



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature  
Fourth Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Public Accounts

Children's Services

Tuesday, December 13, 2022  
8 a.m.

Transcript No. 30-4-2

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

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts**

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Turton, Searle, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain (UC), Deputy Chair

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## **Standing Committee on Public Accounts**

### **Participants**

Ministry of Children's Services

Darren Baptista, Senior Financial Officer

Joni Brodziak, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child Care and Youth Services

Leann Wagner, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child Intervention

Sherri Wilson, Deputy Minister



8 a.m.

Tuesday, December 13, 2022

[Ms Phillips in the chair]

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

My name is Shannon Phillips. I'm the MLA for Lethbridge-West and the chair of this committee. As we begin this morning, I'll invite members, guests, and LAO staff at the table to introduce themselves. I'll start over here with the deputy chair, please.

**Mr. Turton:** Awesome. Thank you very much. Good morning, everyone. MLA Searle Turton from Spruce Grove-Stony Plain and deputy chair of this committee.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Muhammad Yaseen, MLA, Calgary-North.

**Ms Lovely:** Good morning, everyone. Jackie Lovely, MLA for the Camrose constituency.

**Mr. Hunter:** Good morning. Grant Hunter, Taber-Warner.

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

**Ms Wagner:** Good morning. Leann Wagner, assistant deputy minister, child intervention, Children's Services.

**Ms Brodziak:** Good morning. Joni Brodziak, assistant deputy minister of child care and youth services for Children's Services.

**Ms Wilson:** Good morning, everyone. Sherri Wilson, Deputy Minister of Children's Services.

**Mr. Baptista:** Good morning. Darren Baptista, senior financial officer for Children's Services.

**Mr. Wylie:** Good morning. Doug Wylie, Auditor General.

**Ms Hayes:** Good morning, everyone. Patty Hayes, Assistant Auditor General.

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

**Ms Renaud:** Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

**Ms Pancholi:** Good morning. Rakhi Pancholi, MLA for Edmonton-Whitemud.

**Dr. Williamson:** Good morning. Christina Williamson, research officer, LAO.

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

**Mr. Huffman:** Good morning. Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

**The Chair:** There are two folks online. If they could introduce themselves.

**Mr. Toor:** MLA Devinder Toor, Calgary-Falconridge.

**Mr. Stephan:** MLA Jason Stephan, Red Deer-South.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We have a few housekeeping items to address. The microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV.

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We'll now move on to approval of the agenda. Are there any changes or additions to the agenda?

Looking to the room and seeing none, I'll ask that somebody move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the draft agenda for today's meeting as distributed. I have that moved by Member Turton. Is there any discussion on this motion?

Looking to the floor, then, all in favour? Are there any opposed? I'll look to online. No? Okay. Thank you. That motion is carried.

We'll move to the approval of the minutes. We have minutes from our December 6 meeting. Do members have any errors or omissions to note?

I'll, then, look to the floor for someone to move that the minutes of the December 6, 2022, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be approved as distributed. Moved by Mr. Singh. Any discussion on this motion?

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

Friends, we'll now move to the Ministry of Children's Services. I'd like to welcome our guests, who are here to address the ministry's annual report from '21-22. The ministry's opening remarks will be 10 minutes, and the OAG's opening remarks will be five. I'll remind members that we are in an ordinary two-hour meeting; that is to say, we have the opening rotation of 15 minutes per side and then three rotations of 10 minutes each.

With that, the ministry officials may provide opening remarks. Your time starts when you begin speaking.

**Ms Wilson:** Good morning, everyone. I'm pleased to be here to represent Children's Services today and talk about the accomplishments from 2021. You've already met those around the table, so I'll skip over the introductions for those at the table with me, but I would like to introduce in the gallery Cynthia Dunnigan, the ADM for Indigenous partnerships and strategic services; Jeff Anderson, acting ADM of regulatory compliance, quality assurance and business supports; and also here is Elden Block, executive director for the office of the statutory director.

I'd like to start by highlighting a few of the key supports and initiatives that our ministry focused on in the '21-22 fiscal year. The ministry focused on building a more affordable child care system for Alberta families that provides high-quality, accessible, and inclusive child care. The system, built upon the provincial child care subsidy program, supported Alberta's economic recovery and lowered child care costs for Alberta families. That's not to say that the child care sector didn't also have its share of challenges in the last fiscal year; '21-22 was the second year of the pandemic, of course, and created uncertainty for both parents and operators. In response, Children's Services continued to provide essential relief for parents, child care programs, and workers. This included a \$13.4 million investment to help licensed child care programs stay open and keep children and staff safe and healthy.

We also committed additional funds to support the mental health and well-being of children and youth in the province. Children's Services provides a range of programs and supports to promote positive mental health, foster resilience, and improve the well-being

of children and youth involved with Children's Services as well as those at risk and involved.

One of Children's Services' main functions is to provide child intervention services to children, youth, and families in Alberta. Under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act we become involved with children who are at risk of being abused, neglected, or otherwise in need of support. We support children to be safe at home with their families. When a child or youth cannot safely remain at home, we find temporary placements where they can be safe and secure and have all of their needs met, including their need for cultural and family connection.

Finally, Children's Services continues to work closely with Indigenous communities to ensure that children in care are connected to their communities, that services provided are culturally sensitive and relevant, and that consultation occurs on decisions about children.

I'd now like to provide some more detail about specific initiatives. Having access to affordable child care has never been more important. As the cost of living increases, we know that providing high-quality, affordable, and accessible child care helps parents, particularly women, enter or remain in the workforce while keeping more money in their pockets. To do that, in 2021-22 we helped licensed programs operate safely so that they could remain open. We supported programs to align operations with the new Early Learning and Child Care Act. We negotiated two early learning and child care agreements with the federal government, bringing additional funding to our province to invest in child care priorities: the Alberta-Canada early learning and child care agreement as well as the bilateral early learning and child care agreement.

Finally, we enhanced affordability for families by introducing new measures to lower parent fees through affordability grants and increased subsidy thresholds. As of January 2022 child care fees for Alberta families with children up to kindergarten age were reduced by an average of 50 per cent.

We also supported the creation of more than 1,600 new child care spaces with capacity-building funds to address high-need areas and those addressing flexibility for parents. We know that creating spaces is just one piece of improving access to child care; the other is supporting programs to recruit and retain early childhood educators.

In March 2022 there were 19,756 early childhood educators working in licensed programs. That's a 32 per cent increase from the previous year and higher than prepandemic levels. But we did hear from operators that there weren't enough ECEs in the province. That's why we continued to support licensed programs in '21-22 to recruit and retain well-qualified staff by providing funding for wage top-ups for certified ECEs and professional development opportunities. This helped to both retain existing staff while also attracting new staff into the sector.

Children's Services also continued to focus on making adoptions easier for Albertans, expanding on the work done through legislative changes in January 2021. This included an investment of \$50,000 to support each of the three private adoption agencies in building the information technology infrastructure required to support profile publications. We also made access to information on adoption easier for Albertans and started to provide online delivery of mandatory preadoption training so that Albertans, regardless of where they live, can take steps towards adoption. In '21-22 194 children were adopted into loving homes and another 281 achieved legal permanency through private guardianship.

The safety and well-being of children and youth is our highest priority. Since 2019 Children's Services has provided approximately \$4.5 million in grant funding to implement the youth suicide prevention action plan, and in March 2022 we announced a new grant program that provided another \$3 million over two years to organizations supporting youth mental health and suicide prevention.

One life lost to suicide, of course, is too many. Suicide is a tragedy that affects everyone. It devastates families, friends, schools, communities, and neighbourhoods. This grant program will support continued implementation of youth suicide prevention initiatives, and we will continue to work across government with Alberta Health Services, municipalities, agencies, and communities to prevent youth suicide.

We have also been focused on helping young people successfully transition out of the child intervention system into adulthood. In '21-22 alone more than 1,000 young adults have benefited from the advancing futures program. It takes a strength-based approach to supporting youth and recognizes the potential of students to reach their educational goals and to overcome challenges they may face, and it is the only program of its kind in Canada. Benefits of the program include improved labour market participation, higher earnings, improved life skills such as parenting, and improved mental health, physical health, and overall well-being.

#### 8:10

We recognize that investing in the successful transition of young people out of the child intervention system results in longer term individual and societal benefits, and that is what this program does. Children's Services relies on collaborative partnerships with Indigenous communities to achieve its goals to ensure that children, youth, and families have the supports and services they need. We work with Indigenous communities in several ways. We have delegated First Nations agencies delivering service agreements, we have the development of training, we participate in protocol agreement subtables, and we participate in the development of co-ordination agreements under the federal act. Through this collaborative approach we continue to improve the culturally appropriate prevention and early intervention services we provide to families who need them.

Children's Services will continue to focus on ensuring family and child services and supports are accessible to Indigenous communities and to keep First Nations young people firmly rooted in the communities that have raised and cared for them from the beginning. Our first priority will always be to ensure that vulnerable children, both on- and off-reserve, are safe and have the supports they need. When the federal government brought forward An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families, our ministry committed to working with both First Nations and the government of Canada.

Our commitment is to reach co-ordination agreements that facilitate a smooth transition of authority to First Nations in Alberta who choose to take responsibility for delivering child and family services for their members. In '21-22 Children's Services participated at tripartite tables with Alberta First Nations who requested to enter into co-ordination agreement discussions. Our approach to implementing the federal legislation is that Indigenous children should be raised in their community with their families and according to their cultures and traditions. Children's Services actively supports First Nations communities that are choosing to assume authority for child and family services.

The last initiative I would like to highlight in my remarks today is the incredible work of Alberta's family resource networks, or FRNs for short. We remain committed to providing access to early interventions that build resilience of families, mitigating the need for more costly and intensive interventions. There are 70 FRNs across the province, that continue to show a strong commitment to serving the needs of children, youth, and their families in their communities. Of these 70 network areas, 18 networks specifically support unique cultural and linguistic communities such as francophone and Indigenous communities.

In '21-22 we further strengthened the supports offered through FRNs after identifying areas for further investment, including \$800,000 to expand services for rural and remote communities across large geographic areas in northern Alberta, \$1 million to expand brief mental health counselling services province-wide, and \$260,000 to enhance youth programming for pregnant and parenting teens.

I would like to thank our staff and department partners and stakeholders, who worked hard on multiple new initiatives and managed all of this while dealing with various challenges, including the global COVID-19 pandemic.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Deputy.

We will now move to the office of the Auditor General for some opening remarks.

**Mr. Wylie:** Well, good morning, Chair and committee members. Great to be with you again today. I'll take just a couple of minutes to highlight the outstanding recommendations we have relating to this ministry and then briefly summarize the audit work that we performed on the financial transactions within the ministry. We currently have four outstanding recommendations at this ministry. The committee would have received a full briefing in your packages, and as you will know, these recommendations have been outstanding for quite some time. One is dating back to 2014, and the other three date back to 2016.

The department has indicated that two of the recommendations are ready for us to do follow-up. In other words, they're asserting that two of the recommendations are fully implemented, but they're also stating that two of the other recommendations are not implemented, and those are the two that I'll just focus on this morning.

First was the 2014 recommendation that we made, and that was designed to deal with improving user access controls. More specifically, we found that employees' user access was not disabled promptly from the department information systems when employees left their employment or their role with the department. System access controls are a cornerstone of data security. They ensure that only authorized employees have access to systems. The recommendation was repeated in 2020. I was pleased to read, as I said, in the committee briefing materials that the department has asserted to this committee that it anticipates being in a position to formally notify my office of the implementation of this recommendation before the end of this year.

Let me move to the second recommendation. Chair, this is not the first time for us to comment to this committee on our 2016 recommendation related to enhancing early support services for Indigenous children in Alberta. Specifically, we recommended that the department enhance its processes so that they include the needs of Indigenous children and families in the design and delivery of its early support services and that the department report to the public regularly on the effectiveness of the early support systems. The department has asserted to this committee that the recommendation is near completion. We await that notification and look forward to closing all outstanding recommendations to the department. As I said earlier, these recommendations have been outstanding for quite some time.

In terms of the financial statement work, we completed audit work on the financial transactions at the ministry that are used to support our audit opinion on the consolidated financial statements of the province. There were no significant findings, and we made no recommendations to the department related to our financial statement work.

I'll close there, Chair. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'll just note for the record that we have one hon. member who has joined us.

Hon. member, if you would introduce yourself for the record.

**Mr. Panda:** Two, actually.

**The Chair:** Two. Oh, yes.

**Mr. Panda:** Good morning, everyone. Prasad Panda, MLA for Calgary-Edgemont.

**Mr. Toor:** Good morning, MLA Devinder Toor, Calgary-Falconridge.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Toor.

Yes. Mr. Toor, for the record, has joined us online.

Now we will move to the first rotation for the Official Opposition, 15 minutes. Your time begins when you begin speaking.

**Ms Pancholi:** Good morning, and thank you to ministry staff for being here today to report on the ministry's progress in the 2021 fiscal year. I'd like to begin to discuss child intervention, and specifically the annual report doesn't report how many children and youth actually received intervention services in the 2021 fiscal year. Can you just confirm that number for the committee?

**Ms Wilson:** Just give me two seconds here. The number I have at March 2022 is just under 10,000 children and youth receiving child intervention services.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you, Deputy.

In 2021 the budget for child intervention was \$879 million. I note that the annual report indicates it was underspent by \$16.6 million – we'll get to that later – but essentially you've got an \$880 million budget, \$879 million budget. You've indicated that there are about 10,000 children and youth who are receiving child intervention services in the 2021 fiscal year. On page 24 of the annual report it lists outcome 2, which is "the well-being, resiliency and cultural connections of children, youth and families are supported and children and youth are protected."

I've been privileged to be the critic for Children's Services for three and a half years now, and essentially my question, after reading for three years the annual reports, the business plans, the estimates, all that information – what I don't understand when I look at the '21 annual report or, frankly, any of the documents is how Albertans can actually tell, you know, what Children's Services is actually achieving with this outcome. There is an \$879 million budget, 10,000 children who are receiving child intervention services. What does success look like? The annual report only reports on the number of young people in advancing futures who have completed their studies. That's great information. That's roughly about 900 of the 10,000 – right? – that are receiving services. It reports how many children in care are placed in family-based homes, which are foster homes and kinship homes. What I don't understand is: what is success? How does the ministry, more importantly, how do Albertans know that the other 9,000 children receiving services are safe and protected and that their well-being and resiliency are protected? What outcomes, what measures, what evaluations do you have to actually indicate that?

**Ms Wilson:** Just give me two seconds here. Thank you for that question. I think what I would say is that – I mean, we provide a range of services in child intervention. Obviously, part of that is family enhancement, and we look to ensure that we try to continue

to keep kids with their families instead of bringing them to care, only when that's actually required.

**8:20**

The child protection component of it: I think we would look at how many kids we are able to keep within kinship care and foster care and look at home-based placements as a success factor as opposed to group care. I think that the other piece we would be looking at – I'm just asking Leann if you can pull the numbers in terms of what we look at for permanency. One of the success factors for us would be looking at how we either return kids to their homes, keep them in their homes, or achieve permanency for them. Those would be some measures of success.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. Sorry. As we progress, if I ever interrupt you, it's not to be rude; it's only because we have short time.

Why isn't that reflected in the annual report? Why aren't we looking at performance measures around permanency, around perhaps, you know, family preservation or family reunification? Why aren't those pieces indicated in the annual report as measures that Albertans could look at and say: "All right. You've achieved that success. You've kept that family together" or "You've reunified those parents with those children"?

**Ms Wilson:** Well, thanks for the question. I don't think I can comment on why it's not necessarily in this annual report or in the business plan, but I can say that we do track how many kids we do keep with their families under family enhancement agreements as well as those that we reunify. Yeah. We can provide those statistics for you after.

**Ms Pancholi:** But the annual report is the report of the work that the ministry has done to achieve the objective. The outcome was about the well-being and resiliency of families, children, and youth and making sure they're protected. I do think, Deputy, that you are in a position as the deputy minister to comment on why measures such as family reunification and preservation, permanency are not reflected in your annual report. How are Albertans – this is the transparency for Albertans to know that you're achieving the outcomes, and that is not indicated in the annual report.

**Ms Wilson:** We report against the business plan, but the best – like, in addition to that, we do track those numbers, and we can certainly provide them, but we report against the business plan and the performance measures that are identified in the business plan.

**Ms Pancholi:** I appreciate that, that you could provide them to us at this committee. The point is, though, for Albertans to have that transparency and accountability. I mean, we're simply members of the committee asking for transparency on behalf of Albertans. So I think that's – that is, to me, a significant challenge. When I'm looking from an outside perspective at the annual report and I look at the business plans – and I've worked in a ministry before. I understand that the ministry is involved in developing the business plan, and you set your objectives and your measures and your expectations for your work.

This is one of the challenges that I believe is inherent in the child intervention system, that there is no clear definition of what success is. How do you evaluate that children are protected and that their well-being is preserved? It's not clear. I appreciate you saying that it's not in the business – I see it's not in the business plan. I see it's not in the annual report. But how do you feel that you are communicating to Albertans that you are performing your job, that you are doing what you've set out to do and what your objectives are?

**Ms Wilson:** We report on statistics within child intervention quarterly to the public as well as on the website. I'm just trying to confirm whether or not some of that information is available on the website, but I'll have to answer that after the fact.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you.

I can confirm that some of that information around, you know, where children are placed is on the website. What it doesn't show – it's statistics. It doesn't show if that's a good outcome, right? For example, it can show that there are so many children that are placed in kinship homes or Indigenous children – actually, it doesn't say how many Indigenous children are placed in kinship homes. It does say how many kinship homes there are. It does say how many children are placed in family-based homes. What I'm asking is: how do Albertans – is that good? Are those good statistics? Are those good results? Is that what your goal is? Do you want to improve it? You know, I read the quarterly statistics every few months. I see the data there, but what Albertans want to know is: is that achieving your objectives? Are those good outcomes?

**Ms Wilson:** Well, again, Member, I can only say that we report to the business plan and what's in the business plan, that we do provide statistics on the website, and that our programs do offer – we do focus on trying to keep children in their home as best we can, and we have those statistics. We provide quality training to our caregivers to ensure that we are trying to meet the outcomes that we've identified in terms of culturally sensitive, appropriate, and quality care.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

One of the statistics, of course, as you know full well, that is reported monthly, is the number of children and youth who are receiving child intervention services who have died or have been seriously injured. Pages 30 and 31 of the annual report note that 49 children and youth in 2021 died while receiving services.

I must point out that the annual report does not at all acknowledge how extraordinarily and shockingly high that number is. It simply sort of states it as, I guess, a number, which is, I think, really shocking considering these are actually children and youth. Albertans should be rightfully concerned about that number.

I want to go over a bit of a timeline for the fiscal year 2021 so I understand, just to put it into context, the alarming number of deaths that happened in the 2021 fiscal year. In July 2021 the ministry began transitioning young people off the SFAA program. This was, you know, the cuts that were made from eligibility from age 24 to 22, which because of a court injunction the government was not able to proceed with. The Minister of Children's Services stated in March of that year that no young person would be transitioned off the supports during the pandemic. In July we understand that that's when the ministry actually did start to transition young people off the SFAA program although I do note that was also preceding the fourth wave of the pandemic, so the pandemic certainly wasn't over. Anyway, you began transitioning people off SFAA.

In October 2021 it's noted that the ministry observed a tragic increase in deaths. I'm pulling this from the final review on the number of deaths of children in care, that was issued earlier this year.

In November 2021 the office of the Child and Youth Advocate issued recommendations for a government-wide youth opioid strategy. Children's Services, I understand, did not respond to this recommendation because they believed it was Alberta Health's responsibility and not Children's Services' responsibility. In November 2021 the then minister Schulz asked for a review of deaths of children and youth but only up to December 2021. At that



point 36 children and young people had died. Thirteen more would die in the next three months.

In March 2020, again part of this fiscal year, the office of the Child and Youth Advocate issues recommendations that all ministries report to a committee of this Legislature on its work to support children and youth in care. Children's Services responds that it thinks it's already done enough public reporting so that this recommendation is met. Then page 31 of the annual report says that any improvements that will be made as a result of the review of the deaths of children in care would be implemented in the 2022 fiscal year.

The reason I've laid out that timeline is to indicate that in the 2021 fiscal year 49 children and young people died, and if we include those who had received services within the last two years, as the office of the Child and Youth Advocate reports, it's actually 76. That's a significant number. That timeline shows that there was absolutely no action or additional action taken as the ministry was aware that these numbers were on the rise. There were recommendations made, there was a review, but the annual report indicates that no actions would be implemented until this fiscal year. An entire year went by when it wasn't clear that the ministry was doing anything specific to address the rising number of youths in care, and I don't understand why it took a year for any actions to be considered.

During that 2021 fiscal year were there any discussions about emergently hiring additional staff, front-line staff, to support children and youth? Were there any emergency funds that were considered to be, you know, delivered to contracted service agencies that work directly with children and youth? Were there urgent meetings held with the Child and Youth Advocate? Actually, we know from a FOIP that those conversations were not happening with the minister and the Child and Youth Advocate prior to November. What was the ministry doing as those numbers were alarmingly increasing during the 2021 fiscal year?

**Ms Wilson:** Thank you for that question. There are a couple of questions that you have in there, and first perhaps I'll just comment on the relationship with the OCYA. We, of course, consider any death or serious injury to be tragic, a terrible tragedy, and we acknowledge that the number of deaths in the '21-22 fiscal year was high. Our top priority is still safety and well-being of children and youth, and we value the relationship that we have with the OCYA. We work with them very closely. We meet with them on a regular basis, and we do go through those recommendations, and we share the same goals. We have addressed the vast majority of the OCYA's recommendations, and we do respond to them as they come in.

In regard to the deaths the reason that there was a report done to the end of December was because we were noticing the trend within the deaths rising. The minister at the time did request that we look at the deaths at that time. In order to action a further, deeper dive into what was going on, in addition to the typical reviews we do of every death, we chose to look at that time frame from the beginning of the fiscal year to December 31. The intent of the deeper dive really, truly was to see if there were trends or patterns that we were starting to miss and what we could do about that without having to wait for the designated reviews or fatality inquiries that would occur according to a typical schedule.

**8:30**

In regard to opioid and substance abuse specifically we implemented opioid- and substance-use awareness training in February of 2021. It is mandatory for all child intervention practitioners, and we encourage all public-facing child intervention staff interacting with Albertans to take that. We had over 500 learners complete the opiate awareness and substance abuse training . . .

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you, Deputy. Yes. That information is there. What I'm asking is: did you take any new actions, additional actions? Were there any emergent actions that were taken as you saw those numbers increasing during the 2021 fiscal year? If there were any actions taken or work done with the Child and Youth Advocate or any other ministry, can you table with this committee any work plans or meeting notes that address what additional actions, new actions you are taking directly to support children and youth?

**Ms Wilson:** We did implement new policy regarding opioid practice support in October of '21, so that would have been in the time frame that we identified where there was an increase in deaths. We started to work with Alberta Health to identify opportunities to work on substance abuse interventions.

**Ms Pancholi:** Can you table copies of that?

**Ms Wilson:** We can table whatever I can provide after, what's appropriate to provide, yes.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. But you didn't have any sort of additional staffing that was considered, any additional funding that was considered to actually immediately address any of this?

**Ms Wilson:** Maybe the thing that I would point out: in March we did identify several things. Yes, you've already mentioned that they didn't start to roll out until 2022, but we did . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you, Deputy.

We'll now go to the government side for a 15-minute rotation, beginning with Member Turton.

**Mr. Turton:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you very much, Ms Wilson and the rest of the team, for coming out here today. Obviously, the work that you do plays a massive impact to so many families across our province. I've actually quite a few questions, and I guess we'll start off with child care and ensuring that our child care workers are trained adequately so that they can look after our children. I see on page 20 that there were 3,700 early childhood educators that received professional development funding in 2021-2022. Approximately 2,900 of them did it through a release time grant that allowed them to be paid to attend training. It is great that the ministry provided this additional support to the providers, that they were able to attend additional training without, obviously, having to lose pay. I guess my first question is: how much of a key role do you believe this played in encouraging early childhood educators to develop themselves further to be even a stronger asset to our children?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks very much for that question. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic annual growth in certified early childhood educators averaged about 5 per cent. In 2021 – of course, it was a challenging year for child care operators as they navigated through COVID-related closures and quarantines. With many parents continuing to work from home, fewer early childhood educators were required in licensed child care in March of 2021. That's why in '21-22 Children's Services provided \$19.3 million in one-time federal funding through the '21-22 bilateral early learning and child care agreement to licensed programs to help them cover costs related to training, onboarding, and hiring staff. A total of 2,088 programs received the recovery and retention grant.

The critical worker benefit, that launched in 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, was also critical to supporting early childhood educators to remain in the workforce. In '21-22 the program was expanded to include additional child care support staff

to recognize the role they play in keeping programs operating. An additional 382 eligible support staff received a one-time payment of \$1,200 under the critical worker benefit, including cooks, cleaners, drivers, and other critical support aides.

We also took steps in '21-22 to develop the child care workforce and support early childhood educators to participate in more professional development opportunities. We increased professional development funding for early childhood educators at all levels and extended it to certified early childhood educators working in licensed preschool and family day homes. ECEs can now access up to \$2,000 per year for professional development, \$1,500 for postsecondary tuition and books, and another \$500 for workshops and conferences. In '21-22 we approved 6,111 applications for ECEs to access professional development funding. We also introduced new release time funding for ECEs to complete postsecondary course work and attend approved workshops and conferences. In that same year \$1.9 million in funding was provided to ECEs for release time and almost approximately 100,000 hours of professional development.

The last thing I would add is that we invested \$1 million in expanding the online flight child care curriculum with two new learning series, one for modules for administrators and one for ECEs, that would further embed Alberta's new learning curriculum in early learning and child care settings. Registrations for those new modules will be opened in '22-23.

**Mr. Turton:** Excellent. Thank you very much for that comprehensive answer.

I guess my supplemental question is: can you expand upon what factors qualify an early childhood educator to receive grant funding for professional development? Obviously, this is of huge importance to many of the workers out in Spruce Grove and Stony Plain as they look after our kids.

And the second question to that is: what percentage of training costs does this grant actually cover?

**Ms Wilson:** Great. Thanks for that question. Some of this will be a little bit of a repeat from what I've already provided. Professional development funding is for ECEs who are paid employees or family day home educators of eligible licensed care programs who provide direct child care, including program supervisors as defined in the regulation as well as individuals hired by licensed family day home agencies as agency co-ordinators or home visitors and consultants. They are certified as ECEs, either level 1, 2, or 3, Canadian citizens or official permanent residents of Canada, have worked at least 29 hours and at least one month from the date of the expenditure and had submitted a professional development funding request form made from a payment of the course, workshop, or conference within the same fiscal year.

Your second question, I think, was around percentage of training costs. The paid release time grant pays an hourly rate of \$17.50 while attending approved training, up to a maximum of \$2,387.50 per year.

**Mr. Turton:** Excellent. Welcome news for many of our incredible front-line workers. They going to obviously like that grant.

The next question I have is actually regarding the Alberta-Canada early learning and child care agreement that was signed in November of 2021. Obviously, this was of huge interest to the families in my area. I'm a father with a couple of young kids myself, so it seems as if everyone I know has kids and they're involved in daycare. I guess my first question regarding that program is: how did Alberta ensure its interests were included with the negotiations and the actual program and how it came out?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks for that question. When the province negotiated the Alberta learning and child care agreement with the federal government, we made sure it included Alberta's mixed-market child care landscape for both for-profit private and not-for-profit operators. All private child care operators that were licensed when the agreement was signed have been able to participate fully and receive the affordability, quality, and inclusion funding for their programs. In addition, we had 3,700 spaces for private child care programs, including 1,000 spaces for existing programs that wanted to add spaces and 2,700 for programs that were able to open quickly and begin caring for children by spring of 2022.

During the negotiations with the federal government the federal government stipulated that funding through the agreement would be focused solely on children up to kindergarten age as child care is most expensive for children in this age range. We did work hard to ensure as many families as possible were included in the agreement and successfully negotiated for the inclusion of children who both attend kindergarten and part-time licensed child care after school hours.

**Mr. Turton:** Excellent. Obviously, you know, with inflation, I mean, there are a lot of cost pressures on so many families around the province. How much did the average Albertan family benefit from this new agreement in 2021-2022?

**Ms Wilson:** The amount that parents save varies depending on factors such as the child's age, the program type, family income, and the fees that their child care provider charges, but families that were receiving child care subsidy at the time of the agreement, when it was signed in November of 2021, were already seeing reduced fees. Since then, starting in January 2022, thousands of parents saw their fees drop by an average of 50 per cent or more. In '21-22 parents paid an average of \$10 per day if they earned up to \$119,999, \$11 to \$17 per day if they earned between \$120,000 and \$179,999, and \$22 a day if they earned up to \$180,000 or more.

**8:40**

**Mr. Turton:** Excellent. I guess just a quick side question is: how did Children's Services make child care more affordable for parents, especially low-income families? Were there any other additional programs during this time outside of the child care agreement that specifically benefited those that are maybe hurting a little bit more financially?

**Ms Wilson:** Access to affordable quality child care for both Alberta families and the economy is important, of course, now more than ever, and we've seen that over the last year. We continue to be committed to improving child care affordability, especially for those who most need it. Of the \$3.8 billion that is being provided over five years through the Alberta-Canada early learning and child care agreement, \$2.9 billion has been allocated to support greater affordability for families who have children from zero to kindergarten. Through the agreement, Children's Services worked to reduce parent fees, as I said, by 50 per cent on average so that they could lower fees for parents regardless of income level and by raising the income threshold for child care subsidy up to \$179,000. In that same fiscal year we had increased our subsidy rates to \$90,000 in September 2021, and then we further increased that subsidy rate to \$179,999, with the highest rate for families with a combined household income of up to \$120,000.

In addition to the affordability measures that we introduced through the early learning and child care agreement, several other changes and supports contributed to reducing fees by the average of 50 per cent. I mentioned the fact that we increased the subsidy in September, prior to increasing the subsidy further in January. As

well, we also introduced a new preschool subsidy for parents of children in licensed preschool programs. That was a new program in '21-22.

As part of our commitment to help families access affordable quality child care, Children's Services also increased child care subsidy rates for school-aged children for July and August of 2021. With the increase, the maximum subsidy rate for a school-aged child was \$644 per month in a licensed facility-based child care program and \$516 per month in family day homes working under licensed family day home agencies or group family child care programs. The rate increase helped eligible parents with annual incomes under \$90,000 off-set full-time program fees for children who attended grades 1 to 6 during the school year.

In the '21-22 fiscal year the Alberta government spent a total of \$348.5 million for child care subsidies and supports to make child care more affordable for families.

**Mr. Turton:** Excellent. That's fantastic to hear, obviously, about those supports. I know it's going to make a big difference right across the province.

My last question is obviously something that's very near and dear to my heart. Contrary to probably what the good Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar thinks I'm going to ask about, it's not about red tape, but it's actually about adoption, which is obviously very near and dear to my heart. As someone that went through the adoption process myself, I know the strenuous path that many families take to be able just simply to add to their family. I guess my one question before I turn it over is – on page 28 it talks about adoption. What did Children's Services do to ensure that children waiting to be adopted didn't wait excessively for their forever families?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks for that question. Permanency planning is a legislative obligation for all children and youth in permanent care. Adoption and private guardianship are equivalent legal permanency outcomes, both defined by a transfer of guardianship from the director of Children's Services to another caring adult. In '21-22, of the 476 legal permanency objectives achieved, 194, or 41 per cent, were for adoption and 59 per cent were for private guardianship.

Amendments to the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act in 2019 allow any Albertan to make a direct application for private guardianship on behalf of a child in the care of the director. Direct applications for private guardianship can be made with or without the support of the director, with applicants able to request that the court dispense with the consent of the director at the application. Current caregivers have been exercising the right to make such applications when Children's Services is not supporting their wish to provide legal permanency for children in their care or when ambiguity or delays in decision-making are persistent.

The Private Guardianship Self Help Guide was developed by the director to enable Albertans to exercise their right to pursue these direct applications, and a growing number of these applications have been made and successfully resolved, resulting in more children leaving the permanent care of the director.

In the spring of 2022 Children's Services completed the following: we reduced the time to complete the government adoption home study report process down to 3.6 months from the average of five, we created policy and practice supports on consulting with First Nations when seeking legal permanency plans for Indigenous children, we provided a one-time grant to three adoption agencies to assist with the public posting of adoption profiles by agencies, and finally, we updated the public website at alberta.ca to be more user friendly by simplifying and streamlining the information to help potential adoptive families find the information that they need quickly.

**Mr. Turton:** Excellent. Thank you so much for those positive steps that I know your ministry has done.

I know that my good friend MLA Toor has a number of questions to ask on this very important question, so I'll cede my time over to him. Thank you so much.

**Mr. Toor:** Thank you. I just wanted to start by saying thank you. I appreciate the work you do. I'll continue on the same question about adoption. The numbers you mentioned there, about 194 children in permanent care: on page 28 Children's Services says that they continue to advance the progress they have made to streamline the adoption process. Can you expand on this? Like, what progress was made to streamline the process?

**Ms Wilson:** Sure. Thanks for that question. As a result of the 2021 legislative amendments, in addition to birth-parent information, all adopted persons and their descendants can receive information.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Deputy.

We will now move to the Official Opposition's second rotation. Ten minutes, please.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. I want to clarify. Page 24 of the annual report states that as of March 31, 2022, 250 young people aged 22 to 24 were still receiving SFAA supports, but then, of course, we know that the transition to adulthood program launched on April 4, 2022. I'm just wondering if those 250 young people continue to receive the financial supports under the SFAA program, or when the new program began, were they removed from financial supports?

**Ms Wilson:** There are 254 youth or young adults still receiving SFAA in 2022.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

With respect to the changes to the SFAA program and now the transition to adulthood program, we know that it was quite a roller coaster for young people. You know, they were told in 2019 that the program eligibility was changing. Then there was a court injunction that prevented that from happening. Then the minister said that they would not be removed from supports during the pandemic, and then they were removed. Now there's a new program. Has the ministry done anything to follow and track the outcomes for the young people who would have been transitioned off, voluntarily or involuntarily, through that three-year period of time, even those who didn't sign up again for the SFAA program? Have you tracked the outcomes for those young people?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks for that question. Between June 30, '21, and March 15, '22, there were 435 young adults receiving services from the regions. That ended their SFAA involvement, and that's not necessarily due to the age change. That would be transitions that we do all the time with young adults. What I can tell you is that of those, 104 transitioned to advancing futures; a good majority, 140, transitioned to adult services – we track that – and a number, 37 per cent, transitioned to employment and family supports in place. So we do look at where those kids go and at what kinds of programs they're accessing.

**Ms Pancholi:** Okay. Just in the interest of time I'll move on. In the 2021 fiscal year we saw, obviously, the number of intakes drop, and I know there have been some changes in the reporting in terms of how you report intakes, but I'm curious as to whether or not the ministry tracks how many reports of a child in need of intervention are made to the ministry in a year, in 2021, and if you're able to

either provide that information or table it as well as how it compares to the three previous fiscal years. I'm asking to go back to 2018 because of the fact that we know the pandemic impacted the number of reports that were made.

8:50

**Ms Wilson:** ADM Wagner is going to take this question.

**Ms Wagner:** We receive approximately 42,000 intakes every year, and of those intakes – actually, let me clarify. We receive 42,000 calls every year. Then those result in a certain number of intakes. I do have the previous three-year data.

**Ms Pancholi:** In the interest of time, if it's not at your fingertips, you can table it with the committee.

**Ms Wagner:** Yeah. I will table it to the committee.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

So 42,000 reports. Does the ministry track the reasons for the report? Deputy Minister, you indicated in your opening comments – of course, we know that reports are made as a result of allegations of abuse or neglect or other reasons. Does the ministry track the reasons for the reports?

**Ms Wagner:** We don't necessarily track the reasons for the reports. We track the reason for the intake.

**Ms Pancholi:** So if it is determined that a report does not result in an intake, there is no record of why that report was made?

**Ms Wagner:** No. We don't track that information. That information is kept, but we don't track it.

**Ms Pancholi:** Would the ministry be able to track that just as a broad number, sort of break it down into how many of those reports are a result of neglect or allegations of neglect or allegations of abuse?

**Ms Wagner:** I just want to clarify that those 42,000 calls we receive can be calls from people saying, "Hey, I need to know where my family resource network is" or "I'm concerned about a child." They can be a whole host of things. In terms of when we make the determination to move it to intake, so when we go from the phone call to the intake, we do track why we brought it in for intake. Of those in the 2021-22 fiscal year, the majority, 77 per cent, were as a result of emotional abuse, 48 per cent were because of neglect, 16 per cent were because of the risk of abuse, 13 per cent were physical abuse, 3 per cent were sexual abuse. Those are the numbers.

In terms of children being brought into an intake phase, those numbers, the categories, have not changed over the years. It generally is because of emotional abuse and neglect.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you, Assistant Deputy Minister.

So where a report is made and it's determined that an intake is not going to happen because it's not necessary, where are those? I mean, I appreciate that not all reports require significant follow-up, but some of them may still require some supports. What happens to those reports that are made? Are those children and families provided any resources? Are they directed somewhere? What happens if they're not taken in for intake?

**Ms Wagner:** Often the people who are making the report are collaterals, maybe the police, a teacher, a nurse, or someone else, so we will often provide information to that reporter about where those families can receive support or additional services. If someone calls and we don't take it to intake, we just consider it a report. We do

not provide services to the child or their family if it's just a report and we haven't moved it to intake.

**Ms Pancholi:** Is there a category of reports that are – some supports might be, you know, necessary for that family or that child, but it doesn't qualify for intake for Children's Services. I mean, there must be some that are – still, that family might need something, right? That's simply not referred . . .

**Ms Wagner:** In an emergency we would provide information to the reporter, to the reporting source, as to where the family might access additional resources or where the reporter may be able to direct them. If we take a family into the intake phase and we decide not to move it to investigation, to a fulsome investigation, we of course provide resources to that family, because we would have contacted the family directly at that point during intake.

**Ms Pancholi:** Okay. Thank you. That's helpful information.

Okay. We know that in outcome 2 it talks about, you know, evaluations or surveys that are done of staff with respect to cultural understanding, how they responded, and they did that. Is there ever any survey that's done of the families and the parents who are involved in the child intervention system to get their feedback to determine how policy and practices should be changed?

**Ms Wilson:** No, we have not done surveys of parents.

**The Chair:** I hesitate to interrupt, Deputy, but *Hansard* is saying that they need you to come a little bit closer or a bit . . .

**Ms Wilson:** Louder.

**The Chair:** Yeah.

**Ms Wilson:** Sorry.

**Ms Pancholi:** I know that the office of the Child and Youth Advocate has the youth council. The input from youth, maybe those on the youth council but even those who are not children and youth that are involved in the child intervention system: is their input at all considered in terms of policy development or practice development?

**Ms Wilson:** We have a close working relationship with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate, and information that they share in those regular meetings we would consider as part of our policy and practice development as well as anything, of course, that they provide through recommendation.

**Ms Pancholi:** Okay. With respect to Bill C-92, in the 2021 fiscal year – you indicated that the province sat down and did work with some First Nations with respect to co-ordination agreements – approximately how many children who are currently receiving provincial services would those co-ordination agreements cover?

**Ms Wagner:** In 2021-2022 only one First Nation assumed full jurisdiction for child and family services, and that was the Louis Bull Tribe. Approximately 130 children were transferred to the Louis Bull Tribe, and they have full jurisdiction over those children.

**Ms Pancholi:** Is there a framework that the ministry has established with respect to financial or other resources that are provided to First Nations seeking to exercise their authority under a co-ordination agreement?

**Ms Wilson:** Alberta has been working with both the First Nation that self-identifies that they want to enter into a co-ordination agreement as well as with the federal government to determine what

a co-ordination agreement will look like. The co-ordination agreement would include information about transition as well as in-kind services, how the working relationship will look, and how funding would be appropriated.

**Ms Pancholi:** That would be specific to each First Nation co-ordination agreement?

**Ms Wilson:** Specific to each First Nation co-ordination agreement.

**Ms Pancholi:** Does the ministry have projections or expectations as to how many children they expect, projecting out three to five years, will be covered by Bill C-92 via First Nations who are seeking to exercise their authority that may transfer responsibility from the province over to First Nations?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks for that question. Our approach is that for any First Nation that is interested in assuming authority for child and family services, we will work very closely with them to make that happen.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Deputy.

On to the second rotation on the government side for 10 minutes. I see Mr. Toor.

[Mr. Turton in the chair]

**Mr. Toor:** Thank you, Chair. For my question, I'll just continue from the same question I had before about the advancement and then the progress for streamlining the adoption process.

**Ms Wilson:** Sorry. I'm just going to start from what I started with in my answer if that's okay.

Just in regard to the legislative amendments related to adoptions, in addition to birth-parent information, all adopted persons and their descendants can receive information on their siblings, grandparents, and extended birth family if it is contained in their records. This improved access to adoption information, and it helps to increase potential connections to family, community, and culture. Since the legislative amendments were introduced on January 1, 2021, 1,669 requests have been received for adoption information, and of those, 187 have been from siblings who now for the first time can receive information about their adopted sibling.

**Mr. Toor:** Thank you.

Can you also expand on the difference between international adoptions, private licensed agency adoptions, legal permanency, and regular adoptions?

**Ms Wilson:** Sure. I'm just going to write down those ones that you wanted to hear about. International adoptions . . .

**Mr. Toor:** Private licensed agency adoptions, legal permanency, and regular adoptions.

**Ms Wilson:** Okay. Children placed for adoption through a government adoption program are subjects of permanent guardianship orders or permanent guardianship agreements, meaning that they have been permanently removed from their guardian's care. The director under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act is their guardian. There are three categories of matches that are made for a PGO, which is the permanent guardianship order, or a PGA, which is a permanent guardianship agreement, who are to achieve permanency through adoption.

There's child specific, which is under a current caregiver. The child's adoption is to be completed with their current caregiver.

There's child-specific adoption. The child's adoption is to be completed with persons who have a significant and defined connection with the child. And then there's general. That child would be matched with their adoption completed with persons not known to the child and thus have no existing connection to them.

**9:00**

There are approximately 80 per cent of adoptions and private guardianships of children in permanent care completed with current caregivers of the children. If there are no suitable caregivers to provide legal permanency for the child, the child is referred to adoption services for provincial matching from a bank of approved families. After the child is placed, families are supported and monitored for a period to ensure their readiness to become the sole guardian of the child. Important to note, though: if a child is Indigenous or has the potential to be registered with a First Nation, additional work is required to involve the First Nation in any kind of permanency planning. The adoption application is then filed at the Court of King's Bench, and the adoption order is granted. Then there is the supports for permanency program, which provides ongoing financial supports for that family.

[Ms Phillips in the chair]

Licensed agency adoption, which you asked about as well. Children's Services adoption services: we provide licences and monitor Alberta's three licensed adoption agencies. Each agency delivers an open domestic adoption program whereby expectant birth parents select an adoptive family for their child from an approved roster of adoptive families. The majority of agency adoption placements are of infants and occur directly from hospital without government involvement at all. Usually the birth and adoptive families mutually agree on postadoption contact, which can range from in-person visits to sending pictures.

You also asked about international adoption. With international adoption Alberta residents can apply to adopt a child who resides outside of Canada if the child's country of origin allows adoption and if there is a system in place to facilitate these adoptions. If the sending country is a member of the Hague convention on intercountry adoption, they must determine a child's adoptability before a child can be permanently permitted to leave the country. Once it is authorized by adoption services to proceed with an adoption from a specific country, families can work with one of Alberta's licensed adoption agencies to meet Alberta's requirements for preadoption training and preparation of a home study report. Most adoptions internationally are completed within three to four years, which is a different time frame, of course, than government adoptions, and while Alberta's requirements can be completed within six months, the waiting period to receive a match varies with each country and is highly dependent on the characteristics of the child's family and their willingness in their home.

There can be time delays before a child living abroad can come to Canada as a permanent resident or a Canadian citizen. Alberta residents can adopt children from both Hague and non-Hague jurisdictions, but they are informed that the role of the province will vary in those processes.

**Mr. Toor:** Thank you.

On page 28 I can see some postadoption legislative amendments mentioned on this page. Can you speak on this: how have they improved access to the adoption information?

**Ms Wilson:** This is the information that I actually provided in the first question, I think, already, but I can repeat. I will repeat that information. Yeah. When we did the legislative amendments,

effectively the intent was that we improved access to adoption information by helping to increase connections to family, community, and culture. Since we did introduce those legislative changes in '21, we had over 1,600 requests for information, 187 of those from siblings who now, for the first time, can get information about their adopted sibling.

**Mr. Toor:** Thank you.

As you mentioned that there's a difference in the wait times, especially in different kinds of adoptions, too, is there anything Children's Services can do to reduce the wait time for adoption?

**Ms Wagner:** Some of those things are outside of our control, particularly around international adoptions and then also in terms of court processing, how long it takes a court to accept the adoption order. The things that we have done are that during 2021-2022 we added additional resources to complete home study reports to reduce the amount of time it took to undertake a home study report. We also changed our training platform to allow for online training so that families didn't have to wait for an in-person session.

**Mr. Toor:** Thank you.

On page 26 of the annual report the ministry has highlighted the need for youth in care to be placed with extended family members or other members of their cultural community when they can and has invested an additional \$1.8 million to support kinship and foster care, with more enhancement plans, I think, under way. It's also shown, performance measure 2(b) on page 34, that through kinship care Children's Services exceeded its target of 86 per cent of Indigenous children in care facilities in family-based care and met its target of 86 per cent for non-Indigenous children. Could you elaborate on some of the initiatives that were put into place to support kinship care?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks for that question. A new approach to assessing and supporting kinship caregivers was developed and is now being implemented across the province. We started this process in 2019. The assessment and support for kinship caregiving pilot was introduced in 22 regional and delegated First Nation agency sites across the province. The new way to assess and support kinship caregivers is intended to replace the kinship assessment process currently and includes new training for kinship staff. The approach assesses safety, caregivers' ability to meet the needs of children placed in their homes, and identifies immediate needed supported areas.

In addition to implementing and supporting what I call the ASKC – that's the short form for the assessment and kinship care model – the ministry is also strengthening kinship in the following ways. We're reducing financial hardship for kinship families by introducing an initial placement allowance of up to \$900 per child for the caregivers to access to provide what a kinship family needs to get set up and care for the child that will be entering into their home. Those dollars can cover anything from a crib to a car seat to formula to support the immediate needs of the kinship family. Improving the kinship-specific curriculum and training for kinship caregivers is also another way that we are addressing kinship to ensure that kinship caregivers better understand their roles, responsibilities, and the supports that they are entitled to receive as caregivers.

**Mr. Toor:** Thank you.

I only have nine seconds, so I'll just pass my time, I guess.

**The Chair:** There are a couple more blocks, hon. member.

With that, we will head on over to the Official Opposition side for the third rotation.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to move over to child care. Pages 18 and 19 of the annual report reference the affordability grant under the Canada-Alberta ELCC agreement. As it notes, Alberta received \$375 million from the federal government in the fiscal year 2021 for affordability to reduce parent fees. The ministry chose to implement a flat-rate per-space grant that would be provided to operators across the province regardless of the fact that child care fees differ across regions and cities and in different places in the province. On average the affordability grant is around \$500. It varies, of course: more for infants, less for older children. This means that a parent in Calgary sees actually a much smaller percentage reduction in their fees than, say, a parent in Medicine Hat or another area. Why did the ministry choose to ignore regional variations in child care fees when they chose their flat-rate affordability grant for the entire province?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks very much for the question. The early learning and child care agreement with the federal government is a five-year agreement that brings in \$3.8 billion over five years. The commitments that Alberta made were to reach an average of \$10 a day by the end of year five, \$15 a day by the '24-25 fiscal year, and 50 per cent on average in the 2021-22. We did that by introducing affordability grants that built on the already existing subsidy in order that parents would receive a 50 per cent reduction across the board.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. That didn't answer my question, though, why you chose a flat rate. Obviously, not all parents across the board are receiving 50 per cent reduction. In fact, we know that in places like Fort McMurray and Calgary parents are seeing a lot less than a 50 per cent reduction. If they're getting \$500 or a little bit more off their child care fee but they were paying \$1,300, \$1,400, they're actually not seeing a 50 per cent reduction. Again: why was one flat rate chosen for the entire province?

**Ms Wilson:** When we signed the affordability agreement in November, we rolled out the affordability grants and the reduction in fees in a matter of six weeks. This is considered a first step in that, and that's how we were able to determine what we could do for the average of 50 per cent today while we continue to work on getting deep-dive information on what regional differences are across the province, and we'll implement those as we go forward.

**9:10**

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. It sounds like timing was the reason why it was done that way, which is interesting considering Alberta was actually delayed by eight or nine months compared to other provinces with signing this agreement. It should've been enough time for the province to consider what a thoughtful way of rolling out these funds that would've actually benefited most parents would've been, but it didn't appear to take place.

The Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care did an analysis on the way the ministry rolled out this affordability grant. I thank the Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain for asking about this, and I note that your answer didn't really respond to this, which is that what we actually see from that report is that the lowest income families actually received the least reduction in their child care fees, again, as a result of the decisions about how this federal funding would be rolled out. For example, low-income families making less than \$50,000 per year actually only saw a decrease of 24 per cent in their child care fees and in Calgary 13 per cent. The reason was, of course, because of the decision to decrease the subsidy amount and roll out a flat-rate affordability grant. Why didn't the ministry target the lowest income families who, as we all agree, need it the most in terms of reducing fees? Was this also because there wasn't enough time to do it properly?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks for that question. Children's Services actually already provides and targets or prioritizes low-income families by providing subsidies and having increased the subsidy to \$90,000 earlier in the year. We expanded on that subsidy model by increasing the full-time subsidy to \$120,000 and, of course, a part-time subsidy up to \$179,000 so that the lower income families would actually receive more benefit over the longer term. The additional affordability grant allowed us to extend the reach of the 50 per cent reduction to all families. Those that were receiving subsidy already were already benefiting from the program.

**Ms Pancholi:** Do you disagree with the finding of the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care that lowest income families saw the least reduction in their child care fees?

**Ms Wilson:** I don't have that report in front of me; I'm not going to comment on that.

**Ms Pancholi:** Well, I'd be happy to share it with you later. Again, analysis shows you did decrease the amount of full subsidy that those parents making under \$50,000 actually received, so they actually – yes, they received the affordability grant, but they received less in subsidy. So, again, their fees went down the least.

I'm going to move on to provincial child care funding in 2021. Page 42 references that there was a provincial child care surplus due to lower enrolment than planned resulting from the pandemic. As we know, page 18 of the annual report indicates that the provincial child care funding for 2021 was \$290 million. The budget, however, for that fiscal year for child care was \$350 million, and in supplementary supply estimates in March 2022 then minister Rebecca Schulz confirmed that in her calculation Children's Services spent \$55 million less in provincial funding than budgeted in 2021 on child care. Can you confirm, then, that the \$55 million that was not spent on child care in 2021 went back to the general revenue fund?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks for the question. The \$290 million we spent, we spent according to growth. So we matched pace. We planned for the year to see pre-pandemic levels return in child care, and we spent to growth, and we spent \$290 million.

**Ms Pancholi:** Yeah. My question is that you were budgeted for \$350 million, so the remaining \$55 million to \$60 million dollars – the then minister confirmed that that money was not spent on child care. Can you confirm that those dollars went back to the general revenue fund?

**Ms Wilson:** Yes, it was not spent.

**Ms Pancholi:** So it went back to general revenue?

**Ms Wilson:** It was not spent. I'll keep repeating: we spent \$290 million on child care, and we spent according to growth, and we did not spend \$50 million.

**Ms Pancholi:** Right, so that went back to general revenue, which means that at a time when child care programs were incredibly challenged with the pandemic and with the cost of inflation and child care educators were also struggling to make ends meet and we knew they were burning out from the pandemic and parents were struggling with fees, the provincial government chose not to spend those dollars on child care or even move that over, say, for example, in the budget to child intervention to perhaps address the increasing number of deaths, that those dollars went back to general revenue. Is that correct?

**Ms Wilson:** Can you repeat your question, please?

**Ms Pancholi:** So you couldn't find a better use for that \$55 million when child care operators and parents and educators and the child intervention system were struggling?

**Ms Wilson:** Alberta invested heavily in child care services in 2021. There were numerous supports that were provided to help recovery and retention efforts in the child care workforce as well as in relation to COVID recovery.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. Is the federal government aware that – because part of the terms and agreements of the bilateral funding as well as the Canada-Alberta ELCC agreement is that provinces should not reduce their share of provincial funding for child care. At the same time, while Alberta was receiving hundreds of millions of dollars from the federal government for child care, the province was underspending on child care. Do you consider that to be a concern with respect to your relationship with the federal government?

**Ms Wilson:** The commitment that the Alberta government made to the federal government was that we would not reduce our spending in child care, and the spending at the time, March '21, was \$290 million, and we have not reduced our budget for child care.

**Ms Pancholi:** You just didn't spend \$60 million of it.

**Ms Wilson:** We spent according to growth within subsidy.

**Ms Pancholi:** Right. Thank you, Deputy. I appreciate that.

In the Canada-Alberta ELCC agreement that was signed in November 2021, there was an agreement, of course, that the province would create 42,500 new nonprofit child care spaces, and, as we know, in the upcoming fiscal year it was going to be 10,000 new spaces, in the 2022 fiscal year. So what work in the 2021 fiscal year between November and the end of March, as planning for creating 42,000 new spaces, did the ministry do to create a strategy around creating that? It's a significant number of new nonprofit spaces. Did it work with, say, municipalities, existing nonprofits, new nonprofits who might be interested in providing those spaces? What was the work done to create a strategy for creating new spaces?

**Ms Wilson:** ADM Brodziak is going to take that question.

**Ms Brodziak:** Thanks for the question. Once the agreement was signed, we really focused on looking at where there was anticipated and natural growth and leveraging those opportunities as well as reaching out to municipalities who had particularly been approaching us on a regular basis asking for support for child care. As a consequence of the work that had been done in 2021 around increasing capacity overall in child care spaces through a different grant, we developed and stood up in 2022 a space-creation application for not-for-profit organizations to start to reach the target of 10,000, 10,000, 10,000.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you, ADM. I appreciate that. My question, though, is: was there a strategy to actually do that? You know, simply opening up a grant, which did happen later in 2022, is a pretty passive way to try to create 10,000 new spaces, simply saying: apply if you're interested. Really, my question is: what strategy and capacity building did you create?

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now move to the government side. The hon. Member Panda.

**Mr. Panda:** Thank you, Chair. I have to share the time with four other members, so I'll be brief, and I expect you to be straight to the answer, straight to the question. Page 18. The Alberta-Canada early learning and child care agreement was signed with the federal government, and your ministry was able to work with the licensed operators to reduce out-of-pocket child care fees for children from birth to kindergarten age by an average of 50 per cent effective January 1, 2022, which is a good thing. Can you explain some of the steps you have taken with licensed child care providers that help them to reduce their fee by 50 per cent?

**Ms Wilson:** I certainly can provide some of the information, which we may have heard already. So I apologize already if I'm repeating some of this information. Following the signing of the Alberta-Canada early learning and child care agreement with the federal government and beginning in January 2022, Children's Services worked to reduce parent fees by providing affordability grants directly to child care providers so they could lower the fees and by raising the income threshold for child care subsidy up to \$179,999. This ensures that more families can benefit with the highest rates, and it benefits those families that are most in need. In addition to the affordability measures introduced through this agreement, several other changes and supports provided in '21-22 contributed to reducing fees by an average of 50 per cent. In September the child care subsidy income threshold was raised to \$89,999, making more families eligible at that time period, and we also introduced a new preschool subsidy for families with children in licensed preschool programs.

9:20

**Mr. Panda:** Deputy Wilson, I mean, many Albertans are not fully aware and they will appreciate that the costs have gone down 50 per cent. So if your department can share that, that would be great.

Some private child care operators were worried about the impact that this new deal would have on them, so can you explain the steps your department took to ensure that privately operated child care operators were not adversely affected?

**Ms Wilson:** When the province negotiated the agreement with the federal government, we did make sure that it included Alberta's mixed market. We did that in two ways. The first was that those that were already operating within the system were included under the agreement fully to address affordability, quality, and inclusion.

That was 3,700 spaces for private child care programs. That included an additional 1,000 spaces for existing programs to add spaces as well as another 2,700 for programs that were able to open quickly and begin caring for children by spring of 2022.

The second piece to this is that Alberta and Canada have agreed to work on a cost control framework and a for-profit expansion plan to support the growth of additional spaces by licensed private providers in the future. The principles of the cost control framework will build on Alberta's existing successful approach to working with the private sector to increase the spaces and ensure quality and consider all of the operators that make up the Alberta sector.

**Mr. Panda:** Thank you. Thank you for supporting private-sector child care operators.

What did Children's Services do to ensure all parents had access to affordable child care when and where they need it? Specifically, some parents need it in nontypical times, like leaving the kid overnight. How are you ensuring those parents are supported?

**Ms Wilson:** Of course, we recognize the importance of child care to working parents in our economy, and that is why we committed to increasing access. In '21-22 licensed child care spaces increased

by 6 per cent, from approximately 143,000 to 152,000 spaces. This included spaces created using funding from the bilateral early learning and child care agreement to help improve access to child care spaces, including supporting families who need care outside of working hours. As of March 2022 1,076 new licensed child care spaces were created using this grant funding, including 112 spaces for overnight use.

We also negotiated the Alberta-Canada early learning and child care agreement with the federal government, and that again, as I pointed out previously, is \$3.8 billion over five years to invest in child care for children aged zero to kindergarten age. Part of that money will be . . .

**Mr. Panda:** Deputy, if you don't mind, please share that with us after because a lot of my colleagues have tons of questions for you. Thank you.

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Thank you, Deputy Wilson and your team, for doing good work in this very important ministry. I have a couple of areas to ask questions in, and I'll start with the youth in transition. I was happy to read on pages 24 and 25 that Children's Services places a high level of importance on supporting a successful transition of youth from government care into adulthood, focusing on mentoring, educational attainment, employment readiness, and connection to supportive services. This includes the ministry in 2021 providing an investment of almost \$40 million to aid 2,069 young adults through support and financial assistance agreements. I am so glad to see that the program was expanded in April 2022, earlier this year, with the transition to adulthood program. What gaps were not being met by the support and financial assistance programs that are now met through the transition to adulthood program?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks very much for that question. The transition to adulthood program is intended to offer new services not provided by the former support and financial assistance agreements and the advancing futures program and provides additional soft supports previously not available, including mentoring opportunities, life skills, and mental health and addiction supports.

Under the previous SFAA program, young adults aged 18 to the day prior to their 22nd birthday were eligible for financial supports, and TAP will provide supports and services from ages 18 to 24. The clients aged 18 to 21 will still be able to access the financial components of the TAP program, including the financial benefits, as well as those aged 18 to 24 – so expanding beyond age 22 for financial supports – will have access to the emotional and social transitional supports and soft supports that will be provided. As well, we of course know that access to children's education is an important piece of a young person's life, so to continue supporting that, advancing futures is provided to young adults aged 18 up to their 31st birthday who wish to pursue postsecondary education.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Thank you. Can you also elaborate on how the transition to the adult program differs from the support and financial assistance program?

**Ms Wilson:** Thank you. TAP is a client-driven program which allows young adults to choose a primary pathway of four different pathways. So one would be an education pathway, which is advancing futures, the employment pathway, which helps them to successfully achieve training and jobs, and then stability or adult support services. Of course, a young adult may be in a couple of different pathways at one time, but they would choose a primary pathway in terms of what they're actually trying to achieve for their



life goals and what's most suited for them to be successful in that transition.

The participants in TAP work with a dedicated worker to achieve their goals. A key component of the program is that we created a dedicated workforce, including TAP practitioners, whose only caseload will be these young adults transitioning to independence. The workforce is a separate entity, apart from the child intervention workforce, which means that the TAP worker and their supervisor and manager are one hundred per cent focused on supporting the TAP client.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Thank you for that elaborate answer.

I will move on to mentoring. I believe that youth benefit from mentoring support when available. This is why I was pleased to read on page 26 that Children's Services provided in 2021-22 \$1.3 million to keep supporting mentoring opportunities for children and youth, that allowed for enhancements to it to be implemented the following year. Now I have a couple of questions with regard to that. Do you find that the program can meet the demands for mentors for youth?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks for that question. We provided \$1.3 million through the community partnerships youth grants and the youth in care mentoring program for the provision of mentoring supports.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now move to the Official Opposition for, I believe, the final rotation.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I think it's really striking that no members of the government committee or the caucus seem to be alarmed at all about the increasing numbers of deaths of children in care during this fiscal year. No questions being asked about that.

I'd like to ask a few questions about service provider contracts, in particular contracted service agencies. We know that during this fiscal year, the fall of this year already significantly inflation was affecting their costs in terms of supplies as well as their having huge staffing issues because of COVID. Of course, let's be clear that many of these agencies support children who are actually the responsibility of the government; they are either under TGOs or PGOs. I'm wondering. During this fiscal year was any consideration given to reviewing the contracts and the contracted amounts for these agencies so that they could provide appropriate and responsible care to the children that are the responsibility of government?

**Ms Wilson:** ADM Wagner is going to take that question.

**Ms Wagner:** During the 2021-2022 fiscal year, as in all fiscal years, we review our contracts annually to make sure that the expenditures are in line with the actual activities. So during that fiscal year we would have, as needed, moved money from one contract that was not expending to another contract that was overexpending.

**Ms Pancholi:** Sorry. I'm not asking about moving around. I'm asking about actually increasing the contract amounts to reflect the increasing costs that these agencies were facing.

**Ms Wagner:** We did not increase contracts during the 2021-22 fiscal year.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you.

What about increases for foster care providers and kinship providers to reflect the increasing costs of food?

**Ms Wagner:** In the 2021-22 fiscal year we did not increase the per diems for foster care agencies or their caregivers.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you.

The office of the Auditor General has indicated that, you know, recommendation 1 goes back to 2016, and I note it says that the ministry says that it'll be ready to be implemented or ready for review in fall of 2022. It's December; are those recommendations ready for review?

**9:30**

**Ms Wilson:** Sorry. The second part of your question was in relation to recommendation 1?

**Ms Pancholi:** Yes.

**Ms Wilson:** Yes. We are fully prepared that we are going to be ready to notify the Auditor General in the early part of next year to look at that recommendation. Yes. We're confident.

**Ms Pancholi:** So going on for seven years, then; 2023? Seven years to implement that recommendation, and that is to enhance early support services to Indigenous children. That's fantastic.

Okay. Does the ministry track and measure adherence to their policies and procedures with respect to timelines? We do see a reference to these service delivery accountability standards, but is there any – and that was in response to one of the Auditor General recommendations. I'm curious as to, you know: how do we know whether or not the ministry is actually following its own policies and practices and timelines? I've personally heard a number of situations where those timelines and policies are not being followed, and I'm wondering: how do Albertans know that you're actually following your policies and practices?

**Ms Wagner:** The office of the statutory director requires the child intervention division to report monthly on its adherence to critical service standards, including timelines, including face-to-face visits. Those reports are shared with the executive team, and then follow-up is made internally within the department.

**Ms Pancholi:** Those reports are not made publicly available?

**Ms Wagner:** They are not made publicly available.

**Ms Pancholi:** Can you table some of the – are there annual reports that are done to sort of see what progress was made during a year? Is there anything from the 2021 fiscal year that you can table with this committee?

**Ms Wagner:** We'll have to go back and see what's appropriate to table.

**Ms Pancholi:** All right. Thank you.

I want to move back to child care since it's my last block. On page 19 of the annual report it references the \$10.3 million in federal funding for space creation that was given out in March 2021. The deputy has already, you know, indicated how many spaces were created, 1,076. Can the deputy clarify how many of those spaces were actually enrolled by the end of the 2021 fiscal year? Similarly, with the 112 overnight spaces we know that they were created in that fiscal year, but were they actually enrolled by the end of the fiscal year?

**Ms Wilson:** We'll have to table that after. We don't . . .

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

For that space creation grant, which is mentioned on page 19 of the annual report, did any of that funding go to programs that were not licensed at the time of receiving the grant?

**Ms Brodziak:** Space creation grants were, yes, provided to organizations that would have been in the process of becoming licensed as well. It'd be a combination.

**Ms Pancholi:** And how much of that \$10.3 million went to unlicensed programs?

**Ms Brodziak:** I'd have to go back.

**Ms Pancholi:** If you could go back and table that.

And, again, by the end of the 2021 fiscal year all of those programs that were unlicensed when they received the funding: if you could confirm that they were all licensed and operational by the end of the fiscal year.

**Ms Brodziak:** A thousand seventy-six new licensed child care spaces were onboard by that time.

**Ms Pancholi:** No. I'm asking: of the unlicensed programs that received the funding, were all of those spaces licensed and operational by the end of the fiscal year?

**Ms Brodziak:** I'd have to go back and break that down.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

With respect to the inclusive child care funding, page 20 of the annual report indicates that the new model shifted from government program delivery to full delivery through five community agencies. I understand these agencies are providing capacity-building support training to educators for inclusive child care, but if a parent needs an extra support person in the child care program to support their child with needs, is it true that now the parent has to go to the FSCD program under community and social services? Is that the correct process now?

**Ms Wilson:** We would work very closely with the FSCD program, of course, so that they are providing those aids. We did not move in 2021 to make those changes. We worked closely with them to provide the inclusive child care program in '21.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you.

Does the ministry do any sort of follow-up to ensure that those children who receive a dedicated support person through FSCD are actually receiving it in a timely way? The reason I ask, of course, is that FSCD requires an assessment to be done before a child can access those supports. FSCD does not have a very good history right now in terms of its program administration and delivery. So I'm wondering: how is Children's Services ensuring that these children in child care settings have the inclusive supports they need?

**Ms Wilson:** We work with programs and FSCD to make sure that children have what they need. But that specific question: I'll have to go back and follow up on that one.

**Ms Pancholi:** Okay. Thank you.

I'm going to hop back over to child intervention. The ministry has claimed it has implemented all except for one, which is ongoing, of the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention actions that were set out in the stronger, safer tomorrow plan. One of those long-term actions which was supposed to have been completed by this fiscal year, which means work should have been happening in the

2021 fiscal year, was a review of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, the act entirely. Why is this being listed as an action that's complete when that did not take place, a review of the act?

**Ms Wagner:** To your question, the act was reviewed as a result of the first ministerial panel, and the second ministerial panel is scheduled to be established in 2024.

**Ms Pancholi:** I'm glad to hear that there will be a second ministerial panel. That has not been clearly, publicly communicated up until now.

But, also, the action plan actually indicated that the act would be reviewed and it would come to a committee of the Legislature for review by 2022. That means that work should have been taking place during 2021. Now, I sit on a number of committees; I don't remember the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act coming before a committee of the Legislature for review.

**Ms Wagner:** The current legislation requires us to establish a panel in 2024.

**Ms Pancholi:** Sorry. I'm asking about the action plan, for which your ministry has indicated that all of the actions have been completed or implemented that came out of the stronger, safer tomorrow action plan. There were specific actions. I'm happy to provide you with a copy of the stronger, safer tomorrow action plan if you're not familiar with it already, but it actually includes a requirement that the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act be reviewed by 2022.

**Ms Wilson:** We have implemented 23 of the 26 recommendations of the MPCI, the ministerial panel, the recommendations that came out of that panel. I think we're going to have to take back your comments in regard to what was required to be done that potentially hasn't been done. We'll have to provide . . .

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you. I appreciate that. I think part of the confusion might have been that last year the ministry rewrote what the wording was of those recommendations in order to categorize a number of them as completed. I ask you to go back to the original action plan in the stronger, safer tomorrow plan and evaluate whether or not you actually completed those actions. I'll just flag that because that may be part of the reason for the confusion.

I wanted to ask about Indigenous children in kinship homes. Page 26 of the report indicates how many kinship homes and foster homes there are, but of the 5,834 Indigenous children in care in 2021, how many of them were actually in kinship homes as opposed to foster homes? So not the number of kinship homes but the number of children in those kinship homes.

**Ms Wilson:** I just need to look to see.

**Ms Pancholi:** If we run out of time, if you could table that information with the committee, that would be appreciated.

**Ms Wilson:** We have 32 per cent of children were in kinship care.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thirty-two per cent of Indigenous children?

**Ms Wilson:** Sorry. That's of all children. Apologies.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now move over to the government side for the final rotation.

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I would like to thank the office of the Auditor General for being with us today and the

representative officials of the children's ministry here. My question is on accessibility, increasing access, here. On page 19 I see that in 2021-2022 there were 152,000 licensed child care spaces, an increase of 9,000, or 6 per cent, from the previous year. This is a significant improvement from the targets shown in performance measure 1(a) on page 22 of zero per cent. It is also higher than the previous three years of between 4 and 5 per cent. During that time Children's Services invested \$10.3 million through 44 grants into creating 1,076 new licensed child care spaces, including 112 for overnight care, to meet the unique and diverse needs of Albertans that work nontraditional hours. Where in the province were these new spaces distributed?

**Ms Wilson:** Thank you very much for that question. The investments were targeted to communities with limited to no access to child care in areas of high demand, including to support families who need flexible child care outside of the traditional working hours. This resulted in spaces in communities such as Sherwood Park, with a young population, and located near industrial plants that offer 24/7 work schedules; Hinton, a community that supports oil and gas, forestry, and mining and construction industries; Fort McMurray, where many shift workers in energy and emergency services needed extended hours of care; Taber, where many manufacturing plants operate 24/7; and, of course, Rocky Mountain House as well, where many residents are employed at hospitals, RCMP, and other 24/7 services.

9:40

**Mr. Singh:** Thanks for the answer.

What has the province done to support the creation of more child care spaces in areas of need?

**Ms Wilson:** To help ensure that – there are a couple of things we're looking at. We're trying to ensure that we're not investing in areas in the province that don't have a need or that have sufficient or excess capacity already. I mentioned earlier the \$10.3 million that we provided to support child care space creation in the province. It was targeted to communities that had limited or no access. We very much looked at where there was limited capacity.

**Mr. Singh:** How beneficial have these additional spaces been, notably for overnight care for families?

**Ms Wilson:** All of the 1,076 spaces that have been created, including the 112 that have been opened to provide families with the overnight care options – access to high-quality child care we consider to be vital in supporting parents in getting back to work, so we're hoping that these additional spaces provide that accessibility that they're looking for.

**Mr. Singh:** Okay. Thank you.

Now I'll move it to supporting inclusion here. I was happy to read on page 20 of the report that in 2021-2022 Children's Services invested almost \$10 million into supporting 535 unique licensed child care programs for children with special needs. Please can you elaborate on the ways these child care programs were supported with this funding?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks very much. Having access to inclusive child care is important for families with children that have additional or unique needs. In '21-22 the ministry implemented a new provincial inclusive child care program to provide consistent and equitable services to licensed child care programs and family day home agencies across the province. The inclusive child care program assists child care programs and educators to build their capacity and

confidence to include children who have extra support needs, increase families' access to inclusive child care, and prevent the exclusion or removal of children from child care programs.

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you for the answer here.

Which programs received the greatest benefit from the support?

**Ms Wilson:** All children and licensed child care programs can benefit from the support. However, of course, the greatest benefit was to programs that previously had low enrolment of children with extra support needs and/or lacked the capacity to support those children. This is because the inclusive child care program assists all child care programs and educators to build capacity and confidence in providing and including children who have those extra support needs.

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you.

Now we'll move to investing in the child care workforce as it is important to Calgary-East's constituents. I see that the ministry's greatest asset is its staff. This is why it was wonderful to read on page 20 of this report that in March 2022 there were 32 per cent more early childhood educators working in licensed child care programs than in March 2021. This is also 5 per cent higher than in March 2020, before the pandemic. During this time the ministry invested \$115.7 million into the recruitment and retention of their valuable staff through wage top-ups and professional development. Can you please say: how effective was the ministry in 2021-2022 compared to previous years in recruiting, retaining, and developing the child care workforce?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks very much. Prior to the COVID pandemic, annual growth in certified early childhood educators averaged at about 5 per cent. In 2021 it was a challenging year for child care operators as they navigated through COVID-related closures and quarantines. With many parents continuing to work from home, fewer early childhood educators were required in licensed child care if we look at March '21 in particular. That's why in '21-22 Children's Services provided \$19.3 million in one-time federal funding from the bilateral agreement to licensed programs to help them cover costs related to training, onboarding, and hiring of staff. A total of just over 2,000 programs received the recovery and retention grant.

We also had the critical worker benefit, which I mentioned earlier. We expanded the critical worker benefit so that we could provide that benefit to child care support workers, which would have included cooks, cleaners, drivers, and other critical roles that are required to operate child care centres. That, just as a reminder, was a one-time payment of \$1,200 and reached about 382 eligible staff.

We also took steps in '21-22 to develop the child care workforce with more professional development opportunities. We increased the professional development funding for early childhood educators at all levels so that they could access the professional development that they required.

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you for answering my question. I appreciate the effort that's been done to invest and provide funding to important initiatives and programs that support the delivery of proper care for Alberta's children.

With that, I will cede my time to MLA Hunter.

**Mr. Hunter:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the members. One of the questions I have is found on page 32, and it's in regard to reconciliation by strengthening relationships with Indigenous communities, leaders, and organizations. This includes

their work through child and family service discussions as well as plans that have been developed with several communities, including the Stoney Nakoda-Tsuut'ina Tribal Council, the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Métis Nation of Alberta, and most recently with the letter of intent that was signed with the Enoch Cree Nation. Are there any other Indigenous communities that Children's Services are pursuing discussions with as well?

**Ms Wilson:** Thanks very much for the question. Our subtables with the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Stoney Nakoda-Tsuut'ina Tribal Council, and the Métis Nation of Alberta are part of larger agreements that the government of Alberta has through Indigenous Relations. The protocol agreements provide a framework for collaboration between the government of Alberta and First Nations. The subtables formed under those agreements allow for further collaboration with Children's Services and Indigenous communities in Alberta.

On the question about whether or not there are other Indigenous communities that we're pursuing discussions with, we also work outside of those formal tables directly with communities and organizations on other initiatives such as our Indigenous cultural understanding training as an example. When we developed the curriculum for that training, we actually worked very closely with First Nations because they are the experts in their own culture and ways of knowing, and we wanted them to help support that. We partnered with those communities and organizations to reflect that diversity. We also have an elder wisdom circle that provides advice and wisdom on our practice and policy. They represent a circle of a variety of nations, treaty areas, and Métis communities across the province.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We're now on our final rotation, which is that each side has three minutes to read questions into the record for written follow-up. Just a reminder to officials that any outstanding questions be responded to in writing within 30 days and forwarded to Warren Huffman, the committee clerk. That includes the commitments throughout the course of the question-and-answer period as well as the questions that are read into the record now.

With that, the Official Opposition. Three minutes.

**Ms Pancholi:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Page 35 of the annual report indicates that 2,844 regulatory requirements were reduced in the '21 fiscal year. Can the ministry please table with this committee a detailed breakdown of all 2,844 regulatory requirements that were reduced as well as the original number of 10,079 regulatory requirements that were identified in the business plan of 2021? A detailed breakdown of both of those, please, for the committee.

Can you please table for this committee a breakdown of the number of child apprehensions by region and DFNA that were done in 2021?

Page 42 of the annual report indicates that spending on child intervention was \$16.6 million less in 2021 because of staff vacancies. What was the staff vacancy rate at the beginning of the 2021 fiscal year and at the end of the fiscal year for the ministry? Please table that as well as a breakdown of vacancy rates for each region and DFNA.

I'm going to ask you again to follow up with the number of Indigenous children that are actually in kinship care homes.

Also, can you please table with this committee what evaluation metrics were put into place to determine what impact the \$19.3 million in the early childhood educator recovery and retention grant had on the workforce, what evaluation metrics, and how it is reflected that those dollars actually improved educator retention and recovery?

Lastly, clarification. If you can table it for this committee. Page 20 of the annual report references, and the deputy has repeatedly referenced, the 19,756 certified educators in March 2022. Can you confirm that all of those 19,756 were working and receiving wage top-up as of March 2022, and can you break those down by level 1, level 2, and level 3?

I believe that is it, Madam Chair.

9:50

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you.

Over to the government side. Member Hunter.

**Mr. Hunter:** Thank you. Our top priority is the safety and well-being of the children and youth in government care, so I'm glad to see that the ministry started a prompt investigation into every death or serious injury of a child, youth, or young adult who had received services. Can you expand on those steps as it's very important to make sure that those steps are clear?

That's all that I have, one question.

**Mr. Turton:** I have a question, Chair.

**The Chair:** Yes, please.

**Mr. Turton:** My question is: what steps is the province doing to protect children in light of the number of children that have passed away while in the province's care?

**The Chair:** Okay. Very good. Seeing no other items to read into the record, that's very good.

We'll now move on to other business. Ms Robert has a bit of a report for us for next week.

**Ms Robert:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Yes. I just wanted to let the committee know that we have been able to secure the services of ASL interpreters for next week's meeting with Seniors, Community and Social Services.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Very good. Our next meeting is December 20 with Seniors, Community and Social Services, where we will have under consideration the activities of that department and ministry for '21-22, so as it was constituted in '21-22.

Now I'll look to the floor for a motion to adjourn. Moved by Member Yaseen. All in favour? Any opposed? That is carried.

Thank you. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9:52 a.m.]







