Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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

Wednesday, March 20, 2024
3:30 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-11

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC), Chair
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair

Batten, Diana M.B., Calgary-Acadia (NDP)
Boitchenko, Andrew, Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)
Long, Martin M., West Yellowhead (UC)
Lunty, Brandon G., Leduc-Beaumont (UC)
Metz, Luanne, Calgary-Varsity (NDP)
Petrovic, Chelsae, Livingstone-Macleod (UC)
Singh, Peter, Calgary-East (UC)
Tejada, Lizette, Calgary-Klein (NDP)
Wiebe, Ron, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (UC)*

* substitution for Martin Long

Also in Attendance

Chapman, Amanda, Calgary-Beddington (NDP)
Irwin, Janis, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood (NDP)
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
Sabir, Irfan, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall (NDP)

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, KC	Clerk
Teri Cherkewich	Law Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Director of House Services
Nancy Robert	Clerk of *Journals* and Committees
Abdul Bhurgri	Research Officer
Christina Williamson	Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Christina Steenbergen	Supervisor of Communications Services
Shannon Parke	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Director of Parliamentary Programs
Amanda LeBlanc	Deputy Editor of *Alberta Hansard*

Transcript produced by *Alberta Hansard*

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services
- Hon. Jason Nixon, Minister
- Clay Buchanan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Disability Services
- Cynthia Farmer, Deputy Minister
- Shaun Peddie, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Services
- Toby Schneider, Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment and Financial Services
- David Williams, Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing

3:30 p.m. **Wednesday, March 20, 2024**

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

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

The Chair: Well, good afternoon, everyone. 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, 2025.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members please introduce themselves for the record. Minister, when we come to you, if you would kindly introduce your team at the table there with you. My name is Jackie Lovely. I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of the committee. We will start with introductions to my right.

Mr. Boitchenko: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Andrew Boitchenko from the beautiful riding of Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Wiebe: Ron Wiebe, Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Lunty: Good afternoon. Brandon Lunty, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Singh: Good afternoon, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

Mr. Nixon: Afternoon, everybody. Jason Nixon, MLA for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre – a little bit nicer than Drayton Valley, but Drayton is a close second – and the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services. I'm here with a variety of officials at the table with me. To the far right is David Williams, who's the ADM of housing; Sonya Johnston, who's our financial ADM. On my left is my deputy minister Cynthia Farmer, and last is Toby Schneider, who is income supports.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Opposition.

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

Ms Chapman: Amanda Chapman, Calgary-Beddington.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

Ms Goehring: Good afternoon. Nicole Goehring, MLA, Edmonton-Castle Downs and deputy chair of this committee.

The Chair: Member, would you introduce who you've got with you at the table.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. Jamie Post, my constituency assistant.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

A few housekeeping items to address. I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. Wiebe is here covering for Member Long.

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 video-stream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent during the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services shall be considered for a total of six hours. For the record I would note that the Standing Committee on Families and Communities has already completed three hours of debate in this respect. As we enter our fourth hour of debate, I will remind everyone that the speaking rotation for these meetings is provided under Standing Order 59.01(6), and we are now at the point in the rotation where speaking times are limited to a maximum of five minutes for both the member and the ministry. These speaking times may be combined for a maximum of 10 minutes. Please remember to advise the chair at the beginning of your rotation if you wish to combine your time with the minister's.

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 anybody object to having a break today? Okay. Midway through we'll have a little break.

When we adjourned this morning, we were eight minutes into the exchange between Member Irwin and the minister. I will now invite the minister to complete the remaining time he has left in the rotation. Minister, you have two minutes left.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you for that, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to finish up, also to correct a couple of misrepresentations of some comments that were made by Member Irwin in regard to some of the work the departments do when it comes to homelessness. I do want to make clear that any of the work that happens with encampments, the work that we do with the Edmonton Police Service, the city of Edmonton, and all of our nonprofit shelter providers does provide, one, secure storage for individuals' property, but second, at any time that an encampment is coming down, the ability is provided to be able to secure people's individual belongings and take them to the navigation centre and, ultimately, on to both housing and shelter providers, and any characterization that the government of Alberta and/or the Department of Seniors, Community and Social Services or myself don't care about individual homeless people's property is ridiculous.

That said, we do care about the city of Edmonton, which is why we have worked hard to be able to clean up the remaining garbage that comes from encampments, 129 tonnes. That would include things like 4,000 used needles that were lying inside those encampments. I certainly hope it's not the position of the Official Opposition that that is the type of garbage that they would expect the province and/or the city to leave lying around to hurt individuals, but we remain committed to making sure that that type of stuff is cleaned up and that, ultimately, people receive full wraparound support services as they come into the shelters.

The other thing that I would like to make clear is that in the navigation centre that's been open for about two and a half months, we have about 500 of the 660 individuals who have used it so far go on to receive some sort of housing supports. That is the number, not five. I hope that will help clear up any of that.

I also lastly want to be clear that the position of the government is the opposite of the NDP. We will remain very focused on getting care to people, not leaving them in tents to freeze to death, to burn to death, or to be victimized by gangs. That is a position that will not change when it comes to our government.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We will now move over to the government side for your questions.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister, I just want to, first off, say thank you for all that you've done. Today is a great day and many great things are happening. Congratulations on that.

I would just hope we could, you know, as we're on the topic of housing, performance metrics – oh. To you, through the chair, if the minister is okay with shared time?

Mr. Nixon: Absolutely.

Mrs. Petrovic: Perfect. Thank you.

Performance metrics for affordable housing are focused on the number of new units available as noted on page 124 of the business plan. In 2022-23 the ministry delivered 2,325 new affordable housing units and rent subsidies to Albertans with low income. Over the next three years it looks like the ministry anticipates supporting an additional 7,000 households starting with 1,500 in 2024-2025. Which Albertans are you going to be supporting with this target increase of 1,500 units this year? How many of these units will be delivered by rent assistance? How many affordable housing units are currently accessible?

Mr. Nixon: Great question. Budget 2024 adds just over $7 million to rent assistance to support more Albertans who need housing. We'll be using that for rent supplements. We'll be expanding the rent supplement program and continuing to make sure that it's available for Albertans that need it.

Again, as expressed a lot this morning, we are dealing with three different levers when it comes to tackling affordable housing, both building new capital, rental assistance, and making sure that we work to make sure that the market can do its job.

In regard to how many units: Budget 2024 will provide rental assistance to approximately 1,900 more households, including 800 in 2024-25. Then ultimately, as part of the stronger foundations plan, we will take action to provide more affordable and accessible housing options for Albertans with low income. There are about 5,000 accessible units in seniors' lodges in seniors and families overall community housing portfolio. This number will continue to grow as we build. Again, we are exceeding building capacity across the province right now.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair, through you to the minister.

My apologies. I know some of these questions might be repetitions of this morning. I just found it a little bit difficult with the opposition sometimes talking over. If there is some repetition, I apologize.

If we could just move on to page 126 of the business plan, looking down at capital investment for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation near the bottom of the page, can you please explain the reason for the nearly $20 million difference between 2023-2024 budget and the forecast?

Mr. Nixon: Absolutely. We're investing an additional $16 million to upgrade affordable housing units so more Albertans have access to safe homes. There's also an increase of $4 million to continue funding the completion of committed capital investment projects that are already in progress in the province.

Mrs. Petrovic: We see a nearly $20 million drop between the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 budgets. Is it possible to get an explanation on that one as well?

Mr. Nixon: The AHPP program is focused on grant funding rather than on investment funding, which is why we see that decrease. That program itself launched in December 2023. The program brings partners from public, private, and nonprofit organizations together to provide affordable housing when it's most needed. New construction or renovation or development of projects may be eligible up to it, and we cover a third of the cost. Often it will be the federal government who will provide another third and a municipality and/or a housing authority or a nonprofit partner would provide that other third.

The provincial contributions may be in the form of capital grants as well as land or buildings, or we can be sometimes transferring long-term government-owned assets. The program is designed to increase the supply overall of affordable housing. Because it's done through that type of a process, there are minor adjustments year to date as you go through that, depending on the cost of certain capital projects and where we are at as we continue towards that overall ambition, which is why it's a 10-year plan.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister.

Housing providers have made it clear that they're struggling with rising costs. In response early in 2024 the minister announced providing one-time funding to help housing operators with rising costs of running household programs. Is there anything in Budget 2024 that provides more permanent funding for these rising costs?

3:40

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. Budget 2024 is actually $74.6 million for housing providers operating family and community housing, which is actually an increase of $21.4 million. We've made some announcements in the previous fiscal year around this, as well, recognizing the challenges from inflation, increasing costs on our nonprofit housing partners, and their overall increase of operations costs and the impact that's having on staffing and supplies and other expenses, which is why we saw a need to be able to increase this line item to be able to make sure that we are able to operate all of the housing that we were attempting to build across the province.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister.

In my riding of Livingstone-Macleod we have a significant number of seniors' lodges, ranging all the way – you know, we have a few in Nanton, Claresholm, High River, Pincher Creek, Crowsnest Pass. Now, in this budget is there anything specific for these seniors' lodges?

Mr. Nixon: Yes. I mean, seniors' lodges are a pretty major component of our overall affordable housing plans. Budget 2024 provides $60.2 million for the lodge assistance program, which is an increase of just over $20 million from the previous budget. We've been hearing about the challenges that seniors' housing providers are facing, and that's why we decided to take action and add more funding to the lodge assistance program, which is, again, a 55 per cent increase in funding per person per day, as well, on top of the other investments that we're making in that area, which I think indicates again the importance that we put on our housing partners to be able to do all affordable housing but in particular the work that we do around seniors' housing.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair, and through to the minister.

As referenced on page 22 of the strategic plan, transferring and selling assets is a significant part of the stronger foundations strategy. Can you just explain the important work of the government's asset management framework?

Mr. Nixon: We developed a provincial form of housing asset management framework that you're referring to. That framework ultimately lays out a clear and transparent criteria for when and how our government will ultimately retain, invest, and/or transfer, and/or

sell assets. Vacant or underutilized properties are considered for sale if there are alternative housing supports available. We also then take the proceeds from that and reinvest that revenue from the sales back into the affordable housing system. The properties, ultimately, that are transferred to a local housing provider, continue to operate as affordable housing with minimum impact to tenants as part of the requirement. We continue to make sure that government-owned real estate assets are used in a way that best meets the current and future affordable housing needs of Albertans.

I think that's important to note, that just because an asset is sold does not mean that that would go into general revenue. It's a process of determining whether that asset still has value for its objectives and then continue to use the proceeds and/or that asset either with the government or a nonprofit provider to provide the service that it was intended to do.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister.

Are you able to expand on how many properties the government has sold and/or transferred to date?

Mr. Nixon: To date the Alberta government has transferred nine assets to affordable housing providers and sold four assets on the open market. Transfer properties must continue to operate as affordable housing for a minimum of 20 years. In the next year the department is working towards transferring 10 assets to affordable housing providers for that purpose. We are going to continue this. You know, we're hoping to continue the strong Albertan housing market, and if that is the case, the department is planning on selling five assets on the open market in the next year.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister.

In a previous life – I stated it before – I was a nurse, and I understand the need to make sure that our seniors are taken care of. Otherwise, we would tend to see them more often. The government has been talking a lot about finding new and innovative ways to provide affordable housing. Are you able to tell us more about the funding for the new capital program, the seniors' lodge modernization program referenced on page 110 of the fiscal plan in Budget 2024?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah, absolutely. We're investing $125 million over three years to improve and update government-supported senior lodge facilities. In the budget this year it makes that $125 million funding available for this program over three years. It includes $25 million in 2024-25 and $50 million in '25-26. That will support ultimately 375 units. We are working with operators and the municipal governments to address evolving needs of seniors in our province and make sure, ultimately, that our facilities are attractive places for current and future residents.

We're also waiting for Mr. Lunty's committee to report back, which I think will have some advice for us on how to use some of our aging infrastructure, particularly around the size of units that we see in rural Alberta and the need to probably adjust some of that because people are looking for different-sized units than when those facilities were built 50 years ago.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move over to the Official Opposition for their block of time. If you would advise, please, if this is going to be a block or shared back and forth with the minister.

Ms Renaud: Sure. Yeah. We can share.

Mr. Nixon: We'll go block.

The Chair: Block? Okay. Let's go block.

Ms Renaud: Let's go block.

I just want to follow up on the question that Member Petrovic asked. Actually, it was a good question about accessible units, and the member said that Alberta has 5,000 accessible units and then mentioned a few things about that, including lodges, et cetera. I'm wondering if the minister would just sort of list for the committee what makes up that 5,000 number. If they don't have that information today, Madam Chair, I'm quite fine with them tabling with the committee.

Okay. Moving on to income support, I'm going to refer to section 2 of the budget estimates, lines 2.1 to 2.4, page 191. I note the total budget estimate for '24, spending of close to a billion dollars, just under $793 million, but there is not one performance metric listed. So I'd like for the minister to explain: is there something else going on in the ministry that is measuring performance that perhaps we don't know about? If he could share that, that'd be great.

Line 2.1. The ministry overshot their budget by about $26 million in '23-24. What were those cost pressures that caused this? I see that next year's forecast is $21 million less. What were the cost pressures this year, and why are they disappearing next year? My next question is: how much of that unexpected increase in the programming and planning delivery was related to large-scale file reviews, and how many of those reviews are expected to be completed in the next fiscal? And what is the – actually, no; I'm just going to stop there, forget that other part.

The next question I have: how many FTEs are assigned for line 4, so for all disability services, 4.1 to 4.7, for '23-24, and how many are forecast for the '24-25 year? Now, out of that number, how many of the staff are being assigned to file review in Q4 of '23-24, and how many at Q1 of '24-25?

Line 2.3, barriers for employment. Why did the ministry underspend $20 million in '23-24? The '24-25 estimate for barriers for employment is 4 per cent lower than budget '23-24, but the population has grown by about 200,000 people, so that's up about 4.2 per cent in the same time period. Population went up 4 per cent, and the BFE budget, or barriers for employment budget, was cut by 4 per cent. If the minister could explain that math, that'd be great.

Supplemental benefits, which I am assuming are in lines 2.2 and 2.3: if the minister could confirm that, that'd be great. If those include the two benefits in particular that I'm looking at, the supplementals of additional shelter benefit and the handicap benefit, what was the total change in spending for the additional shelter benefit from Q1 to Q4 of fiscal '23-24? And the same question applies for the handicap benefit.

That is a lot of questions for income support. You know, I'm going to maybe repeat a couple of them because I'm hoping that the minister is going to do his best to answer these questions. Again, I'm asking particularly about the spending on income support, really quite interested in knowing the position of FTEs. Where were you at the start? Where were you at the end? Why is barriers for employment income support spending not keeping pace with population growth?

You know, it was interesting this morning during budget estimates that the minister's deputy minister stood up to answer a different question, which I certainly appreciated, and that deputy minister made a point of saying: it's really important; we know that numbers go up when population goes up. I think we all know that, that the amount of need that we see in the community, Madam Chair, goes up when the population goes up. So if we could get an explanation for why income support does not seem to be keeping pace with need, or is there some kind of other plan?

I understand and, you know, we all saw the Auditor General report that was released yesterday, that, I think, very clearly sort of emphasizes my first question about the lack of performance metrics in income support. Perhaps the minister could address that. I think that when we're spending just under – what was it? – $793 million, almost a billion dollars, on a program, I would expect, I think the Alberta public expects that we have performance metrics so that we know that Albertans are being supported in the manner that they are entitled, that government spending is appropriate, that there's appropriate oversight.

I'm looking forward to hearing from the minister all about oversight and the questions I asked. Thank you very much.

3:50

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. We'll start with caseloads because I think that it's a question we're spending a little bit of time on. There's a lot of good news when it comes to what's taking place in income support. A lot of that is tied directly towards what's taking place with the economy. I want to make sure that it's clear, first off, that we have lower caseloads than we did prepandemic. January 2024 was 51,763, this past January, versus where we were at in January 2019, which was 59,693 caseloads. Overall, the cost of indexing increases has been off-set by caseload decreases due to lower unemployment rates following the pandemic, which is great news.

We are fully funded this year – we were fully funded last year – based on the cost pressures that we anticipate this year and the cost pressures that we did have last year. There are some numbers reflected in our budget numbers that would show reduced case management due to wildfire because this is the part of the department that we utilize for wildfire. I see the hon. member shaking her head, but that is the part of the department that we do use for wildfire. It's also some of the work that we had to do to support the minister of affordability with some of the affordability payments. This is the part of the ministry that would have done that to support the ministry, which is why we see that decrease.

I think we'd be happy to talk more about caseloads in another segment if the member would like, and we can have the deputy minister go through it in a little bit more detail.

Let's talk about accessible housing next. Actually, you know, we'll talk about FTEs. We don't track FTEs by specific line items in the way that I think the hon. member is asking, but our 2024 budget FTE count is 3,024, which remains flat from the prior year. Budget 2023, so the previous budget, which is referred to in the fiscal plan, was 3,500 but comparably was reduced by 26 FTEs at that time due to the transfer to Children and Family Services for prevention of family violence programming and Technology and Innovation for IT services due to some of the restructuring of the department. We will continue to manage our FTE count internally, and we are not anticipating any problems as a result of that.

I think the hon. member also asked some questions about the affordable housing stock. There are approximately 5,000 units in the government's affordable housing portfolio that are barrier free, which she refers to, and that is the case for all new builds. We aim to meet or exceed all building code requirements, and we'll continue to do that with all of our projects going forward. Of the 36,600 housing units in Alberta's Social Housing Corporation's portfolio, which are senior self-contained lodge units in community housing, approximately 14 per cent are barrier free. Again, that takes you back to those approximately 5,000 units. I will not be tabling a list of all of those units because it would be extensive, but it does show where that investment is and probably reflects some of the aging population of some of our facilities. Again, we'll be looking forward to Mr. Lunty's report to see if there are some recommendations on how we want to adjust that.

I'm trying to see what other comments that we had that we wanted to respond to. Oh, yeah. Barriers to full employment. Just to give you a little bit more detail on that, both the caseload growth and the cost per client have been lower than budgeted this year in our barriers to full employment income support program because we are seeing reduced spending in that program. Other than indexing we have not changed our benefits at all. The benefits remain the same, except for being indexed to inflation, for supporting clients. There are just less people that are expected to require support from this program. Our caseload has only averaged 17,200 clients this year as opposed to the expected 18,200 clients, and our monthly cost per client has only risen from $983 last year to $1,057 this year after indexing as opposed to the $1,083 that had been expected.

The reality is that this line really follows unemployment very, very closely, so you see it go up when the province is struggling with employment, and you see it go down when the province is doing very well, as we are right now. I don't think that is a secret, certainly to most Albertans, that Alberta is just thriving right now, which means more people are being employed. But I do want to stress that there's been no change to the benefit for the individuals who require this service except for increasing that benefit because of indexation. Let's all hope that we continue to see high unemployment rates like this and that we continue to see our province continue to be the economic powerhouse of the country.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go back over to the government side for their next set of questions.

Mr. Lunty: All right. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister, of course. If I may, we'll do shared time back and forth.

Mr. Nixon: I'd love to.

Mr. Lunty: All right. Thank you.

Thank you, Minister and, of course, always through the chair. I certainly notice that when my colleagues are speaking, they often take the time to thank not only the minister but their support staff. It's super important that we do that. In this situation it's very meaningful to me. I had the honour and the privilege to work in this department for a number of years, and the minister certainly doesn't need me to remind him how hard-working and dedicated and how great his staff are in the department. I still call many of them friends and certainly learned a lot from them. If any of them are watching at 4 o'clock, at the end of the day, I just want to reiterate my thanks and our friendship. I wanted to make sure I got a chance to acknowledge that.

I'd also like to acknowledge a couple of my colleagues who asked questions about seniors and seniors' lodges in particular. This is an extremely important file. I'm very honoured to be chairing the seniors' lodge review committee. I know my colleague here asked a question about the lodge modernization program, certainly a program that our committee has an eye on. I certainly wouldn't presuppose or get out in front of the committee's work or report other than to say that it's a great group. We're talking to so many Albertans. We're talking to seniors. We're talking to seniors' operators. That's our top priority, listening to them and making sure we can support them.

Through the chair, I would like to engage the minister a little bit on another topic that is certainly near and dear to my heart, and that's the conversation around federal transfers. Specifically in this budget, we're looking at page 197 of the '24-25 government estimates. We do see other federal transfers as a source of revenue. Certainly, if you take a look, you know, everyone's waiting for April 1 for another carbon tax increase. We know that when we're dealing with the federal government, oftentimes they certainly do not have the best interests of Albertans at heart, but I know the minister is working hard to make sure that he can make the most of the federal funding.

So I would, through the chair, like to ask the minister: what federal funding can we expect as a result of Budget 2024? And if the minister might indulge us to just kind of explain how his ministry is working with the federal government on making sure we get our fair share. Oftentimes we don't feel like we're getting our fair share. We see so many examples of that from this federal government. Again, I know the minister is hard at work on that, so I appreciate his thoughts.

Thank you.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thanks to the hon. member for the question. We surely appreciate his service on the lodge review panel. I won't comment on the floor crossing from the bureaucracy to the government, but it's good to see you over there.

We do see some money coming from the federal government; for example, funding for ASHC in this budget is expected to be up to $133 million, which will be a slight increase of just over $11 million from what was forecast in '23-24. That $11.6 million increase is due to an increase in eligible provincial spending. In 2024-2025 our province could claim $60.9 million underneath the national housing strategy, including the current Canada housing benefit, and then $61.6 million under the social housing agreement. The federal funding forecast in '23-24 includes $99.2 million in operating funding and $22.2 million in capital funding, and then federal funding for '24-25 also includes $107.7 million for operating and $25.3 million for capital. We continue, though, from the perspective of the Alberta government, to see less funding than we think we are entitled to across the spectrum but particularly when it comes to housing, where the federal government is investing significantly across the country.

4:00

It is certainly a position of the government and myself that that money is being disproportionately invested in targeted federal ridings for the upcoming federal election, and we work with our municipalities to be pointing out our concerns when it comes to that issue and have quite a bit over the last several months, which I know the hon. member has seen.

We also remain deeply concerned about the lack of federal support for our Indigenous communities. We are seeing often an investment by the federal government of – well, first of all, minimal investments on-reserve, but when they do invest, they're often using Canadian mortgage insurance money to fulfill their obligation on-reserve, which is causing trouble in other communities. We want them to invest on-reserve, but we want them to invest fully and with appropriate funds. We continue to raise that, particularly with the work we're doing with Grand Chief Thomas of Treaty 6. We're going to continue to emphasize this.

You know, it's interesting, Madam Chair, that Enoch, which is a very big nation, receives from the federal government about the same amount of money that the Alberta government invests in security for shelters associated with Enoch, which is basically a hundred and some thousand dollars, which shows that the federal government is certainly not meeting their obligations when it comes to on-reserve. We'll continue to be very vocal about that.

Part of our housing strategy is to fight for our fair share of federal money. Ultimately, I think that to get all the way there, we're going to have to change the federal government. Hopefully, we're going to be there sooner than later.

Mr. Lunty: All right. Thank you, through the chair, Minister. I certainly appreciate the effort on that part of your file.

You've mentioned numerous times, you know, that it's exciting that Alberta's economy is going strong, that we're bringing a lot of people in, but it is important, obviously, to continue to work on our supply, to continue to make sure that we have the housing options that we need in this province. I think it might have been alluded to earlier, but I do have a couple of questions on stronger foundations. I understand this is a centrepiece of the ministry's work, and it's a big part of making sure we can support housing and affordable housing options as our economy continues to boom, as people continue to choose to call Alberta home. Of course, why wouldn't they want to do that?

If we can turn to key objective 1.4 on page 123 of the business plan, it involves continuing to "implement Stronger Foundations, Alberta's 10-Year Strategy to address affordable housing across the province." As always, through the chair, I'd like to ask the minister: could you provide us with a high-level update on this strategy? Then maybe also expand, you know, on: what are some challenges that need to be addressed to keep up with the housing demand, thinking of some examples like red tape, labour, et cetera? I'd be interested in your thoughts on how we can make the strategy even stronger.

Thank you.

Mr. Nixon: Well, I appreciate that. We started the stronger foundations strategy in November 2021. There have been some pretty key components of it already implemented. I know you're very aware of some of them. We completed 1,361 new affordable housing units since November 2021. We developed and commenced an implementation of the affordable housing asset management framework and partnership program; redesigned the rent supplement program; maximized federal funding within those programs; launched the find housing online tool; launched the seniors' lodge review, which you are running; and we are working with housing providers, municipalities, and other partners to come up with innovative, nuanced solutions, some of which we've already referred to earlier today, around the work that we do with capital maintenance and renewal, as an example.

We continue to have unique challenges when it comes to our housing market in Alberta, in some ways the most unique challenges because we remain the most affordable jurisdiction in the country while being the fastest growing place in the country. We're seeing, you know, challenges like in Calgary, where people are actually commuting by airplane to Vancouver every day because we are more affordable than Vancouver. Sometimes our market is not actually reacting the same way that we would see to higher interest rates or some of the other things that would usually cause the market to react certain ways, which will create unique challenges because we remain the only affordable game in town, which is why the Alberta government continues to focus beyond just affordable housing but working on making sure that we're developing an attainable housing market so that the dream of home ownership does not flee like it has in other provinces.

Mr. Lunty: Yeah. Absolutely. It's pretty easy to look at Vancouver and Toronto and understand why you're putting such an emphasis

on making sure Alberta does not go down that path. I think that makes a lot of sense. You know, I certainly look to your leadership as we continue on that important topic.

Through the chair, we're getting to the end of this block, but I would like to hear at some point down the road – you just referenced this attainable part of the spectrum, if you will. You know, I appreciated your answers on the stronger foundations strategy, which is affordable housing focused. I think we're certainly all looking forward to hearing more from you on what exactly some of our attainable options look like in the next block.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon member.

We'll now move over to the Official Opposition for their next round of questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just have a quick follow-up. The minister said that he would not table the information about the 5,000 accessible units. Let me just maybe provide some comments around that. Now, I understand he said that of the 5,000 units, some of them are lodges, et cetera. The reason I'm asking is that there are a lot of people that are looking for accessible units, and as you can imagine, it's not always appropriate for them to live in lodges to meet their accessibility needs. It would be really great – you don't have to tell us specifically where they are. I think we're just looking for a breakdown. How many accessible units are lodges? How many are supported, independent living? How many are just community residences, whatever that is? Large categories would be great.

My next questions are going to be about persons with developmental disabilities, primarily line 4.2. I'd like to know: how many PDD decisions were actually dealt with in the PDD internal dispute resolution process? How many decisions were reviewed at that level within PDD, and then how many were accepted by the Appeals Secretariat, again focusing on PDD decisions around eligibility and support type?

The second question. The budget estimate for '24-25, line 4.2, is a 3.8 per cent increase, which does not keep pace, as you know, with population growth and inflation. Now, I think we all probably appreciate that this program is always oversubscribed. I'd like to know how the ministry – what sorts of things will happen to deal with that?

PDD supports to Albertans, line 4.2, also was $1.2 billion. Now, how much of that $1.2 billion, that large number – again, I'm not talking about direct operations; I'm talking about line 4.2 – was not used for direct services? How much of that $1.2 billion was used for administration? And the same question for '24-25.

My next question is just really simple. I would just like to know whether or not the zero intake policy is still in place for Michener Centre. If you could tell me the number of residents at Q1 for '23-24 and how many at Q4 for '23-24.

Next, performance indicator 3(a). I think this was really the only performance indicator for persons with developmental disabilities. Now, it's $1.26 billion. That serves approximately – I think the last number that I saw, because the ministry doesn't update these numbers too regularly, was December 21. We saw 12,670 people being served by PDD in this particular line.

Madam Chair, I'm going to add a bit of dialogue. I was actually part of this community for a fairly long time and saw lots of families and individuals with developmental disabilities partake in the survey that was sent out that makes up the only performance metric, actually, for PDD, that talks about: are you satisfied with the services? What I can tell you is that very often people were frightened and did not want to lose anything, were frightened to maybe say: you know, this is a problem; I'm not getting this. I'm just questioning why this is the only performance metric for a program that's so essential, so vital for people with developmental disabilities. It's over a billion dollars. I would hope that there were metrics in place that could do more than ask a frightened parent or guardian or a person with a developmental disability if they're satisfied or not. That's been sort of an issue, I think, that this community has raised for quite some time. Because it is in the business plan, once again as truly the only performance metric for this file, I would like to know why. Does that seem appropriate to you?

Now, the other question that I have: how many PDD contracts for supports and delivery are delivered on-reserve or in Métis villages?

4:10

I'd also like to know: how many contracts does the ministry have for delivery of PDD supports? What is the total number of service providers that the ministry is contracting with, and out of that total number of service providers, how many are not-for-profit?

I would like to know, Madam Chair, through you to the minister: what is the largest contract for service delivery under PDD, under line 4.2? What is the largest contract? I'm just asking in terms of wanting to know about oversight. What is the largest contract for delivery of supports to persons with developmental disabilities in Alberta? It doesn't matter if it's a for-profit or a nonprofit. It doesn't really matter. I just wanted to get a sense of: what is the size of the contract – not family-managed supports but with service providers. What is the largest contract that the ministry has in this fiscal?

You know, if you can't answer that, maybe what is – I know that you're going through contract negotiations . . .

The Chair: Before the minister starts, there are some stickers on some laptops. Members, the same rules that apply in the Chamber apply here. So if you could just remove those, please, I would be very grateful. Thank you.

Minister, please go ahead.

Mr. Nixon: Thanks. Let's talk about on-reserve for PDD first, and we'll try to get through all the hon. member's questions. In 2022-2023 PDD supported 493 individuals, 3.8 per cent of the PDD caseload on-reserve. That would be members who had a band and/or treaty number. The service costs of that were $43.9 million; 64 of these individuals were verified as an ordinary resident on-reserve through the AISH program and should be eligible for reimbursement under the administrative reform agreement with the federal government. The cost of PDD services for these individuals was $5.5 million.

In regard to the contract question, I refer you to Public Accounts on that. It's a better venue to be able to get into the details of accounts.

I'd like to quickly go back to the questions that you continue to ask in regard to, you know, analyzing data and how we've worked on that. We hired, actually, Dr. Tomas Nilsson to work with our team to be able to bring in more data and measurements. He joined my department in the fall of 2023, and he's leading work on this process.

I'll actually ask the deputy minister to maybe summarize some of the work that he's doing, because I think you'll find that interesting for your questions. Then I'll get back after you're done.

Ms. Farmer: Thank you. Cynthia Farmer, deputy minister. We've asked Dr. Nilsson to look at the impact of population increases on programs, enhanced forecasting models for all of our programs. That's the reason we feel more comfortable with our BFE as far as projections.

One other element just to add: the work that Dr. Nilsson has been supporting is the reviews that we've been doing on case file reviews. For BFE, we did a 100 per cent case file review in 2022, which has given us a better idea of where we are with our caseload. This spring we've also done a 100 per cent review on ETW, the expected to work file.

In terms of other things that he's doing: enhancing real-time statistics and dashboards; working, as far as Jenn's team, in terms of the homeless file; he'll be doing the work to deal with our open data and to deal with moving more of our data to an open platform, which I know has been a question in the past; also on the impact of some of the other enhanced understanding about our client transition. Dr. Nilsson has been leading this piece for us through the fall.

Mr. Nixon: Thanks for that, Deputy.

Then, Madam Chair, if it's okay with you, I'm going to ask my ADM Shaun Peddie to come up if he's got any comments about the specific questions about the appeal process.

Mr. Peddie: Madam Chair, I believe the member asked . . .

The Chair: Sir, would you kindly introduce yourself for the record?

Mr. Peddie: Sorry. Shaun Peddie, ADM, strategic services.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Mr. Peddie: I think the member asked about the number of appeals that were received from the Appeals Secretariat for PDD. We don't have a full, complete year for this year, but the most recent data is that 29 notices of appeal were provided to the Appeals Secretariat. There are some time inconsistencies, but of the appeals that were made as notices last year, some 19 were withdrawn.

Then I believe you asked about the number of confirmations or reversals. Of the 20 decisions made this year, so far to date there were two that were reversed.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much. I just wanted to mention that when guests do come up to the podium, to please direct the conversation, again, through the chair.

Please proceed, Minister.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you, Madam Chair. That is a hundred per cent correct. Let's not fall apart on parliamentary procedure. Great leadership.

I will close with my segment of this block time really quickly back to accessible housing. The numbers that I just gave in the previous block about the percentage of that 5,000 are the overall numbers. Again, we move forward with building code on accessibility. There's no doubt that demand continues to exceed supply, which is why we continue to move forward with new builds. We do have a lot of aging infrastructure, but there are requirements to get under the building code as renovations take place.

Anybody who has constituents or anybody else within the system that is looking for specific housing, we are very much available as a department to be able to help them. You know, I would encourage any of you to reach out to our office, my ministerial office. We'd be happy to give you the appropriate contact numbers to help any constituent who's looking for housing. We take that very seriously and want to make sure that everybody has an appropriate place to live.

I will yield the four seconds.

The Chair: We will go to the government side. Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Wiebe: All right. Right here. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister. I just want to thank the minister and his team for the excellent work that they're doing in this ministry. It's been a great experience. I just want to give you a little bit of a side note, talking about the lodge system. My parents spent the last few years in a lodge, and aside from the disruptions during COVID my parents and we as a family had a wonderful experience in the lodge system. So I know it can work, and it can work very, very well. I just want to thank the ministry for that.

I'm going to go now to some of the middle housing part here, where it was great to see your recent announcement regarding the $840 million in affordable housing investments as part of the government's capital plan. I'm hearing more and more from my constituents with concerns about the price of housing. While they're happy to see the economy prosper and more people moving to my riding, they don't want to see housing prices climb to where we catch up to the major centres of Vancouver and Toronto. As I understand it, we need to keep moving and improving our housing supply to meet the growing demands from our province.

I've heard a bit about how we need a mix of housing to meet those market needs. This is where we see "attainable" being used more and more alongside "affordable" when talking about our housing supply. That being said, I see that your key objective in 1.5 on page 123 of your business plan reads, "Create a strategy for attainable and affordable housing focused on middle- and low-income renters and buyers." Minister, can you talk a bit about the need for this strategy and unpack the differences between the new strategy and the 10-year affordable housing strategy?

Mr. Nixon: It's a great question, Madam Chair. You know, only a couple of times in the history of our country have governments had to take concern with the housing market the way that you see multiple provincial governments and the federal government doing right now. Normally what you would see from governments is a large focus on affordable housing for obvious reasons. That's the area that government should be involved in: providing affordable housing for seniors or other low-income individuals or different types of housing that are required for key demographics, usually associated with the social services sector.

But the reality is that we see an unprecedented moment, probably the only other time in the history of the country that would be similar to post World War II, just as everybody was coming back from Europe. That has required governments of different political stripes to be able to step in and recognize that we have a real significant supply problem. We can build as much affordable housing as Treasury Board will give us the money for and that our construction workers can build, but if we don't restore stability to that market, you're going to continue to see that affordable housing price per door continue to go up, and we won't stabilize that market. That's why the Premier has been clear to us in our mandate that we needed to move beyond just traditional affordable housing; we had to work on attainable housing, as she and I have taken to using to describe the market, and to go in and help.

4:20

That doesn't mean that government goes and builds the market – I think we all agree that that's the wrong approach – but that we need to really focus on creating the market conditions that can allow industry to do the job that they need to do and then, second, also make sure that there's a focus beyond just the traditional housing that we have seen in the past built by the industry in the province.

This can't just be suburb houses in Calgary no more. We need to make sure that there's a significant number of rental units, high-density housing that is being built, which is why we have focused on things like zoning and red tape reduction with our municipal partners and to be able to encourage that to take place.

Again, the great news is that it's working. I mean, we're seeing about a third of all new construction builds right now inside the largest cities going towards purpose-built rentals. I think the number right now – I said it earlier – is 16,000 rental units that are being built as we speak in the market, which is a big number. There have been more purpose-built rentals built in the last three years in our province than in the 15 years previous to that combined. So that's the challenge.

Again, we need to build affordable housing to deal with important aspects of the social services system, but to restore affordability in the market, it's about volume. So far – we're not done yet – we've been able to create conditions that will allow industry to be able to create between 50,000 and 60,000 more houses than they were already going to be able to do in our market.

Mr. Wiebe: Just to follow up on that, is there a timeline to have this strategy completed?

Mr. Nixon: Well, the strategy and the affordable housing strategy itself is a 10-year timeline that we're diligently working away at. The add-on process of the market is us reacting, just like you see the federal government and others reacting, to the conditions that we see from the high inflation and affordability situation across the country. The reality is that we're working towards trying to address the fact that we'll be short between 130,000 and 150,000 total market houses, not necessarily all affordable, by about 2030, eh, David? That's CMHC numbers. That is what we are diligently working at, to be able to make sure it does not become a problem to restore affordability to our market.

You're going to see some conditions also change, hon. member, as we watch to see what happens with interest rates as well as other jurisdictions. Housing prices may soften in places like Ontario and Vancouver. It'll be interesting to see what impact it has on us going forward.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister.

Supporting Albertans with disabilities is such an important core function of the government, in my opinion. This really means ensuring that they and their families have opportunities to live full and meaningful lives. In some cases it can also mean that Albertans with disabilities have an opportunity to access employment, volunteering, and other opportunities to engage and participate in their communities.

Minister, I'm looking at page 124 of your business plan, under key objective 2.2, that says, "Provide supports for adults and children with disabilities and their families through enhanced cross-sector coordination, innovative best practices and modernization." Can the minister give us an update on the need for more co-ordination and innovation to continue to improve and provide supports for Albertans living with disabilities? Also, I always like to ensure that we're measuring success when talking about improving any type of service delivery for Albertans. Can you tell us what success looks like for this very key objective in your business plan?

Mr. Nixon: It's one of the big areas that we have been focused on and we see as a need to deal with when it comes to issues about the client's experience with our PDD programs, which is why the department has been working very hard to develop a new online application for Albertans and to make sure that we can move towards a digital case management system that will simplify program administration and then enhance, ultimately, consistency across the province, which then improves data integrity and reduces the administrative burden for both families and the department, which then means that we can continue to invest more as a result of that. The PDD online application and the PDD digital case management system will be operational in the next fiscal year. That is where we're going to continue to put a significant amount of time.

We've also invested to address providing seamless supports to children at first diagnosis. The department granted funding, for example, for $100,000 to the Society for Autism Supports and Services for one year to expand that early childhood intervention program pilot, allowing 15 more families with young children at risk or diagnosed with autism to participate in the learning engagement and play program. The ultimate goal of that program is to change the development trajectory of young children with autism, age 12 to 18 months, and to increase parent and caregiver capacity through coaching of families to embed teaching in their daily routines.

We continue throughout the system to try to be able to provide ease of access to the system and also provide quick turnarounds of services to those seeking supports, particularly when it comes to children because two years for a child, when you're dealing with things like brain development, is significantly more than two years to an adult. So that needs to be where we continue to try to target as a department. A lot of money was invested on this issue in the previous fiscal year to try to move forward in productive ways.

Mr. Wiebe: Looking at line item 4, disability services, on page 191 of the estimates, what investments or strategies are being adopted in Budget 2024 ensuring that those with severe disabilities have seamless support from the first diagnosis through childhood and adulthood, without interruption of necessary supports?

Mr. Nixon: Well, transition planning, Madam Chair, already begins with the FSCD programs. It begins, actually, at 16. It involves collaboration between the youth – the child – their family, FSCD, obviously, and then adult disability programs such as PDD. The transition plan includes planning for future income, housing, health, employment, transportation . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We will move over to the Official Opposition for their time now.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Madam Chair, I don't know if I'm going too fast. Maybe I didn't number the questions, but the minister is just not covering my questions. Maybe I'll try a different system, maybe numbering them for him.

I'd like to talk about food insecurity. Key objective 1.2 on page 123 of the business plan: to support food security for low-income and vulnerable Albertans. The ministry has budgeted $5 million for the province, same as last year. Simple question: without any real targets to measure poverty reduction or food security, how exactly is the ministry going to assure Albertans that they're actually improving food security? What's that going to look like? Is it information from food banks? Are there standards? Are there performance metrics? Anything?

What is being tracked by the ministry via the funded food banks? For example, I understand that the equation, how funds are distributed, might not be directly from the ministry. It might be, you know, Food Banks Alberta or FCSS. But, ultimately, the ministry is responsible, so I would like to know: what is being tracked by the ministry? It could be via the funded food banks. Is it how many unique individuals are served? Is it the amount of hampers that are

provided? Is it the number of meals and snacks provided? Is it the number of people with disability pensions that are accessing food banks? Anything. I'd just like to know any kind of metrics whatsoever, Madam Chair, that would assure Albertans that the portion of the $5 million that goes to food banks is actually doing what it said it was going to do.

The reason I'm asking this – let me give you an example. I'm going to use the most recent disclosure, and I'm going to use Airdrie as an example. In '22-23 the Airdrie Food Bank received $110,000. Now, for comparison, Edmonton's Food Bank received a total of $280,000. If you calculate per capita, the Airdrie residents are funded at $1.375 per person, and Edmonton received $0.000000357 per person. Edmonton's Food Bank serves in two months what Airdrie does for the entire year, not counting the meal and snack program, which is covered by the food bank. They also serve and support a hundred different partners that include really important partners like Hope Mission, Bissell, Mustard Seed, Salvation Army.

Again, I would like to know – if we could get the equation that was used, that'd be fabulous; that would be ideal – how was the decision made? For example, I know the big food banks, like Calgary and Edmonton: their total amount was, really, about their food costs for one month. So, again, what formula was used? My second question is: what formula was used to determine funding for '23-24? And how will that $5 million be distributed in this fiscal?

I understand that there are grants to agencies to increase capacity or – I'm sorry; whatever the wording was, I don't recall. There was that piece, and then there was also direct money to food bank – I know the minister went on this morning about, you know, that organizations had better capacity to buy food. Totally understand that. Totally agree. That's what they do. So not discussing that. I just want to know, Madam Chair: how do we figure out who gets what? How many of the successful food bank grants and food security grant recipients were in existence, providing food security programming, prior to the creation of this grant in the '23-24 budget?

4:30

Now, another question that I have is why was this particular amount – and I understand that the ministry gave out the same amount last year. I'm just curious. We know grocery costs have skyrocketed, so I'm just wondering why this wasn't indexed. Maybe if the minister could explain that.

Given that I have, you know, a whopping one minute left, I'm going to go back. I mean, there are probably about 40 questions that were unanswered, but there are a couple I'd really, really like to know about, Madam Chair. I'd like to know about the intake policy at Michener Centre. If someone could just tell me that, yes or no, it's in place. And if someone could just tell me how many residents there were at the beginning of the fiscal year and at the end of the fiscal year, I would very much appreciate that.

The other one is: I would like to know on income support – and I ask very specifically – what is the change in spending for the additional shelter benefit, which is a supplemental benefit. Now, I'm assuming that's in line 2.2 or 2.3. What is the change from Q1 to Q4? So how much less money is being doled out to Albertans that meet the criteria for income support, whether that's expected to work or barriers for employment; it doesn't really matter to me. I would just like to know what is the change in the amount of money spent on that particular supplemental, the additional shelter benefit. Now, keep in mind that these are folks that are living on a core amount of under $900 a month. So it's kind of important to know how many people are getting that top-up to be able to afford rent. With that, I will stop.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll now move over to the hon. minister for his response.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you for that, Madam Chair, and for those questions. I'll start with the food security question if I could. In regard to reporting, food banks are required to count the number of visits total, the number of visits that are children, household types, source of income, housing type, demographics info, breakdown of users, number of meals and snacks provided. Food banks' funding formulas are allocations based on populations of service area and served individuals.

I want to stress that the purpose of the investment for food security investment by our department is not to provide food services as a general rule. It was to support capacity of those organizations, which is what we heard loud and clear from Food Banks Alberta that they wanted us to participate in. I also want to reflect that to look at the numbers in the way that the hon. member has tried to break them down does not reflect the capability of those organizations. For example, Calgary and Edmonton food banks have considerably more fundraising capabilities than the Rimbey Food Bank, and Airdrie may have different capabilities than other food banks. So that doesn't necessarily reflect all of the demographics or all of the components of what that food bank may serve within the community. But, again, food banks have been clear with us that they don't need us to fund them fully – that's not what's been asked nor the intention of this grant – but to continue to help them to build capacity to be able to help with food security in the community.

Yeah. The difference between the quarters on the benefits, which we think is what the hon. member is referring to: I'll actually let Toby, one of my ADMs, answer that. I think he'll provide a very detailed answer.

Go ahead, Toby.

Mr. Schneider: Thank you, Madam Chair. Speaking to the additional shelter benefit, I'll provide you now the issuances and expenditures through the quarters of this year, noting that this last quarter is, of course, not quite complete. But this is the most up-to-date information that we have.

The issuances in quarter 1 for additional shelter and the income support program were 3,579; quarter 2 is 3,416; quarter 3 is 3,443; and to date in quarter 4, 3,316. As far as expenditures, the expenditure essentially rounds to $1.1 million per quarter for each of the quarters. It's slightly different in each quarter.

Mr. Nixon: Then just to follow up, Madam Chair, on a couple other things on food banks. It's important also to note that rural food banks also deal with larger geographic areas, which is considerable when they deal with transportation costs and other components associated with that, and also may have different ways that they interact with people in rural communities versus urban, which is taken into account.

I also want to go through quickly the list of the grants in 2023 on this issue: $2.8 million was provided to establish food banks; $2.9 million was provided to eligible civil society organizations with food security programs; $3.4 million was provided to match donations received by food banks and related civil society organizations from December 1 to December 31, 2022; $510,000 was provided to Food Banks Alberta to help strengthen Alberta's network of food banks; and the remaining funding was provided to FCSSAA to administer the grants.

Also, $7.8 million will be provided to food banks and related organizations that support Albertans need to access food, and we are also doing some work when it comes to food banks in this budget to talk about the overlap issues when we're dealing with

emergencies, as we've discussed previously. I do want to say, though, it's important because this is a new funding stream for the department that we take some time to evaluate what worked from that investment with those key stakeholders and make some determinations in the future to make sure that we're investing in a way that is definitely benefiting those organizations. Our intention is not to operate those organizations; it's to continue to help them be able to increase capacity.

Lastly, in regard to the Michener, we're not fully following what the member is asking, and we will be interested to see if she asks again given that there are no new intakes to the Michener Centre. But we look forward to seeing if there is a more specific question, because that's the answer: there are no intakes.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now we'll go back to the government side.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Madam Chair, and again thank you, Minister, for the great work you're doing. You know, it's a super complex file and funding, and you're doing a great job helping us dissecting and going into details here, and we're also grateful for your time dedicated to this file. Before I go to my question here, I would like to also tie in my question to the low-income transportation. You know, those members of our society who are not fortunate enough to actually have enough for transportation, your ministry looking into that. Being born outside of Canada, coming here, you know, this is something very dear to me because it's part of our dignity, and getting from point A to point B sometimes is a big thing. So it's just nice to see that it's part of your portfolio here as well.

I have a few questions on that topic here. Looking specifically at page 124 of this business plan, initiatives supporting key objectives, there is about $5 million allocated to supporting transportation for low-income and vulnerable Albertans. Again, I am very pleased to see that in your budget. How does the low-income transit program meet the needs of vulnerable individuals in our province? My question would be twofold, but I'll let you maybe answer this shortly, and then we can get to the next one.

Mr. Nixon: Well, the low-income transit program provides funding to municipalities with transit systems that offer reduced transit fares to low-income individuals, so that's paying reduced transit to enable low-income individuals to move throughout their communities to access jobs, obviously, education, health care, community and government services. It remains a real challenge throughout the social services sector to be able to make sure those that have transportation issues, that can't receive the same level of transportation services as others – it's a real challenge. In a lot of the communities that you and I represent there is no public transit system, so it doesn't necessarily address some of those challenges that we see, but certainly in municipalities that do have a transit system, this is designed to be able to encourage them to provide that service in an affordable way for vulnerable individuals who can't afford transit otherwise.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you for that.

You just started answering my second part of the question because you and I both come from rural Alberta where we don't have, you know, public transportation. The next part of this question would be: if the program is helping low-income individuals and the vulnerable in municipalities where there is already a transit system, what happens in municipalities that do not offer low-income transit programs or do not have transit systems?

Mr. Nixon: Well, first of all, we would strongly encourage all municipalities that do have a low-income transit system to look at being able to provide that service for those that can't afford it, which is why we continue to stay within the space, to make that encouragement. I actually think the larger challenge as you get further away from places that have that type of transit system, you know, the traditional transit system – bus, LRT, and other things like that – is trying to then use things like CAP services and/or partnerships with nonprofit organizations that do works like Meals on Wheels. The hon. member and I and you, Madam Chair, definitely know of lots of organizations within our communities that also even do simple things like help to drive individuals to medical appointments.

4:40

One of the things that I have instructed the department to do on this program is to look beyond just the traditional way that we have looked at transit, which would be around partnering with municipalities on transit systems, and to have further conversations on what it's going to take to work with a broader community. My view is that we should look at this a little bit more like we looked at food banks, which is about helping to use our investment to facilitate programming and help to encourage that programming to increase.

The last thing I would say on this, Madam Chair, is that we're making it very clear, as we go through the development of the new continuing care organization, that outside of the health care component of it, we need to be looking at, obviously, things like home care and other things that we often talk about, but we can't go forward without a serious conversation when it comes to transportation, particularly in rural areas like the hon. member represents.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much, Minister.

I heard the member asking the question on other disabilities, specifically on severe disability, and there was no time in your block to answer, but I really like that question. If I may, I would like to kind of reiterate a little bit on that as well in regard to severe disabilities. Looking at your line item 4, disability services, on page 191 of the estimates, what investments or strategies are being adopted in Budget 2024 to ensure that those with severe disabilities have seamless support from first diagnosis through childhood and adulthood, without interruption of necessary support throughout?

Mr. Nixon: We spoke a little bit to your colleague's questions about how the process starts, how it works with the transition starting at 16 and the individuals that will be involved and the things that will be looked at amongst the department. Then I think we finished up talking about the LEEP program if I remember correctly.

I do want to point out that we continue as – it's actually within the mandate letter for our department, given to us by the Premier, to have a strong conversation about this issue of how you transition from services, child to adult, beyond just disabilities but also some of the conversations we need to have with our colleagues in children's services and some of that overlap role. You know, some of the things that we discussed previously is where we focus, but we also recognize there has to be a broader conversation amongst multiple ministries. I think some of the stuff that we see happening with homelessness, for example, Madam Chair, to the hon. member, shows us the need to be able to bring in multiple ministry supports when we're dealing with vulnerable individuals. I would say, through you to him, that I see no difference on this issue.

We need to actually make sure that when we're moving somebody from 16 to 18 years old that we are starting to get ready; we know it's coming. There's no reason for that not to be a serious conversation to make sure that other ministries that are going to now take over the care of that individual are ready and getting ready to do so.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much.

I would like to switch a little bit and go into family and community support services. Looking at page 125 of the business plan under initiatives supporting key objectives of outcome 3, I see there is $105 million allocated through the family and community support services program. Again a couple of questions here. With the growing need in communities to provide preventive social services and with no increases in funding to support family and community support services, which is also known as the FCSS program, what are you doing to ensure that the FCSS program is helping to address the key social issues facing Albertans?

Mr. Nixon: Again thank you for that question, Madam Chair. Let me start by saying that we really value the work that we do with FCSS, which also helps us expand some of the work that we can do with our municipal partners, who are also often heavily helping us fund FCSS programs inside their communities, which is a great way to be able to bring together multiple governments working together. We did increase the budget last year by 5 per cent. This year we're holding the number flat as we work to meet our financial objectives. At the same time we are going to be undertaking conversations with FCSS over this fiscal year about areas where they are being asked, frankly, by other ministries to take on mandate, which is okay, but we need to be able to make sure that is being communicated and that their role is being properly addressed by other departments.

Frankly, one of the big areas that we've had some recent conversations on is about the overlap between us and children's services. When children's services was within this ministry, those conversations would have been happening simultaneously. Obviously, as you set up a new ministry, we need to be able to make sure that, while not duplicating funding, we're not losing an important resource for funding that is needed for either a key demographic or a key program that is within our community.

You know, how I would look at the budget, when you see FCSS, is the government's ongoing commitment to this important program and the fact that we value it, which is why we are holding at that line and continuing to make sure that $105 million of Alberta's tax dollars are invested in the important work that they're doing.

Mr. Boitchenko: Good. Thank you very much, Minister.

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

Over to the Official Opposition for their next round of questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to talk about accessible housing. On page 121 of the business plan I note that the ministry will "improve and expand the housing system by 40 per cent, to serve a total of 82,000 households by 2031." As you know, vague statements like this are not helpful targets for government to be held to account. Performance metric 1(c), new affordable housing units, new rent subsidies for low-income Albertans: how many of the '24 targets of 1,500 are accessible? Pretty straightforward. The targets are right in your plan. How many of those 1,500 are accessible? How many of the next target, which is in the next fiscal, '25-26 – there are 1,700, so 200 more. How many of that is targeted to be accessible or, as you said, Minister, barrier free, through the chair? If you can't give me those specific numbers, even just a ballpark investment estimate would be fine.

Now, there wasn't a lot of information about the disability advocate in your business plan, which is unfortunate, but I note the disability advocate's strategic plan covering going right to 2025 lists affordable accessible housing as one of their priorities. Now, I understand the advocate's office is within the ministry and not independent; however, the work is still very valuable. My question is: how many times did the deputy minister and the minister consult directly with the disability advocate – in person or by video or by phone even is fine – in the last fiscal year and in preparation for Budget '24? You could tie it together.

There was, I noted, a slight increase. I'm not sure what that was for, maybe for the move to Calgary, or that could be the expansion to Calgary. It's not a big deal. I'm assuming that costs go up.

I don't see any mention whatsoever about accessibility legislation in the Budget '24 documents. I went through the fiscal plan. I didn't see anything. If I missed that, I'm happy for the minister to point that out, but I don't see any mention of accessibility legislation. As you know, we're one of the last jurisdictions that doesn't have it. You know, in question period today, Madam Chair, we talked a lot about the accessibility of places for when people were discharged from hospital, when they were sent to places that were inaccessible, particularly for wheelchair users, and that's problematic, so accessibility legislation would be very timely.

Now, I know that the advocate's office, that is reflected in this budget, actually did undertake the start of some accessibility legislation consultation. I attended some of those. They were online. I mean, the one that I was at had, I think, maybe six people, but I'm assuming that was just the one, so I'd love to hear about that consultation. What's the plan for this legislation? If there's no plan, happy to let you know that we have a private member's bill coming up that will possibly be accessibility legislation. We could save you some trouble. There is that. I'm going to hope that you answer some of those questions.

4:50

I'm going to quickly flip while I have a little bit of speaking time left. I want to ask a couple of questions about protection for persons in care. Now, as you know, there's legislation. It's called Protection for Persons in Care Act, obviously. There's an office where you can report allegations of abuse. Those allegations are then – they determine whether or not the legislation applies. They assign investigators and so on, the investigation is done, the findings and recommendations are published, and then it's a way for the provider to go back and ensure those recommendations are met. Overall, I think it's a great – it can be a great process. It can be very helpful. As you know, there's a lot of people out there in really complex situations, and things happen, right?

I'd like to know why the ministry stopped reporting about the number of abuse allegations reported and the number of investigations and outcomes. Why did the ministry stop reporting in 2019-20? I think it provided – I don't think it gave people tons of assurance, but it was something. It was something that we could go and ask people to, you know, report their allegations. We could hope that they would be investigated. I actually thought it was a pretty good process. That's what I would like to know about that.

Now let me go back to the accessibility housing. Why I keep going back to the minister's answer earlier: he said 5,000 units; historical 5,000 units, and I'm asking about going forward. I'm not asking where the units are; just a breakdown. How many are lodges? How many are community residences? It's pretty straightforward.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Over to the minister.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Well, let's start with the accessible housing. We can go back to that again. The hon. member is correct. I've provided her the 5,000 current units in that percentage. I think she's got that. What I believe she's attempted to ask is: what takes place with new units? Again, we build or exceed the building code. Multifamily buildings require 10 per cent. However, agreements with CMHC require 20 to 30 per cent of new units to be accessible. It would not be a straight-up number. I mean, 10 per cent is, again, the minimum, but often most of the affordable housing projects that we're working with have some component of CMHC agreement as well, which would require 20 to 30 per cent of new units to be accessible. The building code requires 10 per cent, and certainly all of our buildings meet that code.

As for the disability advocate I don't have the exact numbers of times that, obviously, officials have met with the disability advocate. I can tell you, though, that the assistant deputy minister of disabilities informs me by note that he meets monthly with the advocate himself. His full executive team meets bimonthly with the advocate, and then, of course, my deputy minister is kept up to date on that. My understanding is that the disability advocate has also met with several of our other ADMs who may have some overlap role. I'm regularly briefed on what the advocate is working on, including, for example, knowing that he was going to have a meeting with you, which I think is great. So that does show you that I am in fairly decent contact with what is taking place in the advocate's office, which is great.

Yeah. Again, the hon. member, Madam Chair, asked specifically about the 1,500 and 1,700. It'll be done, you know, depending on the type of project, whether it's a CMHC project or who those funding partners are. The answer is that it'll be anywhere from 10 to 30 per cent of those units, and it would depend on the project that is being brought forward.

On abuse allegations I'm just checking if – the indication we have on that is that it was before all of my officials' time that that change would have been made, so they're not fully following it from a policy perspective. That one I will commit to following up with you directly on because they don't have that answer. It actually might be Health. That actually might be what you are referring to, but we will go find out whether or not there was a change done. Nobody who currently works in the department executive knows when that change took place, so I won't attempt to answer it.

Because we talked a little bit about accessibility legislation, I think it's worth bringing up. I do agree that we are one of the few jurisdictions – I believe there are actually two provinces left that do not have accessibility legislation. I have instructed the department, through my assistant deputy minister of disabilities, to begin a public consultation process with key stakeholders on what that would look like for our province and to begin the work to be able to bring us eventually, hopefully, towards legislation that would come into the Legislature to accomplish that objective for our province. That work will start to be undertaken this fiscal year. We have also been working with Rick Hansen, in particular, to get some feedback with his organization about what that might look like.

I am also going to continue to – and I think the hon. member may support me in this – have conversations with both the Speaker's office and the Legislative Assembly Office on ways that we can continue to improve that issue. I think that is worth a conversation. I've spoken to him recently about that. I think that this is a great spot for us to lead that way. If we start to move towards legislation, I do hope that she and the opposition caucus will participate in that consultation process because I think there's a lot of common ground on that issue.

Then overlap on housing: one of the challenges that we're going to have is to be able to try to make sure that we're investing as many resources as we can into housing. Obviously, we have to be able to make sure that that housing is accessible for individuals that need it. The department understands that's a priority, but, again, when you're trying to find balance between building designs and multiple different funders that are involved, different regulatory bodies, it would be very hard to provide an exact statement. I do want to reiterate that 10 to 30 per cent number. I think we have answered that question.

The Chair: Great. Minister, that's it for you.

We will take our five-minute break right now. See you in a few minutes.

[The committee adjourned from 4:56 p.m. to 5:03 p.m.]

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. We've returned from the break. We'll resume with the government side for your questions.

Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, my questions are related to transportation services funding. I would like to preface my question by recognizing that not everyone can afford a car or a bus pass. That's why it's so important that the government provides support for those low-income and vulnerable Albertans who need to get across town to buy groceries, access services, or just go to work. This can also be an important aspect of people's independence, the ability to get from point A to point B without relying on others.

Minister, looking at the key objective 2.4, that states that the ministry will "provide funding to support access to transportation services for low-income and vulnerable Albertans." How much funding is allocated in the next three years for these transportation services? How many Albertans access this funding, Minister?

Mr. Nixon: Well, again, Madam Chair, thank you for that question. Right now in the budget that is before us, $5 million is allocated for low-income transportation services. So if we put that over three years, it would be $15 million. I think we covered probably just recently what the purpose of that program is.

Each municipality, though, that receives that funding for their low-income transit system determines the eligibility and how they distribute the pass itself. The reporting we receive from participating municipalities is that at the end of the third quarter of 2023 more than 560,000 transit passes and 275,000 individual fares have been provided to Albertans at reduced rates. A great example of success of the program is the city of Medicine Hat. Between April and December of 2023 the city provided more than 4,100 transit passes at a reduced rate to low-income residents.

That's not the only program we have that's helping vulnerable Albertans access transportation that's also worth noting. We recognize that transportation is a social determinant of health and making sure particular access for seniors and others to health care services, social services, and other important things like that in our community, which is why in March 2023 we provided another $3.5 million from the low-income transit pass program to be allocated through Healthy Aging Alberta to be able to provide funding for up to 20 rural communities until March of 2026. That funding supports the delivery of assisted transportation services for seniors and persons with mobility challenges in rural Alberta. Seven communities were funded in phase 1: Edson, Oyen, Smoky River, Sundre, Fox Creek, Barrhead, and Crowsnest Pass. There are expressions of interest for phase 2 that took place between January 15th and

February 9th of this year, and 35 EOIs were selected to proceed in that application phase which ended in April 2024.

The other thing I would mention, Madam Chair, is the special needs assistance program that also provides financial assistance to low-income seniors travelling greater than 80 kilometres round trip to see a medical specialist or for medical testing or treatment, and just over $1 million is disbursed across 2,000 seniors annually for that program.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

My next set of questions will be on civil societies on page 125 of the business plan, which mentions the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society. The original civil societies fund, CSF, commitment was completed in Budget 2022, and you have committed $3 million in 2024. Why did you not allocate CSF funding in 2023? Can you please account for the $3 million in CSF funding from Budget 2023? Where did this funding go to?

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Nixon: Well, with the original commitment completed, Madam Chair, it was important to evaluate the success of the program before we provided further funding. We also believed it was important to take another look at the funding priorities we use in those first three years. The Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society provided us with very valuable advice on these priorities for the CSF grant and with all programs. It's good practice, of course, for us to take some time to check out that criteria and make sure we're getting it right.

There was an independent evaluation of the 21 projects that were funded in year 1, which was just recently completed. That evaluation along with the review of funding priorities will form our future rounds that we decide to do through the program, including the funding, obviously, in Budget 2024.

The review of that program: part of that funding, $1.52 million, will be provided to support community organizations supporting positive social change in the province, and the remaining funding, it's $1.48 million, has been reallocated to other ministerial priorities. Nine organizations ultimately received what was budgeted in '23-24, which was $1.52 million, which is being provided to those organizations to enhance their ability and their efforts, and we'll look at that evaluation and make determinations as we go into this fiscal year.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the answer and thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

Minister, I was preparing for this estimates meeting here, and I was reviewing your business plan and came across the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society. It's been great to see this government really work to harness the full potential of civil society while we are known for a lot of things in Alberta, including our economic prosperity, tax advantage, and more affordable quality of life.

5:10

I have found Albertans give back to their communities by volunteering and contributing to organizations that support our most vulnerable. I was reading a report from the Fraser Institute the other day that shows that Albertans were among the top provinces in Canada at donating to charities.

Key objective 3.3 of the minister's business plan, on page 125, states that your ministry will be supported by the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society to "expand civil society's capacity to address emerging social issues and improve supports for Albertans." Minister, what have you heard from your stakeholders, either from members of the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society or from these organizations that you are constantly meeting with, on how we can better leverage the power of civil society and address our social challenges?

To follow up that question, given your experience prior to being elected in this sector, what are a few areas that you see where we can improve civil society's ability to respond to the issues and challenges of today?

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, for that question as well. The Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society is an important organization. I've met with them recently to get their feedback, particularly on what to do with the civil society fund. They also just recently did their report, Building Momentum for Social Impact, and have been able to provide input to us as a department and to the government on ways to be able to work with civil society going forward. I want to stress that we also meet with civil society and nonprofit organizations and others on a daily basis. I have been pretty clear, I think, today about the importance of partnering with those organizations to accomplish the objectives of my department. We can't do the work that we do each and every day, if it wasn't for the strong relationships that we have with charitable organizations across the department who work with us each day to be able to achieve our objectives.

We continue to have those conversations to make sure that we adjust our processes and are working to make sure those partnerships remain strong and that our investment is going in ways that often is benefiting those organizations, not trying to duplicate, necessarily, the same type of investments but working together to be able to amplify both their resources and our resources to help people.

I can tell you as working for the nonprofit sector before my public life, that one of the challenges that we used to see often with government was not as clear communication with them. I think the process that we've done with the Premier's council has given us a way for charities and nonprofits and others within civil society to provide some significant feedback to the government on ways that we can work together in the future. All of that will just benefit vulnerable Albertans. I think that that's why we've made that process and that you will see, Madam Chair, us continue to do that important work with our social services sector and our nonprofit sector within the social services sector.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the answer.

Again, I would like to thank you and your staff for coming here and for the good work you have been doing for Albertans here.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you for having us.

Mr. Singh: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll head over to the Official Opposition for their next round of questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Okay. I'd like to talk about employment. I'm looking at outcome 2 on page 124 that focuses on employment, ensuring investments allow Albertans to access employment and prosperity, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, initiatives supporting key objectives notes, "in '24-25, $95.9 million is allocated to provide career and employment services for unemployed Albertans." How is it that the ministry is going to ensure that the programming is accessible to disabled Albertans, and are there any related targets? I think that, you know, sometimes we hear, "Well, it's open to everybody; anybody can apply," but, as you know,

sometimes to support accessibility of programming requires an additional investment. It requires accommodation.

My question is, really, that – this is a big spend. This is, well, the annual spend is $95.9 million allocated to this line around employment. What are the targets related to disabled Albertans? I'll talk about developmentally disabled Albertans and their employment funding a bit later; that's not what I'm talking about. Just generally any Albertan with a disability.

Sort of along that line, in the fiscal plan on page 82, for example, there was a section called Expanding Apprenticeship Education, which is fabulous. It's a $102 million investment over three years that is projected to result in 3,200 apprentice classroom seats. What percentage or how many of those seats are targeted or projected to be held or made available or accessible to Albertans with disabilities? That's my second question.

Now, my third one is on budget estimate line 4.2, which is PDD supports to Albertans. As you know, there are a number of different codes that are in this large envelope of money, so I would like to know: what are the amounts for, number one, supported employment and, number two, employment preparation? So the two different categories. I know there is a calculation for that, or there should be, as you're calculating this year's budget or next year what you will need to provide services. I know that there's a number. I understand they're going through contract negotiations right now. If I could get those two fiscal amounts that make up this total, that would be wonderful as we try to vote on this budget.

Now, for the people that are in the line for employment preparation. As you know, there's a real danger for people to just be stuck in employment preparation, particularly if they have developmental disabilities, for years on end. They can just be preparing for employment that never occurs. They get stuck in this, and it just never ends. So my question is: of all of the individuals with developmental disabilities that are in employment preparation that are PDD funded, what is the average length of time that they spend preparing for employment? If you have any stats on employment after they spend time in there, that would be fabulous, too.

I would also like to know, Madam Chair, if possible – I know that this was changed, I think, in the last term. It was changed so that organizations that employ people with developmental disabilities could actually apply for a wage exemption so they would be paid less than minimum wage. They called it training, like a training allowance, which is – I won't comment on that. I would just like to know, just a yes or no: have there been any applications for wage exemption to this ministry at all whatsoever?

I want to go back. As you're going to be pulling information for PDD, as a fair amount of my questions come from there, I want to again ask the minister: out of that total spending in line 4.2 – we've got $1.2 billion for persons with developmental disabilities in Alberta – how much of that $1.2 billion will go to pay for administration of all contracts, of all spending? How much is for administration, and how much is for direct service? If you could answer that, that would be lovely.

The other piece that goes along with that is, as I asked probably about three blocks ago: what is the total number of service providers that the ministry is expected to engage with in this fiscal year to provide the services listed in 4.2? I don't need to know about 4.3 but 4.2. How many service providers total? You can even just give me approximate if you're not a hundred per cent sure. Then: how many of those service providers are nonprofit providers?

With that, I've got about nine seconds left. I'll stop there.

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

We'll turn the time over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Nixon: Okay. The apprenticeship question I'll tackle real quick. Unless we missed something, where the hon. member was referring to something in our budget, which we'll be happy to respond in the next round, it's not in our budget. Okay, so we're in agreement on that. Postsecondary is who we should talk to about that.

Supporting that key objective that she refers to – I just want to be clear: in 2024-2025 it refers to $95.9 million to be allocated to provide career and employment services for unemployed Albertans. I can talk about that more in general, but I understand that the member wants to have more specifics towards PDD and disabilities. PDD spends about $22.7 million, I believe, on employment. That is broken between placement at $11.4 million and prep, which I think is about prepping employers maybe, and it's $11.2 million.

What I'm going to do, though, is ask our ADM of disabilities, Clay, to come up to the podium to provide more detail on that program for the hon. member.

5:20

Mr. Buchanan: Clay Buchanan, ADM, disability services. I think one of the questions that was asked was around direct versus indirect, and just to clarify, that's all the money that goes to the service providers. We spend approximately $850 million on direct support and another $170 million for indirect supports. Again, that total amount goes out to our service providers; that's in contracts. Number of contracts: about 175 currently, probably around 150 contractors; 90 per cent plus are not-for-profit.

Thank you.

Mr. Nixon: Then, Madam Chair, I'll ask Clay to stay because that was actually the second question that we were going to try to answer, but I think that did answer it. The question that I was asking him to come up to talk about, Clay, was around the specifics for investment in disability employment services and the breakdown of that. I know you sent me a note, but maybe you could elaborate a little bit more. I think I gave the high-level numbers.

Mr. Buchanan: You're correct, Minister. We spend about $22 million annually on employment for individuals that are eligible for the PDD program. All those services are contracted services. We have service providers that provide both employment prep and placement.

I think one of the questions asked was average length of time in service. It really depends because those individuals will go from prep to placement, placement to prep, really trying to provide the best service possible for those individuals and to suit their needs. So the length of stay in prep or placement all depends on the individual and what services they need so that they can get employment.

An Hon. Member: Can you provide an average?

Mr. Buchanan: Average? I don't have an average.

The Chair: Hon. member, the conversation should be directed through the chair.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you, through the chair, to the ADM.

On career and employment services in general a couple of things. One, make clear that it's remained flat. That investment continues within our department because we see the value of it for, I think, obvious reasons. I do want to make also clear that we redesigned our employment services to improve services access when it comes to this area, including working on future employment services ultimately being streamlined to meet each Albertan's individual

needs with an increased focus on outcome monitoring and on providing the level of support that an individual requires.

In addition to what the ADM was referring to specifically within the area that he's working on, our overall employment services are designed with that $95 million investment to be adapted to what the circumstance is for the individuals because the goal of the department is to find people work. So the focus of it is that not one process is going to fit all, which I think is obvious.

We're also working on a digital platform pilot right now, which we are hoping will provide an end-to-end employment service to job seekers closest to the labour market. That pilot includes 3,000 job seekers who are at low risk of long-term unemployment and who have access to the required technology and digital literacy skills to navigate independently online.

And of that full $95 million number under that objective, which is different than what the ADM was referring to but under the objective that the hon. member was referring to, 35 per cent of that number goes for disabilities employment.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move back over now to the government side. Please proceed with your questions.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and to the minister. Through you, Chair, first off, I would just like to thank the ministry. I know we talked a little bit about the transportation service funding, and I just want to thank them personally for investing in the Crowsnest Pass. It is extremely important to our rural, remote community down there in southern Alberta to have received this. We've received an extraordinary number of e-mails thanking the ministry for recognizing them and supporting them.

From there I'm hoping, through you, Chair, to the minister, we could touch on homeless supports and housing stability. I don't see the new navigation and support centre anywhere in the 2024 fiscal plan or supporting documents. Does this mean the centre is closing?

Mr. Nixon: First off, Madam Chair, through you to the member, thank you for her comments in regard to the Crowsnest Pass. She and I have an ongoing competition on whether her area is more beautiful than Nordegg. She and I disagree, but I think the one thing we agree on is that together we have the most beautiful places in the province. We'll continue to invest in the Pass.

In regard to the navigation centre, it is something that was added on in this fiscal year. We increased the investment that we put into both homeless shelters and the work that we had to do with the navigation centre end of year and then have maintained that going into the next fiscal year. Obviously, we were responding to an emergency situation that was presented to us by the city of Edmonton. Our original plan on that was to get an open deal with the encampment issue in the short term and then evaluate where we were at after 30 days.

After 30 days it was fairly clear to everybody involved that we were on to something as a department and decided to continue it, and we will be continuing it long term. Within the budget itself the money that we have allocated towards homelessness will be able to facilitate the work that we do with the navigation centre in Edmonton. Then we will be working on a plan next for Calgary and then, ultimately, looking at some of the things that we've learned to try to adapt it to more rural environments. It may not be the same level, but it'll be the same principles that we are going to try to do as far as bringing in wraparound services in that partnership with different agencies. The nav centre will remain. We'll have more to say about it shortly, though, going forward.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister.

Just before we move on, can you expand on how the shelter has acted to support the homeless individuals? And has it proved to be cost-effective?

Mr. Nixon: Well, it certainly proved to be cost-effective in the short term. Frankly, some of our biggest expenses were to deal with some of the issues around cleanup of the encampments themselves. But the navigation centre itself has had pretty significant results, and it's only been two months. So, you know, we need a little more time to fully be able to analyze exactly what's taking place. But as far as getting services to individuals coming out of those encampments, it has certainly done its job, and we're pretty excited about the results. I think the fact that you're dealing with 600-plus people that have taken up that service, which I think is close to 80 per cent of the individuals that were encountered in encampments, shows that there's a lot of need there and that it's something that individuals leaving the encampments are comfortable with.

The other thing we're starting to see now is people coming back to the navigation centre, which now indicates to me that that means that it's a place that is doing the job it needs to with homeless individuals. And then, you know, when you're dealing with individuals who have received access to 2,000-plus services in one location in two months – everything from health care to getting ID and then, ultimately, into significant either emergency and/or long-term housing – it certainly accomplishes objectives, which is to not leave people in tents, freezing to death.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister.

My husband: he used to work with vulnerable people in a prior career, so I know how hard the social workers and these individuals are working in these centres. I just want to thank the ministry and the hard-working service providers. They essentially serve as a lifeline for those who are experiencing crisis. I just want to extend my personal thank you to all of those who are working within these shelters and providing these services to these individuals, especially in the time of need.

If we don't mind, if we could turn our attention to line item 5.2, homeless shelters. I see that this line item has an operating expense of over $108 million, which – and you've already touched on it briefly – provides funding to support the operations of the emergency shelters, short-term and long-term transitional sites located within the communities throughout the province. Now, are you able to let us know: does this funding in this line item include the new shelters that were announced in Edmonton?

Mr. Nixon: The short answer, Chair, is yes. It does include the new shelters that were included in Edmonton and our commitment to maintain them going into this fiscal year.

I also, through you, Madam Chair, to the member, really appreciate the comments when it comes to the nonprofit providers that we depend on to be able to provide this and, particularly, their staff. It's one of the reasons why we've pushed back so hard as a department on some of the outrageous accusations that you continue to hear in the media from, frankly, even some members of the Legislature, that somehow these shelters are dirty or inadequate or not caring for individuals. It's very disparaging to the hundreds of individuals that are working to house thousands of homeless people in our province. So I appreciate you taking the time to mention them.

We are spending $108 million on that line item, which is a lot of money, to be able to tackle this issue of homelessness. That funding will include an additional $20 million to support additional shelter spaces in Edmonton, to your question. I do want to emphasize, Madam Chair, that that also includes the investments that we have

in Indigenous-led and women-only spaces, not to be confused with domestic violence spaces, which are important. We saw a need for women-only homeless shelter spaces, which have had a lot of success so far as they've been open. This is some of the work that we're doing with our shelter providers to provide shelter differently and to be able to adapt to different communities' needs.

5:30

I think I talked earlier today about the work we're doing in Lethbridge, for example, which certainly would be within this budget, to operate the shelter in Lethbridge with the Blood department of health. In the case of Lethbridge something like 90, 95 per cent of the homeless population is Indigenous, and almost 100 per cent of that Indigenous population is Blood because of the uniqueness of the Blood Nation around that community. So it just made sense to give the Blood department of health a leadership role. We were excited to announce their brand new shelter just a few weeks ago in Lethbridge. We're going to continue to do strong investments on that Indigenous partnership and on unique, different shelters to deal with different demographics that may be experiencing homelessness, particularly women-only shelters.

I also want to emphasize that the big objective of this is to be prehousing into our either long-term housing solution and/or to Minister Williams and his department's work when it comes to addictions. We are really adjusting our housing processes to become both pretreatment and posttreatment housing to be able to make sure that we can fulfill our part of the overall Alberta recovery program.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister.

Just a quick question before I move on to a different topic: are these temporary or permanent shelters that you're talking about?

Mr. Nixon: When you're referring to the new Edmonton shelter spaces, those would be permanent. That takes us in line to, I think, roughly about 1,700 spaces permanently in the city of Edmonton and about 1,800 in the city of Calgary.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister.

Minister, you touched on it briefly just in regards to the seniors' benefits. I believe that Alberta seniors have worked hard to build this province up for us, and it's only right that we continue to support them along the way. I can see that we're doing that. Key objective 1.6 on page 123 of the business plan includes a review of the seniors' lodge program. I know you touched on it a little bit, but I just wanted to start by recognizing the importance of the seniors' lodges. I very much love visiting them and going in and hearing the stories of our seniors. I think that these are extraordinary places and very important. I believe this program has been around for more than 50 or 60 years, so longer than I've been alive, providing an opportunity for seniors to age in their community.

I'm extremely impressed to see that the program supports over 10,000 lodge units in 149 lodges across Alberta. However, I understand that the vacancies are becoming quite a challenge for these lodges, with some regions being more affected than others, mine being one of them. I see that there is a first step. A panel has been announced by yourself with the MLA for Leduc-Beaumont co-chairing with the president of Alberta Seniors Communities and Housing Association. Through the chair to you, Minister, are you able to give us just a little bit more background on this review? Is it just because of the vacancies? When was the last time the review was done? Are you able to provide us with a timeline for this review?

Mr. Nixon: Well, with the 30 seconds I've got left, I will just reiterate what the hon. member said, which is that our population of seniors is growing rapidly, and there is a need to take this very seriously. The lodge program is part of this. It's been a long time since there's been a review. The review is open to many different topics but in particular how we deal with vacancies, why there are vacancies in some spots and not in others, how rent works, how our partnership with municipalities works in this process, and to come back with what we hope will be recommendations to make sure that program can exist for another generation.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head back over to the opposition side for their questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Far be it from me, but I would like to give you some kudos, actually. Assured income for severely handicapped for the '24-25 budget estimate is a 6.7 per cent increase, which is appropriate given the combined population growth and inflation. I just wanted to thank the ministry for recognizing what is vitally important, that people that can't support themselves financially are just 100 per cent dependent on AISH. So thank you.

My question is about clawbacks. There is an AISH savings to a degree. Let's say someone has a spouse and the spouse is working, the spouse has an income. There is a clawback that occurs where less AISH is paid to people when their spouse or their cohabitating partner sort of is involved; let's say if they get an increase. I'm wondering if the minister could give us a projection of what they anticipate the savings will be due to clawbacks related to spouses and other partners. I know you have different language that you use. I'm not a hundred per cent sure what that is. So there's that.

I would also like to know how many staff – like, you mentioned you don't report on how many FTEs work in different lines or different areas, but perhaps you could tell me how many full-time jobs or people work within the income services investigation unit. How many completed that work in '23-24 fiscal, which, I imagine, would make up the forecast for this fiscal? I would also like to know the number of fraud allegations made specifically to this unit related to AISH and then the fraud allegations specifically related to income support. I don't need to know the number of investigations – I imagine that's a bit fluid – but could you tell us, out of the reported allegations, how many fraud findings in the last fiscal? I don't imagine you can project that, so I'll stick to that.

I would also like to know, sort of along that line, how many AISH files. Now, I understand that there's an annual review process that is natural to AISH, but I would like to know: other than the normal annual reviews that occur, how many AISH files were reviewed that were completed in the last fiscal, and do you have a forecast of how many AISH file reviews you'll be doing in this fiscal year?

Could you talk to us about – now, we all saw this leaked e-mail. I don't know where it came from, but it certainly had the effect of frightening a lot of people that were really frightened. As we know, there are – anyway, I don't need to get into that. If you could just explain what that was about. I think that you would calm some people down if you could explain that was just a mistake. The sense that the disability community got, Madam Chair, is that things were going to be slow-walked a little bit because there were some other processes going on or there was some deployment of staff to other areas. I'm not entirely sure what motivated that, but if you could explain that, that would be fabulous.

The other thing that I would like to ask. Now, I know in April of 2023 there was an announcement of an investment of $240 million – I believe it was the minister's brother – over three years to address the wait-list for FSCD and PDD. Now, we only have wait-list numbers, and they don't call them wait-lists. There's, like – I don't know. It's "in planning" or whatever the language is. But we don't

have accurate numbers, Madam Chair, because the ministry stopped reporting on that wait-list two years ago, so the last number that we have is from April. No, it's not from April; it's actually from two years ago. We don't even know what the wait-list number is. We know what the investment is or what the announcement is of the investment targeted at wait-lists for both children and for adults with developmental disabilities or disabilities in general, but we just don't know. It's really hard to evaluate any progress, and that is really super important work. You know this. It's very dangerous sometimes for people to be on a wait-list for too long and needing the support, so I think this is a really important question to answer.

Let me see how much time I've got left here. Can you tell us specifically how many full-time equivalents are currently working in AISH? Now, I think you mentioned earlier that you don't divide them between income support and AISH. If you don't divide them at all, if they're doing both, that's fine. You can give us one number, one total number. If you could split that up, how many people work within AISH? I know there's, like, AISH generalists, AISH assessors, all those different positions, so if you could tell us how many FTEs are in AISH.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member. That was well timed.

Mr. Nixon: Well, first off, I'll try to do the fraud statistics for the hon. member, and then I'll likely actually go to the ADM to try to lay out the difference between FTEs in his division of the department, whether there's overlap, and any input he can provide about how he handles investigation FTEs first, the operation of his department.

I think we talked about this maybe a little bit earlier this morning, and hopefully I'm not being repetitive, Madam Chair, but our latest fraud statistics that I can give you are for February 2024, which would be last month, and then I can give you year to date from 2023 to 2024. Current investigations: there are 210 taking place. New investigations are 106. There are 1,281 investigations year to date. The maximum potential loss to the government of Alberta in February would be just shy of $800,000, and year to date would be $9 million.

Am I reading that right, Deputy?

5:40

Ms Farmer: Yes.

Mr. Nixon: Good.

Concluded investigations are 37 in February; year to date was 374. Charges were 20 in February; year to date, 81. No charges were 10 in February 2024; year to date, 128. Unsubstantiated claims were six in February; 58 year to date. Addressed via overpayment was one in '24 and 107 year to date. Convictions was four in February; 42 year to date. And then court order restitution from convictions was $34,121 in the month of February and $690,834 year to date.

Maybe I'll pause there to stay on the AISH line of thought and let the ADM respond on the FTE questions.

Mr. Schneider: Thank you. Toby Schneider. I'll do my best here. You had a lot of questions, through the chair. To begin with, I can tell you that in February we had 315 positions within the AISH program. That included 252 generalists. I don't have the specific numbers for assessors and for the adjudicators, but I can tell you that the adjudicators is around 20. I can also add that these numbers have all increased since last year. The adjudicator number is up four positions, or about 18 per cent. The generalists were up 6.6 per cent, I believe – now you're going to check me on my math, but I went on the fly here – and overall I believe that we were up 18 full positions year over year.

Thanks.

Mr. Nixon: Then I'll take clawbacks. I don't know if I have the number of some of the assessments that we have or what it would cost to remove the full spousal clause of the clawback with us at the table.

Can you take that, Toby? I have seen briefings on it before. It is significant. Toby, do you want to try that one? Go ahead.

Mr. Schneider: Yeah, through the chair. Thank you, Madam Chair, for the question. The AISH clawbacks do work in two different ways, one for singles and one for people in family units, and there are different levels. The family unit is more generous. I can say that today I don't have the full calculation for family units, but I can tell you that, given our estimate, it's about 1 and a half million dollars a month that's created by having the clawbacks we have versus a no-clawback situation. So that's not vis-à-vis some other clawback, like an income support, but just overall. That was per month. Over the course of a year that would look like $18 million is my estimate.

Mr. Nixon: Then I probably won't be able to get to FSCD, but I will try in the next one – I have them pulled – in the next block.

But in regard to the leaked e-mail, which I think is worth bringing up, I want to reiterate what I said at the time for clarity. The department does its own review processes. The ministry, obviously, expects that to take place. The first I ever saw the e-mail was at the same time that you saw it. This is not coming from political direction. I was very clear with the department that while we want them to continue review processes to keep the integrity of the program, that cannot come at the expense of ongoing applications. As a result of those instructions, the department has made adjustments to continue to make sure that people can get their AISH applications complete while at the same time allowing the department to do investigations to keep the integrity of that program for everybody.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go back over to the government side for their questions.

Mr. Lunty: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just confirming quickly, we'll continue to go with shared time. We've heard a lot about support for seniors here today; rightfully so. We can all agree how important that is and how much of a role seniors have played in building this province and our communities, and I think that we will look forward to continue with that support.

In that vein, through the chair, I would like to drill down a little bit on a specific line item. When we look at the '24-25 Seniors, Community and Social Services business plan on page 123, I see in the initiatives supporting key objectives that $536.4 million is allocated to support seniors with low incomes to meet their basic needs. Through the chair to the minister: how are seniors with lower incomes supported by this over half a billion dollars of funding?

Mr. Nixon: Thank you, Madam Chair. The member is correct. The number is $536.4 million. It's being allocated as follows: $516.7 million is in grants to seniors with low income, which I'll talk about in a minute; and $19.7 million for providing low-interest home equity loans; $389.7 million is allocated to the Alberta seniors' benefits program. That program provides a monthly benefit to 189,000 eligible seniors with low income to assist with their living expense. This benefit supplements federal seniors' income programs such as old age security, the guaranteed income supplement, and of course the Canadian pension plan.

Also, $110.8 million is allocated to the supplementary accommodation benefit program. That benefit program provides a monthly benefit to 13,700 eligible seniors with low income who live in designated supportive living or long-term care facilities, to help ensure seniors have a monthly disposable income of at least $357 after paying their accommodation charges. Then $14.5 million is allocated to the special needs assistance program, which helps about 23,000 low-income seniors each year with managing expenses for specific personal and health supports and the costs of appliances. And $11.5 million is allocated to the seniors' home adaptation and repair program, including $9.5 million to provide about 500 low-interest loans and $1.57 million to provide about 300 grants. The program helps seniors to finance home repairs and adaptations, allowing them to stay in their homes longer and to be able to maintain independence.

Lastly, $9.7 million is allocated to the seniors' property tax deferral program, which provides approximately 2,200 low-interest home equity loans to allow seniors to defer all or part of their residential property tax to be able to remain in their homes.

Mr. Lunty: All right. Through the chair, thank you to the minister.

Obviously an impressive list. This is key support and, you know, unfortunately, I'll turn my attention to a related topic about why the support is needed, and that's affordability. I would like to maybe ask a few questions on this topic. I certainly would like to bring this in to something I was reading on page 123 of the business plan. Key objective 1.1, which commits your ministry to "continue to address affordability concerns of seniors with low income and vulnerable Albertans." This is actually probably the top issue that I hear in my riding. A lot of seniors will come and talk to me in my constituency office, and they're very, very concerned about affordability.

I'll be honest, a lot of them are very concerned about April 1. We see the federal carbon tax slated to go up. You know, they tell me they put gas in their car, they go and get groceries; they're paying that tax twice, in their car, at the grocery store. It's really tough on a lot of seniors in my community. So I think it's really important that we look to advocate on their behalf, and that's why this is such a key objective. I think it's really – I was really excited to see this in the business plan.

My question, through the chair to the minister: can the minister provide us with feedback on what he's received when meeting with seniors and other stakeholders regarding how the federal carbon tax is making life more expensive?

Mr. Nixon: Well, you know, we often see the Official Opposition laugh about this question because they don't seem to understand what impact this is having. Often when we talk about it, Chair, to the hon. member, we talk about this in the context of how it's impacting businesses, agriculture for things like drying grain, or everyday Albertans when it comes to paying for their utility prices. But this is by far the number one thing you hear when you talk to social services sector stakeholders, both those fixed-income seniors, for example, who are struggling to pay things like rent or utility bills but also for the providers that we work with.

Whether I'm meeting with an autism support provider, a PDD provider, our homeless shelters – it was staggering to me to find out how much utility bills have gone up for places like the Centre of Hope, who we really count on each day to provide services for our homeless here in places like Edmonton. Without a doubt, one of the number one things that our social services providers ask us to do is to continue to push back on the federal government for the cost of the carbon tax. So, Madam Chair, I mean, obviously the position of the Alberta government is that the carbon tax needs to go, but at the very least the federal government should immediately remove it from charities and nonprofits, things like school boards and other areas that are working to be able to provide services to Albertans. We really need to have a serious conversation about the impacts that this is having on individuals that, particularly, have fixed incomes, like seniors.

5:50

Mr. Lunty: Thank you, through the chair, to the minister.

It certainly seems odd that the backs of nonprofits and homeless shelters would be bearing the brunt of the carbon tax. Absolutely. Through the chair to the minister, just a quick follow-up: can you expand on what your ministry is doing to help off-set these rising costs?

Mr. Nixon: Well, I mean, I think some of the programs that I just listed, really, lay out how we're getting that resource to seniors in particular, but to other low-income individuals is the mechanism that we use to get resources to those individuals. Then, of course, the decision to index those programs to try to keep up with inflation: some of that inflation is being caused by the carbon tax. In fact, the impact of the federal carbon tax on our – just our – social housing: in 2022 the carbon tax cost our operators $6 million, in 2023 the carbon tax cost our operators $8 million, and by 2030 it is estimated that the federal carbon tax will cost operators $21 million.

So you can see that it's just progressively getting higher and higher and higher. And that's just us for one sector, on social housing; that's not counting our other nonprofit providers. It emphasizes that it's not a laughing matter. I was actually shocked, Madam Chair, before I had this file because a lot of times – I mean, I used to be the environment minister of Alberta, so I spent a lot of time talking about the carbon tax, but most of the time we would spend most of our focus talking about its impact on things like agriculture and on overall bills. Then from the moment I had this file and started to meet with the thousands of stakeholders that we depend on, I was surprised how much they raised it, because it was impacting them. Then when you go and look at numbers like that, you realize why they are raising it. They are struggling to be able to pay their bills already because of inflation, and they've had this arbitrary, you know, tax put upon them by the federal Liberals and the NDP, which, as the chair knows and the hon. member knows, is the same party, whether it's federally or provincially.

Mr. Lunty: All right. Thank you, Minister, through the chair.

I'll transition to a more mundane topic; I would imagine it might not elicit quite the reaction from some of my fellow members. I did want to talk about some digital enhancements under the guise of red tape reduction and program efficiency, as the minister knows is a large focus of our government.

Through the chair, on page 124 the 2024-25 business plan introduces performance measure 1(b), which looks at online seniors financial assistance application utilization. I'm glad to see these measures as online services cut red tape for Albertans and make application processes easier and more efficient. Can you outline your ministry's strategy to increase online application usage among seniors?

Thank you.

Mr. Nixon: What I will say is that we continue to see a need for this because, obviously, we're seeing Internet usage and online usage increase across society, and seniors are actually no different. It's actually interesting. StatsCan released an Internet use survey that showed Internet use among Canadians aged 75 years and older grew from 62 per cent in 2020 to 72 per cent of seniors in 2022.

You see more and more seniors are being able to access online resources, and throughout our department we recognize that the use

of technology can help us deal with, one, providing efficient services to our clients but also providing timely services. Without using some of those technology resources, we can't deal with some of the challenges that we see around wait-lists or ease of use for our clients. That's why, with the time I have left, Madam Chair, I would like to talk in more detail if I could, but I will say that we continue to invest in it because of that reason.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Over to the Official Opposition for their questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just wanted to go back to some of the questions that perhaps the minister ran out of time to answer. I was asking about the wait-lists for FSCD, which is family support for children with disabilities, and PDD, obviously, persons with developmental disabilities. Now, as I mentioned, we haven't seen the wait-list or whatever you call it; it's like waiting for service or in planning or whatever it is. But we haven't seen an update of that number for at least two years. I mean, I'm not sure why that is. But especially when we heard about the investment, the $240 million over three years that was announced in '23. That's, like, $80 million per year; that's pretty significant. I actually applaud that investment. It is very dangerous sometimes for people to be on that wait-list for whatever reason.

I would like to know. These are naturally very oversubscribed programs, and we saw that the program spending – not the targeted wait-list spending – is pretty flat, so there's not a ton of capacity to meet that need. One, why is the ministry not updating the wait-list, and will the ministry be able to update the wait-list going forward given the targeted investment? Is that investment still being made? Has there been any progress made? Have there been any targeted reductions?

One of the things – I don't know if other people do as well, Madam Chair – that we hear of frequently for people that are on particularly the PDD wait-list is they'll say that they're being told that priority is given to people that are health and safety. Health and safety is a focus as opposed to the time on the wait-list. I'm wondering if the ministry could clarify, I guess, are there criteria that are used for people on the wait-list to move them up? Is it sheer first-come, first-served? How does that work? That would be really great. And are we on target to spend that $240 million over three years? Is the plan to get to zero? What is the plan? I would just like to know that because I actually think this is a really important investment, to invest in wait-list.

The other thing that I wanted to sort of reiterate or go back to – and I mentioned this, I think, in the first block. If you go to page 125 in the business plan, the performance metric 3(a) is "satisfaction of families/guardians of clients accessing the Persons with Developmental Disabilities program that services are helping [clients] to be" – I hate that word "clients" – "part of their community," which is great. Now, I mentioned this before: this is a survey. That's all it is. It used to be a letter; sometimes it was a call, and it had, I think, at the time maybe three questions: "How satisfied are you? Are you satisfied? Do you like it? Do you have what you need?" It's not very telling. It certainly doesn't sort of give legislators a sense of if we're meeting those targets or not.

The other thing that I really do struggle with, Minister, through you, Madam Chair, to the minister, is that this is the only performance metric for PDD, and it doesn't even include people with disabilities. It's their parents and their guardians, asking about satisfaction. Yes, there are a lot of dependent adults that are served by PDD, but there's a whole heck of a lot of independent adults. So I don't understand why this performance metric is about families and guardians of clients as opposed to people with disabilities, and secondary families and guardians. I believe – I hope the minister does too – that the focus needs to be on the person with a disability. Certainly, their families are vital and their supporters are vital and their guardians are vital, but the focus should be on the person with a disability as their choice.

The Chair: Member, please direct your comments through the chair.

Ms Renaud: Through the chair, my question. This is the only performance metric in all of the time that I've worked in this sector as well, Madam Chair. I've seen this very same survey. I have seen people scoff at it, laugh at it, question it; done it myself when families would ask me about it. But I would like to know why you as a government continue to focus on this metric that doesn't tell much more than a few people who responded to the survey. It certainly doesn't tell us the satisfaction of people with disabilities. So I would like to know: why is this performance metric satisfactory?

I have 32 seconds, and I'm not going to squeeze any more in, so I'll just stop there.

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

We'll move over to the minister for his set of answers.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you for that. First, on the survey which the hon. member finished with: I will commit to go back and have a conversation with the department about it and look at it, and then I'll get to the metric in a minute.

I want to talk about wait-list first. I'll start with a conversation about FSCD first and then go to PDD. I want to just, first off, talk about wait times. One of the areas that we were talking about earlier this outgoing fiscal year was about some of the investment we're doing to try to deal with wait times – and then I'll talk about wait-lists. They are connected but different.

Based on the latest information I've been provided by the department – this is FSCD that I'm talking about right now – it is currently taking about nine months provincially from the time a completed application is submitted to when an agreement is approved and sent to the family for signing. This is down from about 18 months in Calgary and 12 months in the rest of the province at the end of 2022 and 2023, which is a reflection of some of the investments that the department has been making in this area, though I think that it would be fair to say that we'd like to still continue to see that go down.

6:00

One of those investments which the hon. member may be aware of, Madam Chair, is the new digital assessment tool that was implemented in January 2023, which reduced questions and fields by 58 per cent and the time overall that it takes to complete the assessment, which I just referred to. Since July 2023 families have begun accessing some family support services such as respite and counselling prior to the completion of that assessment. Then increasing the use of multiyear agreements for families to have an agreement in place for up to three years to provide more predictability for that family but also to ensure continuity of services but, ultimately, to reduce some of the burden of service after we check and go through that process every year, I think, also helps with that wait-list and the wait times.

Specifically to what's going on with FSCD wait-lists: we will be reporting those publicly later this fiscal year. That process is being undertaken, and it will be done in a very transparent way.

When it comes to PDD, the wait-list is fairly impressive, what has taken place with the department. I hope the hon. member is hearing that from stakeholders she talks to, because we are

definitely hearing it. There's been a tremendous amount of effort that's taken place over the last several years to get down to some of the numbers that we have right now. I have a graph in front of me right now that shows that people waiting for services for PDD, that are noncritical and urgent, at the moment are 165 as of February 24. That number would have been 476 in 2021 and 681 in 2022. It has gone down to that number. Then waiting for services where they've been approved but there are no service providers at the moment, that number would have been 257 in 2022. It is now 58 in February 2024, which I think does show the work that the department has been trying to do on this important area.

The deputy tells me that, in regard to the survey, just to go back to that, it's been postponed and we are engaging to change it. So stay tuned for that. There you go; I learned something new today, too, but I think it's worth talking about.

I do want to circle back, and I'm going to try to deal with the metric question with the time I got left, but just to follow up on the last block in regard to the fraud unit. We do have the number. It's 26; 24 currently employed and two vacancies at the moment for that unit.

The other thing, maybe, as we're closing up, on the metric, I'll say this: 2021-2022 PDD family and guardian satisfaction survey results indicated that 86 per cent of families and/or their guardians, public and private, responded positively to those survey questions indicating PDD services helped the person with developmental disabilities to be part of the community. This result is 2 per cent below the 2019-20 results of 88 per cent and certainly is one of the reasons why we would want to look at it. In 2023-2024 that same survey was conducted in the fall of 2023 but then was postponed to the fall of 2024. It provided more time to adjust the survey questions to align with the program changes and assess that questions are properly targeted. The target of 86 per cent demonstrates the ministry's commitment, though, to support adult Albertans with developmental disabilities to be included in the community as much as they want to be, which is one of the objectives that I think we are trying to track there.

I would say, given what the deputy is informing me of, that we also would recognize that there are probably some challenges with the survey. I think that's fair to say. I will take back what I think is a very fair point, that it should not just be about families' results, but it should be about the individuals that are going through that system. I think that's a pretty fair comment by the member.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move over to the government side please.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to just talk a little bit about the Alberta seniors' benefit on page 192 of the estimates document. I see the budget for element 8.2, Alberta seniors' benefit, is just under $400 million. This is a substantial investment. Minister, can you provide an overview of this program and how it supports our seniors?

Mr. Nixon: Well, that program provides a monthly benefit, Madam Chair, to eligible seniors with low income to assist them with their living expenses and to help ensure that, obviously, they can meet their basic needs; $389.7 million of that $400 million is allocated to the Alberta seniors' benefit program. That's actually an increase this year of $15.8 million, or 4.2 per cent, from budget '23-24. The Alberta seniors' benefit program provides a monthly benefit to 189,000 eligible seniors. The benefit supplements federal seniors' income programs, such as old age security, guaranteed income supplements, and the Canada pension plan.

The program is income tested, and qualifying thresholds are $31,080 for single seniors and $50,720 for couples. Then six months prior to an individual's 65th birthday, the government of Alberta, through the Ministry of Health, sends an application package to Albertans advising them of the senior financial assistance programs available upon turning 65. So those of you who have not had that privilege yet, you'll see that. As well as the assured income for the severely handicapped recipients over 65 are not required to apply as they are automatically enrolled, because we obviously already know about them and their financial situation because of their interaction with us through AISH.

The Alberta seniors' benefit was indexed at 4.25 per cent in January 2024 to keep up with inflation. I will also point out that, compared to other provinces, low-income seniors living in Alberta receive among the highest supplementary financial benefits in the country, and our benefits, again, are designed to supplement the work that's taking place in the Canadian pension plan.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair, to the minister.

I would like to chat a little bit about the seniors' loan program. Under the loans and advances on page 193 of the estimates there are two programs listed: the seniors' home adaptation and repair program, also the seniors' property tax deferral program, and almost $20 million has been allocated to these programs. I understand these programs support seniors to remain in their homes and communities. Can you please provide an overview of these programs and how they support our seniors?

Mr. Nixon: I can, Madam Chair. First of all, the breakdown would be that $9.95 million of that $20 million is being allocated to the seniors' home adaptation and repair program, which allows senior homeowners to finance home repairs and adaptations through low-interest home equity loans with the government. That program offers low-interest home equity loans to a maximum of $40,000 per household and for seniors' household income of about $75,000 or less. Typically, over 400 loans are provided annually at an average of about $11,000 per loan.

Some of the things that program can cover is stuff like house roof repairs and replacement, windows upgrades, furnace replacement repair, flooring replacements, bathroom repairs and adaptations. Senior homeowners with low incomes who are not eligible for the loan – for example, if the senior has insufficient equity or is a mobile-home owner or renter of land – may receive a grant for some basic home repairs. Qualifying income thresholds for the grants are the same as the special needs assistance program, which are single seniors with a total annual income of $31,080 or less and senior couples with a total combined annual income of $50,720 annually.

I think we got that. Oh, no. There's $9.7 million that has also been allocated to the seniors' property tax deferral program, which I think we talked about in a previous question. So that's the breakdown of that program.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you.

On page 192 of the estimates document, the budget for element 8.3, supplementary accommodation benefit, is $110.8 million, a reduction of about $3.4 million from Budget 2023 but a $60 million dollars increase from budget '23-24 forecast. Can you provide an overview of this program and how it supports seniors and the allocation of funds for '24-25?

Mr. Nixon: I think we talked a little bit about it in one of your colleagues' questions, but the supplementary accommodation benefit provides financial assistance to eligible seniors with low income who live in a designated supportive living or long-term care facility. The assistance that's provided through that program helps ensure seniors with lower income have a monthly disposable income of at least $357 after paying their accommodation charges

so that they can accommodate some of their other expenses even though they are living in one of our facilities. Budget 2024 rightsized the budget allocation yet still provides for an anticipated increase of $16 million in expenditures based on the 2023-24 expenditure forecast of $94.8 million. This should ensure sufficient funding is available for caseload growth and an increase in benefit to protect low-income seniors from annual long-term care rates increasing and the indexation of benefits.

I will also point out, Madam Chair, as of January 2024 over 13,600 seniors receive SAB each month, and the average monthly benefit is $526.

6:10

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you. Thank you, through the chair, to the minister.

Looking at line item 7.4 on page 192 of the estimates the seniors' community grants budget shows an in-year variance in 2023-24 from $2.8 million that was budgeted to a forecast of $3.97 million. Can you please expand on and provide a breakdown of this funding?

Mr. Nixon: I can. I'm sure the seniors' community grants 2023-24 budget was $2.806 million. The Q3 forecast was increased to $3.97 million, if I got that right, resulting in a $1.164 million increase transfer from the special needs assessment program for elder abuse shelters and elder abuse prevention programming. What that increase includes is funding for co-ordinated community responses related to elder abuse prevention and response, funding for the elder abuse shelters and newly launched safe spaces program, which sees the government working with community-based organizations to provide spaces in rural and Indigenous communities to support seniors fleeing elder abuse and then, lastly, funding to support research and innovative initiatives designed to prevent and address elder abuse across the province.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you.

The next question is still looking at line item 7.4 on page 192 of estimates, the same line for Budget 2024 shows an increase from $3.97 to $6.1 million in '24-25. Where is the additional funding going, and how does this funding connect to government's commitment to provide the services and supports seniors need to age safely in their chosen communities?

Mr. Nixon: Well, first of all, I'll point out, Madam Chair, that's a 120 per cent increase from $2.8 million that was budgeted in 2023 and 2024. We'll be providing $3.3 million to community partners to address and prevent elder abuse. That is a 17 per cent increase over last year, and that will take place over the next three – sorry; I should say also that over the next three years the government will invest $10 million in elder abuse prevention and supports. The breakdown of that is as follows: $2.025 million for the safe spaces program; $2.634 million, which is $878,000 a year, to Unison, an elder abuse shelter; $2.634 million to Sage, which is the same amount, again another elder abuse shelter; and then $2.4 million to Alberta's Elder Abuse Awareness Council to support the community response networks over the next four years.

Budget 2024-2025 sees us providing also $2.9 million to community partners to support capacity as sector building and piloting new innovative initiatives in the areas of community outreach and social services over the next three years. The government will also invest $8 million in new innovative initiatives to help seniors age in their chosen communities, including $7 million to in-home supports and social prescribing initiatives and community-based senior services sector capacity building, and $1 million to Healthy Aging Alberta to support community-based senior service sector development, co-ordination, and evaluation.

The ADM wants to make sure that I was clarifying that $2.4 million to the Alberta Elder Abuse Awareness Council to support community response networks is over two years, so that would be it divided by two.

I think you asked a follow-up question in regard to how that funding will connect government's commitment to providing services and support seniors' needs to age safely in the chosen communities. The goal of this is that we're working with community-based senior service organizations to address the priorities of that population.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition for their questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. I am going to try to capture a few questions that weren't answered.

My first question, through the chair, to the minister. I asked about the service providers, so the contract service providers, and this is really to get a sense of how the government budgets for this current – or how do we get these budget estimates? I would like to have a sense of – if you could give us even a range of the largest to the smallest contract amount with a service provider under PDD, so not direct operations. What is the largest contract? What is the smallest contract? I would like to know if those administration portions – and I know the deputy minister gave us the total amount, which I appreciate. I wonder if you could tell us: is that amount, is that percentage calculated on the total direct service or is that a flat fee or a negotiated rate? How many of those service providers are accredited to support people that are, I guess, labelled as complex? I'm not sure what the language is. There used to be – I don't know if there still is – an accreditation process for service providers to be able to support people with complex needs. Is there still a process? How many service providers fit that?

My other question is a little odd, but as you know, we were talking about clawbacks. One of the clawbacks comes from the Canada pension, so CPPD, which is for people with disabilities that qualify. You know, rightly so, the legislation requires them to access any other funds first. I know I've got a lot of really frightened people calling around the pension and just the uncertainty. Does the minister have any plans to get information out or to do some consultations for people with disabilities that also rely on the Canada pension plan, the disability portion?

Mr. Lunty: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called.

Mr. Lunty: This is a point of order under 23(b), "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." The member opposite is asking a line of questioning which is well outside the scope of the committee. We are here to discuss and focus on the government budget estimates. The Alberta pension plan is decidedly not in this ministry's budget documents, so I would call 23(b).

Mr. Sabir: It's not a point of order. The member is specifically asking about the policy the department has on clawing back any funds coming from any source to these AISH recipients, and the CPPD, the Canada pension plan disability benefit, happens to be one of those clawbacks. The member didn't even hear the full question that the member is getting at, so it's really not a point of order.

The Chair: Okay. What I'll say about this is that when it comes time for the minister to address it, if he chooses to answer it, then he will.

Thank you.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Going back to the minimum wage exemption – maybe the minister ran out of time – if he could just answer the question. Did the ministry, I guess, last year in projecting for this year, have any requests to exempt people with disabilities from receiving the minimum wage? Now, of course, you understand that there is a danger to that. I mean, I'm not talking about right now, but historically people with developmental disabilities in particular could spend years and years getting paid, like, 10 cents an hour to do really mindless work. Sometimes it was assembly-line work. I think governments have worked really hard to put protections in place. I just want to ensure that there are no wage exemptions out there. Can the minister, I guess, assure us that people that are receiving PDD funding are not sort of in sheltered workshops forever not being paid?

My next question is around food banks. I gave you that example about the difference between Airdrie and Edmonton. I know it's a weird example because one is 0.00057 or something. The other one is $1.38 per person for Airdrie and then just a tiny fraction of a cent for Edmonton. Now, I understand, I appreciate the comments the minister made around their ability to fund raise, and he's absolutely right, but per capita I get it. You know, that's the way it works. I think, the last we heard, like, 35,000 hampers a month are going out. That's a lot. Big food banks: I spent some time with Edmonton's Food Bank and the Calgary Food Bank just chatting, and they would like to know what that equation is.

How did the ministry arrive at the decision that they made last year for the distribution of the portion of funds for food banks, and how will they arrive at that distribution this year? I think these big food banks and, I imagine, the smaller ones, too, would like to know if Food Banks Alberta has that equation or if the ministry does. If you could share that transparently with the food banks, I do think they would appreciate it.

My last question. I've only got a minute here. Now, I've heard the minister reference a few times building codes and safety standards. He's quite right: there are building codes and safety standards. But I would like to know: are there any other tools for evaluating accessibility? When the minister says barrier free versus accessible, what definitions are being used to categorize this housing? Then, lastly, we talked about the Premier's council on civil societies, but we didn't talk about the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Now, they exist to provide advice to the minister on all different areas. I know they do awards and stuff, too, but they also provide advice. I'd like to know how many times the minister has met with and received advice from the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Again, I'm asking about the largest contracted service providers, contracts in PDD. I'm asking about plans to inform people with disabilities about what's going on with CPPD, what they can expect for consultation, any wage exemptions. Then what is the equation – I'm not sure what tool is being used – to distribute the food bank funds? Then what other criteria are being used to evaluate accessibility, from accessible to barrier free?

Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister.

6:20

Mr. Nixon: Well, with the tightness of time, I'll try to focus in order of what, I'm guessing, would be the member's priority. I want to really quickly refer to the disability council, which is an important organization that certainly does more than just provide awards. I would agree with her. I have met with them several times, both as a disability council but also with members of the disability council in their variety of roles across the province, and frankly some of the advice that they have provided has been used to make some decisions that I think were positive around AISH and other things. We appreciate them, and we'll continue to do that.

I'm going to ask the ADM in charge of PDD to come up and try to tackle those, and then I'm going to go to accessibility next. On the housing question, I'm going to give that ADM an opportunity to do that, so I'm just letting him know that's coming.

But for right now I'll ask Clay, who's our ADM in charge of disabilities, to come up and try to address the PDD questions.

Mr. Buchanan: ADM Buchanan, disability services. The largest contract we have is with CLASS, $38 million. The least amount is $45,000; that's John Howard in Calgary.

You asked a question about accreditation. Accreditation is independent third-party evaluation of an organization's compliance to a recognized set of standards, creating excellence together, certification standards owned by ACDS. It actually does that on probably 90 per cent of the PDD providers. There are three other nationals that provide a handful of accreditation throughout the province.

In December 2022 the PDD program announced new accreditation requirements for contracted service providers under CSND and secure treatment; that was in 2022.

Wage exemption: I'm not aware of any. Any provider that I've met with that have individuals who do any sort of work: they get paid. I'm not aware of any sort of subsidy or anything of the like.

Thank you.

Mr. Nixon: Then I'll ask ADM Williams on the accessibility design question.

Mr. David Williams: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Madam Chair. To the member's question, in terms of our design standards, in addition to following sort of the minimum standards laid out in Alberta's building code, we also through the Alberta Social Housing Corporation have a set of design criteria that are used and deployed for all of our social housing assets in terms of our new builds. They lay out qualifications that are required.

Again, what constitutes barrier free? We get into lodge environments. We also work with Health. It's around similar B3 standards. You're talking about, you know, the width of the hallways, the doorways, but we're also trying to make sure that we don't have an institutional feel to any of our organizations, that we do have a very home feel, because they are, first and foremost, people's residences. We want to make sure that they feel comfortable in there. So all of that sort of piece across the design spectrum.

We do have disability standards as part of – you know, we do meet with the disability advocate as well on a quarterly basis, and we talk to him as well about anything that we could do. If he has any suggestions on how to better incorporate that, we're always open to them as well. We do have significant standards. As the minister mentioned, 10 per cent is the minimum standard, but the vast majority of our new builds would be in the 20 or 30 per cent range, again, depending on the need identified within the community and the need identified by the provider as part of their application to us. Obviously, where the need is there, we would want to make sure that the accessibility level is commensurate with the need.

Mr. Nixon: Then real quick on food banks, the original allocation for the previous year, that the member asked about, was based on

both geographic area served and the number of people served. That said, I want to stress, as I've said a few times today, that we're taking a step back. We want to continue to fund this – and it will be; there's an investment in the budget with it – but our commitment to Alberta Food Banks is that we would sit back and have a conversation with them to see what worked last time and what ways we might be able to better use the resources for our shared goals.

Then with the 30 seconds or so I have left, I will tackle CPPD. To be clear, there will be a lot of unknown components that could be coming from the federal government in regard to this. It is led by the Department of Finance, which I know the hon. member referred to. Our department will continue to be able to make sure the Department of Finance understands the importance of these programs and how any changes could impact us. We will do that through the bureaucracy to make sure that there are conversations about that, all with the goal of making sure that we protect people that depend on these programs.

The Chair: That is our time.

Back over to the other side for their questions.

Mr. Boitchenko: Perfect. Thank you, Madam Chair. As we are approaching our last block of the evening, I would like to talk to a specific line item out of this budget that is very, very dear to me when it comes specifically to wildfires. Last year Alberta was hit and experienced a devastating wildfire season. In my beautiful riding of Drayton Valley-Devon not only did we have a fire; we also had a flood at the same time or shortly after. First, a flood; then it's wildfires.

Seeing the disaster emergency line is very important to me because I had the opportunity to be part of that particular evening when we had fire approaching Drayton Valley. You had smoke and the embers flying, and the people of Drayton Valley were still there. I had an opportunity, actually, to go to shelter pods in our area, an opportunity to go to Opportunity Home and seniors' homes and help evacuate all those people. So I know personally how scary it can be when you're in the midst of it.

Coming to this year, Alberta is continuing to experience warmer than normal temperatures and below-average precipitation in many areas in our province. I guess this is why our government has declared an early start of the 2024 wildfire season, which, you know, is very dear to me because of experiencing that horrible ordeal, dealing with the fires and evacuation. It's good to see that we are actually declaring early and that we have that line item. Looking specifically at page 87 of the fiscal plan, the budget line for disaster and emergency expenses, and considering the risk of Alberta experiencing another emergency season, my question to the minister will be: what is the ministry doing to ensure vulnerable Albertans receive protection and support in this 2024 season when we have low precipitation and warmer than regular temperatures?

Mr. Nixon: A very important question, a very timely question. As the member just stated, we have already declared as a province the start of the wildfire season, which means that the emergency cabinet committee, which we sit on, has been meeting regularly to begin to prepare for this year. We anticipate that on our end we'll be fully ready to go here and be fully staffed up by the middle of the next month, middle of April, I should say, and are getting ready to go. We know we're going to be able to provide the same level of services that we did last time around, which was a lot.

In 2023 my department distributed almost $50 million in emergency evacuation payments and supported over 45,000 evacuees, as an example, including, as far as I know, for the first time in history evacuating an entire territory to the north of us to our province to be able to care for them. The ministry stood up 36 sites to distribute emergency evacuation payments to Albertans who could not access that online portal because of evacuations. We brought in 400 extra staff to work at those centres. We worked in rural communities to make sure that they had shelters in places, like Cold Lake, Peace River, Lac La Biche, Drayton Valley, Leduc, Canmore, Spruce Grove, and others, and we've already contacted those communities again to get ready for this year. We are going to continue to get ready. Hopefully, we're overprepared and it won't be as bad as last year. But you're right. Given the dry conditions we recognize the need to be ready.

With the minute I've got left, I would say, Madam Chair, that I think that everybody over the last six hours has seen what a great department I have as far as officials and the executive team of the deputy minister and assistant deputy ministers, who did a great job last fire season and I think are very much ready to be able to make sure that we can continue to help the province with whatever may come. Though they may have some very late nights ahead of them as we head into the spring and the summer, just like they did last year, I can assure you that they're ready and the calibre that they bring to all the rest of our department will be brought to bear to help Albertans with that.

Lastly, Madam Chair, with the last 30 seconds I've got left, I'd just like to thank you and, through you, your committee for spending the last six hours with us. I hope that they see some of the significant investments that the Alberta government is making when it comes to the social services sector in our province. That 5 and a half billion dollar investment from the people of Alberta, I hope, reflects the importance that our government puts on some of these critical issues.

I appreciate the time with your committee, Madam Chair, and I'll turn it back over to you.

The Chair: Well, thank you so much, Minister.

That concludes our evening. We do have one more segment this evening, though, members, so please don't go too far. This is just the end of the minister's segment. I'll 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 be back here shortly, at 7 p.m., to consider the estimates for the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction.

The meeting is adjourned. Thanks, everyone.

[The committee adjourned at 6:30 p.m.]

Published under the Authority of the Speaker
of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta