



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 15, 2023
9 a.m.

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**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC), Chair
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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services

Hon. Jeremy Nixon, Minister

Clay Buchanan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Disability Services

Cynthia Farmer, Deputy Minister

Shaun Peddie, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Services

9 a.m.

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

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

The Chair: I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024.

I'd 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'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of this committee. We'll start to my right.

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

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, MLA for Taber-Warner.

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

Mr. Yaseen: Good morning. Muhammad Yaseen, MLA, Calgary-North.

Ms Fir: Tanya Fir, MLA, Calgary-Peigan.

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

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

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Good morning. Jeremy Nixon, MLA, Calgary-Klein, Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services. I have with me today Toby Schneider, Cynthia Farmer, Michael Lundquist, and David Williams.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Ms Sigurdson: Introduce your staff.

Ms Renaud: Oh, yeah. This is Mary Ellen Green, who is my CA.

The Chair: Sorry. We don't have a mic on, and we missed – can we go back to Marie Renaud, please?

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert. And beside me to my left is Mary Ellen Green.

Ms Sigurdson: Good morning. Lori Sigurdson, Edmonton-Riverview.

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

The Chair: Okay. I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: the hon. Mr. Hunter is substituting for Mr. Long.

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 visual stream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website.

Members participating remotely, if there are any in the future here – we don't have any at the moment – are encouraged to turn on your camera 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. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent during the duration of the meeting.

The committee requested American sign language interpretation services for this meeting. Unfortunately, the service is in high demand, and we were unable to secure interpreters, but I would like to thank all committee members who reached out on this matter.

Regarding speaking rotation and time limits, 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 the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of 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, the speaking times will follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and 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 the rotation, please send a message or e-mail 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 object to having a break today? No. Okay. So we will have one.

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 during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on the estimates and amendments will occur in the Committee of Supply on March 16, 2023. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which time they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk with 20 hard 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, please, at all times, including

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

I now invite the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, Minister.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, everyone, for being here this morning. Good morning. It's good to see everyone. I am pleased to be here today to be able to provide an overview of the Seniors, Community and Social Services budget. As you all heard on February 28, Budget 2023 is about securing Alberta's future and making life more affordable for Albertans. Alberta's economy has momentum, and our finances have recovered.

Budget 2023 will build on this momentum and will focus on even more job creation and diversification as we continue to be the economic engine of Canada. We are securing Alberta's future by remaining steadfast, committed to responsible fiscal management, paying down the debt, and saving for tomorrow while making sound investment decisions to sustain the vital public services Albertans need and deserve. For my department, we are doing this by making sure vulnerable Albertans and seniors continue to have access to the programs and services that they need, with targeted increases to fund sustainable caseload growth, indexation and financial benefits, wage increases for front-line workers, and relief payments for Albertans struggling with affordability.

With Budget 2023 we are fully funding AISH, income support, and Alberta seniors' benefits, including a 6 per cent increase to address inflation and investment to streamline service delivery; increasing access to disability services, with funding for front-line workers, worker wages, service providers, and addressing the persons with developmental disabilities wait-list; record funding for homeless and outreach supports as well as housing supports; increased funding for women's shelters to protect women and families fleeing abuse; continued investment to help Albertans build their skills and be able to find jobs; and more funding to support the growth of our civil society, with more than 90 per cent of our annual budget flowing directly to individuals and front-line organizations supporting vulnerable Albertans.

Budget 2023 supports our goal to secure Alberta's future and help individuals and families gain independence and security. One of our key priorities is to guarantee stability for Albertans to make sure that those depending on programs get the supports they need. That starts by ensuring that there is a strong, resilient social services workforce. Through this budget we are providing \$305 million over three years to increase the wages of more than 20,000 critical front-line disability, homeless, and domestic violence prevention workers. These workers support thousands of vulnerable Albertans every day in our communities. They are dedicated to supporting those in need in our province. They deserve fair compensation for the work that they do.

At the same time, we will also help operators address the rising administration and operational costs that they are absorbing due to inflation with \$25 million in funding. These rising costs are making it harder to provide Albertans with the stable, reliable services that they need. The last few years have been challenging, with the sector struggling to attract and retain qualified staff. More funding for better wages to help with rising costs will go a long way to improve workforce challenges and guarantee Albertans have access to the supports that they need.

In addition, we will address the PDD wait-list. Budget 2023 includes \$37.5 million in additional funding for caseload growth and to get about 500 individuals on the wait-list connected to services. This will take time as we work with service providers to

build capacity to take in more clients, but I'm confident that with the changes we have made internally to improve the program and with increased financial support, we will be able to help more Albertans in need. The program will continue to be a lifetime support for thousands of adult Albertans with disabilities for years to come.

We will also continue to support children with disabilities through the family support for children with disabilities program. In fact, Budget 2023 increases funding for the program by \$30.1 million. This funding will support about 16,000 Albertans and their families, ensuring their continued health and well-being. I know how important our disability programs are to vulnerable Albertans and their families, and we will continue to work with the disability community to make sure that we are providing appropriate supports.

Budget 2023 provides further stability with compassionate and generous funding supports for families, seniors, and our most vulnerable. This includes \$173 million to index financial benefits this year and going forward for AISH, income support, and Alberta seniors' benefits. Additionally, the budget includes \$276 million for the affordability and inflation relief program, providing payments for the remaining three months of this program. That means that every senior, every Albertan receiving AISH, income support, or PDD services will get these affordability payments, which are critical, life-long supports for individuals struggling to put food on their tables and to be able to pay their bills.

9:10

We all know Albertans are struggling with affordability, and we want to help. That's why we're investing \$10 million to support food banks and food security programs across this province. These organizations are the front lines, feeding Albertans, and this support is much needed. We continue to build on our partnerships with those organizations to make sure that Albertans do not go hungry.

Additionally, the budget includes \$16 million for the low-income transit pass program to help Albertans in more communities to be able to get to where they need to go. This includes \$9 million to extend the Calgary and Edmonton low-income transit pass pilot for an additional year and \$7 million to support low-income transit pass programs in more communities across this province. Together these measures are making a big difference. Ultimately, these initiatives are reducing costs and making life more affordable for vulnerable Albertans.

As I mentioned earlier, Budget 2023 will focus on even more job creation and employment. Due to the success of the Alberta at work initiative, Alberta's unemployment rate has decreased from more than 15 per cent in May 2020 to 6 per cent just this past January 2023. In Budget 2023 we are investing nearly \$96 million in career and employment services. This funding ensures Albertans who are looking for work have access to the resources and the tools that they need to be able to gain the skills and rejoin the workforce. This year we are aiming for 65 per cent of Albertans using employment services to gain independence and stability through employment.

Budget 2023 secures the future of Alberta, and that includes the most vulnerable, Albertans struggling with homelessness. I know first-hand the difficult and complex nature of this issue. In fact, Budget 2023 increases annual funding and support for homeless shelters to \$83.5 million. That is an increase of 70 per cent from last year's budget. This significant increase ensures that we can continue to implement our action plan on homelessness, which includes providing 24/7 shelter supports where possible. We have also extended the number of shelter spaces for the winter months in communities where there is urgent need and are piloting a service hub model in Calgary and Edmonton. This model focuses on meeting the clients where they are at and linking them to supports

like housing, health, financial, and social services to help end the cycle of homelessness.

This is a dynamic file, and we are working on many fronts to make positive outcomes for those that need it in our communities. One of those fronts is, of course, affordable housing. Through the stronger foundations affordable housing strategy we will and are already adding 25,000 more units of housing by 2031, and Budget 2023 gets us closer to that goal. Through capital plan 2023 we are investing over \$468 million in the Alberta Social Housing Corporation over three years to provide 6,900 new and regenerated affordable housing units and support 3,300 jobs. We are investing \$94 million over three years to maintain and repair government-owned and -supported housing units across this province. We also invest \$53.7 million over three years into the Indigenous housing capital program to build new housing for Indigenous communities. This is an increase of \$16.8 million from Budget 2022. These investments are a clear indicator of our commitment to take action and provide more affordable and accessible housing options for Albertans with low incomes.

So much of the work my ministry does depends on a strong partnership with communities and with civil society. Civil society plays a critical role in the well-being of Albertans and Alberta's economy. These organizations help create stability for vulnerable Albertans and increase their inclusion in our communities, which is why, through Budget 2023, we are providing a \$5 million increase for family and community support services, FCSS, to strengthen preventative services to help vulnerable Albertans be resilient in the face of crisis. Budget 2023 also extends funding for the civil society fund by investing an additional \$3 million per year over the next three years. The investment we have made through this fund will help kick-start the economy, social recovery, and supports for vulnerable Albertans, and we are proud that we continue to build on the success of the fund to fuel the important work that civil society is taking in our communities.

Budget 2023 is a well-thought-out and responsible plan. It secures the future for Alberta, it ensures we continue to be the economic engine for Canada, and it protects vulnerable Albertans. Budget 2023 enables Seniors, Community and Social Services to help work alongside community partners.

The Chair: Thank you so much, 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 in both the committee room and on Microsoft Teams. Member, would you like to combine your time with the minister's?

Ms Renaud: Sure.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. I'm comfortable with that.

The Chair: All right. Please proceed.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Before we begin, I just want to acknowledge that we are gathered here today on Treaty 6 territory, homeland of the Métis people. We pay our respect to the ancestors of this place and reaffirm our relationship with one another and to each of us, working towards truth and reconciliation.

Okay. I'm going to start with some questions around line 5.3 in government estimates, women's shelters. These questions are based on the line. The minister said in his opening remarks that there is an increase to women's shelters, which is true. Actually, there is about a \$4 million increase. But how much of that increase of this \$4

million was needed to cover operations for the new shelter? I understand there's Jessie's House in Morinville, that I don't believe was included in this line last budget. And then there's Ruth's in Calgary, that I'm not sure was included in this line. Is that what is making up this difference?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: A good chunk of the additional money is designed for increasing capacity. Over the last six months I've spent a lot of time travelling the province meeting with women's shelter providers, and there is discussion about increasing capacity. So that's what we're doing here, for sure.

Ms Renaud: And that includes Jessie's House and Ruth's House?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: That includes Jessie's House; I don't believe that includes Ruth's House.

Ms Renaud: So the \$4 million, if I'm – just make sure I'm correct. The \$4 million increase, Minister: you said that out of that \$4 million increase comes Jessie's House. That's, like, about 1 point something million dollars. Do you have any . . .

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I can clarify. The increase provides annual operating funding of \$1.6 million to Jessie's House as well as previously committed funding for Mountain Rose Women's Shelter Association, central Alberta's women's outreach society, Juliette's place . . .

Ms Renaud: How much was that?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Give me one second.

. . . St. Paul and district crisis association, and Strathcona Shelter Society Ltd.

Ms Renaud: So there are, like, three or four, and you're not sure about Ruth's in Calgary.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah, I'll have to clarify on Ruth's House.

Ms Renaud: Okay. That'd be great. If you could do that, that'd be awesome. So that is three additional shelters.

You said that there is an increase in the line to women's shelters, but really it's just about adding new programs into that line. Is that correct?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Absolutely. Right now we're committed to increasing capacity to make sure that anybody fleeing domestic violence has a place to go.

Ms Renaud: But these aren't additional dollars going to existing programs. Correct?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: No. These are about increasing capacity.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So there are no additional dollars going to the existing programs. That is what I'm getting at. So let's say, like, WIN House, for example: there's none of this \$4 million . . .

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Not in this budget.

Ms Renaud: Gotcha. So women's shelters – I knew this because, actually, two days after the budget was dropped, the shelters received their contracts, and there were no increases for anything. I think that it's important when, you know, we're making statements like: we increased funding to women's shelters – technically that is correct. There's \$4 million extra, but none of that is going to the existing programming. You're right; it's just extending capacity.

We know shelter worker wages have been stagnant since 2016. For some reason in the announcement or in this increase the minister chose just to exclude this tiny, little portion of the human service workforce, really. If you think – I asked a couple of different people to try to get a size of the workforce, and it's about a thousand people big, so it's not very big. It's not like the disability sector. That is quite large. This is not very big, and it's not that many workers. But I don't understand how this ministry – coming out of COVID, we know that there was this shadow pandemic. I'm sure you know, Minister, that the work that the shelter workers do is incredibly stressful. If you've ever spent time in a shelter, working in a women's shelter, it's incredibly difficult, yet you chose not to increase this group's wages. I'd just like to know why.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. Well, I appreciate the question, and, look, I appreciate the advocacy as well. I do fully know full well the importance of women's shelters and the great work that they do there. You know, when you're dealing with crisis daily, it comes with challenges, so I commend anybody that works in a women's shelter. I have friends that do, former colleagues that do. We have spent a lot of time travelling the province meeting with women's shelter providers. The biggest ask that I've been getting as I've been touring with women's shelter providers is for more housing, and Budget 2023-2024 is a commitment to building more housing.

9:20

When it comes specifically to the wage question, my mandate letter was to address social sector wage disparity. We did an analysis back in November. A cross-sector analysis found that shelter workers were making \$18.70 an hour on average – don't quote me on the exact because it's off the top of my head – but disability workers on average were making about \$20 but in some communities as low as \$15. These folks were competing with Starbucks for employees.

Ms Renaud: Can I just . . .

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry; just one clarification because I want to answer your question.

When we were looking at women's shelters, they were making about \$26, which was significantly higher than children's services in many other areas. My task was to deal with the wage disparity, which we did by giving shelter workers and PDD workers a bump. If we had given women's shelter workers a bump, it would have created more of a disparity than we had before. Now what we need to do as we move forward is that we need to work across ministries to make sure that we have cohesion as we move forward to make sure that these valuable workers are getting compensated appropriately.

Ms Renaud: Maybe a couple of points. There are no disability positions other than a sleep shift that are paid at minimum wage. That I know as fact. So that's incorrect.

I think it's unfair to compare a disability worker or a homeless shelter worker and a women's shelter and say: well, these guys already make a little bit more, so we're not going to give them anything. They have struggled. We know that I think about over 96 per cent of shelter workers are women. Many of them have to work two jobs to support themselves and their families, much like disability workers. And this isn't about pitting one sector against another. We all knew – we all said it, I'm sure, in the Chamber – during COVID that there was a shadow pandemic. Things were worse, crisis everywhere, very difficult work, and to purposefully leave this group out, you know, I think is a disservice. They're already dealing with extraordinary turnover, and I'm sure you know

the cost of turnover is very high: all the training, the lost time, the coverage. It's very difficult. In fact, the one stat that I heard from the shelter sector was that only about was it 2 per cent of their workers have been there for two years? That's really tough when you don't have stable senior staff. Again, I'm just incredibly disappointed that this group, this really small group – so it's not a big financial commitment – was left out.

I had a question. Hang on a second here. In the last annual report it listed a total of 52 shelters in Alberta. There were women's, second-stage, elder abuse, fee-for-service reserve shelters. What is the total number being used to support this budget? And the more important question: in the shelter line specifically – so that is 5.3 – are there any other supports in here other than women's shelters? Is this line funding any other programming other than women's shelters?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: This funds 31 women's shelters; 17 second-stage shelters; two senior shelters, which is two of the 10 senior shelters in Canada here in Alberta, which I think we should be proud of; five outreach agencies; and five shelters in FN communities, First Nations communities.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Could you tell me what the five outreach ones are?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. If you give me a second, we can get that for you.

Ms Renaud: Actually, if you can just table that. It'd be faster.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah, we can table that for you. Sorry; I just don't know off the top of my head.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. That's fine.

According to the annual report 2020-21 – that's the most recent one that we have – there are five fee-for-service reserve shelters who have also had their per diems frozen for some time. Do you know how long they've been frozen?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: No. Off the top of my head I don't.

Deputy, do you have the answer to that question?

We can table that for you.

Ms Renaud: Okay. That would be great.

I guess you might be able to just table this next question, too. How much did the province bill the federal government in this fiscal, and what does it look like for the budget year? The reason I'm asking is that we know Indigenous women, obviously, are abused at alarming rates and disproportionately end up in shelters. So how much revenue has the government of Alberta, this ministry, brought into revenue as a direct result of the abuse of Indigenous women, and where is that being invested?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry. I don't believe I have that, but we can get you that information.

Ms Renaud: Okay. That would be great. If you could table that, that'd be awesome.

In one of the announcements we heard about that the ministry is funding 175 family violence prevention workers. And then, you know, I talked about the shelter sector. That isn't very big; it's, like, about a thousand people, right? So you can imagine that out of that thousand, the vast majority are working in the shelter. There's a little, tiny piece that does the outreach work, the family violence prevention outreach. I don't know how big it is, but I'm sure it's quite small. Now, this increase that your government announced

was specifically for family violence prevention workers, but you excluded the family violence prevention workers that work out of shelters, that are attached to shelters. Can you explain that to me?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Again, you had talked about women's shelters not getting a bump since 2016. The program areas where we gave bumps hadn't seen a bump since 2014 and were significantly behind averages for comparable sectors, other sectors. We needed to make sure that we were bringing those up who had their significantly lower wages than \$26 an hour, which \$26 is for the work they've done. We needed to get those wages up to a place that's more comparable.

Ms Renaud: It's been a while since I've been in this sector, so I'm not aware of the wages. Would you be able to table what the government sort of marks are? I know that with the disability sector budgets are determined based on, like, a staffing model, and then there are amounts assigned to each position, so a team leader, a community support worker, a vocational support worker. Same in shelter, right? You have, like, a team leader or a person doing maintenance. You have the outreach worker. Would you be able to table those numbers with this committee, the hourly amounts?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. We should be able to table our process.

Ms Renaud: That's great. That would be awesome.

Back to my question. Maybe I missed this; you answered it, and I didn't get it. Why leave out that little group of family violence prevention workers that are attached to shelters? What I've heard from the shelter sector is that there are cases where there's a family violence prevention worker attached to a shelter maybe working with someone – this isn't real; I'm just making an example. Let's say that they're attached to the Y, and they're working together on a case or with the family, supporting a family. One got an increase; the other did not. You can see that makes it difficult, right? It's a small sector, everybody knows, so why fund some and not the others?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. I appreciate the question. I think what's important here: the goal has been to deal with the wage disparity within the social sector and making sure that people who do comparable work are getting comparable pay. That is the effort. If we've missed a category, we're certainly going to look into it and, as we move forward, make sure that we're addressing that. If somebody is making an average of \$19 an hour, per se, and we know that we've got comparable workers making \$22, we're definitely going to look at that. Again, I think it's critical that we're paying people comparatively across ministries.

Ms Renaud: If I'm understanding: you're going to go back, have a look, and see if you've omitted funding some family violence outreach prevention workers. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I'm more than happy to go look at that and work with you.

Ms Renaud: That'd be great. That'd be awesome.

A couple of things. You mentioned that shelter workers haven't had an increase to their wages since 2016. Well, they got an increase in 2016, but it wasn't to their wages, right? It was for capacity and for other positions, whether it was, like, outreach or – there was actually a component for child care. It wasn't wages.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Similar to what we're doing with women's shelters, increasing capacity, then; is that what you think?

Ms Renaud: Capacity? No. They were adding new positions to the shelter that were needed.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Oh, I see.

Ms Renaud: For example, let's say that they needed a child care worker with some, you know, unique skills so maybe that's what was added. I mean, sure; it's capacity, but it did not go to wages.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Certainly, I mean, that's what we're doing with women's shelters right now; we're working towards increasing capacity. What we've seen as the need is to bring more women's shelters online. There are lots of great people in the community doing great work, and we thought that the government should get behind that work, so that's what you're seeing here in this budget.

Ms Renaud: Of course, we should get behind it. I think it's awesome that disability workers and wait-lists are getting money. We'll get into that later. I think it's – you know, any time this sector is getting any kind of support and attention is a good day. So that's a good thing.

I have a quick question. On page 113 of the 2023 ministry business plan I note \$23.3 million to support a continuum of services for Albertans impacted by family and sexual violence. Actually, it might be the fiscal plan that that is in. So a continuum of services for Albertans impacted by family and sexual violence. Given that there are already lines in the ministry, I'm a little bit confused. Are these new funds, or are you just sort of saying, "We're investing this much, and it's already in the ministry"?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I'm sorry. Can you repeat the question? I missed it.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. Page 113 of the business plan I think it is. Yes. Page 113 of the business plan notes – it's in one of the initiatives supporting a key objective. It notes \$23.3 million "to support a continuum of services for Albertans impacted by family and sexual violence." So you're just announcing a line item? Is that what this is, or are these new funds?

9:30

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We're communicating, yeah, that investment in addressing sexual violence.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So it was just announcing something that's already been done and budgeted and been there for a while.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: And that we're continuing to support individuals who've experienced sexual violence in our community.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So it's just continuing. This isn't a new fund. These aren't new initiatives in any way. This is just what's been there before.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We're supporting the great work that's being done in our community. Obviously, this government is very committed to making sure there are supports in our community for individuals who've experienced sexual violence.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. The only reason I'm asking is that I thought perhaps this was something else that was coming.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Oh, I see. Okay.

Ms Renaud: And the only reason I'm asking is – I was just going to say that if that was the case, that this was sort of funding

something in the future or something else, you know, it's really important to bulk up the core before expanding, and the core of this particular sector isn't really in good shape.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: And I appreciate that statement there. I have had the chance to visit a few sites and talk to not-for-profit leaders, and of course I've been working very closely with Parliamentary Secretary Tanya Fir, status of women, who's also been working at connecting with agencies. We're trying to work with them to figure out, "How do we help support this great work that's being done there?" for sure.

Ms Renaud: Okay. All right. That is great.

That's about all I have for women's shelters. I'm happy that you are going to look at this and see at least about the outreach workers that are not being paid, just like the other outreach workers. You know, even have a look at this sector. By pitting them against each other and comparing like that, I don't think it's healthy, and I don't think we're doing the sector any favours. If we continue to do things as government, perhaps that makes turnover even worse; ultimately, everybody pays.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I value your comments. There is no intent here to pit sector against sector. I think we need to now figure out . . .

Ms Renaud: But it happened.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I appreciate what you're saying. We had to take a look. I think it would have gotten worse if we had given a wage bump to people who were making \$8 more an hour than people who were working in regular shelters. That would have had its own challenges. I think that now, as we move forward, regardless of who's in government, we need to work across the ministry and make sure that we're paying people equitably for the work that they're doing.

Ms Renaud: That is great, which is why I'm looking forward to seeing the amounts that are assigned to positions. For example, I think you were quoting – I can't remember what you said now – \$20 or \$21 for, like, a basic CSW in the disability sector.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah, I think it was \$20.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Sure. That might be a level 1, but I know, for sure, that most positions are not level 1. I would like to know sort of how that calculation arrived. It would be very good to see what positions are being paid. For example . . .

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Well, you know . . .

Ms Renaud: Let me just finish.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah.

Ms Renaud: FMS, right? You've got service providers, family-managed support. I know family-managed support primarily are paid at a CSW2 rate. So when I hear that, you know, the average wage for a disability worker is \$20, I kind of go: well, that seems odd.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. Look, I have received and I'm sure you've received numerous correspondence from individuals that work in the disability sector that were outlining what their hourly rate was and expressing that concern. I think there was a petition with 15,000 names on it at one point. I'm sure you saw that as well. Are they not being truthful with me about what their rate of pay is?

Ms Renaud: I'm not saying that they're not being truthful.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Okay.

Ms Renaud: I am saying that some positions are funded lower than others, and it would be important to – there's a range. It's important to know – I would like to know – how you arrived at that average.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Well, I think you're actually touching on a large challenge as well that we have within the sector, which is disparity even within the disability sector in regard to how we pay.

Ms Renaud: Absolutely.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: You're right. You do talk to people that are getting on the higher end of that . . .

Ms Renaud: Absolutely.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: . . . probably closer to women's shelters. There are people that were making \$15 an hour, because I talked to them. There's an average within all of that which is . . .

Ms Renaud: Are you saying that people not sleeping, like not a sleep shift, in the disability sector – not sleeping – are getting paid \$15 an hour?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I talked to them while I've been on my tour, yeah.

Ms Renaud: Could somebody in your department get that information? If there is somebody working in the disability sector, not on a sleep shift, that's getting paid \$15 an hour, that's a new turn of events.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Well, they're not getting paid \$15 an hour anymore because we've given them all a raise.

Ms Renaud: Even if you gave them a 6 per cent bump, on \$15 that's still pretty bad. If there are people that are not sleeping that are getting paid that low, could you table that?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sure.

Ms Renaud: That'd be great.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I can introduce you to them if you're willing to come on tour with me.

Ms Renaud: No. I don't need to go on tour with you. Thank you.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: It would be lovely, though. We'd have some fun.

Ms Renaud: Yeah.

Okay. How much time do we have? This is the 40-minute clock. Okay.

We're going to move on a little bit, a little sojourn into the disability sector, which is always fun. I think it's really important to talk about changes to this ministry.

Now, I think it's also important to know that we're super close to an election. Like, we're just over two months away from an election. I was a little bit surprised to see the depth of changes in the ministry reorganization that happened, like, 74 days before an election. Maybe I'm cynical, but, you know, I think: why on earth would you do this 74 days before an election? Anyway, let's talk about that.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I'd love to.

Ms Renaud: I want to provide some context. So 74 days before an election you chose to add more complex, oversubscribed, and heavily subscribed supports to a ministry that was already busy. Last year it was already about \$4 billion in spending, which is significant, and now we're up over \$5 billion. That is alarming for a number of reasons.

In the first budget, in 2019-20, there were 223 FTEs cut from community and social services. In the second UCP budget, in 2020-21, that was tabled at the height of COVID, more jobs were lost. In that second budget another 136 FTEs were removed, gone, taken away. Now, every time I asked at budget estimates, I always got the same answer: oh, attrition. Well, okay. I've asked for details numerous times. Where are these FTEs going? Where were they taken from? I have never received any clarity.

Now, the third budget, in 2021-22, cut another 21 jobs, and the fourth, 2022-23, cut another 102 jobs, for a total of 482 jobs. Between 2019 and 2022 almost 500 FTEs were removed from community and social services, now Seniors, Community and Social Services. Now, all of this was happening in the last year or so while this government was raking in billions – billions – and we were still hiving off jobs.

On page 161 of the fiscal plan – that's schedule 22 of the full-time equivalents – Seniors, Community and Social Services FTEs were adjusted from a previous total of 2,547 FTEs to 3,009, so that's an increase of 462 jobs. Now, we know that there was a transfer, obviously, with the reorganization. That is in the notes. But my question is: out of those jobs, how many were assigned to seniors, how many were assigned to housing, and how many were assigned to the office of the public guardian and trustee?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. I appreciate your comments. First of all, I'd like to address the bringing together of the two ministries. There's a lot of synergy between seniors and housing and what was community and social services. I think there's been a lot of value in bringing together the operational side of housing and the capital side of housing and working collaboratively together. A lot of the stakeholders overlap on that file. That's created a lot of efficiency as well as just a stronger ability for myself and for the ministry to be able to respond to the needs that are impacting the community. I think you can see that in the outcomes that you're seeing before you, even just in this budget. The number of things that we've been able to announce over the last six months have been significant as well in addressing the big concerns. I just wanted to be able to address that. I think that there has been value in bringing the ministry together, and certainly we're up to the task.

It's been able to create efficiencies as well overall by bringing the ministry together, having people that were working on similar things now working together on the same file. We've been able to move the needle forward within the ministry. Over the last couple of . . .

Ms Renaud: Can I just ask: whose idea was that to move those three huge departments? I'm just curious where that idea came from.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Well, I serve on behalf of the Premier, but certainly I always thought it was a good idea to bring housing together with homelessness, for example, or housing together with the disability sector, because there's a lot of overlap. Housing with seniors: you know as well as I do that housing for seniors is a major issue. And we were already talking about housing with domestic violence. Being able to work collaboratively, again, between the capital and the operating sides has added some significant value.

You know, I'd love to take credit, but certainly that came from the Premier's office.

In regard to your specific question Budget 2023 provides \$4 million, in total, to address funding for the workload assessment model for AISH and disability services, as you say: \$2.5 million for disability services, \$1.1 million for AISH, and \$0.5 million for the office of the public guardian.

Ms Renaud: I was just asking about FTEs.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Oh, FTEs. I've got the total dollar figures. That works out to 26 for disability services, roughly 10 for AISH, and five for the office of the public guardian and trustee.

9:40

Ms Renaud: Okay. Would you say that you're staffed up to where you want to be with AISH and income support?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry?

Ms Renaud: Would you say that there are enough staff in AISH and income support?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yes. There's been an incredible amount of work done over the last three years to create efficiencies and improve overall processes within the ministry. I think, again, the department has done a remarkable job in improving and streamlining this. There are efficiencies that have been created by bringing the two ministries together. I think that with this budget we will have the staffing levels that we need to continue to provide the excellence in support for Albertans.

Ms Renaud: Now, you know, I actually agree with you. Some of your comments about some of these departments working well together: I think that in a perfect world that would be a great idea. There is a lot of overlap. There is a lot of expertise to be shared, for sure. However, I think that with the state of the way things are right now – I mean, in Public Accounts we're lucky if we see this ministry once every two years. We're lucky in budget estimates if we get an hour and a half to ask questions on \$5 billion worth of spending. While there might be synergy and cost savings to have a massive ministry like this, I don't believe it provides a lot of opportunity for transparency for Albertans.

Again, we have limited tools – you know this – to get details and information, and our job is to try to get clarity for many stakeholders. I just want to put it on the record that in creating a monster ministry, yes, I agree that while there probably are some upsides to it, there are some serious drawbacks as well.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: With all due respect, I mean, that's what today is about, accountability as well. That's why we're here doing this question and answer, why I thought it was important we have a good back and forth.

Ms Renaud: It is, absolutely.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: But you guys only requested three hours with me. It could have been six hours. You're absolutely right; this is a huge ministry. We could have spent at least six hours talking about this, yet you only requested three hours.

Ms Renaud: We could have spent 12 hours talking about it; I agree with you.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. So a little disappointed by that, to be honest. [interjection]

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm not sure what's funny about that, but okay.

The ministry is now projected to spend about \$5 billion in this budget year. That includes all income supports, disability supports, homeless shelters, women's shelters, preventative municipal social service funding, career and employment services, the death review committee, the disability advocate, the Premier's council, seniors' programs, housing, and the office of the public guardian and trustee.

Now, the three-page Seniors, Community and Social Services business plan was not very helpful as a business tool. I'm not sure if you've, you know, worked outside of the nonprofit sector; I imagine you have at some point. I don't know about you, but this business plan would not fly in the private sector in any way. For, like, \$5 billion in spending, to have this little amount of detail, almost zero metrics about – you know, how could we look back a year from now and go, “Okay; well, we invested this much to wait-lists”?

Now, in your comments you said that you want to create capacity for 500 people on this wait-list. That's great. That's a metric. That is something you can go back and look at, but there's nothing like that here in this business plan. I just want to point out that, you know, we don't have a lot of things to reference, Albertans don't have a lot of things to reference to hold governments to account. This tool, this business plan, is fairly important, and it's not very helpful in terms of the targets that are laid out.

For example, there's a goal. For a \$1 billion program, PDD, the goal specifically says: to create capacity within PDD to bring more people into service and to address challenges. Now, that's a mouthful, and that's a lot of work. I know that; you know that. That is a ton of work. To meet this goal is a lot of effort and work, and I'm just curious why there wouldn't be some transparent targets so that the work of this ministry, the super important work of this ministry – I think it's very important – can be evaluated by Albertans and by the opposition as well, to say: we invested this much money of Albertans' resources, and here's what we got as a result.

But I don't see that, and it seems to be getting worse, and I'm not sure why. This particular business plan, although it has almost a billion dollars more in spending, has less in terms of goals and targets. Added was seniors' services and programming, estimated at \$521.389 million for '23-24, not to mention the hundred thousand people touched by these programs, and the only corresponding goal in the business plan says that the ministry will raise awareness about elder abuse, support programs, and help people age in place. Great goals. Really good goals. You know what? Most of us will say: yeah, I totally support that goal; I would have that goal. But it doesn't mean anything if there are not targets and then commitments about the work that'll be done to reach that goal.

Another one: housing. There's an amount. You know, we've got \$125 million, almost \$126 million, but there's no corresponding goal. There's no objective. There's nothing for us to track or measure.

Added public guardian and trustee for another \$27 million, but not just that, right? We also know the OPGT also manages over \$700 million in assets. That's a fair amount of work, and you would think that you would want a goal for that. The only goal there is to ensure personal financial decisions are made in the best interest of Albertans. Now, that's the role of the OPGT. I mean, we know that. That's just basic. But there are no other goals. There are no goals about change. There are no goals about growth. There are no goals about investment marks that you want to hit. Nothing like that.

So my question. There's over \$5 billion in spending in this budget for very complex and vital supports for Albertans, and there's

barely any detail or any objectives that are measurable, much less useful, not to us, because I think we live and breathe this stuff, but to the average Albertan, so the average parent that has a child with a disability that wants to look at this ministry's documents and find out: “What can I expect? What can my child expect?” There is very little for them to measure, and there's very little for them to understand. Do you consider this business plan sufficient for this much spending?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry. There was a lot there. I'm going to go right back to the beginning. I spent my entire career, outside of working as a carpenter for a short while and building countertops, and I was a lifeguard for a little while – not a lot of business planning as a lifeguard. But I spent my entire career otherwise in the not-for-profit sector. I managed multimillion-dollar programs, 60-plus staff teams, and I can tell you that business planning was a significant part of the work that we did, strategic planning, so I know that that is a very important part of our not-for-profit sector, to be able to plan for businesses. Having that experience is important.

You know, I take your feedback that you're not happy with the business plan and you feel that it doesn't measure, but even your last comment there about affordable housing – I mean, there are some pretty specific targets in here that we've set, and I think they're ambitious, but Budget 2023-2024 certainly outlines and provides the funding to be able to address these things.

Ms Renaud: Are you referring to the initiative? Is that what you mean?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I'm referring to the part where it says projected targets. These are our goals. This is what we will be – performance measure 1(c). Yeah. I mean, this is what we will be held against in three years, in one year, and we're already demonstrating action in regard to . . .

Ms Renaud: So these are investments.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: These are specific targets, though; 25,000 units over 10 years.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. These are investments. These are investments, though.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: But they are targets. They are our objective, and this is what's going . . .

Ms Renaud: So you're comfortable with this level of detail and planning?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: You know what? We follow Treasury Board guidelines.

Ms Renaud: I know. I saw a change. Yeah.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: And we are also audited by the Auditor General. So, yeah, I am comfortable, and I believe that we've had a high level of scrutiny, and the team here has done an excellent job putting this together.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I have a couple of quick questions about Clare's law. Could you tell me what the total costs were of setting up and implementing Clare's law?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Just give me one second.

Ms Renaud: Sure.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: So we have piloted Clare's law. We've been partnering with Sagesse. I believe I know the number, but I don't want to say it just in case I'm wrong. You know, I had a conversation with Sagesse the other day. They've had a tremendous amount of success so far in the first two years. Looking forward to the third year so we can be able to provide good metrics to be able to demonstrate that success. Okay. I was right. I had \$200,000 in my head. We are allocating \$192,000 to support the ongoing operations of Clare's law.

Ms Renaud: Is that annual? So that's annual funding to Sagesse?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Annual funding to Sagesse. Yeah.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Can you tell me – I guess it's two years, you said? So two years this has been – is it two full years?

9:50

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: It's been in there for two full years. Yep.

Ms Renaud: Two full years. Okay.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We're in our third year of the pilot program. Yeah.

Ms Renaud: Okay. How many women received information on their risk, and how many applied?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Since then there have been 370 applications for disclosure received.

Ms Renaud: Okay. And how many got the information?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I don't have that information in front of me, but certainly I can get it to you.

Ms Renaud: If you could get that and table that, that would be great.

This has been going on for two years and 370 applications. We're not sure how many people have received disclosures, but you'll table that. Has any evaluation whatsoever on this process, program, set-up, anything at all, been done?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: That's right. This is a pilot program, and this year we will be evaluating that.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So you'll only be evaluating after the two years.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Well, there were 370 applicants for disclosure, so we know that there's been significantly more. They'd only expected a hundred a year, and they've been receiving significantly more. So we're in conversation with them about: how do we actually help them, support them, in the final year to make sure that they can do that and complete the pilot program successfully?

Ms Renaud: Well, the pilot was three years.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Three years. They have one more year left of the pilot program, and then we'll be able to talk about the program. It's very difficult to measure that in the middle of the pilot program.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. You're right. It's a three-year pilot, so nothing coming for a while.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Hopefully, next year.

Ms Renaud: For a while.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I guess. "A while" is perspective, isn't it?

Ms Renaud: A year. Okay. Fair.

Okay. I want to talk a little bit now about food banks. On page 111 of the business plan I note the \$5 million in grants to food banks and civil society organizations supporting food security. That is located in FCSS, correct? So that \$5 million would be located in line 6.2. Is that correct?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. That's correct.

Ms Renaud: Okay. How much of that \$5 million increase that went through FCSS – how much of that went to permanent food banks?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Three million dollars, I believe, right?

Ms Renaud: Three million dollars of the \$5 million?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry. I want to make sure I give you the right number. Yeah. Three million dollars went to food banks, and then we had an additional \$2 million that community organizations that provide and address food security could apply for.

Ms Renaud: Like, what kind of community organizations?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Well, I can think of a number. We have a list at some point here.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I guess your release did say that it was for food banks and other supporting organizations.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Can I tell you why?

Ms Renaud: Yeah.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Food banks have a certain reach into the community, but there are a number of different community and cultural groups as well that have a broader reach and can also work towards meeting the unique needs of those individual cultural communities. One of the big things I've heard from individuals is that a lot of the time the food that's offered through food banks is not the type of food that their culture or their community is used to working with and preparing. So we've been partnering with numerous not-for-profit community organizations to try to address that – also, individual groups have different reach in the community – and to be able to understand and identify need and be able to bring resources to where they are.

I mean, I can start listing from the top here. We've got the Airdrie Food Bank, Alex Mirror Wellness Supports, Athabasca Good Samaritan, Banff Food Bank, Barrhead Food Bank, Bashaw and District Food Bank, Beaverlodge Christmas Hamper . . .

Ms Renaud: If you could table that list, Minister, that would be great.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Oh, yeah. I would love to.

Ms Renaud: All I actually wanted to know was – so the \$3 million went to food banks, but there was \$2 million to organizations. That's what I wanted to know, just the list of the other organizations, nonpermanent food banks.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. I'm very happy to share this list with you. I think there's some great success here.

Ms Renaud: Okay. That'd be great. So you're going to table that.

Here's a question I have, and I have not understood this from the first day that I found out about it. I just don't get it, and I've asked you this in question period before. My expectation, I guess, from the release was that \$5 million is going to address food insecurity, me thinking that, you know, the vast majority would go to the food banks, the big food banks, I think that are doing a lot of work. I'm not saying they're the only food banks, for sure, but you've got Calgary and Edmonton, that are massive, that are like these feeder food banks, right? They're sending out food all over the place. I know that – and I represent St. Albert – Edmonton's Food Bank has sent food to St. Albert before, to lots of organizations in the inner city that are supporting people without homes. We know that.

I just don't understand what equation was used so that the big food banks ended up together, combined, with only about half a million dollars. Like, I don't get that. There's about 104 food banks I think was listed, and the two biggest ones, two massive ones, combined only got about half a million dollars. We heard from Edmonton's Food Bank – they were quite vocal about it – that that covered their food expenses for probably a month. They're doing about 31,000 hampers a month, and they're sending food out to, I think, like, 300 organizations. I can't speak to Calgary because I did not ask them for numbers. But could you explain this to me? Like, what equation was used to determine what went where?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: You know, I think it's important to recognize the amazing work that food banks have done and these other not-for-profit organizations have done in regard to addressing food security and throughout time have done this without any resources from government, including under when you guys were government. There were absolutely zero pennies put into food banks. They've been quite successful over the years in regard to mobilizing community. A lot of their success is also because of volunteerism but a broader community engagement in addressing food security. We don't want to replace that. I think it's important that we continue to encourage that level of civil society action to make sure that we as people are involved in helping address and meet the needs of our neighbours. I think we don't want to lose that as a society.

This fund was not designed to take over that, but understanding that volunteerism had dropped, that donations had dropped coming out of the pandemic, and that demand had gone up, we went: we need to get behind that. That's why we did the matching-fund program as well, to help encourage the natural strength of these organizations to mobilize and keep the community involved, but we didn't want to come in and completely take over as well. This was partly in support of food banks but also partly as a call to action to Albertans to get involved and remind them that there is still this great need in our community. I think it's worked.

Ms Renaud: Could you explain to me – still I don't get it – why the two biggest food banks, biggest, huge, biggest need because they're feeding the most people, obviously, got combined half a million dollars? Like, what equation was used to figure that out?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: So we worked with – yeah. Funding was allocated based on the food bank service area, the population and services reported to the Food Banks Canada 2022 HungerCount, and recognizing that food banks in urban areas serve a larger amount of clients while the food banks in rural areas may have less access to donated food and may need to transport food throughout a larger service area.

Ms Renaud: Do you have any idea why the two largest food banks got half a million dollars out of a \$5 million pot?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry. I'm drawing a blank. We worked with FCSS and – sorry. I'm drawing a blank on the organization's name, but there were two organizations that we worked with in regard to setting the priorities for how these would be distributed within the community. As you well know, FCSS has a good feel for what's on the ground in regard to who is operating, so we worked in collaboration with FCSS and, I believe, Food Banks Alberta to distribute these resources in what we thought was an equitable way based off demand across the province in unique communities.

Ms Renaud: FCSS: that is within government?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Within municipal government.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So you consulted with FCSS, Food Banks Alberta. Now, did they develop an equation? Is that what you're saying? How did you decide? Like, just per capita?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. This was based off Food Banks Canada's 2022 HungerCount and recognized food banks in urban areas serve large – oh, sorry; based off demand and usage over the time. We worked with them to help distribute this based off population and need.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Sure. Based on that, just based on what you're reading, it makes sense, right? The biggest food banks, like Edmonton, massive food bank, massive food bank in Calgary – they are feeding the most people in this province, two food banks, by far – got half a million dollars out of a \$5 million pot, and I don't understand. If we're looking at, you know, the number of people that are fed, the amount of food insecurity, the amount of the pounds of food moving, like, I just don't understand how the two massive food banks got half a million dollars out of a \$5 million pot. I don't get it.

10:00

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: You're talking about a lot of not-for-profits across the province that work towards addressing food security. As we spread these funds out across the province to meet need, 119 established food banks were offered grant funding in December 2022. A hundred and nineteen. That's pretty significant.

Ms Renaud: It is significant. But I think if you look at the total number of people being fed, sadly, that are relying on food banks – and there are a lot of them – unfortunately, there are a lot in rural Alberta. Don't get me wrong. I think life is a lot more difficult in rural Alberta because there are not the supports that there are in the big city. I get that there are a lot of issues in rural Alberta. However, if you look at the sheer numbers and the pounds of food that are moving and the number of people that are being fed and the number of organizations that are being fed by a food bank, Calgary and Edmonton are massive and take care of most of the need in terms of numbers, right? We know that most of the people are in the large urban centres, but they got a fraction of \$5 million. I just don't understand.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Look, I appreciate what you're saying. I mean, they are two of 119 service providers, so they did get funding. But numerous other organizations not only across the province but in Calgary and Edmonton also got funding to address food challenges and food scarcity issues in their communities. This wasn't that Edmonton only got \$250,000. Edmonton – and we can break that down – got significantly more than that as we worked to partner with numerous agencies to address this need.

Ms Renaud: For example, just for comparison, how much . . .

The Chair: Member, the conversation needs to be directed through the chair, please.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Here we go. How much has gone to the St. Albert food bank? How about let's compare St. Albert to Edmonton.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry. Chair, what was the question?

Ms Renaud: Okay. What's the difference, let's say, between St. Albert food bank, what they received, and Edmonton's Food Bank? Just out of pure curiosity, just for, you know, the amount of people that live in St. Albert.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: St. Albert Community Village and Food Bank got \$60,000.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Got sixty . . .

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sixty thousand, yes.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Can you table the list of all of the food banks and what they received? Would you table that for this committee?

The Chair: Through the chair, please, Member. Through the chair.

Ms Renaud: Would you please table the list, Chair, through you, to the minister?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yes, Chair, I'd be happy to table the list.

Ms Renaud: Okay. That'd be great.

Okay. I'm just going to ask a couple of questions about AISH real quick. Now, I understand that AISH – the core benefits were reindexed to January 2023, which is great. You know, it's not perfect. It's not back to where it should be, which was 2019, but that never should have been undone. I think that we all saw the harm, Madam Chair, that happened after we deindexed. We saw all kinds of things happen. There was COVID. We saw just an explosion of food bank usage. We saw the numbers of people without homes increasing dramatically. I don't think it's a coincidence that all of these supports are being used more and more, because all of these benefits were deindexed. So while I'm happy that they were reindexed to January, it's really not enough and really should be reindexed to 2019. Again, we'll get that done. That should have been – it should never have happened.

Anyway, what were the total amounts of overpayments collected last year from AISH?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Do we have the answer to that question?

Ms Renaud: How much in the revenue line?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry. We do not have that answer for you.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Could you get that for us and table that?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We can look into it, yeah.

Ms Renaud: That'd be great. So you're just going to look into it?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We can get that for you, through the chair.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Now, this might sound like a really morbid question, Chair, but I've asked this question a number of times. Maybe I'm just not looking in the correct place to get the information, but I can see how many people are added to AISH sort

of when I – well, let's be clear. The ministry hasn't updated their data online for quite some time, so it's hard to get really current information. But, you know, based on what's there, I can see approximately how many new people apply for AISH and are accepted into AISH and all of that.

What I don't know is how many people leave AISH. I've asked this a number of times and don't get an answer. What I would like to know is: how many people last year, in the last fiscal, left AISH because, one, they turned 65 and were transitioned to another benefit or, two, left AISH because of employment, left AISH for full-time employment, altogether transitioned? Then how many people were removed from AISH rolls because they just died? I'm looking for those three numbers.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Approximately 3,500 people have left AISH annually. Just give us one sec; we should be able to get the employment numbers for you. Approximately 1 per cent of the caseload – it looks like 739 people – left because they turned 65.

Ms Renaud: Okay.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We don't have employment, but that's a great question. I'd love to get you the answer for that.

Ms Renaud: And death? Sorry, Chair. Death?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. We don't have that broken out, but 3,500 annually left, and that would include people who passed away.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I had asked a number of times throughout COVID, because it was really tough to get some information, but clearly this was a group that was very vulnerable, right? This is a group that all of us were working super hard to keep safe. I mean, this was the group. I think most of us that have friends or family that have disabilities probably have really awful stories about COVID, what that was like, and illnesses and all of that. What I'm trying to get at is: how many people left AISH and died, passed away, because of COVID, that were attributed to COVID? I know that that information is collected when people leave AISH, so I'm just looking for that number.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yes. It's a great question. I think it's worth looking into, and we're certainly more than happy to go see what we can do to find out what those numbers are.

Ms Renaud: Someone is sending a note behind you.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Oh, there we go. Certainly, we can look into it. It looks like it might be an AHS question in regard to where that information is tracked.

Ms Renaud: Fair. If it is an Alberta Health Services' question, would you undertake to get that number for us and share it with this committee?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I'm more than happy to put a query into Health to figure out what the answer to that question is.

Ms Renaud: Okay. That would be great.

Okay. I'm going to go quickly to FSCD, family support for children with disabilities, primarily line 4.4 in government estimates. We see that – where is it here? There is an increase of about – well, it depends what you look at. It depends if you look at the budget or the forecast. There is an increase. I don't know what number you're going with. I think I heard you in your opening

statement say, like, \$30 million, \$30.1 million. Is that the number you're going with?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: It was an increase of \$16 million.

Ms Renaud: Sixteen million. Okay. Out of that \$16 million – we know, again, that unless you did it yesterday, the open data hasn't been updated since December of last year, so that's the only number we have. We knew at that time there were 4,144 children or children/families, because it's family support, that were in service planning, were not being supported, did not have supports in their home, likely didn't have a signed contract, right? That's a lot of people, a lot of children. That's over 4,000. Can you tell me: out of that \$16 million increase, how much of that is going to address the wait-list?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: First of all, I want to stress how important FSCD is. I've talked to numerous people in my community, e-mail in the office, as well as I've been door-knocking. I talked to a lovely lady at a recent town hall about the challenges that she's been experiencing with FSCD. I think there's full recognition that this is a program area that needs attention.

Ms Renaud: It gets described often as a hot mess.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Well, I appreciate that. I think challenges coming out of the pandemic have increased it as well, so that's why we have this investment here. I sincerely appreciate your advocacy on this, and I want to make sure that you have my full acknowledgement that this is an area that we need to improve upon as a government for families and children with disabilities. We are committed to that, and I think you see that here with the \$16 million to try to address that and improve front-line supports.

It's not always about more money. We're also looking at the overall system to figure out: how do we improve, you know, reduce administrative burden for families that are trying to access supports, triage in a different way and make sure that people can get in and get those supports quicker, especially depending on the complexity of those needs? So stay tuned. I know you probably don't like that expression, but this is something that I am fully . . .

10:10

Ms Renaud: It's not my favourite.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yes.

But I'm very focused on working towards addressing that and do believe the 10 per cent increase as well for the disability sector is going to help support . . .

Ms Renaud: So the \$16 million is for wages?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: For wage increase as well as for increasing capacity to address . . .

Ms Renaud: So \$16 million: how much is going to wages?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Oh, sorry. It's \$16 million for wages and \$14 million for the wait-list, so we're increasing it by \$30.1 million.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Do you have any targets for that wait-list?

The Chair: Through the chair, please, Member.

Ms Renaud: For the \$14 million investment for the wait-list do you have any targets?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: This is linked to what you brought up as well in regard to addressing the data. Right now we paused the public release of family support data, as you mentioned, in order to get an independent source to review how we collect data and what data we're collecting. At this point, until we get the results of that independent review of our data collection, it's going to be difficult for me to answer that question, but my hope is that through that process we will be able to more clearly articulate what the wait-list is, who's on the wait-list. That way we can set goals and targets for how we move forward.

Ms Renaud: The program review is specifically about the wait-list?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: This is specific about how we collect data within FSCD and understanding what the challenges are.

Deputy, do you want to supplement?

Ms Farmer: Thank you very much. Cynthia Farmer, deputy minister. We're looking at the whole program in its entirety. As you know, through the chair, we have recommendations from the Auditor in terms of training. We've started there. We're looking at applications. We're looking at: how do we streamline the application process? As well, we're looking at, then, what we would call a wait-list. When we started to review the wait-list data that's included, we had things in there that we were collecting, numbers, for people that were being referred, and that's not really a true wait-list. Some of the numbers weren't actually giving us a true sense of the wait-list. So we have a very comprehensive review, which is being led by our ADM, in terms of disability. And as the minister said, we have actually some good things, we think, to cut red tape coming forward.

Ms Renaud: It wasn't clear, what you said about referrals. Like, say somebody would refer a family to FSCD. Then that would count as a wait-list?

Ms Farmer: Yes. It was interesting. Particularly last year you'd asked many questions about the wait-list. We took it back, and we looked at the wait-list just as far as people were waiting for a service plan and who they were. Some of the numbers would be different than how we would collect for income supports. We're looking at the whole program, but it's not just the data, as the minister is talking about; it's also the experience of the Albertan. We think that we can cut some red tape for Albertans. We think we can pathway Albertans to get services quicker. We're also looking at multiyear agreements, which I think families would be excited about.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. Big cost savings, I'm sure, at renewal to eliminate some renewals. Oh, sorry. Through the chair, there would be cost savings.

Anyway, do you have – I guess you don't have any metrics, then, for the wait-list?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry. You asked a question?

Ms Renaud: There aren't any metrics to say, "Okay; we're going to invest \$14 million in the wait-list to for sure review the people on the list" to the data I see. You know, maybe some people don't even belong on that list.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: That's a great question, and that's exactly why this independent review of the data is so critical, because we want to make sure that (a) we're tracking the right things so that (b) we

can actually monitor this and create goals as we move forward. I think that's absolutely critical.

The other thing that's important, too, is that we're working towards – and I think the Minister of Education mentioned this during her estimates, but we want to make sure we're improving the overall family experience. Right now there are supports in Health, there are supports in Education, there are supports in Seniors, Community and Social Services. We want to make sure that we're working better across ministries to provide a better support system for families at the end of the day. So that's what we're working on right now.

Ms Renaud: Just real quick, because I'm going to run out of time, can you tell me how many families, if you have this information or even just an estimate, of the 4,144 who are on the service plan and caseload wait-list have been there for 12 months or more?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Give me one second. I don't know if we have that answer readily available.

Ms Renaud: If you could table that, that'd be great.

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much, Minister.

We're going to go to the government side. Please proceed with your questions.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Madam Chair. Can I go back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yes, sir.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you very much, Minister, for working so hard and so passionately on this very important file which represents the government face of compassion and passion with our residents. I know that you're so passionate about it, and I really appreciate it. And I really appreciate the effort that you have made in terms of helping people, vulnerable people, our youth and children, as well as helping with the food bank and increasing the wages that you have been able to do for low earners here that needed that most.

I will get to my question here, which is that when I looked at the budget, your budget, of \$5.4 billion, that represents an increase of almost 15 per cent, or close to \$700 million. That is a good thing. What I'm wondering about is that we know that more investment is necessary to make life more affordable, to protect Albertans, and to improve the supports available. Albertans have asked for more supports for communities and civil societies to increase stability, participation, and the inclusion of Albertans in need. My question, Minister, to you is: what type of programming will this increased funding support, and how will this investment integrate further with respect to Alberta's recovery-oriented system of care?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Member, for the question and your kind words. You know, I think this budget signifies hope for many Albertans. I know you door-knock as much as I do and hearing door to door the struggles and the challenges that many Albertans are facing, especially for seniors and individuals with disabilities in our community, the affordability challenges.

As you know, a significant chunk of my budget is for AISH, income support, seniors' benefits, and this budget, with the indexing of these supports, not only signifies increased funding for today and for this year but ongoing into the future. No longer as the price of living goes up are people going to be slowly pushed out. I think that's probably one of the most significant things in this budget. One of the things I'm most proud of is that investment in making sure that individuals are able to put food on their plate and

pay their bills, especially those who are most vulnerable in our community, and that ongoing commitment to doing just that.

The other part of it is that so much of my ministry is supporting the amazing individuals that work in our communities and support our most vulnerable and partnering with our not-for-profits, partnering with those who work the front lines in this area. And after being ignored for 10 years, these individuals are getting a much-deserved pay increase. Again, I know how impactful that's been. I was chased down in the street the other day when I was door-knocking by an individual who just wanted to come up and give me a hug and thank me for that. They had lost hope and had that increasing challenge to be able to feed their family but loved the people that they served, so they stuck to it. I'm really excited about that investment in this.

And then on the homeless and outreach side of things there are significant increases, not just increasing funding to shelters but increasing funding towards things that are going to make a significant impact in helping people end their experience of homelessness: you know, the hub model and day shelters, programs that are going to be done with intention to help people and provide those supports to help people find those avenues out of homelessness.

I think there's just so much here that I'm excited about, and I thank you for that question.

10:20

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you very much, and thank you for letting us know the feedback that you have at the food bank or at the doors. I know that you also got some letters from organizations thanking you for what you've done in this budget.

Going back to the question on the additional funding, how will that be distributed regionwise, that funding that you have?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. That's a great question. We've seen it with food banks – and we're going to table this later – but we know that there's great need right across the province, and I've spent a lot of my last six months as minister travelling everywhere from La Crête down to Medicine Hat and everywhere in the middle, and I've thoroughly enjoyed that. But seeing first-hand a lot of these great not-for-profits, community organizations that are doing excellent work in their communities – they're struggling as well to be able to help meet the need. So especially with food banks, for example, it's about getting those resources to these smaller guys in these smaller communities to make sure that our more rural and remote communities are also getting that support.

[Ms Sigurdson in the chair]

That includes supports on housing. I think what's important when we talk about housing is helping people to be able to stay in their communities that they raised their families in, they built their lives in. So when we talk about housing distribution across the province, 25,000 new units over the next 10 years is a pretty significant investment. We want to make sure that we're building that out in communities where people live. I've heard lots from people with disabilities in the community as well and their families, who have been discouraged because their loved ones had to go into the big city in order to access supports, access housing, and I think it's going to make a big difference as we work to invest in building out these supports in these communities around Edmonton, around Calgary, and our more remote areas for those individuals.

So I guess, to answer your question, this will be spread out across the province as there's need, and it is also about partnering with the great not-for-profits as well as our municipal leaders across the province to make sure that we're allocating these resources in the best way possible.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you very much for that detailed answer.

Moving on to the recovery-oriented system of care, on page 109 of the business plan we see that your ministry, having been informed by the advice and recommendation from the Coordinated Community Response to Homelessness Task Force, the Government of Alberta developed the Homelessness Action Plan to reduce homelessness in the province. A key component of the Action Plan and the ministry's overall effort to address homelessness is a recovery-oriented system of care, which is a coordinated network of person-centered, community-based services and supports that builds on the strengths and resilience of individuals, families and communities, to achieve improved health and wellness... By implementing a recovery-oriented approach in emergency shelters and other housing programs, frontline staff can better connect those experiencing homelessness with appropriate supports as a means of breaking the cycle of homelessness.

With that quote in mind, how does the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services partner with other ministries in the government to actualize the vision of a recovery-oriented system of care, otherwise known as ROSC?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. It's a great question and one that brings me great excitement. As you know, I used to work in shelters, and one of the biggest frustrations for me and my colleagues and the people that we served was significant service gaps when it came to recovery. You know, I remember stories of working with individuals, after watching them for years or months in their addiction, coming and saying, "Hey, I need help," and trying to get them into detox or trying to get them into treatment and work with them to do that and no space was available and watching as that hope and that desperation as they asked for help kind of faded away and how devastating that moment was of lost hope. So, you know, a big part of why I ran for government – and I'm so excited to be able to be here today – is to work towards addressing those service gaps so that when somebody does ask for help, that help is available. You know, a big part of our ministry's objective is to tie our homeless and outreach support programs with other ministries like Mental Health and Addiction to make sure that we have a comprehensive support system in place for individuals who are experiencing addiction and challenges, who might need more mental health supports.

I used to work with Canadian Mental Health and managed a postdischarge program for people with axis 1 diagnosis. You know, we worked with individuals who were in the hospital and basically helped with a six-month transition program to transition them into the community. But before that, when we were at the shelter, we would find that if somebody became a risk to themselves or others, they would get put in the hospital, and basically they would get discharged right back to the street.

So when we talk about that action plan, we talk about making sure that there are better paths for individuals so they're not getting discharged right back to the shelter, that we're not spinning our wheels and causing people to fall into further despair, that there are actual avenues for individuals, whether it be to a transitional program or a group home or to housing or to treatment services. We certainly are working very closely with the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction to make sure that our entire homeless and outreach services are working at implementing the recovery-oriented system of care and that we have resources available for individuals.

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

Actually, a recent announcement at the drop-in centre, with \$4 million put towards medical detox, is going to go such a long way

in regard to providing the support that individuals need who are asking and looking to get out of their addiction.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you very much. What are some of the outcomes anticipated from this vision? I thought you touched on some of them, but I'd like you to mention some more.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. Probably the biggest – I mean, obviously, improved health outcomes for individuals and seeing more people moving out of homelessness into detox, into treatment, into recovery, and into housing. I think we'll see increased results when it comes to that. Ultimately, at the end of the day, seeing a decreased number of people that are experiencing homelessness in our community as well as shortening that experience for individuals. You know, people will find themselves in crisis where they're experiencing homelessness, and the quicker we can help people move out of that, the better. Of course, hopefully, preventing people from becoming homeless altogether, in the first place, by having stronger networks and supports in communities to be able to address these things before the crisis leads to the situation of homelessness.

Mr. Yaseen: Excellent. Thank you very much for the good work that you're doing, that your staff is doing, that your supporters are doing, and that this ministry is doing. I am so thankful to all of you.

Now I would like to pass my time to my hon. colleague MLA Hunter here.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to my colleague. It's a pleasure to be able to be here with the ministry. I also want to echo what my colleague said earlier. It's refreshing and exciting to see the passion that you show in your role as the minister to be able to help the most vulnerable in our society. It's exciting to see how you do this, because of where you've been and that you've seen up close and in the trenches what is being dealt with out there. I think you bring a lot to the table and to the ministry for the experience that you have.

Minister, I want to talk to you specifically about the food banks and civil society. On page 111 of the 2023-2026 Seniors, Community and Social Services business plan we see in 2023 the \$5 million in grants and \$5 million donation matching in allocation to food banks and civil society organizations supporting food security to assist vulnerable Albertans and their families in need. To further address the inflationary challenges, Alberta's government allocated \$42 million over two years, from 2022 to 2024, to support food banks. Has the Alberta government traditionally supported food banks?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: The answer to that question is no. During the pandemic we saw a significant decline in both volunteerism as well as donations to food banks. Of course, as you can imagine, the demand went up. So we had this challenge where we had a sector that was traditionally very well supported through philanthropy and through volunteerism struggling to meet needs as needs were growing. So during the pandemic the former minister put the first amount of money into food banks to be able to help address and get through that crisis. As we've come out of the pandemic, we haven't necessarily seen the same number of volunteers coming out to help out in the food banks as we have in the past. Also, we haven't seen the donations start to uptick.

10:30

I think that part of that is the challenge with inflation and increased demand on individuals in our community and affordability. You know, if you're struggling to put food on your own table, you're going to have trouble donating it and being

generous with that, and that's understandable. That left our food banks in a situation where they were hard pressed to be able to meet the growing need within our community.

So when the Premier won her leadership, we sat down, and I expressed my concern and she expressed her concern about food banks. A week later she asked me to be in her cabinet, and this was in my mandate letter, to deal with food scarcity challenges within the community. I was so excited to see that there and so excited to be able to get these resources to these organizations so that they can work towards meeting that great need within our community.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Minister.

Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister: just for clarity, Minister, was there an ask by food banks and civil society for funding? I just don't remember the details on that.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah, there was. We had an opportunity to meet with a number of food banks as well as community organizations that address food security in our community. There was a growing ask as they were raising the concern about their ability to continue to meet the need that's around them.

Mr. Hunter: All right. Well, thank you.

Now I want to just ask a question about AISH. We find on page 86 of the 2023-26 fiscal plan that the budget for AISH has seen a \$1.5 billion investment, which indicates the ministry budget increased \$167 million from budget '22-23. The Alberta AISH core benefit rate remains the highest of all provinces, I noticed, for single individuals with a disability.

We listened to Albertans who are concerned about the pressures on these programs and are asking: what is being done to support vulnerable people and help improve their lives more fully? Could you describe this government's commitment to Albertans accessing AISH supports and maybe also describe how we are in terms of other provinces in comparables?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I'll answer your last question first. You know, recently I've had the chance to meet with the federal minister, Minister Qualtrough, to talk about how we work together across governments to support Albertans and Canadians with disabilities, and it was a great conversation as we shared ideas about how we can go about doing that in partnership. One of the things she said is that Alberta is the model. When she looks across Canada, she is hoping that the rest of the country can catch up and do what we're doing here in Alberta. So Alberta continues to lead the way, which I'm extremely proud of, in regard to our support for Albertans with disabilities, and we have a very strong, robust system of care for these individuals within our community.

Mr. Hunter: So would that be part of the Alberta advantage?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I would say for sure, and I think that because of the Alberta advantage we're able to care for our most vulnerable. You know, I've always been asked: with your background, why are you on this side of the spectrum? The strength of our economy is so critical, and our ability to create prosperity and then to use that prosperity to care for people who are most vulnerable in our community, I think, is critical to the value of who we are as Albertans. I certainly think that's part of our advantage.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. I wanted to maybe just clarify what you just said there. I thought I heard you say that it was because of our economy, because we've done something right here in Alberta, that we're able to actually provide this kind of support to our most vulnerable. Is that what you said?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I think that's absolutely what I'm saying. You know, as we prosper, we can use that prosperity to help. It's critical that we have strong economic and fiscal policies, that we're keeping our financial house in order, so that we're in a position to be able to do what we do right now. I strongly believe that why we're seeing such an amazing budget before us is this government's strong economic and fiscal policies.

Mr. Hunter: In other provinces where they have not had that kind of strength in their economy that maybe we have had – many people throughout Canada have said that we are the economic engine of Canada. What are some of the concerns that we would have if we moved away from a strong economy?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Again, I mean, you've just got to take a look at the revenue tab in our budget here. The strength of our economy, the growing diversity of our economy, the sustainability of that: it allows us to have those financial resources and wealth to be able to provide these excellent services and, again, to lead Canada, especially on this file, in regard to our care for individuals with disabilities and our most vulnerable in our community, our seniors. It's absolutely critical. If we moved away from that, if we lost that, I think . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll take our five-minute break now.

[The committee adjourned from 10:36 a.m. to 10:41 a.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. That concludes our break.

We're going to be heading back now to the Official Opposition for your segment of questions. Please proceed.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to join debate or discussion regarding Seniors, Community and Social Services. I just want to start by focusing on the seniors part of the budget. We know that the seniors population is growing at a higher rate than other demographics. Seniors are living longer, healthier lives than ever before. We are also in a time of high inflation. We have approximately 725,000 seniors in our province, and that number is expected to double in the next 20 years. Both the rapidly increasing population and high rates of inflation mean that increasing investments in seniors' programs is essential. Of course, we know that there's a lot of increasing complexity of issues that seniors are facing. I mean, I'm very interested in discussing this not only because I used to be the minister of seniors and housing but because soon I will be a senior, in just a few more years. I'm looking forward to discussing this very much with the minister.

I'm going to start within the estimates, line 7.2, special needs assistance grants. Okay. This program, we know, supports low-income seniors for basic health care and personal needs, home repairs and appliances. Since the UCP was elected, many of the eligible supports have been deleted or reduced. In Budget 2021 this funding was reduced by \$8 million, and that was a significant cut in this area. Supports for seniors to age in the community, I know, is a goal of this government. I've heard it said before by the Health minister and, I think, perhaps by Minister Nixon here also. It certainly is something that seniors want, and we in the opposition know how important it is. Most seniors do live in the community.

We also know there are tremendous challenges in the continuing care system. Really, supporting seniors to be able to age in their communities is essential. Of course, this program significantly supports people to do that. I know that in, I think, both the Minister of Health and the minister of community and social services' mandate letters they talk about working collaboratively in order to

support seniors, sort of looking at the broad way seniors are housed, seniors are supported.

I guess I'm a bit confused by why this line item, first of all, has been underspent by \$4 million in this last year, why it was cut from over \$23 million, that certainly under the NDP government we had. It was cut, slashed. It kind of flies in the face of what was just said before the break, that we can provide these programs because we have money to do it because of the way our economy is structured or the resources we have. Well, this is a clear choice by the UCP government to slash these programs for seniors regardless of them having billions of dollars. They think this is an important area, and that's all I can surmise from this. I guess I'd ask the minister: why, first of all, have you underspent by \$4 million in this line item 7.2?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Madam Chair, to the member for the great question and, of course, for her advocacy and, I think, for this shared alignment. I think the fact that we can start in the place where we know how important it is for us to be able to help care for our seniors, to help seniors to be able to stay in their homes longer, to stay in their communities is so critical, so it's great that we're starting at a place of alignment in that regard. Certainly, as I door-knock in Calgary-Klein, I hear that from my constituents on a daily basis and see it first-hand on a daily basis. I also see many seniors in my community struggling as well, so it speaks to the importance of these programs and how we help provide adequate supports for individuals in our community to do that.

I'm pleased also to say that I'm working closely with the Minister of Health because I think there's a lot of overlap and alignment that's needed to take place there as we create a continuum of care for seniors within our communities. So I think it's again great that we're at a place of alignment in that regard.

Specific to the member's question on 7.2, due primarily to the impact of the pandemic, uptake for the special needs assistance grants actually dropped. It was much lower than expected. We expected application numbers to of course recover in the coming year – that's why we've seen the budget line item go up there – and we've reallocated the \$1.1 million in remaining funding to senior community grants to make sure that we get those supports out in the community in one way or another.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, through the chair, to the minister. I guess, you know, I know it was before his tenure as Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services, but, I mean, the fact is that this program was cut by \$8 million back in 2020-21, so already for some reason, even though the minister is indicating that he does think it's important for people to have the supports they need when they're aging in community, that program was cut.

I've certainly heard that another way of talking about these supports is nonmedical supports. Not only do people need home care, things like that, when they live at home, but they need nonmedical supports. Sometimes they need help with house maintenance. They need help with shovelling their walks. They need help making food, housekeeping, all of these things. Certainly, I understand from the Minister of Health – last year during estimates he talked about a program coming forward to exactly do that. I'm thinking this is exactly the place where, you know, an augmentation in funding, significant funding, to support people to be able to stay in their communities – so I just wonder if the minister can speak to that, increasing nonmedical supports. Why is it not happening through this program?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. Again, I mean, it was undersubscribed last budget, so we have brought it back up. We're, of course,

certainly committed to making sure that we're increasing supports for seniors in the community. Again, I've heard first-hand how critical nonmedical supports – and I think that's a great way of phrasing it – are for individuals in our community. You see that here in a commitment in our budget to provide those supports, and we'll of course continue to keep our eye on it as we move forward over the years to make sure that our seniors are getting these great supports in our community.

But there's also a commitment to addressing challenges for seniors in this budget in other areas as well. Of course, we reindexed seniors' benefits . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. He answered my question.

I'd like to move on to 7.4 now, seniors' community grants. This funding was \$3 million under the NDP government, but when the UCP became government, they slashed it to \$900,000. I see they have increased it now in the budget to \$2 million. You know, similar to what I shared earlier, supporting seniors to age in their communities is sort of an overwhelmingly agreed-upon goal with us as the opposition and the UCP government. This area, again, is something that really needs to be enhanced.

We know that people who are living in their own homes must have supports through community agencies. We know that if people aren't connected, you know – and we're all social creatures. We need to be meeting with people, interacting. That's essential. That's one of the key issues oftentimes with seniors, that sometimes they become socially isolated. It was a huge issue during the pandemic, of course, and that can lead to significant mental health issues, a diminished quality of life for seniors. So this is such an important piece about investing in communities. Even though the UCP had slashed it down to \$900,000 – they are increasing it a little bit here, but this area again needs to really be beefed up significantly. I'd like the minister just to answer that.

10:50

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. Thank you, Chair and again to the member for the question. Again, I know how critical it is. I was door-knocking the other day in my constituency and was invited into a home, and we chatted for about an hour and a half. I found out that I was the first person she had welcomed into her home since the pandemic had started and that she had had groceries dropped off, and she expressed deep concern of loneliness for her mental health. That's just one story of many, I'm sure, you've heard as well. Having stronger supports in the community to help bring seniors together is so critical, and I think you see that commitment. Seeing the budget increase from 900 to 2,000 there is a demonstration of that commitment.

We've also increased funding for FCSS, which will also help provide additional dollars to help support seniors in the community and allow for local communities to figure out how they best target those resources to support seniors and individuals in their communities.

The Chair: Thank you so much, members.

We're going to head back to the government side.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair. I've got some questions about employment and income support. Alberta's economy is recovering, which is exciting to see. As more Albertans get back to work, the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services' income support program is providing more resources and opportunities for employment training and jobs. As seen on page 185 of the government estimates for Budget 2023-24, under line item 2, the employment and income support budget line for 2023-

24 is \$804.4 million. This government is investing more than \$95 million in career and employment services, ensuring that Albertans who are looking for work have access to the resources and tools they need to gain new skills and rejoin the workforce. So my question is: what are the anticipated outcomes for Albertans and communities with the investment in these programs?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. I appreciate the question. I think this is tied in large part to the conversation we were having before the break as well. As we see economic success in our province, the demand for resources like income support goes down. Even when we're seeing record numbers of people pouring into our province, we're seeing demand for this go down, and that's because there is increased opportunity for Albertans to be able to find employment. As well, I think some excellent work is being done within the ministry to help connect people to employment, to help with training and training opportunities, which is what we see here with this \$95 million investment.

You know, when I talk to people who are struggling in our community, they're looking for work. They're looking for ways to feed their family and to find a way to contribute within their communities in a way that's dignified and that they're passionate about. So this investment is really about helping people to gain access to training or whatever else they need to find meaningful employment within their community. Our goal should be continuing to help reduce that list of people who are reliant on income support as they are finding meaningful ways to be able to contribute and connect in their community through employment.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you. Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister, I'm also interested in – as you've had so much experience in this sector, how important is it for Albertans to be able to have a good-paying job for their mental health, for their self-confidence? I mean, you've seen this up close and personal. How important is that to someone trying to be able to make something of their lives and get back on track?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I think it's absolutely critical. I think we're all – you know, obviously, we need community, as we've talked about already today, and a way to connect within the community to find a place of belonging. But a big part of that as well is work and finding a place of purpose and to be able to contribute and give back in society. I think we all desire that. Certainly, I've seen that with the individuals that I've worked with over the years and have seen people who have faced or face absolutely amazing barriers and obstacles to employment overcome that and be able to find ways to connect, just watching and seeing the sense of pride and joy in individuals as they're able to do that.

You know, I'm sure you as well as I – when I'm door-knocking in the community, I find people who have been stuck at home and on the couch for a long period of time. That's also depressing and not good for one's mental health. Just the other day I was door-knocking, and I talked to a mother who was so excited to see me at the door because she wanted to tell me that her son, who she had told me about last time I was by, had found work in his field. She just lit up and was telling me about where he was at. Before he was depressed and facing many challenges, and now he's excited and has a renewed vigour for life. It's exciting, and it's good, and I think this is why this funding is so important, because giving people the ability to be able to pay their bills, feed their family, and contribute in a meaningful way in society, I think, is really important.

Mr. Hunter: My wife loves holistic medicine. She loves holistic approaches to systems, and this is – you know, the government has

actually talked about the recovery-oriented system of care. How does this integrate with the programs that – I know that there's a different ministry for that, but how does this integrate in a holistic approach to being able to help, you know, society on the whole?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. Well, I mean, again, when we talk about homelessness, you know, people often who are experiencing homelessness: the reasons why they ended up experiencing homelessness started long before that, and it's in the community. So efforts towards prevention, efforts towards improving mental health and addiction supports in community are important to make sure that individuals can get access to that care, but efforts towards helping people who are struggling to find and maintain employment will also be critical in helping prevent people from ever having to experience homelessness.

Again, I mean, mentioning the concern about one's mental health and wellness – again, when you're struggling to find employment, the defeat that that brings for an individual is hard. That's, again, why these programs are so critical in helping people to find that connection in their community and be able to access employment and the sense of pride and dignity and mental wellness that comes with that and so many other things that come with unemployment that create other challenges in our community as well, that this addresses.

Mr. Hunter: One of the things that I liked about the recovery-oriented system of care was that employment part, where they kind of finish the equation. You know, it helped people to feel like, "You know what? You're not going to just help me get out of drug addictions" or whatever struggles that they're having, but it actually helped them to actually feel some excitement about the future and being able to build something for themselves, maybe family or whatever their goals are. How have you seen, have you been able – I know you work with that ministry very closely. How does that work in terms of being able to help our individuals on an individual level?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. I appreciate that. We're not meant to do this alone, so it's important, where we've seen systems that work in the past, when you make that decision for recovery, that you're able to get into detox or treatment but that you're not just left after that and that you're brought into a broader community that can wrap around you. But, also, that you have a way to contribute and be a part of that community, I think, is really important for one's mental wellness and ability to maintain recovery as well. So employment or volunteering or whatever you're able to do is really critical for an individual's overall recovery journey and sense of belonging and purpose within community. It's absolutely critical to the overall strategy.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to just talk about your key objective 1.3, modernizing and digitizing the financial supports systems. As the old red tape reduction minister I remember getting the goal to be 100 per cent digitized and be able to make it so that we don't have as much red tape for our staff out there in the trenches. Can the minister update us on the progress of this program, the modernization efforts that are happening?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. There's been significant progress made on this front. But before I talk about that, I'm just again emphasizing the importance. You know, as we talk to individuals who are vulnerable in our communities and their experience interfacing with us and the challenges, of course, as somebody who used to be an advocate and used to sit down with people and help

them fill out their stacks and stacks of paperwork in order to access resources and myself struggling with this, the expectation for individuals who are vulnerable in our community is that much harder, right? Making sure that we have an interface that's user friendly – at the end of the day this is about making sure that the person who needs access to those resources and supports is getting those resources and supports.

11:00

There's been significant work, of course, in modernizing and digitizing and reducing those barriers for people to be able to access. We launched our online application for both AISH and income supports, and we've received good feedback on that so far. In January 2023 the FSCD program moved from paper assessment to a needs tool to a digital tool, which is creating efficiencies for caseworkers and streamlining the process for families. So some great work on that front, and I think there's more work that can be done as we're helping people to have an easier, better experience in regard to navigating these resources and supports.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you.

One last question here really quickly: how many of these services have been digitized so far, and how many do they expect to get done by the end of 2023-24?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: With investments in innovative digital solutions we will streamline more processes and increase consistency so families have a similar experience regardless of where they're from. We've talked about that. Specific actions we are taking to increase access to services include – I don't think this answers the specifics, but we have AISH, income support . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. That concludes the segment for the government caucus.

We'll move now over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Renaud: Oh, sorry. I thought you were taking . . .

Ms Sigurdson: No. I'm . . .

Ms Renaud: Oh, okay. I'm sorry. Okay. I have a quick question about, Minister . . .

The Chair: Sorry. Chair. Through the chair.

Ms Renaud: To the minister through the chair: can I get a number of the family exemptions that were approved for family-managed support contracts through PDD? And by family exemptions I mean – so there is a rule that family members cannot be the caregivers of people with disabilities, obviously, that have a PDD contract. I'm looking for the number of exemptions that were granted last year.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. Sorry. Chair, how does that relate to this year's budget? I'm hoping we can make a stronger connection there.

The Chair: Member, if you could please frame your question as it relates to the estimates.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Well, I think it has a lot to do with going forward about the contracts. I'm asking about the context of the family-managed support contracts, right? If there is an exemption for a family member to be the provider, I think it is important to know what the number of exemptions are. Honestly, Madam Chair, I don't know why this is a big issue. It's just about planning for the next year. It's about projecting how much this department will cost.

It's just basic information. If you'd rather not answer that, that's fine. We can move on.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We don't have the number. I mean, we do have a process for managing that and making sure that that's done in a way that's accountable but helps best support the unique needs of individual families. That's certainly taken into consideration.

Ms Renaud: Madam Chair, could I get a number – to the minister: could I get a number of the exemptions that were granted last year and how many you anticipate, based on last year's number, for this fiscal?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I will attempt to get you that number.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Attempt; that'd be good.

Also, can we get a breakdown of the FASD funding by region for the total amount for fetal alcohol spectrum disorder initiatives? That would be line 4.6. There are a number of regions, obviously. If we could get, like, a regional breakdown of that funding.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Fetal alcohol syndrome: crossministry the ministry committee provides strategic and operational direction for Albertans with FASD. We don't have the regional breakdown for you, but I will look into getting you that number.

Ms Renaud: Okay. That would be great.

Just quickly on the Appeals Secretariat. That would be line 1.5 in the government estimates. I see, like, a slight increase, from \$3.6 million to almost \$4 million. Madam Chair, I'm assuming that that is probably just a slight increase in wages?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Funding has been provided to the Appeals Secretariat to fill several vacant positions now required for smooth operations. There was a temporary decline in program applications and related appeals due to the pandemic. That's now ending.

Ms Renaud: Madam Chair, just so I'm clear on this, there was an additional, you know, some money in this line, and that was to fill vacancies, appeal panel vacancies. Is that correct?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. We're filling several vacant positions. There was a decline. During the pandemic, of course, there were fewer people requiring appeals, so we were able to manage that. Now we're increasing it because we do expect that that will increase now that we've moved forward.

Ms Renaud: Madam Chair, to the minister: how many people sit on the Appeals Secretariat or do appeals? How many people are there?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Ninety-nine.

Ms Renaud: Okay. That's great.

Now, I'm sure, you know, the Appeals Secretariat, there's – well, there are actually no metrics or targets or objectives in the business plan for the Appeals Secretariat, Madam Chair, so there's really not much for us to measure. There won't be anything a year from now to even look back and measure. But I think the work of the Appeals Secretariat is enormously important when we just look at the number of applications that receive a “no” answer and then for whatever reason go through appeal. Appeal is very important not just for AISH, income support but also for programs like PDD. I'm just curious, like, why there are no metrics at all for the Appeals Secretariat.

Then I'm wondering if the minister could break down the appeal numbers for us – how many appeals over the last year? – so we get a sense of what's coming. How many appeals were related to clawbacks? How many appeals were related to AISH? How many related to income support and how many related to PDD? I don't expect that you have all those numbers handy, but if you could table those, that'd be great.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I'd like to ask ADM Shaun Peddie to come up and respond to that question.

Ms Renaud: Sure. That'd be great.

Mr. Peddie: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair. Just on the appeals for last year . . .

The Chair: Sorry. Excuse me. If you could please introduce yourself.

Mr. Peddie: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Shaun Peddie, assistant deputy minister, strategic services.

I believe the question was how many appeals there were for AISH and other programs. We only have data up to January 31, so we don't have a full fiscal-to-fiscal year. For AISH the number of appeals only were 1,447. For IES it was 744; FSCD, 23; and PDD, there were 36.

Ms Renaud: Great. Thank you.

Now, last year, just related to these appeals, we saw a report from the Ombudsman's office talking about the appeals, and I think the Ombudsman, Madam Chair, was very clear about the lack of accommodation for appellants through this process. Now, I remember in question period somebody answering and saying, "Yes, we accept all the recommendations that are made," which is great. I'm just wondering if the minister could tell us what work will be undertaken by appeals or what's been done already to address the lack of accommodation in the appeal process.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Again I'd like to ask Shaun Peddie to come up and respond to that question.

Mr. Peddie: Thank you for the question. Shaun Peddie, ADM, strategic services. We work with the Ombudsman on a quarterly basis on these issues, so some of the issues were that accessibility. With COVID we went to a full online process, and now we're back into a hybrid system. We find that for the appellants the online is still that bit of a distance type of approach where I think some feel that they're not getting a fair hearing. So we have both the online process and the in-line process to do hearings.

11:10

Ms Renaud: Excuse me. Can I ask you: have there been any, like, structural changes to the process? I think the Ombudsman sort of described that there wasn't a period of time where the director's representative or the director, I guess, said: do you require accommodation? It was almost the opposite, that the appellant was required to say, "I'm deaf; I need this" or, you know, "I'm blind; I can't do this." Has that sort of process changed?

Mr. Peddie: We're trying to work on, again, making sure that the staff are aware of these issues, that they understand the client, they understand who they're dealing with so that whether it's folks with these disabilities – that they understand how and how to address those so they get a fair hearing.

Ms Renaud: Has there been something structurally changed about sort of the time leading up to the hearing that would indicate, that would gather the information, "Here's what I need in terms of accommodation"? There wasn't any formal process before. I'm just looking for an answer. Is there a structural change that's happened?

Mr. Peddie: No. I guess I would just follow up that we have enhanced some of our training, so for folks that are working with these communities, they are now more aware of these issues than I think they had been before.

Ms Renaud: I'll ask: do you know how many people that sit on appeal panels have disabilities themselves or have identified as being disabled?

Mr. Peddie: I do not have that information.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Well, I've got 20 seconds, so that's about it for the questioning. Thank you very much for your answers.

The Chair: Do you have anything else with your remaining 13 seconds, Member?

Ms Renaud: No. For 13 seconds? No. I'm good. I'll pass it on.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you so much.

We'll head back over to the government side.

Ms Fir: Thank you very much, Chair. I've got some questions for the minister, but first off I just want to echo some of the comments of my colleagues about thanking him for his tremendous dedication and compassion to the role. I think we're very fortunate to have a minister in this position who is truly compassionate and genuine and is passionate about this ministry and this file – it's a pleasure and honour to work with you, Minister – and also someone who has lived this in terms of the previous work experience they did in the previous career they had so actually has first-hand, directly relatable experience with this file in conjunction with his incredible compassion and kindness and intelligence. Thank you for the work that you do, Minister. I think we're very lucky to have you in this role, and thank you to your team and your department for the work they do as well.

I'd like to ask some questions around affordability measures as they relate to SCSS. We know Albertans recognize the urgency of supporting communities through this affordability crisis and addressing the rising cost of living resulting from high inflation, high inflation that we know is a global issue and certainly is made worse by some of the federal policies. We know our government didn't cause the inflation, but we're certainly taking extraordinary measures to help deal with the resulting affordability measures from the inflation.

On page 189 in the 2023-24 government estimates \$275.7 million is allocated to provide affordability payments to seniors and low-income Albertans. On page 186 of the government estimates for Budget '23-24 under line item 12 we see an investment of \$8.7 million in affordability supports and inflation relief measures. So a couple of questions around that. Why are these affordability supports necessary? And if you could describe some of the different measures that have been made available to help Albertans through this difficult time, especially some of the Albertans that you help and deal with that are the most vulnerable and in need. And can you talk a little bit about what steps are being taken to make life more affordable for Alberta seniors?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. Thank you, through the chair, to the member for her kind words and her question as well as her passion. Of course, I was working with her closely on the domestic violence piece as well as sexual violence and seeing first-hand her direct compassion and care on these issues and great partnership with the not-for-profit work that she's been doing as well. So thank you.

You know, I know the member sees this as well as she's been out at the doors, the challenges that many Albertans have been facing in our community. As I said earlier, I mean, especially for those who are most vulnerable in our community, for folks with disabilities, for seniors, the cost of living and inflation, which, again, is not due to the government but the larger challenges nationally and globally, have had a significant impact on people in our communities. My role in the affordability plan was to make sure that people who are in most need, our most vulnerable in our community, were getting access to resources and supports so that they could get through. Of course, that's what we're seeing here in Budget 2023 and 2024, and we know how critical it is.

The biggest thing and, again, most exciting for me was the indexing of AISH, income support, and seniors' benefits, knowing that not only will the impact of an extra \$100 a year for people on AISH, for example, have an impact on their monthly lives, you know. I was knocking on a door the other day, and there were two individuals in the house that relied on AISH. They invited me in, and they were so excited to see me and so thankful because of the impact that that's had already for them, so we know that will have an impact.

But, again, not only is that going to impact them today, but we're not going to have to wait five, six, seven, 10 years to see a bump again, watching them slowly get priced out. That now is going to increase year over year. As the cost of living gets more expensive, they're going to be able to keep up. That, I think, is huge as well as for seniors' benefits, and, you know, the increase there is an extra meal on the table and one less difficult decision that they're going to have to make in regard to paying their bills. Obviously, very important, and we know that the impact of the extra \$100 a month over the next six months is going to have a profound impact as well in getting through this immediate crisis.

But we also were looking at addressing some of the larger issues. Of course, the funding for food banks has been mentioned. We know in the immediacy of this crisis that many people are left in a situation where they can't afford groceries as groceries have gone through the roof. That increased access for food, I think, is going to be critical in making sure that people have food on their table. The low-income transit pass as well. I think to find innovative ways to continue to help people access their communities, not just employment but health and community and social supports, is very important. I think the extension of that is going to have a big impact for individuals in our community.

Then it's worth mentioning that the 10 per cent increase for folks that work with our most vulnerable – again, the fact that these guys were ignored for a decade, I think, was too bad. I'm very thankful that we're addressing that now because individuals who work with our most vulnerable shouldn't be left making that difficult decision about how they put food on their table, how they feed their family, and whether or not they can continue doing the work that they love to do because we need them. I think these measures combined are going to have a profound impact in meeting the great need within our communities.

Ms Fir: Thanks, Minister. I'd like to talk a little bit about homeless shelters as they relate to the budget. We know that across Alberta we've seen the challenges of homelessness and the effects of this in

our communities. Whether it's people living in tents in city centres or encampments throughout our communities, we recognize the response and supports need to be intentional that help resolve what drives homelessness in our communities.

We are rethinking what it takes to more fully resolve these challenges for Albertans. On page 185 of government estimates for Budget 2023-24 under line item 5.2 we see increased annual funding for homeless shelters by \$34.8 million to \$83.5 million, so a few questions around that. How is this increase going to help implement the recommendations from our action plan on homelessness? And could you describe the pilot projects that have been initiated in the shelter space in both Calgary and Edmonton?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent; appreciate the question. I'm going to start off where I left off in regard to the 10 per cent increase for homeless shelters, for staffing as well as for administration and other expenses that they deal with. You know, when you're working with people who are at risk, who are very vulnerable, consistency is very important.

What I heard from a lot of the homeless shelter providers is the challenge of keeping staff and staff cycling in and out due to no fault of their own. I mean, they need to go to make the best decisions for their family to be able to pay their bills. But when you're working constantly in crisis, which is very much what it means to work in a homeless shelter, making sure that you've got staff that are paid well, that are being cared for as well in their own personal mental health is very critical. I think that will go a long way in helping do that and create the consistency and the stability in having employees that are trained and know what they're doing but, more than that, know the clients that they're working with. I think that's going to go a long way in just improving overall the supports for individuals who are experiencing homelessness that rely on these services. That's a big part of it.

11:20

Of course, coming out of the action plan, we've learned a lot, and one of the things, of course, was the 24/7 supports. You know, we used to – at the Mustard Seed when an individual had expressed desire to move beyond homelessness and get help, we would keep them in during the day, and they would work with the advocate or the rapid-housing person or whoever to help access resources and supports. Allowing for more access to 24/7 shelter is not only keeping people off the street when it's cold out, but you're also giving them the opportunity to work hand in hand with shelter workers and advocates and others to be able to address the reasons why somebody is maintaining or stuck in homelessness and be able to help them move beyond that, which I think is going to be really helpful.

Of course, expanding the implementation of our shelter hub service model is going to also work towards providing more opportunity for people to be able to connect with health supports and housing and recovery and a number of other resources that are around them, just creating more avenues for people to be able to connect with the supports that they're going to need to be able to move beyond homelessness. Yeah.

Ms Fir: I just wanted to mention as well, I know you've spent time touring many of these shelters, and I spent some time touring some of the women's shelters, and I just want to echo your comments and the comments made by other members in terms of the extraordinary work the individuals that work in these shelters . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.
Back over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just want to talk about housing now. We know that Alberta's rate of social housing is just 2.9 per cent whereas for Canada as a whole it's 4.2 per cent, so we know that we have much less than other jurisdictions. That's a significant issue. In line 9.2, assistance to Alberta Social Housing Corporation, the housing management bodies – you know, there's close to 90 of these housing management bodies that provide local affordable housing to Albertans all across the province. They do exemplary work with very limited budgets. It's extraordinary. I was so disheartened by this budget to see that they are flatlined. There's no increase in operational funding in this line for them, and just like the rest of us, inflation is high. We know their insurance rates are increasing dramatically, utilities, groceries, all the things that we need to be able to provide housing. These are the lodge program; these are affordable housing providers. Oftentimes it's the deep subsidy. This is the rent geared to income, and there's just no way the market can provide this kind of housing, but Albertans need this type of housing. It's so disturbing to see that the UCP government continues not to support this sector.

Just like we've talked about previously in this estimates, they are excluded from the wage top-up, too, and there are high rates of turnover for people in this area. Again, just like the minister said, continuity of care, having those same staff support people is key, especially with the senior population. I'm just, I guess, confused by what I've just heard from the minister, that this particular area of housing is not being supported by this government, so I guess I just want to understand why that is, through the chair.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. Thank you, Chair and to the member for her question and her continued advocacy for housing. We know how important this is and, I think, again, an area where I think we can find alignment. There has been a challenge, of course, as we've seen in our province, and talking about economic success, this is one of the by-products. We've seen a significant decline in the availability of affordable rental right across the province and especially in some of our more rural and remote areas as we saw many people move out of the cities during the pandemic and create different challenges, so this is a complex issue and one that we're certainly dedicated to. I think Budget 2023-2024 demonstrates a strong commitment to building and maintaining and improving current affordable housing supply for individuals in our community.

The question, I believe, was about 9.2 . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Operational funding.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Operational funding. Yeah, 9.2. Did you not reference 9.2?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Alberta Social Housing Corporation provides operational funding for housing management bodies.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. Thank you, Member. So this is about cash flow, this line item. This doesn't show that there's decline in what we're doing to support affordable housing units across the province. Certainly, when you look at other budget line items here, we are seeing significant increases so that we can improve and increase the supply of affordable housing, but really this element provides all the provincial operating funding required to the Alberta Social Housing Corporation to run its programs.

We have adjusted this grant this year to reflect the program approvals of rent supplement in the Alberta housing strategy while removing the additional spending COVID-related pressures on seniors' lodges. If COVID-related pressures continue, of course, there will be supports there, but this is really about managing cash flows, not about reducing supports.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, I certainly have spoken to many people in this sector, and, you know, I just encourage the minister to do that, too, because they have no increase in their operational funding in this budget.

I want to talk again to this line item, and you just referred to it, the rent supplement program. Of course, the UCP slashed this program in their first budget by 24 per cent, and this meant it took the UCP about two years before they actually, you know, started to address this issue again. Of course, this was during the pandemic, when many people did not have access to affordable housing and were in tough economic positions. But the federal government did have the Canada housing benefit, which was a matching program where provinces are supposed to match the money that the feds give. Sadly, instead of increasing the dollars available to Albertans, the UCP government used that 24 per cent that they slashed so that it was status quo for Alberta. It wasn't an increase, which is quite disturbing, Madam Chair.

I know from talking to many affordable housing advocates that they are very disappointed that Albertans didn't receive this bump. I mean, this is the purpose of this program, but Alberta sort of, you know, played a bit of a shell game with the numbers and therefore people did not have the rent supplement that they needed, certainly at a time when they needed it during the pandemic, and really it was a two-year delay. It took the ministry so long to sign the agreement with the federal government. It was one of the latest provinces to do that.

So I just want the minister to tell me right now: how many people in Alberta are currently on the wait-list for the rent supplement program?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: You know, I appreciate – actually, just real quick before I answer that question. The provincial corporation budget line item has gone from \$309 million to \$333 in this year's budget, so that's an increase. I think that's good news for Albertans.

In regard to the rent supplement program I think what we've seen in the past is that just because there's a line item doesn't necessarily mean that we're getting the supports to people who need it. I will remind the member that while they were in government, we saw the housing wait-list go up, I think, 78 per cent. Under this government with this action plan, with money being spent in a way that's actually going to get more units built, it has started to see that wait-list decline. When we take a look at outcomes, which I know is important to the members earlier, we are seeing those outcomes. This is while we're seeing record growth and a significant amount of people flooding the province. We're starting to see that wait-list that they created start to decline. So it's working. We all know that there's still a lot more to do, and that's what is the good news about Budget 2023-2024.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We are investing heavily in increasing housing support.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you.

I'd like to move on to the fiscal plan, capital maintenance and renewal. We know that the UCP cut this budget 32 per cent over three years, starting in their first budget. You know, there is a significant aged stock in Alberta. Again, these are mostly the housing management bodies who need this kind of support. I mean, it's pretty much fallen off a cliff now, the investment in this area. I just really know that there are significant issues. Units have to be closed. Perhaps some units have come back to the government because housing management bodies just can't manage that. It's making housing management bodies into slum landlords because

they cannot invest and support renewal or turn over units when people move out. This is a significant issue.

I just would like the minister to tell everyone. Business plans are given each year to the minister from these housing management bodies. How much was the aggregate capital maintenance and renewal from all those management bodies?

11:30

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: The commitment, of course, is to making sure that we're maintaining housing. You know, it's critical that people have a quality, safe place to live, and that's why we are including \$94 million over the next three years for capital maintenance and renewal, to be able to support social housing across the province.

This is an increase from last year's budget and I think a further demonstration of this government's commitment to making sure that we're upholding and keeping these housing units in good repair for the future.

Ms Sigurdson: Minister, through the chair, I mean, you know, it's a significant decrease. There's just nothing around that. So even if there are, yeah, some millions in there, it's just been slashed significantly. We can't disregard that.

I just want to go on to the fiscal plan, the affordable housing partnership program. Certainly, you know, the minister talks about his 10-year plan, but what we know – and I'm just referencing the seniors and housing annual reports from the last year the NDP was government, Madam Chair, up until the most recent report. We see that there has been a decrease in the units of affordable housing by 8,239 units. This is the government's own information.

During their time in office thus far, actually, housing units have gone down despite the pie in the sky, happy, you know, investment that the minister says that they're doing. They've sort of let the ball drop for quite a period of time that this ministry, this government, has been in charge.

I mean, that is the reality of it, and I guess my big question about this new plan, this 10-year plan, is: how many of those units will be rent-g geared to income, sort of social housing, deep subsidy? That's been missing in action under this government. It's all just below market, you know, and people need that deep . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll head back over to the government side.

Ms Fir: Thank you. Through the chair to the minister, I'd like to touch next a little bit on disability services, PDD. We know Albertans have spoken about the need to improve access to disability services and the need for increased funding for front-line worker wages that are supporting service providers and increased funding to tackle the PDD wait-list. I know I sometimes hear in my constituency about that from some of my constituents. These are some of the issues, again, that we're hearing about from our constituents.

If I could direct your attention again to page 185 of the government estimates under line item 4.2, we see the investment in PDD supports for Albertans is \$1.17 billion, an 11 per cent, or \$116.3 million, increase from Budget 2022. I've got a few questions on that. I guess the first one would be: how will the increased funding benefit people with disabilities, and how is it going to improve services and service delivery to Albertans?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: You know, I can answer that really simply. It's going to be huge. We know how impactful this is going to be because we've heard it. I know that a number of you on both sides of the table have been advocating for PDD service providers in their

community. I know we've had a number of conversations, hon. Armstrong-Homeniuk, about service providers in your community. This has been such a great need over there that's been piling up over the last 10 years, and sadly it's a sector that has not been given the attention that it needed and deserved and was in complete, for lack of a better word, chaos.

You know, it was very difficult. People were coming in and out. They were having trouble retaining employees and being able to provide the level and quality of care that these individuals deserve in our communities, so this is going to go a long way in helping, first of all, to retain and maintain quality staff and providing that consistency of staff for individuals that need it and making the career or the profession one that's desirable for new people that are looking, for young people that are looking at a career path, especially in a compassionate field, that they can go: okay; I want to do that, and I can also feed my family doing that, and let's go do that.

I think that's going to go a long way in building the sector. I think we still have lots to do. Certainly, I am excited about working with the disability sector as we go forward to figure out: how do we help improve working conditions and supports for employees so that we don't just drop this and wait 10 years, that this becomes an ongoing commitment to working with the sector to create a strong, competent, capable, qualified, compassionate workforce to care for our most vulnerable? I think that this is going to go a long way in that regard.

There's also increased funding here to address capacity issues so that we can increase services across the province and be able to provide support for those who aren't getting it right now and help provide that relief for the families and other systems, health care and justice, that have had to pick up the slack so that we can make sure that people are being cared for. I think that the earlier you can get that care in, the better. Otherwise, it gets worse over time. To make sure that people are getting that support early and often – and that includes support for FSCD – making sure that families and children are getting that additional support sooner than later: I think that helps as we go forward.

Yeah. I know I'm rambling, so I'll pass it back.

Ms Fir: No. Not rambling. Good information.

Can you talk a little bit about what investments or strategies are being adopted to support the pressure points in the system and a reduction in wait times?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Absolutely. Again, that early support in making sure reducing wait times is going to be so critical and helps alleviate the pressures on other systems as well: on family units, on justice, on health. To address wait times for PDD services, Budget 2023 provides \$37 million to that end. I want to be clear. Reducing and even clearing the wait-list will take time. This isn't going to happen overnight, but we need to hire more staff, work with service providers to increase capacity and to be able to support clients.

You know, the challenge here is that the workforce has taken a hit over the years. This is again about building up this sector as a viable career path and enticing young people and others to be able to come into the sector and see it as a great place to build a career. We understand that demand for the PDD program will continue to outpace available funding, so we're also working towards making operational and program improvements to ensure that there's longer term sustainability here for everyone.

We've been working hard to improve long-term integrity of the program so that individuals receive PDD services based off their need and outcomes at the right time and the right cost point to ensure that the program is sustainable now and well into the future.

Ms Fir: Thank you for that.

Through the chair: what action are you taking to help improve the program integrity?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. We're taking steps right now to modernize our FSCD program through the use of technology, which we've already done with AISH and other areas, to streamline our operations. We are taking action to improve program integrity, including reviewing service delivery models for individuals with complex needs to ensure supports are effective and to identify opportunities for system-level improvements.

We've been working hard to improve the long-term integrity of the program. Individuals receive PDD services based on their needs and outcomes at the right time. I think that the biggest thing is working alongside the sector, alongside service providers and families as well as those with disabilities, to hear from them and their ideas. There has been robust work that's been done, again, trying to address the labour issues but also working closely with our Premier's council for disability services and others who advocate for the community to make sure that we are improving the overall experience for people.

Ms Fir: How are we better supporting the workers in the disability sector? We know the incredibly important work that they do. You know, having met with some of them, I just can't thank them enough in terms of the valuable, important work that they do with our most vulnerable and for the compassion and love they have for the individuals that they support. We need to make sure that we're supporting them as well. I know you've spoken a little bit to that, but can you speak some more to how we're supporting them?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah, I'd be happy to. Any time I get a chance to speak about these amazing people that work in this sector and the compassionate heart that it takes – you know, these are amazing people, and they deserve everything that we can give them, the thanks and praise.

Obviously, you know, the 10 per cent increase is only part of it. I think the other part of it is not letting that lag for 10 years again, that we move forward in a way that helps support these individuals and these vital programs as cost of living increases.

I think that part of it as well is addressing wait-lists. I think that these organizations have been strained over the last 10 years, and that has created harder working conditions for these individuals. Often they take on more, and making sure that they have a good work-life balance, if you will, that they're going to work and they're excited about it because they're not overburdened with the amount of work that needs to be done: I think that's absolutely critical.

11:40

Addressing other challenges within the workforce, making sure that there's great, robust training, opportunities to progress in your career and to grow in that career, I think, is very important as well. I think, you know, for young people you want to know that you can move forward in something, so I think all of those things are going to be really important, but ultimately it's really about showing that appreciation for these individuals and making sure they have adequate supports to do the work that they do.

Ms Fir: Thank you.

Chair, I'm going to cede my time or pass the remainder of my time to MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, first of all, Minister, I want to thank you for all the good work you're doing and all the time you dedicate to this file. I know you are unrecognized for all the work you do. Your passion shows through, and you do a great job.

Minister, on page 111 of the business plan:

In 2023-24, \$342.5 million is allocated to build, renew, maintain, and operate affordable housing in Alberta through the government-supported affordable housing programs, including rental supplements.

We heard from the opposition recently that Ukrainians are facing challenges accessing these supports. Minister, can you speak on how supports for Ukrainians are being made available, and can you also speak about the importance of the rent supplement program?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. Thank you for the question, and thank you, through the chair, to the member for all of her hard work in advocating not only for the Ukrainian community in this unjust war but also advocating for her constituents and for individuals with disabilities in her community as well and so many other issues, you know, especially for your advocacy for Ukrainian evacuees.

The Chair: That's the time for caucus members.

Over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Through you, Madam Chair: Minister, could you tell me which line the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities comes out of?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Line 6.3.

Ms Renaud: It comes out of family and community safety?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Let me clarify that for you. My memory is great but not that great.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Well, while you're digging around for that, how about we talk about this increase? Okay. PDD got an increase for this year, so it's \$116 million – wait; \$122 million? It depends what you compare it to.

There's a significant increase this year, line 4.2. How much of that increase will be allocated to retroactive staff wages this year?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Again, the numbers aren't right in front of me, but I believe it was about \$101 million for staff wages.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Out of that \$101 million, approximately – that's just approximate; that's fine – could you tell me what the breakdown is? How much is going to service providers and how much to family-managed support contracts?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I couldn't tell you that breakdown, but it would be broken down, I guess, by 10 per cent for whatever the current values were across the board.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So just straight up they're all getting the same.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: A 10 per cent increase to all contracts. Yeah.

Ms Renaud: Okay. What about for administration? You said that there was a 5 per cent relief. Are FMS contracts getting 5 per cent?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Again, don't quote me exactly on numbers, but roughly \$25 million went towards administrative challenges.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Are family-managed support contracts also getting the administrative – I think you said 5 per cent? Is that right?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I can clarify for you, but I believe they're just receiving the 10 per cent increase like all other contracts.

Ms Renaud: So they're only getting the staff wages. Family-managed supports for everyone, then: it's just a different way of funding staff. It's through families as opposed to an agency.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah.

Ms Renaud: So there's I think . . .

The Chair: Members, if you could please direct your conversation through the chair.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. Okay.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yes, Chair.

Ms Renaud: Chair, what I'd like to know is why the administrative amount isn't going to family-managed support contracts.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: We had heard the importance of an increase for family-managed support contracts in the same way for PDD service providers, so we gave the 10 per cent increases. It's essentially staffing.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Maybe you haven't – I've been lobbied, certainly, Madam Chair, and had people contact my office, people, families who use that family-managed support to organize the staffing supports for their sons or daughters. I've heard repeatedly of the pressures and the cost and of some people actually having to leave their jobs to manage an FMS contract. One case I'm thinking about had twins and had a contract that was pretty huge. I'm guessing that they need the admin help, too, that there are costs associated with managing these contracts, so I guess I'm wondering why they were left out. But, in any event, I . . .

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: You know, obviously, that's very important, I mean, especially when families make the decision to care for their loved ones, that we as a province are there. Again, that's why this 10 per cent increase is so important and, I'd say, just the start in how we move forward in supporting this sector. After years of not seeing a bump, this bump is absolutely critical.

Ms Renaud: Now, I'd like to also know: is this a one-time amount of money, or will this be added to the service delivery and administration portion of the contracts going forward?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: This is added going forward.

Ms Renaud: Excellent. Okay.

Now to switch gears a little tiny bit to FSCD, can you tell me last year – I'm sure the department uses those numbers to plan for the cost the next year – how many multidisciplinary team meetings were held and just the average cost of each meeting in terms of staffing?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: No, I can't, but I'm sure we can figure that out for you if you could just give us a second.

Ms Renaud: Sure, if you could. Yeah. I don't expect you to have that number, but if you could get that and table it for the committee.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: I'd like to actually ask my ADM to come up and share that information.

Mr. Buchanan: Good morning. Clay Buchanan, assistant deputy minister of disability services. Just one second, please. For MDTs in the north we had 82 reviews done last fiscal year and 331 in the

south zone. The total cost for MDTs in the north was approximately \$115,000 and in the south, approximately \$188,000.

Thank you.

Ms Renaud: Great. Thank you for that.

Okay. I'm going to switch gears a little bit again to the office of the public guardian and trustee. Unfortunately, there aren't any goals or metrics for us to look at and talk about, Madam Chair, but through you to the minister, there are a number of large service providers that operate in St. Albert. There are three. One of those actually sent me a pretty detailed e-mail listing the difficulties they've been having with getting support from the public guardian and Public Trustee that are assigned to the individuals that are in their care. It depends on the order, obviously, but you can imagine a dependent adult is going to need quick contact with the guardian rep in order to get a yes or no for things, approval to go do something. Let's say they want to move, you know, all those decisions. In addition to the trustee, of course, they're going to need access and a quick return, but these providers are reporting months going by. They're being told that they're understaffed, that there aren't enough representatives, so they're just not getting the help that they need. I'm wondering if there's something going on at the office of the public guardian. Is there just a need for staffing? Have we lost staff? Any idea what's going on here?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Sorry. Which budget line item are we in reference to?

Ms Renaud: The office of the public guardian and trustee.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. Can you point to where in the budget you're referring?

Ms Renaud: The office of the public guardian and trustee is on page 186.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Okay. And the line item or the reference?

Ms Renaud: Well, you can see it right there. It's 10, right on the page.

The Chair: The conversation needs to be directed through the chair at all times during this meeting, so if you could kindly direct your comments through the chair rather than directly through the minister, that would be sincerely appreciated.

Ms Renaud: Do you need me to repeat the question or repeat the answer? Line 10 on 186.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. Thank you. I'd like to ask my ADM Shaun Peddie to come up and answer that question.

Mr. Peddie: Shaun Peddie, assistant deputy minister, strategic services. Thank you for the question. In this budget, Budget 2023-24, the budget for the office of the guardian and trustee has been increased. Some of these increases are for, one, more outreach and more travel. Again, post-COVID we're trying to bring our services back up to where they were before so that we have more in-person contact of the guardian and the trustee with the client. There's also been an increase for staffing. This is to start to bring us up to meet the workload benchmarks in the workforce assessment model, so to the member's question, yes, there have been some staffing increases to increase our service levels.

11:50

Ms Renaud: Okay. Through you, Madam Chair: so we can expect things will get better, then? If people are having difficulty

contacting their reps, it'll likely get better soon? Yes? Excellent. Okay. Thank you.

I'm just going to quickly touch on affordability payments. Yesterday we had estimates with Affordability and Utilities. What we heard over and over again were the groups that were targeted: families with children; seniors; people on core support, AISH, income support, all of those things; and then the most vulnerable. I asked a number of times, Madam Chair, to define "most vulnerable" because I don't understand what that means. This government uses this term a lot to describe people that are eligible for things, but I don't really understand where they're going.

For example, we know about people on AISH, income support, but there are still tens of thousands of disabled Albertans that aren't on core supports. I mean, just a tiny fraction are on core supports. What about all of those other people? For example, we know that there are 25,863 people on CPPD, which is a federal benefit, and did not get the affordability payments if they didn't have children and then weren't over 65, obviously. My question is, number one, to define "most vulnerable," I guess, because it's one of the eligibility bits in the affordability payments. Also, why was it such a narrow window that so many disabled Albertans were actually left out?

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Excellent. I appreciate the question. I guess the definition of "most vulnerable" would be, in my regard, as it pertains to this ministry. This ministry supports Albertans with disabilities, seniors, people on low-income or income supports, and that require PDD supports. That was my role in the larger affordability payments, making sure that people who are supported through this ministry are getting the . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head back to the government side. We have seven minutes left in the meeting.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you. We're short of time here, so I'll condense a few questions together and maybe give you some latitude to do so. Minister, obviously, with the high net migration we saw in the last quarter of 2022, that's both a great opportunity and, I think, a testament to the good work of this government but also a challenge as we move forward to accommodate that growth in both our economy and the need for housing. I wanted to just ask you some fairly broad questions.

On page 114 of the Seniors, Community and Social Services business plan we see over a billion in investment for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation over the next three years. Through the stronger foundations affordable housing strategy 25,000 more affordable housing units will be made available by 2031, with 2,300 new affordable housing units each year for the next three years. By the way, congratulations on achieving 2,243 in 2021-22. I'm going to ask a few questions together here and just give you some latitude in the fact that we're tight on some time.

Maybe you can share with us sort of broadly why this government is so committed to making housing more affordable and more accessible, and what are the outcomes anticipated through these significant investments and rather ambitious objectives? What kind of innovative projects and partnerships did we see with last year's funding that you're encouraged with and maybe want to replicate? I guess, lastly, what kind of projects can we expect to see with this new funding over the next three years? Maybe I'll give you some examples to comment on or share your own thoughts on.

Is there any possibility that we may look at some smaller congregate living pilots for affordable seniors' housing, as was

referenced more on the continuing care side by the Minister of Health? That doesn't necessarily have to be under their realm but could be more for affordable congregate living sites to pilot, at least, within that sector.

Do you see any potential for the government of Alberta to engage once again, as they did in 2009 through 2012, in attainable home ownership, which may have the potential to reduce pressures on the challenged rental market as we see that there's a lot of pressure on that, particularly with all the newcomers, helping individuals and families to begin building equity for the future all while potentially reducing housing costs for many low-income Albertans?

Maybe this is a good time for you to comment just more broadly, as we finish up with the last few minutes, on how innovation in housing initiatives by your ministry and by the Alberta Social Housing Corporation may align with your experience in this realm and, obviously, with this government's objectives.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Chair, and again thank you, Member, for the questions. I'm going to do my best to get to them all, but you can let me know if I've missed something if we don't have time. Also, thank you to the member as well for all of his advocacy. I know this is an area that's of particular passion for him. He's done a lot of excellent work both in politics and outside of politics on thinking innovatively about how we address affordable housing.

I think that's what we're seeing in the stronger foundations program here: how do we think differently about this? We've seen past governments with big, large line items with a bunch of money dedicated towards it, but we didn't actually move the needle on addressing the problem. What's unique about this budget and the stronger foundations plan is that it's about figuring out: how do we partner better with municipalities, with the federal government, with not-for-profits and private to figure out how we actually move the needle and increase the supply? At the end of the day, that's the goal. We need to increase the supply of affordable and attainable housing and other housing solutions. I think that through this strategy it allows us to be able to be flexible and innovative and to create new solutions.

I think that's what we're seeing already with even the \$55 million that we announced before Christmas and all of the great projects that we've announced just a few short weeks ago. If we had just done that on our own, we wouldn't be building 600 units through just that amount of money. That's a great cost value – and I know you were doing the numbers in your head – for Albertans and is actually going to make a significant difference on moving the needle for building affordable housing within our community.

The attainable homes: I love the concept. I think it's certainly something that we've seen success at in the past. We still see success at other layers of government, and I think it's certainly something that we should and can explore as we move forward. You know, the best way to lift people out of poverty is through home ownership, so I'd be happy to have further conversations with you about what that could look like and how we can continue to support that as we go forward.

Obviously, the impact that more housing is going to have for people is significant. As somebody who worked front lines with people experiencing homelessness, that day that you were able to give somebody a key for their own home and the ability to unlock their own door and to shut that and lock that and have the security of a home: the sense of joy and pride that came with that is significant. That's what excites me the most about this plan. We are going to be able to give that feeling to thousands and thousands of

individuals, families, seniors, that sense of security and a place to call home. Yeah.

Did I miss anything?

Mr. Gotfried: Maybe just a comment on the possibility of some smaller seniors' congregate living sites. I know, again, that was referenced more from the Health side under, obviously, contracted services, but I just think that there might be something there that could fall under your ministry as well.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: It's a great question and a good point. I think one of the things is that as I've been travelling the province, meeting with service providers, they're stakeholders of health and seniors, and they're not looking at it as separate entities. They're looking at it as: how do we build a stronger continuum of care for seniors at end of life and to make sure that we're respecting that? I think you've probably seen kind of these campus models where you have the senior lodges and the continuing care and everything and making sure that we can help people age with dignity within there. So, yeah, on small senior homes I think, again, that's what speaks to the value of the stronger foundations program, because it allows us to partner with NGOs that are thinking creatively on this and municipalities to try different designs and different models and to be able to explore those. I think that's really how we're going to move the needle in a significant way in increasing the supply of affordable housing.

Mr. Gotfried: Just one other quick question. We don't have a lot of time here, but maybe you could just comment briefly on some of

the work that you're going to be doing around rural and Indigenous communities to address their issues with homelessness and/or housing affordability.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Yeah. I don't have the number in front of me right now, but we're investing significantly in increasing Indigenous housing. One of the key features, of course, is that partnership, that we're actually doing this with Indigenous communities and Indigenous not-for-profit organizations, that they're taking the leadership role on this. I think that's so critical for reconciliation and how we move forward. There's a significant amount of money that's being invested in those partnerships right now, \$38.8 million to complete 16 projects, which will provide over 259 new units. You know, I hope that's just the beginning because there's such a great need out there, but that opportunity to be able to partner and empower Indigenous communities to take the lead is so important.

Mr. Gotfried: Just a few seconds left there, Minister. Thank you again for all your hard work. I appreciate it.

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're scheduled to meet this evening, March 15, at 7 to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

