



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Community and Social Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 16, 2021
9 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Community and Social Services
Hon. Rajan Sawhney, Minister

9 a.m.

Tuesday, March 16, 2021

[Ms Goodridge in the chair]

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

The Chair: Good morning. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everybody. This committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social 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. I am the MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche and the chair of this committee. We will begin, starting to my right.

Mr. Neudorf: Good morning, everyone. Nathan Neudorf, MLA for Lethbridge-East.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Good morning. David Shepherd, Edmonton-City Centre.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

Deputy Chair Lori Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Lori Sigurdson here from Edmonton-Riverview.

The Chair: Michaela Glasgo.

Ms Glasgo: Michaela Glasgo, MLA, Brooks-Medicine Hat.

The Chair: Richard Gotfried.

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

The Chair: Brad Rutherford.

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

The Chair: Mark Smith.

Mr. Smith: Good morning. Mark Smith, MLA, Drayton Valley-Devon.

The Chair: Jackie Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Jackie Lovely, MLA, Camrose constituency.

The Chair: Did I miss anybody? Fantastic.

Due to the current landscape we are all in, all ministry staff will be participating in the estimates debate virtually. Minister, I would ask that you please introduce yourself, and I would ask that if any of your officials are called upon, they introduce themselves at that time.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Good morning, Madam Chair. I'm Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Community and Social Services. I was going to introduce my department staff. Were you saying that they should introduce themselves, just for clarity?

The Chair: By all means, introduce the staff that you have in the room.

Mrs. Sawhney: In the room today I have Cynthia Farmer, deputy minister; Jason Chance, ADM; Clay Buchanan, ADM; Kindy Joseph, executive director; Sharon Blackwell, executive director; Maryna Korchagina, ADM; Tracy Wyrstiuik, ADM; Olin Lovely, SFO; Tamara Magnan, the comms director; Rob Williams, press secretary; Kulshan Gill, chief of staff for myself; and Robin Anderson, chief of staff for the deputy minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

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 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 face covering.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that all of our microphones are operated by the *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings will be available via the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating virtually are asked to turn on their camera while speaking and to please mute their microphone while 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 would ask that everyone please set their cellphones and any other devices to silent for the duration of today's meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of three hours have been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of his or 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 the Official Opposition, independent members, and the 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 should flow through the chair at all times regardless as to whether or not speaking times are combined. If members have questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, 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 anyone opposed to having a break?

Ministry officials, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee, and 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 at the table at all times.

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

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 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 for distribution to committee members.

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

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you kindly, Madam Chair. Good morning, all. I am pleased to be here to discuss how Budget 2021 helps Alberta's Ministry of Community and Social Services continue supporting vulnerable Albertans. The mandate of this ministry is to provide services and supports that help people meet their daily needs, live safely and independently, and find employment that fits their abilities. It's not hard to see that Albertans need these supports now more than ever before. This time last year we could not foresee the effects a COVID-19 pandemic would have on every aspect of our society.

Budget 2020 focused on meeting some of the government's most pressing platform commitments: creating the civil society empowerment fund, establishing the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society, and increasing support for survivors of sexual and domestic violence and people with disabilities. These commitments are important in their own right, but they also became pillars of this ministry's pandemic response and remain so today.

Our community partners continue to utilize the additional funding the government provided to ensure that vulnerable Albertans stay safe and healthy. This includes funding to help provide food and other basic necessities to those in need. We provided \$30 million to civil society organizations, to charities, not-for-profit organizations, and food banks to support this work.

We also provided \$73 million to homeless shelters to considerably enhance their services and keep people experiencing homelessness safe and healthy. This includes expanding shelter capacity to meet physical distancing requirements, managing isolation care facilities for those who are required to isolate due to infection, and providing other critical services 24/7 during these cold winter months.

In recognition of the sad reality that family and domestic violence rates increase during times of stress and pressure, we provided \$5 million to women's emergency shelters. Agencies use this funding not only to create safe isolation spaces for women and children experiencing family violence during the pandemic but to increase their outreach capacity to support people who couldn't leave abusive situations. This funding is in addition to the changes we made to our programs and policies within the ministry such as changes to support families with children with disabilities who needed more in-home services and additional support such as guidance documents to help people with disabilities navigate the pandemic.

As I said, our community partners continue to make good use of this funding. We are in contact with them to make sure they have

what they need to respond to this public health emergency. For that reason, you will see that additional COVID-19 funding has not been requested in Budget 2021. In addition, in some areas you will see a decrease in funding from our 2020-21 third-quarter figures. This is due to the inclusion of COVID-19 response funding in the last fiscal year.

9:10

Alberta's government remains focused on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has dramatically changed our lives and our livelihoods. Alberta's government has been responding to protect both because protecting lives and livelihoods go hand in hand. As the pandemic continues and no matter what happens, Alberta's government will continue to be there for Albertans every step of the way. I know that many Albertans continue to struggle due to the effects of the pandemic itself as well as necessary public health restrictions to slow the spread of the infection.

Despite our fragile economy one of the main priorities of the government is maintaining supports for those in need. People with disabilities continue to rely on government supports to live independently, women and families continue to seek safety from abuse and violence, those looking for work must still make ends meet, and those experiencing homelessness must still meet their basic needs and find housing. That is why in Budget 2021 Community and Social Services is maintaining its current level of support. One of those areas is the assured income for the severely handicapped, AISH, program. At \$1.36 billion this is the largest budget AISH has ever seen. Despite a slowdown in caseload growth, we anticipate returning to prepandemic growth levels next year. Budget 2021's funding increase of \$33 million will ensure that the program can continue to help Albertans with permanent severe disabilities meet their daily needs and live independently where possible.

I have been very open about the government's work to improve the sustainability of the programs in this ministry, including AISH. We committed to taking a hard look at this program to find new ways to deliver supports that would increase efficiency, streamline operations, and simplify policies and practices. As I have stated publicly in the past, we will maintain the current core benefit rates and eligibility criteria to support Albertans with disabilities during this extremely difficult time.

This support extends to families and individuals who are part of other disability services, including the persons with developmental disabilities and family supports for children with disabilities programs as well as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder initiatives and other programming. These programs support people with disabilities who are looking to live and work as independently as they can. They also provide support for families of children with disabilities so parents can set up their children for success. As parents we want the best for our children, and parents of children with disabilities often face additional challenges to support their children's quality of life. This program helps give these children the supports they need to lead healthy and successful lives.

Family supports for children with disabilities will see an increase of \$2.1 million in Budget 2021. The persons with developmental disabilities program is an example of 2020-21 Q3 showing an increase due to federal wage top-up funding. By comparison, Budget 2021 funding looks lower, but in reality it is slightly increased.

It was indeed an honour to speak with and hear from clients in facilities operated directly by the government and their families last year during our review of options for delivery services. We listened. I listened to these individuals as well as the caring staff at these

facilities. We will not be making changes to how these services are delivered.

This government knows that when we support Albertans with disabilities and their families, we also support inclusive communities where everyone has a chance to succeed and feel valued. The benefits are felt province-wide. That's why Budget 2021 maintains funding for CSS disability services at \$1.35 billion.

We are also maintaining support for Albertans looking to build their skills and find employment. We have seen a temporary drop in income support caseloads in both the expected to work and barriers to full employment categories. As such, program costs have also declined, but both programs remain fully funded according to demand. Anyone who is eligible for income support will receive benefits at current rates, and we are working harder than ever to help all clients access tools and training to build their skills and find employment. These career and employment services are available to Albertans who need support to get back to work. That's why we are providing an additional \$3.6 million in Budget 2021 for career and employment services offered through CSS. This funding will help more Albertans access resources to help them find training, build their skills, and get back to work in their communities.

For those experiencing homelessness, our community partners like shelters and other homeless-serving agencies offer a lifeline to meet basic needs. These organizations have had to deal with additional challenges during the pandemic such as maintaining physical distancing while still ensuring that space is available for anybody who needs it. As I had mentioned earlier, the government provided additional COVID-19 funding to these important partners, shown in the 2020-21 Q3 figures, and in Budget 2021 we are maintaining funding for homeless and outreach supports. The slight reduction from Budget 2020 is due to internal administrative efficiencies, and current supports will be maintained.

The government is also maintaining funding to provide safe shelter for women and families fleeing violence. Funding for women's shelters not only provides a safe space; it provides wrap-around services to help women rebuild their lives in safety. The Q3 forecast reflects \$5 million in additional COVID-19 relief funding and \$1.1 million in federal wage top-up funding. Women's shelters continue to use this funding to provide uninterrupted services, including safe isolation spaces, during the pandemic.

Our community partners do incredible work supporting some of Alberta's most vulnerable people. Funding in Budget 2021 ensures that government can continue working with our partners to provide necessary supports to individuals who need them the most. These partners . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Do the members and the minister wish to share their time?

Ms Renaud: No. Thanks.

The Chair: All right.

Minister, Ms Renaud has indicated that she does not want to share her time.

The timer will be set to 10-minute intervals. We will start with Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. It is nice to see you, Minister. It's nice to see your officials, through the chair. Normally, as I'm sure you know, preparation for estimates involves having an opportunity to review the annual report, having had them appear before PAC. Now, for people that don't know, the Public Accounts Committee is an all-party committee that looks at annual reports. I

just want to say that we have not seen these officials since the UCP formed government, so we don't have a transcript to review. We don't have any information from that. I just wanted to put that out there. You know, if the minister is committed to transparency for Albertans, I am urging her to work with her colleagues to ensure that her ministry does have an opportunity to appear before PAC in the very near future.

Okay. Moving on, I'm sure you noted, Madam Chair, that the CSS business plan is exceptionally light on information this year, and that is very odd given the enormity of what has happened this last year as evidenced by the minister's comments. This year's business plan contains only three outcomes and only lists five initiatives supporting key objectives, and those five initiatives refer to just over \$115 million in spending. Madam Chair, I'm sure you realize that the total CSS spending is \$3.9 billion. Over 200,000 Albertans are supported by income and disability supports, and thousands more rely on homeless and women's shelter supports. Given the enormity of the cuts in this particular budget and the broad scope of programming, to say that the business plan is light on transparency is certainly an understatement. I'm sure you would agree.

Our time is short. I would encourage the minister and her officials, if she is unable to answer the questions that I'm asking, to table those answers for the entire committee. It's my sincere hope, Madam Chair, that the minister and her officials will provide some clarity for Albertans today.

Okay. Let's get started. Budget 2021 allocates \$7 million to a civil society fund managed by the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society. Is this in addition to the \$7 million allocated to the civil society fund from Budget 2020? Hard to tell. The CSS annual report 2019-20 doesn't even mention any of the work beyond the creation, yet this council has had \$14 million allocated to them in two years, with no centralized documentation of work completed or funds assigned. It seems to me that I just saw that a grant program closed its application process towards the end of January of this year.

9:20

In fact, the Premier's new council, which is supposed to adhere to the Public Sector Compensation Transparency Act as noted in their documents, has not disclosed any compensation to date. As you know, Madam Chair, I'm sure appointed members are required to disclose compensation twice per year, but this particular Premier's council has not done so.

There are 15 members on the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society. This group is responsible to award millions of dollars. As far as I can tell, only five of these members are women and none with visible ties to the disability community. My question: does CSS ever complete GBA plus analysis, and is there ever any consideration given to gender equity? Finally, after a quick scan of the membership of this council that is tasked with doling out millions of dollars, I note that one of the members, a faith leader from Ontario, does not actually appear to be a resident of Alberta.

I have six questions for the member on this topic. Number one, I note grant applications for the first \$7 million in spending closed January 2021. I would like to know when and where Albertans may access information about which organization and company received funding and what the anticipated outcomes are. Question 2: when will the new spending, the new \$7 million allocated in this budget, be distributed, and what will that criteria be? Question 3: why was a faith leader from Ontario tasked with choosing which Alberta organizations receive funds from the \$14 million pot? Were there no faith leaders in Alberta up to the task, Madam Chair? I'm left wondering. Question 4: why have there not been any financial

disclosures? Question 5: was this council tasked with the distribution of any other funds, provincial or federal, and where can Albertans find that accounting? I note the CSS report titled *Moving Forward: Charting a Path to Civil Society Recovery*, dated October 2020, indicated that the Premier's civil society fund would provide \$20 million over three years to expand civil society capacity. On which budget estimate expense line can I find this allocation? My final question in this section: which line item in government estimates 2021 did the \$7 million allocated to fund the Premier's civil society fund come from?

I will move on to my next section of questions. Can I get a time check, please, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Four minutes and 45 seconds.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm going to start talking about employment and income support and federal emergency benefits. Madam Chair, I'm sure you know this is section – this is line 2, so 2.1 to 2.4. We first saw the plan to make deep cuts to income support in 2019, then again in last year's budget. In fact, last year's 2020 budget target for this year was \$847 million, not far off from this year's budget estimate, which is \$856 million. That is a \$9.5 million increase. For a little perspective, that is \$129 million less than Budget 2019-20.

There have been no significant investments in employment programming although the minister did mention a \$3.6 million investment in career postsecondary training. Now, I would like to note that that is very specifically for people with developmental disabilities if I'm not mistaken. That is very much like the Rotary project with Inclusion Alberta and the postsecondary support project. I think there were 14 postsecondary education institutions involved. That's not really a jobs plan. That is an investment in a particular segment of this ministry, which I think is great, but that is not a jobs plan.

We know that there have been no significant investments for Albertans that rely on income supports and AISH. Poverty has not been reduced. We are in a public health emergency, and we know the needs of these income support programs demand tracks with population growth and economic forces. Madam Chair, I'm sure you read through the documents. You saw it in the fiscal plan, noted on page 27 of the CSS. Even the CSS annual report of 2019-20 very much makes that link between demand on these programs and stresses in the economy. I understand that the minister and her staff have publicly stated that these cuts were possible because of various federal emergency benefits such as CERB, CRB, and changes to EI. I also understand that budget documents indicate savings will be reinvested. Let's dismantle that.

According to government open data in January 2021 there were a total of 44,359 on the caseload. Of those, only just over 1,100 were expected to work and actually working. That is only 2 and a half per cent. Let's compare that to government open data for January 2020. Just before COVID there were a total of 62,000 on the total caseload, and of those, just over 3,000 were expected to work and actually working. That's only 5 per cent.

As you know, Madam Chair, the federal emergency benefit that is reducing CSS program expense is for those who are working and lost work as a result of COVID. CERB has already ended, and the subsequent Canadian recovery benefit, or CRB, which is only 38 weeks of coverage, will end September 2021, six months into this budget. There are 17,662 fewer people on income supports from January '20 to '21, and of those, we can assume that at least a portion will find work after the federal benefits end. Based on years of data, we know that a small per cent of those expected to work are actually working, as I noted in the stats. According to open data

CSS describes Albertans on income supports both expected to work and BFE.

I'm going to start my questions on income support. I won't have time to get through them all, but I'm going to go through one or two. My first question about income support: what was the total number of people coded expected to work and barriers for employment in 2020 that were transferred in whole or in part to federal benefits, and what was the total reduction in spending as a result? This includes people who had benefits removed due to spousal income changes related to federal emergency benefits.

My next question, building on that: what are the projected savings in corresponding number of people included in the budget estimate for income and employment support as a result of people coded as expected to work and BFE moving in whole or in part to federal emergency benefits, including but not limited to CRB and enhanced EI, and where will these projected savings be reinvested?

Time, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Eleven seconds.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I will stop there and let the minister answer.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

With that, to the minister for 10 minutes of reply.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to respond. First of all, in regard to the comments around PAC, duly noted. I've heard your comments, and, as I said, duly noted.

In regard to the Community and Social Services business plan, we were provided a template by Treasury Board, so naturally we had to work within the parameters of what was provided to us. Certainly, if it was up to me, I think the business plan would be twice as long, but that wasn't an option that I had.

In regard to the performance metrics that are included, Ms Renaud is correct that there are three performance metrics that are included in this year's business plan, but that doesn't mean that the other metrics that were in there prior, in last year's business plan, are not being tracked. They are very important metrics, and we are tracking them. Certainly, those metrics can be available to anybody who would like to see them, and they will be reported in our annual report.

I think I've answered the questions on the business plan. I just will note as well that on page 20 of the business plan we have a really nice visual that describes our strategic mandate as well as the ministry's priorities, so that is something that people can look at to get some more information around what Community and Social Services is all about. That's in regard to the business plan, and if there are more questions for that, I would be happy to answer those.

Okay. The Premier's council on civil society. Yes, there was a report that was issued, the *Moving Forward* report, by the council. In that report four priorities were identified. That was to focus on enhancing the infrastructure of civil society. We know that even prior to the pandemic there was an issue with fundraising and collaboration, so that was one of the priorities. The other priority was building capacity within organizations. There was a priority on research and development and also looking at social enterprises.

The \$7 million that was announced recently, for which the grants had closed in January: that's for the previous year's fiscal budget. This year we do have another \$7 million allocated for the civil society fund, and next year there will be another \$7 million. It's more than \$20 million, which is what was in the platform commitment: \$7 million last fiscal, \$7 million this year, and potentially \$7 million in the year following.

In regard to Father de Souza, he is on the council. He was a former Calgarian – he lived here for a long time – a former Albertan, and he brings tremendous expertise to the council, so we feel very fortunate to have him and his counsel as part of that group.

9:30

There are, as the member had mentioned, a number of women on the council, and I am very particular about making sure that we have proper representation on the council because that is the face of Alberta today. We have to make sure that our associations and committees and councils are reflective of that. We also have the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, that I rely on extensively to get the voice of the disability community within my ministry so I can hear their advice and their counsel as well.

In terms of the last round, the \$7 million that was announced last year, that we just closed in January: who received the funding? We are still making those decisions, and we hope to make those announcements soon. The council did not distribute any other funds at all. In fact, they are not responsible for distributing funds. They are just on a nonadvisory format. The ministry and the department work on the grant applications within. I hope that I've answered all those questions. If not, I would be happy to answer any outstanding questions.

All right. In regard to income support, elements 2.1 to 2.4, I do want to say that there are no cuts to this program. I think saying that over and over again is a disservice to Albertans who really rely on these supports. This program is a legislatively defined program. Anybody who's eligible will have access to it. The budget numbers are based on our caseload forecast, and the forecasts are developed with a lot of thought and foresight. They use historical data, unemployment rates.

Certainly, we've had federal supports that have been announced, like the CERB and CRB, that have impacted what our forecast can look like in the future. We saw a decrease in our caseload because a lot of our clients opted to take advantage of the federal supports. That's why if you look at our Q3 forecast for this particular element, you will see that the forecast is so much lower than what we have budgeted for Budget 2021 because we do anticipate that once CRB finishes in September – and it might be extended to 38 weeks – we will see clients return to the caseload.

I know there were a lot of questions about: how much are you projecting in savings, et cetera? I just want to emphasize once again that this is not about savings and certainly no cuts. If somebody is eligible, they will receive those supports. The caseload forecast is built on what we anticipate the future caseload to look like. There is nothing else in those budget numbers. If you take the forecast and you multiply it by the average cost per case, you will come up to those budget numbers. I believe that I have answered the questions for elements 2.1 to 2.4.

I know that there were some comments around alleviating poverty, and that is why we were very particular about making sure that we provided that \$30 million in COVID-19 funding. Alleviating poverty is an issue that has existed far before any of us were in government. I can tell you that that funding has really helped a lot of our civil society organizations. Vulnerable Albertans receive all kinds of support. We've funded food banks across the province. We've funded civil society organizations that were helping seniors. There are a number of organizations all across the province who put together baskets, food, and essential supplies and deliver them to vulnerable Albertans everywhere. That funding has really made an impact, and we are going to continue to work with

food banks and other organizations to make sure we have an understanding of what their needs are. I think I've answered all of the questions.

I will give perhaps some information on what the caseload forecast looks like for 2021. For the expected to work category, we are expecting about 36,000 clients for Budget 2021-22. And for the barriers to full employment the forecast is looking to be around 20,600 clients. If we look at the Q3 forecast, we've found that in BSE almost 2,000 clients have shifted off of the caseload, again, because federal supports were available. And for ETW, we saw that almost 10,700 clients had shifted off of the program to access the federal supports. I really don't have anything more to add for element 2.0.

Madam Chair, how much more time do we have?

The Chair: One minute, 30 seconds.

Mrs. Sawhney: Well – you know what? – then I will go back and talk about the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society. This group of individuals has done some tremendous work, not only in putting the report together, but I know that some members have individually reached out to organizations across the province and have offered their help.

I will give you a personal example. Calgary-North East is my constituency. I'm the MLA there. It was devastated by the hailstorm, the northeast hailstorm. I can tell you that members of the council helped to connect some very vulnerable individuals to all kinds of supports outside of government supports. There was a lady who needed a new van because her car was destroyed, and some council members got together with their network and helped her with some financing to be able to buy a new vehicle. That is just one example of how this council uses its networks across the province to help other individuals and to help other civil society organizations come together and collaborate.

You know, I could talk about this at length, actually. The level of collaboration and co-ordination that I've seen across the province within civil society has been incredible. Once we get to the section about women's shelters, I am excited to talk about some innovation that we've seen recently.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. That concludes our first 20-minute time block.

With that, back to Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just to follow up with what the minister said, a couple of things. Yes, I can understand your commitment to having gender equality on your council, but let me remind the minister, Madam Chair, through you, that there are 5 out of 15 that are women, and I did not see any ties to any disability communities. I am happy to be corrected.

My other question was about the savings due to federal benefits. What will those savings be? That was my specific question.

My other question was very specific. Were there no Alberta faith leaders that would be useful on a council like this?

My final question there was: where was that \$7 million? Where did it come from? Which budget line in your documents?

Moving on, Madam Chair, I've watched over the last year as Albertans on income support lost supplemental benefits. We know this because they told us, and they also told you, and they copied us on e-mails. We know that those supplemental benefits were sometimes the difference between having a home or not. Albertans on income support receive between \$745 and \$866 per month in core benefits. Obviously, that is not enough to meet the mandate of

this program, which is very specific. On page 26 of the most recent CSS annual report:

Income Support provides financial benefits to individuals and families in Alberta who do not have the resources to meet their basic needs, including food, clothing and shelter.

For years many Albertans on income support have managed with the help of supplemental benefits, one of which is additional shelter allowance. This allowance provided an additional \$307 per month. Many of the recipients were medically fragile or disabled people that fell outside the definition of severe handicap as defined in the AISH Act. Over the last year, in the midst of a public health emergency, people are being denied this benefit that was previously assigned to prevent eviction and/or homelessness. No real explanation other than policy, adjustments, and enforcement.

I have six questions about supplemental benefits. What are the projected savings related to a change in the expense for all supplements to core benefits in lines 2.2 and 2.3? Given these savings, how much will be reinvested in addressing additional pressures created by poverty and deindexing?

Madam Chair, through you to the minister, does your ministry have any targets for Budget 2021, which can be measured and evaluated, related to poverty reduction?

My next question. On page 21 of the CSS business plan, key objective 2.4 describes investment to increase access for disabled Albertans who live on- and off-reserve and on Métis settlements. Through you, Madam Chair, what per cent of Budget 2021 caseload projections, using historical data, are projected to be FNMI? Why is this information not public?

9:40

There is one performance metric for income support listed on page 22 of the business plan, and that metric tracks percentage of participants employed after leaving income support. To be clear, this is a survey of former participants, asking them if they obtained work after leaving the program. What is the average expected number of respondents? How many people are replying to the survey?

The AG report for income support dated December 2019 notes the following audit finding. CSS “has inadequate processes to identify and develop performance measures and to monitor and report on the effectiveness of the program.” Given this outstanding recommendation and obvious lack of transparency, how does the ministry justify the shrinking metrics in this business plan? Finally, will this metric include both expected to work and barriers for employment, and can the ministry adjust this metric for clarity? I look forward to hearing from the minister on those questions.

Next I’m going to move to family support for children with disabilities, commonly known as FSCD. Line 4.4 in government estimates for FSCD tells us that this funding envelope was increased by .3 per cent, but according to government open data from September 2019 to September 2020 active caseloads grew by 2.4 per cent, for a total of 15,137 families. At the same time there were 3,497 people waiting for supports, also known as a wait-list, Madam Chair. Government doesn’t like to call it that. They call it in planning or various stages of planning, you know, whatever else that might be. You can use your imagination.

I have seven questions related to family support for children with disabilities. Number one, what is the average amount of time spent in planning, and are families served on a first-come, first-served basis? If not, how is the order determined, and what is the average time from intake or referral to a signed contract and delivery of service?

Multidisciplinary team review panels are frequently used to review submissions by professionals such as SLP, OT, PT to

determine if funding is continued. These panels are costly in terms of billable time and stressful for families. Using last year’s total number of multidisciplinary team panels, what is the number of MDT review panels this ministry projects for 2021 and the estimated cost associated?

My next question. Based on government open data, we know that the Calgary region caseload pressures are consistently higher. Why is that?

Next question. Using the government budget estimate on line 4.4, \$211.9 million, please provide the projected budget breakdown by the following: family support services, which includes but is not limited to respite counselling, et cetera; child-focused services, child care related costs, costs of an aide, things like that; and specialized services, which would include SLP, OT, PT; and then extraordinary drug approvals.

My next question. Using current caseload data, how many families on both the active and waiting lists are FNMI? How many families are from racialized communities, and how many indicate that English is their second language?

I note that resources for victims of abuse and trafficking are available in 170 languages. Through you to the minister, Madam Chair: what accommodations are made to ensure equity for all FSCD families? I am unaware of any. I would also like to note that I did request an ASL interpreter be available for this morning, but that did not happen. I hope that going forward, we can change that.

My next question. Is the ministry undertaking any policy changes and/or directions that would reduce the number of families who require and receive both PUF support and FSCD? If so, what are they projected to be, and how will that impact Budget 2021?

My next question. What are the ministry plans to address the FSCD wait-list? I would like some specifics, if at all possible, with a timeline. As you can imagine, with over 3,000 families sitting on that wait-list, they would like some answers. Those are my questions around FSCD. I look forward to hearing from the minister about what those are.

Madam Chair, what is the time left?

The Chair: Two minutes, 34 seconds.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thanks. I’m going to move on to my next set of questions, which are about the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities. During a recent review of the disability advocate report by this committee, actually, we heard first-hand, Madam Chair, about how busy this office has been with casework, navigating complex systems, in addition to the education piece and broader work around advising government through the minister. I believe that the disability advocate’s office indicated that they had opened approximately 1,000 case files.

I note that in the government’s budget estimates 2021, line 4.7, the disability advocate’s office, remained exactly the same as in Budget 2020. On January 15, 2021, I asked the disability advocate if he lost any capacity in his office in terms of reduction of FTEs, or humans, casework humans. As you will note in *Hansard* for that meeting, Madam Chair, he said yes, that they had lost FTEs in that department, yet the budget is exactly the same. Now, I know that this may not be material for the crafters of this budget, but it’s very much material to the ability of this particular office to do the work.

So here’s my question. While the loss of a few FTEs in an already tiny office may not be material to this budget of almost \$4 billion, it most certainly is material to the ability to do the work. How many FTEs from the disability advocate’s office are no longer there from budget estimates 2021 compared to the number of FTEs included in Budget 2020, and where were these FTEs deployed? Is it normal

practice to reduce capacity of departments without accurately noting expense changes?

The reason I bring this up, Madam Chair: as you can imagine, as I said in my earlier comments, I'm incredibly alarmed by the lack of transparency and just the minuscule amount of information that is available. So, of course, when I see a number like \$1 million for the disability advocate and I know that just a little while ago the disability advocate himself said that he had lost capacity to do casework in his office with the loss of FTEs, I'm left wondering: where did the staff go? Why is there no mention of reduced capacity when we know by the disability advocate's own report that the work has not slowed down? As you can imagine, I'm sure it has only picked up in the last little while.

I would very much appreciate some clarity on those issues.

What is the time left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Seven seconds.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

With that, we will move back to the minister for the next round of answers.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Ms Renaud. I just want to go back to the \$7 million. It comes out of element 6.3, the civil society funding, for \$7 million.

Now, in regard to supplemental benefits I do want to be clear once again to anybody who might be listening or watching right now that there has been no cut to supplemental benefits at all. There is a more concerted focus on making sure that there is substantiation, and as it relates to the additional shelter benefit, there are stipulations around what is required for a substantiation. In fact, my predecessor had signed a ministerial order in August 2018 describing what those stipulations are. That can be reviewed. We are not, as I said, making any cuts. Those benefits are still available.

Now, having said that, I have made sure that caseworkers, through my staff, have communicated for them to be very thoughtful and mindful of individual circumstances and to express compassion, because certainly we don't want any kind of changes to put anybody in a situation where they're at risk of losing their home or falling into homelessness.

There is more of a concerted effort to ensure that practice aligns with policy. Why did we take that approach? One of the things that I've heard throughout stakeholder engagement is that there are regional inconsistencies across the province in all programs – in FSCD, in PDD as well as income support and AISH supplementary benefits – in terms of how they're given to clients. How do you ensure fairness and consistency? That's by giving the same set of rules to everybody all across the province, and I'm committed to that. I'm being very transparent about that, that we are going to make sure that policies and practices are aligned. Again, no cuts to additional shelter benefits. That benefit is available for vulnerable Albertans who meet the eligibility requirements.

There were some questions around projected savings. Again, the income support program is predicated on demand. There are no savings, certainly no cuts. If somebody is eligible, they will have access to the program.

I also want to say that, you know, this adherence to policy was something that was also highlighted by the OAG, and I think that the member had alluded to that, the office of the Auditor General's comments on ineffectiveness. Well, this is one measure that we can

take to introduce effectiveness and efficiency. That's in direct response to the recommendations from the Auditor General.

9:50

I hope I have answered all the questions for the supplementary benefits and income support. If not, I'm happy to provide more information.

Now, moving on to FSCD, I have done some extensive engagement around this program. This program is very important to me, particularly. It's probably something that means more to me personally than almost any other program in the ministry. I have spoken to a number of parents. I've had at least 12 or 13 virtual engagement sessions, countless conversations in the last two years. I agree; the multidisciplinary panels have come up time and time again from parents, from caseworkers. That is something that we're going to be looking at.

We're reviewing the program right now, as we speak, to understand what is working and what isn't working – that was something that was highlighted – as well as regional inconsistencies across the province. There was a family who was getting one set of services in northern Alberta. She moved to southern Alberta, and the level of services changed. Why? Why does that happen? So we are addressing that.

There were some questions about detailed information in terms of the cost categories. I can provide this right now, and I can provide this information afterwards as well. In terms of expenditures by service category, specialized services comprised 24.4 per cent of the total spending, and this is a Q3 forecast. Child-focused services comprised 35 per cent. Out-of-home services comprised 17.7 per cent. Family support services is about 12 per cent. Behaviour and development services comprised 10 per cent of the total funding for FSCD.

There were some comments about the wait-list. Yes, I also call them wait-lists. I know that there's different terminology, but at the end of the day that's what it is. That is why I am reviewing the FSCD program, because I know that there are ways to find efficiencies, without cutting services, within the program so that we can reallocate those dollars to the families who are waiting right now. I did publish the wait-list myself – that, again, is my commitment to transparency – so that Albertans are aware of what those lists look like but also so that we can work with our service providers so that they were aware of what the caseloads look like and so they could come back. We've been working on this together to help us find ways to whittle that wait-list down. We are working on that as we speak, and I will have more to say about the FSCD program in the future.

Okay. Now, there were some questions around the disability advocate. First, let me start by saying that I have a very good relationship with Tony Flores. We talk; we text. I rely on him for his advice, and he has introduced me to some tremendous people in the community, and I support his work. As we move forward, we will continue working together. There was some turnover in his office last year, and there was a redeployment of staff because of the pandemic. We needed some more help in PDD, but as you have noted, that budget has remained intact. It remains intact as we go forward. I know that there are some recruitment efforts under way. Certainly, we are looking forward to that office having its full complement of staff. It should happen shortly if it hasn't happened already. There are six positions, actually, within his office. I know Tony, and I have spoken about this at length, and I look forward to his continued support in his role. It's very important.

I do believe that I have answered most of the questions. I know that there were some questions: what percentage of our caseload and potential wait-list comprises racialized communities or families

who have English as a second language, and how are we going to ensure equity?

I'm actually really glad that you asked that question, because this is something that I'm also very concerned about. One of the comments that I have made – it's not even a comment; it's a directive – is to ensure that we have culturally appropriate supports available for families who have children with disabilities. We know – I've said it before – that the face of Alberta has changed, and we need to make sure that all families are getting the support that they need. We need to make sure that all families are getting the support that they need, that is reflective of their cultural heritage, that is reflective of the fact that English might be their second language. As I review this program, we will make sure that that element is built in to ensure that the equity piece is there as well.

Your comments around the ASL interpreter are duly noted, and hopefully that will change next year. That's not something that's within my control, but I understand the importance of it, so I do agree.

Madam Chair, how much more time do we have?

The Chair: Thirty-five seconds.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. If I was not able to answer these questions fully, as I had said, I'd be happy to provide some follow-up information afterwards. But once again let me just reiterate to families out there who are concerned about the FSCD program. I have said it publicly – and I'll say it once again – that I'm very committed to this program to ensure that it meets its objectives and to ensure that children who have disabilities are getting all the supports that they need and deserve.

I'll end with that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Minister.

With that, we go back to Ms Renaud for the third round in this section.

Ms Renaud: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you to the minister for her answers. Let me just go back and be clear: there is a massive wait-list in FSCD. Massive. It is over 3,000 people. There are only about 14,000 or 15,000 families in the whole program altogether. So with a minuscule increase, I think it's, like – I don't know – only .2 or .3 per cent, the only way to address that pressure on the wait-list is by cutting existing services. So let's just be clear about what this is.

The other comment is about income support, that nothing was cut. If you look at the budget documents, even just barriers to employment and income support were cut by \$52 million. I asked a number of questions about that. The minister, Madam Chair, just continues to say that there were no cuts. I'm just going to leave it there.

I have a question about, first of all, the critical worker benefit. The minister made opening comments, Madam Chair, about \$72 million being directed to shelters. She's correct. Part of that was directed to shelters but not all of it. On page 106 of the fiscal plan it notes that the CSS operating expense forecast is \$72 million in spending for homeless and women's shelters and the critical worker benefit. This is my question. Of the \$72 million in this little pot that was identified in the fiscal plan, how much went to critical workers, or how much is the minister projecting will go to critical workers in disability supports, and what is the total amount that CSS projects to allocate to critical workers under the entire CSS umbrella? So that would include all of the other departments.

Moving on, Madam Chair, I'm going to move to the program called PDD, which is persons with developmental disabilities. The government budget estimates for PDD supports for Albertans,

which is line 4.2, were increased by 2 and a half million dollars. I think we all know that growth and caseload pressures in PDD year over year – it's all historical data – far exceed this increase, which is minuscule. In addition to the shortfall, there are over 2,000 people sitting on a waiting list. Government-speak: in planning. But it's a wait-list.

In the government estimates 2021-2022, page 52, line 4.2, we see spending on PDD. This figure includes supports delivered by family-managed supports and by service providers. Open data tells us that PDD supports are delivered in these two primary ways, FMS and service providers. So based on this new investment to support FMS contracts in areas with low numbers, as you identified in your business plan, my question is: what are the anticipated growth targets in relation to FMS due to the creation of these new support hubs?

My next question is: of the total PDD 2021 government budget estimates, how much is allocated to FMS supports? The total is just shy of \$1 billion. How much will be allocated to FMS supports, how much to service providers, and how much to special projects? So three categories, three breakdowns in this particular line.

10:00

My next question, Madam Chair. Open data for PDD reports on the number of people on wait-lists and notes the reason for many is "no service provider" vacancy, which is very strange because this is not what I hear from service providers. It's important to understand the system's capacity, so I think it would be helpful for us to know how the ministry determines if a disability service provider has capacity and when that becomes a reason to stay on the wait-list.

My next question. Any changes to FMS oversight since Budget 2020 given the increased risk and complexities associated with the pandemic conditions and the flexibility given to FMS contracts through regulation changes: will there be any changes to FMS oversight within the time period covered in Budget 2021? CSS intends to create support hubs, as you noted in the FMS service delivery contracts in PDD. Government documents note the \$2 million investment will create support hubs in four regions, noting that Calgary is already home to one, I think the only one. The regions selected are northeast, northwest, south, and Edmonton. The only region left out is central, which would include Red Deer. Here's my question. Using open data from September 2020, I note that PDD FMS contracts in the northeast region are nine. There are nine of them. PDD FMS contracts in the central region: there are 205. Northeast will receive supports, and central will not. What data was used to determine where the funds are allocated, and can that data be shared with this committee?

My next question. There are over 2,000 people on PDD's wait-list. This is a two-tiered wait-list. In 2020 how many people moved from service-planning wait-list to actually receiving services? How many new people received PDD services in 2020, and how many people left? How many does PDD plan to take into service in 2021, and how many people does PDD project will no longer require supports in 2021?

My next question. Since 2019 we've heard about ministry reviews, most recently in November 2020, when we saw an RFP for over \$70,000 for a quick, one-month internal review of departments, including PDD. Who was awarded this contract for work? What was the final cost of that review, and which line item would it be expensed to? As review recommendations impact budgets – we all know this – when can Albertans expect all PDD review results to be released to Albertans, Madam Chair?

In Budget 2020 the ministry notes a \$5 million allocation "to build on successful partnerships supporting employment

opportunities for Albertans with disabilities.” Great. That’s awesome. Budget 2021, again, allocates \$5 million “to support new employment partnerships to create job opportunities for persons with disabilities.” Again, great; however, I am concerned about the lack of publicly available information for this work, the scope, and the outcomes. Try as I might, Madam Chair, I could not find any data to indicate the success, how many jobs were created, how many people were placed into employment situations, and how long that employment was maintained after placement. Question: where was the Budget 2020 \$5 million allocated? Were any of those fund allocations sole-sourced, and if so, how many? Who were the recipients, and why was the normal procurement process not followed? Again, my overall question is: from this initial investment and the projection going forward, how many total employment opportunities were created, and how many total employment opportunities will be created?

My next question: how many employment opportunities will the \$5 million allocation from Budget 2021 create, and who specifically will deliver those services?

How many people receiving PDD supports have been infected by COVID? How many have been hospitalized as a result, and how many have died? The reason this is important, Madam Chair, is that we know that there are long-term impacts of COVID, particularly to those who are most vulnerable. Where in the 2021 estimates for PDD are we accounting for the increased need for supports related to long COVID?

My last question about persons with developmental disabilities: what was the total number of abuse allegations investigated by protection for persons in care staff in 2020-21 for Albertans served by PDD, broken down by funding arrangements, first being family-managed supports, second being community service provider, and why is this public reporting not updated? The last update I could find was from 2019.

Madam Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: One minute, 40 seconds.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Those are my questions about persons with developmental disabilities.

I would like to ask a question from the CSS annual report. This is about comments that I read about new assessment tools, which obviously impact targets and budgets; targets, obviously, going forward. On page 15 of the CSS annual report, expense likely included in section 2 on page 52 of government budget estimates, it states that “Alberta Supports staff implemented . . . new assessment and planning tools.” What are those tools? Which departments will they be used in? What are the training costs? What are the delivery and licensing costs? And will you commit to tabling that information with the committee?

Finally, the CSS annual report also states that PDD began piloting these assessment tools in spring 2020, which was, really, the start of COVID. Some explanation there would be appreciated. They “targeted to fully adopt and implement them” by fall of 2020. What are the names of the tools? What do they measure? What is the cost associated? In-person visits were stopped in March. How will the pilot proceed with pandemic restrictions in place, and what are the outcome measures?

Again, Madam Chair, I would just like to say, going back to my initial comments, that there are very few metrics in the business plan. The minister says that this is because there’s a template, but this is the kind of information that . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud. Perfect timing on that question.

Ms Renaud: Thank you.

The Chair: We’ll go to the minister for her next 10-minute block.

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Ms Renaud, for your questions. There were a lot of questions in that block, and I was frantically scribbling them down. I may not have caught all of them, but of course I am happy to answer them afterwards as well.

In regard to the wait-list, it is a concern to me as well, which is one of the reasons why I wanted to undertake a review and really work with my partners in community, the service providers. We have a service provider partnership table that I liaised with and engaged with to talk about the wait-list. Again, as I had said earlier, that’s the reason why I wanted to publish the wait-list, so that Albertans could see exactly who is on that list. These wait-lists for both programs pre-existed, prior to my time. It’s been an ongoing problem with Community and Social Services. They are lists that I have inherited, and I am trying to find ways to find money within the system without impacting services so that we can tackle that wait-list.

I do want to comment on the speculation that you have offered in terms of comments like: well, the only way that this can happen is through cuts. Again, I’m just going to reiterate that, you know, especially with income support, no cuts – and we are not looking at any cuts as the member had alluded to. I just want to reiterate that again, because I know that for – BFE. That’s what it was. There was a comment that we have cut funding to that program. But, again, the BFE program is legislatively mandated, and it’s based on demand. What you’re seeing in terms of the budget numbers is based on what we expect the caseload forecast to be. That forecast is dependent, as I said earlier, on historical data as well as other factors, environmental factors, like the new benefit. So you take the caseload and multiply it by the average cost per case, as I said before, and you get to the budget number. That’s how that number was derived. There are no cuts embedded in that number. I just want to be clear. I am happy to provide more information. Again, it’s hard to really talk about this very effectively within this kind of a format.

Okay. Moving on to the PDD program, the question was that the \$73 million for homeless shelters, how much – actually, I’m going to move on to 4.2. The line item there: \$17.9 million in the Q3 forecast is related to the wage top-up. If you take out that \$17.2 million, the actual increase for the PDD program is higher than that. So just keep that in mind when you’re comparing that to the budget numbers.

The critical worker benefit. Line 4.2: \$17.9 million is in that element. For homeless shelters, 5.2, it is \$1.9 million. For element 5.3, women’s shelters, it is \$1.1 million. Again, these are the numbers for the critical worker benefit.

10:10

For community-based organizations in element 5.4, the wage top-up or the critical worker benefit is \$1.4 million. In element 6.2, the critical worker benefit is \$1.7 million, that totals to \$24 million. The COVID funding for 2020-21 was \$48 million, and I had announced that last year. Okay. I hope that answers the questions around the funding for the critical worker benefit.

The other question was around family resource centres. That was a platform commitment. The expression of interest for the family resource centres is not limited to those four areas that were articulated earlier, because there was a mention that central was not included, so the expression of interest is open to providers or interested parties across the province.

Certainly, what we've seen with the pandemic is that the virtual supports and services that are available have really increased by a magnitude of – I don't even know how much, but that is also available to families to make sure that that virtual support is there. I know that there are a few providers that I was talking to who are quite interested in being the party that offers those virtual supports. I would like to say that announcements will be made soon, and the expression of interest did close on March 15. My department is working on that as we speak, to provide some more information. Again, I will be announcing that soon.

There was also a question around the FMS caseload. The total caseload for PDD is over 13,000, and the FMS caseload is at about 2,600, and that represents about 21 per cent of the caseload. It's about \$100 million for family managed services. Again, if more information is required on that, I can provide that afterwards.

All right. I think there were some questions around FMS growth targets, and, you know, we can look at what we see historically and extrapolate historically to see what those growth targets can look like. I don't have that information here, but of course, as I mentioned, we are going to be having these new family resource centres, which will speak to that further.

There were also questions around the service providers and questions around contracts. I'm going to have to get that question in writing from the member to try to get a better understanding of what exactly was asked. Yes, the funding that is going to be spent on employment resources is excellent. We have \$5 million. It was a platform commitment, and that's going to help with employment partnerships, like what we see with the Rotary Club. Of course, Inclusion Alberta receives about \$6.9 million for their inclusive postsecondary work that they do and to help with employment.

Employment opportunities. Where is the data? What are the outcomes? I think that is what the member had asked. I don't have that information in terms of what those outcomes can look like, but I can provide some more information in a written format.

Now, there were also some questions around how many of our PDD clients were hospitalized or lost their lives as a result of COVID-19. That data is not readily available. I'm just looking at my executive directors and staff. It's not readily available. Yes. I know we were tracking clients in our homeless shelters and isolation spaces very, very closely, so that information we have been collecting, and we've been monitoring it. But for clients of the PDD program, I can't supply that to you. In fact, I think that data would reside with Alberta Health, and they would be the authorities who could provide more information on that.

The total number of abuse allegations: I do not believe we have that information, but I will get back to you on that. I'm going to look into that a little bit further. Certainly, nothing has come to my attention. When these kinds of situations arise, usually I am notified as the minister, but I have not heard of anything as of late.

There were some questions around the CSS annual report. I apologize; I didn't get all the questions. It was basically around the new assessment and planning tools that were mentioned in the report. Again, I will have to get some more clarity around what the question is, and we can discuss that afterwards.

I think I caught most of it. I know I didn't answer all of Ms Renaud's questions, but certainly, like I said, I can come back and provide some more information if I can get some more clarity around those questions.

Madam Chair, how much more time is left?

The Chair: There are about 30 seconds and then a minute left to Ms Renaud for this block.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. I think there was a question around the contract for \$70,000 that was awarded, and that was for PricewaterhouseCoopers. I think it was a great opportunity to take all this data that we have in government that nobody ever looks at and nobody ever touches and use that data and try to run some analytics on it to see if we can find some more meaningful insights and information as to what we're seeing with our programs.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Sawhney. I appreciate that. Ms Renaud, you have approximately 25 seconds left.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I would just quickly say that that data around infection, hospitalization, and death for PDD is available to you, and I know this because I actually had to report.

The Chair: Ms Renaud, through the chair.

Ms Renaud: Oh, I'm sorry, Madam Chair. Through you, I am aware that that data is readily available.

Also, I wanted to know about rapid reinstatement, that you've failed to answer, about income support.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, we move on to the government caucus. The first one up is Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Good morning, everybody. Can you hear me, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you. Good. Well, good morning, Minister, and thank you for your service to Albertans and for answering our questions today. I know that this is always a stressful time for our ministers as they try to explain our government to the people of Alberta and our budgets to the people of Alberta. I know that you're going to just do a great job today.

Through the chair, Minister, would you like to do a back and forth, or would you like to do blocks of time?

Mrs. Sawhney: We can do a back and forth, Madam Chair.

The Chair: All right. Thanks.

Mr. Smith: Is that okay, Madam Chair? We're good to go?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you very much. I want to start by just making a statement, I guess. You and your staff have a very difficult job to do, and as an MLA working at the constituency level, I realize that you're trying to meet the needs of Albertans that are often struggling, and that's never an easy thing to do. We all can attest, I think, as MLAs to the fact that life can be very difficult. Just as people, as Albertans we can attest to the fact that life can be very difficult sometimes and that each of our constituents that we serve is unique and they're complex and they're individual. It's been my experience that government often has a very difficult time trying to break through the need to deliver a program or a service provincially while at the same time trying to recognize and to meet the needs of the individual.

I've just appreciated so very much, every time that my office or I have contacted your office and your ministry, that in order to try and help a constituent that I'm serving, you've done your very best as an office to try and meet the needs of my . . .

The Chair: Mr. Smith, I will just ask that you make sure that you're asking all of your questions through the chair.

Mr. Smith: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. Through the chair, I just wanted to say thank you for your hard work on behalf of Albertans.

Now to the questions that we're going to be looking at today. Through the chair, Madam Chair, I'd like to draw your attention to page 49 of your estimates. It shows in your estimates a decrease of about \$34.7 million from Budget 2020. While we all understand the complexities around providing services in the wake of the COVID pandemic, it seems odd to be showing a budget decrease. I guess the first question I've got – and there might be some supplementals that come out of this – is: what is the reason for the decrease in the overall budget? Then I've got a couple of supplementals that go along with that.

10:20

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you, I would like to thank MLA Smith for his comments around the ministry and the department. We pride ourselves on having a very customer service oriented approach. That's the best way I know how to put it. I appreciate those comments. As my staff is all with me today, they were able to hear it first-hand. It is a tough job, but we're up to the task.

You're right. Page 49 of the estimates does show a decrease of \$34.7 million. I'm going to start off first by saying that the mandate of Community and Social Services is to provide support for vulnerable Albertans, particularly now as we are still within the throes of the pandemic. We are also faced with an economic decline although we're seeing positive movement in a positive direction. In regard to the economy we're still not where we need to be.

These services are obviously very important, and we must deliver them sustainably, but due to the pandemic the ministry has changed significantly since Budget 2020. We have been seeing decreasing caseloads, as I had mentioned earlier, in our income support program and even in our disability programs like the FSCD program. We saw a reduction in caseload pressures there. Because of those caseload pressures, our Q3 forecast for 2020-21 is reflective of what's actually happening. Our 2021-22 budget is reflective of the actual expenditures to date. We do expect some of these caseloads to increase, particularly in income support programs, as the federal benefits taper off. That is reflected. But the decrease in the budget number is not a reflection of cuts; it's a reflection of what we expect to see in terms of demand for programs.

Mr. Smith: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Smith, as both you and the minister are participating virtually, I'll just ask that either of you wait till I call your names so that we don't have the weird back and forth and reverb. Mr. Smith, the floor is yours.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. Me and technology: we don't always get along together. A supplemental, then, on a related note: why was the ministry's 2020 budget so much higher than the 2021 forecast as per page 49 of the estimates? Can you elaborate on how supports are being maintained while expenses are dropping? We know people have required additional supports since the onset of the pandemic, so how can expenses be dropping? You

might have referred to that in the very last part of your comment there, but if you could reiterate that for me, that would be great.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Smith.

Minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Sorry, Madam Chair. I'm supposed to wait for you. Okay. The question was: why is the 2020 budget higher than the forecast? When the 2020 budget was initially put together, we were at the very beginning stages of the pandemic, and we certainly had no idea of the impact that the pandemic would have on our caseload forecast. The actual expenditure was significantly lower in certain programs as a result of that. For income support we had budgeted, for example, an average of almost 61,000 clients in Budget 2020. However, the forecast and the actual historical data related to that forecast was less than 51,000 clients. In FSCD we are forecasting almost 500 clients less than what we had budgeted for. In PDD it's almost 400 individuals lower than what we had originally budgeted for. Because of that reduced caseload, because of the circumstances that families were facing, and because of clients moving onto the federal supports: that's why we spent less money in 2021 than we anticipated.

The decrease is, however, being offset by the \$72 million in additional funding that was provided in response to the pandemic to support homeless shelters and to provide the critical worker benefit.

The Chair: Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you. Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister, can you explain how the government can possibly predict how many people will need income support? I mean, when we are in an unprecedented pandemic, as you've already explained, and a deep economic recession, how do we know that the forecast for your ministry is accurate and realistic?

Secondly, a couple of supplementals for your consideration as you answer that question. How can you justify the \$66 million in cuts to income support when your own forecast shows an increased demand once the federal support runs out? Then how do you plan to meet your targets given that there is a decrease in the budget and that caseloads are expected to increase? Are you going to limit intake or kick people off once you get close to your targets? How are you going to handle that situation?

Thank you, Minister. I await your answer, through you to the chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Smith. Just another reminder that your questions must go through the chair and not directly to the minister.

With that, Minister, your reply.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, first of all, forecasting is a very important activity that takes place not only in my ministry but in all departments across government. Developing a realistic economic forecast is the most responsible way to develop a budget, and that's why we have a very robust system in place within the department. The economists use all kinds of data, including historical data, the advent of new programs, as I've mentioned several times, relating to the federal supports, and we also use information from chief economists from Canadian banks and other private-sector forecasts. The forecasts that we put in place are based on the best information that we have at the time, and they're built around assumptions. What we have in the budget is reflective of what we expect to see.

Of course, again, if the future forecast is off, it is a legislated program, and we have to adjust accordingly. If we see greater

demand, then the budget will have to be adjusted to reflect that greater demand. There's going to be no reduction in services that Albertans are eligible for, and the core rates haven't changed. They haven't changed from what the previous government had in place. I know there were some comments around the BSE rates and ETW rates being too low, but they were the same rates that existed prior to what they are now. I just wanted to be very clear about that.

I think I've covered the comments around the forecast and the fact that the program remains intact. Madam Chair, I know MLA Smith had another question in there, but I missed it. Please feel free to ask that again, the part that I missed.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
To MLA Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. I guess the question that I had was: how can you justify the \$66 million in cuts to income support when our forecast shows an increased demand? Lastly, how do you plan to meet your targets given that there's a decrease in the budget and that caseloads are expected to increase? Through the chair to you, if you could just summarize those two questions, that would be great.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Yeah. The budget amounts are based on the average cost per case, and we have seen some changes in average cost per case as we adhere more closely to policy and ensure that only those Albertans who are actually eligible for supplemental benefits and other benefits have access to them. As a result of that policy work, we are seeing the average cost per case decline. Again, if you take that and you multiply it with the projected caseload and annualize that, you will come to the budget number.

10:30

The Chair: Thank you.
To Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll cede the rest of my time to another one of my colleagues. I believe it's Mr. Amery.

The Chair: All right. Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair, and good morning, through you, to the minister and to the officials who are here with her.
Madam Chair, can I get a time check, please?

The Chair: Six minutes, 37 seconds.

Mr. Amery: Perfect. Would the minister be agreeable to going back and forth, Madam Chair?

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes, I would be agreeable.

Mr. Amery: You know, we've heard a lot this morning from the minister about some of the things that she has been working on through her department and some of the amazing things that she's doing with respect to Albertans with disabilities, and that's where my first and initial questions are going to focus on. For that, to the minister, through you, Madam Chair, I would ask that we turn to page 22 of the business plan, the initiatives supporting key objectives. In there there is a discussion about a \$5 million investment in employment partnerships in this 2021-2022 fiscal year and how that will benefit Albertans with disabilities in finding

employment. To the minister, through you, Madam Chair: can we please hear a little bit more about how this investment is going to be allocated insofar as it will assist Albertans with disabilities in finding the employment that they need?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair, and, through you, thank you to MLA Amery for that question. One of the things that I've been hearing consistently through my stakeholder engagement with the disability community is that there is a desire for and obviously a need for more employment supports to support persons with disabilities to have those opportunities.

In regard to this \$5 million investment, as I said, we see great potential for Albertans with disabilities to join the workforce with the right supports, and that's the key. This investment will help with that, and I can tell you that overall CSS invests more than \$35 million in employment supports for people with disabilities. Again, this additional \$5 million investment is going to be given to organizations that we partner with such as the Rotary group as well as Inclusion Alberta to make sure that they are doing the work to create more opportunities for persons with disabilities. We're also going to continue work with our key stakeholders to increase these partnerships, and I've already mentioned the Rotary employment partnerships. That work is currently under way. We also will be announcing some new projects that align with our federal labour market agreements.

The other thing I wanted to let everyone know is that we have also assisted at the Public Service Commission to make sure that the government of Alberta is a leader in hiring Albertans with disabilities, and there was a lot of work done on this particular initiative last fall.

The Chair: Thank you.
To Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you once again, Madam Chair, and to the minister for that answer. Now, to the minister. The minister will likely be able to elaborate on this, but we've had very intense discussions with respect to AISH and the program as it stands, and the minister alluded earlier here today to a commitment to continue those benefits for the people who need it most. My questions, really, to the minister are as follows. Page 52 of the estimates shows, in fact, a budget increase for AISH. Can the minister describe to this committee and to all of the people watching how this budget addresses the caseload and cost pressures for the AISH program? Can the minister also confirm what this means for AISH recipients in 2021-2022 and whether they will continue to see those benefits provided or whether this will impact any of the entitlements to those who are eligible?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm very grateful for this question because this is something that I've wanted to talk about for some time. I do want to let everybody who is listening and viewing know that I will be making some announcements soon around the AISH program. Obviously, as the budget number indicates, we are providing \$1.3 billion, which is the highest amount that has ever historically been provided to that program. That number is a reflection of the commitment to ensure that core

benefits are maintained. I had said last fall in a social media post that there would be no changes. There were never intended to be any changes to financial benefits or eligibility.

Let me state that very clearly and with great emphasis, that there are no changes to eligibility and core rates. Again, that is reflected within the budget numbers. Everything does remain intact with the AISH program as it is. I've always said that we are looking for opportunities to streamline the program and to improve service delivery. Again, I will have more to say about this in the coming weeks.

I do believe I've answered the question that MLA Amery had asked. Certainly, I can elaborate that a little bit more, but the caseload forecasts for AISH are definitively reflective of what we expect to see in terms of increases this coming year. That's fully built into the caseload. The reality is that the level of increase has not been what we thought it would be, again, because of the pandemic. That is, again, built into the forecast.

The Chair: Thank you.

There are 20 seconds.

Mr. Amery: Time check, Madam Chair. Twenty seconds, you say?

Thank you very much for that answer, Minister. I'm certain that we're going to be talking a lot more about AISH as the morning progresses. Hopefully, I'll . . .

The Chair: I'll let you finish your sentence.

Mr. Amery: I just wanted to continue by saying that I do have a few more questions for the minister, and we'll get to that at the next portion of our time. Thank you.

The Chair: Fantastic. Thank you, Mr. Amery.

That concludes the government members' first block of questions, and 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. Please remember that all discussions must flow through the chair at all times regardless as to whether speaking blocks are combined or not.

Now to the Official Opposition and Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm willing to combine with the minister if she likes. I think she's having trouble keeping track of all the questions I'm firing at her, so that offer is there.

The Chair: To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: That's fine. Thank you.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Minister. I want to circle back. Talking about income support, I understand it's a legislative program, that there's a need to meet needs, but there are other ways to make cuts other than, you know, legislating. There are eligibility intricacies, but we won't get into that. We know – fact – that the income support was cut from the budget the year before, \$52 million in barriers to employment, \$12.8 million in expected to work . . .

Mr. Neudorf: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Neudorf: Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j), makes allegations against another member. I think the minister has been extremely clear on this answer, that it is not a cut. It is actually a legislated

program. To continue to repeat this argument again and again when it has been answered clearly by the minister is clearly an attempt to make an allegation or impute false motives upon the minister and would likely cause disorder. I would ask that the chair direct the member to get on to the questions at hand.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Shepherd, by all means.

10:40

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. I don't see a point of order here. What we have here is a dispute of the facts. I recognize that we have a difference of opinion regarding the terminology that's used about this particular reduction in the budget. I also noticed that members of the government asked a series of questions to the minister about this same section of the budget. So in this case I don't hear the member making any allegations about the minister's motives, her personal intentions. She is simply remarking on this reduction in the budget and referring to it with the terminology which she believes is appropriate. Government members may not like that terminology, but that does not impute motives. I do not see a point of order here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shepherd.

I appreciate this, but I will agree with Mr. Shepherd, and I believe that this is a dispute of the facts. But I will remind all members to make sure that they are directing their questions through the chair and remaining respectful in their questions.

Ms Renaud: Madam Chair, obviously, I'm sure you have looked through the budget documents. You can see \$52 million less in this year's budget estimate than last year, \$12.8 million less in this year's budget estimate from last year. So we can dispute what we call it. The minister let us know that the caseload is anticipated to be 10,000 people less. I know the core rates aren't changing, and let's be honest about what these core rates are. They're about half of what AISH is. That is abject poverty. There is no plan, as we've heard, to address poverty or to have metrics, even to measure our work. So my question to the minister is: what is the average cost per case that your ministry is projecting going forward? What is the average cost per case? If you could break down by expected to work and barriers to employment, that would be great.

I also wanted to note one of the comments – I think this is an area that requires intense support around job creation, maintenance, jobs support. We've heard about the Rotary project, which is great. You know, I think that when we first started talking about it in 2019, we knew that Inclusion Alberta had been working on this project about 15 years and it had 500 people employed, which is great, but that's not a strategy for the tens of thousands of people that are on income support. So my question to the minister is: what is the average cost per case that you anticipate, going forward, for barriers to employment and expected to work? Also, what is the job-creation strategy for the folks that you are looking at moving from income support to employment?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

To Minister Sawhney.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. Yes. Let's talk about the income support program. I think what the problem is here is that there is a budget-to-budget comparison. Yes, there is a decrease that you see budget to budget. The 2020 budget was predicated on a very different caseload forecast, and that was prior

to any knowledge of any federal supports being available as a result of the pandemic.

I think that if you do a budget-to-forecast comparison, so Budget 2021 to Q3 forecast, you will see that Budget 2021 numbers have actually increased. So if we look at the expected to work, the forecast indicates \$346 million, but the 2021 estimate is at \$428 million. That's an increase. That's what we have to look at. What was actually spent? That's how we derive our future caseloads. That increase is reflective of the fact that we do expect people who are on the federal supports to come back. So there is no cut. This is based on math, and the average cost per case is expected . . .

Ms Renaud: I thank the minister for her answer. That is not my question. Madam Chair, I'm actually asking to take my time back.

The Chair: So are you asking to go back to . . .

Ms Renaud: No, no. I'm asking the question. I received an answer. My question – maybe the minister didn't hear, and I had a lot of questions, Madam Chair.

The Chair: I would remind to be respectful and make sure that you're going through the chair.

Ms Renaud: What my question was: what is the average cost per case that the minister, when she described the – she talked about 10,000 less in the caseload. She talked about projections. I understand that she's talking about forecasts; that was not what I was talking about. I'm asking, Madam Chair, through you to the minister: what is the average cost per case that her ministry is anticipating?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. The average cost per case is \$990. The forecast is \$28,000, and this is for ETW. If you take \$28,000 and multiply it by the average cost per case and annualize it, you should come to \$428 million.

The Chair: Thank you.

Just a point of clarification, Ms Renaud. While you might not always like the answers being given by the government, that is their right.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. I got it. Okay. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'm going to move on to women's shelters. The budget estimate for women's shelters, line 5.3, is \$51.3 million, the same amount as the year before, no addition for population growth, inflation, escalating violence, high unemployment. In fact, funding for women's shelters has fallen from an actual of \$56.6 million in Budget 2019 and an actual of \$57.4 million in Budget 2020 to a projected low of \$51.3 million. We know the problem isn't getting any better, Madam Chair. We know this. We have heard from professionals, from law enforcement that violence is escalating, that there is an anticipation of a surge of needed supports very soon.

Jessie's House, Madam Chair, which is in Sturgeon county, in Morinville, is a 35-bed facility. For the first time in 20 years, 22 years actually, a new facility has opened. This is a women's shelter capable of actually housing men and children. It's really awesome that it opened about a year ago, bad timing, I guess, for opening during COVID. Now, we know that they did receive a \$200,000 grant, but they need \$1.5 million in operating. When I look at this

year's budget estimate, obviously there is no room for growth, so there's no way that you can squeeze \$1.5 million out of this budget line without reducing somewhere else. This is a new program. It is essential to Morinville, St. Albert, Sturgeon county, all of the communities around there. In fact, we heard from the shelter that, actually, people from out of province had been sent there for safety reasons. My question is: why is this home, this new facility, brand new, the first in 22 years, not receiving operating funding?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

To Minister Sawhney. There's about a minute left.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Well, Madam Chair, there are a couple of things that I do agree with with the member. First, we are going to be seeing increasing rates of domestic violence and sexual assault. I can tell you that I'm in frequent discussions with my stakeholders, shelters, and service providers across the province. We had provided some additional COVID funding to help with the services and supports during the pandemic, and I know that we're working very closely together to figure out how we can leverage what we have that's existing to ensure that we have the appropriate supports in place. It's a difficult situation, and there are no easy answers around that. But that funding has been maintained. There is also some innovation in the women's shelter space that I'd like to talk about, but we don't have time.

In regard to Jessie's House I know that I was having conversations with my executive director about . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I will let you just complete your sentence there really quickly.

Mrs. Sawhney: We are having conversations to see what we can do. There are no guarantees at this point, but obviously it's on my radar, and we'll be looking at it further.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, I will propose that we take a very quick five-minute break. It is 10:49, so I will ask that we return promptly at 10:55.

[The committee adjourned from 10:49 a.m. to 10:54 a.m.]

The Chair: Thank you, everybody.

With that, we return to the government caucus. Mr. Amery, would you like to share your time with the minister or have block time?

Mr. Amery: I'd like to share my time if that's agreeable with the minister.

The Chair: Minister?

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes. That would be great, Madam Chair.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair and once again to the minister. I wanted to remind the minister, through you, Madam Chair, that we were having a discussion about the AISH program and the budget in relation to that. The minister was answering the question about how the budget addresses caseload and cost pressures for the AISH program. I think that the minister was completing that answer, but as a reminder, if there's anything else that the minister would like to add, I would invite her to do so, through you.

In addition to that, however, I'm curious as to how much of the AISH budget goes directly to clients as compared to the costs of administering the program. The minister was discussing a little bit

about how the AISH program and the funding goes to clients, and I wanted her to elaborate on that if possible.

I'll leave it at that for now, Madam Chair, and ask the minister to answer those questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Amery.

Mrs. Sawhney.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. Over 90 per cent of the total CSS budget goes directly to Albertans who are clients of CSS programs. For AISH specifically, financial assistance grants, or money paid directly to clients, make up over 97 per cent of the total budget, or \$1.33 billion of the total AISH budget. The remaining amount goes to program planning and delivery, and that's \$31 million. Again, most of it, almost all of it, 97 per cent, goes directly to AISH clients.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair. To the minister: will AISH clients see any changes to their benefits as a result of Budget 2021 and the reviews that the ministry is doing?

Mrs. Sawhney: Madam Chair, no. There will be no changes to core benefit rates or types of benefits offered as a result of this budget. Again, the budget we have right now is the highest it's ever been historically for AISH. I know how important these benefits are to Albertans who rely on them to meet their daily needs and to live independently. Of course, we have to make sure that these supports are delivered responsibly and efficiently to vulnerable Albertans.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

To Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you once again, Madam Chair and to the minister. I wanted to turn the minister's attention now to talk about the pandemic response. I know that that has had an impact on a number of government departments. I am certain that it would have similar impact to Community and Social Services. Now, page 21 of the business plan talks about pandemic responses. We all understand and know that this government had to make quick adaptations to support Albertans in a very short period of time, and decisions were made very quickly. To the minister: is there an expectation that the Community and Social Services department will take on additional pandemic-related expenses or costs in 2021, and if so, through you, Madam Chair, could the minister please point that out to this committee?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Amery.

To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. Our community partners and civil society organizations are continuing to use the current pandemic funding that we had provided earlier to maintain necessary supports for vulnerable Albertans. What that means is that no additional funding will be required at this time. It was all fully allocated, and our community partners still have the resources to help out.

I do want to take this opportunity to thank partners and organizations for the tremendous work that they've done in helping people get through this pandemic and are continuing to do. My commitment is to continue to engage and listen to our partners to make sure that we are really understanding what their continued

challenges are and to also ensure that we are responding to those challenges.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Minister.

Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you once again, Madam Chair. Two follow-up questions to that. Number 1, to the minister: what effect did the pandemic have on the ministry's finances this year? Number 2: page 19 of the business plan says that the ministry continues to review all of its programs. Which reviews, if any, has the pandemic impacted, and if so, are there any changes to any of the programs currently being considered?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Amery.

To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. Alberta's government provided, as I've mentioned several times, additional funding to our community partners and civil society organizations to ensure that they had the resources available to respond to the pandemic. These organizations still have that funding, and they're continuing to use it to provide these uninterrupted critical services. Current indications are that this funding will be sufficient for this budget year. If we find ourselves in a situation where that is not the case, then we will ensure that more funding is available, but at this point our forecasts indicate that we're good and no more funding is required. We'll continue to monitor the needs and, as I mentioned, look at additional funding in the future.

11:00

In regard to the review, let me reiterate once again that Budget 2021 maintains the funding to provide social services to help Albertans by supporting their lives and livelihoods. We are going to continue looking at all programs to ensure that we can find better ways to deliver those services and to also reduce red tape where required. I'll just end by saying that any potential changes to increase efficiency and improve services will be communicated clearly in advance.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

To Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair. At this point I would like to cede my time to another one of my colleagues. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I believe, Mr. Gotfried, I see you on the screen. The floor is yours.

Mr. Gotfried: Yes. Good morning. Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you, I'd like to thank the minister and her staff for joining our committee today and for answering our very detailed questions on the good work being undertaken during very difficult times by her department.

Madam Chair, page 19 of the business plan talks about the importance of partnerships with civil society. I reflected back on the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society and some of the incredible leaders you've got on that group, from Wayne Chiu, who is known for the Trico Charitable Foundation and the work he's done on social enterprise; Hyder Hassan with Immigrant Services Calgary, representing, you know, one of the great immigrant-serving agencies in Calgary along with Calgary Catholic and the Centre for Newcomers and many, many more; James McAra from the Calgary Food Bank; there are also other food banks, veterans' food banks; David Mitchell, who is the past president of the Calgary Chamber of Volunteer Organizations; and

representatives from Boys & Girls Club Big Brothers Big Sisters; and really so many other incredible organizations that we see doing great work, certainly in Calgary, and I know there are very similar and parallel organizations in Edmonton as well.

Minister, through the chair, can you explain the focus on working so closely with civil society, how civil society played such a role in supporting Albertans during this very challenging pandemic? What role did those organizations that you've been working with in civil society play in supporting vulnerable Albertans during this very difficult time?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gotfried. I will highlight that you forgot to mention one of my favourite members of the council, which is a woman by the name of Michele Taylor, who hails from my riding and represents Waypoints, one of our fantastic shelters in northern Alberta, so our charity group does have people outside of Edmonton and Calgary, which I think is fantastic.

To the minister.

Mr. Gotfried: Apologies. I should have asked if we could go back and forth with the minister if that's fine with her.

The Chair: Yes. Minister?

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes, Madam Chair, that would be great. Thank you, through the chair, to MLA Gotfried for this question. I'm very proud of the role of the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society. Of course, you've listed off the names of many distinguished members of that council, and they have done some incredible work. They came together very quickly right after the pandemic was announced, at the advent of it, and very quickly we had some conversations about needing this council to talk about what we needed to do to get through the pandemic and also what recovery could potentially look like.

Now, civil society, just to go back and define it, includes Alberta's not-for-profit sector and charitable, voluntary, and social enterprise sectors. Alberta has more than 26,000 nonprofit organizations that employ more than 280,000 Albertans, so the sector is quite large. I can tell you that some of the initial work that they did was to do engagement throughout the province with the sector, the civil society . . .

The Chair: Minister, I'll let you very quickly finish your sentence.

Mrs. Sawhney: . . . to ask about how we can meet some of the social issues that we're seeing today as a result of the pandemic.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we move back to the ND caucus and Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I appreciate hearing a little bit more about the Premier's new civil society fund. I have no doubt that there are some outstanding Albertans on that committee. I have no doubt whatsoever. I actually recognize quite a few names. My question about that was – and the minister did not provide an answer to us earlier, Madam Chair, so through you to the minister again: were there no faith leaders in Alberta that could provide a more local perspective for the Premier through the minister using this particular vehicle? Now, you know, I understand that there's a long history with this particular faith leader, and this has nothing to do with the person's experience. It's simply about faith leaders in Alberta. I won't even comment about the different blog posts from this particular member. They're quite interesting, from Rush Limbaugh to all kinds of things.

Moving on, I'm going to talk about assured income for the severely handicapped, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms Renaud, are you planning to do block time or go back and forth?

Ms Renaud: Oh, no. We can share if you like or block. It's up to you, Minister.

The Chair: Minister?

Mrs. Sawhney: Madam Chair?

The Chair: It's up to you guys.

Mrs. Sawhney: Fine. That would be great. We can share time.

Ms Renaud: That'd be great. Thank you.

Excellent. Thank you. Going back to AISH, I think that I've established that the poverty line for a family of one – this is established by CRA, Madam Chair – is \$2,160 per month, so that's almost \$26,000 a year. Now, let's be clear. Maximum AISH benefits are \$1,685 a month, or \$20,000 per year. Now, the minister has said repeatedly here this morning that core benefits have not been cut in income support and AISH. That is incorrect. Benefits were deindexed at the very beginning of this government's term. That means that as of today benefits are significantly lower than they would have been had that legislation not been changed. I just wanted to provide that clarification.

My question to the minister, through you, is: on April 23, 2020, the minister signed Ministerial Order 2020-016, which gave her officials the power to claw back portions of the Canada emergency response benefit – I'm not talking about CRB, only CERB – received by AISH recipients or members of their extended families. That means a spouse or partner. My question to the minister, through you, Madam Chair, is: what is the total reduction in AISH expense for 2021 related to this ministerial order, and what is the projected reduction in AISH expenses during the budget year '21-22 as a result of the ministerial order? Again, I am not referring to CRB. That was a separate ministerial order.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

To Minister Sawhney.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. In regard to one of the members of council who – and we're talking about Father de Souza here, who doesn't reside in Alberta. I think I would hesitate to pigeonhole him as just a faith leader. He's so much more than that. He has so much more experience and background, and he's a valued member of the council. I would also like to point out that there is precedent for individuals who don't reside in Alberta to be on other panels and committees. I know that the PDD review panel, which was put together by the prior government, had somebody from out of province as a member of that panel because of the expertise and the experience that they brought. Again, I'll reiterate that all members of the council are valued.

In regard to the policy for CERB, yes, I did sign that ministerial order. Regular AISH policy dictates that employment income is deducted dollar for dollar when it is received by AISH recipients, but I knew that that wasn't the right thing to do as a result of this pandemic, so I had implemented a policy where \$300 would be exempt from any of the CERB payments that came in and anything thereafter would be clawed back at a rate of 25 per cent. The ultimate impact of that policy was to ensure that AISH recipients had more than \$2,000. That's what Albertans who are not on AISH

or any other social assistance programs were getting, but with this ministerial order a single person on AISH would be getting about \$2,300 and a family would be getting more than that. That's in regard to CERB. CRB is fully exempt up until the end of this month, so that should be helpful to all AISH recipients as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Ms Renaud.

I will note, Ms Renaud, the minister has not interrupted you while you've been asking questions, so I would just ask that you . . .

Ms Renaud: Yeah. I know it works that way.

Madam Chair, through you to the minister, this is to focus her attention on my actual question, which was about: what is the projected reduction in AISH expense during budget year '21-22? I specifically said, as you will recall, at the beginning of my comments, that I am not talking about the ministerial order that talked about CRB. I'm looking at CERB. What will the reduction be as a result? The minister used the phrase "claw back." I did not. I would like to know what is the projected amount that – well, first of all, what was the amount that was clawed back in the previous budget that was used for a comparable, and what is the target going forward? What is that amount?

11:10

Finally, Madam Chair, just to add on to that question, if the minister could speak to the fact – well, we've already established that people live in grinding poverty. They're well under any measure of poverty. Not only has this government not indexed benefits, but there's actually a mechanism that allows them to penalize people who are actually married to or living with someone who experienced an increase in their wages or their earnings. Are there any plans, any plans whatsoever, to address poverty for people that rely on community and social services, whether it's through income support or AISH, any measures at all, any steps being planned at all, to address the grinding poverty of Albertans that rely on these programs?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

To Minister Sawhney.

Mrs. Sawhney: Madam Chair, I'll answer the latter question first. In regard to policies related to spouses, this has been in place for some time, and it was also in place with the prior government. Certainly, that choice was not made to change that policy at that time. If it was something that mattered to the extent that it has to this member, you know, that would have been a time to really advocate for that change. I'm not saying that it's not a change that has merit – it potentially does – but at this point I'm not making any changes to the AISH program. In fact, I will be making some more announcements about AISH and maintaining eligibility and financial rates, which I've already said. I'll have more to share about that in the future. These rates, again, were also pre-existing just two years back. Certainly, there would have been an opportunity at that point, if there was a deep desire, to increase them further than what they are right now.

I do want to say that the CRB and CERB policy that I have signed off on should help AISH recipients and income support recipients in terms of having additional resources to help them during this time, during the pandemic. That was designed for that particular reason.

In terms of savings the member has alluded to clawbacks, but anything that is not paid out in benefits just goes back into the AISH budget. There are no savings, no cuts. Certainly, with CERB there are some reductions in benefits that are given to AISH clients. All that

money goes directly back into the budget to serve AISH clients, at the end of the day. I'm not sure exactly what number is being requested, but while we're talking about numbers, I just want to make a small correction. I had made an error when I had supplied the forecast value for expected to work. I had supplied it at 28,000. That was incorrect. I was looking – sorry. That was a forecast. The actual estimate caseload number is 36,000. I just wanted to correct that error.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

To Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Can I get a time check, please?

The Chair: One minute.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thank you very much.

Minister, I'm wondering if you can tell me – again, the business plan is kind of light on details. I'm wondering if you could tell me: how many AISH appeal hearings were completed in the time frame covering Budget '20-21, how many decisions were overturned, and what was the average time between filing an appeal and a hearing? Using these data that your ministry should have, how many appeal hearings is the ministry preparing or budgeting for in budget '21-22? Obviously, there are likely to be more appeals requested, so will there be any additional human resources added? Will there be any changes to adjudication in any way? Now, obviously, there are a lot of people that were impacted by both CERB and CRB, possibly even EI with their spouse or partner, so I'm wondering if you could address that. I think we all know that the Auditor General did pay specific attention to appeals and timelines, so I'm wondering if you could speak to that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud. Perhaps we can get to that in the subsequent round of questions.

I believe we have Mr. Gotfried. Do the member and the minister wish to share their time?

Mr. Gotfried: Yes, please, Madam Chair.

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Fantastic.

Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Perfect. Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, I just wanted to continue my questions with respect to the civil society organizations. It sounds from your previous answer that a key role is played by civil society organizations, particularly during these difficult times of the pandemic. But what I'm more interested in is: once we're through this, what is the learning and the long-term support for communities that you see being really envisioned through your department in partnership with those, and how will you support them financially in doing so?

The Chair: Thank you.

And to the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. This is one of the reasons why we have the civil society fund for \$7 million. As I had mentioned earlier, that fund is to address some of the key priorities that were articulated by the Premier's council on civil society. They had talked about enhancing the infrastructure and the collaboration amongst civil society groups across the province. The other priority was to ensure that we were looking at organizations who had social enterprises that would generate new revenue streams for organizations.

Research and development are very important, too, because there's a plethora of data that's available out there that has never been accessed to look at patterns and translate it into information to see how we can do better within the not-for-profit sector. Also, capacity building within organizations is very important. A lot of organizations are very much reliant on government funding and have never thought about: well, how do we fund raise, again, how do we look at social enterprises, and how do we look at other ways to apply for grants?

This is work that we are doing right now with that \$7 million fund, to provide it as one-time funding to organizations to help them develop themselves within one of those priority areas. Of course, this work is going to be ongoing. We know that the sector is having a difficult time, and we have to be creative and innovative and really work together closely.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

To Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I'm very interested in the civil society fund. If I'm not mistaken, there was \$20 million originally put into that and, I think, \$7 million spent in the last fiscal year. I'm interested in the partnerships that will come from that and, again, the leveraging of some government investment. My question to you is: is the fund and your plans for it on schedule, or has it been really slowed down by the pandemic in terms of being able to invest in the civil society sectors in the province? What should we expect to see as deliverables in the next fiscal year in terms of strengthening those partnerships, your partnering and working with those civil society organizations to really create that sort of grassroots, ground-level, in the community support that we know are so important?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gotfried.

Mrs. Sawhney: Madam Chair, the pandemic, obviously, upturned many things that we were planning to do last fall, but I am grateful that we got the council together very quickly. The fund was announced in December, and we had the closing date in January, so it came together very, very quickly because I wanted to make sure that we had this work done before the end of fiscal. We're evaluating all of those grant applications right now, and we should be able to make some announcement sometime soon. We know that we have to get some decisions made within the coming weeks. Once we announce those recipients, it will give everyone a better idea of what we're investing in and what we expect to see.

Of course, this fund is in place for this fiscal year and for the next, and it should be a little bit more than \$20 million in total. Ultimately, what we hope to see is just that greater collaboration and the priorities that I had mentioned earlier. We actually hope to see those materialize, particularly as we're talking about system infrastructure.

Now, it's not just funding. Like, we always talk about money and what money can do. There's so much more beyond that, and we've seen that. Let me just give you an example of what the women's shelters have been doing, particularly in Calgary. They were given some money a couple of years ago, not much, you know, less than \$100,000, and they used those funds to create an app. It's called Shelterlink, and they've partnered up with Amazon. What this app allows them to do is that shelters within Calgary – and they're going to expand it – can connect with one another to determine what kind of capacity is existing and what kind of wait-lists there potentially might be. There are usually not too many wait-lists. There's so much functionality in regard to this app. It was small dollars, but it creates tremendous value.

11:20

These are the kind of partnerships that we need to leverage. It goes beyond money. It's about just taking that next step and making those connections, so I envision this kind of innovation and partnership to sprout up much more frequently in the coming years. That's what my expectation is with the civil society fund.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you for that. Certainly, I've had the opportunity to be involved with social enterprise in the past. It's another great tool for sustainability in the civil society and not-for-profit sector. Many people don't know that actually Alberta hosted the Social Enterprise World Forum back in 2013, the first time it was held in Canada, so there's a lot of leadership that I'm very proud of in our province.

Through the chair to the minister, again, we've seen a lot of stories in the media about the challenges people facing homelessness have had during the pandemic. There is a budget forecast for homeless shelters. It's relatively flat, so I'm wondering how the government plans to support Albertans experiencing at-risk situations or homelessness in the coming days. Certainly, we're not facing quite as cold weather, thankfully, but just how are we going to ensure that we have those supports during these very difficult times, where we may see an increased incidence of people at risk of homelessness or in homelessness itself?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair, and I really appreciate this question because this is also an area that I'm quite passionate about. We've extended a lot of time and effort in making sure that vulnerable Albertans who are experiencing homelessness were taken care of, particularly during the pandemic and even as we speak right now. I know that at the outset there was a lot of fear and anxiety, even within myself, about what the impact would be in terms of the individuals who were in homeless shelters and experiencing homelessness. How were they going to be impacted with the infection? I'm proud to say that we've actually done really well in this regard. Since the beginning of the pandemic, departmental staff, upon my direction – and they actually helped me quite a bit, too. They assumed a very critical provincial co-ordination function with shelters and community-based organizations, with municipalities, Alberta Health, and Alberta Health Services to make sure that both clients and shelter operators were supported.

In addition to that co-ordinating function, what we have seen was a great level of motivation of all of our partners to connect individuals to housing. In fact, since the start of the pandemic we've connected more than 2,000 individuals to housing, and that is phenomenal work. I'm very proud of the work, and I have to give a shout-out to my staff and ministry as well for really focusing in and really rising to the occasion.

We had also provided an additional \$48 million in funding to community partners. I had announced that last August, and that's fully allocated to our community partners, so they have those dollars in place to get them through Budget 2021. We had also provided \$4.4 million in a wage top-up for our critical service workers in our shelters and outreach programs.

Just to summarize my answer to that question, again, we have seen the sector come together in a remarkable fashion and really

synergize and leverage on their existing supports, because the motivation was so great to get people into housing. That is the solution. Homeless shelters are a temporary place where people can be triaged so they can get into housing with supports if required.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Sawhney.

Mr. Gotfried, there are about 30 seconds remaining.

Mr. Gotfried: Maybe just a quick follow-up. Again, the budget on this item is flat in terms of supports. Again, you mentioned that a lot of it will be about transitional housing and supports there as well. I know you probably won't have time to answer it, but just thank you for highlighting that and providing some insights as we go forward with respect to how you see that transition from homelessness to shelters to housing and support. Thank you for that information.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, we move to our next round from the Official Opposition and Ms Renaud. Would you like to go back and forth?

Ms Renaud: Sure.

The Chair: Minister?

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes.

The Chair: All right. Ms Renaud, the floor is yours.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. Just a quick tidy-up of some of the other questions and comments. I appreciate the answers, Madam Chair, through you. The first thing is that the minister mentioned an app that was linking shelter staff, which is awesome. That's great news. I would just like to add that there's a very easy way to add 35 beds permanently, and that would be by funding operations of Jessie's House.

Also, the minister mentioned stats on shelters in terms of infections. I think we can all agree that we were all fairly worried about this, but this leads me to my point and the question I asked earlier. I do know the information is available. It is part of the regular paperwork for Albertans with disabilities who are funded by PDD, some of whom live in communal living. What are the infections, hospitalizations, and deaths of those people?

Finally, just quickly, Member Gotfried talked a little bit about the Premier's civil society fund. That's great. I would also again like to ask my question, that was not answered, about why there have been no disclosures under the Public Sector Compensation Transparency Act. It's been about two years, and I could not locate any disclosures. That would be most helpful. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to move on to the family violence death review. For the minister, my question is: the 2019-20 annual report of the Family Violence Death Review Committee was quietly posted to the website in January 2021. This report failed to respond to the two recommendations from the previous report, the 2019 case review report, as you know. The report also fails to discuss forthcoming case reviews, which is really significant. This is important because the Family Violence Death Review Committee only makes recommendations on case reviews, and the minister must respond to these recommendations.

Mr. Neudorf: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Point of order. Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you. Under Standing Order 23(b), speaking to a question other than the matter under discussion. Though this is a very important review, I don't see where it is in the estimates or budgets or business plan. If it is, I would just ask that it would be drawn back to that, but I fail to see the relevance at this time. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Chair. It's unfortunate that this member is wasting time due to his unfamiliarity with what is in the budget. This committee that Member Renaud is speaking of is directly contained in the budget. Therefore, this is not a point of order, and I would appreciate it if my colleague would be able to do her work.

The Chair: While I appreciate the arguments on both sides, I would just remind all members to ensure that all of their questions do relate to the budget and that they get to that early on in the question to alleviate any clarity.

Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I think the minister can provide some clarity to her colleagues that, yes, it is part of the CSS ministry. This report . . .

The Chair: Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Yes, Madam Chair. Through you, yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Renaud: The report also fails to discuss forthcoming case reviews, and this is important because this committee only makes recommendations on case reviews, and the minister must respond to these recommendations. So my question: how many cases will be reviewed in this fiscal year in this budget, and will the minister respond to the 2019 recommendations?

Let me link why this work and responding to the recommendations are so important, because we see it translate into budget estimates. For example, the Family Violence Death Review Committee recommended the widespread implementation of integrated family violence courts. The UCP cut unified family court. As you can see, the recommendations that come from this committee that is funded in your ministry – it is essential that you respond to these recommendations. To the minister, through you, Madam Chair: what is the plan on responding to old recommendations, and how many cases will be reviewed in this fiscal year?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm just going to respond to the earlier question around the Premier's council and public disclosure. The council was created in the 2019 fiscal year, and the first meeting wasn't held until 2020. The council wouldn't be expected to post compensation until June 2021. That's January 1 to December 31, 2020. That is the answer in regard to the public disclosure.

11:30

The Family Violence Death Review Committee obviously is a very important committee that does just great work, and they've provided a series of recommendations to government. I have seen

them. Again, this is another one of those situations where there is a lot of complexity around the cases themselves and even in terms of taking those recommendations and translating them into policy. It's not easy to do. It's something that requires a lot of thought, and it requires stakeholder engagement as well.

Currently we are short of members on this committee, and we are actively recruiting to get new members on to ensure that they can continue doing the fulsome work that they're doing. But I do hear what Ms Renaud is saying about the recommendations in this report and taking a closer look at them. I will work with the committee, once they have a full complement of individuals, to have more discussions around recommendations and what the path forward looks like in terms of translating them into policy. Complex, not easy but certainly very worth while looking into and pursuing to the best of our ability.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
To Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. To the minister, through you: I didn't hear an answer to my question. The question is: how many cases will be reviewed in this fiscal year, and will the minister respond to 2019 recommendations? I understand that there are likely some vacancies on this particular committee, as the minister said. My question isn't about that. My question is: how many cases will be reviewed, because that's where the recommendations come from, and will the minister respond to the outstanding recommendations?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.
To Minister Sawhney.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. This year there will be nine cases that will be reviewed.

In terms of my response to the recommendations I am going to say that I'm not a hundred per cent sure what my response will be. Certainly, I will be communicating that once I make my decision as to how to respond. I know that's not the answer that the member is looking for, but that's the best that I can do at this time. I want to spend some more time talking to members of the committee and just talking about the report and the recommendations and talk to some of my stakeholders and partners as well just to get a deeper understanding of: what is going to come out of these recommendations, practically speaking? What can we do? I don't want to just give a very flippant or knee-jerk response to the recommendations. I want to take some time. I think it's important, and that's also just the way I roll with these things. If I feel I need to respond, I definitely will, but I haven't made that decision as of yet.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Sawhney.
To Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Chair. I'm going to switch gears a little bit. I'd like to talk about service dogs. I would like to know, through you, Madam Chair, to the minister: what is the total amount out of this particular budget, and which budget estimate line item is it coming out of? What is the total amount that this ministry is spending or targets to spend on all of the work related to service dogs in Alberta, and what is the total number of FTEs in this department?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.
To Minister Sawhney for a reply.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. The budget for service dogs is in the form of grants and is at \$300,000, and that hasn't changed. That's out of element 4.5, provincial disability supports initiatives. I do believe that there are 1.5 FTEs associated with service dogs.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
With that, we will go to Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that answer. So there was \$300,000 that came out of line 4.5 to fund service dogs. Now, let me be clear. My understanding, based on the documents that I've read – if I'm wrong, I would happily be corrected – is that this was used to fund the portion of the self-trained assessments. If I'm understanding correctly, the 1.5 FTEs and the grants were to essentially enable more service dog teams to be present in Alberta, recognizing that many dogs are trained by their own owners. So this was about funding that process. I understand that part.

I don't understand where the other grants go. Now, I've asked questions before, but what is the total number increase in terms of service dog teams in the last year, and what do you project this year? The numbers I've received, Madam Chair, don't tend to match . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud. That concludes that block.
Now we move on to a government block, with Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you so much, Madam Chair. So honoured to have this opportunity.
I see that my camera is not on. Is that working now?

The Chair: We don't see you.

Ms Lovely: Private view. Okay.

The Chair: Would you wish to share your time with the minister?

Ms Lovely: Sure, if the minister is open to that.
There. I think I've got it working now.

The Chair: Yes. We can now see you.

Ms Lovely: Madam Chair, it would just be the minister's preference.

Mrs. Sawhney: That would be lovely.

Ms Lovely: Okay. Well, thank you so much, Madam Chair. I just wanted to acknowledge that earlier the minister said that everyone has a chance to be valued, and I think that's such an important statement. In fact, I wanted to pause and just comment on a recognition event that the minister had done in Camrose, where we were to acknowledge a number of people throughout the community for some great work that they had done, and as recently as last week they were still talking about it. It's still abuzz in the community, and I'm hoping that we can plan another one for the future. The minister is known for having compassion and being very supportive in my Camrose constituency, so I just, first of all, wanted to acknowledge that. Thank you.

Madam Chair, through you to the minister, I'm wondering about the layout of the supports for AISH and federal supports, if that's something you could review for clarity, a layout of all these supports for AISH and federal supports, so that if somebody is not

clear on what AISH provides, they could get a better understanding of how that program works, just all of these supports.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Lovely.
To Minister Sawhney.

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. Let's start with AISH. It's the assured income for the severely handicapped; that's what it stands for. This program is available to individuals who meet certain eligibility criteria. The first criteria is financial criteria, so anybody who has assets that are less than \$100,000 – and there are other elements related to that – would be financially eligible. Generally speaking, most people have far less than \$100,000. These are individuals who are very, very close to the poverty line.

The second aspect of eligibility has to do with medical eligibility, and that requires having a doctor, a physician, fill out quite an extensive form with all kinds of supporting documents that indicate that the individual has a permanent and severe disability that impairs them from earning a livelihood.

Now, once these two eligibility requirements are met, that person would be eligible for AISH. There is quite a process involved. These documents do have to be submitted to an AISH adjudicator, who evaluates the documents to ensure that they meet all the requirements and then takes the next steps forward for either approving or disapproving eligibility. That's the AISH program. We are expecting to have about 71,000 clients in Budget 2021 on the AISH caseload.

Benefits or other programs within the ministry. There is the income support program, which we had talked about at length today. I think the other question that MLA Lovely had asked was about some of the federal supports that are available right now. Certainly, CRB is available right now federally, and I think that goes up until September, unless it's increased, up to 38 weeks. There are all kinds of other supports that are available that, you know, I can talk about further, but I'm sure MLA Lovely has some more questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
To MLA Lovely. Ms Lovely, you're muted.

11:40

Ms Lovely: Sorry. Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

Page 18 of the government strategic plan states that these changes will promote Albertans' participation in the province's economic recovery. Madam Chair, through you to the minister, can you tell me what these changes do and what changes clients can expect to see in the future?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Madam Chair, I really do appreciate this question, because we do know that Alberta's economic recovery depends on the ability of all Albertans to meet their basic needs and to live independently and also to find employment. We know that our disability community is particularly impacted in a negative fashion in terms of having very, very high unemployment rates. I've already alluded to the fact that there will be investments and that there have been investments in the ministry to help create more opportunities for employment within the disability community.

For many Albertans, the AISH and income support programs help achieve goals of finding employment and participating in their community so that we are achieving that strategic mandate of inclusion in addition to participation and so that they can participate to the best of their abilities. Making all of these programs easier to

navigate and providing our clients with up-to-date and accurate information on their files will help them to connect to supports and to make sure that they're getting all the resources that they need. Of course, there is going to be a concerted effort on caseworkers working with clients to make sure that they are connected to more information to help them find and maintain employment.

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

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Madam Chair. How much funding is required to implement these changes, how else is the ministry working to streamline program delivery and increase efficiencies, how will the government help individuals who are unable to use technology to apply for and manage their benefits, and how will they receive the assistance they need?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Lovely.
To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Madam Chair, really good questions. Budget 2021 allocates about \$2 million in this fiscal year through Service Alberta, and additional funding will be requested in future years to complete upgrades to the system to make it easier for applicants to apply.

Some recent changes to simplify the application process have already reduced the waiting period between applying for and receiving benefits by about seven weeks, so that is excellent work. The new online application process will continue to make sure that the whole AISH application process is more user friendly.

For individuals who are not comfortable or unable to access the online services, they will still be able to make visits to Alberta Supports offices, when they're open, in person. Of course, these government offices are currently closed because of COVID-19, but services continue to be available by phone.

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

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister. We hear from many sources that incidents of domestic violence have risen during the pandemic. We can anticipate that many of these are due to isolation, job loss or insecurity, children being out of school earlier in the pandemic, with fewer opportunities for people outside of the family to notice signs of abuse. How does Budget 2021 support Albertans experiencing or at risk of domestic violence or sexual assault?

With regard to core funding for women's shelters, it hasn't increased in several years. How will the government make sure Albertans fleeing domestic violence have access to services and supports?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you once again, MLA Lovely. You're right. We've all heard this, that domestic violence is increasing during this very challenging time, and I've had many conversations with women's shelters across the province and other stakeholders about this.

In fact, today there is an impact summit that's happening, even as we speak, where some bright minds and experts across the province are going to be talking about these very issues. We have increasing rates, and what are we going to do about it? And not just government. Government has a role – obviously, we have to

provide funding and ensure that those resources are available – but what about some of our civil society partners? They're talking today about best practices: what has worked, what do we anticipate seeing, and how do we leverage and co-ordinate with one another to meet these rising social issues that we're seeing?

I'm going to take a moment to commend all of our shelter operators across the province for all of the work that they've done in terms of really understanding that it was very important to meet the moment. They have met the moment, and they are continuing to do that, so I do want to take the opportunity to express my profound gratitude.

The Chair: Minister, I will let you finish that sentence because it sounded like a fantastic one.

Mrs. Sawhney: We introduced the disclosure to prevent domestic violence. We introduced that in 2019. We have operationalized the regulations, and we will be announcing that soon. That should prevent domestic violence as well.

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

Now we're back to the opposition caucus, and I believe Ms Renaud is up. Would you wish to share your time with the minister?

Ms Renaud: Sure. I'm fine with that.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, what is the total number of self-trained service dogs that were assessed by the GOA in 2020? What are the targets for 2021? Does the ministry fund for-profit companies that actually turn around and charge Albertans for the dogs, for training, certification, all of that? There's a whole process – I'm sure you realize that – and they can end up charging up to, like, \$45,000 per dog. Does the ministry fund those companies, and can you guarantee Albertans that no ministry staff that would be awarding any of these grants would have a relationship with any of these for-profit companies? That is my question around service dogs.

Then I'm just going to pivot a little bit. Just a little bit of a summary, Madam Chair. I know that I went very quickly with some of the questions. I realize that this is the last block, so I'm just going to close up a little bit. I just want to say that I'm incredibly concerned that through all of the dialogue this morning, all of the questions and answers, I've heard no statement of intention, metric, or indication in any way of efforts to reduce poverty, no metrics that will measure that work, no measures that will measure the work or investment to end homelessness, no real jobs plan about getting the tens of thousands of people on income support back to work, and all of that amidst a pandemic and, when I look at these budget documents, a disturbing lack of transparency and detail.

I want to go back to my main questions, that I still have not heard answers to – forgive me, to the minister, through you, if she has answered and I've missed those; I apologize – around what specifically is the ministry going to do to address the thousands and thousands of people that are on wait-lists for services this year: FSCD, family support for children with disabilities; and PDD, adults, persons with developmental disabilities? There are thousands, close to 6,000, when you combine. What specifically is the jobs plan? Obviously, there's mention of or plans to have a reduction in the number of people that require income support. What is that jobs plan? As you know, Madam Chair, I'm sure, through you to the minister, she's well aware that these are folks with significant barriers, so they are going to require some investment.

Finally, I would like to say that, you know, I hope that going forward – I know that there has been some work in other committees, Madam Chair. I think it's incredibly important to people that are deaf, that have hearing impairments, that are blind, that have visual impairments. We have not done a good job of making this meeting accessible. I think we can do far better. I think that this ministry perhaps can take a lead in looking at what it is that we can do to ensure that every single Albertan, whether it's through appropriate captioning or interpreters or plain language documents that are easy to follow – I think you would agree that there are thousands of Albertans that could benefit from that. If we could hear from the minister about: what can we do going forward, and what metrics will be used to measure that progress?

I hope that the minister will use the rest of this time to try to answer the many unanswered questions that remain from this morning. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

To Minister Sawhney.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. How much time do I have?

The Chair: There are six minutes and 23 seconds remaining in this block.

11:50

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. I'm going to try to use this time very efficiently. In regard to service dogs, there were three organizations that received grants from the ministry. They were Aspen Service Dogs, Canadian Canine Training, Red Dog Training Solutions. If you sum up the grants given to all of these organizations, they exceed \$300,000. I know there were a lot of other questions around service dogs, and in the interests of time I will provide a written response. If the member wants to submit her questions in writing, we will respond in writing.

Okay. Now, in regard to the jobs plan we are investing more in career and employment supports, \$3.6 million, because there is a recognition that we just need to do more, particularly because of the extremely high unemployment rates as a result of this pandemic. I know that when it comes to our income support program, we are going to be focused more concertedly on case management to make sure that case managers are working on connecting with their clients on a more frequent basis and really looking at developing the service plans together, collaboratively, so that they can have more momentum in that effort to connect people to the labour force.

We're also working with Labour and Immigration. There are going to be some federal dollars that will be coming soon, and I know that the minister will have more to say about that in the future. Of course, Advanced Education continues to be a significant partner when we're talking about jobs. So there is a lot to say about that, but I've said some of it already. We've already talked about the platform commitments and investments as they pertain to persons with disabilities.

In regard to homelessness and ending homelessness, I know that we've had many conversations about this. I have said it in the past, that I don't think it's aspirational to say that we want to end homelessness. First, I'm very happy that we received some federal dollars through the reaching home program that has reached municipalities. That will be very helpful. My department staff continue to work with community-based organizations across the province. We spend \$193 million every year on homeless and outreach support services. That investment is significant, and certainly we invested \$48 million more in the last fiscal to make

sure that we were complying with public health measures. But part of this investment is designed to connect people to housing. That's the whole housing first program that the seven cities are responsible for. So that investment and that commitment is there.

Again, I had mentioned it earlier, that since the advent of the pandemic we have connected more than 2,000 individuals to housing. That work has taken on a greater sense of urgency, and I expect that we will see those numbers increase over time. Again, we're working closely, particularly with the city of Edmonton. We have a whole table set up where we're having these conversations about: how can we, again, work together and leverage from the existing supports that are in the space? There are significant financial investments there to make sure that we're meeting the outcomes and getting people out of shelters and into housing.

The wait-lists continue to be a challenge. They were always a challenge. I know the previous government was challenged by the wait-lists. There were no solutions brought forward at that time. I say that understanding that it's not easy. It's very complex, which is why we have extensive reviews happening right now of the FSCD program and the PDD program to figure out where we can make some changes in both of these programs to relieve some dollars so that we can tackle the wait-list. The member herself had alluded to multidisciplinary panels. We're looking at things like that. We're looking at elements of programs to see: are they value-added? Can we do without them? Can we modify them, re-form them in a way that we can take some dollars out of those particular pieces and actually tackle the wait-list? I'm very motivated in doing that. I'm like a detective looking everywhere to find those additional dollars.

I am happy that my budget is what it is. It's a strong budget, especially given the fiscal environment that we're facing. The fact that we are funding increasing caseloads in all of our disability programs is something that I'm very proud of. I'm very proud of the fact that my team has helped me significantly to ensure that we can build this robust budget together. Through this next year the effort will be on finding additional ways to get resources to look at those wait-lists.

The Chair: Minister, that is five minutes, which is the maximum speaking time during this block.

Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I have a question that I've attempted to ask multiple ways that I've not received a clear answer on. Maybe the ministry can agree to table documents. I'm not sure. I would like to know: what is the total reduction in expense for last year and projected for this year in income support and AISH related to the individual receiving the benefit or their spouse or partner? What is the reduction in expense because of federal emergency benefits? What is the total number?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister. You have 24 seconds remaining.

Mrs. Sawhney: Yes. I know, Madam Chair, that the member has asked this question, and I don't have a number that I can provide. I can tell you that any savings, if you want to call them that, have been put back into the budget.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Minister.

With that, we move on to the final block for today and Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the time to address this committee. I would like to just make one comment on communications. The provision of audio and visual interpretation to all members is actually not a function of this ministry, but it's a function of the LAO, the Legislative . . .

Ms Renaud: Point of order.

The Chair: Point of order. Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. You didn't really reference anything in the standing orders, and I don't think explaining to the chair the role of committee is really appropriate for this particular meeting.

Thank you.

The Chair: What part of the standing orders are you calling a point of order over?

Ms Renaud: I would actually – sorry, Madam Chair. I'm a little disorganized here this morning.

I would like to know, really, how this relates to the budget, so I'm looking for – 23(b), speaks to the matter other than the question under discussion, motion, or amendment. So it would be (i).

The Chair: Your point of order is under 23 which?

Ms Renaud: Under (b).

The Chair: Under 23(b).

Ms Renaud: Yes. Perhaps I wasn't clear a little earlier. You know, we're talking about budget estimates; we're not talking about the role of committee and who provides oversight to accessibility. So perhaps the member . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud.

Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's just interesting that that member brought it up several times on her time of the question, so I was just clarifying for that. I'm happy to ask further questions that do relate to the ministry given that this one clearly doesn't, even though she brought it up several times.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, Mr. Neudorf.

I believe that there has been a lot of latitude given to members on both sides, and as Mr. Neudorf has very rightly pointed out, Ms Renaud has brought up that particular fact on numerous occasions, so I do not believe that this is a point of order.

With that, I go back to Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. One of the very important parts of this ministry is how they work with the continuing of education for many of those with disabilities trying to get to university and college. Inclusion Lethbridge has just an incredible number of amazing parents and volunteers who support the advocacy of children being able to continue their education there. So this is a topic that is very dear to me and important to those in Lethbridge for the work that they do. I was hoping that the minister might be able to expand on the initiatives and steps the ministry has taken as part of key objective 2.1 in the business plan to help Albertans with disabilities achieve their postsecondary dreams and employment opportunities. And, following that, the \$2 million that is allocated for postsecondary opportunities for students with disabilities in your

business plan on page 22: could the minister please explain, through the chair, what these funds will be used for and the programs that will be available to these students?

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, you have 30 seconds for a reply.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Chair. In this year's budget \$2 million is allocated to the government's long-running inclusive postsecondary education program. I've had the pleasure of meeting graduates from this program, and I'm a strong believer in it, and I'm really happy and grateful that we're able to invest further in this program because I know that there are lots of parents out there who

want to see their children with disabilities achieve that sense of inclusion by having access to a spot in the postsecondary . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I apologize 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 all committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on March 16, 2021, at 7 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Service Alberta.

Thank you, everybody.

This meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

