



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Service Alberta

Tuesday, October 26, 2021
8:01 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Reid, Roger W., Livingstone-Macleod (UC), Deputy Chair

Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC)
Pancholi, Rakhi, Edmonton-Whitemud (NDP)
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC)
Schmidt, Marlin, Edmonton-Gold Bar (NDP)
Singh, Peter, Calgary-East (UC)
Toor, Devinder, Calgary-Falconridge (UC)
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Walker, Jordan, Sherwood Park (UC)

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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Participant

Ministry of Service Alberta
David James, Deputy Minister

8:01 a.m.

Tuesday, October 26, 2021

[Mr. Reid in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: All right. Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone in attendance.

My name is Roger Reid. I am the MLA for Livingstone-Macleod and the deputy chair of committee. As we begin this morning, I would like to invite those participating in the committee room to introduce themselves, beginning to my right.

Mr. Rowswell: Garth Rowswell, MLA, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Turton: Morning, everyone. MLA Searle Turton, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain riding.

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

Mr. Walker: Good morning, everyone. Jordan Walker, MLA, Sherwood Park.

Ms Lovely: Good morning, everyone. Jackie Lovely, Camrose constituency.

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

Ms Robert: Good morning. Nancy Robert, clerk of *Journals* and committees.

Mr. Roth: Good morning. Aaron Roth, committee clerk.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, everyone in the room.

We also have participants joining us through various methods of communication. I will note for the record that the following are present either via videoconference or via video teleconference: from the office of the Auditor General Mr. Doug Wylie, Auditor General, and Mr. Brad Ireland, Assistant Auditor General.

With that, I will now turn the chair back over to Ms Phillips.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: MLA Reid?

The Deputy Chair: Yes?

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: This is Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk. I'm on video here.

The Deputy Chair: Oh, thank you, Jackie.

[Ms Phillips in the chair]

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk. We will note it for the record.

My apologies. The appointment that I booked took longer than I thought.

Thank you, Mr. Reid, and welcome to your new role.

Mr. Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: Moving on, then, we have not gotten to the house-keeping items, as I understand it.

Mr. Reid: No. And I don't know if we got everybody that's online.

The Chair: Okay. What we typically do, for the officials that haven't joined us recently, is that we often will just have you introduce yourself, in the first instance when you speak, with your title, and then when you follow up on any questions, just say your name for the record so that *Hansard* can keep up and the public, too, on who is speaking at any given moment for folks online.

According to the Speaker's health orders, friends, masks should be worn in the committee room except when you are speaking, at which point it is your choice. Members are of course encouraged to leave an appropriate amount of physical distance.

Our microphones are operated by *Hansard*. Those participating via videoconference, please turn your cameras off and mute yourselves when you are not speaking. For items such as points of order, for folks online simply speak up because there are times when I do not and the people in the room don't see you either if you are trying to gesture or talk in the chat. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent. Please be advised that our committee room galleries are closed at this time.

Members, you have the agenda in front of you. Are there any changes or additions to that agenda?

Seeing none, will a member move that the agenda for the October 26 meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be approved as distributed?

Ms Lovely: So moved.

The Chair: Thank you. Moved by Member Lovely.

Is there any discussion on this motion?

Seeing none, all in favour? Any opposed? That motion is carried. Please remute. Thank you.

Hon. members, you have minutes from September 17 in front of you. Do members have any errors or omissions to note?

Seeing none, would a member move that the minutes of the September 17, 2021, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be approved as distributed?

Mr. Singh: I'll move it.

The Chair: Moved by Member Singh.

Is there any discussion on the motion?

Seeing none, all in favour? Any opposed? That is carried.

Members, after confirming our schedule of meetings for this fall, a request was made by the Ministry of Seniors and Housing to switch their date of appearance with the Ministry of Health. The committee members were consulted about this request prior to today's meeting. However, as the schedule was established by a motion of the committee, if members wish to grant this request, the previous motion approving our fall '21 schedule must be rescinded and a new motion would need to be adopted. I'd like to open the floor to any questions or comments on this matter.

Seeing none, I'll then look to the floor such that someone move that

the Standing Committee on Public Accounts rescind the motion passed at its September 17 meeting adopting the committee meeting schedule for fall '21.

I see that moved by Member Rowswell. Is there any discussion on this motion?

Seeing none, all in favour? Are there any opposed?

That motion is carried.

We'll now move that

the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the draft revised schedule with ministries and other entities for fall '21 as circulated.

Is there any discussion on this motion? Oh, sorry. Somebody needs to move it first. I see that moved by Member Renaud. Is there

any discussion on the draft revised schedule? It is simply the switching of Seniors and Housing and Health at Seniors and Housing's request.

Seeing none, I will call for a vote, then, on that motion. All in favour? Any opposed? Very good.

That motion is carried.

We have ministry officials from Service Alberta joining us via videoconference today. They are here to discuss the office of the Auditor General's outstanding recommendations and the ministry's annual report. Ministry officials may provide opening comments not exceeding 10 minutes, after which we will hear from the Auditor General on his remarks.

I will note for the record that Mr. Toor has joined the meeting.

With that, I will look now to the officials from Service Alberta. Your time starts when you start speaking.

Mr. James: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and good morning to committee members joining us today. My name is David James, and I am the Deputy Minister of Service Alberta. With me today are key executives from the department. I have Maureen Towle, assistant deputy minister for FOIP and information management division. I have Stephen Bull, senior assistant deputy minister and chief information officer of the office of the corporate chief information officer and telecommunications division; Michael Hocken, assistant deputy minister, shared services division; Ronda Goulden, assistant deputy minister of consumer, registry, and strategic services division; Dominique Bohn, chief officer, digital innovation office; and Richard Isaak, senior financial officer.

Today I would like to speak about Service Alberta's efforts to support Albertans and our colleagues across government to do the same during the 2020-21 fiscal year. This will include detailing some of the key activities we undertook that support our business plan, which focuses on innovation and efficient service delivery. These include supporting government's response to COVID-19, modernizing the delivery of public services, developing a digital strategy, and implementing the government's new enterprise resource planning system, known as 1GX. Time permitting, I would also like to speak to other initiatives and key financials as well as Service Alberta's performance in relation to its 2020-21 business plan.

Looking back over fiscal year 2020-21, Service Alberta was successful in driving innovation, deployment of modern technology and digital services, delivering on its planned business plan outcomes, and pivoting quickly as new challenges emerged such as supporting Albertans through the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of '20-21 Service Alberta continued to play a role in making it easier for Albertans and businesses to access government programs, services, and information both in regard to its operational and business activities and its ability to flex and rapidly meet the emerging and evolving demands and challenges created by the pandemic.

8:10

In response to COVID-19 Service Alberta adapted quickly to provide services to Albertans, businesses, organizations, and other ministries at a time when we needed it most. We provided information technology support for COVID-related assistance programs such as emergency isolation supports, the critical worker benefit, and the small and medium business relaunch grant programs. We provided supports for renters such as temporarily suspending evictions and cracked down on retail price gouging, helping to ensure that consumers were protected and a competitive business environment is preserved. We worked quickly to amend

and publish laws and regulations so that businesses and organizations could observe social distancing requirements yet remain compliant with Alberta law.

We also increased our network capacity to ensure that staff who needed to work outside the office during this emergency could do so and Albertans could continue to receive services. We stayed connected with each other by optimizing our use of collaborative tools like Microsoft Teams, which we deployed during this time.

We also co-ordinated provincial telecommunications efforts with the pandemic response planning team in the early days of the pandemic such as working with providers to increase network capacity and providing temporary connectivity in communities hit hard by the pandemic.

Even as we responded to the pandemic, we were able to maintain a strong focus on delivering on our planned business outcomes in many of the associated initiatives. We continued our work to modernize government to protect consumers, improve service delivery, reduce red tape, and keep government transparent and information secure.

We brought in registry service modernizations such as online birth registrations and a new service that simplifies the crossprovincial registration process for corporations from western provinces.

We also introduced legislation to ensure construction contractors and subcontractors will be paid on time.

We worked closely with real estate professionals to establish a new governance model that included elected councils representing specific sectors of the real estate industry and put in place new board members, who are responsible for setting the council's overall strategic direction.

We eliminated unnecessary expiry date stickers for licence plates, saving taxpayers money, and we continued or completed investments in important modernization projects such as automating business processes and upgrading applications that are used to deliver motor vehicle, corporate registry, personal property, and vital statistics registry services.

As I mentioned earlier, a big part of what we do at Service Alberta is driving innovation and efficiency, and toward that end Service Alberta completed several initiatives that improved service delivery in 2020-2021 and made more programs, services, and information available digitally.

Behind the scenes Service Alberta continued its work to develop the government of Alberta's digital strategy. This strategy, which is still in development, outlines the actions needed to modernize services, to innovate, and to position the province for a stronger digital future. By shifting innovation and modernization to the centre of government business, working with our ministry partners, we will make it easier for Albertans to engage with the province, make government more responsive in a changing digital age.

For example, Service Alberta is currently collaborating with the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General to modernize court filings. Legal counsel are now filing many documents with the Court of Queen's Bench through an online platform. As the service is further developed, more users and more documents will be accepted, making it a better place to work.

We're also looking at deploying modern digital technologies and services so that Albertans interact with government more easily in ways they have come to expect in a modern digital world. In fact, in our efforts towards modernization Service Alberta has also replaced the government's aging financial and human resource planning system, IMAGIS. The new system, as I mentioned, called 1GX, was deployed on December 1, 2020. 1GX provides more functionality, increases efficiency through common processes, reduces redundant systems, enhances reporting, and makes it easier

to do business with government, all with a view to ultimately reducing operational costs and making government more efficient and effective.

Alberta is the first Canadian jurisdiction to implement a large-scale cloud-based enterprise resource planning solution, making 1GX the largest transformation of its kind in the country. Some specific benefits from this investment in software system services technology include reducing operating costs for financial management, human resources administration, supply chain management, reducing legacy applications' support costs, reducing duplication, and providing better business insight through improved data and technology.

There are many other initiatives, achievements that I could speak to in detail, but as time is limited, I will briefly highlight a few other examples. We continued a red tape review of all consumer protection legislation and supported red tape reduction across government through technology support. We implemented a new FOIP system to provide a more efficient, effective, and consistent approach to processing FOIP requests, making it easier for Albertans to submit them and follow up. We successfully delivered programs to ensure delivery of personal protective equipment and supplies to front-line government workers in the K to 12 school system. We continued to make more information available online such as putting COVID-19 information on open government and publishing a digitized collection of historical laws dating back to 1905 through Alberta Queen's Printer, and we implemented electronic signature standards for the government.

Turning to Service Alberta's financial results, our expenses totalled \$632.5 million, a decrease of \$34.5 million from our 2019-2020 actuals; \$28.6 million of this decrease was due to achievements of cost reduction strategies. That included efficiencies through internal reorganization, some staff reallocation, staff attrition, and targeted reduction in information management and technology contracts and amalgamation of those contracts. Our 2020-2021 expenses also came in under budget, by \$32.8 million, mostly due to reduced contract spending for technology services. The revenue we collected in 2020-2021 totalled \$729.6 million, an increase of \$11.2 million from the previous year. Revenue was \$32.3 million lower than budget. The largest variant came from fees and licences, mainly due to a decrease in commercial vehicle registrations during COVID.

In terms of hitting our business plan targets, Service Alberta performed well against several key measures and results from previous years. We exceeded the target for completing inspections, investigations, and dispute resolutions within established timelines. We vastly increased the number of visits to the open government portal and exceeded our target. We also exceeded our targets for the number of Albertans with MyAlberta digital identity accounts, which grew significantly over this last year and a half, and for the number of transactions completed through MyAlberta services, which use MyAlberta digital identity accounts to do those. We also added 15 new e-services and surpassed the target of 100 online services, which we had.

Overall, in the 2020-21 fiscal year Service Alberta continued to invest in technology modernization and innovation to improve access to services and information for Albertans, find efficiencies through initiatives like MyAlberta digital ID and 1GX, as I mentioned, and deliver value for individual fees and taxpayer dollars that we recovered and received as government.

We look ahead to the years to come. Service Alberta is very well poised to make life better for Albertans and businesses. We will continue to play a vital role in driving innovation, fostering efficiency, reducing unnecessary regulatory burdens, ensuring a fair marketplace for everyone, and driving digital services for Albertans

with our partner industries, and of course we'll continue to enhance, as I said, and expand on the availability of those services to make it easier for Albertans to access government services.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy.

We'll now move to the Auditor General for five minutes.

And just for clarity's sake for the hon. members, we are on the ordinary two-hour meeting because we do not have session this morning, so there will be five minutes for the AG, and then our first rotations will be 15 minutes.

Mr. Wylie.

Mr. Wylie: Well, good morning, Chair and members. First, I want to acknowledge that Brad Ireland is on the call with me this morning. Brad has oversight for all the audit work at Service Alberta.

Chair, there are six outstanding recommendations from our office directed to Service Alberta. Of the six, management has indicated that three relating to the contract management processes are fully implemented. I am pleased to say that we recently completed our follow-up work on them and will be reporting the results of that work in the near future.

The remaining recommendations are directed at improving processes related to information and related technology. More specifically, they were focused on protecting information assets through assessing risk and improving oversight processes, systems to manage an inventory of information technology applications, and improving the recovery of critical information technology applications. All of the recommendations have been outstanding for more than three years, and this is not the first time that this committee has had an opportunity to receive an update from management on the progress towards implementing the outstanding recommendations.

8:20

As is the practice of our office, we will perform our assessment of implementation work when management asserts that the remaining three recommendations have been fully implemented. We look forward to working with management towards a successful resolution of the matters raised by our office. I will say that while I understand that the remaining three recommendations have not been fully implemented, I do understand that significant progress has been made.

With that, Chair, I will close and turn it back to you. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wylie.

We'll now move to the Official Opposition for the first 15-minute block. I see Member Pancholi to begin.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the officials for being here today. A quick question, actually, to the Auditor General before we begin with our questions to Service Alberta. Albertans recently received the Allan inquiry report, and, as you know, that inquiry was late, over budget, and received criticism for extremely large sole-sourced contracts to the firm employed by Mr. Allan's son. So just to the Auditor General quickly: will your office be auditing the expenses of the Allan inquiry, and if so, would we expect to see that as part of your financial statement audit of '20-21 and '21-22?

Mr. Wylie: I can't give you an answer right now. I'll have to take that back and discuss that with our team, but it's certainly something we'll consider.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Wylie.

All right. To the department officials, thank you so much for being here. I want to begin by asking some questions. You know, in December 2020, which was part of the fiscal year which is under review as part of our meeting today, that was, of course, when Alberta started to roll out our vaccines. We know that there were a lot of questions, even at that time, around proof of vaccination as vaccines were being rolled out across the world. Certainly, we knew that proof of vaccination, discussion about vaccine passports was already starting to happen. Those questions were raised even by the Premier in December 2020, which is part of the time period which we're reviewing today.

I just want to ask some questions about any planning that might have been done by the ministry, by Service Alberta, in the 2020 fiscal year for preparation for vaccine passports. We know that on page 5 of the annual report in the minister's opening comments he indicated that COVID-19, as we all know, is a once-in-a-generation public health emergency that required government to reprioritize. However, we also see in the annual report that the minister sort of boasts that they've stayed true to their business plan, and outcome 2 of that business plan is to ensure that government is transparent and that information is kept secure.

So I'd like to ask about the work that was done by Service Alberta on vaccine passports in the 2020-21 fiscal year. Ultimately, we saw the government release a vaccine passport through a PDF that was easily editable. This made national news, and while it seemed pretty funny on social media, it's actually quite a serious issue. I would argue that the ministry's number one job and key outcome 2 of the business plan was to keep information secure. Why, after knowing that we would need a vaccine passport at some time, did we end up with a vaccine passport that was actually quite a bit of a failure?

Mr. James: For the vaccine passports all the discussion around that was led and conducted inside of the Department of Health. We made ourselves available in later periods of time if they had questions or they had needs, but all of that development and all of that was there, so it may be better to direct that question to the Department of Health when their allocation comes before Public Accounts.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. James.

Is that to say that it wasn't the actual – I understand that the decisions around, perhaps, whether or not to do one might have been coming from Alberta Health. However, the actual – I mean, this is what Service Alberta does. They actually deliver, from a technological perspective and from a systems perspective, the policy decisions that are made by other ministries. In this case was Service Alberta not responsible for the actual development or delivery of the vaccine passport that we ultimately saw come out?

Mr. James: Well, actually, there's a slight difference there. Service Alberta is responsible for all of the ministries, and we support all the ministries, and we do support the infrastructure and the back-end support for Health in terms of their IT systems. But the actual software and the applications that they run, their services internally: those are all run out of the Department of Health, and they have their own IT organization that also works with Alberta Health Services around the support to both the Department of Health and then out into the actual health services organizations. So they're not actually our responsibility in that regard.

Ms Pancholi: Well, Service Alberta, just to clarify, was not involved in the delivery of the . . .

Mr. Reid: Point of order, Chair.

Mr. James: We weren't in any conversations back in 2020 over the development of a proof of vaccine . . .

The Chair: Sorry, Deputy. We have a point of order.

Mr. Reid: I believe discussions about the vaccine passport are outside the scope of the annual report because of the dates. We're discussing elements that have taken place in recent months, not during the fiscal year of the annual report. I'd just ask the member to remain inside the scope of the annual report, please.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, Madam Chair, as we saw, the deputy minister was prepared to provide an answer to the question. I'm sure my colleague intended to ask the question limited to the activities that Service Alberta conducted within the fiscal year that's under consideration, so I would encourage her and the deputy minister to stick to the activities that were conducted in fiscal '20-21.

The Chair: Very good. I think we will continue along those parameters, please.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again, we're talking about the preparation that would have been done leading up to the rollout of the vaccine passport. Clearly, as I mentioned, this was something that was under discussion. You've indicated that Service Alberta had no involvement with the IT delivery of the vaccine passport, and if that's the case . . .

Mr. Reid: Again a point of order.

The Chair: We have another point of order.

Mr. Reid: Again, the rollout of the vaccine passport occurred outside the fiscal year that we're discussing. If the member wishes to discuss the technologies and the programs that Service Alberta oversees, I think that's certainly within the scope, but again to come back and be discussing the IT related to the rollout of the vaccine passport falls outside the scope of the annual report.

Thank you.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. I can rephrase my question.

The Chair: Why doesn't the member rephrase?

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. So in the fiscal year 2020-21 at any time did Service Alberta provide any advice about the technological requirements that would be involved in the development or delivery of a vaccine passport?

Mr. James: No, not that I'm aware of and not that we were involved with.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

So the chief information officer for Alberta would not have had a role in this? You know, the privacy of information – that's clearly FOIP – is within the scope of Service Alberta's protection of personal information. No advice was provided on that issue by anybody within Service Alberta, including the chief information officer?

Mr. James: Within the period that you're describing, 2020-2021, we weren't in conversations about developing vaccination records at that point. Health had its own CIO as well at that time. After '20-21 and into the current fiscal year, obviously, as was mentioned, there was development of a proof of vaccination, but in that year we weren't involved in active conversations around that.

Ms Pancholi: So just to frame – I realize it’s outside the scope – after this year, then, we would be able to ask questions about Service Alberta’s involvement, in the next committee review for the next fiscal year. Just to clarify as this committee goes forward, there would have been some involvement by Service Alberta after the end of the 2020-21 fiscal year.

Mr. James: If the committee wants to bring that up, I think, in future Public Accounts or in Committee of Supply, you know, we could certainly advise on what it was in the current.

Ms Pancholi: Given that there is an acknowledgement that had it been discussed or had work started in the 2020 fiscal year, this would be something Service Alberta would be involved in, I’m curious as to whether or not the comments by the Premier in December 2020, when he denied that there would ever be a vaccine passport – was that the reason why no work was done by Service Alberta to provide advice as to how this would be rolled out and provide advice on protection of personal information?

Mr. Walker: A point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Walker: We’re here to discuss government administration. This is what PAC focuses on, the economy and efficiency of program delivery. We are not here to discuss the merits of policy that’s included outside the scope of the 2021 annual report. So I would just ask you to request the member to please keep it within the scope of PAC.

Thank you.

The Chair: Yeah. I would encourage the member to rephrase. However, we are in the 2020-21 fiscal year and understanding the mechanics of how specific policy was implemented and the efficiency thereof. So I think we were within the realm if we stay within the last fiscal year.

Thank you.

8:30

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I’m trying to understand: what work did happen in the 2020-21 year? You’ve indicated, Mr. James, that no work did happen in the development within Service Alberta on a vaccine passport. I’m just trying to understand why that may be the case. Given the annual report acknowledging that COVID was certainly an extraordinary circumstance which should have led to the reprioritizing of priorities by the ministry, I’m wondering whether any work had begun or if there was an intention to do that work but the only reason perhaps that it didn’t continue was because the Premier was definitive in December 2020, which is within the scope of this committee’s review today; the Premier indicated in no uncertain terms that there would be no vaccine passport. Had that direction been different from the Premier, would the ministry have been involved in that kind of work in the 2020-21 fiscal year?

Mr. James: Had government asked us to take activities on, any activity – because we follow the direction of government – we would have done that. In this particular instance Health continued to be the lead and was the lead with respect to the proof of vaccination or any of the vaccination activities. I don’t know what direction they received with regard to it. We did not, within our service or within our ministry, have direction to do any work on proof of vaccination at that point, nor would we have been the lead because it would have been a Health matter.

Ms Pancholi: Certainly, I understand that. Having worked myself at one point within a ministry, I understand there’s certainly the direction we get from elected officials and ministers as to what work we’re going to do, but I also know that the ministry does a great deal of work to be proactive and to consider issues that are coming up and to prepare and to bring to attention those issues. You’ve indicated that no direction came, but was any work done or thought given within the ministry that this should be an issue upon which you should be doing some consideration of the IT requirements to roll out such a vaccine passport?

Mr. James: No. We weren’t involved in that during that year.

Ms Pancholi: Sorry. You weren’t involved in that, but you also didn’t take any initiative to bring this issue forward?

Mr. James: The direction that we had was to roll out things like the small and medium enterprise relaunch grants. There were a number of other activities that we were involved with over the 2020-21 period that were directed to support the COVID-19 pandemic supports for Albertans, and that’s where we were putting our focus. We weren’t requested nor were we spending time or effort on any proof of vaccination requirements. As I say, Health was the lead in any of that work, and it may be better to direct that question to them.

Ms Pancholi: All right. Thank you, Mr. James. I appreciate that.

I’m going to move on to an issue that I think is very important given the review by the Alberta Ombudsman, which relates to the emergency isolation payments. That was obviously a program that was rolled out. It is mentioned in the annual report by Service Alberta in this fiscal year. It’s also a program which was well publicized to have significant problems, huge delays online, individuals who were ultimately eligible who were denied the benefit and were not given an opportunity to receive that afterwards. That was confirmed by the Alberta Ombudsman. A few questions on this.

First, the Auditor General. Will the Auditor General be doing a performance audit on the rollout of the emergency isolation benefit, which ultimately was a bit of a failure, or are you looking at this in your financial statement audit?

Mr. Reid: Point of order.

Mr. Wylie: Thank you. We are currently . . .

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Wylie. There was a point of order called.

Mr. Reid: Once again it sounds to me, Chair, that the hon. member across the way is trying to speculate and be forward looking as opposed to reviewing the annual report that is in front of us. Again I ask that she stick to the mandate of the committee, and let’s stick to reviewing the reports, the facts and the figures, that are in front of us from the Auditor General.

Thank you.

The Chair: The Auditor General’s annual report indicates the audit plan for the year, and in that there is discussion of COVID-19. It is customary in Public Accounts that the questioning of department officials be along the lines of the financial statements. However, we can also query the annual report of the Auditor General. Given that we know that the Auditor General, because he has confirmed it to this committee many times, has undertaken COVID-19 audits, this question is in order.

Mr. Reid: Thank you for the clarification.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

If the Auditor General – I think he was about to respond.

Mr. Wylie: Okay. Thank you, Chair. Yes, we have made public, so it is on public record, that we are doing a performance audit of this particular program. We're currently doing that now.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Wylie.

To the ministry. With respect to the emergency isolation payments, as I indicated, the Ombudsman stated that during the program's approval process there was no documentation of who authorized them. Simply put – let's be clear; there was lots of media attention on this – the rollout of this program was a disaster, yet in the annual report on page 5 the minister sings the praises of how this was handled. Who made the decision to launch a program that didn't have proper documentation?

Mr. James: When a ministry identifies a program such as the benefits program that you were describing, Service Alberta comes alongside that ministry. We work with that ministry to develop the technical solution. In this particular case the technical solution was developed in a very few days, trying to put in place a system that was identified and required given the critical nature of that time. And as the Ombudsman's report on emergency supports program recognized, the program responded to the immediate nature of the circumstances and was developed quickly to meet the rising need.

You know, some of the critiques that were in there – and as part of our commitment to developing information management technology solutions that support the evolving needs of Albertans, we're going to work with other departments to ensure that future programs and support applications address the concerns raised in the Ombudsman's report.

Ms Pancholi: Given that it was acknowledged that there were problems with how it was rolled out – there are multiple reports of Albertans who were eligible for this program but did not receive it and were also delayed because they had to register for the MyAlberta digital ID. I appreciate that it was, you know, rolled out quite quickly, but it was rolled out quite quickly because there was an urgent need for Albertans. Given that there were recognized challenges both with Albertans registering for their ID but also then being deemed ineligible for a benefit they were clearly eligible for, why wasn't consideration given to giving those Albertans who were qualified, who were eligible to receive, those benefits? I mean, the decision was – it was a mistake that they didn't get it. Did Service Alberta, in your role, advise, because it was an error on your part, essentially, that Albertans should not have to pay the price for that?

Mr. James: I think that, you know, we were asked to take a rapidly evolving situation, put out a system that would allow for rapid payments to individuals within Alberta. The ministry themselves would have had and would prescribe, through the policy decisions that they were making, what the parameters of that were, and I think the Ombudsman report speaks to that. So they may be able to speak, in terms of labour, more to what the decisions were around who was receiving and why they would have received certain benefits.

In terms of the system development that we were responsible for, the team took all of the technical actions required to make sure that that system was up, that it was running, that it was following in accordance with the actual policies that were in place. And, as was noted by the Ombudsman, there were some areas there because of the rapid development which we certainly have to take into account for future developments, but I think that we will do that. Maybe labour might be in a better position to answer some of the questions

that you have specifically on the program itself and what was decided about who and how they would act.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. James. I appreciate that. I don't quite hear an acknowledgement. I appreciate that it was rapidly developed – I understand that – but it was to meet a crisis point, and I'm not hearing that the ministry is acknowledging that there were errors made. I think that's what Albertans need to hear, and then – you're right – we can take it up with the ministry of labour as to why, you know, retroactively those Albertans didn't then receive their benefits. But if Service Alberta took all the steps that they believed were necessary, did Service Alberta bring in itself an internal audit team to evaluate what took place?

Mr. James: In terms of the technical problems of that program, we certainly look at what was involved with that. We'll look at making corrections, adjustments. We have made adjustments on future programs, making sure that we have, you know, proper queuing so that we have the volumes available, making sure that the MADI application has the strength that would allow for that, and certainly investing in MADI so that people can have more access to it. From a technical perspective we've certainly tried to make sure that any of the errors that were identified . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy. I'm sure we'll get back to it.

We'll now move to 15 minutes for the government caucus members.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to all the representatives of Service Alberta and the office of the Auditor General for being here with us today. My question is on MyAlberta e-services. One of the significant jobs that Service Alberta has is to manage the government's online programs and services. The significance of all this has greatly increased as of late, so I think it's important to touch on MyAlberta e-services. Page 14 of your annual report provides an overview of the desired outcomes and results. I have a few questions about that. Starting more generally, what is the ministry doing to improve Albertans' access to registry services?

8:40

Mr. James: Thanks for the question. Service Alberta is dedicated to improving access to government services for Albertans. Albertans want to be able to access services from their computers, their mobile phones but still have the option of in-person customer service. We know the importance of physical registry offices, especially in rural Alberta, and we remain committed to maintaining face-to-face interactions for Albertans who prefer to conduct business that way. The registry agents are very interested in modernization in government registry services and especially through online portals. We've been working with them and will continue to work in partnership with them to bring more registry service options online and improve the access to government services for Albertans, always while ensuring the protection of personal and confidential information.

Mr. Singh: Then looking at desired outcomes 3(c), (d), and (e) on page 14, it appears that the ministry met or exceeded their targets. Can you take the committee through what changes in innovations were implemented to achieve this?

Mr. James: Thanks so much. The Alberta e-services and MyAlberta digital ID are improving service delivery and reducing costs. They enable government to shift from more expensive traditional service channels such as telephone or in-person to online

self-service. This promotes innovation, efficiency, and sustainable programs. The innovative solutions that we have there allow ministries to benefit from a co-ordinated approach to online payments and identity management. That way, they don't have to develop their own; we've got one that is cross government. It helps them to reduce administration costs related to service delivery, reconcile efforts and security measures, which are centralized within our ministry. That way, the overall risk profile is reduced and the costs of compliance are minimized.

Mr. Singh: Thank you. Obviously, with so many online transactions I would like to know what the ministry has been doing to ensure the ongoing availability, security, and stability of MyAlberta digital ID.

Mr. James: Yeah. We continue to take efforts to upgrade MyAlberta digital ID, supporting technology to improve access to digital services. We've worked on simplifying the architecture to improve its performance, stability, and operation. We continue to make sure that we have the latest version of what's called ForgeRock digital identity management software, which is one of the core underpinnings of that. We did move digital ID, and we're in the midst of, both last year and then moving towards this year, moving into the cloud so that we can realize better efficiencies and mitigate risks. Once that technology upgrade is complete, there are other activities we'll be doing of that.

In terms of what we did with that, we did simplify the verification process. When MADI first rolled out, it was a very lengthy verification process. With a simplified process users can now simply enter two numbers from their valid Alberta driver's licence or ID card instead of entering all the other information. That process halved the number of Albertans seeking contact centre assistance with the ID card verification. That was in May of last year. In March 2020 we also added a queue in front of the verification process. That was one of the lessons that we learned, and we've helped to stabilize the service, basically, from the COVID-19 concerns that were raised with other programs.

And then we are continuing to and we have continued over the last year and we will continue into this year just rearchitecting and simplifying MADI as we go. It's kind of a continuing evolution of making that service better and better and making sure that the security continues to be there.

Mr. Singh: Thank you. The option of e-services is new to many Albertans and quite technical. What has the ministry done to streamline e-services through MyAlberta digital ID such as the verification processes?

Mr. James: Yeah. As I say, the verification process that we did was a significant improvement. It took it from 13 fields down to two to verify their identity. As I said, we continue to upgrade the back end of the digital ID, making sure that it's stable, that it's a foundation where we can develop new services and put them online along the way. We've been able, then, to connect MyAlberta digital ID into other services that we've done. As I've said, we added a number of new services this year, 15 new services. Many of those are using MyAlberta ID to make them useable and accessible to Albertans.

Mr. Singh: Thank you for your answers about the changes and improvements for e-services.

I would like to move now to changes in the motor vehicle information and replatform. On page 32 of the Service Alberta annual report it's noted that in 2020-21 \$250,000 were dedicated to improving motor vehicle information, particularly for law enforcement. Can you please take us through what changed for this

and what other similar motor vehicle items and what benefits were realized from these changes?

Mr. James: Yeah. Thanks very much. Specifically related to law enforcement we were able to implement reflective licences. Reflective licence plates will assist with automated licence plate reader technology, and this is something law enforcement has been exploring. It can really assist with determining stolen vehicles in real time and assist with the Amber Alerts, which obviously are critical to Albertans. The technology functions best when using the reflective licence plates, and it provides improved readability in low-light conditions. That's something that we've done, and we just recently brought the first reflective licence plate in. The \$250,000 that was allocated wasn't spent, but it continues to be reserved as discussions continue with law enforcement about their emerging needs for those automatic licence plate readers. We'll continue to work with them accordingly.

Mr. Singh: Thank you. Can you provide an example of what has been accomplished since the system was replatformed?

Mr. James: Yeah. Thanks. This goes back to my comment with respect to MyAlberta e-services and the integrated nature of the technology and the services that we provide in digital services for Albertans. Since the MOVES system was replatformed, a number of business services have now been modernized through MyAlberta e-services. Now Albertans are able to renew their vehicle or motorcycle registration certificates online in addition to renewing in person at a registry agent office or by mail. As I've mentioned, it's important to have both channels available. The application is all now very accessible and stable and supports the continuity of business services to Albertans, and it eliminated dependency on old infrastructure and technology. We had a mainframe system; we've now moved into the cloud, and that's reduced costs for application hosting as well.

Mr. Singh: Thank you for answering. I appreciate the efforts in improving the services being provided to Albertans.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. I'll carry on from there. I would like to focus a little bit on broadband. I know there's been considerable emphasis by the current government to improve Internet connectivity, especially with the pandemic and people working from home and all the extra things that had to be done there. Pages 30, 31 of your department's annual report deal extensively with this, and I'd just like to work on a few questions from there. I know rural is a big deal, and the SuperNet that was put in before and that B.C. now has – it's just very expensive to get into all these different areas. But regarding the framework to support widespread access to high-speed Internet, high-speed broadband, what did Service Alberta do to achieve progress towards the framework in 2020-21?

Mr. James: Thank you for asking the question. My department worked with a global consulting firm to support the province's broadband strategy. They completed an analysis of the situation in Alberta, and it supported our analysis in reviewing models that consider our particular market conditions or outcome, the nature of our regional dispersion of cities and towns and communities. They identified the scope of the investment required to bring high-speed broadband to every underserved Albertan household in the province. With that information, we prepared and briefed the jobs and economy cabinet committee on its findings. We secured committee support – the minister was able to secure committee support on its next steps towards a broadband strategy.

Because telecommunications is a matter of federal jurisdiction, we've advocated quite extensively with the Canadian government to ensure that Alberta receives its fair share of broadband funding. I've been in conversation with my ministry colleague, and my predecessor was as well, to ensure that timelines, criteria, and policy decisions recognize those distinct needs of Albertans, Alberta businesses, and in particular our Indigenous and rural and remote communities. This included asking the federal government to consider a need to reform the policies and procedures for federal spectrum assignment. We continue to have that conversation with them. We also took some steps to connect communities to service providers to increase opportunities. We proactively worked with the federal government regarding Indigenous mapping concerns that were raised by the Cold Lake Métis settlement. The federal government worked with them and assured us that Indigenous applications will be reviewed retroactively, that the amount that they receive will be considered or receive consideration for higher funding amounts in that period of time.

We also shifted some of our efforts on the file to support connectivity within the province. We led reviews of short-, medium-, and long-term options to support emergency connectivity. We worked with major telecommunications companies to increase capacity for voice, video data, and mobile means for Albertans, front-line health professionals, and public-sector facilities, and we worked with Alberta Education and Advanced Education to support rural learning institutions in that year.

8:50

Mr. Rowswell: I was going to ask about the federal commitment. Like, they have the CRTC broadband fund and the universal broadband fund that is available. It was initiated during that year. Do you know how much money was there and how much that we were, you know – how much are we looking for in this relative to what you knew that year?

Mr. James: Yeah. I can't speak specifically to all that we were asking for. The universal broadband fund at that time was \$1.75 billion, that the federal government had announced. They've announced subsequently a larger increase. It was also \$750 million for the CRTC broadband fund. We did work with the federal government on the universal broadband fund and the broadband fund, the CRTC one, to support providers, municipalities, Indigenous communities who applied for it. That included letters of support for those communities and industry service providers. We also got answers about applicants' questions and addressed issues on applying for funding, and we, most importantly perhaps, worked with them to advocate extending the UBF deadline to allow more time for Alberta communities. There was a very limited deadline, and working with Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, they did announce a deadline extension by a month, and that allowed more time for large transformative, mobile, and generally universal broadband stream applications.

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. I know, you know, the strategy, as I understood it, was, of course, the direct fibre connection and Wi-Fi. I know some small rural places are setting up themselves as their own Internet service providers, and then there's the low-orbit satellite that you've referenced in your report. I'm just wondering if you can expand on how you see or how the ministry saw that rolling out and if you had an opinion in that 2020-21 year.

Mr. James: Yeah. As we look at that in the '20-21 year, and Minister Glubish has spoken to this as well, you know, there are a variety of service types that will be there. There are some rural communities where fibre optic connectivity will be well supported.

In fact, there have been some announcements by the federal government to support some fibre optic communities or deployment coming out of last year's applications. In addition to that, there is, as you say, low-Earth-orbit satellite. Those are kind of on the upper band of very isolated areas where either putting in fixed cellular access points, which would be sort of mobile devices, or putting in fibre optics is just too expensive.

So we've got a variety of those that we're working with ISP providers on. Again, we're not directing what those are, but as we considered and looked at it with that large, you know, national expert around this, there were opportunities for all of that to come into play within the province, and we'll work accordingly with service providers and communities to enable that.

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. Okay. I know it's a big deal. Like, I know there are businesses that are – like, if they're trying to situate in a town, one of their concerns is: do you have access to broadband and high-speed? And if they don't, they don't go there. It's a big deal from a rural perspective, that's for sure.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

I will now go to the 10-minute rotation with the Official Opposition, please.

Member Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. In March of '21 Service Alberta let us know that they were going to replace the province's paper personal health record at a cost of about \$600,000, or about 14 cents per Albertan. At the time, on March 4, '21, the minister stated through his press secretary, and I quote, we know that Albertans are frustrated with their paper health care cards, which have no security features and are more than a few decades old. Unquote. All the planning that was done in fiscal '20-21 and funding to execute is for this fiscal year. I have a few questions about this. We're about halfway through the fiscal year, and my question is: when are the new health care cards coming?

Mr. James: The new health care cards would be something that you would need to speak with Health about in particular. They have their own systems that they kind of do to enable those health care cards. You know, we're continuing to look at, as Minister Glubish said, the ability to put the public health number onto drivers' licences. That's what that \$600,000 would have enabled that was spoken to. That work continues with our colleagues in Health, but as you can appreciate, they have a lot of pressures in front of them as well.

Ms Renaud: So are you saying that Service Alberta is not going to have any involvement in producing new health care cards, that this \$600,000 was just to improve some feature of a driver's licence?

Mr. James: Health care cards are within the mandate of the Department of Health. The drivers' licences are within the Department of Service Alberta. So what was talked about at that moment with the minister and was contemplated was the ability to take the public health number, which is currently on paper cards, we all know, and then move that health care number onto the driver's licence. We continue to look at the best way to do that, and we continue to be in conversation, as we were last year, with our colleagues in Health around that opportunity.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So what was the figure of \$600,000? What was that budget figure for . . .

Mr. James: That was . . .

Ms Renaud: . . . specifically? Sorry. Go ahead.

Mr. James: Sorry; I heard an echo. That was for the ability to work on any automation or any of our IT systems, because the IT systems right now from that MOVES platform – the MOVES platform is a system that gets into, you know, how the drivers' licences work and what have you, so that was some of the work that we did last year in the estimate of that, and that money would be in Budget 2021 for this fiscal year and the activities of this fiscal year.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So do you anticipate Albertans having access to this new card? Do you have a timeline of any kind? Do you have any insight on when that'll happen? This was a pretty clear promise. The Premier made a promise about Albertans having new health cards, so can you give us some insight on when we can expect that or when Albertans can expect that?

Mr. James: I couldn't speak to the new health cards and where that is. Again, my colleagues in Health would be able to do that. For our part, taking the work that we began last year, we continue to look at it. We have not got a date by when we would see private health numbers onto drivers' licences. There would be a requirement for more work to do that, and we haven't completed that work.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So no timeline, no date when Albertans can expect something to replace these decades-old, flimsy, paper cards that – you know, Albertans were promised that this would be happening. So we don't really know when that'll happen, but we know it'll cost approximately \$600,000 from Service Alberta and the Service Alberta budget to do some consultation work. Is that about right?

Mr. James: Not quite. The health care cards that you're talking about, replacement health care cards: that is work that our colleagues in Health are doing as a complete replacement of those cards, and I couldn't speak to where that is at. What we're talking about is the opportunity to take that private health number and move it onto the driver's licence, which, again, sounds like the same thing but it's not quite the same thing. They are slightly different work efforts that are on the go or doing between ourselves.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So the two different things: are there different timelines for those two different activities?

Mr. James: Well, right now both ministries need to work on both of those activities. Sorry. For our activity with respect to the driver's licence we're working with our colleagues in Health, and, as I've said, they have a lot of things that they're working through right now and were even last year. We will continue to work with them on that timeline, but I can't give you a specific time at this point.

Ms Renaud: You can't tell us if it'll be done in this fiscal year?

Mr. James: Sorry. Say that again.

Ms Renaud: So you're unable to tell us if it'll be completed in this fiscal year?

Mr. James: Correct.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm going to move on. In addition to the pandemic, we're facing an opioid crisis. Many Albertans have died. We know it's a tragedy. In 2020 we had 1,128 people die. One of the strategies to prevent additional deaths is the digital overdose response system. My question is to the chief information officer.

The promised response system wasn't delivered in fiscal 2021. With so many deaths, what explains the delay?

Mr. James: Again, that particular one is not something that Service Alberta is responsible for. This is a system that would be run through Health or Alberta Health Services, but I would need to defer to the Department of Health. We have no role within the digital overdose initiative or with regard to opioid overdoses.

Ms Renaud: So Service Alberta will not play any role whatsoever in the rollout, development of this particular application?

9:00

Mr. James: No. Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health have their own IT services, their own chief information officers in both of those organizations, and they would be the ones, that I'm aware of, that would be doing that. If Health asks us for support, then, as with every other ministry in government, we would certainly furnish that support to them at their request. But they would have the lead, and we would only act on their request.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm going to switch topics again. In Community and Social Services' annual report they note – and that's on page 17 – that there will be a transition strategy that will be finalized for a move to a digital-first approach. It notes a collaboration with Service Alberta to modernize AISH and income support programs. I notice on page 11 of the Service Alberta annual report that it talks about Service Alberta working with Community and Social Services to develop an online system that leverages the digital ID for financial assistance to eligible Albertans. I'm wondering if you could tell me about this project, when that began, and specifically what programs within the Community and Social Services ministry are you talking about that will be transitioned?

Mr. James: We're working with our colleagues in Community and Social Services on a number of aspects – you know, their PDD program, their AISH program, their income supports program – and in various ways we're taking those and making sure that they have both the ability to leverage MyAlberta digital identity for payment systems and the ability to pay those out. In addition to that, we're also working with them to advance digital services that make it easier for Albertans to apply online to work with case managers, for case managers to access that information to make decisions in that particular space. It's fairly broad work that's going on. A lot of that work is happening this year, and we were working with them last year on a number of digital activities that speak to what you're describing.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Can you tell me when that work began to transition? I think the goal was to move all of the payments – let's say AISH and income support payments – to have everybody have electronic transfers or the deposits because some people were still getting sort of paper cheques. Can you tell me when that transition began or when that work started?

Mr. James: I'd have to confirm. I know we did a lot of that work. We had been doing that work in 2020-2021. That work continues today. The specific moment in time at which it started I'm not sure I can speak to. It may have been in the 2019-2020 period. These are complicated systems that have large legacy applications. They cross over into, you know, multiple systems. We need to make sure that the data, the access to the data, and then also the complexity of that connection – these are long-lead-time kind of projects. Maybe it started in 2019-2020, possibly earlier, but it is work that we have

been doing, both to plan out and then to, in a very stepwise fashion, work to get them into these new capabilities.

Ms Renaud: Okay. You may not have these answers here with you, but if you could provide those in writing.

At this point in time if we were to look at two of the programs, let's say, that you talked about, one being AISH, one being income support, can you tell me how many users you have in each of those programs that are currently simply using their digital ID to receive monthly payments?

Mr. James: I can't speak to those. Again, our colleagues in Community and Social Services may have a better sense of that, but the number of people that are in and out of that program, depending on the nature of their particular employment or their circumstances, would vary in my conversations with my colleagues. As more and more people come onto MyAlberta digital ID and as we have more capability to offer those e-transfers or systems, then more people will likely be using that capability. We can go and we can find out sort of both when this started and then also, to our knowledge and our understanding, the number of people that are getting e-transfers as opposed to cheques.

Ms Renaud: How about more specifically the number of people on AISH? That number doesn't change very frequently. Can I get that in writing? At this point in time how many people are getting electronic transfers?

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

We'll move on to the government caucus, please.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you. Yeah. I've just got one more question relative to broadband. In your report you mention that you're continuing to work with BCE on the SuperNet relative to the towers and stuff like that. I know, at least in my constituency, that the different telephone companies kind of divvy up the towns. Like, for example, Telus in Lloydminster is making significant investments there. Can you explain the relationship between BCE and the other phone companies and how you're working with them to spread this quickly and what roadblocks you found? I just want to see what kind of progress you had in 2020-21.

Mr. James: Yeah. Let me just find where we were with that. BCE runs on our behalf on a contracted basis. The fibre-optic cabling supports connectivity to all the various institutions out there, about 3,000 facilities, that are connected to the SuperNet. We're working with BCE to make sure that all of those services are provided accordingly. In terms of the connection to the other telecom providers, many of them have their own infrastructure across the province that they are using. We are however transitioning a significant number of our sites. Last year we managed to transition, you know, a certain number of sites. We had about 1,300 sites last year that we targeted transitioning. We transitioned about 944 sites to the new BCE contract. We're going to transition more of those this year, and then we'll finish up the rest in the next fiscal year.

I just wanted to test if that answers your question or not.

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. I'm just trying to – you know, you always get complaints about broadband, especially in rural. I know myself even. I just recently moved. Telus had my postal code and said: we don't service that area – right? – in Vermilion. They kind of divvy up the towns, and it must be an economic thing that they're doing with that. I was just wondering about that relationship and how it worked exactly. I didn't know.

Mr. James: They choose. We have made the SuperNet available to ISP providers. For the most part, Bell, Telus, and others have their own infrastructure that they've put in place that is different than the SuperNet infrastructure. Smaller ISPs have, in some instances, access or made use of those SuperNet services.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. All right. Good. I'll carry on, then.

Next I had dispute resolution. On page 22 the annual report notes that the department was able to exceed performance measure 1(a), being "the percentage of inspections, investigations" – and you did mention this – "and dispute resolutions completed within established timelines," by about 10 per cent, which was an increase of 13 per cent over the previous year. Can you identify and explain the changes made that led to the increase in efficiency?

Mr. James: The department was able to exceed that target primarily based on the effect of the pandemic on hearings conducted by our residential tenancy dispute resolution service. During the first several months of the pandemic there were a lot fewer applications than normal filed with the RTDRS due to the uncertainty created by the pandemic as well as the ministerial order that temporarily suspended forced evictions, so that allowed those applications which were received to be heard more quickly.

In addition, we made changes last year to our processes for the RTDRS. That included transitioning to telephone hearings, and that enabled RTDRS to adjudicate more hearings per day due to eliminating lost time for strict scheduling because we had strict scheduling parameters that we had been using previously. For example, what they're doing now is that several hearings are scheduled for a specific block of time, and that enables the hearing officer to move from one hearing to another more quickly, allows for more of those to be completed. Scheduled time hearings often resulted in lost time waiting for all of the parties to show up. By having more people within a scheduled block of time, you have the flexibility to adjust within that block of time you're hearing, and that allows for those no-shows or those late shows that come in for a particular hearing. That's what allows that additional, you know, volume of completions.

Mr. Rowswell: You might want to continue to do that. It seems like it's working better.

Mr. James: It's on our path; that's for sure.

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. Good for you.

To continue this a bit more, was your department able to identify lessons learned to implement more broadly to achieve improvements and efficiencies? Are there other things you feel you'll be able to do?

Mr. James: Yeah. I think conducting the hearings by telephone is certainly a big one. We believe as well that adding mobile-home site tenancies was more efficient than standing up a separate one. In that year we also passed legislation or changed the regulations that allowed for mobile-home tenancies to come into the RTDRS, so that was more efficient than standing up a completely separate dispute resolution system, because they had questions as well, and there would be disputes. We were able to leverage existing processes and systems and also the expertise of existing hearing officers and information officers. That gave us the ability to respond more rapidly to mobile-home site disputes as well, which was positive for Albertans.

9:10

Mr. Rowswell: Good for you. That sounds like it's working, so congratulations.

The other one on page 22 of the annual report references the Builders' Lien Act and specifically the Prompt Payment Amendment Act, which was introduced in the fall of 2020. Can you provide some context on why stakeholders asked for government to modify the Builders' Lien Act and to legislate payment in the construction industry?

Mr. James: Yeah. Thanks for that. This is an issue that has been of primary concern for those working in construction for quite a while. You know, what we understood was that in recent years the average time for payment in the construction industry increased from 45 days to 70 days, and obviously that has a corresponding impact on sort of their businesses.

Under the Builders' Lien Act the contractors in most industries had 45 days to register a lien for nonpayment with the land titles office, the difference being that oil and gas contractors have 90 days. That longer payment period, that started to go to 70 days, generally meant that the contractors lost the opportunity to file a lien if the payment was not received, and even when liens are registered on time, the act's remedies are through the courts, which are time consuming. They're prohibitively expensive for some of these smaller companies within the organizations or within the construction industry. So representative organizations within the industry sought amendments to the Builders' Lien Act to enable prompt payment.

Prompt payment is a term that encompasses, you know, a suite of legislative amendments. That streamlines payment processes. It introduces a system of adjudication through faster and more cost-effective mandatory adjudication, so basically they would go to an adjudicative process instead of the courts. That also helps to reduce red tape associated with collecting accounts. So these new rules that we introduced address these concerns.

There is a change to legislation. There is a clear timeline of 28 days for project owners to pay an invoice. Subsequently, contractors then have seven days after being paid themselves to pay their subcontractors. As I said, a new system of adjudication, and we're using trained authorities or will use trained adjudicators under nominating authorities. They will be an alternative to the courts for the prompt-payment disputes, and this should help unlock cash flow in the industry. Contractors and subcontractors will have more certainty and confidence to operate in Alberta. You know, if they're paid on time and subcontractors are paid on time, we'll just see a steady stream of cash flow in the industry, which was starting to lag.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Great.

You were talking about it a little bit, but additionally, what work has been done to bring it into effect? Like, was that done by the end of the '20-21 fiscal year, or has that happened since?

Mr. James: We started in the last year with significant engagement. In fact, this whole process has had significant engagement with the industry itself, and, you know, we continue to work with the construction industry around this. In response to that delay we did pass last year Bill 37, the Builders' Lien (Prompt Payment) Amendment Act, and we did additional amendments set out in Bill 62, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, early in this year. These bills essentially put in place that prompt-payment legislation as I talked about.

Following that, we have continued, as I said, to work with stakeholder associations. We continue to look at what other

jurisdictions are doing in terms of the nominating authority and how that's done, and we're anticipating that with that work, as it continues, we should see, you know, the new prompt-payment construction lien act as well as new regulations proclaimed in early 2022.

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. You mentioned other jurisdictions. How are we relative to other jurisdictions? Do we have a more prompt system?

Mr. James: We're learning from them. Ontario has put in place a prompt-payment system, so we're learning from what they've done. The UK has also done that, and we're learning from what they've done. We're trying to make sure we take that expertise and those learnings and then apply them back into what we're doing and have best practices, I guess, in effect.

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. I know I've talked to a few construction people, and they certainly appreciate the work that's been done. You know, it always works best when you can get paid in a more prompt way.

I appreciate your help. Thank you.

The Chair: That concludes that time.

We'll move over to the Official Opposition, please. I'm seeing Member Schmidt, please.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. My questions are related to the eviction prohibitions that are mentioned on page 18. Now, I hope the deputy minister can help me with the timeline here. It says, "The supports included a prohibition on evictions established until April 30, 2020." Now, when I went back to review the legislation that was passed in the middle of April 2020, it indicated that the eviction prohibition was going to stay in place until the end of the public health emergency. So can the deputy minister just confirm for the committee what the actual timeline for the eviction prohibition was? How long was the eviction prohibition actually in place?

Mr. James: Yeah. Just give me one second. I appreciate that question. So that temporary eviction enforcement was set up in that window of time, as you described. It's the correct window of time, so into April, and that was while other supports were being established. We did put in place restrictions with respect to rent increases, and they weren't allowed during that first state of public emergency either, nor could they be applied retroactively after the state of emergency ended, and landlords couldn't charge fees for late payments until the end of June in that particular time. We did talk to landlords and tenants about working together to develop meaningful payment plans through the first state of public health emergency, but that end of April is the timeline.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. If the ministry could get back to us with a written timeline of the eviction prohibition in the fiscal 2021 year, I would appreciate it.

Now my first question. How many residential evictions occurred in Alberta after the eviction prohibition was lifted in fiscal 2020-21?

Mr. James: I'll have to go and look at that particularly. I don't have that at hand.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. If you could get back to me on that.

Now, can the deputy minister talk to the committee about the enforcement provisions or enforcement mechanisms that were put in place to enforce the eviction ban?

Mr. James: Just to clarify the question: what measures we put in place so that if people were evicted during that period of time, we would have actually ceased that eviction during that window and the activities. Is that correct?

Mr. Schmidt: Yes. That's correct.

Mr. James: Okay. We have a consumer investigation unit, so if there were, in fact, any issues associated with the conduct of people, the conduct of owners or tenants, we have the opportunity to have our consumer investigation unit identify that, to go out and to meet either with the landlord or the tenants themselves and understand what was happening. So that's a practice that we have in place. I couldn't speak to whether or not that was employed during that window of time, but that is generally a practice that we have, and, you know, we could confirm that, in fact, they had to go in and do that.

I do know that when there were complaints over that window of time on a number of matters with respect to consumer matters, our consumer investigation unit was active in that. If there was a specific eviction that was done, then civil enforcement under the Justice and Solicitor General would be responsible to deal with that particular matter. Ours would have been more on the complaint side of what was happening.

Mr. Schmidt: So can the deputy minister respond to the committee in writing with the number of complaints that were investigated related to the eviction ban?

Mr. James: Yes.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

Now, another part of the importance of the eviction ban was a requirement for landlords to work with tenants to come up with payment plans for rent that was missed during the period in which the ban was in place. How many payment plans were established between landlords and tenants according to this legislation?

Mr. James: We wouldn't have been involved with those individual agreements between the tenant and landlords. Those would have been between the tenant and landlords unless they had actually identified a concern or a, you know, consumer complaint and come to us.

Mr. Schmidt: If landlords refused to come up with a payment plan or abide by the legislation that was in place, what enforcement mechanisms could tenants rely upon to make their landlords comply with the legislative requirements?

Mr. James: I can confirm, but again we go back to our consumer investigation as well as civil enforcement through the JSG. We also have the RTDRS, that I spoke about earlier. There are, through the RTDRS, specific penalties that can be applied to landlords or to tenants on the vice versa, depending on the circumstances of this particular case. If landlords had taken actions with regard to that and wouldn't work with tenants, then those tenants had the opportunity to apply and still have the opportunity to apply to the residential tenancy dispute resolution service, and they'd be able to work through that. If there were other complaints, then they could go to, as I say, the consumer investigation unit, which has the ability to investigate business owners.

9:20

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. I would appreciate it if the deputy minister could commit to responding to the committee in writing with the number of consumer investigations that were launched with respect to residential repayment plans.

As well, the deputy minister mentioned that the RTDRS had the ability to deal with or mediate these kinds of disputes. How many decisions regarding these repayment plans did the RTDRS deliver in 2021? If the deputy minister could commit to responding to us in writing on that matter as well.

Mr. James: I would have to look into those matters and then get an answer back. I don't have the numbers at hand, but I can get them back to the extent that we have that information, yes.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. Now, normally there are extensive guides that are written to accompany legislation regarding residential tenancies, commercial tenancies, those kinds of things. Did the department issue any guidance on how landlords and tenants should come to an agreement on repayment plans?

Mr. James: I don't believe so, but again during that period of time – let me confirm with my team on whether or not we issued specific direction. We often do through our consumer information unit . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Deputy Minister. I hate to cut you off, but our time is short. Now, the residential eviction ban was only in place until approximately June 2020. Now, we know the worst waves of COVID were to come later in this fiscal year, in November and then in March. What consideration did the department do to reinstate the eviction ban during subsequent waves of COVID, or was that ever considered again?

Mr. James: I don't know what considerations happened during the window of time sort of leading up to January, and that's not to pass that off. During the time that I was here when I started, in January through the end of March, we weren't in conversation about specific actions with regard to that. Part of that is the third – sorry. During those waves by that point the federal government had put in place, you know, their programs and their supports associated with what was needed for Albertans. So there was I wouldn't say less consideration, but those supports were in place to enable people to work through that period of time perhaps in a different fashion than when the initial pandemic hit and the eviction policy.

Mr. Schmidt: I appreciate that consideration. Did the department actually measure the number of evictions that were occurring over time to see if the federal supports were adequate to keep tenants in their homes?

Mr. James: Not that I'm aware of, but I will have to confirm with my team.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you very much.

Now, I had a whole bunch of questions related to commercial evictions. If the deputy minister could commit to responding to us in writing with the number of commercial evictions that were conducted in Alberta over the fiscal year, how that compares to the previous fiscal year, how many complaints were investigated regarding commercial evictions. Is that something that the deputy minister could have? And just confirm for my understanding: commercial evictions are not eligible for the RTDRS process. Is that correct?

Mr. James: Correct. They're not. We also don't track evictions. We track when people raise complaints to us, or the RTDRS does that. If somebody has been evicted and they don't raise an actual complaint or they don't bring that matter to our attention, we're not aware of that within the province. There's no requirement to do it. Even in terms of other residential evictions . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Deputy Minister. I appreciate that it wasn't past practice to track evictions, but we are going through a once-in-a-hundred-year public health crisis where hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs and were at risk of being thrown out into the street. Did the department consider tracking evictions, either commercial or residential, just to see how things were going for the people of Alberta?

Mr. James: We continue to track what was coming in in our consumer investigations or the complaints to us. We didn't reach out and start tracking specific evictions. However, we did work, as was talked about earlier, to make sure that the various programs that government implemented were available through the various e-services or through specific programs. That was our support into that particular space as well as a significant amount of our support to help Albertans during that period of time.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy.

We'll move on to the government caucus.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you so much, Madam Chair. Well, sir, I have not yet had the opportunity to meet you in person, and I just wanted to say that it's very nice to meet you. You know, COVID is very difficult for everyone to deal with. Your department has had a lot of pressure on you, and I just wanted to thank you for the good work that you've done. Thank you to you and your team for all the work that you've done.

Getting to my questions here, in the annual report on pages 11 and 18 it's noted that your department had to make some changes to respond to the pandemic, as we all have. Could you provide the committee with the details of what your department did to support Albertans through the pandemic?

Mr. James: Yeah. Thanks very much. Clearly, you know, COVID-19 was stressful for many Albertans. Our focus really was around alleviating some of that stress by consumer protections, fostering confidence in the marketplace, and protecting their livelihoods. A couple of examples: price gouging and consumer protection. We received more than 660 complaints in 2020-2021 related to unreasonable price increases for in-demand products during the pandemic. We heard about businesses inflating the cost of products like hand sanitizers, disinfecting wipes, toilet paper, and a variety of others. Albertans were advised that they should report any of those prices that seemed unreasonable to our report-a-rip-off line or file a consumer complaint. As I mentioned, our consumer investigation unit is responsible for these types of protections, and they followed up on the complaints that we received. They posted information online regarding any enforcement actions the government took as a result of those.

In addition, as was just mentioned, rent protection. We had job losses, business closures at the start of the pandemic that caused a lot of challenges for various tenants. You know, we took several measures to support them. We temporarily suspended eviction enforcement, as was just discussed – tenants could not be evicted for nonpayment of rent during the month of April – prohibited rent increases during Alberta's first state of public health emergency, made sure that that could not be applied retroactively, prohibited landlords from charging fees for late payments of rent, as I discussed, and then required landlords and tenants to work together to develop any copayment. Those are sort of the consumer ones.

On the IT supports we put out a total of 41 applications and services to support COVID-19. That included MyAlberta emergency isolation support, which we talked about, the working parent benefit, COVID self-isolation payments, emergency benefits, health records, critical worker benefits. All of these

systems were designed to eliminate the need for in-person visits, reduce reliance on the costly ways to deliver services to Albertans, and also to enable timely delivery of service to Albertans, those who were in self-isolation due to COVID-19 itself. So a number of those payment systems were in place along the way.

Maybe just on that, you know, that very first system that went out in terms of the emergency isolation support: we launched that within six days. It processed 46,000 applications, disbursed \$44 million to more than 38,000 Albertans, and by the close of the program it had disbursed more than \$107 million to 94,000 Albertans. That system disbursed more e-transfers in that first day than we had in evacuation payment systems later this year in the first 30 days. It's a fairly significant outcome.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you so much for that fulsome answer. Further to that point, can you identify any lessons learned through the pandemic that may have not been identified during more normal times?

Mr. James: Yeah. I guess, you know, the ability to really advance online services and resources to reach more people who otherwise wouldn't have been engaged. For example, our outreach moved fully to online, and that allowed both for education stakeholder engagement, so more Albertans from across the province were able to participate rather than those in a specific geographic location or in a physical engagement. We were able to identify the need to modernize legislation to allow organizations to do the same for their annual general meetings. Our legislation at that point had required in-person meetings, so we implemented changes that would allow for corporations and boards and shareholder meetings to occur. We also implemented the ability for select registry services to be provided when they weren't physically present in person at registry locations. Our registry agents worked with us on that. That allowed just more accessibility for Albertans in remote locations who otherwise would have had difficulty travelling.

Ms Lovely: I heard many accounts . . .

Mr. James: And I talked about . . .

Ms Lovely: Sorry. Go on.

Mr. James: I was just going to say that I talked about a number of our IT systems as well. We learned a lot in terms of technical errors as we were rapidly pushing out those systems. You know, we learned from those. We got better and better as we went along. It's unfortunate that from time to time some of those challenges happened, but it did teach us how to make sure we had better queuing and better system formatting otherwise.

9:30

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you for the answer, and pardon me for the interruption. I was just going to say that I did receive a lot of positive feedback in my community about the new options to get involved with meetings on Zoom. Lots of people were able to participate in more things and multiple things, so it turned out to be a silver lining.

On to my next line of questioning, which is going to focus on technology in government. Pages 27 through 31 of the annual report identify outcome 3, government is modernized and services are accessible to Albertans. Obviously, technology is a part – sorry. That was a quote: government is modernized and services are accessible to Albertans. Obviously, technology is a huge part of modernization and accessibility, especially during the '20-21 year.

To these ends, what is your ministry doing to build a culture of innovation in government?

Mr. James: Yeah. No. Thanks for that. We're really working hard to transform our delivery, and we're introducing what we call Internet-era ways of working through some of our work with partner ministries. Some of those are really about adopting industry-proven digital approaches, right? For the sake of this agile, devops, cloud – again, those are terms that are common in the industry – they really allow for faster iterative development, and they help to reduce the cost of maintaining aging technology. We have seen this in leading jurisdictions, U.K., Estonia; in industry, Amazon and Spotify, for example. We're taking these teams of people, these multidisciplinary teams, and they work very closely with the ministry.

The ministries have what we call product owners. Those product owners are people who are, you know, delivering the service. They're business owners delivering the service, and we're coming alongside them. That has helped us to really transform how we're providing public-facing services across government sectors, that includes justice, social services, Indigenous consultations. That improves the user experience, it reduces administrative burden for staff and makes for better days of work as well as just lets Albertans access government services in a way that they're familiar with: on their time, when they need it, through their mobile devices, along the way. You know, all of this is starting to change both the culture within my organization but also within our partner ministries around focus on innovation and in this public-interest technology that brings together digital services as well as policy decisions along the way.

Ms Lovely: That's great. Well, thank you.

What are some specific initiatives that you've undertaken with other ministries in government to make the interactions that Albertans have with government easier and better?

Mr. James: Yeah. No. Thanks for that question. A couple of examples. We're working across various ministries, so we've got people in Advanced Education, Children's Services, Community and Social Services, but let me just give you sort of a couple of quick examples.

Traffic tickets are a digital service, something that – you know, traffic tickets are important to a lot of Albertans, unfortunately – enables citizens to manage their traffic tickets, pay online, or accept early resolution of disputed infractions. Before the rollout of this service there were limited online options. Drivers would have to physically attend courthouses to resolve the matters. Some of those services such as speaking to a prosecutor about resolving a ticket on the first appearance date were only available in larger cities, and that created inequity.

We have been able to, on a rolling schedule, release functionality to different locations in Alberta. We've seen significant reductions of in-person visits to courthouses. In fact, we've seen 1,600 transactions are processed every week through the traffic ticket digital service. That's thousands of in-person visits to courthouses that reduce manual processes, lots of touchpoints, lots of e-mails and hand-offs. We have 15,000 disputes that have been submitted and responded to by traffic prosecutors without people having to appear in person, and we've had about 5,000 people request additional time to pay their traffic fines using that service because it is now no longer that they have to come to the courthouse to do that. It just really helps. Additionally, online payments, requesting more time to pay, disputing, pleading not guilty, requesting different trial dates: all of that's available to Albertans 24/7, 365

regardless of where they live and where their ticket was issued. This has created a better system of justice.

I've got some others if you want me to keep going. You know, maybe Alberta consultation office digital service. The team works with proponents, First Nations, and Métis, and government to make consultation more efficient and effective. You know, we've also introduced that and the first GOA-provided system to help First Nations and Métis conduct their consultation.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy.

We're now into our final block, the fourth rotation. The Official Opposition has 10 minutes, and I will look to them to begin. Mr. Schmidt.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. I'm wondering if the deputy minister could tell us, back to this issue about putting Alberta health care numbers on drivers' licences, whether or not Service Alberta contemplated a fee increase for drivers' licences to accommodate that inclusion of the health care number.

Mr. James: At the front end of this work we did not look at an increase associated with the drivers' licence fees for this. That's not to say that there won't be one, but at this point in time, you know, at the front end of it we haven't made a decision. I think it probably would be better to say that we haven't made a decision associated with that at this point as the work is still ongoing.

Mr. Schmidt: The \$600,000 that you budgeted towards this initiative: will that cover any additional cost, or do you anticipate that Albertans will have to bear the cost of having their health care number printed on their driver's licence?

Mr. James: No. That \$600,000 was intended to support our initial changes to the systems, as I was starting to say earlier, the integration between the health system and the MOVES system, the motor vehicle system. Because we have to have confidential information move between us and the provider of the driver's licence cards that are actually made for us, we need to make sure that we integrate that information and that we have proper security and proper IT services. That's what that \$600,000 is intended to do once we get to that point in time of integrating them, so that's where that cost of that . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. Thank you. Because of the sufficient lack of clarity on this \$600,000, I'm wondering if the deputy minister could table for the committee a comprehensive breakdown of how that \$600,000 was spent to support this initiative.

Mr. James: No. Not exactly because that work is still ongoing. We haven't finished that. We haven't actually got it to a point where I can tell you where that \$600,000 is being spent or what it's being spent on at this point because the work is ongoing. That might be a better question for a future committee.

Mr. Schmidt: Duly noted.

I want to move on now to mobile-home site tenancies. Page 20 refers to the expansion of the RTDRS to include mobile-home site tenancies. Now, this was intended to allow mobile-home site tenants to have access to a low-cost alternative to resolving tenancy disputes. What performance measures or indicators did the department establish to determine if expanding mobile home site tenancies' eligibility to the RTDRS met the stated objectives of this expansion?

Mr. James: We would have measures associated with the number of complaints that come in. We would have measures with respect

to the number of resolutions that are done through the RTDRS in that particular case. All of the existing measures inside of the dispute resolution system would now be available to us relative to mobile-home owners, and we would understand where those particular disputes are related to that, and we would be able to look at that.

Mr. Schmidt: I'm hoping that the deputy minister can table for the committee a comprehensive list of the number of inquiries that the RTDRS has received with respect to mobile-home site tenancy disputes, the number of resolutions that were achieved specifically for mobile-home site tenancies under the RTDRS.

I'm also interested, because mobile-home site tenants were forced to take these actions to the Court of Queen's Bench: did the department do any sort of crossdepartmental analysis? Did they look at how many proceedings were initiated in the Court of Queen's Bench related to how many are now in the RTDRS and come up with any kind of measure as to, you know, how much time and hassle you've saved mobile-home site tenants?

Mr. James: We've had 36 mobile-home site tenants applications to date this fiscal year as of September 30. You asked for that number, so there are 36 that have come in. You know, the application fee associated with RTDRS is lower than taking it into the courts, and those who experience financial hardship can apply for a waiver. To date we've seen a number of people coming to us. We've had 30 applications related to it . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. I would appreciate a comprehensive tabling.

How many inquiries into the process were there, and how many people were told that they weren't eligible to have their problem heard by the RTDRS, specifically related to mobile-home site tenants?

Mr. James: I would have to get back to you on that question.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. If you could supply that answer in writing.

You said that there were 36 mobile-home site tenant applications filed, and you have committed to telling the committee in writing how many have been resolved. What's the current backlog of mobile-home site tenant disputes before the RTDRS?

Mr. James: I'm not aware of any backlog in there, but again, you know, we'll go back and we'll look and see what that is in terms of the process.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

What kind of training did the RTDRS staff receive to equip them to deal with inquiries and disputes related to mobile-home site tenancies?

9:40

Mr. James: The RTDRS staff are experienced adjudicators with regard to tenancy dispute matters. You know, they would therefore be able to bring that expertise into the mobile-home site tenancy activities. In terms of the specific activities around training, clearly they would need to better understand what was there with respect to mobile-home sites, regulations and legislation associated, which, I understand, is very similar to our existing residential dispute regulation. That's an area where they would have had to be more familiar, but they are experts in this area.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, if the deputy minister could get back to the committee in writing with a curriculum or some kind of guidance

or training, because I'm hearing from my constituents that the RTDRS staff that they deal with don't have adequate training to deal with these mobile-home site tenancies and in fact are told that they haven't been given adequate training. This is a serious issue that needs to be dealt with.

How many staff currently work in the RTDRS?

Mr. Turton: Point of order.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Under 23(b), the hon. member is continually talking, asking questions pertaining to the current time, to the date of today in terms of the status of manpower and things like that. We're supposed to be dealing with the business at hand, which is in the past, so I would just respectfully ask that the line of questions be focused on the time period that we're supposed to be discussing.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Turton. You're quite right.

Mr. Schmidt, I'm going to ask you to rephrase properly. Thank you.

Mr. Schmidt: How many staff were working for the RTDRS at the end of the fiscal year before the committee?

Mr. James: I'll have to get the answer back to you on that.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

How many fee waivers were granted for the RTDRS in fiscal '20-21?

Mr. James: Again we'll have to get back to you on that.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

I'm looking at the budget for the consumer awareness advocacy line item, and it says that the actual amount spent was \$1.3 million less than budgeted. How much, if any, was the budget of the RTDRS reduced in '20-21?

Mr. James: The consumer advocacy line didn't include – I should clarify. I'd have to get back to you to confirm that.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you. If the deputy minister could tell us, if there was a reduction specifically to the RTDRS, how that reduction was achieved.

Now, when the Mobile Home Sites Tenancy Act was amended, there was a lot of discussion in the Legislature about the \$50,000 cap on damages that can be sought under the RTDRS. Now, I understand that this is a legislation matter regarding the jurisdiction of the Provincial Court of Alberta and the Court of Queen's Bench. What work did Service Alberta do to communicate with Justice Alberta about allowing the RTDRS to hear cases exceeding the \$50,000 damage limit?

Mr. James: Sorry. Just to confirm, can you restate that question, please?

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. The RTDRS can only hear matters up to and including \$50,000, and that's because it's a branch of the Provincial Court. Now, it would be the Justice ministry's decision to allow the RTDRS to hear matters exceeding that \$50,000 cap. This was an issue of discussion in the Legislature. What work did Service Alberta do with Justice to exceed . . .

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

The Chair: Sure. Yes.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. The point of order is under Standing Order 23(b), the member speaks to matters other than the question under discussion. The committee has convened for the purpose of considering the ministry's accounts, particularly the outstanding recommendations from the office of the Auditor General and the ministry annual report 2020-2021. The matter that has been raised by the member is not within the boundaries of the said topic.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Hon. members across the way, is there any intervention here to make?

Mr. Schmidt: You know what? It's clear that the government members are just trying to waste my time. I will try to reframe my question so that it meets whatever ridiculous criteria they set up.

The Chair: Okay. Good. All right. Thank you.

Mr. Schmidt: Service Alberta delivers the RTDRS.

The Chair: Okay. Wait. Wait, Mr. Schmidt. I am going to provide some guidance just to the member that, you know, if – here's what I'm going to say about this. It is quite clear that the questions are being asked within the fiscal year under discussion, and the deputy has committed to a number of undertakings as written follow-up for that time period under discussion. Right now the member is querying direction that was given during the time period under discussion. So as long as we understand those parameters, I think we can proceed.

Member Schmidt.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. If the deputy minister could commit to getting back to the committee in writing to outline the work that was done between Service Alberta and the Justice department to deal with this \$50,000 limit on the RTDRS.

Mr. James: Just in terms of that, the \$50,000 limit is the authority within the provincial courts. There was a decision made not to provide RTDRS with higher than \$50,000 and to leave that within the courts.

Maybe just to close on a couple of other points. There are 28 staff in RTDRS. Thirteen are here in the office and 15 leads. We have, you know, added additional training and staff to deal with the mobile-home tenancy dispute matter that was there. In fact, they've received extensive training on legislation and natures of the matter. That is ongoing, and as they adjudicate more matters, they will, obviously, adjust them for learnings associated with that. They dialogue with each other about those, leveraging the learnings inside of that. Hopefully that answers a couple of the member's questions.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

I'm hoping that the deputy minister can commit to responding to the committee in writing with a status update on the Mobile Home Sites Tenancies Act review, telling us whether or not a what-we-heard document is going to be published and when the results of the review will be made public.

Mr. James: That matter would be outside of the 2020-21 year.

Mr. Schmidt: It's clearly stated in the fiscal report. I would just like a status update as of the end of the fiscal year, then, if that's all that you can provide.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

We are in our final fourth rotation then. To the government caucus, please.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Hello. Good morning. It's nice to meet you. I have had many positive comments from constituents that are glad they're able to access their required government services from the convenience of their home and their iPad. I want to thank you for the work you and your department have done to deliver these online services, so thank you again.

I'm going to be talking about red tape reduction. In your department's annual report on pages 16 and 17 there is considerable discussion of red tape reduction. The target is one-third by 2023. I was wondering if you could give us a bit of a progress report on this topic.

Mr. James: Sure. Thanks very much for the question. Maybe to give you some examples of the work that we have been doing with respect to red tape reduction and perhaps administrative support to Albertans more broadly: the MyAlberta e-services that you mentioned, including the digital ID and emergency isolation support system; you know, extending the government's dispute resolution services that we just talked about, the mobile-home site tenancies, that provides a much more cost-effective means of dispute resolution, that I noted; bringing in service modernizations for families, so online birth registries, and then also for businesses. The multijurisdictional registry access service that I noted in my opening remarks: that allows Alberta companies to operate more freely.

In particular, while we have been doing those, we did review policies and forms, including the Consumer Protection Act, and that results in hundreds of requirements removed and forms streamlined. The Alberta Motor Vehicle Industry Council, which Service Alberta is responsible for: they also reduced the red tape in their licensing and registration processes, as an example of an agency, by 44 per cent. The elimination of licence plate validations saved Albertans \$1.3 million in costs.

Online vehicle renewal changes and implementation from the registry in portals to the MyAlberta e-services platform: that brought that technology into a modern platform and allowed for a one-stop user experience to obtain registry services online. It also allows us to do more in the future, more integration of vehicle renewals services and eventually, you know, immediate registration certificate printing. Once this is fully developed, it will be no longer required of Albertans to wait two weeks for their registration certificate to arrive in the mail. That is all work that, you know, continues and has been going on for some time.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

By cutting too much red tape, could you tell me: do we risk compromising government's oversight or accountability to protect Alberta consumers and Alberta businesses?

9:50

Mr. James: Yeah. Given that consumer protection is a critical outcome for Alberta, you know, we remain focused on ensuring that any proposed changes meet that strategic outcome, that they are protected and a competitive business environment is preserved. Our work is really focused on driving innovation, particularly the use of technology to modernize services, foster efficiency, and reduce unnecessary duplication. That would include reducing policies and procedures that just are not efficient and not required but still not reducing the amount of protections that we offer to consumers. All of that oversight is provided throughout the organization, and

stakeholders are engaged prior to making changes. That helps to reduce the risk of unforeseen consequences.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

Can you please speak to the newly implemented pending registration queue mentioned on page 29? What is the intent?

Mr. James: Yeah. That queue was brought in to guarantee that a party that was registering an interest in a party – so they put in a registry – maintains their position of priority in the work of the land titles office. It also had the effect of increased transparency of pending registration, so we would know how many are in the queue and who's doing that. While it doesn't guarantee registration, because there may be flaws in the registration package or whatnot, which people are given an opportunity to correct, the PRQ guarantees priority position.

By relying on this priority and the legislation, it gives parties the option of closing real estate transactions as soon as the land titles office has received the registration documents, so they don't have to wait until the registration process is complete. Now all parties to a real estate transaction in Alberta – buyers, sellers, lenders – can rest assured that their priority will be maintained in the order that land titles confirm receipt of their documents and that no other documents will be allowed to jump ahead in priority.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Given that this is a fairly technical issue, what are you doing to engage stakeholders and educate them on how to use the PRQ?

Mr. James: Yeah. When we developed the PRQ, we met extensively with key stakeholders to discuss that with them and then, as we implemented the PRQ, to share information and communicate the benefits of relying on the PRQ to close real estate transactions. Some of these stakeholders included the Alberta Real Estate Association, several law firms as well as the Canadian Bar Association, and Real Estate Practice Advisory Committee of the Law Society of Alberta. We've had municipalities, developers, lenders, and legal advisers. They're working on now trying to figure out how the process can be best integrated to complete land transfer sooner, and we continue to support them through that.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

Page 20 of your annual report references amendments to enable virtual meetings. Can you speak as to why these are necessary changes? Just having to add to that, I have to say that in this particular case I do have quite a few small businesses very happy that meetings can be virtual. They're very thrilled about the possibilities.

Mr. James: Yeah. No. Thanks for that question. March of this year, end of March, actually, the 26th of March the Service Alberta Statutes (Virtual Meetings) Amendment Act was proclaimed, and that allowed, as you said, condominiums, corporations, nonprofit companies, and societies to provide meeting notice, to conduct meetings, and member voting using digital technology.

Now, the reasons for implementing these changes were, I guess, twofold. First, a temporary minister order last year in 2020 which had suspended the requirement for specific organizations to hold in-person meetings ended in August 2020. The public health restrictions requiring limits on public gatherings and social distancing: you know, that limited the ability for people to do that; however, organizations still required accommodations to carry on with the annual general meetings and shareholders and board meetings notwithstanding those restrictions that were in place. You know, the past legislation did not reflect the advent of technologies

that allowed organizations to send electronic meeting notices or to meet virtually or conduct votes, so these changes allowed both for-profit and nonprofit entities to have the flexibility to use the technology to conduct board and shareholder, member, business meetings while respecting the health requirements that were out there.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

Page 18 of your annual report notes that the Alberta Motor Vehicle Industry Council, the AMVIC, embraced the challenge of finding efficiencies and reduced red tape in their licensing and registration processes by more than 44 per cent. Can you speak to how they were able to achieve this and if there were any learnings that could benefit other agencies looking to undertake similar work?

Mr. James: Yeah. No. Thanks. You know, AMVIC's focused red tape reduction initiative is really about listening to feedback received regarding the application process for an automotive business licence, and while taking into consideration their mandate of consumer protection, some previously required business forms were eliminated. Now, other areas were able to make similar red tape reductions inside of that, but the focus really was on that licensing department. All of those targeted actions amounted to a 44 per cent decrease, as you noted, in regulatory burden, and that helped move AMVIC to year 4 of the government of Alberta's red tape reduction program.

AMVIC also launched AMVIC Online. It was the portal for industry and consumers that drives data processing and provides information management and other regulatory administrative functions. Agencies that have a similar mandate could look at what AMVIC's online service does in terms of faster, more convenient licence and registration applications. If they have similar practices around licensing and registration of businesses or people, they could certainly learn from what AMVIC has done in that space.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you very much.

At this point I'll cede my time to MLA Lovely. Thank you.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you so much, Member.

Question is: what is the role of the digital innovation office, and what are some of the examples of projects that they've worked on?

Mr. James: Yeah. The digital innovation office you know, it works to undertake partner ministries across the GOA for service transformation and modernization. They have a number of product and platform teams that are currently delivering digital services. Their job is to come in and bring that Internet-era way of working I talked about earlier, and they work on these product teams as agile devops sort of methodology.

I gave you some examples earlier of traffic tickets, which was work that they had done, and I gave you another example with respect to the ACO, but maybe one final example is filing in digital services. It makes it more simple and efficient for Albertans to file routine documents. Right now QB receives about 140,000 filing submissions for process. They're moving to a digital portal.

The Chair: Hon. member.

Ms Pancholi: Are we going to reading in?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy. I wanted to just read in some questions and ask that you table responses to these questions. The first is with respect to performance measure 2(a), which is on pages 25 and 26 of the annual report. The performance measure refers to

the percentage of FOIP requests that were completed within 60 days, but the results that are listed there are the percentage of requests that were “handled within 60 days.” If you can clarify the difference between what a completed and what a handled request is deemed to be as well as how many of those applications that were received within the fiscal year actually resulted in information being disclosed to applicants as well as how many of those requests were abandoned at the stage of receiving a fee estimate, that would be greatly appreciated.

I also would like some clarification as to how the ministry met its target for FOIP requests within 60 days given that during the pandemic of this year the time limit was actually extended to 90 days under the act as a result of public health emergency orders. How did that impact the number of applications that were successfully, according to this, handled?

With respect to the in-person engagements that are listed under performance indicator 1(b) on page 23 of the annual report, it lists that in the last fiscal year 210,000 in-person engagements occurred as compared to 8,000 the year before. If you can clarify: how did so many in-person engagements occur during a pandemic? That’s a 2,500 per cent increase in in-person engagements in the middle of a pandemic. Therefore, how does the ministry define in-person engagements?

Lastly, in the questions I was asking you earlier, you indicated that the ministry was doing a review or an analysis of its performance with respect to the emergency isolation benefit rollout. If you could table that analysis that was done by the ministry as to the problems and lessons learned, that would be appreciated.

I’ll turn it over to Member Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Can I also get the nonprofit legislation consolidation project? If we could get how you’ve tabled the terms of reference and talk about some of the work, the processes that this group is undertaking.

Also, at the end of this fiscal period that this annual report covers, if we can get actually a number of individual Albertans who are receiving monthly AISH benefits through the e-transfer monthly payments, that would be great.

I’ll turn it over to Marlin.

10:00

Mr. Schmidt: No. I’m good.

Ms Renaud: No other questions? Okay.

I had one other question around open data. If you could table the process between Service Alberta and other ministries. What is the process to determine what data is put on that portal, and when is that updated? Is there a schedule or a timetable that each ministry lists? For example, in Community and Social Services I think there is probably about five or six different sort of series of information that are released, but there doesn’t seem to be a schedule of when that happens. Sometimes it happens regularly; other times it does not.

The Chair: Hon. members, we’re just slightly over time here, so I’m just going to look to the room for unanimous consent to just

finish off the agenda. I’ll ask: is there anyone who objects to going another three to five minutes to finish off the read-in question portion on the government caucus side and just the other business piece?

Seeing none, go ahead.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr. James, for your time today. I just have three questions related to the Auditor General’s report and outstanding recommendations for Service Alberta. May 2017 the Auditor General recommended that Service Alberta complete its plans to implement a comprehensive inventory system for information technology applications across government with the supporting processes to maintain that inventory. What has been done? What progress has been accomplished to address this recommendation?

October 2014 the Auditor General recommended that Service Alberta improve the recovery of critical information technology applications for the government of Alberta. Has this audit recommendation been addressed?

Finally, in October 2012 the Auditor General recommended that the government assess the risk to public information assets throughout the government, determine if the government has adequate IT security policies, standards, and controls to mitigate risks and to determine who is responsible and accountable to ensure that public information assets are adequately protected. Again, what progress has been made to address this recommendation?

I look forward to your written responses. Thank you.

Ms Lovely: I do have some more to add as well, please. Thank you, Chair. Page 19 of the annual report mentions collaboration between your department and the Real Estate Council of Alberta. Real estate affects all Albertans, so I would like to discuss this collaboration. Can you provide some insight into the nature of the collaboration between your department and the Real Estate Council of Alberta, particularly regarding the legislative changes introduced in 2020? I would like a bit of a progress report on this, whether it has occurred as the ministry has anticipated.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Any more? No? Okay. We’re very good.

All right, friends. We concluded our business for today. Just so that you know, the committee has received a supplementary written response to questions asked of the Ministry of Environment and Parks on June 22. As per the usual practices those responses are posted to the committee’s public website.

I’m just looking to the floor now to see if there are any other items for discussion under other business.

Seeing none, the date of our next meeting is Tuesday, November 2, with the Ministry of Education.

Please do remove all of your items, your bottles and cups and so on, for the safety and convenience of the LAO staff.

I’ll now call for a motion to adjourn. Moved by Mr. Rowswell. All in favour? Any opposed? That motion is carried. Have a great day, folks.

[The committee adjourned at 10:03 a.m.]

