

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 26, 2005**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 05/04/26

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we will call the committee to order. Before we proceed with the estimates before us, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly four wonderful teachers from the St. Albert Protestant separate school division. They have joined us in the public gallery this evening. It's very fitting for us to honour these guests during Education Week.

First of all, I would like to introduce Sarah Varghese. Mrs. Varghese was nominated by a parent in her school as one of the 15 teachers from across Canada to be chosen to receive the prestigious Prime Minister's award for teaching excellence. This award was in recognition of her innovations in the creation of an inclusive environment for students with diverse needs. Her reward is a \$5,000 award for her school, which I'm sure will be well spent. I would also take great pleasure in introducing three St. Albert teachers who have been chosen as finalists for the 2005 excellence in teaching awards. We're honoured to have these four in the gallery with us this evening.

One of these people is Mr. Ron Hansen. Unfortunately, he was not able to be with us this evening. I'd also like to introduce you to Percy Zalasky. Mr. Zalasky is a mathematics teacher at Paul Kane. Mr. Zalasky is being recognized for his ingenious approach to students, diligently and patiently working alongside students and helping them to learn. I'd also like to introduce Mr. Glenn Wilson. Mr. Wilson is a physical education specialist at Leo Nickerson elementary school in St. Albert. Mr. Wilson has a keen sense of the physical education philosophy and puts his philosophy into action. The final person I'd like to introduce is Mrs. Liane Zutz. Mrs. Zutz is a biology specialist teaching at Paul Kane high school in St. Albert. Mrs. Zutz has an excitement for her field that infects all of her students with a desire to learn. Would they please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Any other introductions? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group who is just walking in. They're grade 7 students, and they belong to the 395 squadron air cadets. I just had a picture taken with them. I stood in for my colleague for Edmonton-Calder. These young cadets are accompanied by Second Lieutenant Leonard, Flight Sergeant Campbell, Sergeant Egeto. Also, they're accompanied by parents Miss Dominique Smith, Mr. Andrew McLellan, and Mr. Eden Fehr. I would ask these cadets and the adults accompanying them, please, to rise now to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, due to a potential conflict of interest relevant to the item of business under consideration tonight, I will withdraw from the Chamber and ask that it be duly recorded.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: It shall be duly recorded.

head: **Main Estimates 2005-06**

Children's Services

The Deputy Chair: For the information of members in the gallery we are at the committee stage, which is much more informal than the proceedings of the Assembly, so you will see members moving around and maybe taking off their jackets. Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. This evening I am pleased to present the 2005-06 budget estimates for the Ministry of Children's Services. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge all the hard work done by some very talented, incredible staff from my office, my deputy's office, and staff from across this province. For this, I give them a big thank you, and I'm honoured to be their minister.

Mr. Chairman, our spending over the next few years reflects our continued commitment to an Alberta where children and youth are valued, nurtured, and loved, an Alberta where children and youth will reach their full potential through enduring relationships, healthy families, and safe communities.

The 2005-06 budget for Children's Services is \$798.6 million, up \$32 million from last year. The budget invests \$82.8 million towards caring for children with disabilities, \$28.8 million towards the prevention of family violence, \$14.7 million towards resources that support parents in giving their children a healthy start in life, and \$6.6 million towards stopping the sexual exploitation of children.

In 2005-06 regional CFSAs will receive \$592 million to help children reach their full potential. This includes grant funding of \$588.6 million from Children's Services and \$3.4 million of other revenue. This is \$18 million more than last year to deliver quality services for children, youth, and families across Alberta. This includes increases to continue implementing the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act and the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act. This CFSA funding is 74 per cent of the total ministry budget.

The cross-ministry strategy for the prevention of family violence and bullying has committed more than \$35 million over three years to implement its action plan. We will develop a new provincial response to family violence and bullying with improved protection and preventive services in our communities for children and their families who are impacted by family violence and bullying. We will do this with sustained and secure funding to women's shelters and for prevention activities. Our total commitment to prevent family violence in 2005-06 is \$28.8 million.

In October, Mr. Chairman, Alberta will host the 2005 World Conference on Prevention of Family Violence. At this conference we will learn from the latest programming and research on family violence prevention across this world and share the progress being made in Alberta.

Our budget does not include any dollars for new or expanded services related to the federal initiative on child care. We are participating in negotiations with the federal government, other provinces, and the territories on a new child care agreement. Should the federal budget pass, we anticipate receiving our share of new

federal funding for this initiative very soon. This year that amount will be \$70 million.

A \$3 million increase to the youth in transition program will give youths who are or have been in government care a helping hand with education and training. Family and community support services will receive a \$2 million increase this year to address population growth and cost-of-living increases. The government remains committed to the children and youth in this province. By 2007-08 funding will reach \$851.3 million, a three-year increase of \$84.7 million.

Over the next three years funding is allocated to three key areas under the core business of promoting the development and well-being of children, youth, and families. Approximately \$190.2 million of the total budget will be used for services that focus on young children. This includes family support for children with disabilities, early intervention, and child care. The ministry will continue to operationalize the new Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act with resources to help families meet the needs and promote the capabilities of children and youth with disabilities, helping them to reach their potential.

Spending to prevent family violence and bullying will increase to \$33 million by 2007-08. With planned spending of approximately \$32 million to 2007-08, the ministry will continue to develop community-based parent link centres and other programs to assist parents in giving children a healthy start.

8:10

Funding for the family and community support services program will increase by \$5.4 million to approximately \$69 million by '07-08. Through this program we'll support families so that vulnerable children are kept from entering the child intervention system. Under the core business of keeping children, youth, and families safe and protected, 56 per cent of the total ministry budget will be spent on child intervention services, protecting children from sexual exploitation, foster parents, maintenance rate increases, and contracted agencies' salary costs.

The ministry will continue to implement the new Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act. We will act on the recommendations to the foster care review by focusing on the training needs of foster parents, kinship care providers, adoptive parents, and those seeking private guardianship. In partnership with First Nation communities we'll explore ways to achieve permanency for aboriginal children and youth.

The ministry will redesign the protecting children from sexual exploitation program to focus on prevention, awareness, and treatment services. We will increase educational activities for children and youth at risk of sexual exploitation through prostitution, Internet luring, and child pornography. In fact, on May 18 at 9 p.m. we will be presenting a TV broadcast on Access TV to educate parents on safe Internet practices for their children.

We will further develop the role of the Child and Youth Advocate to ensure that children in the system are heard and their rights are protected.

Finally, under the core business of promoting healthy communities for children, youth, and families, we will provide \$12.7 million for community-based activities and initiatives for children, youth, and families. Total planned spending will reach \$38 million in '07-08. We will provide \$975,000 per year to attract greater private support of Alberta's Promise, and the Alberta Centre for Child, Family & Community Research will receive \$2 million per year to support applied research on issues affecting children and families.

The ministry faces significant opportunities and challenges that we consider when developing initiatives and strategies. For instance, the aboriginal population in Alberta is growing quickly,

and the aboriginal population is much younger than the general population. Aboriginals have a high representation in the ministry's child intervention caseload, and aboriginal children at risk are more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than nonaboriginal children. However, there are opportunities for us to partner with First Nation and Métis settlements and organizations to provide effective child intervention services.

Trends in family violence are demanding more space in women's shelters. That's why we've made recent investment towards services and support for victims of family violence. We will be providing stable funding to 489 women's shelter beds. We will expand community-based prevention and outreach programs. We are developing safe visitation and access sites, and we are launching a public awareness and education campaign for bullying prevention and intervention strategies.

We also have significant opportunities to develop strategies to reduce the potential for youth to be at risk. This includes, Mr. Chairman, providing support to children at risk of sexual exploitation and helping young people successfully become independent through things like the advancing futures bursary program.

I'd now like to ask the MLA for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, who is chair of the Youth Secretariat, and then the MLA for Calgary-Hays, who is chair of the Social Care Facilities Review Committee, to please update what we are doing. After they speak, Mr. Chairman, I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the minister is ceding part of her time for the chairman of the Youth Secretariat. The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Minister. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and speak on the roles and the importance of the Youth Secretariat. I want to emphasize – and we have youth in our Assembly today – that youth are our future. I know it's a cliché, but I want very much to re-emphasize that youth are our future, and it is very important to know and to realize how knowledgeable, how intelligent, how resourceful and resilient youth are. They are very much the assistants to the decisions that we make.

The Youth Secretariat works with stakeholders, but I want to emphasize that the main stakeholder for the Youth Secretariat is the youth. Youth in our province, in our country today are very much challenged and, I would say, at times enticed by different attractions, by different opportunities, and not all of them are positive. But I will say that it is the youth in this province that are also part of the solution, part of the help, and part of the willingness to transfer and to transform some of the direction that is taking place. They are the experts, and we need to listen. They are and have the solution. They need some support and resources as long as we give them some opportunity.

The Youth Secretariat's role is to talk with the youth to involve them in the decision-making and to get their input in the decision-making that affects them. Earlier this month we had a meeting, and we heard from a number of youth. Their presentation had to do with the drug issue dialogue. These are youth that were addicts. These are youth that were involved in the high use of drugs. They had been clean for a number of years, and they were there to help with the solutions. In May at the Children's Forum we heard from youth again – the forum dealt with bullying and violence – and their aspect and their presentation. Youth will also have another opportunity to get involved during a feedback weekend this summer.

I want to stress to you again the importance of decision-making and the importance that the youth bring to us and that we need to

listen. Today's age is going very quickly, and when we as legislators now maybe look at 20 years ago, it's a different situation, and it's a different direction. It's very important that we have the involvement of youth who are experiencing the challenges of today.

When we talk about speaking to youth, yes, I very much emphasize the importance of speaking to them, of involving them on what affects them, but most of all, we need to listen. We need to listen to what they have to say, and we as legislators are the vehicle to bring forward their ideas into something that is going to be fruitful. I want to make sure that the Youth Secretariat and ourselves as legislators are making the right decisions for youth that will help Alberta grow and help the youth grow with it.

I would also like to say that through the Youth Secretariat we will continue the Youth Advisory Panel. That is a forum where we have youth that come from all over the province and provide insight into what they feel some of the issues are. We can talk about crystal meth. We can talk about all sorts of different issues, but the Youth Advisory Panel is an opportunity again for youth from the province to come collectively and provide us their experiences, their challenges, and for us to take that message and bring it to the legislators and bring it to a direction that is going to be positive not only for them but for this province.

Again, thank you very much, Madam Minister, for giving me the opportunity, and thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the minister is also ceding the balance of the time to the chair of the Social Care Facilities Review Committee.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

8:20

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister. Just before I get to the Social Care Facilities Review Committee, I'll just give you my background. I was on the Social Care Facilities Review Committee for two years, and I was last involved until April 2004, so approximately two years.

There are approximately 4,000 facilities under the jurisdiction of the Social Care Facilities Review Committee. These include day cares, nursery schools, out-of-school care facilities, foster homes, child and youth social care facilities, and women's emergency shelters. As the eyes and ears of the hon. Minister of Children's Services, we review those social care facilities and investigate any complaints against them. Our committee conducts 225 reviews each year. A review involves meeting with the service recipients, their families and guardians, and staff. We hear about the services they provided and whether or not the clients were satisfied. This year our members will visit facilities in four of the nine CFSA regions, and those are Calgary and area, central Alberta, east-central Alberta, and Edmonton and area.

If I didn't indicate, I'm now the chair of that Social Care Facilities Review Committee. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I struggled to deal with the wealth of data in these estimates, I found myself wishing there was contour and relief to the landscape to help bring some sense to the statistics. As I pondered this problem and shared it with colleagues, it suddenly dawned that this was the dilemma: how does one discover and deal with the reality of human lives in a statistical context?

I'm reminded of a parallel predicament faced by the federal government years ago in reporting unemployment statistics. Its

measuring tool was the number of EI claims. They were called UI then. At any one moment they would give the statistics for UI. It was assumed that once an unemployment insurance file was closed, that person was no longer unemployed. In reality, Mr. Chairman, it simply meant that the person was no longer drawing UI. Perhaps their period of benefits had run out. Perhaps they had run afoul of one or more rules of the program, failing to fill out their cards properly or to report sufficient progress in trying to find a job. Perhaps they had become discouraged and simply stopped trying.

In any case, Mr. Chairman, we would never know because those persons – for that is what they are and not simply statistics – had fallen off the radar screen of the federal government's reporting system. We assumed that they were no longer unemployed, but we had no right to that assumption. Some other means of measurement was needed than participation in a single program if we were to have the truth.

One of the most pressing needs of our time is for a qualitative perspective. We have become very good at statistics, so good that we often ignore issues that do not lend themselves to the mode of measurement. In the case of children's and other social services we have adopted the mode of the business plan. What does that mean? Let us listen to the word as it was once spoken and as it is still spelled, with an "i" or a "y" in the middle: business or busyness, or activity.

A business plan deals only with the level of activity according to some predetermined indicators such as files opening, closing, or transferred, expenditures in a particular program and in a certain column. A business plan does not tell us about children's lives, the quality of those lives, their hopes, dreams, and disappointments. For these we must look deeper than sheer statistics. The problem, Mr. Chairman, is not in the money we spend but in our minds, with which we see and make sense of the issues and try to figure out the figures.

Yet even in limited statistical terms there is an indication that the business plan approach is missing something. That clue is the number and size of supplementary estimates. I do not begrudge these figures, Mr. Chairman. I doubt if any feeling person does. They reflect a reality of children's lives, a reality we need to know more about. The fact that they show up as supplementaries is a sign that our planning is missing something.

As I considered the budget for Children's Services, I learned about the changes as a result of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act. Under the Child Welfare Act and the previous model a file could be opened under CWA as assessment for 30 days, and this could be extended for a further 30 days if needed before formal voluntary or involuntary services. This no longer occurs. I'm not sure of the process, but I believe files are now opened under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act under enhancement or intervention. If under enhancement, there is initial assessment or extended assessment and/or a family enhancement agreement, which I think is similar to the old support agreement.

Under the new act children who need secure services can be opened under a family enhancement agreement if parents consent to secure services. Prior to the new act a TGO, temporary guardianship order, was needed for secure services. Changes in the act and different terms make comparisons from year to year very difficult. It's essential that the statistics used are clear in the scope they cover and that consistent definitions are used.

I have some questions to help me understand what the numbers in the business plan for 2004-2007 mean. Perhaps the minister can try to answer some of these when I finish. There may be far too many here for you to answer tonight, I understand. Are the above statuses – initial assessment, extended assessment, secure services – included

in the enhancement services statistics, the 85 per cent? If they did include enhancement, initial assessment, and extended assessment and secure services with parental consent, then the baseline statistics need to include the previous 30-day assessments, support agreements, and any secure services with guardian's consent.

Also, do enhancement statistics include or exclude families who were open more than once under enhancement? Are there any statistics for families that come to the attention of Children's Services after enhancement files are closed or while files are still open? What is in place to determine efficacy of the Alberta response model? Are you doing any preimposed Alberta response model program evaluations?

Enhancement agreement with youth should include youth under care. Custody agreement with child was the term used previously. Are those agreements included in the enhancement statistics?

I would like to present some general questions before I go into specifics about the budget. I realize that some of these questions may require more thought, and perhaps I can get them in writing later, but I present them now at least as food for thought. I am concerned about the uncertainty of revenue for youth shelters. At present they do not qualify under FCSS because they are not preventative. Contracting and grant funding are not enough. Are there plans to change this so there will be predictable, sustainable, and stable funding to youth shelters?

Another grave concern of mine is that foster parents are not paid enough, and we need assessments that are thorough to help place children with families where they will fit best. Assessments need to be up front to make decisions about appropriate placement services and work with schools. Appropriate placements can be preventative and can enhance the opportunity to meet the goals of Children's Services. Are there any plans to help establish more funding for foster parents and plans for a placement model that will serve the best interests of all children?

Children's Services, schools, Justice, and AADAC need to work in partnership to do what is best for families and children. As other areas are cut back and if the cutbacks involve families, Children's Services generally has to pick up the slack because in the end it is this department that is responsible for the safety and security of children. We hear from parents who are caught in the system between the education department, health, Children's Services, and local school boards. Is the cross-ministry initiative working? Is there a one-stop place for a person to go so that this bouncing from ministry to ministry can stop and parents can get the services that we all know these youngsters deserve?

I quote the minister from 2004-2005: "Alberta has a Children's Services ministry that strives to nurture, cherish, provide homes for children in need and provide opportunities for families to feel supported no matter what their circumstances." This is a tremendous mandate and an honourable one. It causes me to wonder about the need for supplementary budgets. Why are we underfunding in the regular budgets? The supplemental budget for foster parents maintenance was \$4 million. I wonder if this is even enough. Why was it not included in the original budget? What do we have to do to avoid the need for supplemental budgets?

8:30

Another supplemental item was for the \$2.5 million needed to implement the family violence and bullying incentive grants. I believe that this is a very worthwhile project and wonder again why this extra need was not forecast with the original budget.

I have to ask the same about the \$3.6 million added for the implementation of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act. I realize that some of this went to the development of transitional

plans for children and the costs for providing intervention services, including the retraining of front-line delivery staff. Could this have not been predicted earlier?

I know that this is often an unpredictable business, such as the extra dollars needed for the networking of the parent link centres, but I believe we should be working towards a goal of eliminating the need for supplemental budgets so that we get a truer picture of needs when the original budget is presented. Predictable funding is essential for the health of any organization.

I have a serious concern about the decrease in the number of subsidy applications for child care. I have heard from parents who lost benefits because of criteria changes, parents who still need help but no longer qualify. I'll quote from one of the letters.

Back in August of last year, they arbitrarily changed the rules so that subsidy would be based on gross income, not net income. This sounds ok at the outset, however, for single parents who are in positions like myself (lower paid secretaries . . .) it was devastating. I have no control over mandatory deductions the government takes from my pay, and in the past, the daycare subsidy office would take this into account when determining my subsidy. They no longer do this. For example, my gross salary is \$3,092 a month, however, I only take home a net salary of \$2,001 a month. After rent, daycare, food, utilities, clothing, etc, there is literally nothing left. To lose my subsidy has left me in a precarious position . . . There are a lot of parents who did not "choose" to leave the subsidy system, and a lot of us who were hoping and praying that this federal program would come through [quickly].

How can we be certain that we are really providing choice in these cases?

I'm looking now at child care and early childhood development. The increase to child care money is less than \$1 million over the previous year's budget. There have been many issues with quality of care in Alberta, specifically in daycares and family day home facilities. I'm referring to page 64 of the government and lottery estimates.

In a press release on April 21 we learned that the province is seeking public input on child care programs.

Alberta's negotiations with the federal government on a national child care program have gone well from our perspective, and we're ready to go forward once we have finalized key details relating to an agreement . . . To be prepared, we want to hear what's important to families in terms of caring for children, whether parents choose to go to work, go to school or stay at home. We're also interested in knowing what's working well now and what improvements are needed in the future.

This is encouraging news, and I commend the decision to listen to Albertans. However, I do have some concerns about this consultation process on child care. If there's no provision for representative balanced responses – that is, a proper sample – this can become an exercise in propaganda. I hope that this is not the case and that we will have integrity as we consider what needs to be changed.

Alberta's regulations for infant care require fewer staff than some provinces, and enforcement of compliance with regulations is problematic. Accreditation is a step in the right direction, but our daycare centres are underfunded. Staff are often poorly trained, and there is no incentive for training as the pay is so low.

How much money is this survey on child care announced on April 21 costing this ministry? What money is going to inspect daycare facilities and family day homes? We had the concerns this year about children being left behind here in Edmonton. How much of the money going into child care will raise wages of daycare workers? I believe we must start an effort to promote work in daycares. This means that we must provide adequate pay and subsidized training to improve care and provide incentives to attract

people and to keep them in this very important role. What are the plans for monitoring unlicensed care providers? Government oversight is essential as a check.

Another quote from the survey:

The Alberta government is committed to helping children and families get the best possible start in life by supporting families and communities with comprehensive programs that ensure parents have choice and flexibility in their child care decisions.

Would you please explain what you mean by choice? What do you see included as options for parents? With so few announced dollars will there be any change to the availability of child care subsidies to parents? What are the next steps in working with the federal government to get some of the \$5 billion announced in the national daycare plan?

Another area of concern, as I mentioned earlier, is related to youth shelters. Youth shelters have no source of stable funding other than grants they get from year to year, and that is not enough. The province has announced a review into this, but why do we have to wait for a review when all the agencies have been asking for the same thing that horse racing gets, which is steady, sustainable funding from year to year? Why is there a set amount for women's shelters, on page 62, government and lottery fund estimates, section 3.3.1, but not a set amount for youth shelters?

I quote from the minister's comments in *Hansard* for the 2004-2005 budget.

My understanding is that the funding is very piecemeal and their administrators end up spending a lot of time trying to figure out which different grant program to apply to this year to try and get them up to the level of funding they need to operate.

Does this government have a plan for youth shelters and how they are funded?

We know the welfare of children is strongly linked to their nonoffending parent's safety and emotional well-being. Thus, there must be attention paid to secure shelters for women who are abused. I know of an instance where an investigator had to return a woman who was pregnant and had been beaten by her common-law and then given crack back to the home where this man still lived. The woman believed she was not safe anywhere because this man would find her, as he had on previous occasions when she'd been placed in a shelter. What do we need to do to ensure safety and security for women such as these and their families?

I reviewed the Alberta shelter statistics from 2002, information from the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters released by the office for the prevention of family violence. In 2002 woman sheltered, 5,194; children sheltered, 5,546; women turned away, 8,443; children turned away, 9,017. This is a tragedy. What part of the Children's Services budget addresses this tremendous need?

8:40

As I look at child intervention services, there is a \$20 million increase over the previous year's budget amount assigned to child intervention services, but this is only a \$2 million increase over last year's forecast. Page 64 of the budget. The regions have required supplementary money for funding to perform these tasks. Can we get a breakdown of what programs the \$401 million will be funding? By programs I mean how much goes to agencies, to government social workers, to directors of child welfare, and the courts process? How much is spent on hiring teams to investigate the programs in agencies? Goal 3.3 on page 153 of the ministry's business plan clearly states that permanency planning for kids in care is an important goal of this ministry. What programs are going to be introduced to ensure that the workers and agencies that care for these children are going to have the stable funding required to provide that environment?

I believe this is a good-news budget, but there is much more to be done. It is good that money is going to more beds and shelters for youth. We have been at a crisis level for so long, and caseworkers have been overloaded and without adequate supports. The current minister and deputy minister are demonstrating a better understanding of and perhaps closer connections with the department. Now that we are investing more money, there must be judicious planning.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Many, many questions coming from the opposition and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. I was trying to keep up with her, but as she said, she had a lot of questions. We will as in the past be pleased to answer her questions by letter, but I'm going to try and start with some of them.

She started off talking about the statistics and stats. I can tell her that under the new legislation of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act one of the goals is to enhance the quality assurance system to improve the quality, the consistency, and the accountability of child protection across this province. I can also tell her, in my short tenure as minister, about the incredible information that's contained in the case files that we receive on my desk on a daily basis.

While I don't disagree with her on follow-throughs, I can give her some personal history of some things that I found when I was dealing with the protection of children involved in prostitution. I was very eager, wanting to find out what was happening after we apprehended children, and was particularly involved in one very, very sad case where we brought a child back from Vancouver and met her at the airport with her mom and dad. The little girl got off the airplane in her working clothes, street clothes. We got her in there, got her into one of our protective safe houses, and from there she entered drug and alcohol treatment in Calgary by the name of AARC.

I went to her graduation after she graduated from that particular program and with an enquiring mind decided at one time that, gee, I wanted to find out how this young child was doing. I guess maybe because of my personal involvement and because sometimes your heart leads before your brain, I phoned the parents. I wanted to know how their daughter was doing. He politely said to me: "Heather, we're moving on. We've gone through a very, very difficult period in our life. She claims she's sober, and we're moving on as a family and closing that part."

So, you know, when we have some people entering our system – and we have had some horrific cases but have had a lot of very, very successful cases – to follow through when they're moving on with their lives and they want to get off the paths where they've been receiving support services from the department, we appreciate that. But we do know when we've opened cases, when we've re-opened cases: all documented very, very well. Some of the money that we've asked for in our budget is for technology, just trying to incorporate all of the paper copy into the new system of the computerized world so that we can I guess make it easier for the people who work out in the province, trying to do these stats and keep up with these families that sometimes tend to move around.

I can assure her, though, that we do keep incredible stats. I can tell you how many times we've had interventions, how many times we've dealt with a particular child. In my mind very, very good stats, hon. member.

You touched on youth shelters a couple of times, and you also toward the end of your comments talked about the fact that, yes,

they're being reviewed. You know, you asked me this particular question in question period about a youth emergency shelter. To this day, to this hour, at a quarter to 9 I have not heard from them. I have not had a phone call from them. I indicated to you when I answered that particular question that I'd be pleased to sit down and talk with you. I'd be pleased to sit down with the shelter. I have not heard from any of the shelters in this province except for one in Grande Prairie on youth shelters.

Some Hon. Members: That's the one.

Mrs. Forsyth: Different one? Same one? Sorry.

Anyhow, if you're talking about the youth shelter in Edmonton, I can tell you that I haven't heard from them, but I have heard from a shelter in Grande Prairie, and we're working with them on that.

The foster parents, yes, we're working with them on increasing their funding and have been working very closely with the Alberta Foster Parent Association and the president, Norm Brownell. They do a remarkable job in this province, and we're very, very appreciative of all the work they do.

You talked and asked about the cross-government ministry. We've had some very, very successful cross-government ministries. I'm very proud of what this government is doing. I think that when you were talking, you indicated about Health talking to AADAC and AADAC talking to Justice or the Solicitor General or even Children's Services. I think what you saw recently with Bill 201 and the private member's bill and the government getting treatment centres shows that we've had some incredibly successful cross-government ministries. I can allude to the family violence initiative and the round-tables and the cross-government ministry and the buy-in from all the different departments on that.

You asked about supplementary estimates and why. You know, I don't have a problem when I'm dealing with supplementary estimates and a particular region comes to me on the child authorities and says: you know, we don't have enough money; we need to get some more money. If we have to go back because they've got a huge, increased caseload in regard to the population that they're serving, which is our children or families in this province, then it's difficult to try and judge.

You spent a lot of time talking about child care and about the daycares and the funding. I have to tell you that I'm very, very proud of what this province has done. It has been watched across Canada in regard to the daycares that we have in place, the accreditation program that we have in place. In fact, I had the federal minister here several months ago to look at our accreditation program, went out and talked to the people who are setting up and establishing the standards and strengthening the best practices within the accreditation program.

We have a huge percentage of success in the '90s for daycares coming to us to talk about the accreditation program. It's a program that is the first in Canada. It's going to address the issues that you asked about. That's staff recruitment and the retention of the child care sector. I'd be pleased to show you that, let you meet some of the people that are working on the accreditation program. It even surprised the people in the accreditation program. We had to hire extra staff because of the overwhelming response from the daycares in this province signing up to be accredited daycares.

You also talked about where we are in the negotiations with the national daycare program. I can tell you that we're cautiously optimistic. I can tell you that I had a verbal agreement on all of the issues that Alberta wanted addressed from the federal/provincial/territorial meeting in January from the federal minister. I have sent him two letters since then asking him for confirmation. I would

encourage you to write him. Tell him that you would appreciate him responding to the letters that Alberta has sent.

We have been very pleased with the progress that we're making, and we'll continue trying to sign the agreement. As I explained, we had a verbal commitment from the federal minister a few weeks ago. We have sent two letters since then asking him for written confirmation. My understanding from talking to Minister Dryden is that at that period in time there was some negotiating going on with the Northwest Territories and Prince Edward Island on base funding, plus around his own cabinet table about the French language issue. So we're waiting. No deal has been signed yet, but we've placed a call to him, and hopefully we'll move forward on that: \$70 million for sure to Alberta.

8:50

When you talked about the online survey – and I stand to be corrected, but I will tell you that I think it was approximately \$2,000. For us it was important even though I have received hundreds and hundreds of letters in regard to this issue about what parents see as choice. They have told me over and over again that they want a choice of daycare system whether it's for-profit, whether it's nonprofit, or whether it's kinder-care.

An incredible amount of response in regard to stay-home taxes. I can tell you that when I brought that up to the federal minister, he said at that particular time that that wasn't part of the negotiations. That was not on the table. But parents have continually told us, even when I appeared on *Rutherford* today, that they want the choice to be able to choose what's in the best interest of their children.

I was somewhat dismayed at the very end of your conversation when you talked about the fact that you know of a particular case where a woman was returned to her home. I can only say to you that when you come across incidents like that, I beg of you, for the woman that you're referring to, to call our office. It's important that we're aware of this. It's important that we know. We will do everything in our power to help if there is a situation.

I am told over and over again that no woman who is in a crisis situation is turned away from a shelter. If there's not room in the shelter, then we make other accommodations, whether we put them into a motel, into a secure environment, but if they're in a crisis situation, hon. member, my understanding from talking to the shelters is that they're never turned away. If they're thinking about leaving, then there are other things that they'll do. They'll talk to them. They'll talk about other ways that they can deal with that particular issue. If they're running and they're accessing a shelter, then they're never turned away. We will put them into a motel or something.

I know I haven't answered all your questions, and I apologize for that. We've got another hour and 10 minutes, and I know other members will probably want to ask questions, so I'd be pleased to try and get all of your questions answered.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you very much. I know that there's a lot of information that we're dealing with here. I know that we've got a very good system, but I don't think that we should ever stop trying to stretch beyond our own shadows. We can do better.

The points about accreditation are good. I'm glad to hear about the desire of many agencies to be accredited. I'm still concerned about the compliance with regulations and so forth.

The last part about the woman who was returned to the home that wasn't safe: the concern there was not that there weren't spaces but that there wasn't safety. How do we protect these people? I'm not

expecting you to answer that right now, but the problem is bigger than just having the space available.

As I do not want to continue talking for a long time, and I've got other members who want to talk, I do want to just – I think there was one point you made if I can just look back here for a minute. I guess what I'd like to do is request that we get any written responses before we vote on the budget. Is that possible? Can you do that?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, the discussion should go through the chair.

Mrs. Mather: I'm sorry. Okay. Thank you.

Can we get the written responses before we need to vote on the budget, Mr. Chairman?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, the matter is before the committee, and the committee at the end of the day will vote, and the committee can decide whether they want to vote or not vote or reject or accept. The chair will follow the instruction of the committee.

Mrs. Mather: I'm just asking, Mr. Chairman, if we can get written responses as soon as possible so that when we vote on the entire budget, we've got that information.

The Deputy Chair: The chair cannot assure that. I don't know if the minister wants to make a remark to that effect.

Mrs. Forsyth: My understanding, Mr. Chairman – and I'm at the will of the table, obviously – from my past experience in this Legislature is that we have a call for the vote on the budget at 10 o'clock. If it's the will of the people around here, they'll ask for a call for the vote, and if the vote passes, then it does. If it doesn't, then obviously – I will give my commitment to the member that we will respond, as we have in the past, to the questions that she asks by writing, but I can't possibly within the next hour.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, did you want to speak on this matter?

Mr. Taylor: Yes, Mr. Chairman, on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods. I don't believe that she is asking for written answers within the next 63 minutes; rather, she is asking if we can have the answers to her question in writing before we go to appropriations for the budget itself. That would be the request that she has put on the table.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, just for the clarification of every member in the Assembly, at this committee stage anybody can participate in asking as many questions as they choose. I am not so sure if there is an obligation on the minister to provide answers to every single question, but by and large I believe most ministers make an effort to respond either directly on the floor or by follow-through with a written response.

Does the Minister for Children's Services want to make any comments about this request?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Chairman, if I may. We will endeavour to provide as much as we can as far as written answers to all of the questions the hon. member has. She knows from past experience that when we've debated other things on this floor, we have gotten back to both her and the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in writing.

There is an incredible amount of questions coming from the opposition at this particular time, and I've just dealt with one member. I have an incredibly busy ministry, but I will do whatever I can to answer as many questions as I can before the budget. Some of the questions that the particular member is asking are even difficult questions for me to answer; for example, when she talks about the stats and the outcomes, how she started at the beginning. So some of these things may not be physically able to be answered. The questions that she's asked that went point-blank to the budget about the supplementary estimates, when she's asked about the, you know, increases or decreases in the budget, we will do whatever we can to answer.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I will now recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and make a few observations on the budget for the Ministry of Children's Services. This is, in my view, one of the most important ministries. The ministry deals with children, families, and I know that the minister has very strong commitments to strengthening our families, supporting them, and providing services to our children that they need.

I am assuming that the minister knows that child care services in Canada, particularly daycare services for Canadian children, don't rate very high among the OECD countries. With the exception of Quebec the child care services, particularly the daycare services for children, are judged by OECD experts to be seriously deficient. Alberta falls in that category of provinces that provide patchwork services that are not properly funded, services that are not available to families that will want to use them, take advantage of them.

9:00

There was a hope over the last six months or so that the provincial governments and the federal government will get together, and with the new commitments that the federal government was making with respect to children's services, daycare services in particular, provinces will receive new funds which they would then use in co-operation with each other to provide high-quality daycare services, quality that would be measured with reference to some sort of national standards, not federal – I must clarify this – and the services would be provided in daycare centres that are primarily there to provide quality services and not there to operate in order, primarily, to maximize their returns on their investment. In other words, these services would be provided in nonprofit centres that will be funded adequately by the two levels of government, federal and provincial.

Secondly, these services would be universally available. They will not be denied to families which don't make the cut, as it were, that the government of Alberta's practice currently is, to provide subsidy to parents, not to daycares anyway, whose incomes fall below a certain level. That's not universality. Children in this province and children in Canada deserve an opportunity to take advantage of child care services that are universally available, and these services should be paid through taxes.

The federal government, it seems, was willing to go ahead and provide some funds, and according to my numbers Alberta would have received as much as a hundred million dollars from this federal budget if that budget were to pass and if the province were to move ahead and co-operate with other levels of government and with other provinces on agreeing to establish some national standards – the provinces together would establish those standards – and to provide these services, properly accredited, appropriately staffed with qualified staff who are adequately paid to provide quality services for our children.

Any expert that you talk to who has done work on child care or on early childhood development tells you that any money spent on quality child care and early childhood development and education is a return manyfold later on. So it's an investment worth making. If we were to look at it purely from the economic returns point of view – and I'm sure that all of us agree that there's more to it than just economic returns when you think about children. Children's welfare is far more important than merely the economic returns. Even in terms of the narrow criteria of economic returns money spent on early child care is money well invested, yet I find that there are rumblings around that the Alberta government may in fact be having some second thoughts on co-operating with other provincial governments and working with the federal government to use the opportunity to work together, to work collaboratively, to get extra resources to improve the child care services in this province.

Mr. Chairman, if you look at the past five provincial budgets for child care, you see that the Alberta funding for child care has not even kept pace with inflation and with population growth. We spent less than one-quarter of 1 per cent of government revenues annually on child care and only about \$3.22 per capita of our personal income tax and \$1.63 per person of our corporate income tax on children's services in this province.

It certainly raises some questions about the priorities that this government has and how high the early development and education of children figure in that list of priorities of this government. Looking at the record of funding for these services, it seems to me that it enjoys a very, very low priority on the government's list of priorities, yet I think it is here in this group of our population, the young children, our children who are our future of tomorrow – they are the ones in whose future we should be investing and investing far more adequately than has been the case.

I have some concerns with the politics on child care that, according to the statements that I've been reading in the press, statements coming from the federal Conservative Party, suggest that the provincial government of Alberta is playing along with the federal Conservative Party to delay signing on to the national daycare program. I have a quote here, Mr. Chairman: "It looks to us like the Klein government is going to play along with the federal conservative party and delay signing on to the national child care program while they consult Albertans." Mr. Harper, the leader of the federal Conservative Party, in a speech to the Cambridge, Ontario, Chamber of Commerce earlier this week said, "The Conservatives don't support a national child care system that will drive taxes up so high that young couples won't be able to afford to have children."

Now, I want to ask the minister if the minister supports Mr. Harper's observation that spending money and investing in our children somehow will run us bankrupt, run families bankrupt, and in fact will lead to such high taxes that families will be dissuaded from having children. This is a position, certainly, that the federal Conservative leader has taken, and I wonder if the minister wants to comment on this.

9:10

In fact, I would hope that she would reject the position taken by the federal Conservative leader and urge him to help the federal government at least pass the budget, which makes a commitment towards our children which is quite substantial. The province of Alberta will benefit to the tune of a hundred million dollars this year if that budget were to pass. The government of Alberta spends about \$70 million on children's services, on child care in particular, and imagine with another hundred million dollars added to it how many more resources there would be at our disposal if we were to see that budget pass. So I would urge the minister to take an initiative on

that and tell this House that she is going to write to the leaders of all the federal parties and urge them to pass this federal budget, which, in my view, makes some very important and promising commitments to provide the daycare services that children in Canada and Alberta so badly need.

Mr. Chairman, I have another question here, but let me go back and conclude my observations on the federal undertaking or promise in the budget that it's made to provide new funds to provincial and territorial governments were all of them to agree on some sort of national program on child care. The Children's Services budget, that we're discussing, does not include any provision for new or expanded services related to the new federal initiative on child care. What's the minister's position? If tomorrow the federal budget were to pass, where are the provisions made in the budget for the minister to be able to set forth a new set of programs or policies that will help improve the quality of child care services and the availability of quality child care services to parents in this province?

Another question that I have here for the minister to address, Mr. Chairman. The minister probably is aware of the KPMG study that did a sort of forensic accounting study of the child care services in the province, daycare services, facilities in 2002. It was entitled, I think, Supporting Day Care Professionals: Issues and Options. That study found that a subsidy for low-income Albertans paid for about one-quarter of its own costs directly by offsetting welfare costs, yet the maximum daycare subsidy available for low-income Albertans is \$475 for youngsters ages zero to 18 months, the beginning of life to 18 months, and \$380 for children 19 months and older. Given that daycare can cost up to \$880 a month, this subsidy is not nearly enough. If there were greater supports available to low-income Albertans, the benefits could be tremendous. Also, I think the vacant child care places – and there are thousands in the province – would be filled. I know that one of the answers that I've got from the minister's department as to why it's not investing more in increasing the number of spaces available for daycare in this province came in the form saying: well, we already have lots of vacancies; Albertans are not using the spaces that are available.

We've got to get to the bottom of this statement that was made, Mr. Chairman, to see why it is that daycare spaces that are available in the province are not being used, not being filled when in fact we know that 70 to 75 per cent of parents with very young children are participating in the labour force, and they have children that need care when they themselves are at work, and 70 to 75 per cent of the parents who are working want to have their children in daycares which are appropriately funded, appropriately staffed, are safe places, and where children not only can be babysat but can in fact learn and engage in early childhood development programs, daycares that are not only properly funded but are staffed with people who are appropriately educated and trained.

So why is it, then, that these spaces in the thousands, I think, go unused? I think the answer, Mr. Chairman, is very clear to me, and the minister may have some information on it that she would like to advise me of. It is that the government's policy of funding low-income parents only leaves lots of parents and families, hard-working families, in a situation where they don't qualify to receive the subsidy that they need in order for them to be able to afford to put their children in child care centres or daycare centres.

Now, the minister may have information that contradicts the information that I am aware of, and if so, I am sure she would like to share that information with the House and with me. So I'll sit down, let her answer two or three questions that were raised, and then I'll come back to ask some more.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and again try and answer some questions from the member of the opposition. He has spent a fair amount of time talking about the daycares, and I had thought or hoped I'd addressed some of those issues to the member previously, but I will endeavour to try and address some of his questions.

He started off talking about daycares not rating very high except in Quebec. I would like to let the hon. member know that this year in the budget we have worked very, very hard to deal with programs and to focus on the design and the implementation of daycare centre accreditation systems to achieve what we consider three goals. One is to raise the standard of care in the province and improve the best practices in daycare centres and family day homes. The second one is to support families through the provision and identification of higher quality care. The third is supporting child care programs and working towards achieving accreditation standards of high quality.

I want to emphasize to the hon. member again that this is a first in Canada. It's been very, very successful. We had the federal minister here – I believe it was in January – to look at the accreditation. He went and visited with some of our accreditation people and was very, very interested in what we were doing. The Alberta child care accreditation program establishes standards of quality and strengthens best practices in early learning and child care programs across Alberta. The accreditation will support families through the identification and provision of higher quality services.

Daycare centres that attain preaccreditation status will be awarded quality improvement funds, of which a minimum of 80 per cent must be directed to child care staff certification. The remaining funds must be directed towards ongoing quality improvement in order to ensure that child care staff are receiving the benefit of the quality improvement incentives. The recipients will be required to submit audited financial statements.

9:20

The other question that was asked was on the compliance to daycare regulations. I'd like the hon. member to know that under section 8 of the Social Care Facilities Licensing Act there is a section called Order after Inspection, which is issued under that particular section, and it's issued for serious noncompliance and specifies what the centre must do and the timelines for compliance. Other enforcement actions include notice of deficiency, notice of suspension or cancellation, and stop orders. If we think back, we can see where we closed a daycare in Edmonton because of some serious issues that that particular daycare was faced with and complaints that we had received, that we investigated and dealt with in what I think was a very, very quick manner.

He talked about the national child care. I would like to first of all tell the hon. member that it's not a hundred million; it's \$70 million. Those are the numbers that we are getting from the federal government. So while at one time maybe a hundred million might have been under discussion, we have heard that it's \$70 million from the federal government. It's a lot of money, and it's something that Alberta has been negotiating in good faith right from day one with the federal minister, right from the time when I went to Victoria to the federal/provincial/territorial meeting.

It was important as the Alberta minister responsible for Children's Services that we bring forward what was important to Albertans, and that was that Albertans have choice. Any choice for them was whether it's for-profit or nonprofit, but they wanted choice. The accountability and reporting requirements that the federal government was pressing for were far too cumbersome a burden, and we believe that it was important for that – while we don't mind accountability and reporting, we told them in our three-year business

plans and our annual business plans that we report to Albertans and received support for that.

We talked with the federal government at length about program inputs and outputs versus child-focused outcomes. The federal government was talking about space. What was important to the province was the outcome and what the child was getting once they came out of that particular daycare.

Lengthy, lengthy discussion at that particular meeting about funding issues at that time. There were no real dollar values. It was important for us to understand, before we could establish what was happening, the funding that it was getting, that it was confirmed within the budget how the funding was being delivered. There was talk about trust funds. There was talk about the CST, the Canada social transfer. It was important for us to know how we were able to draw.

The last thing was federal legislation. The federal government has made a number of statements regarding future federal legislation. I want to reiterate one more time that we wrote to the federal minister on March 31. We wrote to him again on April 15. I can tell this member that the negotiations that we have had with the federal government since January have always been very, very positive and in the best interests of the parents and the children in this province.

So I would encourage you, like I said to the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, to write to the federal minister, ask him to respond to Alberta. We are just asking him to confirm our conversation from prior to March 31 about agreement with what was important. I can tell you that in that conversation – and I'll repeat what I said to the member of the opposition – at that point in time he agreed verbally to all of the concerns that Alberta put forward and was at that time dealing with the Northwest Territories and Prince Edward Island on base funding. He was also dealing with his own federal cabinet in regard to the French language issue. To me, hon. member, this has never been about politics. It's about providing the best quality service so that Albertans in this province can have choice in the best interest of their children.

I'm not even going to comment on Harper's comments. I have not had a conversation with the member of the federal Conservatives. In regard to any of the comments that you have made, I can only say – and I can't speak for the federal Conservatives – that from what I've read, they're very, very supportive of the children in this country and concerned about many, many children's issues. But that's something that I haven't talked to them about previously.

Why the money is not in the budget is because we haven't got the budget. We will put that into the budget process once we have confirmation of the \$70 million and once their federal budget is passed.

I think those are most of the questions you had on national childcare. Again, we will try and write to you on the other questions if I've missed any.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of issues that I wanted to raise with the minister around the budget debate for Children's Services, and just before this slips my mind, the question I did want to get on the record is: how exactly does the minister anticipate allocating the \$70 million should it come the way of the province? We'd like to get the specific details on how that would be allocated, and if you could provide that in writing before we have to vote on the budget, please.

There are a couple of areas that I would like to talk about tonight. One is funding for sexual assault centres; funding and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth, especially around

bullying initiatives; a little bit on childcare, although I will note that my colleagues from Edmonton-Mill Woods and Edmonton-Strathcona have done a superlative job of covering that issue, so I won't speak very much about it. I'd also like to talk about insurance for the nonprofits and agencies that provide services in this sector and, finally, funding for women's shelters.

Starting with the funding for sexual assault centres. I often tell people that if I talk about something 500 times, it finally happens, and I'm beginning to see that payoff around the funding for the sexual assault centres. I think I'm approaching the 500 mark, and I can see it paying off here because, in fact, the province has released as part of its larger initiative that it is developing a comprehensive provincial strategy for the prevention of sexual violence, and specific to that is \$500,000.

[Mr. Oberle in the chair]

The initiative is working "towards improving services available to survivors of sexual violence in Alberta" and facilitates the "sharing of information and resources to enhance and inform sexual violence program development and research." So I'm taking that right out of the news release of April 19, and the background of it came with that. Finally, thank you, and I'm glad to see that. I've been very frustrated with the cross-ministry committee that was in place because for a long time nothing happened, and that seems to finally be working there.

I will note a couple of things that the sector has already done. Specifically, they have done an environmental scan of what the current situation is. A few nights ago I was lobbying the Minister of Finance to take the leadership and start to move this issue forward, and she'd asked me for what was happening at the moment. In fact, I can and will provide her now with a copy of this scan that's been done by the sexual assault centres of Alberta. They have also provided me, and I'm sure could provide the minister if they haven't already, a listing of their funding and where their funding comes from. I'd just like to talk about that a little bit because this is actually the nitty-gritty details that I have spoken about more generally in the past.

9:30

When we look at funding for a number of the sexual assault centres in Alberta, this one, I think, is Edmonton but very interesting. What we have here is that 3.8, so less than 4, per cent of their total funding came from the Solicitor General, 4 per cent exactly of their total funding came from Alberta mental health, and 14.8 per cent came from Children's Services, so three different departments and totalling 22.6 per cent of the Edmonton Sexual Assault Centre's total budget, not a very large contribution overall to what they were doing. Significantly more amounts of money came from the United Way, for example, 25 per cent, and through funding from the municipalities.

So very interesting that the funding, as I had said, was very piecemeal, coming from different departments for different reasons and usually for short-term projects that were not renewable. This is what I think we need to address, to get some long-term stable, predictable funding in place that covers the operation of these centres and not just a program here and a program there.

One of the things that I looked at in their environmental scan where they were talking about that same topic of secured sustainable funding is how many of them have only one-year funding, and that runs out every year. Then they have to spend so much time reapplying annually for the funding, and it's never guaranteed, so other funding such as support from foundations is typically used to

fund special projects or ongoing programs for counselling rather than providing finances to support the organization's infrastructure.

The donations they're getting from local corporations and service groups are also one time, and a significant portion of the shortfall is made up by fundraising activities, that have mostly had to be done on a volunteer basis by the staff, who come in on their weekends and after hours to organize fundraising events to keep the centres going. It does have operational consequences for the staff of the centres. Setting aside the stress of not knowing what your budget is, it's darn hard to be a good manager when you can't predict how long your centre is actually going to stay open. Should you be managing to close it with honour and pay off all of your debts and close everything out and pay off your staff, or do you try and manage to keep going for a few more months, hoping that something is going to come together?

Now, I'm not saying that all the centres in Alberta are dealing as close to the edge, but it certainly does impinge upon your ability to be a good manager to run your centre in the long term. Rather than being able to focus on the victims and the survivors of sexual abuse, you have the staff focusing on securing additional funding to get them through the next year or the next few months.

The Alberta Association of Sexual Assault Centres has recently identified six core service areas that sexual assault survivors and their families should have access to throughout Alberta, and they consider these services essential in each community in order to provide a co-ordinated approach to service delivery across the province. These include crisis services, counselling, police and court support, education, outreach, and volunteer support. With a few exceptions Alberta's eight sexual assault centres do provide all six core service areas across the province, and they go through this in the environmental scan that they have provided.

There is some discussion in this environmental scan as well about new co-ordinated, multidisciplinary approaches like advocacy centres and some discussion about how well they work. An example of that: they seem to work particularly well for delivery of services to child victims of sexual abuse. You have an example here that, in fact, has been funded through the minister's previous ministry as Solicitor General. I'm sorry; that might have been through Justice. It's the Zebra centre, that's located just down the block from here. There must be funding as well from Children's Services. But the consideration here is more about provision of services to adults, which is the area that tends to get left aside.

So I'm encouraging the minister to continue along the right track that she set out on. We do need the funding. I'm hoping that at the end of the time for this comprehensive provincial strategy we have the minister continuing to work with her colleagues to secure the operational funding that needs to be in place so that we can get out of this cycle that we've been in.

I'd like to talk now about the bullying initiative, which I haven't been very involved with because I was generally approaching it from family violence or violence against women, and the bullying initiative just didn't work for me there. The other issue was the sexual assault centres, and they didn't fit into that bullying strategy either. But I'll tell you: somebody that does fit into the bullying strategy is lesbian and gay youth, and, boy, do they understand what bullying is all about. I mean, if we want to look at some of the studies and descriptions of what these kids go through, they understand bullying.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I am a little curious because there was a project that's been brought to my attention that was to fund through the office for the

prevention of family violence, through the bullying initiative. They'd asked for funding for the Out Is In project, which has been funded by the Department of Justice Canada's community mobilization fund. Interestingly, Justice Canada was saying: we'd like to keep funding you, but you've got to have some indication of interest from your provincial government. They've never been able to secure funding for the excellent work that they do through this minister's department and through the office for the prevention of family violence. So I'm wondering if perhaps the minister is funding other groups that are working with this particular group of kids.

I would argue that this is one of the most vulnerable groups of youths, vulnerable to bullying and very particular bullying in the whole province. I mean, if you want to talk about kids that have been physically assaulted because of who they are, you want to talk about, you know: two-thirds of gay and lesbian students have heard homophobic remarks made by kids at school. Thirty-seven per cent of gay and lesbian youth questioned feel like outsiders at school. I mean, this is the epitome of bullying victims here. Forty per cent of gay and lesbian youth surveyed have dramatically low self-esteem.

I can tell you that the one stat that is the saddest statistic of all is that the youth group that is most likely to commit suicide is this group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth by far. In particular, those rates are very high following any sort of public upheaval around the issue of gay lifestyle or same-sex marriage or Delwin Vriend or any of those public discussions of those issues. Their suicide rate goes up because they see a public reaction, and they think: I can't deal with this. So it's very high.

The project that was brought forward – in this case, they were looking for funding for the Out Is In project but in particular for a camp called Camp Fyrefly, which was to help work with provincial gay and lesbian youth as a co-ordinating network and also to work with them on a leadership package. I mean, what's more worthy of funding through this bullying project?

So I'm interested to hear whether the minister has been funding other gay and lesbian youth groups. Or if they haven't been funding any, then why not? Maybe I could get the ministry to go back and have another look at what's been put forward in this group. I mean, this Camp Fyrefly: "leadership weekend attracting more than 40 youth from across Alberta and designed to help develop the capacities" of gay and lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth "to address violence and bullying in the home, school, and the community." I mean, it's tailor made. It fits exactly what's supposed to be happening here.

9:40

So, you know, lots of volunteers, including teachers, social workers, and other professionals donated their time. I'll just ask the minister to go back and have another look at that particular group and see if there's something else that can be done to fund them this year or to assist them in some way. That certainly qualifies, in my opinion, under the bullying initiatives, and we should be able to help all kids.

Another question under family violence and bullying. There's a \$14 million increase in the amount of funding for family violence from the 2004-05 budget to the '07-08 forecast and a \$10 million increase in this year alone. This is appearing on page 158 of the business plan. We would like to get a breakdown of where that \$10 million is going. Some of it is in the press release, but if I could get the details of where all of it's going, I would appreciate it. I mentioned that \$500,000 was going to the sexual assault initiative, and there were a couple of other things in that press release. The women's shelters are part of it, the community incentive fund, an additional \$2 million to the women's shelters, but if we could get the complete breakdown, please, I would appreciate that.

As part of that, there was a specific question about how much money will be spent on more conferences. There's also a question on youth in transition, an increase of \$3 million to the youth in transition budget, which appears on page 60, vote 2.3.4. How is this money going to be spent? Will it get tendered to agencies? How many new transition spaces are expected to open?

Finally, ministry support services, over \$2 million increase in ministry support services over the last year's budget. Why is most of this money going into corporate services? If we could get written responses to that, that would be good.

I continue to be concerned about the actions that the government has taken on child care, particularly, because I think it has jeopardized our funding, and it's certainly jeopardized the funding of the federal plan across the country. That's what happened the last time the feds tried to come up with a federal program. It was Alberta that stymied the whole thing. It's happening again, so I certainly hope the minister is going to be able to work this one out with her federal counterpart. I agree that choice is important.

You know, the government seemed to understand – at least, they were arguing with me – the idea of incrementalism in implementing this smoking ban, and that was the reason for not supporting the bill the other day, that it was to be done incrementally. Well, if you can propose it in that, why can't you propose it in the funding for daycares and at least keep going or enhance what we've got but not blow the whole thing in trying to go for something that's not possible?

I'd like to know what the minister is doing to work with the agencies that are under her portfolio and that contract under her portfolio, supply services that are important to the people that she serves around the absolutely astronomical increase in insurance rates for those agencies. We've seen increases from double to fivefold. A lot of the ones that I've spoken to in the last couple of weeks have looked at changes, increases over the last 18 months from, say, \$4,000 to \$10,000. That's really, really tough to find in monies for social service agencies, and somebody on that side has got to do something. The government regulates insurance. You've got to do something to help these nonprofit and charitable agencies for what's happening to them and how they're being charged for their public liability insurance by the insurance industry.

Also, I'm wondering – my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods was quoting the shelter statistics from 2002, and I know that the ministry then stopped releasing the shelter statistics. I always suspected at the time it was because there were more women and children being turned away than being served by the ministry, and it just looked so bad that they stopped releasing the statistics. I'm wondering if, in fact, they have gone back to releasing them again or if the most recent stats that are available are from 2002. If that's the case, then could the ministry please work with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters to give us an updated number on that? Also, I would like to hear the reasoning behind why those aren't being released publicly if that's still the case.

I know that there is a rush for everyone else to get in on this one, so I thank you for the opportunity to be able to raise those comments. I invite the minister to respond to me in writing just given the shortness of time because my colleague who's the official critic for this department would like to get up one more time to ask some questions.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I will be short because, as the member has indicated before, she'll accept some of the

questions she's asked in writing, but I think it's important for me to get some things on the record, and I would really like the time to be able to answer that.

I want to go back to the answer on the national child care and Alberta once again being painted the black sheep for holding up nine other provinces and territories. To me that's an incredible statement of all the other ministers across this country who don't have the initiative to stand up for their own provinces and Alberta, one province in Canada, being blamed for stalling a deal from our federal counterparts. What Alberta did is they made it very clear what was important to them and what was important to the people that they serve in this province, both Albertans and children in care. I can . . .

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, the book is in front of the microphone, and therefore it's not picking up all the sound. You may proceed.

Mrs. Forsyth: I can tell the hon. member that when we were at the negotiating table in January with the federal government, at that particular time we were ready to sign an agreement called an asymmetrical agreement, but the federal government would not pursue that. After that, we went out and had a press release, and he said at that particular time that he was going to be negotiating with the provinces. I want to reiterate one more time that with my recent conversation with Mr. Dryden, he verbally agreed to all of Alberta's concerns. He indicated at that particular time that the stall was from the Northwest Territories and Prince Edward Island in regard to the base funding plus discussion around his own cabinet table in regard to the French.

I am pleased that the hon. member acknowledges the fact of the money we have given in regard to the sexual assault shelters and the \$500,000. I can tell her that the Alberta Association of Sexual Assault Centres was very, very grateful for the money that the government was providing, and we're going to continue to work very, very closely with them and monitor what's happening with the money and how they're going to use the money and how they're going to deal with the particular issue. I can tell you that it's been a struggle for the sexual assaults because they have referred to sexual assault as a hidden disease, something that people don't want to talk about and again were very, very pleased with the money.

The member talked about the issue of lesbian and gay bullying and the initiatives that were dealing with that. What I want to say on the bullying issue is that it's all encompassing. It does not matter if you're a lesbian. It doesn't matter if you're gay. It doesn't matter if you're black, green, purple, short, tall, whatever. Bullying is bullying no matter who's doing the bullying. I think that what the government is doing on the bullying initiative is recognizing bullying as a problem. We're even seeing at this particular time cyberbullying become a huge problem, and we'll look forward to what we see coming out of the community incentive grants.

She talked about youth in transition. The increase in the youth in transition is related to the advancing futures bursary program that was implemented from the Children's Forum. The success of the advancing futures bursary program and the anticipated uptake that resulted from a very successful program is why we've increased it to \$3.2 million. The youth in transition initiative is intended to develop policy and programs for youth in transition, and as the member indicated, the chair has been very, very successful in regard to this particular initiative, and the kids like it.

Due to time, what we'll do is we'll allow the critic to ask some more questions.

9:50

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to address a couple of issues, one of the issues brought forward by the Member for Edmonton-Centre and also the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, mostly in regard to the youth initiatives that are taking place.

I think it's our responsibility not only as a government but as a society to always look for better directions, to always look for more effective and efficient solutions to some of the challenges, to some of the concerns that we have that we deal with with youth. I know that it is difficult, and I know that it is a situation that may seem as if the solutions arrive very quickly or very easily from the outside, but I would suggest to you that some of those solutions that we could arrive at aren't long-lasting solutions.

I think it is absolutely imperative that we engage our youth in the decision-making that we are doing right now. I could give you a number of examples, and I think the Member for Edmonton-Centre talked about some of the tragic areas involving youth and gay individuals. I want to say from that aspect that I think that when we have youth forums or youth gatherings between staff and between myself as the Youth Secretariat and youth, we very much look at all of the different aspects and all of the different challenges that are brought forward. We look at all of the different avenues where bullying is being effected. We look at all of the different directions where violence takes place.

The question, of course, that arises is: how do we engage youth? How do we involve youth to a more successful outcome? I think that on a regular basis that is the goal, that is the direction we should be following. We need to involve youth, and we need to listen to what youth say because they are experiencing the issues exactly at the time when the issues are prevalent. We can look back to our past and what experiences we've had, and we think that we can apply that knowledge to the youth of today. That always doesn't happen. So when we have youth and we engage youth, I know that the solutions they have are more practical. As I stated earlier, the knowledge that they have is one that is immediate and, if I can say, one that is practical because they understand the situation now.

I want to say that I talked about the involvement of youth in the bullying and violence forum. Now, those youth came from across the province. Those youth came from as far south as Kainai. They came from the northern part of the province. They came from urban and they came from rural areas. They came from intercity areas, all having different issues, all having different perspectives of the challenges that youth have in their communities.

Most recently we had a meeting with a group of youth in regard to the challenges they have with drugs, the experiences they had, and the initiatives that they brought forward to that meeting, that they brought forward to a meeting that involved the chair of AADAC and at this particular meeting the Premier, who also dropped in for part of the meeting to listen to youth, some of the solutions that they had, the desires that youth had to be involved in the solution-forming direction – let me give you some examples if I can. We talked in a round-table with the youth that were in attendance – and they came from all different types of social situations, economic situations, from very wealthy homes as well as homes that were very much struggling to survive – about how they got involved in drugs and how they got involved in schools where they were basically enticed to partake or to get involved with peer groups that did not give them the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Now, these individuals came to us and came to the meeting with solutions. They want to help. They want to help their fellow students. They would like to work in a situation where they could as students go to schools, meet with children, present their experiences to classrooms, present their experiences to audiences, to

parents in order for other children not to get involved in those sorts of activities. They relayed to us the different types of experiences that they had, the different types of challenges that they had and what directions could better assist them in bringing their message forward.

“What needs to be done?” you ask. So what needs to be done? As I said before, what needs to happen is that we do need to involve our youth. We need to get them involved. We need to get our children and our youth involved. Now, we do have to assist them. We have to assist them in the manner that we need to support them. We need to support them going out into the communities. We need to support them with . . .

Mr. Snelgrove: The tools.

Mr. Danyluk: I appreciate the advice that’s being given to me by the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

I believe and we know that with that support, the message will be clearer when it comes from children to their own peer group than if we send, let us say, officers or politicians to send the message, and that message will be very clear.

Mr. Chairman, I understand that my time is just about up. I just want to summarize by saying that I very much believe that with interaction with our youth, with the support that we can give our youth, we will find solutions, and we will continue to look for solutions, to strive to make their world just a little bit better.

Thank you very much.

10:00

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, we only have a few minutes, but, yeah, go ahead.

Dr. Pannu: Two minutes. Okay, Mr. Chairman.

I’ve got two quick questions for the minister. One is on the cut of 11 per cent for the early intervention programs in the budget. The budget for 2005-2006, the current budget, allocates about \$10.7 million, whereas last year’s budget had \$11.9 million for the early intervention program. So why that dramatic 11 per cent cutback?

The second quick question, in the last 50 seconds, has to do with the child, youth, and family services program. There the budget seems to have been even more dramatically cut, from close to \$7 million in the 2004-2005 budget to about \$2 million in 2005-2006. There’s quite a dramatic cut. I don’t think there is time for her to answer now. I’m sure she will answer these questions in writing.

How much more time is left, Mr. Chairman?

The Deputy Chair: About three more minutes.

Dr. Pannu: Oh, three more minutes. Okay.

I would like to return to one of the issues that I feel very passionate about. The minister talked last time around and continually talks about our child care system being one of the best in Canada, and I respectfully disagree with that. I ask the question because I want the minister to perhaps take another look at it and see what measures she can take to improve it.

The Ministry of Children’s Services’ own studies indicate that when we compare ourselves in terms of child care staff qualifications, we don’t really compare very well with Ontario, where 80 per cent of child care staff have a two-year early childhood education certificate or higher compared to only about 43 per cent in Alberta, about half as much as Ontario’s EC staff.

The median hourly wage in Ontario is about 62 per cent higher than in Alberta. In Ontario it was about \$13.50 per hour; in Alberta it was about \$8.30. With that kind of low wages for our child care

workers, you can’t get them at \$8.30 an hour if they have a university degree or two or three years of college education, and you need well-educated, well-trained people to provide good education. To keep these people, if they are well educated, in child care services, you need to pay them well. What programs does the minister have which will address these two issues which determine the quality of child care in Alberta?

Another question, Mr. Chairman, for the minister. It’s information that she would perhaps like to look at, comparing Alberta with Quebec. Quebec’s child care program and system is considered the best. It works the best. It has the highest ratings. Eighty-six per cent of Alberta’s total child care expenditures for regulated child care spaces goes to parent fee subsidies. Nothing goes to operating grants in Alberta. At the other end of the spectrum . . .

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(4), which provides for not less than two hours of consideration for a department’s proposed estimates, I must now put the following question after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Children’s Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006.

Agreed to:
Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases \$793,954,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I’d move that the committee rise and report the vote of the Department of Children’s Services and request leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006, for the following department.

Children’s Services: expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$793,954,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 1
Access to the Future Act

The Deputy Chair: I am given to understand that we are currently on amendment A3, that's before the Assembly.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Chair, I adjourned debate on that, so I'm not proposing to continue speaking to that. I just wonder if we could revert to introductions for a moment.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Our guest this evening for the Bill 1 debate is Paul Zits, outgoing president of the Students' Association of Grant MacEwan College. So at the start of our committee debate on Bill 1 tonight I would just like to recognize him. If he could rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House, please.

Bill 1
Access to the Future Act
(*continued*)

The Deputy Chair: Did the Government House Leader want to rise and be recognized?

Mr. Hancock: Just briefly. I understand that the amendment that's on the table is A3, which proposes an amendment to add a subsection (8.1) to Bill 1. I don't have the amendment in front of me, Mr. Chairman, but the amendment essentially would call for putting into Bill 1 a requirement that there be a full and complete reporting on all of the commitments made under the access to the future fund, so to report what commitments have been made and how much had been given to whom.

Of course, that's part and parcel of reporting and disclosure in this government. We have a government which prides itself on being open in publishing all of that information. I would indicate to the House that it would be absolutely remiss if that information were not in the annual report of the Department of Advanced Education each and every year in terms of what commitments had been made and what funds had been expended out of the access to the future fund.

10:10

So while I understand the desire of the Member for Calgary-Currie to bring forward the amendment to put sort of belts and suspenders in place to make sure that the public has all the information it needs, the reality is that that's the way we do business, so it's not necessary for it to be in the bill. It's not necessary for every bill to be full and complete with all the rules and details. In fact, often it's helpful to have framework legislation. I know the opposition tends not to like framework legislation and things being done by regulation, but that often makes it much better legislation, in fact.

I have nothing against this amendment, but I am going to ask that the House not approve this amendment because it's redundant. It's

surplusage. The fact of the matter is that that information is and will be reported.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I do agree with the hon. member across the Assembly. Belts and suspenders are good; elastics around the waist are even better. Good, solid accountability. My mantra throughout my political life has been exactly what he has said: open, accountable, honest governance processes.

I think it's very important, especially with dollars of this magnitude, that we have a complete breakdown of the grants and where these grants are going. In fact, the education community and the student community deserve to understand exactly how these grants work. There are some very specific recommendations, and I think that it would be interesting to have that breakdown in terms of the dollars that actually go toward education delivery as opposed to the administration of the grants.

Some of the things that were said, just to put them on the record because I know the hon. minister across has actually read them: the minister would report on each grant in the annual report; the fact that this fund is established for particular purposes, and it's therefore important to specify that the accountability mechanisms are in place to support those particular purposes for which they were made; and the minister would be specifically required by 2(3) to report on access and affordability. We also believe that he should be required to report on each grant in that manner. I think that he sincerely feels that there isn't any need for this amendment, but I would like to see it go through as I feel that it really addresses the belts and suspenders part of this amendment.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We're returning to debate on this amendment after a break of almost one week. I don't have the amendment before me, but the intent of the amendment seems to be such that it merits the support of the House.

It's a bill that has very little specificity and detail to it, but we are dealing or are going to be dealing, hopefully pretty soon, with \$3 billion worth of taxpayers' money; \$134 million a year are promised to flow down to the postsecondary system on a yearly basis. But we need some clear ground rules and some reporting mechanisms so that we know how the purposes and the objectives of this particular piece of legislation are achieved. In order for us to make that assessment on whether or not the objectives are indeed reached or achieved or are well-served by the way that \$134 million will be allocated in the years to come on a yearly basis is if we legislate that there be full disclosure of the monies allocated, grants made, monies transferred to different institutions. Only if we as a Legislature and as representatives of the people of Alberta have that ability to scrutinize and look at the numbers and see how the money is spent will we be justified voting for this bill. So I support this bill.

Another concern that I have is about the minister of higher education's general claim that this government operates transparently and always discloses information. My experience over the last eight years in this House tells me that that's not always the case, especially on a new venture of the sort that this Bill 1 proposes to undertake on behalf of the postsecondary system and on behalf of close to 200,000 students and teachers who work in the system.

I think that it's important that the information with respect to the grants made to institutions, to programs, to research applications, to researchers, students, and others be made public. This bill is somewhat equivocal on whether or not the funds from this endow-

ment fund will in fact be accessible by private, for-profit institutions, that are growing by leaps and bounds in this province. I have some amendments later on to propose. Hopefully they'll be accepted, and we will not have to worry about any dollars flowing to private, for-profit institutions in this province. Until that happens, I think it is an additional reason that there be full disclosure about the way the monies from this endowment fund are distributed and the destination of these monies, especially with reference to whether they go to all institutions in the public system or whether they also go to private, for-profit institutions, which are being approved year after year to operate in this province by this government.

For those reasons, I speak in support of the amendment proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. A sardonic comment first of all. Here we are talking about a piece of legislation governing post-secondary education, and the critic from the third party and the hon. minister do not have a copy of the amendment with them. They failed their homework assignment tonight, sir. But, seriously, folks, as we say.

Obviously, and I'm on record from last week as feeling that this is an important amendment, as I felt about amendments A1 and A2, which did not succeed in this House. What we see here, for the record, is an example, I think, of the philosophical differences between the governing party and the opposition parties. The two sides of the House, it is my experience in my brief time in this House, do speak different languages using the same words. The government feels, and the minister just said so, that framework legislation – oh, the minister has found his homework; the dog did not eat it. I don't know if he's going to turn it in for marking afterwards or not.

As the minister said a moment ago, the government feels that framework legislation is best, laying out the legislation in broad strokes and then leaving it to the regulations to dot the i's and cross the t's. The government feels philosophically – I accept that this is a philosophical bent of the government – that doing it through regulation gives you better legislation, perhaps more flexible legislation. I don't know.

10:20

On the comment about better legislation, we are considering during this session some 40 bills, 39 of which I believe are amending bills to existing legislation. So that begs the question, a rhetorical question for tonight: how good is the legislation if you have to amend 39 existing acts in every session? But it's a rhetorical question, sir.

Philosophically, the government believes in framework legislation and working out the details through regulation. Philosophically, Mr. Chairman, we believe on this side of the House that whether or not it is the most efficient way to write legislation, writing legislation properly with all the details in there and working together collaboratively to amend legislation that can be improved and doing it on the floor of this House, passing amendments, passing bills through their various stages, making law on the floor of this House is the most democratic way of doing it.

There have been other forms of government in history that have been very efficient at getting the trains to run on time, but they've had some pretty unsavory aspects to them. I'm not suggesting for a moment that I'm making a comparison here. I am suggesting, though, that efficiency, a quest for efficiency, a desire for efficiency should not be the highest philosophical, ideological, moral, or ethical

calling of a political party or a government. The highest philosophical, moral, and ethical calling is democracy and the respect for our bosses, the people of the province of Alberta, a respect that allows us and requires us and compels us to do our business in public in an open, accountable, and transparent fashion.

At the end of the day the results may be the same, but we value democracy in large part because it is about process, because it is about an openness and a transparency and an accountability when done properly, when done right that allows the people to see that they are being democratically and responsibly represented and that they can hold their representatives to account. That's why we proposed these amendments, plain and simple.

Now, I'm not going to drag out debate on this one any longer. I'm going to suggest that we put it to a vote, but I wanted that on the record because this is why we have done what we have done.

[Motion on amendment A3 lost]

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now, I do have four other amendments to Bill 1, and I would very much like to debate them and talk about them in this House, and I hope to get the opportunity to do that in the future. I'm also aware that the critic from the third party has some amendments of his own. The committee study of Bill 1 so far has been my show, I guess, our show, my honour to have the opportunity to introduce my amendments. I know that the member from the third party would like to get his amendments or at least some of them on the table, on the floor in play as well.

So if I may, Mr. Chair, at this point in hopes of getting back to my remaining four amendments, I would like to table my amendments if you'll allow. I have the requisite copies here.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. With that, I cede the floor to the member from the third party.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I just need some clarification. It's my understanding that there are four amendments that you are circulating.

Mr. Taylor: Tabling.

The Deputy Chair: You're just tabling?

Mr. Taylor: I am tabling them only, sir.

The Deputy Chair: You are not moving for debate?

Mr. Taylor: I'm moving no amendments for debate at this time. It is my hope that we will get back to those amendments in further study in committee before the end of this session, but that's a decision of this House. In the event that we might not, I simply want to get these amendments on the record, so it's a simple tabling.

The Deputy Chair: Okay.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I should also thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie for deferring to my desire to propose some amendments to Bill 1, Access to the Future Act. I have the amendments ready. The first amendment I'd like to propose is to section 4 of the bill, actually section 4(2). I have the amendment ready for circulation. Here we go.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, are you moving an amendment?

Dr. Pannu: Yes.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. We shall refer to that amendment as amendment A4.

Dr. Pannu: Okay, Mr. Chairman. I will wait for a minute or two while amendment A4 is being distributed.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, you may proceed.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to draw the attention of the House to some of the concerns that I expressed when I spoke to Bill 1 in its second reading. At that time I had expressed some concern about the equivocal language used in the section of the bill, specifically section 4(2), which reads in a way that it leaves room for interpreting this subsection as including private, for-profit postsecondary institutions in the coverage of what this section 4(2) provides. I call this equivocal language. The bill neither says yes nor says no to it. Therefore, it leaves room for private, for-profit institutions to make valid claims on the resources of the fund.

Section 4(2), Mr. Chairman, reads as follows at present.

The purpose of the Fund is generally to support innovation and excellence that enhances and expands opportunities for Albertans to participate in accessible, affordable and high-quality advanced education opportunities and, without restricting the generality of the foregoing.

Then there are several other subs that follow this.

10:30

My concern is that there's a lack of specificity in that paragraph that I've read with respect to public institutions as being the only ones in which these education opportunities will be enhanced. The amendment that I am proposing, Mr. Chairman, proposes to amend that section 4(2) by adding "in public post-secondary institutions" after "education opportunities." It removes the ambiguity. It addresses the problem with equivocation of the language of section 4(2) and clarifies that the purpose of the fund is generally to support innovation and excellence in public postsecondary institutions.

I don't think I need to say much more to this amendment, Mr. Chairman. It's self-explanatory, and I think it is an eminently supportable amendment because all it does is improve the language of the bill and clarify the intent of the proposed legislation to enhance these activities related to innovation and excellence and thereby enhance and expand high-quality advanced education opportunities but in public postsecondary institutions.

So with that, I'll sit down and hope that the House would support this amendment. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. While I certainly appreciate the sentiment raised by the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, I would urge the House not to accept this amendment and for very good reason. While it should be obvious to everyone that a matching grant out of the access fund, if that was the proposal, or an ingenuity project out of the access fund would not normally go to a private institution – in other words, you wouldn't use public money to build private assets; that's clearly not in the cards – you also don't want to limit the efficacy of the access fund by suggesting that, for example, a scholarship fund or a bursary fund set up to allow a student to take an education would preclude a student going

to an educational institution, even a private educational institution if that was the appropriate choice for the student.

So this is one of those situations which I was directly dealing with before, where you don't want to be too strictured in the act because you might rule out things that you didn't intend to rule out. While I think it's clear that the intention of the hon. member is to rule out the concept of grants coming out of the access fund going to a private, for-profit institution, the fact of the matter is that there are plenty of educational opportunities in private, not-for-profit institutions which we support students in going to through student loan processes and through bursaries. In fact, there are choices for students in private, for-profit institutions which we support through student loans and through Rutherford scholarships.

So to put this amendment in place, while the intention is honourable, it's exactly one of those things that I was mentioning earlier, where by codifying too strictly you end up having unintended consequences and where it's better to have the framework in place and then deal with the regulation.

I would certainly intend to bring forward the regulations and the policies to this House so that people could see them, so that they're open and transparent, but make it apparent that we ought not to delimit it in such a way that you wouldn't have the opportunity of someone coming forward and saying, "I want to put forward a scholarship fund or a bursary fund to bring students out of northern Alberta," for example, and then say that because you went to a private, not-for-profit institution or you went, for that matter, to a private, for-profit institution in a course that was an acceptable course of studies for a student loan program, it would be not acceptable for this type of a scholarship fund.

So you can set up a scholarship fund, I would think, under the access to the future fund. If somebody wanted to donate money to set up a scholarship fund or a bursary fund, it could be matched, presumably, out of this, and that would be available, then, to students who meet the criteria for the scholarship or bursary. But this amendment would say, well, if they're going to anything other than a public institution, it wouldn't qualify. Honourable intention, but clearly one of those areas where by putting in too much stricture, you may have unintended consequences.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That was an interesting explanation, which begs a couple of questions that I wonder if I can get the minister to address in terms of perhaps explaining or giving us some insight in the House as to how he sees these sorts of scholarship or bursary programs operating.

While the minister doesn't want to put too much stricture on things here because of unintended consequences, I'm left wondering, if we do not pass this amendment, whether one of the unintended consequences could be that public money in Alberta is following Alberta students, then, to public or private, not-for-profit or private, for-profit postsecondary educational institutions in other provinces, states, or countries around the world. Is that the minister's intention, to take the access to the future fund and use it to in effect endow other institutions around the world?

Mr. Hancock: Clearly, the intention of the fund is not to endow other institutions around the world, but one of the intentions of the fund is to promote access to Albertans to advance their education, and Albertans can advance their education in public institutions, in private, for-profit and private, not-for-profit institutions. Those are choices that Alberta students can make, and those are choices that are currently supported through the student finance process if they're

appropriate courses of study. Not all private, for-profit courses of study are supported through student finance, but some are.

We've indicated that there will be a process of defining the parameters because this fund isn't going to do everything for everybody by any stretch of the imagination. The parameters do have to be defined in terms of what will qualify and what will not qualify. But my point is that in defining those parameters, which would be inappropriate to do in the act itself, it would also be inappropriate to preclude certain things from happening.

One of those things which immediately jumps to mind when you see this amendment is the concept of a bursary or a scholarship fund that might be privately supported. I can think of a number of proposals that have come forward already, because I can tell you, Mr. Chairman, that just the fact that we're debating this fund has spurred a huge amount of interest in people bringing forward gifts and bursaries and suggestions as to how they might give, give some money back, give some of what they've earned in Alberta back. The thirst for this has been phenomenal, even more than I anticipated.

In bringing those forward, people agreeing to put forward a scholarship or a bursary, to automatically preclude accessibility to a student who lives in Alberta, who's grown up in Alberta, whose family has paid taxes in Alberta because they might want to access that opportunity at a private, for-profit institution or a private, not-for-profit institution in Alberta or elsewhere is something that we ought not to be precluding right off the top.

When the regulations are designed, because the fund is only so big and only goes so far, that might be something that would be delimited or prioritized, but obviously it ought not to be precluded.

Mr. Taylor: So let me just make sure that I clearly understand what the minister just said, and I do this strictly for the purpose of understanding. In the Access to the Future Act, Bill 1, the minister has the intention of allowing the money to enhance the educational opportunities of the Alberta student – as the minister just said, yes, there will be some restrictions, some provisos – regardless of what jurisdiction the student then chooses to pursue his postsecondary education. Is that correct?

Mr. Hancock: There may be appropriate circumstances where a student who lives in Alberta, whose family has paid taxes in Alberta, and who we hope will return to Alberta with their capabilities, strengths, and knowledge may need to go elsewhere to get that, and there's no good reason why they should not have that kind of support.

10:40

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the minister's explanation, his response to the amendment, and the reasons why he can't support the amendment. The strictures on the bill, on the flexibility that he wants to have built into the bill are important from his point of view, but I think what he has said deepens my concern about what I see as a flaw in the bill. I am concerned that public dollars, in light of the explanation the minister has given, are now put at the disposal of private, for-profit institutions as much as they'll be there for the use of institutions that are part of the public system.

My intention by way of introducing this amendment is not to deprive having access to the funds for private, not-for-profit institutions in the province. My concern is with profit-making institutions that, as I said, are growing in numbers in this province. We are getting some complaints from students who have had, perhaps, the misfortune of entering some of these institutions and finding that their interests are not at the centre of the operations that these private, for-profit institutions undertake in this province.

There are some institutions here, Mr. Chairman, in this province operating now that have in fact been fined across the border for

violating contractual obligations. They've been fined to the tune of millions of dollars for those infractions. I am saying why, when this fund is being introduced with such fanfare and such hoopla, are we taking a chance of this fund becoming accessible to institutions, some of which clearly should not be in this province and, if they are, should not have the right to enjoy access to this bill?

My concern is enhanced, not mitigated by what the minister has said. I would certainly ask members in this House to support this amendment, to clearly lay out the purpose of the bill and define the type of institutions that will have access to it and such other institutions, such as for-profit ones, which will not have access to the dollars from this bill.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A4 lost]

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Chairman, I would like to introduce a second amendment, and I have it ready for distribution.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, you may proceed.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm again speaking to a subsection of section 4 of Bill 1, the Access to the Future Act. Specifically, what I'm proposing will amend subsection (7) of section 4. Subsection (7) at present reads as follows.

The Minister of Finance shall annually, in a manner determined by the Minister of Finance, pay from the General Revenue Fund to the Access to the Future Fund an amount equal to 4.5% of the total amounts allocated under subsection (4), as adjusted under subsection (6).

Now, the amendment amends the language of subsection (7) by adding "and such amount shall be included in the estimates for that fiscal year" after "adjusted under subsection (6)."

So, again, this amendment, I think, is a friendly amendment. It simply clarifies the language of the bill and strengthens the bill. The major intent of this amendment is to ensure that the fund is built up without using unbudgeted surpluses. Unbudgeted surpluses give the government an excuse to hide money away in other ways and not put the money in rather than being up front in their budgeting, and for that reason it also suggests that the provision as presently standing in the bill doesn't really represent a strong and firm commitment to postsecondary education because it doesn't, by way of the budget, make commitments. We have seen already that although the bill is supposed to sooner or later grow to \$3 billion, this year we put only \$250 million into it.

I think that being up front in budgeting is helpful in both ensuring that the government maintains and continues this renewed commitment to postsecondary education and that it is included in the budget. I think that will improve the piece of legislation that's before us, and that's the only reason that this amendment is being proposed here, not to change either the intent of the bill or the scope of the funds and the manner in which they'll be used.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, before the committee can deal with this amendment, you will have to move it.

Dr. Pannu: Okay. Mr. Chairman, consider it moved.

The Deputy Chair: Okay.

Hon. members, we shall refer to this amendment as amendment A5.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, again, I would have to ask the House not to pass this amendment. The rationale for the amendment that's just been put forward is that it will require the funds to be voted, but the hon. member has confused the money going into the heritage fund to be allocated for this purpose and the money coming out of the heritage fund and into the access to the future fund for spending. So this amendment will not, in fact, enhance the flow of money into the fund but will have a different effect, and that is to change the money coming out of the fund from being a statutory amount of 4 and a half per cent of whatever is in the heritage fund allocated to this purpose and, rather, put it into an estimate amount, which means that it's subject to an annual vote by members of the House as to how much should actually come in.

In effect what the hon. member's amendment does is say that although the act provides for 4 and a half per cent on a statutory basis, the act calls for that to be transferred into the fund for expenditure purposes. In fact, that's statutory. That's a requirement. That's something that has to happen. By making this amendment, what he's suggesting is that it becomes a voted amount, which is then at the will of the budget process every year in terms of being able to use that to balance the other numbers. So this has not the effect that the hon. member had requested.

10:50

In fact, it doesn't have anything to do with how fast the \$3 billion is built up in the fund. It has nothing to do with that. Section 4(7) doesn't deal with that. It deals with the amount being paid out, which is 4 and a half per cent of whatever's in there and accumulated.

So the theory of the fund is that \$3 billion goes into a special delineated account in the heritage fund. It grows by inflation. Four and a half per cent of whatever has been contributed in there comes out through the general revenue fund into the access to the future fund to be allocated to these projects. The effect of this amendment will make that a voted amount rather than a statutory amount, which is not exactly what the hon. member wants to happen.

Dr. Pannu: I must confess that I am at least 50 per cent persuaded by the minister's explanation on this. I think the manner in which he has drawn attention to the fact that this is a statutory commitment to put 4.5 per cent of the total amount into the fund to be made available for use every year makes sense too.

Is it possible, by any chance, to withdraw the amendment, Mr. Chairman, on this? Just a procedural guidance.

The Deputy Chair: Sorry?

Dr. Pannu: Once we introduce an amendment – I've never been through this – is it possible to withdraw an amendment? If I'm persuaded by the minister's rather fairly clear explanation of it, can I simply withdraw the amendment at this stage?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, yes, it can be done. All we have to do is request unanimous consent to withdraw it, and it can be done.

Dr. Pannu: I think I'm willing to do that, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: So you are asking for unanimous consent to withdraw the amendment?

Dr. Pannu: Right. Yeah.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, who has moved amendment A5, is requesting unanimous consent to withdraw the amendment.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We probably set some sort of precedent. I've never seen an amendment being . . .

An Hon. Member: It's not a precedent.

Dr. Pannu: But I'm pleased to do this.

I have one more amendment, Mr. Chairman. This will be amendment A6, I believe. I would like to move it. So I move that Bill 1, Access to the Future Act, be amended in section 9 by striking out "This Act comes into force on Proclamation" and substituting "This Act must be proclaimed no later than one year from the date it receives Royal Assent." So here is . . .

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, we need to have the amendment circulated first.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, you may proceed now.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: This amendment I'll refer to as amendment A6.

Dr. Pannu: A6. Yes. Mr. Chairman, amendment A6 is a fairly straightforward one. I have expressed my reservations about this bill before, so I won't go over those again but simply want to say that the amendment attempts to ensure that the promises, albeit insufficient, that are made in this Bill 1 actually do come to fruition within a predictable time period. The amendment gives a deadline for any necessary regulations to be completed and for the act to be proclaimed.

The minister, while speaking to amendment A4 or A5, indicated that already the bill has generated very high expectations, and he's receiving inquiries from interested institutions within the post-secondary system about the fund and the availability of new dollars so they can begin to access these new funds as soon as possible.

I guess my amendment addresses this heightened interest on the part of member institutions of postsecondary systems to have access to this bill within a finite period of time, and that is that the bill be proclaimed within one year of the passage of the bill so that access is guaranteed to institutions to the amount of funds that will be available at the end of the first year after the bill passes through the Legislature. So its proclamation will be made certain within a year of the completion of the debate here.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Hancock: Again, Mr. Chairman, while I appreciate the support that the hon. member is giving to the sentiment of the bill, it's an unnecessary amendment. The fact of the matter is that this bill is going to be proclaimed very, very quickly because there's a high degree of enthusiasm for this to happen, and the fact of the matter is that the budget that was presented and the business plans that were presented have indicated that some money is going to be allocated to it. That can't happen unless this bill is passed and proclaimed.

The forecast for next year and the year after forecast that even of the amount which is indicated already in the budget that will be applied to this fund out of the surpluses – there'll be \$11 million next year and \$11 million the following. They anticipate that

number to be much, much higher as a result of surplus funds going into the fund before now. But none of that can happen if this bill isn't proclaimed.

So I don't think the hon. member need have any worry about the speed with which this bill will be proclaimed into law if the Legislature passes it soon, I hope.

Dr. Pannu: To quickly conclude debate on this, Mr. Chairman – it seems as if no other member is going to be speaking on it – I think that the minister agrees with me that the bill should be proclaimed as soon as possible. All the amendment intends to do is to make sure that the bill doesn't sit there awaiting proclamation beyond one year. If it's proclaimed sooner, so much the better. This is one amendment that the minister should find very easy to accept.

I'll urge him and the House to vote in support of this amendment so that we get it out of the way and move on to whatever business the House has before it after this. Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A6 lost]

[The clauses of Bill 1 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

11:00

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and may I say thanks to members of the committee for the manner in which we've been able to deal with the issues raised on the bill tonight.

Now, having agreed to report the bill, I would move that the committee rise and report Bill 1.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 1. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly. I would also like to table copies of documents tabled during Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed?

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Acting Speaker: So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 29
Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped
Amendment Act, 2005

[Adjourned debate April 20: Mrs. Fritz]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I support and would ask my colleagues to also support this bill and the extra supplementary benefits that will become a part of the AISH program. These supplementary benefits are in addition to the living expenses and the medical expenses that people on AISH will get.

I will just use a very quick analogy. If someone would have a guide dog that they are reliant upon, the guide dog's expenses, the extra food and the veterinarian and whatever else that dog would require, would come under the supplementary benefits as special dollars for people that have special needs. It doesn't have to come out of their living expenses.

I think this is a very good bill, and certainly I am pleased to see that the government is listening to the opposition and that we, in fact, have listened to the grassroots Albertans, and now by listening we have improved the lives of the elderly and the disabled.

I don't think there's a great deal more to say on this one other than I think it's very good. I think it's positive for people on AISH, and I would ask my colleagues to support it.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to speak to Bill 29. Bill 29 is about the changes that have been overdue for a very long time that needed to be made. Over the last eight years that I've been around this House, we have been talking about the need to increase the monthly payments for Albertans on AISH. The recipients, as a result of the changes that the government announced in the budget, certainly are getting an increase of a hundred dollars immediately, making their total monthly payments \$950. By April 2006 they will get an increase to \$1,000. So they'll have to wait till April 2006 before they get the increase to the \$1,000 level.

Mr. Speaker, we were hoping that the increase would be to \$1,050 immediately. This would have made up for what was lost to inflation over the past 12 years. Then we were hoping that AISH would be indexed, of course, to the cost of living using the market-basket measure. That would ensure that the severely handicapped would be able to meet their needs on this program without having this Legislature return to amend this piece of legislation again in two years' time. MLA salaries are indexed to inflation, so there's no reason why Albertans who are on AISH should not expect the same kind of adjustment on an annual basis.

It seems only reasonable that the real value of what AISH recipients receive is maintained from year to year. We do know that that value is eroded on an annual basis by the increases either due to inflation or the cost-of-living increases, which are inevitable and do happen on a predictable, ineluctable basis. So there is, I think, a disappointment here that indexation is not part of the adjustments that have been made.

There are some new medical benefits that recipients should be made aware of. We welcome those benefits. We think they are long overdue. But the problem with the new benefits is that, according to the minister, they will be dispensed on a case-by-case basis. We think programs should be a lot more universal than that. We also

know that this kind of approach requires people to advocate for themselves. We have to bear in mind that this is the severely handicapped we are talking about here who may not be able to advocate for themselves, certainly not all the time. Giving people more bureaucracy to navigate is not the answer.

The government has also doubled the amount recipients are allowed to earn to \$400 before getting AISH clawed back. That's a good thing, but that amount should be reviewed annually to keep pace with the cost of living again.

So we are certainly not entirely happy with the increases. We don't think that they go far enough. They are, nevertheless, a welcome change. The reason that we are not happy is simply this, Mr. Speaker. Since 1993 AISH recipients have lost 23 per cent of their income to inflation. Current increases mean a 15 per cent increase, and recipients will have to wait until next year for the whole increase. This means that this increase still falls far short of inflation, by about 8 per cent, more if you factor in inflation for the next year, which will likely be higher than usual given the oil prices and the way the energy prices are going up. In any case, those are some of the concerns I wanted to put on record.

That said, I think the change is welcome, and I know that the AISH recipients appreciate the increase that they have been waiting for for very long. I have lots of them in my constituency, and I've been hearing from them on the phone and through my constituency office. They are happy, but they don't think the change has gone as far as it should have.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise this evening to speak to Bill 29, the AISH amendment act. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, if I could just indulge you for a minute. The chair did not realize that the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona was the third speaker, so if there are any comments or questions, we have five minutes available for that purpose.

If not, the chair recognizes the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill to continue.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports for her leadership in bringing forward these much-needed changes to the program and for implementing almost all of the changes which were recommended by the MLA AISH Review Committee. I was pleased to be part of that committee and to have a role in renewing the AISH program. As MLAs the AISH program is one of the programs that we hear about quite regularly from our constituents.

11:10

In reviewing the submissions made by numerous stakeholders and in reviewing the questionnaire that was circulated, many of the concerns which were raised were about the ability of AISH clients to make ends meet on the living allowance of \$850 a month. Many people also criticized the so-called clawback that affected the living allowance of those AISH clients who were able to do at least some work to supplement their income. The committee also heard from clients and families who said that the administrative processes under

the program were too complex to be easily understood. I'm glad that the committee's recommendations for these important changes in all of these areas were accepted and that the minister will be moving forward to implement those changes.

The package of benefits announced last week represents a renewal of the AISH program, and part of that renewal is the new supplementary benefit that will be available to those clients with assets of less than \$3,000. This supplementary benefit is the reason for the minor amendment which is being proposed under Bill 29. This is an important change for AISH clients as it will give them access to an additional benefit when they're having difficulty making ends meet because of special needs. More importantly, this benefit will be tailored to a client's special circumstances.

I know the minister has already shared with the hon. members a few examples of the types of expenses that may be covered by supplementary benefits, and I would like to address one more. As severely disabled Albertans most AISH clients have regular medical appointments with specialists for treatment or ongoing monitoring of their conditions. While the living allowance covers their basic needs and their health benefit package covers the cost of their health care and prescription drugs, in the past there was no benefit to cover things such as additional transportation costs. So if a client needed to come to Calgary, for instance, to see a medical specialist and they lived in Drayton Valley, Lloydminster, or Etzikom, for example, there would be a large cost associated with that and a transportation cost they may not be able to absorb.

Under this new category of benefits, the supplementary benefit, a client will be able to speak to their AISH worker about emerging expenses, and on a case-by-case basis the program may offer additional benefits to address the needs of those clients. This is a very significant change, one which I believe will help make the program more flexible and more accommodating to the unique and individual needs of each AISH client.

Given that through Budget 2005 the minister has been allocated funding to implement this change, I support Bill 29 and this amendment which will allow for this new benefit to be offered under the AISH program. I've heard people often refer to AISH as simply a living allowance. They often aren't aware of the comprehensive health benefit package or the earnings exemption. With the changes that the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports announced last week, including the introduction of supplementary benefits as outlined in Bill 29, we are renewing the AISH program on behalf of nearly 32,000 disabled Albertans who rely upon it.

I urge all hon. members to support the bill. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). Any questions or comments?

Does anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

The hon. Government House Leader on behalf of the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports to close debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 29 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the hour I'd move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 11:15 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]