



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 11, 2021
9 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Sigurdson, Lori, Edmonton-Riverview (NDP), Deputy Chair
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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Children's Services
Hon. Rebecca Schulz, Minister

9 a.m.

Thursday, March 11, 2021

[Ms Goodridge in the chair]

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

The Chair: Good morning. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everybody. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Children's Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

I would ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. My name is Laila Goodridge, and I am the MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche and the chair of this committee. I will begin starting to my right.

Mr. Sabir: Irfan Sabir, MLA, Calgary-McCall.

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

Mr. Smith: Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon.

Ms Glasgo: Michaela Glasgo, Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

The Chair: Now we'll go to the members participating virtually. When I call your name, please introduce yourself for the record.

Matt Jones.

Mr. Jones: Matt Jones, MLA, Calgary-South East.

The Chair: Mickey Amery.

Mr. Amery: Good morning. Mickey Amery, MLA, Calgary-Cross.

The Chair: Richard Gottfried.

Mr. Gottfried: Good morning. Richard Gottfried, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

The Chair: Brad Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Good morning. Brad Rutherford, MLA, Leduc-Beaumont.

The Chair: Due to the current landscape we are in, all ministry staff will be participating in the estimates debate virtually.

Minister, I would ask that you please introduce yourself and ask that you introduce the officials that you have with you and that if they are called upon to speak, they introduce themselves at that time.

Ms Schulz: Sure. Madam Chair, thank you very much for having us here today for our budget estimates and our business plan for 2021-24. Joining me are some new faces this year because we've had some shifts in our senior leadership team at the ministry. I have my deputy minister, Sherri Wilson; assistant deputy minister for child intervention, Leann Wagner; assistant deputy minister for transition and intervention supports, Jon Reeves; acting assistant deputy minister for indigenous partnerships and strategic services, Joni Brodziak; from early childhood services we have assistant deputy minister Michelle Craig and executive lead Mark Hattori; and our senior financial officer, Susan Dubetz.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I would like to note the following substitutions for the record. I have Mr. Sabir as deputy chair for MLA Lori Sigurdson. I have MLA Matt Jones for MLA Jackie Lovely.

Before we begin, I would like to note that in accordance with the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health attendees at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants. In addition, as indicated in the February 25, 2021, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper, I would remind everybody of the committee room protocols in line with health guidelines, which require members to wear masks in committee rooms and while seated except when speaking, at which time they may choose not to wear a mask.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV, and the audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings will be accessed via the Alberta legislative website. Those participating virtually are asked to turn on their camera while speaking and please mute their microphone when not speaking. To be placed on the speakers list, virtual participants should e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please wave or otherwise signal to the chair. I will ask that everyone please set your cellphones and any other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

I also will note that we have had MLA Jackie Lovely join us. Ms Lovely, can you please introduce yourself for the record.

Ms Lovely: Jackie Lovely, MLA, Camrose constituency.

The Chair: Fantastic.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process of the consideration of the main estimates. A total of three hours has been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Children's Services.

Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or a member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of her comments a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus. Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but time may be combined between the member and the minister. The rotation of speaking time will then follow the same rotation of Official Opposition, independent members, and government caucus with individual speaking times set to five minutes for both the member and the ministry. These times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block.

One final note: please remember that discussion must flow through the chair at all times regardless as to whether or not speaking times are combined. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, I would ask that you please feel free to send an e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process. 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. Is there anyone opposed to having a break? Fantastic. We will co-ordinate to have a break.

Ministry officials, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee. Ministry officials are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit, appropriately distanced, at the table

to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise; however, the speaking block and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

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

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 17, 2021. 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 as a courtesy an electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk so that it can be distributed to committee members.

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It is, as I said, my great pleasure to be here this morning to discuss the 2021 budget estimates and 2021-24 business plan for Children's Services. I have already introduced my senior ministry colleagues, but I do want to say that they are part of an exceptional team that provides great leadership for a ministry focused on the safety and well-being of children and youth, starting with early childhood programs, moving through the continuum of protection, and helping young adults transition into successful adulthood.

Madam Chair, it's safe to say that all of us have been affected to some degree by COVID-19, but for those already struggling, for vulnerable children, youth, and families, the challenges have been even greater. Now more than ever we need to make sure that programs, services, and supports are there for those who need them most. In every area of Children's Services we're reducing duplication, streamlining processes, and working more efficiently. We're modernizing the way we do business so it's easier for Albertans to access the resources and information that they need. We did a deep dive into our work and cut red tape where we could to ensure that every dollar we spend is directly directed to support front-line services with a direct impact on children, youth, and families.

Budget 2021 protects essential services and supports, including continued caseload growth in both child intervention and child care. We continue to focus support for youth in care transitioning to adulthood, and we continue to provide supports for households with the lowest incomes in the province. Madam Chair, to do this work, we're showing a 5 per cent increase in funding for Children's Services in the next budget year. That extra \$81.3 million will help us protect essential services and these higher caseloads. It brings total funding in 2021-22 to \$1.5 billion for Children's Services. I will explain how my ministry is allocating that funding.

The safety and protection of children and youth in Alberta is our highest priority. That's why child intervention is about 51 per cent, just over half, of the ministry budget. Budget 2021 provides \$879.8 million dollars for child intervention, which is an increase of \$14.3 million to meet caseload demands. Caseloads continue to grow around the same rate as Alberta's population growth.

The kinship care program also remains a high priority for Children's Services. Work is ongoing to improve practice in this area. This commitment is demonstrated through a \$1.8 million increase in funding for kinship and foster care to support caseload growth. We're keeping more children connected to their extended

families, to their cultures, and to their communities. I can share that, again, kinship care placements outnumber foster care placements by a third. Those numbers are 2,568 kinship homes compared to 1,699 foster homes.

Budget 2021 maintains support and financial assistance agreements, funding for youth formerly in care so that they have the skills they need to successfully transition to adulthood, especially at this difficult time. We also continue to invest in vital programs like advancing futures, the only program of its kind in Canada, to provide social, emotional, and financial supports for youth who have been in care to attend postsecondary studies and programs.

Now, Madam Chair, when it comes to child care, we know that a strong child care system is absolutely vital in supporting Alberta working parents and helping get parents back to work. It is an essential piece to Alberta's economic recovery. That is why child care funding will remain stable, with \$279.6 million directed to support the child care subsidy, including \$12.4 million for caseload growth.

9:10

It's important to note that while there is a decrease showing of \$84.6 million when comparing the 2021 budget to the last year, I do want to be clear that there is absolutely no reduction or decrease in programs or services budget to budget. That number accounted for the one-time federal safe restart dollars received in 2020 as a result of the pandemic.

We know that in the year ahead more and more families will be accessing child care. We're targeting our investments to support families with the greatest need so that more parents can get back to work or attend school knowing their children are cared for in safe, nurturing early learning environments. Our work to improve the child care system in Alberta puts parents first and is based on principles of quality, affordability, and accessibility, focusing on meeting the unique child care needs of families right across Alberta.

The Early Learning and Child Care Act and regulation came into effect on February 1, defining the expectations for high quality and safety within these licensed programs. Budget 2021 supports licensed programs to recruit and retain qualified staff by providing funding for wage top-ups, the highest in the country, and professional development, with a stable budget allocation of \$114 million.

Access to quality child care options is a challenge for many parents in certain areas across the province due to a lack of spaces or options in their community, so starting this April we're supporting operators as they seek to create new spaces in licensed facilities as well as home-based child care programs, and that includes overnight spaces, Madam Chair, to increase options for parents who may not work the typical 9 to 5. Updating our legislation was about putting parents first, improving the quality and safety of child care, providing more transparency as well as resources and information to help parents with young children make one of the most important decisions they will make for their children and for their families.

Now, Madam Chair, it's always best to prevent a family crisis before it occurs. Building well-being and resiliency in families and communities prevents the need for greater interventions and supports down the road. That's why we launched the new family resource networks across Alberta at the beginning of last April. We didn't anticipate at the time the beginning of a global pandemic, but these family resource networks do deliver programs that build parenting skills. They improve child and youth development, provide social supports for vulnerable families, and in spite of mandatory public health restrictions these networks very quickly found ways to deliver these supports to families in need. Today we

have 70 network hubs co-ordinating and delivering services through 126 spoke organizations in every area of the province with a budget of \$63.3 million.

Madam Chair, community grants are also an effective tool to help communities, including 16 First Nations, to provide additional supports for children and youth. Budget 2021 provides funding to administer about 60 community-based grants totalling \$6.2 million, and this includes \$1.2 million to support mentoring for children and youth with a focus on youth in care, \$2.2 million to support mental health services for children and youth, and \$1.5 million to support early intervention services on First Nations. We also have an additional \$1.3 million to support youth suicide prevention.

Now, Madam Chair, this government introduced the Alberta child and family benefit program. That came into effect July 1 of last year. The program increased the amount a low-income family with little or no employment income receives. Budget 2021 increases funding for this benefit by \$69.5 million for a total of \$345 million. We continue to support Alberta's lowest income households to help make ends meet while also creating incentives for parents who are entering or remaining in the workforce.

Now, Madam Chair, because we worked so hard to improve and modernize the way we do business, we're spending less operationally and focusing our support to the resources and services that directly impact and have the biggest benefit for vulnerable young Albertans and working families.

Madam Chair, I do want to thank the women and men at Children's Services who are wholly dedicated to doing their best to protect and support Alberta's children, youth, and families. As it is Social Work Week here in Alberta, I really do want to express my gratitude for our front-line caseworkers, who I think do some of the most difficult work that we do in government overall. Thank you again to the great employees in Children's Services for all of your dedication.

Budget 2021's focus on lives and livelihoods clearly supports our ministry with increased funding where it is needed most. My ministry is making the most of every dollar, improving the work we do, and I am confident that Budget 2021 gives us the resources we need.

With that, Madam Chair, I look forward to answering questions of this committee.

The 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 20-minute intervals so that you are aware of the time. Would you guys wish to share your time?

Ms Pancholi: Minister, I'd be willing to share time if you'd like to.

Ms Schulz: Yeah. Sure. That works for me.

The Chair: Fantastic.

With that, Ms Pancholi, the floor is yours.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister for being here today and presenting her budget as well as to all of the ministry staff who are joining you today. I'd also like to extend my appreciation to the thousands of front-line workers in the Ministry of Children's Services, who have had an extraordinary year, of course, like we all have, and have done extraordinary work, so my thanks to them.

Minister, as we are sharing time, through the chair I may interrupt you at points, not to be rude. I hope you understand that. It's just that we do have limited time, and I have many, many questions, so

through the chair I will direct when I believe I've had a sufficient answer to a question in the hopes that we can move on.

I'd like to begin first by responding to some of the minister's comments around child care, and then I will proceed to my questions. At this point the evidence and expert advice around the economic and social imperative of additional and significant investments in child care have been made abundantly clear to this government, not just by myself, of course, as a member of the opposition, but by countless experts, economists from across the political spectrum, RBC, Scotiabank, Bank of Canada, AIMCo, Edmonton Chamber of Commerce, Calgary Chamber of commerce, YWCAs of Alberta and Canada, the early learning sector, child care operators, and, of course, most importantly, working parents of Alberta.

It is clear that the government has chosen to ignore that evidence and experts by tabling a budget that does not invest even one dollar more in child care than it did last year. Not only does this choice reflect that the government doesn't understand that the child care sector has not recovered from the past year – many programs, as the minister is aware, are on the brink of closure, operating at 50 per cent capacity; educators are being laid off; programs are closing; fees are going up – but this budget also doesn't recognize how important and imperative child care is to stimulate our economic recovery.

Billions have been invested in physical infrastructure by this government, but not a dollar more has been invested in child care, which is the infrastructure that's required to get parents back to work. As a province and as a society we would never accept the idea that roads and bridges would be operating at 50 per cent capacity, yet this government has indicated they are willing to accept just that when it comes to child care.

Child care is the choke point to get parents, particularly women, back to work or back to school, women in all fields: public and private, entrepreneurs, service industry, hospitality, public sector. Whatever the work that women do, it is a choke point. It prevents them from going back to work and participating fully in our economy, to the point that Alberta now has regressed in our rate of women's participation in the workforce to a level not seen since 1984, a year when my mother was returning to work after having children.

To avoid investing in child care under the guise of parent choice is truly ideological because working parents in this province do not currently have choice, because they don't have access to quality, affordable child care. The current budget that we're looking at today reflects a failure to invest in the human capital of women and in children and a failure to address economic recovery and growth.

With that, I'd like to proceed to my questions. Minister, through the chair, I'd like to turn to page 106 of the government's fiscal plan, which sets out the operating expenses for the Ministry of Children's Services. Minister, if you may, I'd like to begin by looking at – on page 106, \$230 million is indicated as being spent on the COVID-19 recovery plan. I believe that would reflect both federal and provincial investments in COVID recovery, so I'm wondering, Minister, first if you can clarify: of that \$230 million in COVID recovery, what is the breakdown of federal funding in that amount? If you could be specific with respect to the various allocations: safe restart, critical worker. There was a clawback from the ELCC funding from the bilateral agreement. If you could break down how much of that \$230 million was federal and what those breakdowns are for those various areas, through the chair to the minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, and these are good questions. We absolutely know that many economists and organizations have identified the need for child care to support working parents through the recovery. What I would say, though, is that we also have a couple of interesting pieces of data that show – for example, the CFIB did a COVID-19 recovery survey in January 2020 suggesting that a strong majority, 78 per cent, of Alberta small businesses are not willing to pay more in taxes to fund a national child care system. They believe that we should wait until after COVID to begin the reintroduction of new social programs so that we have a better idea of the current state.

9:20

Angus Reid Institute also suggested that 65 per cent of Alberta parents would prefer to provide financial supports directly to families; rather, to a system or to a provider. When asked about the reasons why one or both parents are at home with their children, 31 per cent said that it was their preference or that it was always their plan to have a parent at home. We just have to look at the data.

I don't disagree with you at all. I actually wholeheartedly agree that child care does make a difference not only for women but for all working parents. When we look at our subsidy numbers, the vast majority of parents are single parents who are accessing subsidy, so that's a nonnegotiable for these parents.

But when we look at our mix, there are a couple of things. Even before COVID only 1 in 7 Alberta parents was accessing licensed child care. When we talk about entrepreneurs – and, you know, the member mentioned it. When we look at our operators, being 2,800 across the province and 60 per cent of them being entrepreneurs, a move to universal child care is quite concerning for them because that would essentially say: we as government know better than you how to do your business, will tell you what to charge for rates.

You know, I think we've heard it before, even through the pilot, that, yes, absolutely, high-quality, accessible, affordable child care is important, but I think that for parents like you and I – I know we both have young children. At a time like this, where we're facing very difficult fiscal realities, Alberta taxpayers want to make sure that every dollar is to go to support parents who truly need it, not parents like you or I but parents who truly need those supports.

To answer your specific questions, we have provided \$130 million around that in financial relief to licensed and approved child care programs. That does include \$27.8 million through the child care relief program to ensure safe opening, \$71 million – and this is through the agreement we had, the safe restart agreement between provincial and federal governments, where we could work with our child care working group here in Alberta. They gave exceptional feedback on how we could invest those dollars to have the biggest impact on these centres and help them to stay open and give them the flexibility that they needed, because not all operators have the same business model, as you can appreciate. Some of the pinch points that they invested these dollars in: some of it was to recruit workers, front-line early childhood educators; some was to recruit families back; some was to adhere to the health guidelines set forward by the chief medical officer of health; and others were just to support some flexibility in fees for parents.

Then we had . . .

Ms Pancholi: Chair.

The Chair: Minister.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I just wanted to . . .

The Chair: I said: to the minister.

Ms Schulz: Sorry. I'm not sure if I missed something.

I was just about to say: \$11.4 million provided to programs in January and February. Now, that was surplus from the '19-20 bilateral agreement with the federal government. You know, this is really something. Those \$25-a-day centres were either not open or not running at full capacity, so they weren't able to use the grant funding for what it was outlined and intended to go towards, so we did ask for a portion of that back so that we could share it equally across the province to support licensed programs in all areas of Alberta, not just the select few.

Then we also have up to \$19.2 million which will be invested through the federal critical worker benefit, which is being distributed to programs in February and March, 2021. In addition to that, we also made sure we worked really closely with jobs and economy to make sure that child care programs and preschools could apply for the small and medium-sized enterprise relaunch grant. That would offer up to \$20,000 for any businesses that were ordered to close or saw a reduction in their business operations of at least 30 per cent as a result of the pandemic. That was something that we felt was really important, and many operators have accessed that although we don't have total numbers from jobs and economy on a breakdown of how many of those dollars went directly to those operators.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm just going to remind both the minister and all members to make sure that their comments are flowing through the chair and not at another member.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. Through the chair, which is what I said before, can I have clarification, Minister: of the \$230 million that is indicated on page 106 for the COVID recovery plan, does that include the \$108 million that I believe is designated for the working parent benefit? Can the minister, through the chair, indicate whether or not – of that \$108 million that was allocated for the working parent benefit, did that include any of the \$29 million that was allocated in the 2020-2021 bilateral funding agreement for subsidy top-up when the change to the subsidy rates was made, or was that \$108 million entirely from the provincial child care subsidy budget?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. The answer to that is no. That \$108 million, even though it's not – I know we're here to discuss this year's budget, 2021, but I am happy to respond because I do know that the member had asked us to invest the unspent provincial dollars in the child care budget, which was \$108 million. This was surplus from lines 3.1 and 3.2 in last year's budget. As asked, we did invest that directly into the pockets of parents because the vast majority of that was meant to support child care subsidy. Given where we're at, with child care enrolment being at about 50 per cent – over 95 per cent of centres have reopened, but we're only at about 50 per cent capacity – we were seeing fewer investments, well, needed to support child care subsidies. That's why we decided to put these dollars back into the pockets of working parents, who needed it most.

This is something that, Madam Chair, the member opposite had asked for, to not let these dollars go unspent. Given the amount that we had invested into supporting the actual structure, system, operators and the great feedback that we heard – many of them are still using these funds to get through the difficult time of COVID – we wanted to reinvest that \$108 million in provincial unspent dollars directly to support parents.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. Through the chair, can I just seek clarification if, again, that \$230 million on page 106 of the fiscal plan: did that include dollars that were spent on essential services child care when the rest of the child care system was shut down in the spring? Does that include the essential services child care? If the minister can provide details as to how many programs were open for essential services child care and how many children it served and the total amount spent on that.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Sure. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Yes, that is included. I believe that does include those dollars. Originally, what we saw – that was an interesting rollout of those funds only because we had tried really hard to open a number of centres across the province, and we did find that not all of the centres that were identified to open for essential service workers actually had families signing up to use those spaces at that time. When we look back to a bit of the timeline, March 16 – that feels like an eternity ago. Just about a year ago, when all licensed facility-based programs were required to close, the family day homes were able to stay open and continue operating. Then when, on March 23, we reopened those select centres to provide child care for essential service workers, we had 215 programs in 33 communities that were selected to reopen to provide this child care under very stringent operating public health guidelines at the time.

Again, those programs: if anybody is curious about how they were chosen, we worked with Health to identify – you know, we didn't want to be in a position where government is picking and choosing centres that would benefit or be able to stay open, so we essentially took a radius around major health care centres in these communities and opened those up. That was really in place until May 14, when programs were able to reopen with reduced numbers of children and following updated public health guidelines, like the 30-person cohorts and those specific limits for spacing and cleaning and sanitization protocols. They have done a very good job of keeping children and staff safe. I do also want to thank child care operators and early childhood educators for the great work that they did at that time.

9:30

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. Sorry. I didn't get an answer as to how much in total was spent on the essential services child care. I don't think I heard the total amount that was allocated for that. I think I heard how many programs were reopened for that but not how many children were served.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Oh, sorry. It's different when it's all virtual. Madam Chair, \$10 million was set aside out of our child care budget to address that reopening for essential services workers. I did provide the number of the centres. I'm not sure if we have a specific number of children and families accessing those supports, but I can get that for you right away. I would say that as of November 2020 I can provide an update that there were actually over 2,900 active licensed programs in Alberta. I misspoke before; I had said 2,800. We've actually had an increase of 12 additional programs. There

are approximately 142,000 licensed child care spaces in Alberta. When we put the COVID mitigation measures in place, the guidelines put forward by the chief medical officer of health, only 115,200 spaces are available. Again, as I've said, we're at about 55 per cent enrolled.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. Just to be clear – and I know you've said that you'll follow up and get that number when you get it.

The Chair: Ms Pancholi, through the chair.

Ms Pancholi: Through the chair, if the minister could confirm: I'm looking for the number of children that were enrolled in the essential services child care in that period of time before all child care centres were able to reopen in mid-May, so in that period of time between March and May 2020. I understand the minister has indicated she will follow up with that information. I appreciate that.

I'll move on now to a question with respect to the business plan 2021. It's line 3.1, where it talks about – and I'll allow the minister to probably get that in front of herself there – the budget for child care subsidy. Line 3.1 of the budget indicates that it is flat, essentially, compared to last year, roughly about \$280 million for line 3.1, child care subsidy. In the business plan last year, for 2020, which had the same budget of \$280 million, it indicated that of that \$280 million, \$180 million would be going to the child care subsidy.

However, I note that in business plan 2021 it now indicates that pretty much the entire envelope, that \$280 million, will be dedicated solely to child care subsidies. My question, through the chair to the minister. That sounds like there's \$100 million more being spent from this budget line on child care subsidy this year. Is that a result of an anticipated increase in the rate of child care subsidy, is it increased caseload, or are the subsidy amounts changing to allow for more money to be spent? Again, business plan 2020 indicated only \$180 million of that entire envelope was going directly to subsidies. Now it indicates that \$280 million is going. That's my question, through the chair, to the minister.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Madam Chair. I do have a number, somewhat, for the member's last question. I would say this. Given the uncertainty around COVID-19, specifically when we opened up the spaces for essential service workers, those numbers fluctuated. We did see that there was some slow uptake at first. In some cases we had centres saying, "Look, we have parents enrolled," and then a couple of weeks later parents made other choices. So as of April – this is our best estimate – about 30,000 children were enrolled in those spaces that were open for essential service workers. As the member could appreciate, given the unprecedented circumstances that we were in at that time, those numbers fluctuated.

I am a little bit confused by the member's question about the business plan, so I will explain, as I did in my opening remarks, Madam Chair, that there is no change from budget to budget. There is a \$12.4 million growth for caseload in child care subsidies. This is because – and I think, you know, I've said this publicly before, and I know that certainly the Premier and the ministers of jobs and economy and Finance have said this as well – we are starting to see signs of optimism. As we move into 2021, we're starting to see business growth, we're starting to see very positive outlooks for the economy of Alberta, so we are anticipating that working parents will go back to work, especially, too, as we open the economy.

I know we've talked a lot about lives and livelihoods. Throughout the pandemic we have tried to strike the right balance of supporting both, protecting the health of Albertans but also making sure that Albertans can get back to work. As we see things shift, as vaccines are rolled out, as our economy picks back up, we do expect that parents will go back to work, and that will also include subsidy numbers going back to near regular levels. But we did include \$12.4 million for caseload growth.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're on our second 20-minute block. Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I agree that it is a bit confusing. Perhaps just to flag for the minister what I'm pointing to, on page 22 of last year's business plan, the 2020 business plan, it indicated under key objectives that in the 2020-21 year \$180 million is allocated to the child care subsidy program. Of course, it had the same budget of \$280 million for the year. But in this year's business plan, which also has a \$280 million budget for child care subsidy, under key objectives on page 15 it now indicates that almost the entirety of the \$280 million is allocated to subsidies. That's the discrepancy. Perhaps it was an error last year, where it seemed to indicate only a portion of the child care subsidy line item, 3.1, was going to be allocated to subsidies. That's the discrepancy that I'm asking about. But I understand, from the minister's response, that the anticipation is that the full \$280 million for the 2021 budget, line item 3.1, will be allocated to parent subsidies, going out the door, essentially, directly to parents, and that it reflects an anticipated caseload growth. That's just the discrepancy that I'm speaking of.

I wonder if the minister may, through the chair – I understand it's in fluctuation. Is there a projection for what the subsidy caseload will be for this year, 2021? Do you have a projection for the caseload levels for this year?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: We do. You know, it was really based on what we were seeing over previous years' growth, I guess, returning to prepandemic, normal amounts, knowing that COVID-19 was not a normal situation. Because we don't have a better way to access data and so few parents are choosing licensed child care right now, we used our best estimate based on historical funding levels. It's really that we're not only anticipating, Madam Chair, a move back to our normal levels but also a 4 per cent growth in terms of the number of parents on child care subsidies.

This is one place where, especially when we look at space creation and all of the investments that we're making from the ministry into child care, we want to make sure that these spaces and every dollar – and it is tied to subsidy, right? So for every space that we create, we want to make sure that it's sustainable. We want to make sure that it's in a community of need. I know I've used the example of Edmonton, but downtown Edmonton certainly, under the pilot program, was oversaturated with spaces whereas across the province there was right about 80 per cent prepandemic enrolment in our child care spaces. For us to be efficient and effective, that number would be a little higher. We're going to try to strike a right balance, but we're still expecting a 4 per cent growth. Some of that will come through new space creation in communities that haven't currently had licensed child care, whether that's in a home- or facility-based setting, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pancholi.

9:40

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister, through the chair. To the minister. Can I ask: does line 3.1, the increase that you've allocated for child care subsidy, include factoring in the increased cost of the subsidy rates that were announced last summer? That was funded originally through the bilateral funding agreement with the federal government, that increase of about \$29 million. I believe that was to carry us through to the end of this fiscal year. Does that line item, 3.1, reflect that the province will now be paying for the increase in the subsidy rate that was announced last summer?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. The answer to that question is yes, but we do also expect to sign another bilateral agreement soon. We are continuing to direct a number of additional provincial dollars, as we find efficiencies within our own ministry, to support child care subsidy and direct supports. We are, as I've said, you know, starting off with much lower levels of program participation.

You know, again, as our economy recovers, we are very optimistic that parents will return. We want to make sure that those subsidy dollars are available for them. Part of that – we do have flexibility within the bilateral agreement. It's kind of tough to answer that right now while we're still in negotiations with the federal government over our bilateral agreement. But they do provide flexibility. The short answer is that it depends. When we strike that bilateral agreement with the federal government, we identify where we know we will be spending the dollars. But the numbers within each of those areas, if you will, can change. There can be flexibility to meet the needs on the ground of working parents but also child care operators.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. This is a pretty short question: is there any intention to index the subsidy rates to the cost of living?

The Chair: Minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Madam Chair. That's not something that's been considered. What I would say: we've had – and I've said this before – excellent feedback from our child care working group, really articulating the challenges that child care operators are facing. But as I've also said this morning, we also have data.

But what do we really know? We know that only 1 in 7 Alberta parents are using licensed child care. We know that the majority of small businesses don't want to see a business tax increase to support universal child care. We know that the majority of Albertans – thanks to the Angus Reid data that was presented I think it was two weeks ago, it suggests that over 60 per cent of parents want direct supports to go to parents. I truly believe that this is not about an ideological approach. It's about meeting parents where they're at, recognizing that parents in Alberta do want access to child care. They want access to high-quality child care. They also want to make sure that dollars are going to where they're needed.

We're going to continue to gather data. We've been working with a number of folks across the province, both child care operators and nonprofit organizations that support us, gathering economic data so that we can really drive not only our future investments but investments that we make for Albertans in partnership with the federal government.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. Through the chair, I would note that while I agree that we don't need to increase and don't want to increase taxes to small businesses, if the minister is looking to find additional ways to invest in child care without increasing taxes, there's always, I believe, about \$1.5 billion that was thrown away last year in addition to the lost revenue from the reduction in the corporate tax rate. Those would easily be investments that could be put right directly into child care.

As well, I do want to respond to the repeated point that the minister has raised, through the chair, that about only 1 in 7 parents is choosing licensed child care. I think we should be careful when we use the term "choice." I think the fact that there are only enough licensed child care spaces available for a small fraction of the children in Alberta means that choice is not really a factor here. In fact, Stats Canada reports that over 40 per cent of Alberta parents report having difficulty finding child care. The cost of child care and lack of affordability is the key reason behind it. Those parents who can't find child care: over a quarter of them end up staying home from work and not going to work because they can't afford or find child care. I think we have to be careful, when we're using these statistics, about framing that as choice when it's actually about lack of access and inability to access quality, affordable child care.

I'd like to move on, Madam Chair, through you to the minister, to talk about one of the outcomes listed in business plan 2021, particularly under outcome 1. It's back to the subsidy discussion. To the minister. In this line on page 15 of the business plan it indicates that \$280 million is being provided to subsidies to low and "middle-income families with children who access licensed child care" centres. Again, to the minister, through the chair, last year this same line item, this same budget amount of \$280 million, was indicated as being targeted towards low-income families, which I agree that it is. Now we see the inclusion of the words "middle-income."

I'm wondering. Last year, to the minister, through the chair, with the change in subsidy that was announced, the high-income thresholds for this subsidy rate was actually lowered from approximately a \$100,000 household income to \$75,000. In fact, the threshold was lowered. I would also point out that the average household income in Alberta is roughly around \$100,000 per year. I'm wondering if the minister can speak to why the same subsidy, same amount, for a lower income threshold is now being called support for middle-income families, through the chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. I do just want to clarify one piece. I mean, when we're looking at data, for example, the Angus Reid study that I mentioned before: when we're talking about choice, affordability wasn't actually the first thing that parents were often looking at in making choices for their families. That would be consistent with what we've heard touring the province as well. It is absolutely one of the considerations. Certainly, that's where, you know, parents are making choices for a number of reasons. The expression of interest that has just closed is really directed at space creation.

We are doing this in a far different way than governments past. We're not picking and choosing constituencies or areas of the province where we'd like to create child care or we'd hope to see more child care. We're using data to say: okay; what does the population look like in these communities? Here are some child

care deserts, as we call them, where we need to see spaces created and then reach out to these operators right across the province, again not just in a facility-based centre but also recognizing that licensed family day homes are an excellent choice for families as well. They often have lower overhead cost, and that actually does result in lower fees for parents and helps with that affordability piece.

So I am really excited. We will have more to say on that in just a couple of weeks. But, you know, to say that affordability is the number one topic for all parents across Alberta, based on the study we saw just two weeks ago, isn't necessarily accurate. When we're looking at the former subsidy model, when we got up to parents making up to \$96,000 a year, the amount of subsidy that they were receiving was somewhere around \$36. The administration of running a program to offer subsidy when it's resulting in less than \$40 for some of these families: there was a far more efficient way for us to articulate that.

I think last year we did speak about the fact that the former minister, when asked, "How does subsidy work?" said, "Let me get my computer." This is now very simple, very tailored to families. We have low-income families across Alberta now paying as low as \$13 a day for child care. Also, we're seeing I think it's 28,000 families right across Alberta being able to access higher subsidy than before.

Just for a real example – I know we provided some last year as well – if we're looking at a two-parent family making around \$70,000 a year and their child is in out of school care, under the old model this dual-parent family with this income level, with two school-aged children, would not have been eligible for subsidy at all. Now under the new model this family receives \$402 a month, or \$4,800 a year, to help out with out of school care fees. We often, when we're talking about child care subsidy, forget. I don't forget because it is tax season – we've been sharing this information with a lot of families – that regardless of the choice you're making in child care, parents are able to access a huge amount in terms of tax returns for both preschool, so children aged zero to six, but also school-aged children as well. There are a number of supports, and it's not always as simple as comparing apples to apples, as the member would appreciate, Madam Chair.

Thank you.

9:50

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. My question was: how are you supporting middle-income families? Your business plan indicates that your subsidy levels are supporting middle-income families, which was new. It recognized last year that actually the level of subsidy provided, which, again, has been lowered – I appreciate there might be a small change in terms of the \$96,000 and how much they've lost, but it has been lowered. The question is: how does – your stated objective in the business plan, to the minister through the chair, is that it's now providing support to middle-income families. As I've indicated, the average household income is \$100,000 in Alberta. Currently parents in Edmonton and Calgary would pay more for four years of child care than they would for four years of university. So my question to the minister is: your business plan indicates you're now providing support to middle-income families, and I'd like to know how you define middle-income and what additional supports you provided over last year to middle-income families than this year.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Pancholi.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I would just say this. When we talk about gathering more data, this is actually one of the questions that my ministry has been working on to gather better economic data, again, not making sweeping changes while we're still coming out of a pandemic or in the middle of a pandemic. I would also say that we look to data not only in terms of the average incomes of Alberta families and what pressures they are facing, but we also know that there are different pressures in different areas of the province. To the member's statement about the cost of postsecondary versus the cost of child care, those are, well, two very different things, but I would also suggest that the average cost of child care is around \$900 a month. That is right across the province.

I can tell you – I know the Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat is here as well – that, you know, I use the example of a child care centre in Medicine Hat that we visited. It's a brand new centre, excellent care, a purpose-built facility with fees of, I believe, less than \$800 a month. This is where individual operators have been reaching out through the pandemic, and one of the things I've been sharing with them is that within the ministry we do have staff and supports to help child care operators offer their services in an efficient way. I recognize that they have the flexibility to run their child care centre or preschool in the way of their choice, but we are also here to help identify different ways of bringing down overhead costs or being creative with scheduling or things like that so we can bring down the overall cost. It wouldn't be accurate to make assumptions about what families pay and why or using just the highest cost you can find to use when you're making estimates like that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. In Edmonton and Calgary there was a fees survey done in 2019 by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and they'll also be coming out, I believe, with an updated survey shortly, actually within a week, which will look at the cost of child care, which includes day homes and child care centres. Using the average cost – and this is the low average in Edmonton or Calgary of \$1,000 a month because I think that's actually fair for both those cities; it's actually low – just for the minister's understanding, a family making \$75,001, putting them above the threshold to be eligible for subsidy, with two children in child care, using the conservative estimate of \$1,000 a month per child, would actually be paying 33 per cent of their monthly income towards child care.

I think many working parents who might be listening or might follow this would be surprised to hear that the minister doesn't feel affordability is a problem because that's certainly not what they're telling me. I know that's not what I understand the minister is receiving e-mails about. I see many of those e-mails myself. It sounds like, through the chair to the minister, the number one effective way or the number one strategy the ministry is using in order to increase affordability for middle-income families is to make child care more efficient. I believe that's actually reflected in the consultation report that was done as a result of the consultation for the child care licensing regulation. When asked about affordability, the ministry's report indicated that how they were addressing that was by reducing red tape.

To that end, to the minister, through the chair: how much are you expecting child care fees to go down over this next year as a result of the red tape reduction of the child care licensing regulation? I'll give you an example, Minister. I know some of the larger corporate chains currently charge almost two – corporate child care chains. One of my friends has their child in one of those centres. The fee is

\$1,840 per month for a child. Seeing as red tape efficiencies are important, will bring down costs according to the minister, how much can parents anticipate that their child care fees will go down as a result of the red tape reduction?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I do just want to clarify because I know the member has a tendency to cherry-pick comments. This is not one thing or another. It's not affordability or accessibility; it is both. We owe it to Albertans to be responsible with their tax dollars. We know that parents are making different choices, certainly even compared to before the pandemic, and we need to monitor the choices parents are making. I did not say that affordability isn't an issue. It absolutely is for many families but so, too, is high quality. Many of the parents that we spoke with said that quality early childhood educators is how they make a choice when it comes to child care, and that's why we continue to have the highest wage top-ups in the entire country. We also have the highest subsidy levels, outside of Quebec, in the entire country.

When I say that, you know, we could argue semantics about what is low and middle income, my preference would be to continue to gather data to drive those decisions. If the member has productive, positive feedback on the subsidy model, I would be happy to take it. That would be very well received. We also, for example, made changes to our subsidy program not only in the simplicity so that parents could understand it but because it also helped us when we upgraded our IT system, which will make it 25 per cent faster for parents to access, where they don't have to have a computer or a printer, a car, a library card to go print off and fax subsidy forms. So not all of the red tape in child care can be quantified in a dollar amount.

I would also suggest that \$1,800 is definitely probably some of the highest child care fees in the province. If parents are accessing centres like that – again, we respect the choices parents make; we also respect the choices operators make – and if, Madam Chair, the member's friend or any families that she speaks with need help to find more affordable or suitable child care close to their homes, our ministry does that all the time. We have excellent front-line staff that work every day to support the needs of parents, and we would be happy to provide that.

You know, this is not to say that we won't make changes in the future. It's to say that we're going to make them based on data and that we know both our provincial government is dedicated to supporting Alberta working parents through child care – the federal government, I've said before, there are many things that we disagree on, but the one thing that we definitely agree on is the importance of child care to not only the recovery here in Alberta but right across Canada. It would really be short sighted for us to go ahead with a program of our own without working in tandem not only with other levels of government, like the federal government, as well as child care operators and using current data that respects what parents are looking for.

You know, also in a CFIB survey, I would say that 56 per cent of Alberta respondents said that cutting red tape would help stimulate economic recovery. This has been something that came up time and time again from operators. I highly doubt it can be quantified because it's going to depend on every single individual operator, and we know that they are making different decisions right now just based on what they're seeing in their families, but, you know, these are things that we're going to continue to gather feedback on and to watch.

Then also, you know, again, space creation really does tie in with subsidy as well because we want more parents across the province to be able to access those subsidy spaces in communities right across the province, not just Calgary and Edmonton, as well, Madam Chair.

10:00

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister. Just to clarify, with respect to the Angus Reid poll that seems to be guiding so much of the minister's understanding right now, I understand that it had a sample size of 113 Albertans, which is actually probably just a small fraction of the number of Albertans that I hear from regularly on the issue of child care, and I understand that within that poll itself it actually indicated that the agreement was higher in Alberta than any other region and 10 per cent above the national average for the principle that we need a much bigger public investment in affordable, quality child care. So those 113 Albertans certainly made their views clear on that.

Going on to early childhood educators. I'm wondering if the minister has kept track – I believe the pandemic has had a very significant impact on both the number of early childhood educators that have been able to stay in the sector working as well as the certification levels of the educators who have been able to stay within the sector. I know that I've heard the minister say, through the chair – and we agree on this – that the experts are very clear that quality, qualified, supported, educated early childhood educators are the key indicator of quality for early childhood education.

I'm wondering if the minister has kept track, through the chair, of the number of early childhood educators that are still employed in the child care sector, how many have left over the past year as well as how many current child care workers are still being supported through the Canada emergency wage subsidy, the CEWS, program. As the minister is aware, that program will end in June, and right now I believe a number of child care programs are only able to sustain the level of child care educators in their programs because of that support, so should that program end, it may affect their ability to keep those childhood educators. I'm wondering, through the chair, if the minister can respond to those questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Pancholi.
To Minister Schulz.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. We are, again, expecting that we are going to return to pre COVID-19 program levels. When we look at our budget specifically, we've included a \$4.1 million increase for child care educators, and primarily, obviously, we support early childhood educators here in Alberta through the most generous wage top-ups in the country. I think that they're important because when we heard from – and this is not only just in speaking with operators but some of the feedback that we've received from centres. It is the number one thing that keeps centres in a position where they're able to retain high-quality early childhood educators.

When it comes to gathering data, we added some questions that we received to all of our programs, licensed and open, in the province every week, and one of the things we did ask them to report on is, you know: what are they hearing from educators? What are the struggles that you're facing when it comes to retaining staff?

Now, at the beginning of the pandemic, while we can't necessarily track numbers of participation in federal programs, we do track the number of early childhood educators that are currently

working at any time. Those numbers come in based on the top-ups. This is something that the ministry does in fact have to track and licensed centres have to provide. I'm just working on getting you that number here. Hopefully, we can get it right away. But as you can imagine, it also does fluctuate. One piece of feedback that we did receive, specifically earlier on, was that given some of the uncertainty with the pandemic, a lot of centres were suggesting that some of the federal programs and some of the, quite frankly, fear around the pandemic and what it would look like was kind of one of the biggest struggles in getting people back to work. You know, that has dissipated somewhat.

We've seen a 15 per cent reduction in early childhood educators due to COVID, but continuing our top-ups is going to help support this as our economy recovers and more parents make the choice to go back to child care. We've got some statistics. As of November 2020 we had 15,857 early childhood educators, 9,651 of those educators being in a child care centre, just over 1,900 in a family day home, 4,286 in out of school, and a similar number for group family child care, a 15 per cent reduction. We do also have those numbers broken down by levels 1, 2, 3. Those numbers are fairly evenly – you know, it's a small reduction. We see just over 7,100 in terms of level 3; for level 2, we've seen a slight reduction from the previous year, from 2,900 to 2,400; and then around 6,200 being at a level 1.

The Chair: Thank you.
Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I would like to talk a little bit about the space creation, because the minister has mentioned that a few times. I understand that's completely funded through the federal government as part of the bilateral funding agreement for last year. I'm curious because the business plan indicates that the goal, the actual stated goal of the ministry for this upcoming fiscal year, is to have a zero per cent increase in the number of licensed child care spaces, which, again, somewhat flies in the face of two things. One, we've talked about the importance of investing in early childhood education and child care for economic recovery, but certainly even when speaking to the statistics that the minister mentions often, which is that 1 in 7 parents are choosing licensed child care, part of that is because there's not enough licensed child care.

I know the minister and I have agreed on the idea that there are certainly areas of the province that are child care deserts, that require more focused attention with respect to child care space creation. But considering that this expression of interest is intended to create a number of new child care spaces yet the target for the ministry for this year is actually zero per cent new licensed child care spaces, it seems to me that that's premised on the idea that we will obviously have lost a number of child care spaces due to closures over COVID. Therefore, I still question why the ministry would be betting on the closure of so many child care spaces, counting on that and not actually seeing that as a problem that needs to be addressed by either maintaining certain levels or adding new spaces. I'm trying to reconcile why the minister is speaking very positively about child care space creation but, at the same time, has created a target in here of zero increase in licensed child care spaces, through the chair to the minister.

The Chair: Thank you.
Minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. One of the things I just didn't get to sneak in on the last response: I do also want to clarify that we are working with the federal government on a

workforce strategy. This is something that the federal government has identified as one of their goals moving forward, so we're waiting for a little bit more information on that. But, again, we are looking to Alberta child care operators, our child care working group to guide us in making those decisions.

You know, we talk a lot about sustainability. When it comes to the creation of spaces, in no way is this betting against child care or betting against Albertans. We believe that Albertans are going to go back to work. We are hopeful when we look to '21 for our economic outlook. The numbers are all pointing to optimism, and we've certainly budgeted for that in our child care budget. That said, when it comes to space creation, I have to point out that, you know, the former government had this way of picking and choosing, I think, based on who was lobbying them at the time. Downtown Edmonton had hundreds of empty spaces. At some point, that's not sustainable. It's not sustainable for tax dollars to continue to go to spaces that aren't in areas where the public is going to use them. We had feedback from programs not to increase spaces wholesale, that we need to do a better job of using targeted strategies.

I know, Madam Chair, we spoke about this in the House in the last session when we were talking about the updated Early Learning and Child Care Act. We have 96 per cent of our spaces open – that is excellent – very few requests to actually close. You know, things are looking really positive. Some of the centres who haven't opened may yet open as we come out of this pandemic. I just want to say that this is a realistic number given the position that we're in. We need to do a better job of – in some cases it'll be rebalancing, but we have to look at data to create new spaces that are sustainable, because they're sustainable by being in areas where parents are actually going to use them, not where it makes a popular news release announcement.

I'm really proud of the work that the ministry has undertaken for the expression of interest. Nine point seven million dollars, as the member quite rightly identified, Madam Chair, is coming from the bilateral agreement with the federal government. Now, they have identified around 1,700 new spaces in areas of need. We have to still work through those applications, and when we look through those, there are a variety of different parameters.

10:10

I will keep it quick and highlight the top few, because I know the member probably has some more questions to get to. First of all, we use the age of the population. You know, is this a community that has a young and growing population? That would be really one good piece of data to start with. The other that we're going to be looking at is: where were they at in terms of enrolment? Again, across the province we were only 80 per cent enrolled, and that's prepandemic. I think that tells us that if there is a shortage of spaces, we've got to make sure that those spaces are in places where they are accessible and convenient for the working families who are going to use them.

Then, you know, additional considerations are things like cultural supports, linguistic supports, making sure that we have appropriate supports for, you know, in some communities it's indigenous populations, in some it's multicultural aspects and really also expanding something that was really popular with child care centres – probably more excitement about this than I actually anticipated – the kind of alternative hours or 24-hour child care. This is really about being realistic and creating new spaces in areas where they're going to be sustainable so that we can report back to Albertans that this was a good investment of taxpayer dollars, that these are spaces that parents are actually going to use and that they have a hope of staying open in the future because they were thoughtfully placed.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I do want to point out that the 80 per cent, I guess, usage rate of licensed child care spaces, which I know the minister has spoken to often: I think it would be poor public policy considerations to think that that does not reflect demand. I think, as child care operators have indicated to me, that's largely based on the fact that licensing numbers are often actually much higher than actual capacity. It's based on that square footage per child, and if we had a system that was at 100 per cent capacity, we would be in real trouble because we would not have anywhere to put children. Also, it reflects that there's often the inability to find early childhood educators to actually staff those spaces. I know that's particularly a problem in areas like Fort McMurray right now. As well, we can't ignore the fact that lower usage of those licensed spaces has also got to be linked to parents who can't afford them. To the minister, through the chair: I would just advise on that.

Minister, I'd like to just, because we're running out of time in this segment, really quickly, if I can, get a quick answer on page 48 of the budget. It accounts for \$76 million from federal transfers other than the transfers that are paid – other than the services to First Nations reserves, which I understand would be for child intervention through delegated First Nation authorities; I understand that – with respect to other federal transfers, the budget for this year is roughly the same as the previous years, around \$76 million. Can you account for what that \$76 million reflects? I imagine part of that is the bilateral funding agreement but other funding as well. Can you indicate what the \$19 million there under other revenue accounts for?

The Chair: Ms Pancholi, I'd just remind you . . .

Ms Pancholi: Through the chair.

The Chair: . . . through the chair.
Minister Schulz.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. When we're speaking to other federal transfers – and I think we did speak about this in last year's estimates as well – this includes the child special allowance and revenue for, as the member identified, the bilateral agreement for early learning and child care. The child special allowance is a tax-free monthly payment to help with the care and education of children who are under the age of 18 who physically reside in Canada and are in the guardianship of the province. This is paid to the province for providing care to the child.

The current amount payable for each child under the age of six is \$563.75 per month, or \$6,765 annually, and then that number is \$5,708.04 annually for each child between the ages of six to 17. This includes also a supplement to the CSA, which is the children's disability benefit, which is earmarked to assist in the cost of caring for children with disabilities under the age of 18 as well who have severe mental or physical impairments that restrict basic activities of daily living.

When we look at other revenue, some of this, the examples in this area: reimbursements from delegated First Nations agencies for on-reserve children when a child is placed in a kinship care, foster care, or group home placement; maintenance charges for the maintenance enforcement program: these payments are received from parents whose children are in care of Children's Services who have a legal order against them to make child support payments under that program; and other miscellaneous revenue could be things like debt resulting from child care subsidy.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we conclude the block with the Official Opposition. I will suggest that we go for a quick break. It is 10:16, so we will return promptly at 10:22.

[The committee adjourned from 10:16 a.m. to 10:22 a.m.]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go for a 20-minute interval with the government caucus and the minister, and I believe we are going to Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I just wanted to say that my community is known for being a seniors community, but we're also known for having a lot of young families in the Camrose constituency. It's multigenerational. There are, you know, grandpas and parents and kids. We're actually known for having a lot of good jobs in the community and attracting a lot of people to come to our community. One of the things is that, of course, you need to have affordable child care, which is something that your office and you are always focused on.

I've been meeting with a number of constituents, and this is some feedback that I wanted to share. I recently talked to a mom who works in the local hospital and has her kids registered full-time in a child care centre. This mom is having a tough time making financial ends meet. On page 15 of the business plan you identified key objective 1.1 as "improve access to child care through initiatives that support affordability," amongst other things, and as a working mom yourself I'm sure you appreciate the need for safe and affordable child care. Minister, can you tell us what our government's long-term plan is for affordable child care and how you see this fitting in with key objective 1.1?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I do appreciate this question from the member. As I've said already this morning and a number of times before, I absolutely know how important child care is to support working parents as our province recovers. I know this. My own children are five and three, and I can tell you that I wouldn't be sitting here right now if I didn't have excellent child care over the last number of years to make that possible. You know, that is where in Budget 2021 we have continued to support families through our new subsidy model and also targeting our investments to those who are most in need given the fiscal situation our province is in. We are continuing to fund subsidy but also, as I've said, increase the dollar amount because we are anticipating some caseload growth in this area once Alberta parents get back to work.

Also, you know, we just need to make sure that we are working on affordability while we work on things like accessibility and quality and safety and accountability, to be quite honest, and that's where, you know, it's not just as easy as providing one simple solution. When we look at even Quebec, I mean, Quebec made a move to universal child care, but that move took years – that move took decades – and also at the risk early on to quality. I think Alberta parents have said loud and clear that they want quality as well as affordability for those who need it. I recognize and respect those views, and I really want to make sure that we are looking at all of those pieces – accessibility, quality, and affordability – at the same time in a way that's sustainable.

That's where we are reaching out to gather additional Alberta-specific child care data so that we can direct investments to have the biggest impact while responsibly investing taxpayer dollars. Watching what happens as we come out of the pandemic over the next couple of months, tracking the choices that parents are making, looking at additional StatsCan data: you know, we can't just use one study or another. We've reached out to a number of economists who've said that child care matters. Absolutely; I agree with you.

You know, what other data points do we need to look at to make decisions on future investments, both at the provincial level and the federal level? I do think it would be short sighted, knowing that the federal government – and I do have to say that I have a great working relationship with my federal counterpart. It would be really short sighted to come out with kind of a half-baked plan in the middle of a pandemic without working together with our other partners. We're going to continue to do that important work and to step up and meet the needs of hard-working Alberta families because, absolutely, child care is important, and it's not just important for the parents.

I truly believe the quality piece. The early learning piece is beneficial, especially for families who may be in need or, you know, face additional difficulties or circumstances. High-quality early learning education and that development piece are especially important for some of the more vulnerable children in our province, so we're going to see some additional investments through the bilateral agreement and through our workforce strategy to do a better job of targeting things like professional development so that we really are taking some of the best brain science that we've learned as we work through the well-being and resiliency framework. That's something that was actually introduced under the former government, and it's excellent work. It's the best of what we know in terms of supporting kids in need. So how do we take things like that and provide early childhood educators with some of that information? How do we make sure that all educators across the province have access to professional development when historically it's been a small amount?

It's not just one thing. We absolutely want to continue to make child care affordable for those who need it, make sure there are spaces in communities and areas where there traditionally haven't been any, make sure we're getting rid of some of the red tape that prevents operators from spending more time with families and kids, and then also make sure that we can remain a place where parents have access to spaces that are, in fact, high-quality learning environments for kids.

Thank you to the member for the question, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

To Ms Glasgo.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being with us today, and also thank you for the nice little shout-out to the good people of Brooks-Medicine Hat. I appreciate it very much. I know that they appreciated it as well when you came down to visit. We visited several child care providers as well as the SPEC resource centre, family resource network in Brooks. I know that that was very, very much appreciated because we know that for families trying to access child care, especially in rural Alberta, that can be very difficult. I know that with your background, being from rural Saskatchewan, you know that life in the rural areas is very different. You know, whereas the child care centre might be around the corner from your house, you might have to drive a half an hour into town to get child care for you to be able to go to work, and those working women and parents deserve that availability as well.

10:30

Minister, I love being from a smaller centre. I love my constituency. I think that we have a lot to offer in rural Alberta. But many people, especially with, you know, limited access to different specialties and things like that and other areas, might see child care as a reason to maybe want to live in a larger city because there is more availability. As a rural MLA – I know there are several of us in our caucus and in government – we have an obligation to ask these questions on behalf of our constituents. While I might not be using these child care services myself yet at this point in time, hopefully someday soon, I do have to ask the question, Minister: what is your ministry doing, through the chair, to achieve the objective in outcome 1 on page 15 of your report, ensuring access to child care in rural Alberta?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Madam Chair. That is a good question. I had a great time touring Medicine Hat and Brooks in the summer. It was really interesting. I think, too, while we watched the transition happen away from the \$25-a-day pilot program, it really identified the need for those ministry supports that I spoke about earlier in terms of how to offer supports to some centres who may need it. You know, we visited, actually, a number of child care centres in the member's constituency. One of them was an incredible, incredible facility, purpose built for the purposes of child care, based on space ratios, with beautiful outdoor space, excellent resources for kids, yet rates that are far lower than the provincial average. I did spend the time asking, "How does this work?" and trying to better understand the business model and making sure that those supports are accessible to all operators across the province to provide that business support, and that includes in rural Alberta for those who need it. But your centres are doing an excellent job of that, so I would say that.

But I do know that access to child care in rural Alberta can be difficult for families, and that depends, really, on the community. As I mentioned before, the expression of interest that has just recently closed – and we're working through the parameters and the applications that came in on that front. We are looking at things like coverage for specific areas that maybe didn't have it before; making sure that we have not just a focus on licensed, facility-based centres, because not every rural community is going to have access to a facility for a child care centre; making sure that people know that you can have access to a high-quality, licensed day home, which is an excellent option; making sure that we are being flexible enough in our space creation that we're meeting the needs of rural Alberta and that we truly are using data to create spaces but also making sure things like quality are not compromised in areas outside of the major centres.

You know, I use our inclusive child care program as a good example of that, that previously \$9 million of those funds went to Edmonton to support children with exceptional needs, \$1.7 million went to Calgary, and there was very little or nothing that went to the rest of the province. We're changing that just to make sure, too, that whether it's a behavioural need, a cognitive need, a physical disability, we want our early childhood educators right across the province, in the cities and the rural centres, to have access to the same professional development, the same training, and the same supports for kids right across the province.

Thank you to the member for that question, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Schulz.
Now on to MLA Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, and good morning to all and to you, Madam Chair. I want to take this opportunity to thank the minister and the Children's Services staff for being here and for helping to provide answers to this committee and to also thank the minister for sharing her personal experiences with respect to her beautiful children because I truly believe that one of the most important ways that one can understand the work involved within Children's Services is to have that first-hand experience. I think that we're very fortunate in that.

Having said that to the minister, Madam Chair, I have a few questions here this morning, and I will get right into it. I want to direct the minister's attention to page 105 of the fiscal plan, where it says that Children's Services' operating expenses are set at \$1.7 billion in 2021 to 2022 and then remain flat over the next two years.

Indeed, on page 106 of the operating expense chart it appears to show the same story, and that is that funding in 2019 and 2020 increased remarkably, I would say, and then remained sort of stagnant for the next three years. Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister: though the Children's Services ministry saw steady increases from the 2019 and 2020 budgets, can the minister please explain the reasons as to why that funding now remains stable, and is this plan sustainable given the inevitable challenges in growth and increased costs that face all departments and indeed your department, Minister?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Amery.
Minister Schulz.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for that question. What we're seeing in the Children's Services budget – and this budget is a positive one. It is focused on lives and livelihoods. We are creating jobs, we are supporting the health care needs of Albertans, and we continue to invest in programs that support those in our province who need our support the most, especially at a very uncertain and difficult time.

When we look at our budget, we absolutely are continuing to ensure that vulnerable children, youth, and families remain safe and protected. As you've pointed out, there is increased funding. I guess what I would say is this. As we work to reduce some of our operational and administrative costs in a variety of areas across the province, we continue to have a statutory obligation to ensure the safety and security of kids in need. You know, especially in child intervention, we often don't control any of the drivers that lead to children coming into care although I would say that we are working in unprecedented ways as a government across ministries to address some of those basic issues, whether that be mental health or working with, obviously, the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Community and Social Services to make sure that government is there for those families to provide the supports that are needed but also to look at some of the ways that we can prevent some of those circumstances that would result in kids coming into care.

That is a statutory obligation that we have within our legislation, to provide those child intervention supports to kids in need. The \$1.7 billion consolidated budget includes an increase of 5 per cent over budget 2020-21 to address caseload growth. You know, that's not necessarily tied to anything related to the pandemic. It's that typically what we've seen historically is that about 1.7 per cent of the Alberta population at any time may be coming into contact with Children's Services. That number has been stable, and it tends to grow as the population grows or declines, when those numbers go down. So we do see an increase based on that, knowing that those

numbers have been consistent over time, but we're also providing an increase to the Alberta child and family benefit.

Now, for that program, that came into effect July 1, at the time one of the things that we worked on with the Minister of Finance, because the program is actually administered through the tax system, was sustainability, to make sure that the program was sustainable, that we could continue to provide more support for families who are in the greatest need but continue to provide, you know, what's needed for families who are entering or re-entering the workforce. This year, given the fiscal situation of the province, we're seeing that this program is essentially doing what it was intended to do, that it is sustainable, that it is providing more supports to families in need.

Then we are also this year, given where we're at with the pandemic, making sure that we're maintaining the support and financial assistance agreements funding for young adults who are transitioning out of the child intervention system. You know, given the uncertainty not only with COVID but also with the economic circumstances of the province right now, we want to make sure that young adults will remain supported and that these programs are going to be there and that we're going to focus on those smooth transitions as opposed to any dates or deadlines.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Amery.

10:40

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm noting, if my timing is correct, that we only have a couple of minutes left to go. To the minister. On page 45 of your estimates – once again, I found it on page 105 of your fiscal plan – I note that under line item 2, child intervention, and the subcategories that follow and in looking at the history of the operating expenses with respect to that line item, it appears as though in 2019 to 2021 those numbers remain stagnant, and then we see a significant increase in child intervention funding in the 2021-2022 estimate. Can the minister please explain why this was increased substantially, and as a result, is it the minister's view that there are additional needs for these vulnerable families and children insofar as they warrant that type of increase?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. That really is a good question. Again, I kind of answered part of it in my last response. Our priority is always going to be the safety, security, and well-being of kids, youth, and families in need in Alberta, specifically for those who are in a position where they come into government care. This is often very complex, and one of the things that I could have addressed maybe a little bit better in the last response was the changes that we're making to practice, things like therapeutic foster care. There is an organization called Align, that works with many of our Children's Services providers and Community and Social Services providers. They've asked for a number of these changes. How could we do a better job of coming together to provide supports for kids with complex needs? Doing this in a better way is, in fact, what many of our partners have asked for, but it may actually result in a reduced number of tax dollars going to support those.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes the government members' first block of questions.

We now move to five minutes of questions from the Official Opposition, followed by five minutes of response from the minister.

As mentioned, 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. And please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking time is combined.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: I would like to continue to combine our time if that works for the minister.

The Chair: Minister?

Ms Schulz: Sure. That works for me.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister. I'd like to also pick up on what you were just speaking about, which was, of course, child intervention. I'd like to speak to business plan 2021. I was quite shocked and surprised – and I think many Albertans who take the time to look at business plans probably were – to see how condensed business plans across the government now are. I understand there was a direction that came from Treasury Board and Finance for ministries to, I guess, streamline their business plans. I also understand from the comments by the Minister of Finance in estimates on Treasury Board and Finance that ministries were able to push back against that and to make their own decisions about how to do that.

I see that the ministry here, in this case, has decided to put forward a business plan that's only basically two pages, one page double-sided, and it collapses a number of key issues and indicators and objectives around child intervention. In particular, the following key objectives have been removed in this year's business plan as compared to the 2020 one: improving "child intervention practices by implementing safety-oriented, evidence-based, culturally appropriate approaches and models"; supporting "children in care to develop long-term, nurturing relationships by increasing their connections to families, significant persons and Indigenous communities"; early intervention supports "to enhance parenting skills and knowledge in their home environment"; and collaborating "with Indigenous communities . . . to support Indigenous children . . . while ensuring all staff and service partners have enhanced . . . cultural awareness."

The following performance indicators have been removed from the business plan: the percentage of cases open that did not have involvement in past year, the percentage of child population receiving intervention services, the percentage of indigenous children in foster or kinship care who are placed with indigenous families, and the percentage of young adults who access SFAA supports, which is the support and financial assistance agreement.

Minister, I have to ask. It looks like you've collapsed into one outcome the requirement which I believe is the core function of the ministry, which is to keep children safe. It is now collapsed into another one, around the well-being and resiliency of children, also equally important, but it used to be two separate outcomes with different indicators and objectives. It's been pushed into one. To the minister, through the chair: none of the key objectives in this outcome actually relate to keeping children safe, which is remarkable considering the year we've just come out of.

So I have to ask the minister. You've added a performance metric on red tape reduction. We've got an entire associate ministry responsible for that, but that's now taking priority within this ministry. Minister, can you comment on why that has been removed, all those performance metrics, and can you commit, as the Minister of Education did yesterday, that all the performance

metrics removed from this year's business plan will still be publicly reported on? To the minister, through the chair.

The Chair: To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. This is a good question, and I know, based on our conversations last year, it's one that I did anticipate. We spoke about this last year as well, that when we're looking at, "What are our goals? What are our targets? What are our performance measures?" these are really things that we can control and work towards. We don't always get to control things like the per cent of the population receiving supports. These are things that we absolutely will continue to track. They are things that measure whether or not we are following the legislation that's put forward. They are things that measure whether or not we as a ministry are adhering to the policy changes that came into effect in the last couple of years. Already this morning I've provided some of those statistics around kinship care or the per cent of children that are going into placements with family and being connected with their community and their culture. These are things that we will still continue to track, but they're not necessarily something that we have a target for.

I know that we did speak about this last year as well. It is absolutely a priority of our government to work with indigenous communities and partners to address the significant overrepresentation of indigenous children in care. Part of that work is now being done through our work on Bill C-92. We've shifted some priorities within the ministry, and this is – some of the thought that went into the reorganization of the ministry was to make sure that we had the appropriate staff in place and the processes in place to make sure that we're having the right discussions at the right time with the right people as we work through what impact that bill is going to have on the way that we do our work and how we draw up those agreements.

But it isn't really appropriate to establish a specific measure because the priority is always going to be the well-being and safety of children. Setting targets isn't necessarily the most appropriate way to do that although the legislation and the policy that were introduced in the last number of years were really – the goal really is to reduce the number of indigenous kids in care and to reduce the number of children that are being removed from their families and from their communities. These are things that we will absolutely continue to track, but they're not necessarily a specific target.

We do still have key objectives around the well-being, resiliency, and cultural connections of kids. The well-being of children includes not only prevention and early intervention but also child intervention. We did keep – you know, obviously, with the changes to tighten up the business plans to ensure clarity between spending and results achieved, that was the kind of genesis of the changes to the business plan, but we still have targeted, relevant information, and then we also have performance metrics and targets that our ministry is working towards.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I do want to point out that the business plan – I understand that you're saying that you're trying to track it – is a public-facing document that is an accountability to Albertans for what's happening. These measures are incredibly important to measure how we are doing as a province when caring for the most vulnerable children. It's the public reporting and tracking and accountability that is key, not just the internal ministry tracking. For example, I want to point out that

now one of the only performance metrics left in the business plan, under 2(b), is to track the number of indigenous children in family-based care, which is not actually the same thing as tracking the number of indigenous children who are placed with indigenous families, which was an indicator under the previous business plan.

Of course, Minister, if we go back to the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention, one of the key objectives was around reducing, through the chair, the number of indigenous children in care, reducing the number of children in care, making sure that indigenous children in care are being placed in culturally appropriate homes where necessary. When we speak about Bill C-92, I appreciate that that's complex work, but 60 per cent of indigenous children in this province do not live on-reserve, so they won't directly be impacted by what's happening with Bill C-92.

Minister, when we look at the statistics around child intervention, we see that the number of children in care is increasing, the number of indigenous children in care is increasing over the past two years, and we've also seen that the number of young people over the age of 18 in the SFAA program who have died in this fiscal year so far is on track to be 40 per cent higher than the previous fiscal year. So we are seeing that we are not making progress right now in the objectives from the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention. How does your budget reflect how you're going to be dealing with the fact that you're not making – through the chair to the minister, how does your budget reflect that you're actually addressing what's happening . . .

10:50

The Chair: Ms Pancholi, through the chair.

Ms Pancholi: Through the chair to the minister, how is the minister's budget addressing how it is dealing with these rising numbers and the failure to implement the action plan of the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention?

The Chair: Minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I would say that the work on the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention continues. Work is under way on nearly every single aspect of that panel. Obviously, as we've discussed before, some of that is tied up in the changes on Bill C-92 and the changes that that will have both for the way that we do our work but also transitioning some of the children out of, specifically, provincial child intervention.

When we look at family-based care, that is exactly what kinship care is all about. That is about making sure that indigenous young people who are not able to safely stay in their own home with their parents have a family connection and are kept connected to their families, to their communities, and to their culture. The numbers that I presented earlier this morning: as we see that the numbers of kinship care continue to outpace the numbers of children being placed into foster care, that actually does suggest that the changes that happened as a result of the child intervention all-party panel – it actually does suggest that it is in fact working.

When we look at the intent of shifting the performance measures, the number of children, broken down by both indigenous and nonindigenous family, being placed in family-based care, because this is an important indicator of how well all children are being served as family-based care leads to positive outcomes for both indigenous, nonindigenous children, also children who may, you know, be – we've heard a lot about multicultural or newcomer families and how we need to provide some additional culturally appropriate supports in our prevention and early intervention area to support families who may be new to our country and new to Alberta. This is where measuring the use of kinship or family . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. That concludes that block.

Now we go on to Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you once again, Madam Chair. Thank you to the minister. Again, I want to go back to the discussion about child intervention programming, and that sort of follows from the discussion that had been taking place. To the minister, I note on page 13 of the ministry's business plan that the ministry is dedicated to providing services to help build resilient, inclusive, and economically vibrant communities. I also note on page 13 of that same plan that the ministry is committed to supporting inclusive and culturally appropriate child care programs, whether located in schools, communities, workplaces, or home settings. Obviously, included in building resilient communities and families, in my view, would be intervention for the children at home and in care when needed. I appreciate that the ministry's focus is also on culturally appropriate and inclusive programs. I think that's incredibly important, especially in my constituency, which is very ethnically diverse, and further and more work is needed in that area for sure. To the minister: can you please identify any support included in your budget to improve intervention services for children in care and comment on some of the culturally appropriate child care programs that are included within your 2021-2022 estimates?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Amery. I just remind you to make sure that you're directing your questions through the chair.

Minister Schulz.

Mr. Amery: Certainly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I do just want to follow up on the last question that the member had because I didn't quite get to my last sentence around the supports and financial assistance agreements for young adults who are transitioning out of care. The other bit of the increase in the child intervention budget is really to address those transitions for young adults during this difficult time, as we are in a pandemic. We want to make sure that these young adults, before they transition, are connected with natural supports in their community and are set up in a way that they can be successful in their independence once they age out of supports from Children's Services and into adulthood.

To speak a little bit more about improving intervention services, the member, Madam Chair, is absolutely correct that there are a number of things that we do to support cultural connections, whether that be in newcomer communities or indigenous communities, as we've just been speaking about. This is where we do continue to invest in child intervention.

We also have really maintained the focus on the kinship care or family-based care model so that we can help reduce child trauma, help maintain children's connections to their family, to their culture, and to their community, and build on traditions of having family or community care for children who can't safely stay at home. We're also increasing our continuum of out-of-home care placement options so we can provide the best care for children and youth that will meet their needs, and this is something that I had somewhat alluded to in one of my previous questions this morning.

When we look at the continuum of placement options, this isn't always – you know, child intervention: I think, maybe previously, people get nervous about change, right? This is where we've made some shifts based on feedback from our community partners but also best practices that we're seeing on how can we not only – absolutely, we want to keep kids safely at home when we can by

building on the strengths of a family as opposed to moving straight to child intervention and removing children from their homes but also, absolutely, accessing family-based or kinship-based care, then also taking some of these unique practices that we're seeing working across this field.

There are sometimes better ways, especially when we're looking at young people with very, very complex needs, as some of the children that come into care certainly have. For those young people whose therapeutic needs exceed what a kinship provider or a foster provider can provide, this is a difficult thing because it's not just about a cheque or an amount of money or, you know, providing different programs for supports. There are some children in the child intervention system that – their needs are just exceptionally complex, so when we're looking at that, we also have areas where multiple ministries are sometimes involved in providing support services and programming to some of these young people, whether that be Alberta Health, AHS, working through the personalized community care model. We are providing these.

It is definitely a unique way of providing foster care but really, truly matching children or youth with very complex diagnostic needs or profiles – it could be psychiatric complexities, it could be severe, severe trauma, it could be mental health, it could be behavioural challenges – creating more capacity, if you will, in a very designated therapeutic space to provide those needs as opposed to just, you know, expecting a caregiver to be able to do this with the support of a variety of programs: we're going to try this. It's something that Align and other community-based providers have been very optimistic about and given really good feedback. They've been waiting on the ministry to do something on this front for a number of years, so that's something that's coming out in the next year as well.

Also, it's about prevention and early intervention and making sure that in those areas we have specific cultural connections that we've built into that network of family resource network providers, hubs and spokes. I often say that it's the behind-the-scenes network. A family in need comes to access a specific service, but their needs might be greater. They may need other, additional cultural supports, linguistic supports, you know, I would argue, more culturally appropriate supports, but we also want them to have the very best supports that they can get. So within that network we have those who are exceptionally skilled in the well-being and resiliency framework – that was a nonnegotiable measure within our expression of interest – but then make sure that we have those connections behind the scenes so that families get the services they need without having to seek them out.

The Chair: Thank you . . .

Ms Schulz: And that's . . .

The Chair: Sorry. Thank you, Minister.
Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair.

At this point in time I'd like to cede the remaining amount of time to my fellow colleague.

The Chair: All right. Ms Glasgo.

11:00

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, I have a couple of questions for you. I'm looking at page 45, line item 2.4. Sorry; we're in the child intervention budget, to be clear. I can see an increase that now estimates \$225 million for '20-21 for kinship and foster care support. Given that, obviously, your ministry, through

the chair, is focused on returning kids to parental care as much as possible, can the minister please explain why it was necessary for her to increase this line item in her budget?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for that. As I said in the last response, it is important that we continue to serve the children and youth in our province by making sure that they are safe and protected in whatever placement they are in and that their very specific individual needs are met. That's why in the line item that you noted, we have seen an increase in funding for kinship and foster care.

This is really around supporting some caseload growth, but we also recognize that kinship care is unique and requires some specialized training for caregivers and caseworkers. As you can imagine, even the way that children would come into a foster home versus a kinship care home would be different, and the needs of the families might be different. That's where it's not always just about a basic rate or things like that; it's also about making sure that we have excellent training in place, training that uniquely meets the needs of either kinship care providers, family-based providers, or foster care providers.

You know, when we talk about the fact that 2,568 kinship homes and 1,699 foster homes – I do want to point out that I am grateful for all of the kinship care providers as well as the foster care providers that are really stepping up to support kids in need right across this province, often with very little notice and in some cases, for foster care providers, not knowing how long these children may be in their care. But they step up, and they provide these very important supports anyway.

This shift is really important. It's exciting because it shows that, again, the policies, the legislation are working, that we're keeping more kids connected with their families and their communities. We know it's better for their outcomes. We're seeing it in the numbers, but again we . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go back to Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister. I want to go back to – I think you raised it, actually, in your response to one of the previous members – the increase in line 2.1 related to the ongoing supports under the support and financial assistance agreement budget. Last year when the minister was presenting the 2020 budget and was asked as to how much lowering the age of eligibility for the SFAA program from 24 to 22 would save the ministry, the minister indicated that that would save the ministry \$14.3 million.

Then we know, of course – the minister is aware, of course – that a court injunction prevented the government from going forward with that change in eligibility as a result of a challenge from a former foster child who is now a young adult, who outlined the effects that that would have on her life, and that is certainly representative of many other former foster children's stories. That injunction has now been lifted, and the minister has indicated that she will continue to provide supports under the SFAA agreement, presumably to the age of 24, for the upcoming year.

To the minister, through the chair, I'm wondering if the minister can indicate how much she is expecting – considering that last year the cut to eligibility would save \$14.3 million, how much will continuing to provide funding for young people age 22 to 24 cost the ministry out of their budget in line item 2.1 going forward?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Pancholi.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. That is a good question. I do want to point out that the \$14.3 million number, when we're looking at the budget for Children's Services, as I've pointed out, is not a reduction to government necessarily overall because many of these young adults transitioning out of care may transition into other programs. That said, I would point out that we have reinstated \$14.3 million only because we want to make sure that no young adult is left without supports at a difficult time. We are in the middle of a pandemic, and we want to make sure that it's not a target that essentially results in a transition. It's making sure that caseworkers have the time that they need to work with these young adults to transition them to not only adult support services or into independence but to make sure that they have the networks that they need to be successful in those placements. You know, currently it's a little bit too early to say whether or not that will be the actual amount, but \$14.3 million is the amount that we reinstated to make sure that these transitions go smoothly.

I would also say that through the injunction one of the things that was made clear was that our program is in fact aligned with many other provinces in the country, and our shift to focusing on policies as opposed to just a dollar amount is something that other provinces are starting to do as well. I think it is absolutely in the best interests of young people to make sure that we shift the policies to match that.

I also want to point out that alongside the supports in the financial assistance agreement, we also have the advancing futures program. There has been a \$3.5 million increase since '18-19 and over \$13 million in ongoing funding to that program. When we look at that program, 92 per cent of those dollars go directly to students. Our estimated caseload for '21-22 is 1,150 young people. Our completion rate is around 88 per cent. We are hopeful that that will increase, but that's also a testament to the way that this program is designed in terms of also providing social and emotional supports for young adults who may not have those supports in place, and that's for everything from, you know: how do I find an apartment? How do I apply for student loans? For example, what area of the city do I want to live in if I'm going to go to the University of Alberta?

We project modest growth in that area, but as I've said in the past, we will continue to fund growth in that program. It is really important, especially as our economy begins to recover.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. What I'm hearing, then, is that the \$14.3 million that we're seeing as an increase in the child intervention line of the budget is reflecting the ongoing support of the SFAA program to young people age 22 to 24. If that is the case, that means the entirety of the increase of the child intervention budget for '20-21 is solely related to maintaining the SFAA program. It's actually not, as the minister has indicated in numerous statements earlier – it does not seem to actually be reflecting an increase in caseload other than an increase in caseload or ongoing caseload of the SFAA program.

To the minister, through the chair, we are all, I think, in agreement that this has been an extraordinarily challenging year for children. Particularly, we know that the rates of domestic violence and child abuse and family stress and anxiety and economic insecurity have put enormous pressure on families that were probably already vulnerable, so we anticipated, of course, that

while the intake number has gone down for this year, as expected because there are fewer trusted adults around to make reports, I think perhaps, through the chair to the minister, she may agree that we anticipate that that does not mean that the need is not there, and when things somewhat return to more normal, intake numbers and the intensity of supports that may be required will be increased.

Knowing now that that increase in the child intervention budget, to the minister through the chair, is actually to account for the ongoing SFAA program – it does not reflect an increase in caseload – I’m curious, then, Minister, as to how you feel your budget will reflect the ongoing needs for children in this province given the year we’ve all experienced.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Schulz: Well, I do want to thank the member, Madam Chair, for that question. That’s actually a very good one. It’s not as simple as that. I’ve identified that before, that we do expect that caseload will increase by 1 per cent, you know, especially in ’22-23. We do account for that in our budget, but there’re also some differences, mostly because of internal re-organization within the ministry, as I’ve said, also shifting some of our practices in areas like therapeutic foster care.

11:10

What this will be is better care for those young people with extremely complex needs, but it’s also going to be at a lower cost because we’re providing it in a far more efficient and effective way for young people with those specific needs. Then we also continue to find operational efficiencies and reduce our overall administration costs. So that’s not entirely accurate. But those are kind of the three main areas where we’re seeing those shifts. We’re still accounting for caseload growth. We are reducing some of the costs but at a benefit to the programs that we are rolling out, specifically, as I said, in child intervention when it comes to therapeutic foster care but then also the increase in the supports and financial assistance agreements.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. The minister indicated the reasons for continuing on the SFAA program this year in spite of the fact that the court lifted the injunction, and a lot of those relate to the ongoing needs of these young people as they transition out of care and the supports they require. I would like the minister to comment as to how that would be different a year from now, the ongoing supports. When the minister mentions other jurisdictions and what they’re doing, I note that Ontario, for example, is no longer looking or considering making changes. They’re not looking at an age cut-off. They’re looking at the individual young person and when they’re able to transition out. Would the minister consider, based on just the decision she’s made here to extend the SFAA program for this year – for those reasons, it would be a good reason to extend it beyond that.

I also want to quickly, because we’re running out of time, through the chair to the minister – I appreciate the importance of the advancing futures program. It sounds like only roughly about 20 per cent of young people who are eligible for that program actually apply, and slightly less than that are actually approved. Meanwhile, the annual report from 2019-20 and the business plan indicate that 90 per cent of young people reaching 18, aging out of care, actually access the SFAA program. So while advancing futures is great and important, the program that serves these young people the most

appears to be, to the minister through the chair, the SFAA program. Why would that be the program that the minister would choose to someday reduce in the future?

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, you have 30 seconds for a response.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. You know, as we’re seeing in other provinces, many other provinces have either an age of 22 or kind of a four-year time frame to support young adults who are transitioning out of care, and that’s largely because we require programs and supports to truly support these young adults as they transition. It is more about creating the natural supports than it is about a dollar amount or per monthly fee. We are . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we move on to our next question. Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. Sorry. A little delay in shutting off my microphone there. Thank you to the minister and her staff for appearing in front of us today and for giving us a lot of very detailed information on Children’s Services and supporting of children, youth, and families in Alberta. I’m very encouraged to see the 5 per cent increase in the budget for Children’s Services over Budget 2020-2021 and that we are committing a significant amount of funds to the caseload and child intervention services but also to our Alberta child and family benefits and many other services that we look forward to supporting youth within our communities, including some of the child care issues.

Minister, just to get into some detail on some of your ministry plans and some of the metrics there, performance metric 2.b on page 16 of the business plan is the percentage of children placed in family-based care. It gives us a metric on that. Unfortunately, there are instances in which a child’s parents are unable to adequately care for them. Unfortunately, just a fixture of our society and something I know that we are very, very committed to in this government. It’s a reality your ministry has to address on a daily basis. However, in these instances I would certainly think it’s ideal to place them in family-based care, whether it’s kinship or foster care or permanency placements, which I think are certainly the preference for society and for government. The description of this performance measure states that “85 per cent of Indigenous children and 86 per cent of non-Indigenous children were placed in family-based care” in 2019-2020.

The targets you’ve set for the next three fiscal years are to bring the percentage of indigenous and nonindigenous children in family-based care to parity and, in fact, to increase it to an 87 per cent metric on that, which I think is important for us, to seek continuous improvement in terms of these metrics. I certainly know that you’ll be held to account through the various committees, the Public Accounts Committee and others. Can you explain the importance of this increase in the metric, what that means to Alberta families and, most importantly, to children in care?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I did somewhat respond to a similar question.

The Chair: Mr. Gotfried, can you please mute yourself? There, Minister.

Ms Schulz: A little bit less feedback. No, that’s okay.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for that question. This is really about making sure that we're following through on the feedback that we heard through the all-party panel on child intervention. I know, and certainly our colleagues know. We have many colleagues who were very passionate about that all-party panel a couple of years ago and continue to advocate for the changes that were made to the legislation and the importance of making sure that kids are not only placed in a home that is safe but recognizing that we're looking at things like trauma and intergenerational trauma and, obviously, for indigenous children and families, the path to reconciliation in terms of supporting families to keep children safely within their family whenever possible.

This is why the change to kinship or family-based care – and I think it's important that we talk about this as a whole because it's important for all families, especially so indigenous families but also families of different cultures and backgrounds and all children who may be in need. This is where it's really about trying to keep extended families together to support that family unit. Again, the cultural connection is really important when it comes to the well-being and resiliency of youth, having pride in culture and understanding, having those family connections.

You know, this is really well connected in all the research that we have on better outcomes for kids. This is where every single caregiver is also connected with resources. They have a kinship care support worker, and then they have a mandatory support plan to assist them in meeting each child's needs. That's where the kinship program is really quite exceptional. We are technically somewhat in a pilot of reviewing how this is working, but it recognizes that every single family is different. The needs of every kinship provider may be different as the needs of every child in care may be different. Again, given it's a family connection, the way that children come into care is often unique.

I would say that, you know, the numbers that we're seeing in the increase in family-based and kinship care are truly something that is positive. It suggests that the supports that we're putting in place are working because we're seeing more families step up in those roles, and I think that's largely because of some of the other supports that we're providing in that area. But that is a really excellent question, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.
To Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, through you to the minister, for her very robust answer on that. It is extremely important, particularly during these very challenging COVID times, where we have children spending more time with the family unit in their homes. Those supports are really, really critical to us during this time period, and hopefully we'll be through that during this calendar year.

Through the chair, Minister, key objective 2.1 on that same page is to “improve processes to support the successful transition of youth from government care into [independent] adulthood.” I'm glad to see this is a priority for you and your ministry. I've been very lucky in some of my volunteer life to be involved with some great organizations like Avenue 15 in Calgary, through the Boys & Girls Clubs, and various other organizations that are also assisting. A lot of this is in the civil society realm, which is great. I know our government is very committed to working not only through government but through the civil society organizations that support so many of these challenges in our communities, from homelessness to kids being on the street but getting them into a very productive part of their lives and providing the supports that are there.

11:20

As we all know, kids are our future, and their stability and their ability to reach their fullest potential, to thrive within society, to obtain the education that they need and the supports that they need are so important, and we have a duty to make sure that they're not only well cared for growing up but that they've been set up to succeed when entering adulthood because in many cases they don't have the supports that we see in a traditional family unit. That is the role of government in many cases, to ensure that we take them from that support during youth into entering a successful and thriving adulthood.

You also say here that you want to focus on “mentoring, educational attainment, employment readiness and connection to supportive services” as they move through in this transition. Through the chair, Minister, can you explain and please elaborate on what these different strategies look like, how they help set a young adult up for success, and even some references to some of the partnerships and some of the bridges that you've built with civil society so that we can deal with this not only from a government perspective but from a societal perspective?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gotfried.
Minister Schulz.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I think that bringing up the role of civil society is a really key piece because when we look at – firstly, the changes that we made in prevention and early intervention were really made by community organizations. Avenue 15 was one of the first youth shelters that I toured, and we talked a lot about not only human trafficking but just, you know, walking and saying: “If I am a young person, how do I come here, and what happens to me? How long am I here? What does the transition look like?” Transition continues to be a key priority for us, and that's across the board.

Our civil society organizations, nonprofits, the community partners that are doing a lot of this work and providing the direct supports to kids and young people in need have given us a lot of feedback that has then created many of the changes that we're seeing in our ministry, whether that be through early intervention and prevention or through some of the changes that we're making, for example, to therapeutic foster care.

When it comes to transition specifically for young adults – I was just answering this for the opposition member who asked the question – it's not always as simple as saying: you know, here is a monthly amount you will receive until you are a certain age. That's not what it's about at all. I actually had a really great conversation with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate about this. They also have a youth panel. We had a pretty good discussion about this, that it's not just about certain amounts of supports when it comes to dollars; this is about providing opportunities for young people to access further education, to find jobs, to help them access support from their communities, to find mentors, to find natural supports. When we talk about natural supports, what does that mean? They are the actual supports in a young adult's life.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that.

With that, we go back to the ND caucus and Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. Minister, I want to follow up – as we noted, it was a key indicator in your former business plan – on the number of indigenous children placed in indigenous foster or kinship homes. This is no longer going to be tracked in the business plan. The minister noted,

of course, that the number of kinship care homes now is far more than the number of foster homes, which is a good indicator, certainly, but when we look at the current data of how many children are actually placed in those kinship and foster care homes, I believe the data shows a different story.

To the minister, I understand that, yes, there are approximately 2,400 kinship care homes and 1,700 foster homes. However, I understand, based on the most recent data from the ministry available on open data, that 2,000 indigenous children are placed in kinship homes whereas 2,500 are placed in foster homes, and that's because the foster homes have more children sometimes in them than the kinship care homes. While there are more kinship care homes available, I guess, than foster homes, the number of indigenous children being placed in kinship care homes is less than the number that are being placed in foster homes.

I think that's one of the reasons, through the chair to the minister, that it is important to track. It's not just, "Are there kinship homes or foster homes?" but "Are indigenous children being placed in indigenous home settings, culturally appropriate settings?" That's what is so important about the transparency and the data that needs to be in the business plan to hold the ministry accountable for that, and by removing it, to the minister, I think that removes that accountability. I'm wondering if the minister can comment on that disparity between the number of indigenous children actually in kinship care homes versus the number of kinship care homes.

Ms Schulz: I think this somewhat, Madam Chair, goes back to what I was saying about the nature of how children come to be in a foster or kinship care home placement. You know, the process is very different. In a foster care situation you have foster homes set up to make sure that – they step up and say: look, I would like to be a foster parent, and I want to be there to support children in need. For kinship care that's very different. There is a call that comes in, a concern for a child that may be at risk. The ministry has a statutory obligation to look into every single case, so we do that. If, for example, the case is an indigenous young person who is not able to remain safely in a home and needs to be removed from the home, our caseworkers, under the updated Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act but also in our updated policy, have to show that they have done everything possible to look at every single kinship care placement available before putting a child in a placement where it is family based or kinship care based.

As you can imagine, that still requires a safety plan. It still makes sure that, you know, a caseworker would go through all available noted family connections, extended family connections, community connections to see if there is an available safe space where this potential kinship care provider would be willing to provide care for this child in need. We do have a kinship-first placement approach, and certainly that is the approach for indigenous children as well, particularly so, but we don't always have control over the parameters that make that happen.

Our work with DFNAs has really focused on placing children in communities. That's been very positive. I think the increases in the numbers that we're seeing are also positive, but I think it's also important to recognize that, you know, while it may not be a target in the business plan, it's absolutely something that we continue to track. Even within foster care placements there is a requirement for all children to be connected to their culture, and we make sure that that happens in any of those placements. There are some considerations that those front-line caseworkers have to make, but they absolutely do have to look at every possible family or community or culturally appropriate connection first.

The Chair: Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I want to go back to some of the points that I highlighted earlier with respect to the child intervention stats and how they relate to the budget. The most recent, the quarter 3 child intervention stats, as I indicated, note that the number of children in care is increasing, the number of indigenous children in care is increasing. I've noted that the number of deaths of young people aged 18 plus in the SFAA program are increasing and are set to be the highest ever in a decade. Related to those numbers, which I believe should be the key objectives to be lowering, I'm wondering how the budget, now that we have some clarity – and I understand the minister has stated that she believes there are other efficiencies that can still allow for the current budget to address caseload needs, but the bulk of the increase in the budget in line 2 of the budget seems to be dedicated to the SFAA program.

We also see a flat budget for early intervention, which we know is key for supporting families before things get to the point where a child might have to be apprehended. We also see, essentially, a flat budget for supports for permanency. I'm wondering how to reconcile those things. The numbers are increasing, the number of indigenous children is increasing, and the number of young people in the age over 18 who have died has increased, yet child intervention funding is flat. Early intervention funding is flat. Supports for permanency is flat. I'm wondering if the minister, through the chair, can answer how she feels her budget reflects the needs of children in the most vulnerable situation in this province.

11:30

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Madam Chair. You know, I would say that when it comes to the child intervention budget, I have already explained a couple of times how we are changing practice. We are finding operational efficiencies. We have some of those administration costs being reduced, and then that is being directed to address the caseload needs and the front-line child intervention services in that line item.

When it comes to prevention and early intervention, this is a new program. Is it flat? Yes, but it was also a three-year commitment to support this new family resource network system. We also saw, given the pandemic – when we look at April of last year, April 1 being the first day of transition, two weeks into a pandemic, essentially, that's something that we didn't necessarily plan for, yet the family resource network, both the hub and spoke organizations, did exceptional work to step up, to figure out how to open up, and to reach out to families in need.

This is, you know, an area where, because of that maybe slower transition or the different circumstances, there were actually some of those organizations that didn't necessarily use their full budget. We did switch to monthly reporting to track some of that because I feel like it's really important to be responsible. We all here report to the people of the province on making sure that every single tax dollar is invested in supporting families. They were not all necessarily open on time or serving 100 per cent of their capacity right on April 1 as anticipated, just given the health guidelines.

There was some additional flexibility with those funds, and keeping in mind this is a three-year grant, it also provides flexibility and consistency and the ability for our family resource networks to plan. With the \$63 million in funding there, from April to February there were 23,397 adults served, 28,608 children served, and that is everything from child development and well-being, caregiver capacity, and social connection and support to also home visitation.

That's something that we've heard really great feedback on, the home visitation piece.

As I've told our partners, this is the first year. As things shift, you know, and we work through this new model, it's not that our work is done and we've left it and this is the program and this is the way it shall be. We really need to continue to listen to the feedback of our partners. Home visitation, being in-home specific parenting supports, coaching parents, supporting children or kids that are newborn to age six, complements what Alberta Health does in terms of supporting new parents. It's something that's really important, and it's something that we're going to focus on moving forward.

Then when it comes to the deaths of children in care, I would say this, that . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go back to the government caucus and Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I note on page 13 of your ministry plan that your ministry is committed to working and partnering with other levels of government agencies and civil organizations to deliver necessary programs and services to support our vulnerable children and youth. Specific to child intervention programming, can you please speak to the partners you would work with and how you intend to ensure that they continue to receive the supports that they need so that they can continue to protect and support our most vulnerable?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Lovely.
Minister Schulz.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. This is a good question. Much of our child intervention programming and the families that we support really do truly rely on contracted and nonprofit organizations who deliver these services in communities, and they do an excellent job. We have a very good relationship with not only our partner organizations like Align, who we meet with regularly to make sure that, you know, what we are offering in terms of programs and policies is in fact working for our nonprofit organizations that do this very important work.

These contracted agencies are right across the province and provide a variety of supports to kids and families. You know, we've talked a little bit today – the last member who asked some specific questions talked about Avenue 15, Boys & Girls Clubs. We have McMan. We have Wood's Homes. We have Catholic Family Service. We have a number of organizations that provide these very important services. In total the ministry provided \$11 million to these agencies in 2020. They are able to use this funding into the 2020-2021 fiscal year. They continue to do exceptional work, and we continue to take their feedback as we really take a good look at whether or not the supports and services we're providing are making a difference to providing the best supports we possibly can to kids and families in need.

I do just want to, Madam Chair, if I can, speak to – I didn't quite get to finish my answer for the last member, who asked a question about the mentorship programs and what that wide array of programs and services looks like for young adults transitioning out of care. I know I was talking about natural supports and what those look like, but it's also – you know, there's something really exciting happening with the Alberta mentoring partnership. This is something that Children's Services co-leads with Education. It's about expanding mentoring opportunities for children and youth in Alberta. As young people transition out of child intervention and into independence, we just want to make sure that they have the

right supports in place that can go on well beyond programs that are offered through Children's Services.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, if we could go to page 15 of your business plan. On that page it states that there's \$113.8 million allocated for funding for the certification of child care staff through professional development and wage top-ups. I know you've touched on some of this already with previous members, but could you go into a little bit more detail as to how this will help the overall quality and safety of children? I know these are key questions to a lot of child care service providers in Lethbridge, and they've asked these questions as well. If you could help clarify and expand on that, I would appreciate that answer.

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Neudorf.

Minister Schulz.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. This is where – when we're talking about high-quality child care, the number one thing that both centres and educators often would provide in terms of feedback was that the number one important thing we can do to support a high-quality early learning and child care system in Alberta is to make sure that we have high-quality early learning and child care educators in those positions. So that's where our wage top-ups – they are, as I said, the most generous in the province – are very important for recruitment and retention of early childhood educators here in Alberta, for, you know, folks who are attracted to these types of positions. We want to keep them there. We know it is hard work, but it's really important work. It really is an important part of high quality, having that highly skilled early educator workforce.

Then we also have professional development funding. This is something that is important because we want to make sure that early childhood educators have an opportunity just like anybody else. We all want professional development, to continue to learn, to be on top of brain science, leading practice. So these types of supports are really important. In the past they were accessed by very few, and they were difficult to access.

Even when we look at things like the flight curriculum – excellent work, exceptional work, really, when it comes to a curriculum for early learning and child care and the development of young minds – we didn't want to continue to have barriers for centres across the province and educators across the province to access those supports, so we moved some of that online, for example. This is something that we're going to continue to work on with the federal government because they have identified workforce dollars and they've really articulated that this is going to be – they are going to put some significant funding behind that. So we are going to continue to work with operators and to hear from educators on how we can best invest those dollars in Alberta.

Yes, \$113.8 million currently is what we provide mostly for, well, specifically for the wage top-ups of all early childhood educators, and that is based on their level of certification – 1, 2, or 3 – on their education but also for professional development funding.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the minister through you. My second question for the minister, through you, Madam Chair, is on page 17 of the business plan. Again, there has been some discussion about this already. But I can see a marked increase to the Alberta child and family benefit, and that is even in addition to the consolidation with the Alberta child benefit this past year.

11:40

Through you to the minister, if she would be able to elaborate on this increase as well as how the new Alberta child and family benefit has helped Albertan families, how that transition has gone from the Alberta child benefit to this new program, just clarify again for those who may be listening or interested in this transition as it is meant to help a lot of families in Alberta. And whatever the minister is able to elaborate and explain and provide direction on, that would be great.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. This new benefit, the Alberta child and family benefit, brought two former programs together. The benefits were that we would save up to \$400,000 in administration costs, but we could provide more funding to low-income families in Alberta but then continue to encourage families who are able to take part in the workforce to do so. I know that we had talked a lot about sustainability of the program, and I think that's where we've seen it be a benefit this year, with so many families struggling because of the pandemic, those families that are struggling, the low-income families, receiving more. This is important. It's important to have government supports that are available for families who need it most to keep their children and their families out of poverty.

I would also remind members that, you know, these programs – well, this is our provincial program. There is also the universal child benefit program at the federal level. Again, that was introduced by a Conservative government, and changes have been made over time. But these programs work together to support low-income families and, I think, especially so at a time like this. What a family would receive under this program would have no impact on their eligibility for other provincial and federal tax programs or social programs.

And then, you know, due to the pandemic and the downturn we do anticipate that we're going to have more families relying on this funding, especially in the beginning of the next year. We are estimating that the ACFB will benefit about 200,000 families in 2021-22, but of course we won't know actual numbers for 2020-2021 until later in the calendar year, when taxes are done and payments have been made.

Thank you to the member for those questions, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, I believe we're going to Mr. Smith. Oh. Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Yep. Thank you, Madam Chair. I was going to ask how many families this did help, and the minister did catch that as well in her answer.

I will cede the rest of my time to Mr. Smith.

The Chair: Well, there are 19 seconds, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you. I'll try to make it quick. Through you to the minister, in the 2021-24 fiscal plan, on page 105, it states that

the ministry's 2020-21 forecast is \$98 million higher than Budget 2020 due to . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Smith.

With that, we go back to the ND caucus for their final round of questions. Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister. I want to be fair to the minister. I think in the last block she was just about to respond to reacting to the number of children who've died in care, so I'd like to give her the opportunity to respond to that.

The Chair: To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for that opportunity. What I was about to say is that the death of any child or young person who is currently or who has been in care is tragic, as is the death of any child or young person, exceptionally so in these cases.

We do review all deaths to learn and to shape our practice moving forward. I have really worked hard to develop a relationship with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate. We meet often. In fact, when it comes to some of the data that the member opposite, Madam Chair, had raised, I did proactively reach out to the office of the Child and Youth Advocate to see if he would be willing to take a deeper dive into things like whether or not the opioid crisis we're seeing in Alberta has had an impact on the deaths specifically of young people in care but also those who may be on the support and financial assistance agreements.

The increase this year is very slight. It's largely in line, we're seeing, with past years. Again I would say this, that I wish that number was zero. In many cases the causes have yet to be determined, but we absolutely are committed to looking at every single case to see if there's something that we could have done differently, that we could have done better: did we follow the policy, and, in some cases, does the actual policy need to change? I am very much open to that. That's why, Madam Chair, I have expressed to the member opposite that any time there is a specific question or a specific case, I am open to hearing specific concerns.

These results are posted publicly. They are updated monthly, and they provide annual accounts covering years across several categories, including: what did the initial assessment look like, what was the level of involvement, what was the manner of death – that's obviously classified by the office of the Chief Medical Examiner – and demographics? We haven't really, though, in the last number of years seen an increase in the number of deaths. They've been fairly consistent. But, as I said, we take the death of any child seriously. We would love that number to decrease. I would love it to be zero.

We're going to continue to work with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate. Again, it also speaks to the importance of our programs being wholesome in terms of providing a very wide array of support services, natural supports, and other types of mental health or addiction supports. We are working with my other colleagues on this front to make sure that when we're looking at mental health treatment, we not only have spaces; that we have resources and the same things on the front when it comes to addictions and treatment beds, making sure that we have thought about that in the 4,000 spaces that have been committed to.

I would also say this. When it comes to mental health and trauma – this is something that comes up a lot – child intervention staff do have specialized skills and training to address these things: trauma, grief and loss, child and adolescent development, the brain story, indigenous multigenerational trauma and healing, the indigenous

cultural understanding framework, the mandatory suicide intervention training. Opioid and substance training is starting this year. These are numbers that represent young people and young people with complex needs, and we're going to continue to look at different ways of supporting them and taking the information that we get in these reviews to essentially drive our practice.

Before I, Madam Chair, hand it back to the member, I do want to just clarify one of the numbers on enrolment. I have to apologize; in the essential services child care question I provided the number for the wrong year, so I am sorry. The number I provided of 30,000 children was for April of 2019. Reopening immediately on re-entry for essential services was just over 1,100 in May of 2020. But, again, it still did fluctuate, and the tricky thing is that while we balanced – we did open. We still offered to provide dollars for those centres to open no matter how many children they had because we knew . . .

The Chair: Minister, your time has elapsed for the five-minute block.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. Because we're running out of time here, I'm going to ask that, if you can, you commit to the questions – I'm just going to read them into the record – and if possible that you could provide the answers in writing, that would be deeply appreciated.

With respect to the front-line caseworkers within the ministry I'm wondering if you can update. There's no increase in FTEs for this upcoming budget year. It is my understanding that caseworkers, who are front-line workers, have been quite overworked, and it's always been a challenge to fill those positions. If the minister can update, through the chair, the current vacancy rate and also the percentage of ministry staff who have social work certification and are registered with the College of Social Workers, that would be appreciated.

Through the chair to the minister. With respect to transitional funding for early learning and child care centres can the minister update as to how much will be allocated from this budget to continue transitional funding for the 13 phase 2 ELCC centres going forward as well as – that transitional funding, I understand, cannot be used to offer \$25-per-day fees to parents, so what are these centres being allowed to use these dollars for, as well as, again, confirming the criteria as to which ELCC centres were eligible for transitional funding.

11:50

I'm hoping the minister can also provide some information as to whether or not the ministry is tracking demographic information for non-indigenous children who are currently in care. I just have questions about the demographic makeup. There is potential, of course, that newcomer families, refugee families, families with language barriers, racialized families may make up a large majority of this, I suspect. But I think the question I have for the minister is: is that information being tracked, and can that information be provided?

I want to ask if the minister can formally provide an update, either to myself as the member, tabling with the House, or on their website, on the status of the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention action plan. I understand that that website has not been updated in some time. Can the minister commit to doing that?

I would also like to ask if the minister can provide additional information regarding the implementation of Bill C-92. I understand that there are significant challenges and ongoing negotiations with the federal government and First Nations and

indigenous governing bodies. Can the minister update as to whether or not any Alberta First Nations or indigenous government bodies, as defined under Bill C-92, have expressed their intent to exercise their jurisdiction over child welfare or initiated the process to establish a tripartite agreement? As well, can the minister advise as to whether or not the provincial government or any part of this budget reflects an investment of provincial dollars into the Bill C-92 implementation process, or will that funding all be coming from the federal government?

I would also appreciate – I'm just reading these into the record now, Minister. I'm hoping that we can get some responses tabled. If the minister can confirm as with respect to its child care budget the percentage of the child care budget which is funded through – sorry. Let me correct that. From the forecasted budget for 2020-21, line item 3, child care, can the minister update and provide, in writing, the percentage of that funding which was provided solely through federal dollars versus provincial dollars? That's for the forecast, Minister.

As well, I was wondering if the minister can provide an update as to whether or not the ministry is considering providing wage top-ups to preschool early childhood educators. The stay-at-home subsidy was removed in a previous budget, which removed a subsidy to parents accessing preschool education, and I would appreciate an update as to whether or not there's a consideration that early childhood educators in preschool programs, who have provided, as the minister has acknowledged, critical front-line and early learning services to children regularly but certainly through this past year, will be eligible for top-ups.

I would also like to ask the minister – I think I'm running out of time. I've got 20 seconds. I will leave it at that, Minister. I believe there are a number of questions. I appreciate your time today and your willingness to share time and to have an engaging back and forth in these debates.

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, 10 seconds.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much. We'll see what we can do about providing those answers. Obviously, it's difficult when they're kind of thrown out haphazardly and rapidly like that. But we will do our best to provide some additional information. Some of that information is actually publicly available online, and we're happy to provide you the websites by which you can find that.

The Chair: All right.

With that, we move to our last round of questions. Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister. I just have two questions, which I'll ask rather quickly and allow time for the minister to respond. Minister, on page 15 of the business plan document outcome 2 is stated to be ensuring that "the well-being, resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth and families are supported and children and youth are protected." I think this is something every Albertan is in support of and would like to see. Two questions out of that statement. Can you give us an overview of what steps your ministry has taken to achieve this outcome? And on page 13 of your business plan I know that you mention family resource network preventative programming. I also know that this program was just implemented in April of last year. Can you please update us on the progress of that initiative as well as how this program has adapted given the COVID-19 pandemic, through you, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Neudorf.
To the minister.

Ms Schulz: I'm sorry, Madam Chair. I caught the second question about the progress on the FRNs, and I do believe I have the number of the families that are participating and the number of programs. Does the member mind just reminding me of the first question again or clarifying that for me?

Mr. Neudorf: Sure. To the minister: can you give us an overview of what steps your ministry has taken to achieve the outcome on page 15 of the business plan, outcome 2, "the well-being, resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth and families" being supported? If you could get to those.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Sorry about that, Madam Chair. Yes. I can say that the FRN system is up and running. There were some delays, just given the pandemic, early on. This system is comprised of 70 hubs and 126 spokes that provide a network of support services for kids and families right across Alberta, far more equitable, far more seamless supports than the patchwork of supports or services that were available before. As opposed to focusing on universal supports for kids aged zero to six, we are now introducing targeted supports for children in need all the way from zero to 18. Basically, the family resource networks quickly pivoted, and we are working together to create a structure within the ministry to provide feedback, best practices, and gather data.

As I've said, we've served so far 23,397 adults and 28,608 children so far, from April to February. Feedback has been very good, but we're going to continue to monitor the program and make sure that we have the right supports in the right place in the right communities and really the right mix of funding to support the diverse needs of families right across Alberta.

The Chair: Thank you.
To Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. You know, in the 2021-24 fiscal plan on page 105 it states that

The ministry's 2020-21 forecast is \$98 million higher than Budget 2020 due to including \$72 million for the child care Safe Restart federal government program and \$23 million in critical worker benefits for child care intervention and child care programming.

Can you explain the importance of that funding for Albertans, please?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Schulz: Absolutely, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for the question. This is something that is really important, and it was really important for making sure that child care and preschool and out of school care operators were able to operate and remain open over the last year through very difficult times.

We allocated together with the federal government \$110 million in relief funding to child care programs so that they could reopen safely but then also made sure that it was flexible enough that the child care and preschool operators across the province were able to use it in a way that met their needs, whether that was for Plexiglas or PPE or partial walls or other cleaning and sanitization, or it was recruiting families or early childhood educators. In some cases it was to bring on additional staff to keep parent fees low. That flexibility was something that came from the operators in one of the many town halls that we hosted with them. It was something that was really important to make sure that there were also per-space and per-centre allotments, that we weren't favouring any size of centre or type of centre across the province. For that, we rely on the great feedback from our child care working group but also the feedback on those town halls.

We also made sure that certified early childhood educators were eligible for the critical worker benefit. This is something that I think maybe only one other province did. It was something that was really important to me given the role and the risks and just how grateful I think we all were that early childhood educators and child care and preschool operators opened up at a time of great risk and uncertainty to make sure that working parents were supported. It recognizes the tireless work and commitment of front-line workers throughout the entire pandemic. I know that the monthly range was primarily in the second wave, but we also really appreciate those who stepped up very early on during the first wave of the pandemic to provide these supports to families.

This was really important funding . . .

The Chair: I apologize, Minister, for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for the consideration of the ministry's estimates has now concluded.

I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on March 16, 2021, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

Thank you, everybody. The meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

