.

I also think a lot about Métis family services and Bent Arrow, as I've said before, and that work will continue. The need has not reduced. We don't have a cost-per-case basis as every single child is different. Then as we see so many of these organizations starting to work together for more of those wraparound services, that work becomes – we don't lose the importance of that work. It maintains a hugely important piece of communities coming together to also help support vulnerable kids and families.

Those are some of the tricky things that we're working on. I have been very clear with our First Nations and Métis partners that I am truly there to listen and that we have to work together as three levels of government. Given that there was no transition plan identified, my worry is knowing how this all works, that whatever the path forward is, we remain committed to stay at the table together to ensure that vulnerable kids and families are safe while that transition happens.

The Acting Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded. I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on March 16, 2020, at 7 o'clock p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Service Alberta. Thank you, everyone. This meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

