



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Justice
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 6, 2023
7 p.m.

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The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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

Participants

Ministry of Justice

Hon. Tyler Shandro, KC, Minister

Kim Goddard, Assistant Deputy Minister, Alberta Crown Prosecution Service

Brad Smith, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Services

Susanne Stushnoff, Assistant Deputy Minister, Legal Services

Alex Thompson, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategy, Support and Integrated Initiatives

Tracy Wyrstiuk, Acting Deputy Minister and Assistant Deputy Minister, Court and Justice Services

7 p.m.

Monday, March 6, 2023

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Justice
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Justice for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024.

I'd like to ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Jackie Lovely, and I am the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of the committee. We will start, beginning to my right.

Mr. Smith: Good evening, everybody. Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon.

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

Mr. Yaseen: Good evening, Muhammad Yaseen, Calgary-North.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Good evening, Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Long: Martin Long, the MLA for West Yellowhead.

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

Mr. Shandro: Madam Chair, you want me, then, to introduce at this time? Okay.

First of all, Madam Chair, we have the acting deputy minister and assistant deputy minister for court and justice services directly to my right; that is Tracy Wyrstiuk. We also have Brad Smith, who is the assistant deputy minister of financial services and the senior finance officer; he is directly to my left. Sue Stushnoff is the assistant deputy minister for the legal services division; she is on the far left. Alex Thompson, acting assistant deputy minister for SSII, strategy, support, and integrated initiatives, is to the far right. We also have in the gallery Kim Goddard. Kim is the assistant deputy minister of the Alberta Crown prosecution service. We also have the executive director of financial services – another Brad – Brad Wells.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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

Mr. Dach: Lorne Dach, MLA for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Barnes: Good evening, Drew Barnes, MLA, Cypress-Medicine Hat.

The Chair: All right. I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Member Loyola as deputy chair for hon. Ms Sigurdson.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Alberta Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely, if there are any, are encouraged to turn your cameras on while speaking and to mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on the speakers list are

asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should signal to the chair.

I see that Tanya Fir has joined us online. Welcome, Member. Let's pause for a moment and have you introduce yourself.

Ms Fir: Good evening. Tanya Fir, MLA for Calgary-Peigan. Can you hear me, Chair?

The Chair: Yes, we can. Thank you, Member.

Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of three hours has been scheduled for consideration of estimates for the Ministry of Justice. 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 the minister's 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 speaking times may be combined between the member and the minister.

After this, speaking times will follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and the government caucus. The member and the minister may each speak once for a maximum of five minutes, or these times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or rotation, please 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. Does anyone oppose having a break? Okay. Hearing none, we'll proceed with the break.

Ministry officials may be present and, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commencing.

Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

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

Any written material provided in response to questions raised by 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 16, 2023. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk with 20 copies. An electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to committee members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, please, including

instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Justice to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, Minister.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll begin by saying that this ministry's mandate is clear and focused. It aims to ensure that all Albertans have access to a fair, efficient, and innovative justice system, and we work alongside partners in law enforcement, in family justice, the judiciary, and many other groups. Although the system is multifaceted, it's well supported, and the investments for this year will make a difference in the lives of many Albertans.

The consolidated budget for the Ministry of Justice for Budget '23 is \$658.5 million. This year we're making significant investments in justice. We're increasing the budget by \$152.4 million, or 30 per cent, to strengthen the overall justice system. We will do so through our continued investment to expand and modernize Alberta's court system – and that includes new online digital and court technology services – increase access to justice through additional funds for legal aid, improve services and supports to Albertans with legal family matters, and add more staff and judiciary. This means that it'll be easier and faster for Albertans as well as the legal community, police, and others to access the justice system any time, anywhere. We'll also invest in infrastructure planning to new and existing buildings and provide timelier closure for grieving families.

I'd now like to take a closer look at the budgets for some of our individual divisions in the Justice ministry. The total budget for the courts and justice services division: that total budget is \$260.4 million, and that includes \$26.9 million in additional funding to increase staff and judiciary at Alberta's three independent courts, what we used to call the Provincial Court of Alberta, now the Alberta court of justice; the Court of King's Bench; and the Court of Appeal.

Over the last several years a number of factors have contributed to a significant increase in workload and case volumes for those working at the courts. Along with the growing population of the province, we've also seen an increase in law enforcement, prosecutors, and the judiciary. Courtroom time, complexity of matters, and an increase of self-represented litigants have also had an impact on workload and case volumes. This funding will address and provide solutions for these issues and many more. For example, Budget '23 provides funding for additional judicial appointments in the Provincial Court and the Court of King's Bench of Alberta as well as for an increase in the number of court clerks.

The role of the judicial clerk reflects the fair and equitable delivery of justice in Alberta, and this funding will enable us to hire over 140 court clerks in our courtrooms, process fines, and serve the public at our front counters in rural courthouses. We also have improved services and supports for families this year, which I know will make a difference to many Albertans facing the emotional stress of legal family matters; \$5 million will go towards enhancing family resolution services such as for precourt assessment, mediation, family court counsellors, and parenting intervention programs.

7:10

Whether going through the trauma of a divorce or dealing with the challenges surrounding child custody arrangements, these services will improve outcomes for and help Albertans that need support to address their legal family matters. Resolution services help mitigate backlogs in the justice system by allowing folks to resolve disputes outside the courts. On top of that, some of the

increased funding will allow for reinvestment in services such as the contact centre and to assist those experiencing family breakdown.

Justice infrastructure is also high on our priority list. We want to make sure that buildings such as the courthouses meet the needs of our communities and that their designs are functional and serve those who use them. That's why we are investing a total of \$4.8 million in capital funding for a range of studies for courthouses in Edmonton, Grande Prairie, and Sherwood Park. We're also planning for additional courtrooms at the Red Deer justice centre. A wide range of technology upgrades will also continue to modernize Alberta's justice system. This year our plan is to invest \$5.4 million in courtroom technology services for additional funding to upgrade technology in our courts, and that includes increasing the number of users who can access remote courts and increasing the capacity of the courts' hardware to support the enhanced virtual appearances.

Moving on to the legal services division, this budget is \$65.8 million, and from this amount comes \$20.2 million for more civil lawyers. These lawyers are integral to the work of government. They draft grants, they create contracts, they draft legislation, and they stand up for the government's interests in court, including defending Alberta from federal intrusion on provincial jurisdiction.

Staying with the lawyer theme, this year's budget for the ACPs, the Alberta Crown prosecution service, division is \$129.1 million. Now, when it comes to charging someone with an offence, precharge assessment prosecutors are working with law enforcement to make sure that charges are reviewed before they're laid. Budget '23 provides \$4.6 million to fund 16 more of these Crowns, whose work helps to promote better access to justice for Albertans. This province-wide implementation of the precharge assessment system along with hiring more prosecutors creates efficiencies that reduce the burden on the courts and all Albertans. These prosecutors help to ensure charges entering the criminal justice system meet the standard for prosecution. It also saves time and money for Albertans who would otherwise have to pay for counsel or use legal aid for court appearances until the file can be assessed fully by a Crown prosecutor.

The next division I'll highlight is SSII. As I said, that stands for strategy, support, and integrated initiatives, and they have a proposed budget of \$187.5 million this year. Now, as a lawyer I understand the vital role that a strong legal aid program plays in a justice system, and it's a priority for my ministry. We want to make sure that vulnerable Albertans can have access to the legal support and help that they need. To that end, a funding increase of \$40.3 million would make sure that Albertans accessing Legal Aid Alberta services would have access to a strong roster of lawyers. It would do this by ensuring that the tariff – that is the rate that roster lawyers are paid to provide legal aid services – reflects current court processes and legal practices and that remuneration and lawyer efforts are properly matched.

Supporting grieving families is also of utmost importance to our work in the Justice department. When someone loses a beloved family member or a friend, they need to focus on supporting and caring for each other. We know that continued investments are crucial to help hurting families find closure during this traumatic time in their lives, and that's why we're investing \$3.9 million in Alberta's medical examiner's office. We will bring in more medical examiners. We will bring in more state-of-the-art equipment for these pathologists and their staff. We will continue to provide high-quality services and help bring timelier closure for grieving families. On top of that, we're investing \$500,000 on a planning study for a new, modern Edmonton medical examiner's office.

At the same time, we're bringing in new court and digital services. That's going to make it easier and faster for Albertans to access the justice system any time, anywhere. To support this, the province is maintaining its \$11 million investment in Justice digital for the capital budget to help expand on existing and develop new online services. A variety of services will include virtual appearances, courtroom productivity, new digital applications, and new digital filing services. These enhancements will make the justice system more user friendly and efficient for all Albertans.

There are also ways in which we can keep Albertans safe, and this year we're continuing to do so by reducing wait times related to applications and transfers of legal firearms with a funding increase of more than \$7.4 million this year. The Chief Firearms Officer will be able to hire 40 new positions, and that means that the office will have more people here in Alberta to process more administrative tasks such as licence applications, transfers, range inspections, and authorizations to transport. Having more qualified, highly trained staff to complete these and other tasks in a timely manner will better serve law-abiding, responsible . . . [Mr. Shandro's speaking time expired]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Members, would you like to combine your time with the minister? Combined, yes?

Mr. Sabir: Yes, if it's okay with the minister.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Shandro: I'd prefer block if that's okay, Madam Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go with the minister's request. Block time, then. Okay. So we have a 60-minute block for the Official Opposition. Please proceed.

Mr. Sabir: So we are not combining time?

Mr. Shandro: Block. Same as last time. Last year I think we did block as well. Thank you.

Mr. Sabir: Okay. Well, thank you, Chair. A pleasure to be here to discuss Justice estimates, and thank you, Minister and all your staff, for being available here and for all the work you do.

As you indicated on page 86 of your business plan 2023-26, ministry business plans should be considered in conjunction with all budget documents – including the Fiscal Plan, Government Strategic Plan, and Estimates – which work together to provide a complete overview of government's commitment to responsible fiscal management.

I do have a fair bit of questions relating to all of these documents and about some of the recent and concerning developments relating to your ministry. We are not combining time, so I will try to list my questions, and I hope that I will get answers to all of them.

My first set of questions relates to the ministry's business plan. On page 85 of the business plan it states: "The Ministry of Justice helps ensure that all Albertans have access to a fair and accessible justice system where the rule of law is upheld and government undertakings are administered according to law." The question is: would you agree that a fair justice system where the rule of law is upheld is one that is free from political interference? Yes or no?

Second question. Last year it was discovered that the former Justice minister called the Edmonton police chief about his distracted driving ticket. An investigation was conducted by Justice Adèle Kent. The investigation concluded that the minister attempted to interfere in the justice system. This is an egregious act for a minister, especially for a Justice minister. Do you think having the Justice minister attempting to interfere in the administration of justice achieves your ministry's goal of maintaining a fair justice system that upholds the rule of law?

The next set of questions relates to comments that the Premier made. In particular, speaking to reporters on January 12, the Premier said that she had asked Crown prosecutors about charges related to COVID-19 health violations, and I quote: "We do have an independent Justice department and independent Crown prosecutors, and I have asked them to consider all charges under the lens of: is it in the public interest to pursue in court? I ask them on a regular basis as new cases come out: is it in the public interest to pursue, and is there a reasonable likelihood of conviction in court?"

The Premier made similar remarks in December in an interview with a far-right website. The Premier said that she continues to ask questions about whether the prosecution related to public health orders is in the public interest. I quote . . .

7:20

Mr. Yao: Point of privilege.

The Chair: Proceed.

Mr. Yao: The hon. member from across the way – the discussion is supposed to be about estimates, about the budget, about finances. The member across the way is talking about issues other than our financial situation, so I would respectfully say that he can use his time to ask those questions, but I don't believe that the minister has to answer those questions. I mean, that's it. Basically, it's 23(b), "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion."

The Chair: Okay. Member, thank you for that. That would be classified, then, as a point of order.

Mr. Yao: Oh, I'm sorry. Point of order.

The Chair: You know, thank you for that. I think that because this is blocked time, the member can ask whatever questions he would like to ask, and if it falls outside the purview of estimates, then how about we leave it to the minister to proceed with which parts he would then answer? Does that seem fair? Let's go with that.

Mr. Sabir: Chair, it is not a point of order. I can ask about the business plan. I quoted the exact line from the business plan about a fair justice system where the rule of law is upheld, and I'm asking questions about the rule of law, which is squarely within, I guess, the purview of the Justice minister. I don't think it's a point of order.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you so much, both members.

I am going to just ask that we, for the purpose of our discussion tonight – we do have limited time, and in order to proceed, I ask all meeting participants to keep their questions and responses concise and to the topic at hand.

Mr. Sabir: I was about to quote the Premier: I put it to the prosecutors, and I have asked them to do a review of the cases with two things in mind. So the question I have is this. The Premier should never be speaking to Crown prosecutors and trying to direct them. This is clearly political interference and goes directly against your ministry's goal of a fair justice system in upholding the rule of law. I have previously written to you requesting an investigation

into this matter, but I have not heard back. Will there be an independent investigation into the interference in the justice system by the Premier like the one conducted regarding the former Minister of Justice's interference in the justice system?

The next question I have is about the same topic, the rule of law and independence of our Crown prosecution office. When the Premier was asked about her comments to Crown prosecutors, she then claimed she spoke to the Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General. By the way, the Deputy Attorney General is also entitled to the same independence as Crown prosecutors. For the Premier to speak to the Deputy Attorney General still constitutes political interference. If you recall, this is a similar matter to the SNC-Lavalin scandal, where the Prime Minister spoke to the Attorney General about an ongoing case. This led to a public hearing and an investigation by the Ethics Commissioner. So the question I have is: can you explain how this interference in the justice system is any different than the Prime Minister's and why an independent investigation is not warranted in this case?

Mr. Smith: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order. Sorry.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. I would speak to 23(b), "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." I'd sure appreciate if the member across the aisle could explain to us where exactly in this budget estimates document that you're talking, referring to – it seems to me you're going way off base here. Could you explain more clearly to this committee how the questions that you're asking tonight deal with the ministry plan? Could you point it out to us? Could you read from it for us, please?

Mr. Sabir: Through the chair, first help me understand why you think a question about the independence of the judicial system and political interference into it is way off. Help me understand that.

Mr. Smith: Madam Chair, I am not here to be asked questions by the opposition.

Mr. Sabir: You raised the point of order.

The Chair: Sorry, Member. Member, please, through the chair.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. I am.

Mr. Sabir: The member raised the point of order in asking me to explain.

The Chair: Okay. All right. Thank you. I've heard from both of you. Thank you so much.

We have, it looks like – how much time in this? The member has five minutes left. So, Member, if you could please ask questions as it relates to estimates, that will help us move along.

Mr. Sabir: Chair, I'm asking questions about what's in the business plan.

The Chair: What page number? If you can refer to the page numbers, that would be most helpful.

Mr. Sabir: Page 85 of the estimates. The second line says that the ministry is all about having a fair justice system that upholds the rule of law. So I am asking about the justice system, about the rule of law, and about the developments that happened recently in the Justice ministry. These questions are all about the independence of our judicial system, independence of our prosecution branch.

The Chair: If we could just pause for a minute, I would like to do a brief consultation if you all don't mind. One moment.

Well, thank you so much. Appreciate the consult here.

So, Member, I do find that you are straying a bit and, for the purpose of this meeting, would prefer that you do really focus on the estimates and the reason that we're all here this evening. Please proceed. You have four minutes now left. Just over four minutes.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you. Again, my question directly relates to page 85 of the business plan. "The Ministry of Justice helps ensure that all Albertans have access to a fair and accessible justice system where the rule of law is upheld and government undertakings are administered according to law." That's what is stated in the business plan, and I will make sure that my question is about how government is ensuring that the rule of law is upheld and that it's about government undertaking.

Government did undertake a search about e-mails relating to this issue, and the minister's own press staff claimed that some deleted e-mails are retained for 60 days, which means the e-mail search that the Justice ministry conducted would only go back to November 22, 2022. Even if this is the case, it leaves out the first six weeks since the Premier was elected. When asked to clarify if the search went back to November 2022, Minister, your press staff refused to answer and only referred media to the initial statement claiming that the search only went back to December 2022. Given that the search did not cover the Premier's entire time in office and the importance of maintaining a fair justice system which upholds the rule of law, will you conduct an independent investigation into this issue?

The next question I have: Minister, are you satisfied with the state of the rule of law in this province, and if not, what do you intend to do differently to uphold the rule of law and to ensure government undertakings are administered according to the law?

Mr. Smith: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order. Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Smith: I bring to the chair's attention 23(b). I'm really having a struggle here with the member opposite's questions. He's using one sentence out of an entire business plan, and the sentence reads:

The Ministry of Justice helps [to] ensure that all Albertans have access to a fair and accessible justice system where the rule of law is upheld and government undertakings are administered according to law.

And then it continues:

Working alongside partners in the judiciary, law enforcement, public safety, and health, the ministry provides programs and services that ensure access to justice and support the needs of Albertans involved in the justice system.

7:30

Madam Chair, the questions that he's got – he has picked one sentence and taken it out of the context of the business plan. The questions that he's asking are not devoted to the budget and the estimates. He's trying to rehash arguments that they brought up in the House that have nothing to do with this budget plan. I would ask for you to rule on that, please.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Please proceed.

Mr. Sabir: Again, Madam Chair, I submit that it's not a point of order. The member read from the business plan the line that I'm referring to. That ministry's job, fundamental job: to ensure the rule of law is upheld, that there is a fair and accessible justice system for Albertans, and that government undertakings are administered

according to the law. And then it goes into other programs, which I will certainly ask questions about. But I was asking a question about a fundamental principle that's stated in the business plan and what the ministry is there for. So I don't think it's a point of order. Members may not want to hear about it – that's a different thing – but that's squarely within the purview of these estimates and this business plan.

The Chair: All right. We're just going to pause again for a brief consultation.

Thank you so much, Counsel.

I just will say, then: hon. member, please, if we could really focus your questions. You've only got very limited time left. If we could really focus that on the estimates and really bring your questions to have more relevancy to the budget, that would be much appreciated.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I think any question about the fiscal plan, government's strategic plan and business plans is part of these estimate debates. That is what it clearly says on page 86 of the minister's business plan as well, so I think I am trying. I will take your advice and do my best to make them more relevant to the estimates.

Page 85: it says that the ministry is striving to provide Albertans with more timely and accessible services. On page 87, key objective 2.1 states: "Improve Albertans' access to justice and ensure a sustainable justice system that utilizes court and prosecution resources efficiently and effectively." The question I have is that there are thousands of court cases involving serious crime that are at risk of falling through the cracks. That was the case last year because there were simply not enough resources. The government's vague plan does not accommodate for the shortages in the department, but currently it is unknown – it is not uncommon for the Crown prosecutors to handle 30, 40 trials a week and be working 70, 80 hours a week. So I would like you to speak about the status of Jordan delays and specific steps that you are taking to address those delays.

Also, it's a serious situation which needs a real plan from this government. Those who were wronged by criminal acts are watching their perpetrators walk scot-free, without any punishment, because of these delays. So the question I have is: why is that? They didn't get access to justice; they didn't have their day in court. What message have you for those victims of crimes?

The next question I have is that I didn't see Crown prosecutors mentioned in the business plan at all even though they are so foundational to the justice system.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you so much, Member. That's your time.

We are going to reset the clock, and the next 10 minutes will be turned over to the minister for his response. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair. Maybe I'll begin by speaking generally on the fact that government is not seeking to grant amnesty or pardons for COVID-related charges.

I'll also speak generally to be able to answer the first series of questions for the member by pointing out that the office of the Attorney General has a very unique independence and neutrality in our parliamentary democracy. This is something that we've inherited from the United Kingdom. It took until 1951 for it to be articulated by Lord Shawcross, as he later became known, but this is part of the unwritten constitution that we inherited from the United Kingdom. It's a very special and unique role that the Attorney General has, and then the prosecutors themselves have a unique independence and neutrality from the Attorney General himself or herself as well.

That is something that has been upheld. It's been my commitment to the civil service that that independence, neutrality will be upheld, and it has been. We see from the answer that the Premier herself gave to the member in question period that when she came into the role of Premier, she sought the advice of her Attorney General, me, and she accepted that advice. That's really the end of the answer to the series of questions that we had from the member, Madam Chair.

I think it's also important because there were allegations raised by the member that I think would be addressed by quoting the statement from the ADM of the Alberta Crown prosecution service, which said at that time: the ACPS has fully co-operated with the independent and comprehensive review of ACPS e-mails conducted by the nonpartisan Alberta public service; this review found no evidence of contact between the Alberta Crown prosecution service and the Premier's office regarding prosecutions; continued suggestions of impropriety without evidence are not warranted. I'm going to pause there. It then continues: this unsubstantiated speculation harms the reputation of the ACPS and does a disservice to the dedicated professionals in the ACPS who carry out their work with unwavering integrity; it is wrong to suggest that the ACPS has been anything but ethical and appropriate in carrying out its duties; the ACPS continues to act independently while maintaining the highest ethical standards in its service to Albertans. I think, Madam Chair, that is a quote that really needs to be remembered by all members of the committee, in particular those of the opposition.

Now, before I leave that topic and that series of questions, I think it's also important perhaps to address question 3, which was: how is this different than the SNC-Lavalin situation that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau found himself in, where he did attempt to politically intervene? And the answer is the answer that the Premier provided the member during question period where she said that she accepted the advice of her Attorney General, which is not the situation that we saw in the Rivard affair, in 1964 or whenever it was in the '60s. It was not the situation in 1988 under Vander Zalm in B.C. with Brian Smith as the Attorney General and not the situation with SNC-Lavalin with Prime Minister Trudeau. This situation is different because the first minister here in Alberta accepted the advice of her Attorney General.

Next, Madam Chair, I will move on to the questions related to our plan to deal with the case volume in the court system and the work that we're doing in working with the Crown prosecution service and court services to be able to make sure there are the resources there to make sure that everything is proceeding in a timely way for Albertans. I'd first talk about that we have increased funding that will be used to address increased demand for operational resources due to backlogs in court services, continued growth in volume of incoming cases, and judiciary compensation as well. We're modernizing the technology that is used by the courts, as I mentioned in my opening statement, and capital funding will be helping those efforts by expanding videoconferencing capacity in our courtrooms. So the member is quite wrong when he says that it's vague plan. It is a very specific plan on how to be able to do this.

7:40

I also in my opening comments talked a little bit about precharge assessment and the work that we are doing in Budget '23 to be able to expand the pilot project to the whole province to be able to deal with those volumes so that we know that when something is proceeding to court, it has already had the advice of one of those 16 additional prosecutors who are going to be doing precharge assessment and be able to provide that advice when they work with law enforcement.

We've also seen a significant increase between 2019, under a previous government, and now with the number of prosecutors that we have in the system. It's 53 additional prosecutors that we have. As well, with the work that we did in the last year, Madam Chair, in working with the Crown prosecution service and their association to be able to provide them with the supports that they need but also dealing with some compensation issues when they pointed out that there was a differential between Alberta and other jurisdictions – we had a turnover rate that was significant, actually, for a very significant period of time. Vacancy rates for prosecutors have varied between 8, 11, 12 per cent in the last, well, at least seven years. This is the lowest now that we've seen the vacancy rate for prosecutors because of the work that we did in working with the prosecution service and those prosecutors, getting it down, when we last checked it in February, as low as 4.2 per cent. That's helping us, being able to work with the civil service to address systemic issues that we saw under previous governments, to be able to make sure that we have the resources in the prosecution service and in the courts to make sure that we're addressing court volumes.

It wasn't just issues of volume and increases in volumes over the last couple of years; it's also the issues that every province has seen as a result of COVID and trying to deal with volumes that did add up during COVID. As I said, there are the investments in technology. There's the investment in more staff in the courts and more prosecutors to be able to address this volume to make sure that we have all of our cases proceeding in the courts in a timely way. I said in my opening comments that Budget '23 provides funding to enable us to hire over 140 court clerks to clerk in our courtrooms as well as to process fines, to serve the public at our front counters in rural courthouses, and that's going to meaningfully increase access to justice for Albertans through quicker service and expanding capacity of the courts in Alberta.

We also see, Madam Chair, that we are investing \$38 million over five years in court and justice service modernization for each of the budget years of '22-23 and '23-24. That includes \$11 million in funding. We remain committed to Justice digital, particularly given the importance of court and justice services in providing access to justice for Albertans, and Justice digital has been delivering tangible benefits so far in areas such as adjournments, traffic, filing, courtroom productivity, virtual courts, transcripts, and case management. The benefits include new online services for staff, the judiciary, justice system stakeholders, and Albertans but also adaptive tools and responsive solutions to be able to address rising caseloads and modernize the justice system, shifting from paper-based systems that are, quite frankly, Dickensian, as the Chief Judge described it to me, to digital solutions. And with a further \$5.5 million investment in '23-24, that's going to work to continue to modernize outdated processes and technology, with a particular focus on digital filing and virtual courts.

As well, resolving court matters in a timely manner is addressed in other ways as well. We're going to continue to focus on making sure that the courts . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. That's your time.

We're going to flip back to the Official Opposition to continue on with your allotted time.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just to follow up around the advice you provided to the Premier, I think it was the Premier's own words in December and then on January 12 that she has talked to Crown prosecutors. Nobody is making it up. It's a matter of public record, so I would suggest that you may want to look at it again.

The next question I have is about the process for recruitment and retention of Crown prosecutors. Can you speak generally about it?

And then I also note that Justice plans on adding 363 new employees, full-time employees, I note. Where are they being recruited for? If you can provide a breakdown for that.

On page 85: "The use of technology, including virtual courts, digital filings and adjournments, is improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the justice system," which is a good thing. "Alberta Justice will continue to invest" in that. In this regard I think it's a good thing if we can use technology to make our system more effective. But I do want to know how it impacts self-represented individuals, those without access to Internet or technology, and what specific steps you are taking to address that.

On page 85 again it says that the department will "publish legislation to protect [Albertans] from intrusive federal policies that infringe upon the province's sovereignty under Canada's constitution" and further adds that "it will also advance work to constitutionally entrench the protection of property rights." Which legislation or steps are we talking about? Can you expand on that? Also, what do you mean by "sovereignty under Canada's constitution"? Alberta is a province like any other province.

Page 87, outcome 1.3: "Work with Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services to review the delivery of policing services in the province, including further examination of a provincial police [force]." What's the nature of your involvement, the Justice department's involvement, in this work, and what's the progress so far on it?

Page 85 mentions that the government plans on continuing the examination of an Alberta provincial police force. It is known to us that the majority of Albertans are not interested in the provincial police force and do not want to transition away from the local RCMP detachment. I understand that it has been moved to public safety, but since your business plan states that you are working with the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services to review it, that's why I am asking these questions. The question I have is: why is this government still insisting on moving ahead with the idea of a provincial police force, and what will it take for the government to listen to Albertans, municipalities and abandon this idea? Also, how does the government plan on funding for this further examination since the budget or business documents do not mention that?

7:50

On page 85 again, the same quote, that Alberta Justice is working with the ministry of public emergency to review the delivery of policing in the province. The question I have is this: what programs specifically are under review at this point, and will the public have any opportunity for input, and will that information be made public after those reviews?

Page 87, under initiatives supporting key objectives: "In 2023-24, the ministry will invest over \$8 million to support the Alberta Chief Firearms Office's goal of keeping communities safe, which includes advocating for federal legislation that supports law-abiding firearms owners." The question I have is this. Calgary has seen over a hundred shootings involving guns last year. What about the proliferation of guns onto our streets, and what's your department doing specifically about that?

The next question is about performance metrics, 1(a), which sets out targets for a firearms office. Do you think giving more gun licences protects Albertans' freedom and interests, as mentioned in your business plan, since your government has now started measuring freedoms as well?

Statement of operations, page 90. Transfers from the government of Canada are estimated to decrease this year from \$30.8 million to \$27.1 million. What's the reason for that decrease?

Same page, 90. Ministry support services has increased from \$7.6 million to \$9.1 million. Your ministry is now smaller, so what's the reason for that increase?

Mr. Shandro: Which increase?

Mr. Sabir: That's page 90, ministry support services. That's why I thought the back and forth would have been better.

The next question I have is that, as mentioned on page 90 of the business plan, the current third-quarter fiscal spending for Alberta Crown prosecution services is \$128 million, and the government has committed to recruiting 16 more prosecutors in the coming year. How does the government intend on recruiting more prosecutors with a \$1 million increase? Also, a related question. There were concerns raised by Crown prosecutors about their working conditions. What steps are you taking to improve their working conditions?

On page 89 of the business plan it mentions that \$1 million will be used "annually to fund the direct delivery of restorative justice programs." Can you share more about the training, who developed it, how it was developed, what percentage of Justice staff have been consulted on this, what stakeholder consultation was there, and when will you be implementing these programs?

On page 137 it mentions a 75 per cent change in the number of complaints of discrimination received by the Alberta Human Rights Commission. On page 90, again, there is an increase of \$119,000 in the Alberta human rights budget. How will this increase in the human rights budget be used to increase inclusivity and acceptance of the diverse ethnocultural communities across the province?

On page 88 of the business plan under outcome 3 it states that "the ministry will employ strategies to improve services and supports to individuals, families, and victims to ensure they are supported [through] their interactions with the justice system." In the past Albertans have been unable to actually use the services in place to support them. For instance, in 2020, when the victim financial benefit program was replaced with an interim program, the victim assistance program, the government services available to victims were reduced. The question I have: did government track the number of people who reached out for services and were not able to avail those services because of government shifting delivery models?

The next question I have is relating to the government of Alberta strategic plan. Page 24 of the plan talks about implementing a precharge assessment and says that it will reduce the number of cases entering the court system. Although you talked about it in your opening remarks, I would still want you to expand on it, whether it's to manage pressures on court and what will be considered a viable matter.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member. That's your time.

Now we'll go back over to the minister. Please proceed.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair. First, I think we were talking about the staffing of Crown prosecutors, and I got one number wrong in my previous set of answers. We have made good on our commitment to add 50 new Crown prosecutor positions by '22-23, and as of December 31 of last year there were actually 55 more trial prosecutors working for the ACPS than did at the end of the previous government's term, and we continue to work to fill those vacancies as they arise.

We think that hiring more Crown prosecutors is essential to addressing increasing caseloads and ensuring that viable cases can proceed. Work continues to be done to fill existing vacancies, and we've also been having ongoing job competitions and increased the size of our articling program to ultimately grow the ranks of the

ACPS. We lifted the salary freeze, and that was part of the way in which we are able to address recruitment and retention challenges. As I said, when we last checked, in February, that had dropped to 4.2, the lowest that any of us here at this table can remember it being. As I said before, in particular under the previous government, it had been much higher than that.

There's a question about the ways in which technology will be able to assist those who are self-represented, and I am going to impose on – is that all right, Tracy, to impose on you? Acting Deputy Minister, if you could help to speak to the ways in which that's going to address those who are self-represented litigants.

Ms Wyrstiuk: Thank you. Yes.

There's been a big investment in Justice digital, \$11 million to deliver newer, enhanced online services, and a lot of those are focused on self-represented litigants to ensure that they, too, have access to our justice system. An example of some of the items that would be under way to assist our self-represented litigants would include our civil filing digital services, which enables documents of any type to be filed with our King's Bench. Also, our King's Bench Surrogate Court is expanding its functionalities, and their self-represented litigants would be able to access those online services. Also, work has commenced on our Provincial Court family filing to build services to support self-represented litigants, once again, to help them when it comes to accessing the courts and with family law applications. So there's a lot of work under way in our digital services that are supporting self-represented litigants.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Acting Deputy.

I'm going to jump to I think it was question 6, which had to do with the increase in the ministry support service budget but also to speak to the first question, related to the breakdown in FTEs for that first question.

ADM Smith, if you don't mind speaking to those questions while I give you the floor.

Mr. B. Smith: Thank you, Minister. Through the chair: Brad Smith, ADM of financial services and SFO.

The member asked regarding the increase in full-time equivalents for the Ministry of Justice. That is shown in schedule 22 on page 161 of the fiscal plan, and, yes, it is a 363 FTE increase. Generally I'll just skip through the increases by division. The court and justice services division: a 133 increase for business and resolution services. Both the Alberta court of justice and the Alberta Court of King's Bench are seeing increases of 23 and 24 respectively; legal services, civil law area, a 65 increase; Legislative Counsel office, a 29 increase. The Alberta Crown prosecution service is seeing a 57 increase, and the strategy, support, and integrated initiatives area is seeing a 30 increase. That generally gives you a breakdown of that 363 FTE increase.

Thank you, Chair.

Oh, and the other question?

8:00

Mr. Shandro: Yeah. And the other question, if you don't mind, just while you're speaking.

Mr. B. Smith: Sure. The member asked a question about the increase in ministry support services in the government estimates. Overall, program 1, ministry support services, is going up by about \$1.5 million. There is no increase in element 1.1, the minister's office. There is no increase in element 1.2, the deputy minister's office. The increase of \$1.5 million is within financial services, element 1.3, and that is due to the transfer of the witness fine processing from the Alberta Crown prosecution service to the

financial services division. It was transferred to financial services simply to achieve efficiencies as it is primarily a financial function.

Thank you.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you.

For the third question I'm going to ask the member to repeat that question, Madam Chair. This was related to property rights, so perhaps if he could ask that question again, as I may not have understood what that question was meant to be.

Regarding the continued investigation of the Alberta police service the first part of my answer would be to remind everyone that – I think I hear a lot of folks using the phrase “Alberta police force” – it's really important to remember that “police service” is actually the correct terminology because it would be a service that falls under the Police Act here in Alberta as opposed to a paramilitary force, which, admittedly, the RCMP is. Those are two different models of a policing agency to be deployed out into the community to protect our communities, and they are very different models on how to best police a community.

Second, I point out that, as has been said by the Minister of PSES, Minister Ellis, we are not proceeding, but that doesn't mean that we have to stop looking at the question, Madam Chair. I think that's what keeps on being missed by our friends opposite. They're expecting this conversation to end or – here's the surprising thing for me when it comes to this issue – they want this to be a partisan issue, but it's not.

We see the NDP in British Columbia, and not even just the government NDP in British Columbia, looking at a police service in B.C. to replace contract policing with the RCMP, but we see an all-party committee of NDP, Greens, and Liberals coming out with a report recommending getting out of contract policing. So this isn't a partisan issue. As hard as our friends here in the Alberta NDP would like us to believe, it's not.

We see Saskatchewan looking at getting out of contract policing, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia. I think everybody other than Manitoba is investigating this. It's also something that the federal government has said before. They want out of the liability of the subsidy for contract policing, and they want police services to be implemented in the provinces. They wanted this, actually, when we began negotiating the current PPSA, the provincial policing services agreement, and those conversations began in 2007 before it was executed in 2012. The reason is because if you look at the last 10 years, the core function of the RCMP in doing federal policing, the number of officers doing federal policing has decreased by 30 per cent. And that's part of the frustrations with the federal government, because federal policing in that role with the RCMP is being distracted by contract policing.

The federal government has said privately, actually, that they would want to encourage – and we should be expecting that. We have 10 years left in this PPSA, maybe nine years now before the PPSA terminates. We'll begin conversations again to begin negotiating the next PPSA in about four or five years, and every province should be expecting to be ready to have the federal government saying, “No more” for the subsidy for contract policing and that they want the RCMP to focus on a federal policing role and not provincial policing.

For us to not be prepared: that'd be taking us back to the way it was in 1917, when the North West Mounted Police pulled up and left the prairies and we had a very short period of time to establish a police service for Alberta at that time. I don't think that's in the best interests of Albertans, for us to not be prepared.

And the conversation – as I said, we are not proceeding with the provincial police service at this time in Alberta, but that doesn't

make the conversation go away. We're going to continue to – sorry, Madam Chair. Your light turned on.

The Chair: It did. Thank you so much, Minister. I appreciate the answers.

Now we'll go back over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed with your final block.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you. I think I was asking about the precharge assessment process. The question I have is: if these are all charges that seem hard to implement, are they going to have someone on call all night and weekends? Like, how will this be operationalized? What does this look like in practice, and what's the cost of implementing this program?

I think the minister mentioned that there will be 16 more Crowns in that full-time equivalent breakdown. The deputy provided that there will be 57 staff to Alberta Crown prosecutor services. Will there be a different unit set up with a Crown available that the arresting officer can consult with? Essentially, I'm asking: what will it look like in practice?

Moving on to Justice estimates, page 9 of the Budget 2023 estimates, under capital investment there's \$17.8 million for Justice. Can you provide details, what it will be spent on?

Court and justice services, page 150, line 2.1. It was budgeted for \$32 million, the forecast has gone up to \$40 million, and now it's increased to \$48 million. What's the reason for this increase, and what information and education services are included in it?

Page 150, line 2.2. There is a slight increase for family support order services. So the question I have is: are we seeing increasing caseload there? There tend to be more self-represented individuals in court, so is this going to address this issue to improve access to justice?

Regarding maintenance enforcement what's the workload like? How many employees are there now? Has the caseload per person increased? If so, how are you addressing that? Because of delays of payments is there an increase in the financial amount outstanding?

Page 150, lines 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 all relate to positions that will be funded through these increases.

With respect to legal services, page 150, line 3.1, there is a substantial increase, from \$40 million to \$57 million. So the question I have is: is your department involved in providing legal advice more often, or is government involved in more cases now? And is there any outsourcing of legal work, like in relation to the cases that government is involved in, and what's the cost for that?

8:10

Crown prosecution services certainly play an important role in our justice system, and they must remain independent. Again, I asked these questions before, and I will ask again. What assurance can you give Albertans that the Crown prosecutor's office remains independent of any political interference? We have the Premier's comments on record to have talked to them twice.

What's the status of vacant positions? I think you addressed it.

With respect to Jordan delays there was also a strike by defence lawyers over inadequate legal aid funding and cuts. How did that strike impact the delays in our courts? How many cases were stayed or charges withdrawn due to the strike? Was access to justice interrupted as a result of that strike? How do we quantify that and the impact of the charges stayed or withdrawn on the complainants, who often waited years to seek an answer from the court? How many cases are there which are past 18 months or the 30-month timeline set by the Jordan decision and therefore eligible to make a Jordan application and are at risk of being thrown out?

Line 4.2 provides for commercial, organized, and Internet crime. There is a slight decrease. What's the reason for that?

Line 4.3, criminal and youth prosecutions. The forecast expense is \$85.1 million, but the budget is reducing its estimate to \$78.3 million. What's being cut there? How will it impact prosecutions?

Line 4.4, advanced projects and traffic office. It's a new line item and has \$7.7 million. The question I have is: what will it be spent on? Also, you reversed the changes you made to traffic courts while we need it now. Another related question is that there used to be Crown prosecutors at the first appearance for traffic matters who the client would talk to to resolve the matter. This your government got rid of when you implemented the online traffic system, and now that you have reversed that change, the Crowns are no longer there. How come? I am thinking that you reversed all those changes.

Strategy, support, and integrated initiatives, line 5.1. What agencies are included in it? Where can I find information for all of them?

Line 5.2. Tell us how many employees are there and how many more will be added through this budget.

Line 5.3. There is an increase, and I believe you mentioned that it is for a new office in Edmonton. Can you explain a little bit more that increase?

The chief firearms office budget is going up substantially. How many employees are currently there, and how many more are you planning on adding?

Line 5.5. We're seeing an increase for legal aid, but it still may not be in line with the 2018 governance agreement. Do you have any intention of honouring that agreement in paying the amount in arrears pursuant to the 2018 governance agreement?

Will the eligibility for legal aid change? Are there any plans? There was a strike over inadequate legal funding. How many legal aid certificates were rejected during that, and for what offences? Defence lawyers stopped taking serious files in September, including homicide, sexual assault, and gun-related charges. Is there any investigation into the delays that were caused by this? What was and is the impact of these delays on access to justice for the complainant's timely justice? As per the Charter an accused has the right not to be denied bail without just cause, section 11(e). Due to the strike there were accused who were not able to exercise their right, and bail was delayed as they could not hire defence lawyers by legal aid. Do you know how many bail hearings were delayed? Are there any subsequent Charter challenges? With the remand centre capacity impacted since there were more accused in custody, was there overcrowding? Was anything done to address this concern?

Also, is your office in an ongoing discussion with the CTLA and other organizations over the remaining concerns they raised with respect to legal aid? Also, the government projected a surplus. They had the resources. Why did they cut legal aid, and what was the reason for the delayed relief in response to that strike?

How much time do I have?

The Chair: Thirteen seconds.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you.

The Chair: That's it? You're wrapping up?

Mr. Sabir: No. I mean, 13 seconds: I won't be able to ask further questions. I will wait for the answers.

The Chair: Thank you, Member. That concludes your time with the minister.

We will flip back over to the minister now to hear from him for his final block with the opposition.

Mr. Shandro: Sure. Thank you, Madam Chair. Maybe I'll pick up at the next question that I had from the previous block, which was a question related to the increase of \$8 million for the Chief Firearms Officer.

The Chair: Minister, I will tell you: you only have 36 seconds left to wrap up the 60-minute block.

Mr. Shandro: Oh. Then thank you, Madam Chair. I was looking forward to answering all these great questions. I thank the member for asking so many questions and look forward to answering as much as I can at my next opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

With that, we will move over to the independent members, and it's a 20-minute exchange. Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, is it okay to go back and forth, or would you prefer block?

Mr. Shandro: Well, I was doing block for our friends in the NDP, if you don't mind.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you. Well, first of all, thanks to you for your work for Albertans, and thanks to your team at the table and your team in the room. Thanks to all of you for the work you do for Alberta. It's appreciated.

I want to start on the business plan, page 85, the ministry's mandate and structure. "It will also advance work to constitutionally entrench the protection of property rights." Very, very good to see. I'm just wondering: of the millions of dollars that you're spending, how much will be dedicated to this, and what kind of metrics are you modelling for what is success or what is failure? I'd appreciate your thoughts on that.

It also says that your ministry will take "active steps to protect the freedoms and interests of Albertans... including the federal government's use of the Emergencies Act, to protect Albertans' rights under the Canadian constitution." Of course, the justice said something like: a reasonable person could have come to a different conclusion in the Emergencies Act. I'm wondering again: what resources are the people of Alberta putting through your ministry to ensure that our freedoms are protected in Canada?

Next I want to move on to rural crime and effectiveness of the money you are spending. I believe you indicated a 30 per cent increase, \$152 million more over last year's budget that you're spending. Thirty per cent, of course, is far, far in excess of the population increase in Alberta and a huge increase. I know that your government this year is spending \$68 billion. You know, my goodness, when I was elected 11 years ago, I think the government spent \$42 billion, and I think our NDP government's high-water mark was \$55 billion. So a \$152 million increase.

I appreciated your remarks throughout the first hour and the questions from the NDP, and it sounded like, to me, a lot of it was going to timely updating of the IT system and possibly some deferred money on antiquated courts and infrastructure. But I get a little concerned, Minister, and I wonder. We're spending an additional \$152 million. Are we sure we're getting value for this, and what metrics are we using? What I'm looking at is in your last year's business plan, your performance metric 1(a), and of course I don't expect you to have this. Your first performance indicator was Alberta violent crime rate and the Alberta property crime rate in both urban and rural Alberta. My goodness, the crime rate in rural Alberta was considerably higher than in urban Alberta per 100,000 of population.

8:20

Minister, I'm a bit surprised to see that that metric isn't in this year's business plan. Have we abandoned that as a way to check the effectiveness of our legal system and protecting Albertans, or were the numbers not available? I'd appreciate your thoughts on our fight, you know, against crime and helping those involved get back on their feet and find a way back into society. I'd like to hear some numbers, especially with a 30 per cent increase.

Rural crime. I wanted to talk there for a sec. You know, sometimes in our rural counties, areas 300 miles by 400 miles, there'll only be one or two RCMP cars out covering the whole district. Absolutely impossible to get three or four hours away on a timely basis, especially when hard-working police personnel are working very, very hard, so it's one of the one of the things that we need a strong performance metric for.

I do appreciate your answers about the police service, and I want to focus on that for a second. I see, again, on page 85 under the ministry mandate and structure: "further examination of an Alberta Police Service." Minister, I want to suggest to you there is a bit of a disconnect. When I talk to rural Albertans, to a man and a woman they sure appreciate the work that RCMP individual officers do, but they know that the system is broken. They know that rural crime has increased dramatically. They know that often it's hard to, you know, make accountability stick, and they're in favour. They're in favour of looking at different ways to protect them and their families, including an Alberta police service. I will say that it seems like municipal politicians maybe feel not as strong that way, but I wonder, Minister, if they're concerned about the cost, and of course a good local politician, a good politician should be concerned about the cost. So, Minister, if you could take a few seconds and talk about what your government will do to ensure that the hardship on municipalities, if we do change, won't be too severe. So thank you for that.

The government itself has been in the news a bit in the last little while. Minister, I'm wondering if you have any numbers on how many court cases, how many civil court cases in particular, the government of Alberta is currently involved in and how much is budgeted for court cases on behalf of the government of Alberta and Alberta personnel and politicians and where I would find that number here. Thank you.

In our fall session, with the newly established Bill 6, the police review commission, having Edmonton, having the provincial government reach into local police commissions and have involvement, there were a lot of pros and cons discussed about the need for or the effectiveness of that. I'm sorry, Minister. I don't see in the estimates where the costs are for what Bill 6, the police review commission, is going to cost the taxpayer of Alberta. So if you could discuss that, I would appreciate it.

Crown prosecutors for the Alberta Court of Appeal and for the Court of King's Bench. I sure appreciate your answers. I sure appreciate that I believe the number was 55 new Crown prosecutors and some new hirings for those judiciary positions. Absolutely, that was one of the bottlenecks where, you know, too often time was delayed, and too often justice was delayed. I'd like to hear you speak about two things, though. The 55 new ones: with the payments to these professionals and these hard workers, are we in the ballpark with other provinces? Are we in the ballpark with other jurisdictions? Are we treating them fair? But especially, Minister, I'm wondering about making sure that we get them out to mid-size urban communities and rural Alberta. Again, I heard some things about some online justice opportunities. If you'd take 20 or 30 seconds to talk about that a bit more, I'd appreciate it, because I do know that in large parts of rural Alberta, where Internet is still a

huge problem after all these years, access to the justice system is as big a problem or bigger.

Okay. I think my last question is that in your ministry business plan 2023-24 on page 90 we see the Ministry of Justice here collecting \$27 million in federal transfers. You had budgeted or asked for more, I'm supposing. Please, Minister, can you tell me what this money is being used for? Is there some disagreement with Ottawa as to what is Alberta's fair share or as to what the focus of this money should be?

If it's okay, I will leave it at that and ask in the rest of my time for some answers, please.

The Chair: Okay. We have 10 minutes blocked now for the minister to respond, and after we're done with your response, Minister, we're going to pause for a coffee break. Please proceed.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the member for the questions. I'll begin with the concerns that he had about the ways in which government can step up to support the freedoms of Albertans and the POEC, the resources that were spent there. That work was done. As a province we were a party to the commission and did make submissions and participated in the commission's work. That was done by a group of our hard-working LSD lawyers. And my thanks to them. I thought they did a fantastic job in participating in the commission's work, asking questions and making submissions on behalf of all Albertans.

I should also say – and maybe I should have said this off the top – that I think, perhaps accidentally, a lot of the questions that were asked by the member are perhaps best addressed by the Minister of PSES, by Minister Ellis. Because the ministry was split, the policing and corrections side, the Sol Gen side, of the ministry has gone to the public safety ministry, the new ministry that Minister Ellis is now the minister of.

I think an example would be the police review commission, the costs for Bill 6. The reason that they're not in this budget is because that would then go to the PSES ministry and be included in their budget. Maybe I'll say this. Even though rural crime and some of the questions related to that perhaps fall to be answered by Mr. Ellis, I think it's really important for us to also highlight that a big part of why we've seen significant increases in crime in rural Alberta or in Alberta in general since 2019 could be attributed to some of the changes that the federal government made in 2019 through a bill called Bill C-75.

As we know, the federal government has the sole jurisdiction of the Criminal Code, and it's through the Criminal Code that the rules of whether you committed a crime, how long you are sentenced for, whether you get bail or not – all those rules are going to be found in the Criminal Code. Now, Bill C-75 rewrote the bail regime, and the point that the federal government was trying to make at that time was trying to reduce the number of BIPOC offenders that we saw being incarcerated. A noble cause to try and be able to develop that legislation, but what we've seen for all provinces is unsafe communities. We've seen increases in crime, in particular in rural areas, throughout the country.

This was a topic that I raised at the last conference that we had, the FPT of Justice and public safety ministers, in October. I raised this and was really appreciative to hear other provinces – B.C., Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick – say: "Gosh; us, too. We're also seeing this." Once the federal government saw that it wasn't a partisan issue, that it wasn't just Conservatives in Alberta but was also the NDP in B.C. saying, "This is a real big problem; you guys got it wrong in Bill C-75, and we are seeing increases in crime in our rural communities, too," I think that's why the federal government has called for this conference this next

weekend or this week, where Minister Ellis and I will be going to Ottawa to talk about bail reform.

One of the pitches I'm going to be making to other provinces and to the feds is that we really do need to go back to the way things were before C-75. If the goal of C-75 was to reduce the number of BIPOC offenders we saw being incarcerated, then it missed the mark because there is no indication that we have seen that reduction at all as a result of these changes to the bail regime. I think we have to have – I mean, this is my take – sentencing and rules related to bail. You know, bail is applicable to most folks who are accused of a crime – we should be presumed innocent until proven guilty – but there are ways or sometimes circumstances where it's appropriate for pretrial custody for someone who is a repeat offender or someone who's been accused of a violent or serious crime. So that's going to be one of the pitches that I make when I go with Minister Ellis to Ottawa.

8:30

Then your question is – sorry. Madam Chair, through you to the member, the question as well about the increase and the loss of the metric related to violent crime: why is that metric missing? Again, that's because the ministry has been split in two. That would be more applicable to be included in the PSES ministry's budget.

There were questions about the costs of the RCMP. I mean, even though that falls to Minister Ellis to answer, maybe I'll just generally say that the total amount that would be spent if there was to be an Alberta police service, according to the advice that we've received, would actually be largely less than the total amount that is spent on contract policing right now.

But there is a question, because I think the question, Madam Chair, from the member is: are municipal politicians nervous about increased costs for them? I think there are two sides to that. Yes, I think that was the feedback that I received. Our commitment to them was that there would be no increase in cost to municipalities. And I think there are ways in which it could be done through the police funding model and making a commitment and continuing to use the 2018 numbers as the basis – right? – or having an MPSA with a municipality that's large enough to have an MPSA and having a formula that works and makes the commitment that there are not going to be increased costs on them.

But the other side of the question is: is there an increased cost for Albertans for losing the subsidy from the federal government? That's a good question. The hard part, though, is that in the last couple of years the federal government keeps on increasing the costs of the current contract. They've increased it by 20 per cent so far, and they are going to increase it by at least another 20 per cent in the near future. So there's a benefit, even though there's a subsidy that might be lost, in actually being able to control the denominator in how much is being spent on policing and, to the point that the member made, Madam Chair, about rural policing, having civilian oversight over the deployment of resources.

We have 113 detachments throughout the province. Many of them – I think it's 42 per cent – have fewer than 10 members in their detachment. A lot of them have, like, three or five detachment members. Having civilian oversight means that you don't have a cookie-cutter model for the deployment of your resources like the RCMP has for every province. You can say: look, we're going to have fewer officers sitting behind a desk in Edmonton and actually being deployed out in the community, so we're going to have a minimum viable detachment size of 10, for example. So some forces will be sent out into the province. I think that's an important side of it, when you think about that question for Mr. Ellis, to be wrapping your head around.

The federal transfers. Sorry, ADM Smith. I'm going to jump to that question and maybe put you on the spot while I think about the other questions the member asked me.

Mr. B. Smith: Thank you, Minister. Through the chair, the member asked for what was included in the transfers from the government of Canada. As noted on page 90 of our business plan, there is \$27.1 million estimated for the '23-24 year. I'll just quickly give you a breakdown of that: \$18.2 million related to legal aid; \$2.5 million, also legal aid but immigration and refugee legal aid; \$1.3 million for the Canadian family justice fund; about half a million dollars for the Divorce Act's official languages provision; \$1.7 million for the Indigenous court worker program; just under \$800,000 for the justice partnership and innovation program, which is related to family violence funding; half a million dollars for drug treatment court; and \$1.6 million in this fiscal year for Alberta's chief firearms office.

Thank you.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, ADM Smith.

The next question I have, Madam Chair, from the member is related to the Crown, about their salaries but also how we're recruiting folks to rural Alberta. First, I'll take on the question about salaries. I think it was a question about whether they're fair, whether they're comparable. The answer is: yes, now; not going back to last February. I think that was the concern that ACAA had with the salaries, that there was a salary freeze. There was an investigation that we had internally about whether – what was our turnover rate? What was leading to the high turnover rate that we had, a much higher turnover rate than other provinces have with their prosecutors? And there were concerns that it might be attributed, that the recruitment and retention issues related to a differential in compensation for the Crown, because usually we're losing, or we were at the time, Crowns to the federal Crown prosecution service or B.C. or Ontario. So those are probably the most comparable to look at.

We've now brought ourselves to the middle of the pack, but also with all the other advantages that we have in Alberta like a low tax rate, better standard of living, we've now been able to really reduce those challenges that we had with recruitment and retention because of that. We're not the highest, but we brought it to at least being comparable so that we do not have those same issues that we had and bring it down . . .

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Shandro: Oh. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

So we actually will go back to the member for 26 seconds.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Minister, if you could quickly touch on property rights in the Canadian Constitution, please.

Mr. Shandro: I would say that we are continuing to work with stakeholder groups throughout Alberta to be able to hear from them. We've taken great strides in being able to entrench – oh. Sorry.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We are going to take our five-minute coffee break. We'll see you back here in five.

[The committee adjourned from 8:37 p.m. to 8:42 p.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. We're about to begin.

Thank you very much, everyone. Our session is resuming now, and we'll move now over to the government caucus for 20 minutes

of questions from the members. Would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Yaseen: Yes, please.

The Chair: Yes.
Minister?

Mr. Shandro: Thank you.

The Chair: Combined? Okay.
Please proceed.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister and your team, for the good work you have been doing for the province of Alberta. One of the most substantial increases in the Justice budget appears under line item 2, which is called court and justice services. There are increases being provided to the Alberta court of justice, the Alberta Court of King's Bench, and the Alberta Court of Appeal, line items 2.3 to 2.5 on page 150 of the estimates. Can you elaborate, Minister, on the unique needs that each court system has faced over the years and why a comprehensive, across-the-board increase to all courts was determined to be necessary?

The Chair: Just a reminder to please direct the conversation through the chair.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for the question. All three courts have faced increased volumes over the years as the population in the province has increased by almost 5 per cent since 2016. Increased population has a direct impact on the workloads in the justice system for all three levels of court. We've also seen an increase in law enforcement, in prosecutors and the judiciary. Courtroom time and the complexity of matters and the increase of self-represented litigants have also had an impact on workloads and case volumes. All three courts have advocated for increased services and supports for family and civil matters to alleviate pressures in the court system. Court of King's Bench: I think 40 per cent of their matters are going to be a family matter.

First, beginning with the Alberta court of justice, what we used to call the Provincial Court, they're providing services to the entire province. They're responsible for timely resolutions in not just criminal and civil but also family matters, as I mentioned, throughout the province. They're also handling traffic violations, the vast majority of criminal and regulatory offences here in the province, and they hear civil cases up to \$50,000 right now as well as the family, youth, and child protection matters. They do fatality inquiries. They also run the provincial hearing office, and they're sitting in 72 communities across the province; 21 base courts and 51 circuit court points, and the lead times for criminal matters have increased since prior to the pandemic.

So without any new resolutions a trickle-down effect was felt on family and civil matters, which now face even longer delays. Increased court appearances, longer court dockets, more data entry, higher turnover rates of staff, increased self-represented litigants, as I mentioned, all create a demand on that court, the Alberta court of justice. So now we have \$20.4 million in additional funding in Budget '23, and that funding will provide for new judicial positions, new court clerks, as well as improved clerk education.

The budget also provides for specialized courts. This would be the mental health court, the drug treatment courts, the domestic violence court, and the Indigenous courts, which are doing amazing

work throughout the province. These courts are proven to be effective in combating recidivism, but they are more resource intensive, so that's part of the reason as well for the increased demands in investing in that level of court.

Now, the Court of King's Bench: with the 41 and a half million dollar budget, which is 359 FTEs, they are providing services for the entire province. They operate in 11 judicial centres through registry services, support services for the court, court clerks, jury management, exhibits management and fine processing, and as the superior court here in Alberta with the power to try indictable offences; for example, murder and sexual assault, et cetera. They have joint jurisdiction as well with the Provincial Court and other criminal offences and the demands that they have on civil proceedings like commercial, surrogate matters, personal injury, bankruptcy, insolvency cases, litigation of wills and estates.

The increased volume, the complexity of cases, the backlogs in filing court documents, increases in court sittings, high staff turnover rates – we needed to get criminal cases through the system to complete under the time limitation set out in the Jordan decision. As well, there's also been a significant increase in jury trials here in the province as more and more accused are electing to be tried by jury, so that \$6 million increase in funding in Budget '23 will fund new judicial positions, new court clerks, improved education as well, just like previously, with the court of justice and funding for off-site juries.

Then the Court of Appeal. We have a budget of \$8 million for 68 FTEs. That's \$350,000 of additional funding in Budget '23. That's going to address staffing challenges to ensure funding is available for increases in support staff; for example, judicial assistants, legal counsel, articling students, which are all paid for by the province.

Then the overall budget for Budget '23 will enable us to hire an additional 140 court clerks across the province to support our courtrooms, to process the traffic tickets and fines, and serve the public at the front counters.

Thanks, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Back to the member.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Chair. We'll move on to the next question here, then. We have all read about the increased demands and backlogs in court systems across the country for a while now. Page 9 of the fiscal plan talks about our government's plan to add more funding to increase capacity and ensure timely access to the justice system for Albertans.

In view of that, I have a couple of questions here. Can you please elaborate on how this budget will improve Albertans' access to justice and help fulfill our government's commitment to ending the court backlog, and to what extent will the \$43.7 million net increase to courts and justice services be used to address operational pressures and backlogs? Third, can you tell us how many new positions will be created in each of Alberta's courts, and are there new judicial positions that are being created with this funding?

8:50

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair and, through you, to the member. That \$43.7 million that the member mentioned will be used to address some of the operational pressures and backlogs in a few ways. First, the additional funding for the Alberta court of justice will allow that hiring of the additional 140 new court clerks in our courtrooms to increase capacity, to manage our courtrooms, process fines and tickets, as I mentioned in my previous answer. The new funds will also be used for judicial clerk training and development to ensure that our staff are properly trained, as a lot of the matters are becoming more and more complex, and to make use

of the new technology that is becoming available and to keep up to speed with the modernization of not just the technology but modernization of business processes that is under way and expected to accelerate in the courts.

Additional funding of over \$5 million to enhance family resolution services such as precourt assessment mediation, the family court counsellors, and parenting intervention programs is really important as well. Also, increased capacity for our contact centres. These family resolution services help to mitigate the backlog in the justice system by allowing Albertans to resolve a dispute outside of the courts before it has to hit the courtroom. Budget '23 funds over 20 new resolution service positions to support the best interests of the child and lessen the hardships between separating parties. Budget '23 also invests an additional \$5.4 million in courtroom technology services to update the technology that's in the courts. Digital filing, virtual courts, improved technology: those are all tools for the staff that will help to improve the operations and to address the backlogs.

I think the next question was about the number of FTEs created. There are 47 new FTE positions that will be created in the courts for staffing; 23 of those will be in the Alberta court of justice. The rest, 24, will be in the Court of King's Bench, and those new FTEs will be filled with court clerks, JAs, or judicial assistants, legal counsel as well, and there are new judicial positions as well being created in the Alberta court of justice.

Budget '23 provides for three new judicial positions and three new JP, or justice of the peace, positions. Justices in the Court of King's Bench and the Court of Appeal are federally appointed and paid for by the federal government even if the staff are paid for by us. But those justices in those two levels of court are paid for by the feds, so we continue to advocate for funding from the federal government for two new judicial positions in the Court of King's Bench. One we would like to see in Red Deer and one in Grande Prairie and one position as well in the Court of Appeal.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Member.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you. I will go to my final question, Madam Chair, now. The court system has been significantly challenged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading in some instances to breakthroughs in utilizing new technologies. At the same time, it has been a priority of Alberta Justice for many years to modernize the court system's use of technology. Can you tell us how much funding in court and justice services will be allocated to modernize the courts – I know you talked a little bit on that – and how that will change how the average Albertan interacts with the justice system in this province?

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair and to the member for the questions. Justice digital is a program that's focused on digitizing court processes. I joked about, you know, Chief Judge Redman and referring to the paper-based systems that we have now in the courts as being Dickensian, but Justice digital is focusing on digitizing court processes, creating easier and timelier access for users, including the public. In '23-24 Justice digital received \$11 million to develop new services, including digital filing services for the Court of King's Bench, family and divorce; the King's Bench civil filing; King's Bench, surrogate; as well as the Alberta court of justice, family. Additional services for courtroom and judicial scheduling are also planned along with expansions and upgrades to virtual courts.

Benefits that we will see from Justice digital include quite a few items. One would be courtroom digital service and, through this, over

700,000 digital adjournments and a 27 per cent reduction in processing time. The next example would be traffic ticket digital service. That's eliminated around 9,500 visits to courthouses, and that saves about 1,000 clerk hours per month. The adjournment digital service takes about 65 per cent less clerk time per adjournment. The surrogate digital service: that's reduced processing times by 90 per cent, from six months to 12 days now, so that's been a real success in Justice digital. Filing digital service civil saved 15,000 hours of clerk time in its first year. The Court of King's Bench commercial list civil: that's reduced wait times for filing from between four to six weeks to just 48 hours, and it's reduced time to sign an order from 10 days to one day.

On top of that, that \$5.4 million will be used for court technology services to improve technology supports and replace aging equipment. Upgrades will support the expansion of virtual courts and the creation of faster, more streamlined processes. Virtual courts are also expanding the ability for vulnerable folks, like children or victims, to appear in court without having to face the accused in person.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Member.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Madam Chair. That's it for my questions, and I will share my remaining time with my colleague MLA Gotfried.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister and your team for being here, for encouraging the use of modernizing technology, that you were just referencing. Really happy to hear that.

My questions are with respect to legal services and how they relate to line items 3 to 3.3 within the budget, for your reference, which is where we fund the civil law, Legislative Counsel, and law reform areas within your budget. Minister, cumulatively, through the chair, this amounts to an increase of approximately \$20 million, a significant amount. I'm happy to see that. Although these line items are perhaps not headline grabbing and not necessarily a larger part of the budget, we know that this area of Justice is integral to the functioning of government and to make sure that your systems behind the justice system are functioning at the highest possible level. It would be very helpful if you could elaborate on the necessity of the funding increases with the legal services and the civil law office and why we are seeing these increases this year and what type of legal services are supported through this funding to government of Alberta ministries and how this is going to impact the improvements of the services that you're going to continue to offer for Albertans.

Mr. Shandro: That's a great question because those folks in civil law as well as Leg. Counsel, or LCO, are providing solicitor services, litigation services, and, in LCO, leg. drafting services to government. Can't thank those folks enough for doing all that work, not just those who are in Justice. Many of them are embedded with their client ministries and doing all that amazing hard work, and my thanks go out to them.

9:00

Legal services that are provided by civil Crown counsel include appearing before the courts in a matter that might involve child protection, defending claims brought against the government, providing constitutional and Aboriginal advice, defending our provincial jurisdiction in certain circumstances, drafting all the

bills, all the regs that come before either the Legislature or cabinet, providing legal advice to all the departments, as I mentioned, like all those folks who are embedded in the client departments, including those departments responsible for responding to emergencies.

Matters that are addressed by civil Crown counsel have increased not just in volume but also in complexity over the last few years. The current pace and volume of work isn't sustainable, and LSDs' year-to-date billable hours over billable expectations – the acronym that we use internally is B – to the end of October '22 was 116 per cent. As of December '21 this increased to 121 per cent, and that rate of use contributes to a high burnout of staff. That, in turn, may contribute to increased absences, and it could negatively impact the division's ability to recruit and retain talent to be able to do this work that is needed for government to function.

If the work is not done internally, then the private sector will need to be relied upon, and the cost of external counsel is rising throughout the province, so we have to be mindful of wanting to prefer to use our folks at LSD over those who could do the work by contract. The current calculated hourly rate for our civil Crown counsel within LSD is \$168 per hour, and that includes the salary, includes the benefits, includes their training, divisional overhead as well as the Law Society fees. The average hourly rate for outside counsel that is retained by government is \$340 per hour as of July of last year, and that's increased by 26 per cent from the budget year 2020-21. So that's the context here that we're looking at when we are thinking about . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we are wrapping up with the UCP members and heading back over to hear from the NDP side.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair. Is it still block time or back and forth?

Mr. Shandro: Block, please.

Mr. Sabir: Okay. So I guess back and forth was only for UCP members.

Let me also say that the majority of my questions have not been answered. In particular, one block went completely unanswered. So the question I am asking is: will the minister undertake to provide answers to those questions which were completely untouched, which the minister didn't have the opportunity to talk about?

Just to follow up on that e-filing process, can the minister confirm that the e-filing process is also available to self-represented individuals? My understanding is that it is not, that the e-filing process is only available to those who are represented by lawyers and that self-rep people cannot access that. Again, the question is: what steps are you taking to make sure that those people can benefit from those efficient processes?

Page 151, department capital acquisitions, business and resolution services. Now, it is about business and resolution services. That's budgeted for \$5.1 million. Yeah, it is capital acquisitions. What does that include, and can you explain what projects are considered under that?

Page 155, financial statements. Fines and penalties were budgeted last year at \$210 million, the forecast is \$168 million, and the current estimate is \$171 million. What fees and premiums does the government expect to collect more of this year?

The capital plans for Justice digital and the Justice transformation initiative are down \$2 million and \$1 million respectively. What is the reason behind these reductions?

Questions relating to the fiscal plan 2023-26. My first question is that the government's fiscal plan 2023-26 does not mention the

words "racism" or "systemic racism" in it. Why is that? Don't you see that as an issue for the justice system?

Also, Minister, can you confirm if you are overseeing a hate crime unit? Where is the budget for it? How much is it? How many employees are there?

Also, is the Justice department responsible for the security infrastructure grant program? How much is that program worth? What's the total amount of grants you provided last year? What's the plan for the current fiscal year?

In September last year the government announced two hate crime studies through the Alberta Hate Crimes Committee and the Organization for the Prevention of Violence. What's the status of those studies? When can Albertans expect to see those reports?

Page 12 of the fiscal plan:

In 2022-23, the total expense forecast increased by \$3.5 billion from Budget 2022 mainly due to measures to help Albertans deal with the rising cost of living, funding for the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) Agreement and collective bargaining agreements with teachers and other public sector unions, justice system and public safety enhancements.

Can you tell me how much of that money, exactly, went to the agreements within the Justice department?

Page 92 of the fiscal plan:

Operating expense forecast for Justice is \$594 million in 2022-23, an increase of \$92 million from Budget 2022. Operating expense will increase to over \$650 million annually in Budget 2023. Increases are mainly for judicial and crown prosecutor compensation.

How much went to compensation? Earlier I asked about full-time employees, and Deputy Brad Smith mentioned there will be 57 new full-time employees in ACPS, Alberta Crown prosecution services. Will they all be Crown? When will they be hired?

Page 92 of the fiscal plan: "\$20 million annually . . ."

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Now we'll go over to the minister for his five minutes of response.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair. Where I left off in the member's questions from the previous block was related to the CFO's increase of \$8 million. The member mentioned the increased gun crime that we've seen in some areas of the province and asked what we're doing about that. This is an answer that involves this ministry but also the PSES ministry and the work that we're doing to target gun crimes in our community. But I think there was a thesis in the member's question that seemed to indicate the belief that in having backlogs in processing applications, whether it is an application for a licence, transfer of a firearm, or an authorization to transport, those backlogs actually make our communities safer.

The point that our Chief Firearms Officer has made many times publicly as well as to me is that those backlogs actually make communities less safe. It is important to have those applications processed in a timely way because if there is a concern – if somebody is making an application and there is a concern with that person – we don't want it being done by staff who are trying to quickly, in a sped-up way, go through those applications. We want people to have the time to go through thoughtfully. But it needs to be done, and those applications need to be processed in a timely way to ensure that our communities are safe.

I think it's also important for us to realize that a lot of the ways in which the federal government pretends to address gun crime in our communities is not targeting gun crime. It's targeting law-abiding Canadians instead. One of the points that has been made to me by the police is that if you look at certain restricted firearms like a pistol, for example, a handgun, that would be restricted. The slider

and the barrel may not be restricted themselves. There are ways in which there are ghost guns being created through 3-D printers where all one has to do is order the slider and the barrel, and then the rest of the firearm can be manufactured in an offender's home very quickly.

9:10

So the work that we can do to enable the Chief Firearms Officer and her staff to be able to work with manufacturers, to work with retailers to look at that suspicious activity and make sure it gets reported to law enforcement in a timely way: those are the ways in which we can make sure that a sped-up system, through proper resourcing and not relying, for example, on applications being done in Miramichi by the RCMP, is actually going to make our communities more safe.

I think there was a question as well about the working conditions of the Crown prosecutors. I would just say, as I've said a couple of times, I think, in my answers today, that we have worked with ACAA to be able to address their concerns, not just to be able to deal with retention and recruitment issues by increasing compensation but also working with them on their concerns about supports that they felt they weren't having before and ways in which we can make sure that those supports are provided to our Crown prosecutors throughout the province. I really appreciate that advice that we've gotten from ACAA.

The next question was about restorative justice. I don't know. Alex, it's been some time. I don't know if you have notes, then, from that question. Is it okay to rely on you? Restorative justice, RJ, is a passion of mine, and I thank Alex for his passion as well. Sorry. ADM Thompson. Sorry, Alex, for using your first name. I've really appreciated working with you on these innovative programs that we have been able to continue to invest in.

ADM Thompson, over to you.

Mr. Thompson: Sure. Madam Chair, funding in this budget line for restorative justice is intended to be used for the implementation of restorative justice service delivery in communities and will be used to build the initial framework and the administrative structure of a provincial restorative justice program. It is in its infancy, and engagement with the restorative justice stakeholders across the province will form part of this framework. This will include the development of training standards, service delivery requirements, and professionalized restorative justice practices across Alberta and ensure that restorative justice becomes an integral part of our justice system.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much to the minister and the team members.

We will head over now to the UCP caucus for your next set of questions. Please proceed.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. I've just got a few quick questions I will, then, move to. Thank you again to the minister and his team for being here. Minister, we've heard you in the past talk about producing *Revised Statutes of Alberta*, RSA. Can you tell us, really, what the revised RSA are and why they're important and how long it's been since a new RSA has been undertaken? It is *Revised Statutes of Alberta*, and I understand that that is something that's sort of long overdue.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair and to the member for the question. I have been a bit of an advocate on this issue. The last RSA that took effect was in 2000, just before I had started law school, so it's been over 20 years. The last one before 2000 was in

1980. I've been asking the question: why do we not have a plan for being able to proceed with the next iteration for the RSA? The reason was that at that time we thought that it was best to wait for the demise of the Crown to be able to proceed with the next. The new RSA will increase access to justice in a few ways, including enhancing the ease of use and referencing by renumbering the statutes and the provisions within the statutes.

That's implicitly part of what happens when there's a new iteration of the RSA that ends up taking effect: the eliminating of obsolete provisions and statutes that have been repealed; resolving current diction and certain language issues in statutes such as gender neutrality; creating a new presentation format to provide a uniform document presentation regardless of the media format, whether it's electronic or whether it's print; to allow for an easy transfer between media formats such as the removal of columns, adding hyperlinks to cross-references, and developing and implementing a process to provide electronic access to all of the changes to the statutes that have built up over the last 23 years by amendments as well as full consolidation. Those are some of the reasons why this has been something that we wanted to make sure was included in this budget and being properly resourced.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you.

Again through the chair, I know that you've referenced this already a little bit, but just maybe a bit more detail with respect to the Legislative Counsel office, which is in this section, line item 3.2. You talked to us a little bit about the constraints and a lot of the overtime there, but can you talk a little bit about the work that the LCO undertakes and why there's a \$2.8 million specific increase for this office? I assume that this funding will be used for both enhancing the LCO with new technologies, which you referenced already as well, and adding new staff. Maybe you could actually elaborate and give us a little bit of an idea of the split between those two offices in terms of full-time equivalents that will be added to the LCO in various areas as well.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair and to the member for the question. The LCO provides advice respecting legislative proposals. It drafts all of the public bills, the regs, the orders in council. As well, they advise and they assist with advancing draft legislation through the decision-making process, and they work very closely with the King's Printer to produce all legislative publications for all government ministries.

That volume of work conducted by the LCO has increased. As an example, the number of bills – and that includes those drafted but not introduced – increased from 27 in the spring of '21 to 32 in the spring of '22. The annual volume of pages also increased. That increase, just to compare, from spring of '22 to just the fall only increased from 72 in the spring of '22 to 118. Our staffing levels in LCO are comparatively low. That new funding will bring staffing levels in line with those in B.C., which has one drafter per ministry. Currently Alberta has one drafter covering two ministries, just as an indication.

On top of that, additional staff in LCO will also be required to produce the new RSA that we were talking about, Madam Chair. This would be a combination of lawyers, legislative editors, leg. assistants: about 10 positions. The RSA team will also be responsible for implementing new software that will benefit the LCO office more broadly. The estimated cost of the software is 4 and a half million dollars.

I know that funding under line item 3.3 is being held steady.

Madam Chair, yeah, I think that answers the member's questions. Thank you.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you.

I was just going to reference the line 3.3, which is the Alberta Law Reform Institute specifically. I know both yourself and I have had a good chance to work with them on the more recent passing of the abolition of adverse possession. I know they do some good work there. The continuation of the funding for the ALRI, the Alberta Law Reform Institute, is in place. We're seeing that that's well reflected, the continuation of that funding, in Budget 2023-24. Can you maybe explain a little bit about what the ALRI does as sort of an arm's-length group that works with Justice and how that continuation of that budget is important to us?

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair and to the member. They were established in 1967. They were established by the Attorney General as well as the governors of the University of Alberta and the Law Society. In 2018 the institute was then at that time incorporated as a nonprofit, and they're funded through the Alberta Law Foundation through the Ministry of Justice and the University of Alberta. There is funding in kind that's provided by both Calgary and the University of Alberta.

They're the official law reform agency for the province of Alberta, and they've been a catalyst for the many changes in the legal system here in Alberta. Many of those changes have been of a systemic nature and have had a significant impact on the lives of many folks here in the province. An example might be the recommendations related to the Matrimonial Property Act, the Arbitration Act. We recently saw, with their help, changes to the Trustee Act.

9:20

Most of their reports recommend changes to legislation that falls within the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, and we rely heavily on the institute to inform our legislative reform work. They've had the ability to leverage volunteer contributions from judges and senior experts, and their reputation for integrity and credibility allows them to call on top practitioners based on their established history of listening to different points of view and building consensus for how to improve laws. Funding the institute ensures that they are able to hire and retain staff and maintain a stable stream of recommendations to benefit not just government but all Albertans.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. I am going to cede the remainder of my time to MLA Long.

The Chair: Proceed.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for your time this evening. I'll just sort of start off. I didn't quite hear an answer earlier, and I was just hoping to go back to that. It was the question actually asked by the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat. I think that it's just something that I know my constituents have had questions about, and I'm assuming it might have been part of what that member was trying to get at.

You know, there have been a number of MLAs over the last few years that have had issues, whether it be with things that they've said in public or – I know there was a recent hacking scandal by a prominent member of the NDP caucus prior to the scandal and prior to his court appearance and the things that were said in public by the former Health minister of the NDP that led to the recent out-of-court settlement. The question that was brought forward by the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat was: is there money budgeted by the government for court cases?

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Chair: We've just had a point of order. Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Sabir: I think the member is using this opportunity to just sling things across the aisle. If he really wants to talk about it, I can go on about the RCMP investigation into the UCP caucus and all those things.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Mr. Sabir: I think we should keep that relevant.

The Chair: Thank you. Sorry. I did not find that to be a point of order.

Now we go to the NDP side. Please proceed.

Mr. Sabir: I think I will begin by asking again that – in the last block my questions were again not answered. Will the minister consider to provide an undertaking to answer those questions which were not answered throughout this debate? I believe that Albertans deserve to hear answers to these questions.

Back to page 92 of the fiscal plan. To support key government initiatives, the budget "includes an additional \$20 million annually to expand government's capacity to draft, review and provide advice on legislation." Why does this increase so much? Is it the cost of hiring a lawyer on cases? Are there any legal services that are outsourced by the Justice department? What's the exact cost of legal services being outsourced?

Another question with respect to line item 6, human rights. There is a slight increase, but before that this budget, human rights and multiculturalism grant, was cut from \$1 million to exactly zero. Will there be any human rights and multiculturalism grants provided in this budget?

Page 109 of the fiscal plan: "\$83 million over two years for continued investment in the Red Deer Justice Centre, which will provide a new courthouse in the city." I didn't see it in the capital budget this year. Any reason for that?

Page 161 of the fiscal plan. Justice full-time equivalents will increase by 363 individuals. When will that hiring be complete? There's also an increase in the number of sheriffs, so concerns have been raised that more officers would have helped to address crime in rural communities. So why do you prefer hiring sheriffs over RCMP or police officers?

Page 171 of fiscal plan is about the recommendation from the AG: "improve and follow policies and procedures." That recommendation is being repeated, to "review and assess whether its policies are appropriate" with respect to the office of the public guardian and trustee and whether "procedures are adequate to mitigate the risk that client assets could be mismanaged" and "improve its processes for ensuring compliance with policies and procedures." The department says that it will be completed by 2025. It's already a recommendation that's been repeated by the Auditor General, so what's the reason for this delay? What led to the AG making this recommendation again? Why was it ignored? Why is it taking so long to implement it?

Page 62 of the fiscal plan states that the "fines and penalties and other miscellaneous revenue have increased by a net \$32 million." Where do these increases come from? A little bit of a breakdown of that increase will be helpful.

Some questions relating to the annual report of Justice and Solicitor General '21-22, the last report. It was prepared under your direction, Minister, but I will still keep my questions relevant to the Justice ministry as it stands now. Page 10 states that "the authority to conduct prosecutions, including all . . . discretionary decisions that must be

made in every case, originates with the office of the Attorney General. With this role also comes the duty to remain independent.” Independence of our justice system was put in question because of the statement made by the Premier. So the question I have is: when was the first time the department became aware of these statements, of these interactions, and what steps were taken before all this became public?

Same question with respect to Minister Madu’s incident. When the department became aware of that, was . . .

The Chair: Sorry. The timer did go. It’s the minister’s time now because it goes five and five. Thank you.

Mr. Shandro: All right. Thank you, Madam Chair. There was a previous question in a previous block. I know that the member just had a question about the Human Rights Commission again, but for that previous question in the fiscal year ’21-22 the Human Rights Commission accepted 1,040 complaints, so that was a 15 per cent increase from the previous year, and they closed during that fiscal year 1,118 complaints. They also responded to over 9,000 public inquiries about rights and responsibilities under the act. I think with that question, the specific questions that were asked, that number isn’t available to us at this time.

And then going to the member’s question about whether by writing any questions that are answered orally today in this estimates hearing – will we follow up? To the extent that we have the information, yes, we will if it’s information available, with a couple of caveats. One would be if it’s actually a Justice ministry question. I point out that the member has asked quite a few questions. One in the most recent block about sheriffs: that’s a PSES question, so that would be something I’d direct to PSES.

We were also asked about hate crimes, the hate crimes co-ordination unit, or the hate crimes liaison. I don’t know which one the member was referring to, but both of them would be under PSES as well, so that wouldn’t be a question for Justice.

We were also asked a question about AACP. That would be a question for PSES as well.

We were asked a question about victims’ services: again, a PSES question.

And then a question in the most recent block of time about the public guardian. That’s actually been moved to Seniors, Community and Social Services.

9:30

To the extent that it is a Justice question, we have the answers. And maybe I’ll also give this second caveat. To the extent that they’re related to Budget ’23 for the Ministry of Justice, I believe I’ve answered the political questions that have been reiterated and re-asked a couple of times, Madam Chair. I provided those answers to the member for those questions. But to the remaining questions that don’t get addressed today: yes, absolutely, we will.

The next question I have, then, is related to precharge assessments. Oh, that’s right here, I think.

Or did you get that, Acting Deputy? Do you want to maybe answer that instead of me digging through?

Ms Wyrstiuk: Sure.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you. Oh. Sorry. The question was: how will it operate? I think he used the words: how will it be operational? I think he meant: how will it operate? If you don’t mind giving that answer.

Ms Wyrstiuk: Sure. Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. With respect to the precharge assessments, we have been doing pilots for a number of years. It’s having a great impact in that 20 per cent reduction in charges hitting the courts because of the precharge assessment. It’s been rolled out to a number of locations. You know, it’s unique in Alberta, some of the ways we are communicating about why the precharge assessment may not be proceeding, so it’s leading to a lot more robust investigation. The precharge assessment is being done very well in the province and continues to be rolled out.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you.

Next question I have is related to maintenance enforcement and how many employees.

Do you mind if I impose on you again, Acting Deputy?

Ms Wyrstiuk: Sure. Madam Chair, in relation to the maintenance enforcement program we did actually see an increase in our budget for maintenance enforcement by a small percentage. It was a \$1 million increase for our maintenance enforcement program. Again, we’re wanting to make sure that our cases are actively managed, moved to a new case management system whereby a case manager handles the file now from beginning to end, which has really increased the ability to handle the files more effectively. It’s also reduced our lead times to manage a file when it comes to maintenance enforcement. We’ve been able to increase our FTEs slightly to again increase the number of staff that deal with our maintenance enforcement files. Again, an increase in dollars, some increase in FTEs, and a change in process on how we manage those files so that we’ve improved the effectiveness of our program.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much to the minister and your team.

With that, we will go back over to the UCP caucus side. Thank you.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, I see that in the estimates document under line – oh, sorry. Wrong question. I’m sorry. Line item 5.4 for the Alberta chief firearms office sees an increase of \$7.4 million from the 2022-23 budget. I understand that this funding will be used to enhance services provided by the ACFO, which run the gamut of helping law-abiding firearms owners navigate an increasingly complex regulatory system to cracking down on smuggling, theft, and criminal misuse of firearms. Minister, can you elaborate on the funding increase to the ACFO? Why, in the minister’s opinion, is the time right to strengthen and increase funding to the ACFO?

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair. Maybe because I also didn’t get a chance to answer Member Long’s question previously – look, I suppose my answer would be that as someone who has been slandered by the NDP himself, and my family has been slandered by NDP members – gosh. Just today in question period I got slandered by the member that Member Long was referring to in question period, where her comments about me were privileged, and she knows very well that I’m sub judge and can’t answer to this slander. So it’s interesting to see that settlement.

But maybe in a position on – I don’t know if it would be ADM Smith. But to the extent that we are budgeting for litigation against government in those situations – perhaps could I impose? Or is that legal services division?

Mr. B. Smith: External counsel: is that the question?

Mr. Shandro: Well, it was external counsel but also for resolution of litigation against government to the extent that we are budgeting for, because we self-insure, I think.

Ms Stushnoff: It's Sue Stushnoff, ADM of legal services. I think what you're referring to, Minister, is the value of our contingent liabilities.

Mr. Shandro: Yes. Thank you.

Ms Stushnoff: Those have increased, and I can outline for you what those increases are. In 2019-20 there was \$111.1 billion of outstanding contingent liabilities; 2020-21, \$122.4 billion; 2021-22, \$121.9 billion; and for the 2022-23 fiscal year, as of February it is \$126.3 billion.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you.

Good question, through you, Madam Chair, to the member, because I think it was actually also a question, although the member opposite raises a point of order, that he also asked, so I thought it was a helpful question.

Now to the next question. Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the member. Some of the funding increase will go towards expanding the capability of the Alberta Chief Firearms Officer and her office to deliver a number of items. One of the significant opportunities lies in the work being done with her office and police agencies around firearms ownership and use and safety and the work involving a co-ordinated effort between government ministries to address collaboration and advocacy for law-abiding firearms owners.

There's also an opportunity related to increasing collaboration between policing agencies – and that includes the RCMP and the chief firearms office – in addressing increased cases of straw purchasing in firearms trafficking. Opportunities also exist to better support law-abiding gun owners and businesses by a co-ordinated and collaborative effort.

There's also the identification of improved service delivery; unwanted guns program establishment, increased public relations, and the public support of the Chief Firearms Officer's office. Educational initiatives to strengthen safety would be another example; the ways in which we can foster collaborative relationships with all parts of the firearms community to ensure that the CFO's office better reflects the priorities of Albertans; advocacy for evidence-based policy changes to the federal firearms legislation and to make sure that legislation and regs are focused on safety and reducing violent crime and not related to political ideology; and becoming independent from the Canadian firearms program by establishing an Alberta call and processing centre.

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

The Chair: All right. Back over to the members.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to cede my time to my colleague MLA Long.

Mr. Long: Thank you, and thank you again, Minister. I have a lot of concerns raised in my rural constituency around the federal bail system, commonly called the catch-and-release system. I know that recently, you know, Premiers around the country actually signed a letter about the desperate need to fix the bail system. I'm still waiting on the opposition members provincially to speak up and add their support to that letter, but I'm assuming that there's a lack of understanding on what's truly transpiring in rural communities, and that's why they haven't offered the support at this point.

Now, I hear from residents, I hear from officers about, you know, a few criminals that are constantly causing the issues in the communities that I represent. I do want to commend the police officers and law enforcement in my communities because it takes a lot of their time and their resources to go and catch someone, sometimes in a very serious crime, and then to see the person released, sometimes within hours, because of the failure of the federal bail system.

With that in mind, you know, line item 4.1 of your budget is around operations and bail prosecutions. While I understand that the provincial government is limited by jurisprudence and the Criminal Code, my question is: in providing operations and bail prosecutions – obviously, we have the responsibility for providing these services – to what extent will the \$12.4 million increase actually improve the functioning of the bail system?

9:40

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair and to the member for the question. He's right in his preface that there is a concern. Bail, I think we have to remember, is a type of conditional release, whether it's an undertaking to appear or whether it's parole, whether it's stat release and you're under conditions for stat release. Those are all different types of conditional release. The indication of whether someone is going to be successful in that conditional release, including bail, is whether they've been successful in conditional release in the past. If you have a lot of failures to appear or if you have been a repeat offender, it's every indication in the world that you're not going to be successful on bail if you go back out in the community.

Whether it comes to sentencing decisions or bail, I think that the Criminal Code should be focusing on providing a regime that is focused on risk to the community rather than the other factors that often are included. That's my own take on that. From being a past member of the national parole board, that's my take.

That's one of the reasons why I think that as a result of the letter – and, Madam Chair, the member is right to point out that this is a nonpartisan issue. It doesn't matter what type of government, which province. These are provinces who have governments all over the political spectrum who are asking for reform to the bail regime. I think that's why we've been successful as provinces to obtain this conference this week to be able to speak to the issue with the federal government and implore them to not just try to spend more money but actually have legislative changes to focus on keeping our communities safe.

For this additional funding – sorry. Is that a question for Kim, then?

Ms Wyrstiuk: Yeah. Kim can answer.

Mr. Shandro: Is that okay, Kim, if I impose? Kim, we haven't given you anything yet. ADM Goddard, who's the ADM responsible for the Alberta Crown prosecution service, if we can impose on you to answer that question.

Thank you.

Ms Goddard: Thank you, Madam Chair. With respect to that money a large part of the bail office is – one of the difficulties is recruitment and retention.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you so much, Minister.

Now we'll go over to the opposition.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for agreeing to provide answers to the questions that have not been answered.

My questions in this set relate to the annual report. It was prepared under your direction, so I may ask some questions which may be more relevant for Mike Ellis's ministry, but let's see. A firearm-related question. Page 22 of the report says that there are plans currently under way to establish an unwanted firearms program which will lead to the voluntary surrender of firearms that are no longer wanted by owners, thus reducing the risk of harm. Tell me what this program is about. What is an unwanted firearm? Is this program for legally owned, like, legal firearms where anybody can surrender it? It also says that it will reduce the risk of harm. Have there been any firearms surrendered voluntarily to date? That's one.

Another question I have relates again to Jordan delays. On page 41 of the annual report: ACPS tracks criminal cases in Provincial Court and Court of King's Bench to ensure matters proceed to trial within timely limits specified by the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. versus Jordan*, and it provides that 38 cases were stayed by the courts due to unreasonable delay, a total that represents 9.8 per cent of all Jordan applications filed since 2016. What kind of cases were these? What kind of offences were the serious cases? That's a large number, 38.

Again the question I will ask: how many cases are there that are sitting there past the 18-month or 30-month time frame set by the Jordan decision which may be eligible now to make a Jordan application? I'm asking about the number of cases that are already around the 18-month or 30-month limit, and they may apply for that relief under *R. versus Jordan*.

Another question, that's directly out of your message in this annual report, which talks about a provincial police force – in reference to a PWC report that the government commissioned, it says that the report also showed that it's "possible to do this at the same or lower . . . operating cost." Since your business plan says that you are working with the public safety minister on this, I have looked through the PWC report. It says that in two different scenarios it will cost somewhere from \$734 million to \$754 million to set up an Alberta police service while at this time contract policing costs us around \$350 million. That's excluding \$366 million for transition costs. In light of these facts stated in the PWC report, I don't think that that message is correct, that it's possible to do this at the same or lower overall operating costs. Also, many Albertans and municipalities are opposed to it. The government should not continue with this boondoggle.

Another question, again around the rule of law: what went wrong on the Coutts blockade? For 22 days or so the border was blocked, and some UCP MLAs attended that blockade as well.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it over to the minister for a response.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair. The next question I have is related to the \$7.7 million budgeted for JTI phase 2. Sorry. That \$7.7 million is related to us not proceeding with phase 2 of JTI. Just as a reminder, the justice transformative initiative, JTI, is focused on freeing up justice system resources to meet other service delivery needs through an administrative adjudication model. Phase 1 diverted 89 per cent of all impaired driving incidents from the courts. It's quite a success. It's also increased enforcement by 47 per cent, and on top of that, the number of recipients able to review their files increased from 12 per cent trial rate to 20 per cent review rate while concluding more than 1,700 reviews, all in 30 days. That change freed up more than 10 Crown prosecutors to address other serious and pressing criminal matters, including impaired files causing bodily harm or death, and decreased police issuance time

from three to 10 hours to less than an hour and eliminated all disclosure and investigatory follow-ups.

9:50

Now, in January of '22, at that time there was a pause for phase 2 of JTI to ensure that Albertans were informed and consulted on the changes proposed in that phase 2, and that was proposing to add traffic-related offences under the Traffic Safety Act to the administrative penalty information system, or APIS. Now, because that's not proceeding at this time – perhaps, ADM Thompson, if you can speak to the extent to which this replacement of JTI phase 2 is going to be proceeding and then the \$7.7 million that's budgeted for that.

Oh, it'll be Kim. Sorry. ADM Goddard. We are actually giving some – hopefully, we can get you in under the bell this time.

Ms Goddard: Thank you, Madam Chair. For the record it's Assistant Deputy Minister Goddard speaking. With respect to the \$7.7 million, when JTI phase 2 was put on hold, it was recognized that we needed to revitalize and re-vision how we deliver traffic court services to Albertans. There were certain inequities where there wasn't an availability for people in parts of the province to contact Crown prosecutors to seek plea negotiations. So what we've done is that we've consolidated traffic prosecutions, and you'll see that there was an internal transfer of money into this new branch. This will ensure that Albertans in every corner of the province will get the same service in terms of the same policies, the same procedures, and the same access to the Crown prosecutors for these plea negotiations, resolutions, and trials.

As part of this, we are working with the courts to look at how we can deliver traffic court more effectively. Additionally, this branch is working with the traffic digital service to improve our ability to communicate with people who want to discuss their traffic tickets or people who want to set trial dates.

Finally, one of the other things this branch is working on is working on an e-ticketing system that would allow Albertans to not only get their disclosure almost immediately but also to contact the prosecution service immediately, contact the courthouse immediately, and have all that information available to them so that they can make decisions with respect to whether or not they want to run a trial at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, ADM Goddard.

Next, Madam Chair, I'd point out that, because there were some questions related to the annual report – now, just a reminder that that's not up for consideration at this hearing. This is really just for reviewing and receiving questions related to the business plan and the budget. However, there was a question about the unwanted firearms program even though the annual report isn't up for discussion. This is a mechanism for Albertans to turn in firearms in a safe and secure manner for destruction.

ADM Thompson, if you can speak a little bit more to that, if you'd like.

The Chair: With that, that's the end of our time.

We'll head back over to the other side. Please proceed, members.

Mr. Yao: Minister, thank you and your team so much for all that you do for Albertans. It's a great honour to be able to ask you some questions. My questions revolve around line item 5, which is strategy, support, and integrated services. Line item 5, strategy, support, and integrated services, covers a large number of different files, and cumulatively the line items from 5 to 5.5 represent a \$57.1 million increase. That is substantial.

The largest increase is \$40.3 million under line item 5.5, which is support for legal aid, where the funding has increased from \$94.2 million to \$134.6 million. Now, I'm aware that Alberta Justice oversees the delivery of legal aid to Albertans through an agreement with the Law Society of Alberta and Legal Aid Alberta. Legal aid was in the news a lot over the course of the last year with the roster of defence lawyers arguing for an increase to the tariff rates and enhanced services for individuals who are trying to access legal aid. As we all know, legal aid is a very valuable service that we provide to those who are underserved in our society. I'm wondering if you can talk about this increase and to what extent the funding will be used to increase the tariff rate for roster defence lawyers. The second part of my question is: how will this funding ensure that low-income Albertans have access to high-quality legal counsel?

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair and to the member for the question. I think the member makes a good point that government is just one of the contributors to the budget for legal aid, and together the government and our valued partners and stakeholders are engaging and collaborating to ensure that there is optimal delivery and, as well, long-term sustainability of legal aid in the province.

The department began undertaking a comprehensive review of legal aid which included the tariffs, which is a list of the items which a roster lawyer can bill for, and a review of the tariff amounts, the tariff items, and reducing it from 40 different items to a smaller number of items but also a review of the financial eligibility guidelines. The results of that review are informing our discussions, our negotiations to develop the next governance agreement between us as the government of Alberta, the Law Society of Alberta, and Legal Aid. The funding is to be used to ensure that lawyers are properly remunerated to provide effective and efficient services to vulnerable Albertans and to ensure a fulsome roster of lawyers. Funding will create positive results, I think, for folks by ensuring that more people are eligible to access legal aid services.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much for that.

Line item 5.2, community justice and integrated services, includes funding for the drug treatment court program. I just want to say, first off, thank you so much for coming up to my region to cut the ribbon for our local drug treatment court. You know, this is a phenomenal program where we're trying to address issues of addiction and trying to provide people with alternatives to simply going to prison and repeating that cycle. I'm wondering if you can

educate us on how important this program is to Albertans, especially those that are trying to work their way through the system.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you to you for emceeding that ceremony and for all of your advocacy for the folks who are doing that work now. It was great to be able to see that drug treatment court in Fort McMurray, being the last one for that commitment that we made during the campaign to expanding our drug treatment courts throughout the province.

I would say that \$4 million annually is allocated for the operation of our now seven drug treatment courts. That's Calgary; Red Deer, which serves central Alberta; Edmonton; Fort McMurray; Grande Prairie; Lethbridge; and Medicine Hat. All of these drug treatment courts provide wraparound supports to high-risk and nonviolent offenders whose crimes were driven by their addiction. The participants involved in these drug treatment courts accept responsibility for their criminal activity and are provided with intensive drug treatment. They also receive community supports and criminal behaviour interventions. These services help participants address their drug addiction, find housing, employment in the community, and get back to the communities, all while reducing their criminal behaviour and supporting them to live healthier lives.

I think even one of the folks that spoke at the announcement is a graduate of a previous drug treatment court who has now been hired to work as a caseworker and to have her tell her personal story. That announcement was really touching. Thank you again for your work in supporting this drug treatment court in Fort McMurray.

Mr. Yao: Again, thank you so much, Minister, for all your hard work on that file. I think we're really providing a good alternative to some of the things that they might be doing in our neighbouring province of British Columbia. We're taking a different approach, and I think we're going to come up with some better results for our most vulnerable.

Thank you.

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

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 7, 2023, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Education.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

