



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday evening, April 1, 2020

Day 13

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Party standings:

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New Democrat: 24

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Wednesday, April 1, 2020

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Hon. members, please be seated.

Government Motions

Legislative Assembly Debate on COVID-19

17. Mr. Jason Nixon moved:

Be it resolved that despite any standing order and immediately on the passage of this motion the Assembly is to debate the urgent public matter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the following manner:

- (a) the Premier may make the first statement not exceeding 45 minutes;
- (b) immediately following the Premier's statement, the Leader of the Official Opposition may make a statement not exceeding 30 minutes;
- (c) immediately following the Leader of the Official Opposition's statement and for a period not exceeding 30 minutes
 - (i) the Leader of the Official Opposition may ask questions on matters relevant to the Premier's statement, and
 - (ii) the Premier may respond to those questions;
- (d) any other member of the Executive Council may make a statement not exceeding 10 minutes;
- (e) immediately following each statement made by a member of the Executive Council and for a period not exceeding 15 minutes
 - (i) members who are not a member of the Executive Council may ask questions on matters relevant to the statement, and
 - (ii) the member of the Executive Council who made the statement may respond to those questions;
- (f) a member who asks a question or a member of the Executive Council who responds in accordance with clause (c) or (e) is limited to a period of five minutes at one time to ask that question or make a response;
- (g) immediately after all statements and related periods for questions and responses have concluded, the debate is considered to have been concluded by the Assembly without decision.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to move Government Motion 17. It's on the Order Paper. This motion is to allow for special debate to occur on COVID-19 and allow ministers to update the Legislative Assembly and answer questions from MLAs.

I also know there is likely an amendment coming from the Official Opposition, which I hope we will be able to support once we see it, Mr. Speaker, in the spirit of co-operation.

The Speaker: Is anyone else wishing to join in the debate this evening on Government Motion 17? I see the hon. deputy Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Government House Leader has anticipated me. I rise with an amendment to Government Motion 17.

The Speaker: Thank you. Maybe just in terms of expediency this evening if you can hand that through to members of the LASS and we'll get this to the table as quickly as possible and proceed with that. If you want to go ahead and read the amendment, and then on the conclusion of your reading that, once we make sure we have everything in order, we'll proceed.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Notice of amendment on Government Motion 17. Member Gray to move that Government Motion 17 be amended as follows: (a) in clause (a) by striking out "45 minutes" and substituting "30 minutes,;" (b) in clause (b) by striking out "30 minutes" and substituting "15 minutes,;" (c) in clause (c)(i) by adding "or the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic" immediately after "on matters relevant to the Premier's statement,;" (d) in clause (c)(i) by adding "or the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic" immediately after "on matters relevant to the statement,;" (e) in clause (f) by striking out "five minutes" and substituting "two minutes."

The Speaker: Hon. members, this amendment will be referred to as A1.

Please proceed, if you have additional comments.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As per discussions between the government and the opposition I believe that should we look for consent on this, we may find it. Thank you.

The Speaker: Is there anyone else wishing to speak to the amendment A1? I believe that it's possible that the Government House Leader might, but I'm not sure that he's received a copy of it yet. We'll just provide him with a moment to review the amendment prior to proceeding.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that opportunity. I'm just looking. This seems to be in line with what I was anticipating, and I do encourage all members of the House to support this amendment.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to speak to amendment A1?

Seeing none, I'm prepared to call the question.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Speaker: We are back on Government Motion 17. Is there anyone else wishing to speak to the motion this evening?

Seeing none, I'm prepared to call the question to Government Motion 17.

[Government Motion 17 carried]

The Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to Government Motion 17, that was just passed, I will first call upon the hon. the Premier to make a statement not exceeding 30 minutes. Then I will call upon the Leader of the Opposition to make a statement not exceeding 30 minutes. Following the two statements, for a period not to exceed 30 minutes, the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition may pose questions to the hon. the Premier. The Premier may respond to those questions. Once that portion of the debate has concluded, I will further explain the procedure time limits as they pertain to other members who wish to participate in the debate this evening.

I will now call upon the hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Sorry, Mr. Speaker. Not to interrupt, but – I am interrupting – I think you missed the amendment. I don't know if that came up. They did change the times, in fairness to the Official

Opposition, and the times you presented seemed to fit with my original motion, just for clarification.

The Speaker: Oh. Correction. It is a 30-minute time limit for the Premier and a 15-minute time limit for the Leader of the Official Opposition. My apologies if I communicated that inappropriately because it is on the amended motion.

The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to begin this take-note debate in the Assembly on the COVID-19 crisis and the enormous threat it poses to Alberta society. This is a time of unprecedented adversity, the greatest public health crisis since 1918 and potentially the greatest economic challenge in our province's history as we face the concurrent challenges of a global economic recession, a significant contraction in the Alberta and Canadian economies on top of which we are facing the largest collapse in energy prices in our history: all of that on top of five years of economic fragility and social adversity.

First, let me speak, Mr. Speaker, let me acknowledge the outstanding performance and effort of the thousands of Albertans leading the fight to protect public health and safety from the brilliant pandemic planners and managers at Alberta Health Services under the steady leadership of the chief medical officer of health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, to the doctors, nurses, and all front-line health care workers to the countless unsung heroes providing the entire spectrum of essential services.

Mr. Speaker, this is a moment for all of us as Albertans to appreciate so many people who perform essential work that, frankly, we often take for granted, from the truckers who are keeping our supply lines and supply chains operating to grocery workers who are stocking the shelves to janitors who are sterilizing workplaces across the province to child care providers offering important services to the children of essential workers to the volunteers in our charities, not-for-profit organizations and throughout the vast, remarkable movement of civil society to the countless acts of individual human kindness and compassion. To all of them, we thank them. Because of all of them we can say, united and with confidence, that Alberta is rising to the challenge of the coronavirus pandemic.

7:40

Mr. Speaker, to summarize the situation today in Alberta and across Canada, around the world, and particularly in the United States and in Europe, the number of novel coronavirus infections and fatalities continues to rise. The global number of reported infections rose to over 900,000 late today and the number of deaths attributed to the virus to roughly 46,000. Canada's latest totals are over 9,500 infections and just over 100 deaths. Here in Alberta testing has confirmed 117 new cases over the last 24 hours, bringing the total to 871.

Let me pause on that, Mr. Speaker. I know that many people will be alarmed to see that the total number of confirmed infections in our province has on a daily basis moved past 100 for the first time. While obviously that is of concern, please understand that the context is that we've had a surge in testing. Alberta, that was already maintaining the highest per capita incidence of COVID-19 testing in North America and one of the highest in the world, has further increased its testing regime in the past 24 hours, partly to make up for a backlog of testing because of a temporary shortage of materials that we now have in stock, and that reflects the increase to 117 new cases.

The important thing to understand, Mr. Speaker, is that the percentage of those tested who are confirmed to be infected by

COVID-19 remains constant at approximately 2 per cent, and thankfully we have not yet seen what epidemiologists would refer to as exponential growth in the curve of infections. That exponential growth would see a doubling every two or three days. In Alberta we have seen a doubling roughly every seven to nine days, so this seems to be some early success in our efforts to flatten the curve. Nevertheless, this has been the toughest week for our province, with the number of fatalities from COVID-19 increasing by eight, to a total of 11. I know I speak for all members of this Assembly in expressing our sincere condolences to the loved ones of those who have lost their lives and to all of those that they knew.

Let me speak to put a human face on the tragedy. I would like to express our deepest sympathies to the family of Shawn Auger, who passed away earlier this week from COVID-19. He was a father of three, a husband, and a valued team member at the Children's Services Youth Assessment Centre in High Prairie. While I never had the chance to meet Shawn, tributes are pouring in that show what a profound loss this is for the at-risk youth that he helped, many of them in our indigenous and Métis communities in northern Alberta. He was vice-president of the minor hockey board in High Prairie and organized hockey teams for indigenous kids. I know that he will be deeply missed. On behalf of all members our thoughts and prayers are with Shawn's wife, Jennifer, and their children together with the families of all of those loved ones of the victims of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, I must be candid with Albertans. The hard truth is this: things will get worse before they get better. That said, I also want everyone to know that Alberta's pandemic response is, I believe, second to none in North America. We are leading all provinces in per capita testing. I think at last report we were at 54,000 completed tests, and I believe by this time tomorrow we will be approaching 60,000 completed tests. We have one of the highest rates in the world, in fact. South Korea has been cited often as a model for testing and containment, and I am pleased to report to the Assembly that we have exceeded South Korea's per capita incidence of COVID-19 testing.

Alberta Health Services expects to take delivery soon of new COVID-testing equipment that will expand our capacity by thousands of tests per day, especially improving testing in rural and remote communities. That's very important, Mr. Speaker, particularly when it comes to, for example, our indigenous communities, with whom we have been working very closely. I want to commend the Minister of Indigenous Relations for being in constant touch with indigenous leaders across the province. I spoke last night to several of our chiefs, and they were very complimentary of the efforts of Alberta Health Services and Indigenous Relations to provide them with adequate information. I underscore that because our indigenous people tend to live in housing situations with high density, with an easier chance for transmission of a pandemic such as this, and it is very important that we get testing out to them.

The more we test, the better informed we will be about where the numbers are headed. As I say, it's important to note that so far only about 2 per cent of all tests in Alberta have come back positive, but bear in mind that we are only testing those who showed symptoms or who are identified as belonging to high-risk groups. Now, in the initial phase of testing, for roughly the first three weeks of our pandemic response, AHS was focused on people returning from abroad, so there was a higher focus on travellers or those closely connected to travellers given that initially all of the cases here were travel related. However, we have refocused our testing regime to high-risk groups of people who do not necessarily have a connection to travel, and that includes our medical professionals who have been treating COVID patients as well as the residents of

continuing care and seniors' residences, who are also uniquely vulnerable.

Moreover, based on the relatively modest trajectory of infections in Alberta compared to other jurisdictions, we believe that Albertans can be confident that we have the health care personnel and equipment and resources needed to cope with anticipated hospitalizations, including patients needing intensive care. Let me explain. I know all members of this place will understand this, but for members of the general public who may be viewing the debate, Mr. Speaker, the essential challenge for us is this. We need to expand the maximum capacity of our health care system to cope with the pandemic at the peak of infections and hospitalizations, particularly with respect to intensive care units equipped with ventilators and staff trained to use them. We must expand that capacity so that it exceeds the projected maximum number of infected patients in hospital beds, particularly the ICU wards.

I want to commend AHS for its diligent work under the direction of the hon. the Minister of Health, the president of Alberta Health Services, the Deputy Minister of Health, and all of those involved in the day-to-day planning. They have opened up hundreds of additional acute-care beds and ICU beds. Mr. Speaker, the AHS very presciently ordered an emergency supply of additional ventilators in January, when the coronavirus first manifested itself in China, even before – even before – the World Health Organization began to recognize human-to-human transmission and the global risk of this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, in the days to come I will be and the government will be providing Albertans with a detailed report on the modelling being done by AHS, Alberta Health Services, as well as a modelling in terms of the peak of infections, the peak of hospitalizations, the peak of ICU utilization, of ventilator utilization, and the increased capacity of our health services as well as the equipment and personnel that are available. But at this point I can assure the Assembly and, through it, Albertans that we are confident of our capacity to cope. We are confident at this stage that we will have excess hospital and health care capacity to deal with the peak of infections.

We cannot take that for granted, Mr. Speaker. We must all be diligent and alert to the possibility of a sudden spike in infections, and that is why we are engaged in planning for worst case scenarios that would involve the establishment of emergency backup hospital units and beds, ICU capacity, innovative use of ventilators. We are also constantly seeking to procure additional redundant equipment.

7:50

As the vice-president of AHS said today at our daily briefing, AHS estimates that we have adequate personal protection equipment for our health care workers that would last approximately four months. But that is not adequate, Mr. Speaker, and that is why we are engaged in extraordinary procurement efforts. For example, last week we placed an order for an additional 2 million N95 surgical masks with an overseas supplier, and we are engaged in extraordinary efforts to develop and procure critical supplies and equipment both here in Alberta and across Canada. We are working in co-operation both with the Public Health Agency of Canada and other provincial governments as well as diligent efforts with the private sector to source as much equipment as we can obtain, both ventilators and personal protection equipment, reagent for testing, and other critical supplies so that we have a redundant stockpile of these supplies in case we face a worst case scenario.

Mr. Speaker, in countries that were among the first affected and took countermeasures similar to the ones we have implemented in Alberta, countries like South Korea, we see that the number of recovered cases is in the range of 55 per cent of total infections and

rising. In Alberta the number of recovered cases is already 142, over 16 per cent of total infections. In British Columbia it's about 50 per cent. Now, they were, of course, ahead of the curve. I believe their first infection was about two and a half weeks prior to ours in Alberta. We now have enough data to model informed projection about what lies ahead, and as I said, the government will be providing much of that information in the days to come once it is finalized.

COVID-19 is an entirely new virus with unique characteristics that the global scientific community is racing to define and understand, so scenario projections are inevitably inexact, and we need the public to understand that. When we release projections or models, this is not a certainty; it is our best effort to plan. Albertans should take confidence, however, from the government's effective management, thanks to our tremendous professionals.

Let me start with a chronology of the actions we have taken to protect public health and safety to date. It started with working with AHS in January on contingency plans, particularly involving the implementation of a pandemic response plan and acquisition of resources such as testing materials and PPE. And let me say that AHS has been planning for this for at least six years, in 2014 having developed a pandemic influenza plan that was successfully exercised last November. Within days of the announcement of the first presumptive case of COVID-19 on March 5, the government of Alberta, acting on the advice of AHS, began taking aggressive action to contain the spread of the virus. Immediately following the World Health Organization declaration of a pandemic on March 11, the Emergency Management Cabinet Committee approved a recommendation to cancel large gatherings of more than 250 people and international events and to limit gatherings involving recent international travellers. We set up the online self-assessment tool – and kudos to those at AHS who developed it – and we massively expanded the 811 Health Link line capacity as well.

AHS ramped up testing. Major public awareness efforts were launched. We redirected all government advertising programs to COVID-19 awareness. Even our travel advertising budget was redirected to making snowbirds in the U.S. aware of self-isolation protocols upon return. We focused on the importance of rigorous hygiene and called on international travellers to self-isolate.

On March 15 we announced half a billion dollars in additional health funding, which was adopted by this House in the budget, to ensure that front-line professionals have the tools they need for testing, surveillance, and treatment of patients. On March 15 we made the very difficult decision to close daycares and K to 12 and postsecondary lecture halls.

On March 17 Alberta declared a state of emergency under the Public Health Act. Also on March 17 we committed \$60 million in emergency funding to civil society organizations, adult homeless shelters, and women's emergency shelters to enable social distancing and sanitation of common areas, provide supports and services to at-risk seniors, people with disabilities, and families facing homelessness, poverty, and social isolation.

On March 18 emergency isolation financial support was launched to enable people to stay home and contain the spread, and I know that there have been technical problems with the website. We regret that. I'll be honest, Mr. Speaker. The website, the IT infrastructure was never designed for demand of this nature. I think the highest peak demand in the past was 5,000 people applying for emergency payments during wildfires, and the last I've heard, we've had over 60,000 applications in a few days. The good news is that once people are able to apply, the cash transfers are happening very quickly, and I know that Service Alberta continues to work to improve service. By midnight tonight we will have disbursed over \$50 million. Even though that is the budget, we will

continue with those disbursements to satisfy demand until the federal supports kick in later this week.

On March 21 we amended the Emergency Management Act in this Legislature to allow provincial and local states of emergency to exist at the same time.

On March 23 we brought in new emergency building codes to enable doctors to conduct virtual visits with patients and to expand the role of pharmacists.

On March 25 we announced new measures to help stop the spread of COVID-19, including mandatory self-isolation for returning travellers, close contacts of COVID-19 cases, and people experiencing symptoms, as well as giving law enforcement agencies the full authority to enforce public health orders and issue fines. We did so, Mr. Speaker, through a ministerial order under the Public Health Act, and we are keeping our commitment to the Assembly to provide legislative authority for that in Bill 9, currently before the House. We will also be coming forward with an expansion of the delegated authorities to include municipal bylaw officers to enforce public health orders.

On March 28 we, upon the advice of the chief medical officer, reduced mass gatherings to no more than 15 people, closed nonessential and close-contact businesses, restricted vehicle access to parks, and boosted services on the mental health helpline.

New guidelines on personal protection equipment to protect health workers and guidelines for managers of industrial work camps as well as directions for operators of continuing care facilities, seniors' lodges, addiction treatment facilities, and for persons with disabilities were issued. I can say that the hon. the Minister of Justice will be bringing forward a package that reflects our efforts to prevent the spread in our correctional institutions, I believe as early as tomorrow.

For over a month the government of Alberta and Alberta public health officials have been carefully monitoring the situation in Canada and internationally. We're working closely with federal, provincial, and territorial partners to share information and to assess risks.

Mr. Speaker, on March 18 we announced initial financial support for Albertans affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including a deferral for 90 days of utility payments for residential and business customers. Let me say that we're working with utilities to ensure that the accumulated balance is amortized over the course of at least 12 months so that people don't run into a massive wall of liabilities in the summer. We also deferred student loan payments for six months, and the government is assuming the interest costs related thereto. We provided for a deferral of business taxes and other supports for employers.

On March 20 we announced new measures to address the economic crisis, including immediate relief for the energy sector by funding the Alberta Energy Regulator levy for six months, achieving \$113 million in industry relief to assist with critical liquidity. We extended the term of mineral agreements expiring in 2020 by one year to provide increased certainty for industry by allowing additional time to raise capital. In other words, as companies shut in their production and cancel their capital spending, we didn't want them to lose leasehold tenure. We've given them a year extension, at least, to get through this period.

We extended \$100 million earlier to the Orphan Well Association to bolster immediate reclamation efforts. Mr. Speaker, that's one of the reasons why we have legislation before the House, Bill 12, the Liabilities Management Statutes Amendment Act, 2020. I gather the opposition has raised questions about why we're bringing such legislation forward. The reason is that we need to bring forward to the Legislature any measure that can help us cope with the economic crisis, and that includes accelerating work on well

reclamation to put unemployed oil field service workers back to work. We are working very closely with the federal government and are optimistic that in the days to come we will receive an extraordinary federal investment in accelerated well reclamation and completion, and the streamlining included in Bill 12 will be very helpful to turn that into real jobs.

8:00

On March 20 we established an economic recovery council led by Dr. Jack Mintz and including the former Prime Minister Stephen Harper and a team of Alberta's top economic and business experts. We just met with them for the third time earlier today. We're getting fantastic input and advice from that group.

On March 23 we announced further financial supports, including an education property tax freeze, plus a six-month deferral for education property taxes for businesses, a Workers' Compensation Board premium deferral for the private sector, and the government assuming half the cost of WCB premiums this year to again help them with liquidity.

On March 27 we announced protection for residential renters and tax relief for hotels and other lodging providers, and we are working on a further package that looks at potential additional financial support for both renters and landlords at this time, both on the residential and the commercial sides. Today was payment day for tenants, Mr. Speaker, and we know that there are going to be a lot of small businesses and residential tenants who could not make rent today, and we ask their landlords to understand that as we work through these issues.

Mr. Speaker, this week, yesterday, in fact, I announced a historic investment on behalf of Albertans to plan for the future. As we deal on a day-by-day basis with the economic and public health crises, we cannot lose track of the future. The job of the economic council is to help us to plan for that future, but we must also act to create that future. Yesterday we made an announcement, to which I will speak tomorrow, to seize control of our own economic destiny with a historic investment to ensure the beginning of construction of the Keystone XL pipeline and its completion in 2023, a project that will, we believe, generate at least \$30 billion of additional royalties and revenues to the government of Alberta through higher energy prices and shipments over the next two decades. That is part of our long-term economic strategy to move beyond this time of crisis.

Mr. Speaker, let me also speak, however, to the backdrop there. The crash of oil prices is not attributable merely to the crash in global economic demand. That's the major part of it right now. This week western Canadian select has been trading as low as \$4 a barrel, less expensive than a fancy coffee. This is without precedent in our lifetimes. Here's the even more challenging news. With the direction of demand and supply, I will not be the least bit surprised if we reach a WCS price that is negative in the next two to three weeks. I will not be surprised if WCS price is less than zero, by which I mean that our producers will have to pay shippers to take away Alberta oil.

We expect, Mr. Speaker, that between the crash in demand and the predatory dumping by OPEC dictatorships, primarily the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – there is an armada of tankers filled to the gunnels headed from the Persian Gulf to the U.S. Gulf, that will completely saturate the U.S. Gulf refinery complex and will take inventories to tank tops in the southern United States and then in the Midwest, to the point where we will have nowhere to ship an incremental barrel of Canadian oil. I regret that this will likely result in widespread shut-ins of production in our conventional basin and then in our oil sands mines and then in our SAGD in situ projects. We are working hour by hour with our major producers to ensure that prospective shut-ins do not compromise permanently the assets of those companies and the people of Alberta in those projects.

That is why we are calling on the government of Canada once again urgently to come to the aid of Canada's largest economic subsector, the largest creator of jobs in Canada, the largest export industry of our country, responsible for \$120 billion of exports, responsible for 800,000 jobs in Canada. That is the Canadian energy sector, primarily located here in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, a third of the Canadian chartered banks' book liabilities and assets are tied up with the Canadian energy sector. As I've said before, the government of Canada took extraordinary action during the global financial crisis of 2008 to prevent the immolation of the Canadian auto sector, a sector that represents \$25 billion to our GDP. This is a sector that represents well north of \$100 billion, the largest subsector of the Canadian economy.

I can assure the House that the Minister of Finance and I and my staff are in constant contact with Ottawa, and I would like to take this opportunity once again to implore the national government to act with an extraordinary injection of liquidity through credit backstop for the industry that has done so much to generate revenues, to lift up living standards, and to create jobs from coast to coast. Earlier today, I understand, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador, the other province most heavily dependent on the energy sector, indicated that it is no longer able to finance its debt. Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta is now having very closely to manage its cash. I cannot stress sufficiently the importance of national leadership on this front.

Mr. Speaker, let me close by saying that I know that all of these challenges can seem overwhelming, but we must take this day by day while planning for the mid- to long term. As I said in my last speech on the pandemic, we must follow the spirit of the Blitz, to keep calm and to carry on, confident in the remarkable resilience and spirit, the entrepreneurial drive, and sense of solidarity of the people of Alberta. Together we will get through these challenging times.

The Speaker: The hon. the Leader of the Opposition has up to 15 minutes to respond.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today and address the unprecedented situation that we find ourselves in, facing the COVID-19 pandemic. This is without a doubt the most pressing public health emergency in recent memory. Alberta now has 871 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 117 more than yesterday, and I, too, on behalf of Alberta's Official Opposition want to send my sincerest of condolences to the families of the 11 Albertans that we've lost, including the families and friends of Shawn Auger.

It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, if you live in a big city or in a small town, this virus, this pandemic, is hurting all Albertans in every corner of our province, but at the same time I am also extremely proud of our province. We have responded as only Albertans can. Even as we're staying home, we're still looking for ways to help each other out, to protect each other, to lift each other's spirits.

The best of us, Mr. Speaker: well, they're working twice as hard. They're caring for our loved ones in hospitals and our parents in long-term care. They're restocking our grocery stores. They're volunteering in our shelters. They're checking in on kids in care. They're helping get support cheques into Albertans' bank accounts. They're teaching our kids, driving a bus, growing food, maintaining our food supply chain, filling prescriptions, maintaining infrastructure, trucking in supplies, and so much more. Every single one of these workers deserves our respect and our gratitude.

I want to say as well that so do all of our public officials. They're working day and night to find solutions to the unprecedented

challenges that we're facing in all sections of our society and giving their best advice to the government and to all Albertans. I know, too, that members of this government are working very hard, I'm sure. As I've said before, it's a 23/7 activity, I suspect. In particular, as well, I want to join the Premier in offering my thanks to Dr. Deena Hinshaw for her steady and calm demeanour. She has become a bit of a national celebrity as a result of the skill that she brings to her job, and she's giving all Albertans confidence that we have what it takes to get through this.

8:10

Now, of course, the primary issue in front of us is the health crisis and all the actions the government of Alberta is taking to protect the health and safety of the people of this province. I want to thank the Premier for outlining the work that's been done to date. I know that the Premier sometimes doesn't think so, including today when he said it in question period, but I actually think that there has been some good collaboration across the aisle. There have been some good actions taken by the government, some we recommended and some we were very pleased to see. In particular, I want to offer congratulations to the government for co-ordinating offers of donations and support from Albertans. If Albertans want to help but aren't sure how, they can go online now to alberta.ca/covid19, and there's a resource for that: how they can help, how they can chip in.

I know that even some of our ideas, the ideas of the Official Opposition, ideas that we shared, have been accepted and implemented by the government: utility costs have been deferred, student loan payments have been deferred, job-protected leaves are now ensured, some property taxes have been deferred. Of course, yesterday this House acted with great speed to pass legislation to better protect Alberta's renters. We pushed quite hard on that last one, and I'm glad that we were finally able to get that done.

Now, there are lots of important things happening right now to support people and get us through the next few months. There is bipartisan support for those things that we can act together on, and this also extends to our future. Now, the Premier talked about our economic situation, and I'll ask questions over the half hour specifically about some of the matters that relate to our energy industry, but no doubt the postpandemic economy will not be the same as it was. It will take time and effort and support to build us back up, and it will take bold ideas and new vision to make sure that we are set for the long haul.

We know we must maintain our economic prosperity. We must build on our strengths, but we must also diversify for our future. This will require new thinking and new ideas, bold ideas, and they will require us to work together and also abandon some of our old frames through which we approach economic challenges, which is why I would once again ask the Premier to consider striking an all-party committee to hear from experts and listen to ideas from people from all corners of expertise on these issues, with all types of different backgrounds, about how we can get our economy back on its feet in a way that makes it more resilient.

I understand that he has struck his own panel – we're aware of it, and that's great; there's no problem with that – but it would be nice to see the opportunity for bipartisan, open discussion and consideration for economic growth going forward in a more open forum, where all ideas can be injected with sort of a, you know, brainstorming, judgment-free kind of setting, where all Albertans can listen to the kinds of ideas and possibilities that could exist for our future and to frankly give all MLAs a bit more room to do their jobs and represent their constituents, including many MLAs on the government side.

Now, we did this in government a few times, and while we didn't always agree, there were often good suggestions and positive

changes that came from that work, and it was a genuine opportunity for better conversation. On this issue in particular, helping Alberta's economy postpandemic, I think we could all leave our allegiances at the door and work together or try very hard to work together to plan a better path forward for Alberta. So I reissue my request for the Premier to consider that.

Now, there are, of course, some areas where we don't agree now when it comes to how we're handling the pandemic. I need to be clear that when we talk about these issues, it is not an attack on the public service, nor is it even some form of an extreme partisan attack on the government. Rather, it is, in fact, the opposition doing what it's supposed to do: holding the government to account and asking hard questions, hard questions that are typically being put to us daily by tens of thousands of Albertans. And suggesting that the pandemic means we have to stop doing our job and just nod every time the government speaks: that's not giving credence to the work that we should be doing here in this building. As I said, it's absolutely not a criticism of the public service, who I know from experience are working very, very hard.

Let me talk about some of the issues. I'll start with health as that has the highest bearing, of course, on our response to COVID-19. First, we had a lot of talk about a \$500 million investment in fighting the pandemic. That is good, but here's the thing. The government failed to increase health spending in line with population plus inflation. So, essentially, the budget that we passed – sort of passed; put that a little bit in quotation marks – actually cut a billion dollars. So even with the additional \$500 million we're still about \$480 million behind.

Although the members opposite might think – you know, I'm sure they do believe that we have to find ways to pull money out of the health system because we spend too much and yada, yada. We've all heard that argument. I don't agree with that. But even if you do think that, I do believe that now is not the time for a full-scale reorganization to achieve that outcome of pulling money out of the system. The same goes for pausing plans to fire a number of registered nurses and many other front-line support staff. I don't think that we should get credit for saying that we'll fire them later. I think we need to just put that aside.

Lastly and most importantly – and we've raised this before – we have this protracted fight with doctors. We need to just let them do their job and focus on the pandemic. We know that the government has dropped two of the 11 changes to the doctors' agreement that was arbitrarily imposed upon them, but they have not dropped the rest. The amount of money that doctors working overtime in our hospitals will now be earning is still a big question, and many of them say that they believe they will now be suffering an income loss. They say it. I don't think they're saying it just to make things up. I think they believe it to be true. At the same time, more than 400 clinics are cutting staff or closing down permanently. These closures, by the way, will be mostly in rural areas. It will hurt people who already have the least access to health care. So I'm surprised that we haven't heard a little bit more about this from some of the government members whose communities this will affect.

Now education. It was absolutely prudent to close the schools. We absolutely agree with that, but as I said today, we weren't stopping education. We were just asking that kids not assemble in the schools. We needed to protect households, prevent the spread, and flatten the curve. What wasn't prudent was adding over 20,000 people to the unemployment line in one day. The government promised school boards that the funding they needed would be there throughout the rest of the year. You know that you did just under two weeks ago. Then with only a 15-minute heads-up that decision was changed on a Saturday. Then they say, you know, part of the answer to that was: well, those folks weren't working. But we've

heard from parents, we've heard from trustees, and we've talked to those people themselves. They were working.

Moreover, this move was compared to what happened in municipalities. We know that about 2,000 in each major city were also let go, but there the municipalities themselves negotiated with the unions. They got upfront notice and they made a plan to top up the amount that those folks were receiving through the federal program, exactly the kind of thing that the provincial governments across the country and the federal government have been imploring employers to do so that families do not suffer hardship. But we didn't do that. So that's unfortunate.

I want to talk about support for working people and for families just for a moment. We've seen some really positive things from this government, and I do want to say that is true. I mentioned the rental protections, the work on mortgage deferrals. The emergency isolation support is also a very good thing. The Premier is right. This government was, I believe, the second provincial government – Quebec and Alberta were the first two to announce this kind of thing, and it's going to help some people pay the rent and get by until the federal benefits kick in. However, the point that we've been making is that it does not bridge the gap as promised. The support is narrow. It leaves behind tens if not hundreds of thousands of Albertans who could use help and heard that they were getting help.

Now, the Premier suggests that they've paid out roughly 50,000 people. That makes sense: \$50 million, 50,000 people at \$1,000, there you go. But what we know is that there probably have been about 200,000 people who have lost their jobs in Alberta in just the last few weeks. The way the system has been set up, it has serious problems, as has been mentioned, and the Premier acknowledged that the online system struggles to meet the demand. So we have people who deserve help who might still get nothing and many, many others who expect help who will be told, when they finally get through, that they don't qualify.

I can tell you that in times like this, because we have been through a smaller version of this, one of the things that people need the most is clarity and transparency, and on this issue they're not getting it. They were told they were going to get this coverage, and then, unfortunately, the criteria is so narrow that most people are being told they don't qualify. So we urge you again to align the criteria for this \$1,000 payment with the criteria that the federal government put in for their process.

8:20

Now, I want to touch on shelters quickly. I think I'm going to run out of time, I'm afraid. I thought I had timed this to get it all in under 15 minutes but apparently not. Anyway, we will move into questions soon. In order for people to stay home, they need to have a place to stay. We can't have a major outbreak in this vulnerable population. Nobody wants that. We know that mayors have asked for different arrangements. We know that the chief medical officer of health has approved the current arrangements for homeless people, but we also know that it is not ideal, and it doesn't align with the recommendations that she has made for the rest of Albertans.

We believe that these people, these people in Alberta who do not have homes, are entitled to the same dignity and the same rights as other Albertans, and we also believe that the kind of set-up that we see these folks living in right now is bound to create a concentration of infections and disease spread. We are very concerned about that as well, so we ask and urge this government to reconsider that issue and to look at the kinds of strategies being considered by the city of Toronto now. We have the space. It's just a matter of dollars, and it is fundamentally important to controlling the spread of the virus over the course of the next 6 to 8 to 14 weeks.

Anyway, there has also been some very good work in supporting small business, and I want to congratulate the government on that. We have additional things that we would like to propose, and I will outline those in advance of a couple of my questions because I'm going to run out of time, Mr. Speaker.

In closing, Alberta is strong. I know that we will rise to this challenge. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to share ideas and ask questions. We have, as I said, been contacted by tens of thousands of Albertans who are looking for answers, so we're going to do everything that we can to do that and to work to build this province up. I know, as the Premier has said, that we will get through this and that we have to do everything we can to ensure that support goes to those people who need it the most, which is to all Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to Government Motion 17 we will now enter into a period of 30 minutes where the Leader of the Official Opposition will be able to question the hon. the Premier. At no point in time during the 30 minutes will either member speak for longer than a duration of two minutes.

The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you. Am I standing? I guess I'm standing. Okay. I wasn't sure about that.

Let me just say on the issue of economic development that we support the province's actions with respect to the WCB deferral, the tax deferral. We know the WCB deferral is actually probably the biggest throw to many small businesses, and we know that there have been a number of other things in terms of deferring other taxes for small businesses.

There are three things that we would like to see the government consider, and I'd like to ask the Premier if they will consider them. One is – and you mentioned it – some form of support for small businesses in terms of their rental and lease agreements. That's the first thing. The second thing is the kind of grant that we're seeing discussed in Ontario that would support small businesses to transfer to online business operations so that they can maintain their viability. It's a relatively small amount of money, and in some cases it can make all the difference. And the third thing, of course, is whether going forward – and I'll ask a little bit more about this – we can expand the criteria so that self-employed Albertans and small-business owners can also have their income protected in a way either through the current \$1,000 amount or, alternatively, through additional top-ups that we will be asking the government to consider in my next question.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the thoughtful questions. On the first one the Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism and her officials will be coming forward to the emergency cabinet committee I believe on Friday with some proposals to mitigate the financial stress of commercial tenants who have no cash now and are unable to make their lease payments. I have to say that this is an overwhelmingly huge problem. I'm sure the Leader of the Opposition will agree that the government of Alberta just simply does not have the fiscal capacity, particularly under current constraints, to cover a substantial portion of the rent liabilities of small and medium-sized enterprises for this month, let alone the next three or six months. We are looking at various options. We do call upon landlords to be reasonable. Evicting businesses at this point would be counterproductive for landlords because there's nobody to fill that empty space. But we would take on board any practical ideas the opposition has.

On the second point we actually are – I appreciate the point – working with Shopify on expanding opportunities for Alberta SMEs to market their products and to engage in commerce online, and we hope to have something concrete to release in the near future in that respect.

Finally, with respect to expanding the criteria for the self-employed. Mr. Speaker, the emergency isolation payment, to be clear, is a public health measure to provide an emergency income to people who had to self-isolate without an income so that they didn't have to choose between working and staying at home. But the federal government has included in its expanded EI package support for the self-employed.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you. Let me just sort of try to finish this piece, then. In terms of the relationship with the federal government's program and their CERB, which is a pretty generous program, as, quite frankly, was the 70 per cent wage subsidy program that they announced – that was a very big throw. I suppose I should take this opportunity to offer our thanks for that. I don't know that we were necessarily expecting quite that big of a throw to small business.

I want to talk a little bit about the CERB and the \$2,000 a month. Although in some cases that will be an adequate amount of money for some people, for a lot of families, let's say a family of four with only one working parent who was previously earning, you know, \$70,000, \$80,000 a year and now has no income, you can imagine very quickly that that \$2,000 a month is not going to go very far for that family of four. It'll be great – well, it won't be great, but it'll be manageable for a family of one, maybe two, but for four you're in trouble. So my question is: will the government consider some version of a needs-based top-up to that \$2,000 per month essentially from the federal government in order to supplement where there is real financial hardship created by that amount, and in so doing, would that also, then, be made available not only to people who were employees but, you know, self-employed folks and small-business owners?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, the answer is a conditional yes. We would be prepared to consider that. You know, we're open to all sorts of ideas. I agree with the Leader of the Opposition that the \$2,000 federal payment is likely inadequate for many families who may have a much higher burn rate and larger liabilities, larger families.

Mr. Speaker, I'd just ask the Leader of the Opposition to work with us on these challenges. As I've said in this place before, we only have so much fiscal powder. We have already committed to roughly \$9 billion in incremental spending or deferrals, and we have seen our revenues sideswiped. We're looking at a projected revenue shortfall this year of \$7 billion to \$10 billion. You take \$9 billion in incremental spending and deferrals, \$7 billion to \$10 billion of revenues that have disappeared – as I've said, we're having a lot harder time floating bonds to finance the shortfall than we've had probably at any time since the 1950s. That's not an excuse. We are prepared to do everything we can, but we can't do everything we want, so we have to prioritize. We have to take a look at: what are the top priorities? When we get past the pandemic, what do we do to help those small and medium-sized enterprises to get back to work, to get restocked on inventory, to cope with their debt so they can hire people again?

8:30

I'm standing here saying, Mr. Speaker, that we don't have obvious solutions to these problems, and we're open to a potential

top-up to some of these federal payments, but doing things like that may mean we lose the chance to do other essential things in the recovery phase.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: All right. That's true, so it is a question of priorities. There's no question about that.

Let me just shift a little bit to some of the conversation that we've seen with respect to the energy industry. Now, I too have spoken with people who talk about the fact that WCS may well get into negative territory very quickly and that we could actually see a system-wide or province-wide experience of shutting in very quickly. The Premier will remember that we went through a much smaller version of this – much smaller – in the fall of 2018 when we ran out of takeaway capacity, and we took the rather unorthodox step of engaging in curtailment, a strategy which was initially criticized but ultimately adopted although relieved to some degree. The point of curtailment, as much as it was an unorthodox thing which I had no desire to do, to be quite honest – that was not a thing that we wanted to be doing. We wanted to let the business do what the business does, but we became aware that if we didn't structure it properly, as owners of the resource Albertans would lose out in a number of different ways because the market doesn't necessarily work perfectly as it relates to the best interests of Albertans, who are the owners of the resources and the beneficiaries of our energy industry. As a result, we engaged in a global sort of arrangement.

So my question, then, is: is the provincial government looking at a similar structured arrangement around shut-ins to make sure that the consequences are strategically executed?

The Speaker: The Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll remind the hon. Leader of the Opposition that when I was in her position and she was in my position, I supported the then government's curtailment policy. I think it was the right thing to do, and subsequent events have confirmed that.

Mr. Speaker, we are of the view that further government-mandated curtailment at this point would be essentially pointless because there already is massive voluntary curtailment. In fact, I'm told that the Enbridge main line, which ships about 80 per cent of our energy out of the province, has about 150,000 barrels per day of unused capacity. That's a reflection of voluntary shut-ins. If we were to try to interpose the government in the midst of this negative price environment and to micromanage which producers, conventional versus heavy versus oil sands mines versus in situ, if we were to try to calibrate who gets to produce what when they're all shutting in anyway, I just don't see a way forward. That's the advice of the officials, the same officials who ultimately advised the then Premier to proceed with curtailment.

I must confess that apart from one single small producer I've not had any requests for government to step in with more aggressive forms of curtailment. I think what we need to look at, however, is a continental energy policy that tries to protect North America from predatory dumping by OPEC. I've begun that discussion with American officials. I would like to pursue concepts like an import tariff on foreign oil that's been dumped into the North American market during this crash in demand.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, thank you for that answer. I will say that some of the folks that we are talking to are actually still suggesting that there would be ultimately a benefit to managing the shut-in process, understanding that it's a virtual thing that's going to

happen with greater and lesser degrees of industry ability to restart once it's happened. I guess we'll just continue that discussion later.

I'm wondering, then. Now, the Premier has talked about and certainly the Finance minister has talked as well about a package for our energy industry coming from the federal government. My question is that the Premier mentioned just very briefly a massive credit backstop to ensure liquidity I think it was, basically. I am wondering: can you share with the House the specifics of what is being considered or what is being asked for from the federal government and what advice you've received in terms of when we can expect to see a relief package from the federal government for the energy industry? Certainly, we are hearing as though that is a thing that we can expect to see, but the question is: what has the specific ask been, and what is the ETA in your mind or your expectation of when we'll see an answer on that?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, what we have shared – I don't want to share all the details because this is a matter of some political sensitivity, quite frankly, but let me just say that there have been public estimates that the need for liquidity runs in the range of \$20 billion to \$30 billion for the Canadian oil and gas sector. It is our estimation that our largest producers, who have improved their balance sheets and compressed their costs, are in a position to survive the current price scenario for a period of time but that our small and intermediate-sized producers are much more vulnerable, particularly given that they cannot raise capital on either the equity or the debt side. That also applies, of course, to the service sector.

One of the instruments that has been discussed is some form of credit backstop where effectively the federal Crown would offer credit instruments, loan guarantees for example, perhaps through a vehicle like the Business Development Bank or another federal entity and that energy companies and other enterprises that are uniquely distressed right now – like, for example, airline companies, perhaps tourism operators – could access that extraordinary source of credit at commercial rates. I do note that the federal government has commendably already rolled out a number of credit backstop instruments generally for the economy, including SMEs. We thank and commend them for that, but this is one sector that's in particular need of that kind of support.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Okay. Thank you. I'm going to switch gears just a little bit to Health. Now, as the Premier mentioned, there is some forthcoming information with respect to modelling and also information around availability of beds and all those things we saw from B.C. at least. I think it was last week that they talked about how they'd been able to free up over 4,000 beds, and there were some other stats which I don't have at my fingertips. My specific question is this. How many beds have we at this point been able to free up through deferring surgeries, getting rid of nonessential surgeries or elective surgeries, all that kind of stuff? At one point I had heard a number of about 2,500, and I'm wondering whether we've been able to make further progress on that. You know, B.C. is talking about over 4,000. I think we have some work to do.

Then I'm also curious as to whether there have been additional beds secured, you know, finding them in different spots. What is the overall number, what is the ETA for those beds actually being available, and what does your modelling suggest is going to be the maximum number of beds that we are going to require?

8:40

The Speaker: The Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. First of all, AHS has, they report, freed up 1,300 acute-care beds to date and are on track to make 2,250 beds available by April 22. That would be roughly three weeks in advance, so the projected peak of hospitalizations for COVID-19. I'm sorry; I don't have a briefing note with all of the current projections, but they would continue to see more beds available throughout late April and into the month of May. The current plan is to release all those details early next week.

AHS is just constantly refining their modelling. I think they've done very good work in creating excess capacity. Now, that's based on the projected peak; however, of course, they are including in their modelling a negative scenario where we would see a sudden and vertical growth in infections and hospitalizations, and for that reason they are working on backup facilities. That would include, for example, engaging prospectively the Canadian Armed Forces, temporary facilities for emergency beds. But, Mr. Speaker, for that negative scenario to become real would require a velocity of infections significantly higher than what we are currently seeing, so we are confident that we will be capable to cope with the peak of hospitalizations.

Ms Notley: Well, I guess I just want to follow up on that a bit. I mean, you know, I don't have anywhere near the information that the Premier has, but if B.C. is looking at about 4,200 beds, one would think that we would be looking at needing 3,500 – I'm simply using that as a guide – unless there's some reason to believe that we've bent the curve much more effectively than B.C. If we've got 1,300 that we've freed up now and then we've got another 900 to work on in the next three weeks, the question is: aren't we about a thousand or so short? Can we get a bit more detail on where exactly we would be looking to find those other thousand-ish beds, or are my numbers wrong and we don't need as many? That's my question.

The Speaker: The Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. We'll have to double-check on British Columbia's projections. I understood that the number of beds that they're freeing up is significantly less than what the leader is quoting. I'm not suggesting that she is misleading the House, but I would like to more closely analyze British Columbia's efforts. We have about 8,500 acute-care beds in the Alberta system. As I say, we estimate that by April 22 roughly 2,250 of those will be set aside for prospective COVID patients. We currently have about 509 intensive care unit spaces in the AHS system, and the plan is by April 22 to nearly double those to 925. I think, from memory, that the AHS current projection for ICU utilization on that date is in the range of 250, substantially below the projected capacity for intensive care.

The Speaker: Just for the benefit of the Leader of the Opposition and the Premier, there are approximately 10 minutes remaining in this block of questioning that is available to you.

Mr. Kenney: I'm sorry. That's ventilators, not ICU.

Ms Notley: Ventilators was the 925.

Mr. Kenney: Yeah.

Ms Notley: Right. My understanding is that not all beds involve ventilators, right? Some beds involve other levels of care, and then the ICU ones are the ones that involve the ventilators.

I am wondering if perhaps the Premier could table the AHS numbers or briefing notes or whatever perhaps in time for tomorrow, what information they have. That would be very helpful.

I want to move to another area. There are so many areas to cover, but this is one that I think has revealed itself as a pretty important issue over the last little bit. This relates to the issue around the housing of homeless people as we are telling homeless Albertans to shelter in place and to exercise social distancing and all those things. We have seen picture after picture of very large centres, you know, hundreds of mats or beds, where the mats and the beds appear to be within two metres of each other. Certainly, we are looking at people being collected in rooms that are well above 15 and well above 50, maybe around 250. Then, of course, we're not clear, when we see those pictures, on how many bathrooms there are, how much access there is to water, where people gather to get water, all those things.

Now, I appreciate that the chief medical officer of health has indicated – oh, I guess I'm running out of time. I want to know what work is being done to reconsider and look at using hotel rooms to keep these folks safe.

The Speaker: The Premier.

Mr. Kenney: First, allow me to correct myself, Mr. Speaker. I should have said that we have currently available for use 509 ventilators. The plan is, by the end of April, to have 925 available. In terms of ICU beds, we currently have 295. We hope to expand that to 1,200. I will certainly table modelling statistics when they're available from AHS. I don't anticipate that will be tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of the homeless, we are deeply concerned. I appreciate the member raising these matters. First of all, we provided an immediate cash injection of \$30 million to provide for supplementary emergency shelter space. We've done that in Edmonton with the Expo Centre, in Calgary with the convention centre as well as additional overflow capacity working with delivery agencies like Hope Mission, Inn from the Cold, the Mustard Seed, and the drop-in centre.

Mr. Speaker, hotels are being used in some cases. For example, in Calgary hotel rooms have been leased for isolation and quarantine. Inn from the Cold, all roughly 2,000 of their families have been housed in apartments. There is additional federal money to surge into housing-first initiatives, where lower needs homeless people will be able to find apartment accommodation. In terms of the emergency shelters, many of the higher needs individuals do require some level of supervision because we have people who in some cases are at risk of self-harm, for example.

We are complying carefully with the guidelines of Dr. Hinshaw. Residents are not sleeping side to side; they are staggered in a way that she believes is safe in terms of transmission.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is really quite troubling to me because we know that the chief medical officer of health would not recommend that any of us go into a place like the Expo Centre and sleep in as much proximity with each other as is happening in our homeless shelters. We know that there is excess hotel space throughout both cities, and we also know that there are other means of keeping people safe and supporting them if they are at risk for self-harm. Quite frankly, we know that gathering them together in places where there are 300, 250-plus cots that are, you know, a metre apart or even two metres apart yet at the same time they're sharing bathrooms, they're sharing places to get water, they're running around, is a risk. Quite frankly, I would argue that

statistically that is a bigger risk than self-harm. The reason we know it's a risk is because it's not what the chief medical officer of health is recommending for anyone but homeless people.

It goes back to the point that every citizen of Alberta needs to be treated the same and with the same level of dignity. You know the saying: you measure a society's response to an emergency or anything else by how they treat their most vulnerable. These folks are our most vulnerable, and we can find ways. I mean, we're looking at about 2,500 people across the province. There is room for them, and there are a lot of folks looking for work who could support them with respect to the mental health needs that have been referenced. So I would really urge the Premier to reconsider that and focus on keeping these people safe because it's also a public health issue for everyone else as well.

8:50

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, the government is doing everything it can to keep homeless people safe from this pandemic. I want to thank and commend the hon. the Minister of Community and Social Services for her truly diligent efforts in this respect. She has visited, I think, every major homeless shelter and many of the overflow shelters across the province. She is in daily contact with the managers of these shelter spaces. We are following the best advice from homeless shelter operators and from the chief medical officer of health. I have to my immediate left the former executive director of the largest homeless shelter in the province, who will confirm that there are certain high-needs homeless people who are not optimally put in isolation for a number of complex reasons or supervision is the best approach.

I can assure the member that, for example, at the Expo Centre they are spread out more than two metres apart. They are staggered in a way that infection is – Mr. Speaker, let me put it this way. The AHS public health officers are inspecting all of the homeless shelters on a daily basis, sometimes multiple times a day. We have deployed additional AHS resources. They are offering more rigorous screening and training to homeless shelter staff. We have deployed personal protection equipment to homeless shelter staff. There are enhanced sanitation protocols in place, and in some cases, where it makes sense, hotels are being used, for example, for quarantine and self-isolation.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there are two minutes remaining in the 30 minutes that has been allotted. I'm more than happy to provide that time to the Leader of the Official Opposition, or if she would like a response, perhaps she would keep her question short as well.

Ms Notley: Absolutely. Well, I would just say that there is a difference between isolating somebody in a hotel room, separate from everybody else, and ensuring that homeless people are housed in smaller groups, groups of five or 10 or 15, and also making sure that people are available there to keep an eye on them. You know, we have got hundreds of folks together in the same place. It is a hazard. To sort of group all people who are homeless along with those who are the most challenging to house is disrespectful to them, and it's resulting now in disrespectful treatment.

I need to move to long-term care, so what I'm going to do probably is set up the next presentation by a minister. We have a number of challenges with long-term care staffing, staff moving from one place to another. We are concerned about that practice as well as their testing – how often they are tested, if they are tested regularly – and if we have ways to accelerate or amplify or raise their compensation so that we can get more long-term care workers in place and reduce the degree to which they are moving from

institution to institution because we know that that is a very significant problem in long-term care centres around Alberta.

The Speaker: I hate to interrupt. The time has expired, but I think it's reasonable to allow the Premier to respond. Well, perhaps, by the look from the table, we'll need unanimous consent to allow the Premier to respond for a time of two minutes. Perhaps the Government House Leader would like to move such a request.

Mr. Jason Nixon: I would be happy, Mr. Speaker, to move for unanimous consent for the hon. the Premier to respond to the Leader of the Opposition's question for a maximum of two minutes.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Premier for up to two minutes.

Mr. Kenney: First, I just wanted to supplement my answer to an earlier question, Mr. Speaker. I would invite the hon. Leader of the Opposition to watch the response of Dr. Hinshaw, chief medical officer, at her briefing earlier today about her own guidelines with respect to the density at homeless shelters because she points out – well, I won't go into the details. I'll refer the leader to that answer.

On the question of long-term care or continuing care facilities the leader is quite right to be concerned. That is where I think we find the greatest vulnerability to this kind of influenza pandemic, as underscored by our chief medical officer. Just today the emergency management committee of cabinet approved additional public health orders with respect to the administration of continuing care facilities and seniors' residences. I believe those will be published tomorrow by the Minister of Health. We are very concerned about that.

We are concerned about staff going from one institution to another. Now, having said this, there is a practical concern. As we impose greater constraints for hygiene and public health reasons, some of the continuing care facilities may find real challenges accessing adequate labour to care for the seniors who are there, so Dr. Hinshaw and her team are working closely with the Alberta Continuing Care Association and the residences to enforce more stringent protocols that do not inhibit their ability to feed their residents, to provide medical care to their residents. We agree that this is a matter of great urgency, and I assure the Leader of the Opposition that the chief medical officer is very alive to that.

The Speaker: Hon. members, thank you for your co-operation, and a special thank you to the Government House Leader for moving such a request for unanimous consent.

We will now proceed to debate in the following manner. Any member of Executive Council may now make a statement that will not exceed 10 minutes. It's my understanding that that may be the hon. Minister of Health, but only time will tell. Immediately following that statement any other private member may pose questions relevant to the statement or the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This question-and-response period must not exceed 15 minutes, and neither questions nor responses may exceed two minutes at any one time.

I will now call upon the hon. Minister of Health to make his statement not exceeding more than 10 minutes.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very happy to speak to this motion tonight. The COVID-19 pandemic is a serious challenge for our province. This virus is dangerous, and we must all do our part to limit the spread of COVID-19 throughout Alberta. As reported today by Dr. Deena Hinshaw, the chief medical officer of health, there are now 11 COVID-related deaths in Alberta. My

heartfelt condolences go out to the families and the loved ones of those individuals. Every loss of life is a tragedy. It is also a call to action and serves as a reminder of how serious this pandemic is. We must all do everything we can to stop the transmission and to limit spread.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Alberta now has 871 cases of COVID-19, and this includes 527 cases in the Calgary zone alone, 219 cases in the Edmonton zone, 57 in the central zone, 51 cases in the north, 12 cases in the south zone, and 5 cases in Alberta have yet to be confirmed. This week we have seen a large jump in the number of positive COVID-19 cases. As the Premier said, that might seem on the face of it to be alarming, Madam Speaker, but it is the result of our provincial labs completing a backlog of tests. They're now back up to working at full capacity. Our labs continue to do incredible work. AHS has conducted more than 4,500 tests in the last 24 hours. Of these around 98 per cent came back negative, an indicator in line with previous days. Last night we also passed a significant milestone, with over 50,000 tests completed in this province. I would like to again acknowledge the tremendous work of our laboratory testing, which continues to lead many other jurisdictions, especially when we compare ourselves on a per capita basis.

Of the total 871 cases we suspect that 94 may be through community transmission. I was pleased to hear that 142 Albertans have now recovered. That is 22 more than yesterday. This is good news, and I'm happy to see that this number is increasing daily.

At this moment our greatest concern is the health and the safety of those in continuing care and other congregant settings. Alberta currently has 41 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in our continuing care facilities in this province. This includes suspected outbreaks in four locations across the province. To date 35 cases have been confirmed at the McKenzie Towne long-term care centre, one case has been confirmed at Carewest Glenmore Park, one case has been confirmed at the Foyer Lacombe nursing home, and four cases have been confirmed at the Shepherd's Care Kensington location. Each of these outbreaks needs close attention, Madam Speaker. AHS is working closely with each site to do everything possible to protect its residents while also ensuring that they continue to get the daily care and the support that they need.

9:00

Updated operational standards are now enforceable by law at all congregate settings to further protect both the residents and the staff. Strict infection protection protocols have been implemented at each site, and this includes requiring enhanced cleaning multiple times every day and daily screening of all staff. AHS's medical officers of health are also in daily contact with these sites and, where needed, are providing additional support to make sure that enhanced care and enhanced cleaning standards are followed. These are measures that are being followed across Canada and have been proven to stop outbreaks of influenza and other viruses.

I can't stress this enough, Madam Speaker. All Albertans must follow Dr. Hinshaw's recommendations in order to limit transmission and to protect our most vulnerable in this province. Aggressive public health measures continue province-wide to limit the spread of COVID-19 and protect Albertans. To protect the health and the safety of Albertans, law enforcement agencies now have full authority to enforce public health orders and to issue fines for violations.

Public health orders include mandatory 14-day self-isolation for returning international travelers or close contacts of people with confirmed COVID-19 as well as mandatory 10-day self-isolation for people with symptoms that are not related to pre-existing illness

or a health condition, including cough, fever, shortness of breath, runny nose, or a sore throat. Another is restrictions on mass gatherings and businesses. New operational protocols, including limited visitation, are now enforceable for all nursing homes, designated supportive living and long-term care facilities, seniors' lodges, and any facility in which residential addiction treatment services are offered under the Mental Health Services Protection Act.

Today the chief medical officer of health created an exemption for critical medical appointments, including appointments for the purposes of COVID-19 testing as long as it's done safely, and critical health appointments as long as the patient discloses to the health care setting that they are under self-isolation. We encourage patients throughout the province with an upcoming critical health appointment to speak to their doctor about how to safely access needed medical care.

Public health orders are not suggestions, Madam Speaker, nor are they guidelines. They are the law, and they must be followed. Violators may be subject to tickets of \$1,000 per occurrence. Courts could also administer fines of up to \$100,000 for a first offence and up to \$500,000 for a subsequent offence for more serious violations. If Albertans are aware of individuals, businesses, or organizations violating public health orders, they can now submit a complaint to AHS public health inspectors.

Our government announced an additional \$500 million, Madam Speaker, committed to the COVID-19 response and to give Alberta's public health officials the resources that they need to respond and keep Albertans safe. The new funding will ensure that front-line health professionals have the tools that they need for testing, that they need for surveillance, that they need for treatment of patients as the province works to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This is truly an unprecedented public health emergency for Alberta. Our government is committed to bolstering the efforts of our front-line health professionals with the resources that they need to continue protecting the province. Alberta's public health workers are doing an outstanding job, and we're here to support them with whatever they need.

In the coming days and months we must all exercise caution. The most important measure that Albertans can take to prevent respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19, is to practise good hygiene. This includes cleaning your hands regularly for at least 20 seconds, avoiding touching your face, coughing or sneezing into your elbow or sleeve, disposing of tissues appropriately, and staying home and away from others if you are sick. Anyone who has health concerns or is experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 should complete an online COVID-19 self-assessment, and we're encouraging all Albertans to visit alberta.ca/covid19 for recommendations on protecting yourself and your community.

Now, in conclusion, Madam Speaker, I want to thank the thousands of doctors, nurses, and other health professionals who are working around the clock to help identify, to help isolate, and to help treat the cases of COVID-19 throughout our province. I know that this outbreak is putting a significant burden on you and your families. Your dedication is a reminder that our province has a long track record of overcoming adversity.

I also want to thank Dr. Deena Hinshaw for her dedication to Albertans and her continued efforts to provide the province with critical public health information. Each of us needs to do our part and to follow Dr. Hinshaw's advice to adhere to all public health recommendations. I want to state again that every Albertan needs to take this very seriously. If you're sick, stay home. I know that some of these recommendations are significant to the daily lives of Albertans, but this is the best way to help slow the virus and to

protect the health of all those around us. As Dr. Hinshaw has said often, we are strongest together.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much. I'm just going to try to follow up a little bit on some of the questions that I was asking the Premier, and then I'll pass over questions to my colleague the critic for Health. On the matter of disability and continuing care centres, this is obviously a huge, huge issue, so I have a few questions about it. First of all, when we banned, for good reason – no one is questioning it, but we said that visitors couldn't come and family couldn't come and nobody else could come in. There was, without question, a measurable drop in care experienced by residents of continuing care because families have long since provided that care or, conversely, have hired private people to come in to provide that care. The first question is: was there any effort made to bump up long-term care staff to accommodate that issue?

The second question is: if there is a plan coming tomorrow, although it would be lovely if you could tell us tonight, to limit staff moving from a continuing care centre to another continuing care centre, is it the plan to compensate those staff for the loss of income that arises from that limitation? Obviously, the reason long-term care staff move from centre to centre is because they can't get full-time work at either, so they're moving. This is required for them to pay their families – not to pay their families; well, some of them may feel like they're paying their families – and to feed their families. The point is: is there a plan to compensate long-term care workers associated with any limitation on their ability to be in more than one spot?

Thirdly, what is the current testing protocol for workers in continuing care? I'm sure they must all be tested initially, but they must be getting retesting, I'm hoping. Are they getting retested, and how frequently?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. For the first question, about the efforts to bump up staff: I agree. We were aware, when we were approached by Dr. Hinshaw with this recommendation regarding the limitation of essential visitors, that much of the care in these facilities does come from loved ones who come to visit every day their loved ones in one of those facilities.

As the hon. leader knows, throughout continuing care about 80 per cent of the capacity in the system is through independent providers; 20 per cent of it is through AHS. I understand that AHS has made efforts to try to make sure that that is one of their considerations as they are looking at their workforce capacity throughout the system on an ongoing basis as well, especially when we have to consider when the peak for COVID-19 is going to hit this province and what their workforce capacity is going to be. I understand from them that that is one of the things that they have considered in their workforce capacity, to make sure that everyone in those facilities is going to get the care that they need, the treatment that they need, Madam Speaker. I understand from AHS that they're doing everything they can to make sure that happens.

9:10

They're also working because – as we know, AHS in continuing care wears many hats. One of them is as a provider for that 20 per cent of the capacity in the system in continuing care but also as the regulator and as the funder as well. So through those two hats that they wear, I understand that they are also speaking to their remaining independent providers throughout the system to be able

to understand and make sure that the patients in continuing care are going to get the care and the treatment that they need.

The second question was regarding limitations of staff moving. Yes, I understand, Madam Speaker, that this is a difficulty for especially our health care aides.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, and thank you, Minister, for that update on that. I did want to also just say thank you; your staff and your office have been quite co-operative with the staff of my office on a couple of these issues around continuing care. They've been able to exchange information to address some situations, so I want to say thank you very much for that collaboration. It's been greatly appreciated.

Moving along, I guess, one of the things I am interested in talking about a bit is the question of personal protective equipment. I think there is some confusion amongst some in the community about when PPE is necessary, in what situations, even sometimes with front-line staff. I've had people reach out to my office who've expressed concern about home-care workers coming by and not wearing a mask, about: when is that appropriate, and when is that not? Some people suspect that the recommendations at their site may be influenced by a scarcity of supplies. I was wondering, Minister, if you would consider committing to perhaps publishing fact sheets that could be released in the near future as to what PPE, in fact, should be worn and when for the public, for health care workers, and for other workers who have to interact with the public, to help sort of set that at ease.

Along the same lines, I know that there seems to be some confusion about the supplies of PPE, and I did hear the Premier say that, you know, we have adequate numbers, that we're securing more. Yet I look online and I see a GoFundMe for personal protective equipment for Calgary health care that's raised \$55,000 that was started by a doctor in Calgary. So there seems to be some concern amongst some in the community. I've heard it from respiratory therapists and other folks who are concerned about their access to PPE in different aspects of their work, so if you could provide, perhaps, some information on how that's being assessed. Would it be possible, like during the Fort McMurray fire, when the government published daily updates about how many firefighters, helicopters, tankers, et cetera, to maybe provide Albertans with information about what actual supplies we have, how those are being allocated, just to put folks at ease on that and perhaps to help some of these different groups? I know the Alberta funeral association reached out to me . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the questions. I'll try and speak a little more quickly. I'll just go back to the second question from the hon. leader. We are aware of that issue for some of those employees who may lose hours. We're speaking to some of our independent providers as well as AHS to be able to understand if there are steps that we can take for those folks who are affected by having some of their hours affected in their compensation because of locations they can work in.

Testing protocols. We have worked with Dr. Hinshaw to be able to prioritize those who are working in both AHS as well as our continuing care facilities, to make them a priority and make sure they're tested. They are being tested – that is to say, with a swab – if they present with symptoms so that they are prioritized, so that we can get the results back for that employee, so that they can get back to working as quickly as possible. That's why they're

prioritized. There are also some precautions taken, before they begin a shift, to make sure that they're not presenting with a fever or other symptoms before they begin, but they're not doing a swab.

We are doing an immense amount of work to be able to get, hopefully even by the end of this week, and drastically increase the number of tests that we're going to be doing in this province. Still, we have 4.3 million Albertans. Many people who have been tested already, especially if they are already working in the system, may have to get tested again if they present with symptoms later on. So that's a concern that we have to also consider when we're testing those folks who are in the health system and making them a priority for testing.

On PPE for front-line staff, as one who believes very strongly in transparency, while this is a decision of AHS, it's a clinical decision about when appropriate use is for PPE; for example, an N95 mask as opposed to a surgical mask. That is something that I very strongly believe is a decision that should be made by the physicians.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, on similar lines, I was wondering, I guess, in terms of – we've seen that the U.S. government has released some very detailed information about their forecast for the number of cases, hospitalizations, fatalities, and those are very sobering numbers. We completely understand that the trajectory of the pandemic here in Alberta is going to be decided by our behaviour and some of the practices that we have in place.

To the minister, just asking: is that information that can then be made public? I did hear the Premier make reference to, I guess, some modelling that's being done. If that information could be provided to the public, I think that's helpful in understanding the challenges in the system and also for folks in understanding perhaps how long they may be looking at some of the issues or some of the practices that are being required or closing of businesses. With that, it would also be helpful, I think, to know, in terms of the best and worst case scenario, what the forecast might be for numbers of cases, numbers of hospitalizations, numbers of deaths.

Talking again about the long-term care facilities – well, actually, pardon me. To speak more about home care on that, that is something that I heard about from quite a few people who have concerns about family members who are not receiving home-care services that have been deemed nonessential, things like shower assistance and those sorts of things. If we are looking at an extended period, are there any plans to help mitigate that or help provide those supports to family members to be able to help provide that to their parents or to find ways that we can work with home care to be able to provide those supports for seniors and others who may require them over that period of time when we are looking at isolation?

Also, in terms of, I guess, long-term care and seniors, I heard you talking a bit there about increasing inspections. Just curious: how is that working between – have we brought in, indeed, additional inspectors through AHS to be able to go out and do that work amongst the private long-term care facilities to ensure that they're following proper protocols?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'll just finish answering the previous question regarding the appropriate use of PPEs. I'm very happy to be able to speak to AHS and to work with them on providing more transparency publicly. I understand that they have worked over the last couple of weeks to make sure that it's very clear to AHS employees and our physicians throughout the

province about appropriate use of surgical masks versus N95 respirators and other PPEs, when they should be used, and when alternatives are appropriate. I'm very happy to make sure that I work with AHS to provide public transparency regarding those decisions.

For modelling, actually, maybe three weeks ago we started working on modelling. COVID-19: our information was limited to only a few countries, unfortunately, at that time. We did our best to be able to start doing that modelling. We started working with epidemiologists on being able to work with them, but it involves hundreds of assumptions and data that's not specific to Canada, not specific to Alberta, so it admittedly was very difficult work. The modelling is dynamic. It is changing over time, which is actually, I think, a feature. Now that we have Canada-specific and Alberta-specific information, I think that our modelling is getting quite sophisticated, and we're happy to take steps in the near future on making that disclosed to the public so people can see what we're expecting for a probable scenario as well as an elevated scenario.

Now that we're aware of how we think social distancing and other measures that we've taken might have been able to push out our peak and how they have flattened our curve, how long people are expected, from the cases that we've seen already on ventilators in ICUs, to be in those ICUs . . .

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Minister.

Just to return to the question of long-term care, then, and to follow on the Leader of the Opposition, just to reiterate a couple of things that she had been touching on there, first of all, if we could just clarify: do you know the total number of long-term care staff that we have in the province and, of those staff, what number have actually been tested at this point? Then, what are the plans to ensure that that is extended and that we increase those numbers? Is that something that's going to be prioritized?

I know that in B.C. the chief medical officer of health has actually taken over the management of staffing in all centres. That's being centrally co-ordinated, is my understanding. Is that something we might consider here? I think that would probably fall within the extraordinary powers under the public emergency act. Is that something the government is considering, taking over co-ordination of private long-term care, to ensure that we are keeping uniform practice and everything is being followed and considered there?

9:20

Also, the Leader of the Opposition, I believe, had a couple of questions to which we have not gotten answers yet. Are we looking at bringing in more staff to perhaps offset the loss of family care and interaction, providing that for seniors? We know that without social interaction, health can degrade very quickly for seniors and make them much more susceptible. Are there any plans to bring more staff to help with that? Are we looking at actually providing support in dollars to actually support staff who will lose hours because they are only able to work at a single location? Is that something the government is considering bringing in to keep those health care staff whole and better able to do their work? Then, lastly, is there a specific testing protocol that's being put in place for long-term care workers?

Along those lines, then, as well – okay. We're coming up on the end of the two minutes, so perhaps I'll just give the minister the opportunity to answer that.

The Deputy Speaker: Thirty seconds. The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. Sorry. I've got quite a few questions here that I've written down notes for, so maybe I'll start with the comparison to B.C., where the chief

medical officer of health there has taken over operations of long-term care facilities. I would say this. Unlike any other province – well, I guess Saskatchewan now has one integrated health authority there, although still fairly new – Alberta has the advantage of having . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I hesitate to interrupt, but this section of the question-and-answer period is now concluded.

We will now proceed with the next minister, who appears to be the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. As my colleagues have said, we truly are in unprecedented times. I do want to note – and I believe all members in this House would agree with me – that it is truly a privilege to serve Albertans at any time, but I would assert that it's especially an honour to serve Albertans through such a challenging time. It's not an easy time, but it is truly an honour to represent Albertans during this time.

The COVID-19 pandemic is being felt across global markets. Economies all over the world have virtually come to a halt as countries fight to keep their citizens safe from this virus. We've seen the markets plunge, and we've seen businesses close. These are challenging times for everyone. Here in Alberta one of our primary challenges has really doubled because of the importance of the energy sector to our province. While OPEC and Russia are at odds, the oil price war has caused a complete collapse in global markets.

Moreover, on top of that surge in supply, we are seeing unprecedented demand destruction in energy markets due to COVID-19. This morning west Texas intermediate was trading at just over \$20 a barrel, with the light-heavy differential around \$15. So if we put it in simple terms, Madam Speaker, we're getting \$5 a barrel for our heavy oil in Alberta. That is likely to drop even further in the upcoming days and weeks. These are prices we haven't seen since January of 2002.

With prices at this level in Alberta, we are facing an unprecedented economic challenge. This not only has an impact on the energy sector but other sectors and jobs that are dependent on the energy industry. Energy is the largest subsector of the Canadian economy. It's Canada's largest export industry and the largest contributor to government revenue for programs and services that we rely on. That's where we are feeling the additional hit from COVID-19.

It's critical that we continue to follow the advice of our public health officials because this is how we're going to get through this health emergency, but that doesn't make it easy on any one of us. We recognize the increasing demands COVID-19 will have on our health care and social services ministries, and to that end we've added half a billion dollars to the Health budget, giving Alberta's public health officials the resources they need to respond to the pandemic and keep Albertans safe. Madam Speaker, make no mistake. We will provide additional resources if they're required to ensure that front-line health care workers have the resources they need to fight this health care emergency. Community and Social Services is providing \$60 million to support charitable and nonprofit social service organizations in addressing COVID-19.

No Albertan in self-isolation should be concerned about whether they can keep their lights on and their home heated. For those concerned that they will be unable to make their utility payments on time, service providers are offering a 90-day deferral on payments and will not cut off service. We are also providing a six-month interest-free moratorium on payments for Albertans currently repaying student loans. Individuals who meet the requirements established by Alberta's chief medical officer, Dr.

Deena Hinshaw, are able to apply for our government's emergency isolation support. We have allocated \$50 million, that will provide a one-time payment of \$1,146.

For Alberta's energy industry government is paying the Alberta Energy Regulator industry levy for six months, totalling \$113 million. That will provide liquidity for these energy firms in the near term. We're also extending the term of mineral agreements for oil and gas tenures expiring in 2020 by one year.

Madam Speaker, to assist all employers, we're providing immediate financial relief for businesses by deferring WCB premiums for all private-sector employers until the end of 2020. We're also providing support to small and medium-sized private-sector employers by paying half of their 2020 WCB premiums when they come due. That will provide over \$350 million of relief to small and medium-sized businesses in this province.

In my ministry we've been working hard to assess the evolving landscape and provide relief and supports for Albertans and Alberta businesses through this crisis. One of our first measures was to defer the collection of corporate income taxes until August 31, 2020. This includes any balances or instalments due before that time. This provides Alberta businesses access to \$1.5 billion in funds to pay employees, to pay rents, and to continue operations while they cope with the serious economic downturn brought on by COVID-19.

We also made the decision to freeze education property taxes at 2019 levels. This measure will be felt across the province, saving Alberta households \$55 million and businesses \$32 million, for a combined \$87 million this year. We're also deferring education property taxes for businesses by six months, providing access to approximately \$458 million for employers to prioritize to other pressing needs during this time.

Our provincial financial institutions have stepped up. ATB is offering six-month deferrals on loans, lines of credit, and mortgages to ensure that Albertans and local businesses are able to meet their immediate needs in the weeks and months to come. To date ATB Financial has provided deferrals on customer loans with balances totalling \$5.4 billion, Madam Speaker. Many other banks are also providing loan flexibility and deferrals. Albertans are encouraged to call their banking institution if they need relief due to COVID-19.

The tourism industry is especially affected by the pandemic, and our government is taking measures to support hotels and lodges by deferring tourism levy payments until August 31. This will free up more than \$5 million in additional funds for those employers.

Madam Speaker, we are continually evaluating the landscape in Alberta and in Canada and around the world. We've assembled the Alberta Economic Recovery Council, a group of respected leaders, chaired by Dr. Jack Mintz, who are providing advice to guide Alberta and this government through the downturn that will come as a result of COVID-19 and the energy price crash.

I'm in regular contact with the federal Finance minister on a number of issues, including the very important issue of liquidity for the energy industry. As the Premier noted earlier, we are expecting a federal announcement in the days to come. We're working together to provide a co-ordinated response to the economic impacts, and I'm ensuring that our federal government is aware of and understands the significant challenges Alberta is facing.

Madam Speaker, we know there will be tough days ahead, but we also know that Albertans are strong, resilient people, and we know that there will be a recovery. When that day comes, Alberta will be positioned to attract a disproportionate amount of investment to the province. We will continue, and it's imperative that we create the most competitive business environment in the country. We will work to attract businesses and investment to Alberta, creating jobs and wealth for our province.

Madam Speaker, these are truly unprecedented challenges, but as we work together and as we persevere, I'm confident that Albertans: we will prevail. Thank you.

9:30

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that outline of information. I have a few questions. First of all, the minister talked about the fiscal challenges, of course, that the government has. Last week or a couple of weeks ago we saw from Bloomberg that the government issued in a private placement a 100-year bond, otherwise known as a century bond, a bond where will we not see the principal being paid back during our lifetime. What's more concerning is that we learned about this through Bloomberg, not through the normal practice of the government publishing debt issues. My question to the Finance minister is: have there been any other century bonds issued? How bad is the spread over that of other provinces? Will we be going back to the normal practice of publishing the details of our debt issues for all Albertans to see?

Another set of questions really quickly. Of course, we know we have the KXL deal. We previously heard that we couldn't afford to pay 130-ish million dollars for educational assistants because we were running out of money, but we did find \$1.6 billion for this year for the KXL deal. My question is: where did we find that money, and was it funded in any way from the issuing of the century bond?

Finally, earlier the Premier talked about and the minister and the Premier sort of went back and forth talking about there being an additional \$8 billion to \$10 billion drop in revenue this year. I'm wondering if the minister could identify the breakdown between nonrenewable revenue, CIT, and PIT in terms of accounting for that \$10 billion shortfall in rough percentages, very rough. I appreciate that you can't possibly give exact numbers.

The Deputy Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the hon. Leader of the Opposition for the questions. Firstly, with respect to the century bond, we only did issue one century bond, and we have since issued additional debt. We've managed to issue additional debt in the subsequent days. I will say – and the Premier noted it earlier – that during the initial days of the global economic meltdown, which is really what it was, it was very difficult. In fact, there wasn't one province, to my knowledge, that was able to actually successfully issue debt for approximately a week. We were fortunate to begin to issue debt here in recent days, successfully issue bonds, and one of those, only one of those, was the century bond. Again, there have been others, and we will be looking to issue debt as required to fund the operations of this government in the upcoming weeks and months.

Madam Speaker, our spreads have widened over the last number of weeks, as all provincial spreads have, relative certainly to the government of Canada's borrowing rates. The cause of that has been due to the fact that capital has migrated to what the market perceives as the best safety available, so that's been to national bonds such as, of course, U.S. Treasury bonds as well as Canadian bonds.

With respect to the KXL pipeline, Madam Speaker, we have not . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The Official Opposition leader.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, I guess I'll just follow up again really quickly, then. The minister talked about issuing additional debt.

Just to confirm, there's only been one century bond. My question is: will that additional debt issue be published so that we can track that, unlike what happened with the century bond, which, again, we heard about through Bloomberg, not through the normal course? So I'm looking for that.

Again, I'm asking for the minister to finish his sentence with respect to where we came up with the \$1.6 billion expected to be expended this year. Even if it is a pay-as-you-go, it's expected to be spent this year. My understanding from someone, I can't imagine who: presumably, the shovels went in the ground yesterday, so money must be getting expended in some fashion.

Then, again, if the minister could break down for us: with that \$8 billion to \$10 billion shortfall in revenue, roughly speaking, how much of that is attributable to nonrenewable revenue? How much of that, rough percentage, is CIT and, rough percentage, PIT? Then also, with respect to all the additional tax deferrals, is the assumption that notwithstanding the deferrals, the annualized amount of the taxes that have been deferred, those are still built into the budget, or is the nonannualized amount part of that \$8 billion to \$10 billion revenue shortfall; i.e., they defer and then they can't pay up within the subsequent six months or whatever?

Those are my questions.

The Deputy Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. With respect to further bond issues, I would expect that we will be publishing those issues in the historical way in upcoming days.

With respect to the KXL project, the Keystone XL project, it is a pay-as-you-go arrangement. The work is just going to begin in the next few days. We have an agreement where we will not be funding that project in the early days, so relative to the work that will be conducted over the course of the summer of 2020, our financial obligations will largely occur after the second quarter.

With respect to the expected reduction in provincial revenues, well, I certainly don't have exact percentages. We're expecting that provincial revenues will drop somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$7 billion to \$10 billion relative to what we anticipated in Budget 2020. Approximately half of that drop is due to nonrenewable resource revenues. The remaining would be a combination of a reduction in personal income tax revenues, corporate income tax revenues, and lower revenues from other sources due to a slowing economy.

With respect to the expected corporate income tax revenues, the deferral that we have implemented is a deferral into the early fall. We would anticipate that we will collect those corporate income tax revenues, recognizing that we expect a slight increase in uncollectable amounts. But we will be recognizing those revenues in our current fiscal year.

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

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for being here to answer questions. I have questions around the emergency isolation supports, which are the singular focus of so many Albertans right now as they try to access the website, try to get their IDs validated.

The amount of stress that we are seeing from Albertans is immense, so I'm going to ask you some of the questions that those who have been trying to get their applications in have been asking me, starting off with: do you know when applications will no longer be accepted? This was always introduced as a bridge to the federal programs. Applications for the federal programs start on April 6. That's not necessarily the date when money will flow, and people

are feeling very anxious because they've been trying to apply for a week and haven't been able to receive any successful messages. Are you able to report how many have applied, how many successfully, and how many have been rejected? How many Albertans are trying to get that support and are not being able to?

Will the total budget be expanded given the numbers that we are hearing about how many people have successfully received the supports this far?

Finally, just for this kind of block, has the government of Alberta considered hiring more people or staffing up the phone lines or otherwise supporting the website? Given that the website wasn't originally built for these volumes and it is struggling, how are you adding resources to be able to serve Albertans and to get them responses on their applications and to hopefully keep the website up for longer and longer as people are trying to apply and trying to access the supports that the government announced?

Thank you.

9:40

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. As the member appropriately noted, the emergency isolation program was, in fact, a bridge to the federal program, the Canada emergency response benefit, which we are expecting, based on a federal government communication, to be rolled out on April 6. Again, our commitment to Albertans was that we would roll out our emergency isolation benefit until the federal program was up and running. We intend to keep that commitment to Albertans.

Relative to the number of Albertans I can't comment right now. I simply don't know how many Albertans have applied, but we do know that by the end of the day today, as the Premier noted, we're expecting approximately \$50 million to have gone out on the program, which would mean that just under 50,000 Albertans have successfully applied for the program.

Madam Speaker, the demand on this program has been incredible. It's certainly been more than was anticipated. I have to commend and thank those at Service Alberta that put this program together in very short order and have worked hard to keep it running as much as they can, and they have added resources in order to continually update this program, provide improvements and repairs, again due to the challenges experienced with the excessive volume in demand.

The Deputy Speaker: Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. I apologize, Minister, but I'm not sure I heard an answer to: when will applications no longer be accepted? I know Albertans are hoping that they will continue to be able to apply, especially those who've been trying for multiple days. They're worried that the program will be closed before they have the chance to get their application submitted. I think that's really important. I appreciate that more resources have been submitted. Right now I would suggest that there isn't enough guidance for people who are trying to apply.

Some specific questions. I absolutely understand that you may not be able to reply here but perhaps some sort of follow-up – or I'd be happy to work with you – to get this information out. If somebody is getting an error message that their account cannot be verified, should they delete their account and try over, or would that put them in a worse off position? Right now the phones aren't being answered, and people don't know what they should do. They're frozen because they're so anxious about this support.

People have noticed that if they genuinely started their isolation on a date like March 13, early on in this pandemic, their rejection letter is coming through on the system, but if they put in a date that's later, that's within 14 days of the date of application, then it's successful. Can some sort of communication come out around what that logic is with the 14 days? People are putting in truthful information, and it's not working, but then if they switch their date and make it closer to the application date, then it's working. Now people are starting to crowd-source solutions for how to get this support, which isn't what we want. We want people to be able to just get the support they need.

There are also some groups, people who do not have ID. People who recently moved to Alberta have no way to get that MyAlberta ID, MADI – I think it's called MADI – and some people are even getting messages on the system, being told to go to a registry office. I'm surprised the system even does that because this is somebody who is on self-isolation trying to access the supports, so being told to go to the registry office doesn't seem feasible.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. As we've noted – and I think we all agree – the emergency isolation program was a bridge to the federal program. We've committed to keep this program operational until the federal program is up and running. The reality is that you would apply for this program or the federal program but not both, or that would be duplicating benefits. We really believe that this program was built as an interim measure. When the federal program is up and running, we will refer Albertans to that federal program, or they will be taking double benefits, and in fact that was not the intention of our government with respect to this program.

Madam Speaker, again, I recognize that the demand for this program has been overwhelming, and it has created challenges with the system. My advice to those who have attempted and failed is to try again, to keep trying. I do know from the information that I've received that the system is working better than it was earlier.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. minister, I hesitate to interrupt, but this now concludes this portion of the question-and-answer period.

We will now move on to the next minister, who I believe is the hon. Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to speak to you about Alberta Education's response to COVID-19, but before I begin, I want to thank all of those working tirelessly to address COVID-19. I also want to extend my deep gratitude to all in our education system for working so hard to adapt to these unprecedented times.

As the House knows, on March 15, following advice from the chief medical officer of health, all in-school classes for K to 12 education were cancelled due to the provincial health emergency, but that did not mean the end of learning for the rest of this school year. We quickly developed a plan to ensure that students continue to learn. This plan had input from the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta School Boards Association, and the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta as well as other education partners. With their feedback we developed and put into action Alberta's education continuity plan, that outlines how teacher-directed learning for students will continue across Alberta. Our approach centres on four principles: the safety of students and staff comes first, student learning will continue, resources continue to flow to

schools, and school authorities have flexibility to do what is best for their communities.

Madam Speaker, since putting our plan into action, we have been fielding many questions from other jurisdictions across the country who are very interested in what we are doing in Alberta to ensure that students continue to learn. I've had countless calls from my colleagues across the province, and media across the country have highlighted the work that has been put into this continuity plan. For example, CBC stated that Alberta is ahead of the game when compared to one of our other neighbouring provinces. I am very proud to say that my discussions with my counterparts in other provinces reaffirm this belief. It is clear that Alberta is leading the way in many areas of managing the effects of this pandemic on our students' education.

This is a direct result of collective efforts with our education partners across our great province during this very challenging and very unprecedented time. For all K to 12 students, school authorities are providing at-home learning opportunities either online or through other means such as course packages and telephone check-ins. We expect that every student, regardless of their geographic location or socioeconomic status, will continue to learn while in-school classes are cancelled. This includes students in public, separate, francophone, charter, and independent schools and indigenous students attending provincial schools. Madam Speaker, we have set specific content delivery guidelines broken down by grades, which include content focus and hours of work expected, to ensure that the high-quality learning that Albertans expect will continue at home.

Content delivery is as follows: kindergarten to grade 3 students will focus on language and literacy and mathematics and numeracy outcomes of the provincial curriculum. Teachers will assign these students an average of five hours of work per week and will be expected to work with their students and parents on the delivery of these materials.

Students in grades 4 to 6 will continue to focus on language and literacy and mathematics and numeracy, and there will also be opportunities to incorporate science and social studies outcomes. Like students in kindergarten to grade 3, these students will receive an average of five hours of work per week.

9:50

Madam Speaker, for students in grades 7, 8, and 9 education content will focus on core mathematics, language and literacy, science and social studies, and curriculum outcomes. Teachers will assign students in these grades an average of 10 hours per week.

Our grade 10, 11, and 12 students will have their content focus on the specified and core courses required for high school graduation. This includes language, such as English, French, and French language arts; social studies; mathematics; biology; chemistry; and physics. Content for other courses the students registered in will be delivered where possible. Teachers are expected to assign an average of three hours of work per course per week for these students. Our plan ensures that every student will receive final grades and will receive a report card appropriate to their grade level. It also ensures that grade 12 students on track to receive 100 or more credits will still be eligible to graduate and receive their high school diploma.

We have also made sure that parents and students have access to and are aware of a wide variety of online learning resources to supplement at-home learning. Besides public announcements we have communicated directly with parents, students, and our education partners on the measures being taken to ensure learning continues. This includes, Madam Speaker, numerous teleconferences in a town hall with our education partners, regular

information updates to our partners by e-mail, continuously updating information on alberta.ca, and providing an open letter to parents, distributed through schools, outlining our plan and providing them an e-mail address for specific questions they may have. I can assure you that the lines of communication will continue to be open.

Now, Madam Speaker, I want to talk about a very difficult decision that had to be made during these unprecedented times. With more clarity on how the system would deliver at-home learning, the support programs now available to workers at a federal level, and the need to direct dollars to the front-line COVID response, we have made the difficult but necessary decision to make a temporary adjustment to education funding. I want to be clear. The decision was not taken lightly. No decision regarding valuable workers is. This is just as true in the public sector as it is in the private sector. Governments at all levels, including the cities of Edmonton and Calgary, are being forced to make difficult decisions at this time. The unfortunate reality is that in-person classes are not occurring due to COVID-19 and at-home learning options do not use the same staff and resources. I want to stress that this is a temporary measure only and that funding will return to regular levels when in-person classes resume.

My department has allowed funding for and encouraged school authorities to continue to pay for benefit premiums while affected staff are not receiving a salary. School authorities are also encouraged to keep educational assistants employed until the end of April and then make the appropriate staffing changes to meet their temporary funding adjustments. Authorities should encourage affected employees to apply for employment insurance or other enhanced federal funding they're entitled to as part of this temporary adjustment.

Madam Speaker, teachers and other staff, including speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, mental health workers, physiotherapists, and others, will continue to provide specialized supports and services to meet the unique needs of our students. Further, program unit funding, or PUF, continues to flow to school authorities so that they can tailor their services to continue supporting our most vulnerable students. This also means that educational assistants who are funded through program unit funding will continue to be employed.

We also recognize the importance of good nutrition for our students even while they're not in school. Nutrition program funding continues to flow to school authorities, and they have been provided with the flexibility to either continue administering their own programs or to provide funding to local not-for-profits to ensure their students do not go hungry.

Madam Speaker, I want to assure everyone in this House that regular funding will resume when schools begin operating normally. Unlike many in the private sector who, unfortunately, will be looking for new employment when this is done, affected education staff can rest assured that their funding will be returned to school authorities so that they can return to work when in-school learning resumes.

Madam Speaker, these are unprecedented times. However, I am confident that our education system will come out of this pandemic stronger than ever and that all of our students will continue to receive a world-class, high-quality education.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: We'll now hear from the Official Opposition. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. You know, it's been said: don't tell me what your priorities are; show me your

budget, and I'll tell you what your priorities are. Certainly, we saw that this last Saturday. Earlier today I think it was the minister – perhaps it was the Premier; it's been a long day – in question period said that it was actually a school board that encouraged them to send layoff notices to these staff. I'd like to know which school board that was.

Member LaGrange: Since the announcement that we were going to cancel in-school classes, the various school boards, all school boards and school divisions, were looking to government to provide further clarification on operational issues. I received numerous areas of concern from the ATA, from parents, from school boards wanting guidance. There were several school divisions who actually had approached us saying that they were looking to do layoffs. They were looking at other options as well such as cancelling bus contracts with bus companies, et cetera. There were many, many decisions being looked at. They were looking to the province for guidance. As I said, this was not an easy decision to make. My own daughter is an educational assistant and is affected by the decisions that we've made.

Again, these are temporary measures. As we've changed the way that we deliver education in the province, we have to also adjust the way that we are funding it so that we can direct those dollars back to the COVID fight. We have heard from the Minister of Health, from the Minister of Finance, from the Premier how significant these costs are and how essential it is that where we can find some savings even temporarily, we can redirect them to where they're most needed.

The Deputy Speaker: Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you. Let me reiterate that it is my strong belief that the staff who work with these kids and keep them feeling safe and secure and able to learn from home are part of the COVID fight, that being able to provide families with support so that they aren't calling EMS, so they aren't calling the police, so they aren't going to the hospitals in states of emergency, which we've already heard from a number of families is the case because of lack of support, I think, will contribute to greater public health risks than keeping kids feeling safe and supported. While I understand that the minister does have a daughter who is directly impacted, we're talking about tens of thousands of students who have been impacted. I appreciate that she's focused on the angle of the employee. I also would request that she consider the impacts on kids and families.

I have a letter here from a student, Gwen. She's in grade 9. She's talking about the program supports that she has with her educational assistants. Maybe I'll just paraphrase it. She talks about how when class happens and she doesn't understand a question, she doesn't need to be embarrassed, and she knows that she can talk to her educational assistant. She can get that one-on-one help and support and tutoring. She's in grade 9, so the PUF that is currently in place for this year certainly won't help her. She's much beyond the age of five. She talks about how fundamental this is to ensuring that she can learn, she can have a successful year, and that when she is finished this year, she'll be confident and proud of her grades. She feels that this government has completely let her down, that they've really taken away any opportunity that she has to be able to learn this year in the remaining months, and it's causing her great stress and anxiety.

I ask these questions because I'm talking about the impacts on kids and families. I've heard many, many words around caring about kids and wanting to put supports in place.

10:00

Member LaGrange: Thank you, hon. member, for the question. I certainly understand the anxiety and the concerns of parents. I also

know that we have teachers that are providing the programming to these students, and they are there. Beyond that, we do have additional supports that schools are able to utilize. Additionally, as I said earlier, while, as you say, the PUF funding is accessible, it continues to flow, unlike in previous years there will be no requirement to return unused PUF funding. School authorities have been given the latitude to use all PUF funds allocated for special needs but also to go beyond that in the best interest of all students. So we've given school divisions a great flexibility to use their resources.

As I said earlier, the teachers who I know are doing their absolute best to provide services for every single child within their care. They are the ones that develop programs that EAs often go on to support, but the teachers are there. They're there for the kids. I know that they're approaching it in so many different ways, whether it's phone calls, whether it's packages that they're delivering to students, whether it's online supports. The teachers are also accessing the speech-language pathologists, the occupational therapists, the PUF EAs, mental health workers, family liaison workers, physiotherapists, and so many more out there. I know that families are going to see, as more of the continuity plan moves forward, that they will receive the supports that they require for their students. I'm confident that our teachers are able to deliver the programs that are necessary to alleviate the anxieties of the parents.

Ms Hoffman: Just to clarify, the minister said that funding that's directed for three-, four-, and five-year-olds, that's specifically targeted for students who are PUF, should be used for students who are not those three-, four-, and five-year-olds. I find that deeply concerning, as I know many of those parents will as well. It's targeted funding for a reason, Minister. That doesn't mean that older kids don't have needs as well, but that, of course, has been taken away.

Again, one of my earlier questions that the minister didn't respond to is about the boards that asked her to initiate this layoff process on Saturday. She says there were many. I'd be very happy to receive the information about who those boards are because I haven't heard any speak up publicly saying that they really support it. I've heard a number speak up in opposition, including the minister's own home board of Red Deer Catholic. Then there were two today that have been very vocal, Medicine Hat and Prairie Rose, saying that they're refusing to implement their share of the Saturday layoffs that were directed by this minister. Is the minister hearing what these boards are saying? They're saying that these staff are fundamental and crucial to the ability to educate at home.

I also have to say that saying to a teacher who already isn't able to deliver in a regular classroom environment the adequate one-on-one support for students with special needs, "Now you have 30 kids all at home; good luck; do that, and also provide that extra level of support" clearly wasn't adequate. That's why there was an educational assistant assigned to that student in the first place. I think it's out of touch with the realities that parents who are home-educating right now are experiencing and the kids who rely on those supports.

Let's try that for two minutes.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you for the questions. In regard to the PUF funding, I've already been hearing from school superintendents and school administrators that they feel that they are not able to utilize all the PUF funding that they have, and could they expand the usage of it to provide further supports for all of the students that require it? Again, they are thankful for the flexibility in the system, with the other special needs, with the funding that's

available to them to provide for all students that require assistance. They are in the best position to determine what their needs are, so we have allowed the school divisions to determine that. They are in the process of making those determinations. Again, these were not easy decisions to make. We know that they're short-term decisions, but the way we're delivering is different, and we need to, you know, allocate our resources accordingly so that those resources can go to the front lines of fighting the COVID-19 battle.

As I've said many times, I'm a rehabilitative practitioner by profession. I understand the needs of special-needs students. I've worked with the developmentally disabled, and I'm confident that the teachers that are there, that oversee the programs for these students, are doing their utmost best to ensure that they are putting great programs in place and providing what those parents and those students need.

As far as going towards the superintendents and the schools, you were asking who was actually asking for these things. We have heard from numerous school divisions, actually superintendents, actually some administrators as well, that wanted direction and were seeking . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: The minister said that many times, but she still hasn't tabled or presented any names of boards that have actually asked for this. Many boards are speaking up in opposition to this. What's the minister going to do when Medicine Hat and Prairie Rose refuse to implement her cuts to their boards that she announced on Saturday? What if other boards also choose to refuse to implement them because they know how fundamental these staff are to helping support student learning? That hasn't changed because kids are learning at home. In fact, many of them feel that they have even greater pressures on them wanting to differentiate for 30 kids learning in 30 different classrooms at home, so having those supports through educational assistants is fundamental. What's the minister going to be doing to Medicine Hat and Prairie Rose if they continue to abide by kids and not move forward on the minister's direction?

What about the school nutrition program? There are more than 30,000 kids who've been fed through that nutrition program. When I asked about this previously, the minister talked about bus drivers delivering food hampers, and now bus drivers have been laid off through the minister's announcement. I find this very frustrating.

There are sort of three key areas that I've been asking about since before this pandemic really took foot, and those are around mental health pressures, students with special needs, and kids who are going hungry at home. We still haven't got any concrete new ministerial actions in those areas.

Again, the names of the boards that are asking for this: I hear the minister say vague references to those, but I'd really like to know who actually encouraged this and if she consulted with all of our boards to make sure that they were onboard with this. If you're going to use, you know, the allusion of some asking for it to justify doing this to all, I think that we deserve to have the evidence and the information that guided the minister and her decision. I'd be happy to receive that, ideally, now, and if not, tomorrow through tablings because I think that this is something that is fair and reasonable for somebody who has launched the largest single-day mass layoff in the history of our province and the impacts of those layoffs on those kids and those families.

I'd also like to know why the minister didn't do the announcement in person and why she refuses to answer questions about this from the media. The announcement was made Saturday via Twitter.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Okay. There's a lot there, and hopefully I can answer them in the two minutes. As for the nutrition program I just shared in my opening address that full funding was continuing with the nutrition program, that we have allowed the flexibility to school divisions to either provide it in-house as best they can or to, as many have already done, turn the dollars over to NGOs or not-for-profits so that they can provide those services. I'll also be announcing something a little further in the days to come with the additional \$3 million that was set aside for nutrition funding, and I'll be happy to share that with the hon. member as soon as possible, in the next couple of days sort of thing.

As far as the mental health and wellness, as you know, it's very difficult to provide individuals to go into people's homes, but we have been diligently working with Community and Social Services and Children's Services to look at all the wraparound supports that we can possibly provide for students and their families. We know, moving forward, that as the pandemic continues to take effect on students and their families, there's going to be an ever-growing need that we're going to have to address. Those are conversations we're starting to have already about what we can put in place. We've been very good about putting out the numbers of the Kids Help Phone, 1.800.668.6868, and the mental health line, 1.877.303.2642. Of course, we've asked . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Fifty seconds, Edmonton-Glenora.

10:10

Ms Hoffman: I'll try to keep mine really short. The last exchange I'd like to have is around children who don't have access to technology: computers, phones. They physically don't have a way to connect with their teachers, and there are many of these, I'm confident, in our province. So I'd like to know how many the minister assesses that need as being and what she is doing to bring them technology so that they don't lose more connections and fall further behind in their learning.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, hon. member, for that question. Yes, technology and the connectivity is an important issue. I know that with Service Canada Minister Glubish is working diligently to try and improve our broadband width, and we've asked school divisions to look at new and creative ways to deal with that particular issue.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, I hesitate to interrupt. That now concludes that portion of the question-and-answer period.

We will now move on to the next minister to open. That is the hon. Minister of Community and Social Services.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to begin this evening by offering my heartfelt and sincere condolences to all the families who have lost loved ones during this pandemic.

This evening I would like to speak about the vital role of Community and Social Services, the role it has had in responding to Alberta's COVID-19 crisis. From the beginning of this public health emergency our government has acted aggressively to prevent the spread of the virus and protect Albertans' health. I'm very grateful that we have had effective collaboration between my ministry's staff and civil society partners to assist Alberta's most vulnerable during this crisis.

I'll begin with homeless supports. As you know, we are immediately providing \$25 million to support community organizations and homeless shelters to help them respond to COVID-19. Organizations are using these emergency dollars to

increase shelter capacity, meet physical distancing guidelines, support rapid rehousing, and address additional needs as they emerge. We worked closely with municipalities and local Alberta Health Services, with shelter operators, with agencies serving shelters to locate appropriate sites for social distancing and surge capacity. Shelter operators are working hard to provide more space to house people struggling with homelessness in a way that meets social distancing guidelines set out by our chief medical officer. Every community has stepped up to implement social distancing and surge capacity in group care settings. We must rely on the experience and expertise our shelter partners have in using group care sites, and they're working diligently to support people struggling with homelessness during this crisis. This is truly an unparalleled public health crisis, and we will continue to support our partners to meet the immediate needs of Albertans experiencing homelessness during this pandemic.

In most communities, except for Edmonton, individuals who test positive for COVID-19 will be sheltered in hotels. This approach was medically preferred by AHS, ensuring clients can isolate easily behind closed doors, thereby minimizing the threat of community transmission. With this approach capacity can also quickly be increased based on need. I want to stress that all measures currently implemented are in compliance with the recommendations set out by Alberta Health and the chief medical officer. Having said that, I know that there is no single approach that is universally acceptable or palatable to all, but under this emergency situation we must rely on the advice of experts.

I will now share an update on approaches used in various communities. In Edmonton the Expo Centre has been activated as an isolation and care centre for individuals who test positive for COVID-19 and will also provide day services. Homeward Trust is assisting and will work to rapidly rehouse some of these vulnerable Albertans. Hope Mission is setting up overflow capacity in the Baptist church basement and the Lions centre. Mustard Seed is setting up spaces at Kinsmen Sports Centre.

Safe Harbour in Red Deer has moved to an alternate location that will accommodate more people while meeting physical distancing guidelines. Calgary will use hotel rooms to set up isolation and care for homeless populations, and in some cases hotels are being used to rehouse individuals as well. The Calgary drop-in centre will move up to 300 healthy people to the Telus Convention Centre, which will be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The hotel in Calgary providing isolation rooms will open early next week. CUPS and Alex will be providing health and social supports on-site, again, working on connecting people to housing. As the hotel is currently being retrofitted, as required by the health guidelines, we will see this isolation site opening later this week.

The Lethbridge Senior Citizens Organization will serve as a social distancing and surge capacity site and will accommodate up to 65 individuals in Lethbridge. The main shelter will also remain open for the time being as it is well-suited to support individuals with complex needs. Isolation units opened on the weekend, and two people exhibiting symptoms were moved into the Super 8 hotel.

The city of Grande Prairie will maintain their winter emergency response centre and will be opening the shelter services in the Dave Barr arena in the next few days.

Fort McMurray and Medicine Hat Salvation Army shelters continue to operate their shelters within social distancing capacity, and plans are under way to activate isolation approaches in the coming week.

We will continue to work with our partners to monitor this ongoing crisis and assist them in changing spacing strategies as needed to comply with public health orders.

We are equally concerned about the well-being of domestic violence survivors and are committed to help ensure their health and their safety. That is why we are providing \$5 million to 27 women's emergency shelters for their immediate response and emerging needs related to COVID-19. Funding will be used to help families access hotel rooms and pay for food, transportation, and other needs. It would also help shelters hire temporary staff and ensure service delivery aligns with physical distancing. We are prioritizing funding for shelters operating at capacity and with limited access to reserve cash. We will continue to work closely with community partners to ensure that Albertans fleeing abuse are safe.

To further support not-for-profits and community organizations, as mentioned many times, we are providing \$30 million to charities, not-for-profits, and civil society organizations to support the COVID-19 response. These emergency funds will help ensure food security for vulnerable and at-risk populations, support at-home services for seniors, provide emotional and mental health counselling for all who need it, enable information and referral services, promote volunteer involvement, and support helplines. The goal is to get these dollars flowing as soon as possible. The funding criteria and application forms are now available on our website and on local FCSS web pages.

Just over a week ago our government was honoured to announce the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Societies, which engages civil society organizations such as nonprofit and charitable groups, to strengthen the sector and address pressing social issues. Alberta has more than 26,400 nonprofit organizations, employing more than 280,000 people. The council's first activity will be providing support and guidance to civil society organizations as they support vulnerable Albertans during the COVID-19 emergency. As charities and nonprofits swiftly organize to set up programs and supports with the government's \$60 million in emergency funding, this council will consult with the sector to identify what they need to help Albertans quickly and effectively. Because of their close relationship to communities, civil society organizations are often more effective than government in addressing their communities' social challenges. This is why strong partnerships and co-ordination are critical to ensuring vulnerable Albertans get the supports that they need during this emergency.

I've mentioned physical distancing a couple of times already as it applies to specific groups of people. I'll mention it again because physical distancing and limiting in-person interaction is key to preventing the spread of the virus. To protect the health and safety of Alberta Supports clients and staff, we have temporarily suspended in-person services at our 52 Alberta Supports centres. Front-line staff continue to provide Albertans with supports remotely. Albertans who need help can contact their caseworker or local program office directly. The income support contact centre is available 24/7 to assist eligible Albertans who require emergency assistance. We will also ensure AISH and income support remain fully funded according to demand to ensure our clients continue to receive their benefits to help them meet their basic needs.

10:20

I want to thank and acknowledge the hard work and adaptability of ministry staff to provide services remotely. We appreciate the patience and understanding of Albertans who have had to adjust to receiving services via telephone or web. I know the uncertainty of the current situation is particularly hard on individuals and families who rely on our disability programs for support, particularly on families who have children with disabilities.

The safety and well-being of our clients and staff is my number one priority. My department and I have been in close

communication with the disability community, including clients, families, self-advocates, service providers, and stakeholder organizations. We are committed to providing up-to-date information and working with the community to address challenges and concerns. My department is having daily discussions with Inclusion Alberta, the Alberta Council of Disability Services, and the provincial parents advisory council.

The Deputy Speaker: We will now hear from the Official Opposition.

The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Let's just dive right in. We don't have a lot of time. I'm going to focus on – you started with homelessness. Let's start there. You mentioned shelter partners and the importance of shelter partners. I absolutely agree. Likely, one of the big partners that you're referring to are food banks. We know there are 95 in Alberta. Let's look at one of the largest ones in Edmonton. Edmonton's Food Bank currently provides food to 250 organizations in the capital region. The last that I checked, they sent out two full cube trucks of food to Hope Mission every day. My question to the minister is: what kind of support will you be giving food banks in Alberta? They don't currently receive any government funding.

Switching a little bit, according to public reporting the *Calgary Herald* on March 21 noted that Mayor Nenshi indicated the Calgary hospitality industry would be involved in the housing of homeless Albertans. The mayor indicated that it was the right thing to do. I think it's a way for us to move beyond just the minimum standard for homeless Albertans to something a little bit better. Of course, I think he was, as I was, a little bit surprised to see that we've got these great big shelters.

Then I read in another article – I think it was yesterday – where the minister mentioned that one of the reasons to use these huge congregate living situations was because suicide mitigation strategies for hotels was too time consuming, and just given the nature of the emergency, there wasn't time. I'm wondering if the minister could share with us some of the science or the data that she used in terms of suicide mitigation and the risk of suicide, suicidal ideation of the homeless population here in Alberta that would sort of lead her to that decision. I think that's really important. I'd also like to know: between the time of when the guidance for providers for services for at risk of homelessness – this was published . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Community and Social Services.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you to the hon. member for her questions, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak to food banks. We do know that the food banks across the province have indicated a potential shortage in supply, and we're working quite closely with them, Madam Speaker. In fact, Food Banks Alberta Association is a key member of the NGO council, which interacts with our Provincial Operations Centre. We're working with that organization closely to assess what their needs are because, obviously, one of the things that we track with all of the homeless shelters is their food supply, so it's certainly on top of mind.

In regard to the comments from the mayor of the city of Calgary, certainly the approach that he brought forward was an approach. It was not a plan. I know that in the discussions that the city had with several hotels, there was one hotel that backed out right away once they realized some of the complexities involved with serving homeless populations. I think it's very important that we don't assume that homeless populations are a homogeneous population. They are not. There's a diversity of different needs. They have very

diverse, chronic health conditions, behavioural conditions, and the triaging is quite complex. Having said that, hotels have been used in some situations. For example, Alpha House is housing 40 individuals in a hotel, and that was very appropriate for their clientele. Inn from the Cold used government funding to actually house about a dozen families. That is a situation where funding was used, and hotels were used to help these individuals.

In terms of the comments on suicide prevention measures and retrofitting in hotels, that information came to me directly from health officials. I was talking to a representative from Alex, and they described all of the retrofits that have to take place because you do have to worry about people . . .

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

Ms Renaud: Okay. It would be great if you could table that data or that science that backs up that decision. That would be great.

I'm going to move quickly to persons with developmental disabilities. I would like to know: during this emergency period will there be any reductions at all to any of the contracts, whether they are direct operations, whether they are service providers or family-managed supports? Also, when this government came into power, they created a two-tiered wait-list for PDD supports. We've got about 2,300 on a service planning wait-list and about 13 on a wait-list. I'd like to know what strategies the ministry is employing to ensure that people on the wait-list waiting for service delivery planning, whatever that is, if you can tell us what it is that you're doing to ensure their safety. As we know, there are some really high-risk people on that list.

As well, in the last budget there was another reduction of 136 staff added to the over 220 staff in the budget before. We keep hearing, "If you have problems, call your caseworker," so I'd like to know: are you continuing to move forward to eliminate the 136 positions that were outlined in Budget 2020? If you could just talk to us a little bit about what your call stats are like.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I know in my office, I can't keep up with the calls, the e-mails. It's just unbelievable. I'm assuming that the health centres, whether it was 51 or 49, as listed on your website for the Service Alberta sites – but if you can tell us: what are the strategies that you are employing to ensure that calls are being returned? Are the front-line people that are answering these phone calls able to make decisions about funding, or do they have to go up the chain to get decisions about, you know: "Was there an error? Can we release some additional funds for something?"

Are supplementals still available for people that are on AISH? There were some additional dollars. For example, if somebody had a service dog, they could access some additional dollars per month if that was a requirement. I am hearing from Albertans that there is a lot of difficulty.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Community and Social Services.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think there are about five questions there, and I'll try to get through all of these very quickly.

I'll start with AISH. All AISH benefits are intact, including supplemental benefits. In terms of PDD contracts, they are also intact, but, as we know, in this pandemic situation everything is very challenging. It's very difficult. Obviously, daytime supports are no longer available, and people coming into individuals' homes is also very, very problematic. But in terms of those contracts, they are intact as well.

The waiting list: in estimates I had acknowledged that there seems to be a two-tiered waiting list. I don't agree with that. There is essentially one waiting list of about 2,300 individuals, and we continue to prioritize those individuals who have complex needs or are medically fragile. We do need to ensure that they are served first before anybody else.

In terms of staff, during this pandemic time, during this time of emergency, my staff, in fact the entire GOA, the government of Alberta staff, is mobilized to help serve vulnerable Albertans, and it will be like that as we are navigating our way through these uncertain times during the pandemic.

Call statistics: I do speak to my staff every day, particularly as we've moved to remote services. Right now we are not hearing of any issues of concern in terms of Albertans not being able to get the information that they need. I've tested this out myself as well, personally, just to see what the response was going to be like, and it was quite positive after several tests. If the Member for St. Albert is looking for specific numbers or a specific statistic, certainly I can offer that information to her in the next little while.

Again, I'll go back to AISH. The supplemental benefits and core benefits, financial and health benefits, are intact as is our income support.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Just going back to the wait-list, you talked about how, you know, people on the wait-list who are complex, most in need will get supports. That's actually not the way the PDD legislation reads, so perhaps we need to relook at criteria for providing service to people.

10:30

But I'd like to go back to one of the comments the Premier made at the beginning of the night. He said that, you know, in January he ordered more ventilators because he saw the need for them, that there was a pandemic on the horizon. I just want to ask the minister. In February you made a decision to change AISH and income support payment schedules. We were very clear that this would create some hardships for people with the change in date, even just a few days. When you have people living in this kind of poverty, when you change dates, even a few days, making it to the end of the month, stretching that wage to the end of the month is really, really tough. So I'd like to know: did you understand or were you aware that there was this pandemic, this thing coming, and was that a consideration when you looked at the feasibility or the rationale? Why on earth would you change this other than potentially making the deficit in 2020 or in the previous year, in the year that you made the change, look a little different than it was? Certainly, we'll get into that at another point. But I would like to know: was that a consideration?

I'd also like to know, if you could talk to us a little bit about – I know that one of the members the other day called it double-dipping. When someone is on income support, they're earning under \$900 a month, so they augment with work. They've lost work. They're not eligible for emergency isolation benefits, nor are they eligible for federal benefits. A lot of these folks are stuck at home. They are experiencing all of the problems that everybody else is. Income support and AISH: it's not earnings; it's income replacement. There's a very real reason why Albertans receive that, whether it's a disability, a mental illness.

Speaker's Ruling Relevance

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Community and Social Services will have the call in just one moment, but I might just

remind all members of the Assembly that the purpose of Government Motion 17 is to allow questions with respect to the statement that was made by the minister or the Premier at the time and not about decisions that may have been made in the past. So I would encourage all members to ensure that their questions are specific to the COVID crisis, not to things that the government may have concluded in the past for any other reasons.

The hon. Minister of Community and Social Services.

Debate Continued

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In regard to the wait-list I can certainly affirm that it's very much the same process that was in place when the opposition was in government. Nothing has changed. There was always a wait-list, and it's still in place right now. We are working to try to reduce that wait-list.

In regard to the question, "Did we anticipate the pandemic?" I think it's a very unfair question. In January, when we implemented this policy change for AISH and income support benefits, nobody could have anticipated the magnitude and the devastation of this pandemic. So that question, to me, is not fair, and it's actually meaningless in many ways. Certainly, if we knew in January what we know now, I mean, there are many, many things that we would have done in anticipation of that.

I'm going to go back to the AISH and income support supplemental benefits, the core benefits, the financial benefits, the health benefits. I do know what the member opposite is alluding to, perhaps making the emergency isolation benefits available. I want to be clear once again that that benefit is available to Albertans who have no other source of income. They have no cash. That's what that benefit is for. We have to be very clear about that. Income support recipients do get a cash core benefit, they do get some measure of health benefits, and they also have supplemental benefits. AISH recipients have a much higher core benefit, and they also have a very comprehensive health benefit program, and supplemental benefits are available to them as well.

The government of Alberta is going to take care of vulnerable Albertans. AISH recipients and income support recipients already receive a cash benefit from this government. It's a legislated benefit. In addition to that, they receive all of the other benefits that I just mentioned.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert has approximately two minutes remaining, so this will be the last set of questions.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Under PDD supports we have direct operations. That would be, like, Michener Centre in Red Deer. You know, at their peak they probably supported 2,400 people in that institution. They're down to a hundred and some, I believe. These are, obviously, older people that have been there their lifetime, likely medically fragile. Can you tell me: if indeed – I hope to God this doesn't happen – an infection turns up, will they be treated on-site, or will they be moved to a hospital? That is my question.

Also, going back to one of the questions I posed – and I agree; I probably rattled a bunch of them off – in the last budget over 220 staff in your ministry were eliminated; another 136 were in Budget 2020. Are you continuing to move ahead with the staff reduction in Community and Social Services given the extraordinary circumstances that we are in and given the incredible amount of work that we're going to have to undertake once things start to slow down a little bit? If you could talk to us a little bit about that. Again, I hear often when people are asking questions, when I am, that it's: call your caseworker. Well, it sounds like, you know, this is quite a few FTEs that will be gone from this ministry. I know this ministry

has always been really busy. So many people rely on it. It's vital for tens of thousands of Albertans. I'd like to know the justification for continuing along the path to reduce FTEs in a ministry that's clearly already stretched to its limit.

I will let you answer.

The Speaker: The hon. member has 22 seconds remaining.

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, in regard to direct operations, we have some PDD service providers who are serving vulnerable Albertans for direct operations, and we do have emergency pandemic responses available to those service providers to make sure that they are ready in case there is an outbreak at a group home or at one of those sessions.

Oh, I'm out of time.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. However, the time allotted for debate on this matter has concluded.

I believe the hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration has a statement to make, which will be followed by 15 minutes of question and answer.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to acknowledge all Albertans struggling during this crisis. My heart goes out to families who have lost loved ones to COVID-19. I also want to thank the front-line health care workers for doing such a tremendous job and also thank some of the unsung heroes: the janitors, the store clerks, the truckers, who are ensuring that our supply chains keep operating and our grocery stores stay open.

Mr. Speaker, over the past few weeks I have been speaking to employees and unions, employers and employers' associations as well as small-business owners from a variety of sectors. I've been listening to the impact that the pandemic and the economic downturn are having on them. As we've heard from a number of my colleagues in the discussion that we've had in the House so far, it is unprecedented. There have been significant layoffs in multiple sectors. Employees who have lost their jobs are worried about how to pay rent. For those that have a job, some employees have told us that they are concerned about self-isolating, and in certain cases, when they are doing so and they have no benefits, how can they put food on the table? Employers and small businesses are concerned about having enough money to pay their bills and trying to keep as many of their employees working as they can.

The Ministry of Labour and Immigration is doing everything it can to support Albertans and Alberta families during this time. This is being done in the context of a variety of programs being offered by other ministries in our government as well as programs announced by the federal government. On behalf of Labour and Immigration I would like to discuss three items that we've been involved in: job-protected leave, the emergency isolation support program, and the WCB premium deferral and support program.

First, I'd like to speak to job-protected leave. On March 17 we introduced changes to the Employment Standards Code which were applied retroactively to March 15. This leave does three things. First, it provides workers with up to 14 days of unpaid job-protected leave if they are required to self-isolate. Second, we removed the requirement for them to get a doctor's note. Finally, we also removed the obligation that they had to work for 90 days for an employer before they were entitled to this benefit. Now, these changes are helping to contain the spread of the virus because Albertans do not have to choose between their health and safety and their jobs. Their jobs are protected while they're on leave. This leave can be accessed more than once.

We know that the decision to stay home can be incredibly difficult, especially for Albertans who are losing income and have no other sources while they are in self-isolation, so we introduced the emergency isolation support benefit. Now, this program was announced two weeks ago. It was put in place to help Albertans bridge the gap until the federal supports became available. Mr. Speaker, this support is available to Albertan adults who have experienced either a total or significant loss of income as a result of having to self-isolate or care for a dependant who is self-isolating due to COVID-19.

10:40

Now, to apply for the emergency isolation support payment, you must be over 18, currently self-isolating, and not receiving compensation from any other source. These funds will provide some financial relief until the federal program is in place. I appreciate that while there have been some difficulties with the system, we are pleased to report that approximately 60,000 Albertans have applied for and received benefits under the program, and payment of the funds is occurring within 48 hours. Although this program was initially intended to be in place until the federal program was in place April 1, today, given the delay in the federal program, our government has committed to continue the emergency isolation support program until the federal program is up and running. This program, Mr. Speaker, has already exceeded the \$50 million originally estimated. Again, I appreciate there are some challenges that some Albertans have had in applying for the program, and we will continue to work with Service Alberta to address these issues. I want to thank Albertans for their patience during these unprecedented times.

Mr. Speaker, this program was announced two weeks ago. We set up the program last week, and we've already made payments to 60,000 Albertans. Recognizing that there are some challenges there, we are having success in getting money into the hands of Albertans so that they don't have to make the choice of whether to go to work or self-isolate. They can self-isolate, have some earnings, and help prevent the spread, which is critical at this point in time.

The last item I'd like to talk to, Mr. Speaker, is the 2020 WCB premium payment deferrals. We introduced WCB premium deferrals to help private-sector employers save money at a time when they need it the most. For small and medium-sized businesses, we will not only have a deferral, but we will also pay 50 per cent of the premiums for 2020, and large employers will not have to pay any of their premiums or can get a refund until 2021. What does this mean? Approximately 184,000 private-sector employers will be able to defer their premiums until 2021, and 98 per cent of those employers will have half of their WCB premiums covered for a year, and this represents savings of \$350 million. Now, these actions ensure the sustainability of the workers' compensation system while at the same time giving job creators some needed financial flexibility and liquidity. Really, this is all about reducing the cost for job creators so they can pay the bills and employ Albertans for as long as they can. Mr. Speaker, there is more to come.

We are all in this together. It is important that we continue to work together, support each other as best we can, and continue to follow the practices outlined by the chief medical officer. Alberta is made up of strong, resilient people, and we will get through this together.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we will now move to a period of 15 minutes of question and answer. Any private member is welcome

to ask a question. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has risen.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much to the minister for some opening remarks. I will talk very, very briefly about the unpaid job-protected leave. I think it is a very good thing. It is something that the opposition called for. It was just incredibly unfortunate that it was announced as paid job-protected leave, which I think gave a lot of people the wrong impression. That obviously has now been clarified. The regulations are out. I do think job protection is important, and thank you for doing that.

Secondly, you spoke about the emergency isolation supports. I did get the opportunity to talk to the Minister of Finance about that. I think it's really important, and I'd like to clarify something that the Minister of Finance said, and, please, if you could echo my clarification if I'm getting this right. The Minister of Finance had referred to people not being able to receive both the Alberta emergency isolation supports and the federal program, the CERB, but what is actually possible and more likely is that someone would receive the Alberta supports for a two-week period and may also need the federal supports from the end of the Alberta supports going forward. It is not the intention that someone would get both for the same period of time, but, yes, many people will receive the Alberta supports and will still need the federal supports because those will be the longer term, four months, supports. I just want to for the record make sure that that is clear to Albertans. If you can clarify how many have been rejected and if you have any suggestions for the people who do meet what I would define as fairly narrow criteria, the people who need to isolate, what they should do if they do not have ID, if they are not able to go to a registry office because they chose to self-isolate and they thought that this program would be there: what is the government able to try to do to reach some of those people?

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much to the hon. member for the question. In regard to the question about the emergency isolation support benefit and the federal program, the intent is not to double up on both of those. However, it is quite possible that an individual who has applied for the emergency isolation support and received that can then apply for the federal support for the period of time after that and be eligible for that payment.

Again, the purpose of the emergency isolation support program was to bridge the gap for those who weren't receiving any income; for example, someone who needed to self-isolate and couldn't work and didn't have any benefits while they're not working. We wanted them to not go to work and make the choice to stay home and have some kind of income support while they are doing this while we were waiting for the federal program to take effect. I'd like to point out to the hon. member that for those who are not eligible under the Alberta program, you know, the federal program is backdated until March 15, so they are entitled to actually apply under the federal program and then get benefits for that period.

Regarding the number of applications, there are roughly 60,000 that have been approved and approximately 3,000 that were denied under the program to date.

I think that deals with all the questions that the hon. member had.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. Just around – this would be probably offline; I don't think you have an answer here – people who don't have ID, people who are being told to go to the registry office, and people who are confused around the logic of some of that 14 days piece, which I talked to the Minister of Finance about.

Moving to employment standards, one of the questions that I have been asked is that right now under employment standards, essentially, after 60 days of a layoff it becomes a termination. I apologize; my language might not be quite exact. I didn't look it up, but employers are wondering about that. Are we considering extending the 60 days temporarily, during this time of crisis, and have you received that request?

I'd like to move into your role as minister of immigration. Migrant workers, nonstatus people, international students, and temporary residents are some of the most vulnerable because of language barriers, understanding the system, not knowing who to ask or how to ask, and this pandemic is having a huge impact in those communities in many, many different ways. To begin with, is your office involved in any way in helping to make sure there are translated materials for different workers in the province? I'm hearing from vulnerable workers that they are being kicked out by employers and landlords. They're not sure who they can call. The temporary foreign worker advisory office or some of the tools that you have within your ministry: are they looking at the crisis response, the pandemic response, and providing more supports to those workers?

Finally, I have a strong concern around nonstatus workers being able to access health care. Ontario and Quebec have both taken action to address this. Would you be able to speak to if any conversations are happening around nonstatus workers here in the province and if there may be steps taken to protect them?

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much for the questions. In regard to some challenges that people are having in terms of ID and applications for the emergency isolation support program, we are continuing to work with Service Alberta to refine that process and make it easier and provide greater explanation so that people can get through it. That's an ongoing project that we're working on.

In regard to employment standards, we have heard from the employer community about the desire on temporary layoffs to increase it from 60 to 120 days for termination benefits. When I said that there was more to come, that was one of the items that are on our list to take a look at because we appreciate that especially employees who are temporarily laid off do not necessarily want to sever their relationship with their employer at the end of this period and would rather have a relationship there and then be able to be recalled to work at the end of the 120 days.

10:50

In regard to immigration, our department, particularly the area which deals with providing assistance and advice to temporary foreign workers, is engaged with the federal government. The federal government is responsible for not only temporary foreign workers but international students and the permits and visas that they are under to stay in Canada. We appreciate that there are temporary foreign workers who are being laid off and need access to employment insurance, which they can't access. There are also issues with temporary foreign workers who have a permit to work only with a single employer, so we're looking at ways that we can actually expand this. Also, we're dealing with challenges of international students with the federal government. Their visas are running out, but they can't get home because of that, so we are taking an active part and working with the federal government to address those issues.

In regard to the question you had about languages . . .

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Minister. I will stay on this topic for just a little bit. Is the provincial government prepared to explore income support for nonstatus or undocumented workers here in the

province, understanding that finding work is going to be very difficult for migrants, for refugees, potentially other groups? I know that there have been some strong commitments about not letting anyone fall through the cracks. Because they're not going to be able to apply for those federal programs necessarily, what action is this government prepared to take?

Secondly, AINP processing and the requirements to be employed: is there going to be any latitude in the program there? A lot of people who are in the queue right now have maybe lost their employment. I don't know if your department is starting to think about what they might do and what that might look like.

I believe I mentioned it in my earlier set, but I really want to emphasize that I hope you'll work with your Minister of Health around making sure that there is clearly available health care for everyone, even if they are nonstatus. We don't want anyone to be afraid to go to the doctor when we're talking about stopping the spread of the pandemic. We've heard Dr. Hinshaw say many, many times that everyone needs to be working on this together.

I look forward to hearing more about translated materials. I'll stop my questions there.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying earlier, our government has been translating a number of materials to different languages and getting them out to a variety of ethnic communities. We have on our bench of cabinet and caucus a wide variety of languages, so we're doing this not only from a translation service, but also a number of my colleagues have been out doing Facebook ads and posting about the programs and opportunities that the people who need assistance can take advantage of.

In regard to the AINP process we are looking at providing some flexibility. We appreciate that, you know, there's some difficulty in terms of people at this point in time getting the documents to the right places, so we are looking at that. Initially, effective April 1 we were going to start charging for AINP applications, and we suspended that during this crisis. We'll do that later, recognizing some of the difficulties associated with people in terms of having lower income. Particularly, there are a number of people who applied to the program who are TFWs and who are students, foreign international students, applying to the program who have some challenges with flexibility.

In regard to the nonstatus, that is an issue that I'd like to thank the hon. member for bringing to our attention. It is not on our radar screen, but we can commit to take a look at that and see if anything can be done in that regard.

The Speaker: All right. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, there are only four minutes remaining, so this will likely be your last set of questions.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a great many questions, so I will try to be really quick. For nonstatus health care I would just mention that Ontario and Quebec have already started to address that. I will also just mention that migrant farmers will need to start coming into Alberta soon, and Ontario and Quebec have both been working on policies around that.

Also, the translated materials which you are sending out: can you make sure that those are available on the website? I'm quite familiar with the government of Alberta website, and I haven't seen anything like that.

I'll leave that because I want to talk about occupational health and safety. Minister, have you considered or would you consider launching essentially a COVID-19 workplace health and safety call-in line – perhaps it might have the same phone number as our

occupational health and safety line – something that could be branded so that people know, when they have questions or concerns, where they can reach out to get that clarity? Around occupational health and safety it's really important that people know what their rights are and how they can be kept safe at work, particularly because vulnerable workers are the ones who are most at risk.

My next question. We've heard some stats that show that there are a few health care workers who have contracted COVID-19. The majority of them were travel related but not all. In the case where a health care worker has been infected presumably at their workplace and not having it be travel related, does occupational health and safety automatically go and conduct an investigation in that facility to make sure that the protocols and whatnot are set up?

As well, if you could speak at all to how you have continued to support employers and employees to make sure job sites are in compliance and don't become hubs for the spread of COVID-19.

Finally, regarding . . . [Ms Gray's speaking time expired]

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt.

Hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration, there is a minute and 55 remaining.

Mr. Copping: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to comment on temporary foreign workers and migrant farm workers, for migrant farm workers there has been an exception put in place by the federal government to allow them to come in, so we are working with employers to ensure that there's a process in place when they come, that they self-isolate for the required period of time and that they have the knowledge they need when they're working in this environment given the current pandemic. We are working on that right now with both the federal government and with employers who are bringing in temporary foreign workers.

Regarding occupational health and safety we have received over 2,400 inquiries to date. We are getting information through the occupational health and safety contact lines. OH and S is currently involved in roughly 200 inquiries at this point in time regarding COVID-19 matters and Alberta workplaces. In these cases occupational health and safety is working with the parties to find best solutions. I'd like to point out that in the occupational health and safety resource centre, as the hon. member knows, we recently uploaded guidelines for employers that are nonhealth related to be able to apply the guidance put out by the chief medical officer, and we are continuing to work with industries on a sector-by-sector basis – the construction industry, the oil and gas industry, the concrete industry – on sharing best practices about how in that industry they can ensure they can apply the guidance put out by the chief medical officer.

In the same vein, we're also sharing that information across provinces because multiple provinces have the same issues, and we're working out a system that we can actually get this out to Alberta workers and make sure that they know what the best practices are. Our focus is on being safe and keeping our workers safe.

On the last comment in regard to WCB . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt; however, the time for debate on this particular matter has concluded.

I believe the hon. Minister of Children's Services would like to make a statement.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise in this House tonight to speak to our government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To echo the words of our Premier earlier this

evening, I want to start by expressing my sympathy to the family, friends, and coworkers grieving the loss of Children's Services team member Shawn Auger. He was in his early 30s, had a wife and three children, and was a community leader in Grouard and High Prairie. While we all understood this virus would take lives, he was so young and was so clearly loved. He leaves a legacy of supporting and uplifting the most vulnerable in our communities, and his loss is a poignant reminder that we need to continue the fight against COVID-19. We need to do everything we can to stop the spread of this virus so that we can protect people who are elderly or have pre-existing conditions like Shawn. As Dr. Deena Hinshaw said, each of these individuals had a life that mattered and people who loved them.

I also want to recognize the work being done by my colleagues. I've watched our Premier show remarkable leadership through these unprecedented times. He shows strength, resolve, compassion, and I am incredibly grateful for his leadership. My colleagues and I have been working day and night to protect and to fight for Albertans. Our MLA colleagues have also been dedicated to advocating for the concerns of their constituents and communicate essential information to the public during this ever-changing health crisis. In fact, one of the first locations identified for child care reopening was based on information brought to us by an MLA about a critical need within local government infrastructure.

11:00

While I'll speak more to that later, I do want to thank our public service and front-line workers who, like us, have worked around the clock, through evenings and weekends, and sacrificed time with their loved ones in order to ensure that Albertans have the supports and services they need to survive this pandemic and come out on the other side. They are innovative, they are hardworking, and I am grateful for their dedication.

Mr. Speaker, while this is a time of uncertainty, of stress, and even of fear, Albertans need to know that we are clear in our objective. We must keep Albertans safe using the best available medical advice, medical evidence, and prepare for our economic recovery.

As the Minister of Children's Services my job is to serve the most vulnerable children and families in our province and to help families access child care. I started tonight by speaking about Shawn Auger and his legacy of dedication to young people in northern Alberta. My ministry is full of people like Shawn, women and men dedicated to service and to ensuring a brighter future for vulnerable and at-risk young people across our province. Ministry leadership is providing daily guidance to our front-line workers, and they in turn are changing their practices, doing things differently every day in ever-changing times to ensure that young people in government care continue to be cared for in the midst of this pandemic.

We've also made sure that young adults who had previous involvement in the child intervention system are supported and have the resources they need to manage through these challenging times. We will not be closing files or terminating services to young adults up to 24 who continue to require support, which, in fact, exceeds what other jurisdictions are offering.

Mr. Speaker, while this has been an incredibly trying time, I'm also encouraged by the leadership being shown by our community partners who provide important services for kids and families across Alberta. In fact, last week I was speaking to a respected community leader for an agency that serves our most vulnerable youth, and she said that she has seen more innovation in the not-for-profit sector in the previous week than she had seen in the last decade or 30 years.

I also continue to work closely with my colleagues from Community and Social Services and Education to ensure that we're collaborating on issues that impact the collective populations we serve and with the civil society partners we share, not creating solutions in silos.

In addition to community partners, the Minister of Education and I recently reached out to teachers across the province, asking for their help to continue to be our eyes and ears for vulnerable kids and families. In this time where community supports like nonprofits and schools are closed and in situations where factors that lead to neglect or maltreatment of kids can be exacerbated, we have asked teachers and all Albertans to be especially vigilant in reaching out to families that are struggling, to check in on them, to ensure that they have the supports they need to safely keep their children at home. Parents who may already be struggling will be put under additional stress brought on by financial insecurity and prolonged periods of isolation.

Mr. Speaker, parents who have faced trauma in the past may find it very difficult to cope with these additional pressures, so I would like to thank the educators across the province for all you're doing to support the learning but also the well-being of students and families across our province at this very challenging time. As always, if anyone has any concerns about children, the well-being of children in our province, please immediately contact the child abuse hotline at 1.800.387.5437. If you believe a child is at risk, you must, in fact, report it. Our front-line caseworkers will continue to work hard at supporting open cases where families are involved with the child intervention system.

Mr. Speaker, my ministry is also working hard to support child care since we know that it will be a key component of our economic recovery when COVID-19 has passed. I have had three telephone town halls with child care operators across the province, the last of which had nearly 1,100 participants, to provide them with regular updates and answer their questions. We certainly could not have predicted this global health crisis and that public health advice would result in closing their centres or the resulting stress and uncertainty for parents and early childhood educators across this province. Many of these are also small-business owners who have gone above and beyond to support parents and children, despite having to worry about their own businesses and their own families at this difficult time. They have been kind and compassionate and gracious at a time of uncertainty, and for that I am incredibly grateful.

We will continue to work with operators and their workers to find ways to support them through this crisis. Many elements of both the federal and provincial relief packages will absolutely be applicable to the child care sector. We will look for opportunities in the coming weeks and months to redirect our budget dollars to support these centres and these operators, but we do have to get a much better lay of the land before we make decisions about what that's going to look like. We need to evaluate the impact of federal and provincial and municipal measures, get feedback from child care centre operators, and understand that this impact will be dependent on the length of these child care centre closures to get a better idea of this situation. I'd like to once again be clear that when this public health crisis is over, Alberta, like others, will have a significant economic challenge to overcome, Mr. Speaker, and we will absolutely need our strong child care sectors to support these working parents.

Now, since their closure a few weeks ago select child care centres have reopened to serve families of essential workers who need child care in order to continue to go to work and serve on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis. These spots were originally dedicated to serve the children of essential workers, which at the time was defined as health care workers or critical infrastructure workers

within municipalities. Our first responders – like police, fire, correctional workers – were also included in that group, Mr. Speaker. So far we've reopened 4,000 spaces in 10 communities across this province to support parents. Those communities are Calgary, Edmonton, Devon, Fort McMurray, Fort Saskatchewan, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Red Deer, and Stony Plain.

Given that we now have a broader definition of essential services, as determined by Municipal Affairs and the Provincial Operations Centre, we are going to continue to expand access to those spaces across the province, again working with the president of AUMA as well as the president of RMA over the past couple of days, to reach out to communities across the province and determine which communities have the greatest need. We will continue to take our direction, as always, from the chief medical officer of health and balance the needs of parents with the safety of all those in our province.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, to front-line Children's Services staff: thank you. To the adoption specialists who have continued to work with kids and families all over the world, in some cases, to get them back home safely: thank you. To the caseworkers who have been checking in with families over video conference and by phone and helping them to access supports remotely: thank you. To the child care licensing officers who are making Herculean efforts to get daycares reopened so that parents can focus on getting us through this pandemic: thank you. To our community, nonprofit, and civil society partners, child care centre workers and operators, and our staff right here in the Legislature: thank you. I hope you know that none of what our government accomplishes would be possible without you.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I am so deeply proud of the tireless work of everyone and the outpouring of compassion and kindness that I have seen from my colleagues, the public service, front-line workers, and everyday Albertans. As Dr. Hinshaw often says, we are in this together. Our government will continue to make the tough decisions to protect the safety of Albertans and to work tirelessly to bring Alberta through this crisis.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we will now enter a period of 15 minutes where any member can comment or ask a question of the hon. Minister of Children's Services. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has risen to ask a question.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks so much, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to try to keep them short and see how many exchanges we can get in going back and forth. I know that sometimes the time goes fast, so my apologies if I ask a question too quickly.

The main one I want to start with is around essential workers. We know that there are essential workers throughout our province. We've heard about grocery store workers, people working as custodians, people working in health care on the front lines. We have a lot of essential workers who are seeing actually increased child care costs during this time because their kids would have been in school. Now they're being expected to pay for full-day child care when they are essential to the functioning of our province. What is the minister going to do to make sure that these essential workers aren't seeing increased financial costs because of the pandemic?

11:10

The Speaker: The Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To address that question, our first priority was to get these spaces up and running, so one of the requests that we did make of child care centres was to certainly be

mindful of what costs are, to not charge exorbitant costs for child care at a time like this. We also recognize that this is a great responsibility and a great deal of work for these centres who are in fact choosing to reopen to provide child care for these essential service workers. Not all who we reached out to were able to reopen their centres or interested in reopening their centres at this time, so based on the feedback that we received from these centre operators, we have committed to supporting them financially, \$500 for each centre to purchase supplies needed to comply with the sanitation guidelines and procedures put forward by the chief medical officer of health. We also want to remind Albertans that when they are accessing child care, if parents are in need of subsidy, that still remains, and it is now very simple to apply for a subsidy online for those parents who may be in need of those supports.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you. Maybe I'll try my question slightly differently. If I'm a nurse and I have two kids that were in school, my child care costs were zero. Now I'm a nurse who's needed on the front lines, and child care costs in many circumstances are about \$2,000 a month. What's being done to make sure that that nurse isn't seeing a significant financial penalty by doing her job and serving all of us and, of course, choosing to do so and not spending time with her own kids? If she's putting her kids into child care, what are we doing to keep her whole? Why aren't we offering to pay child care costs for essential public health workers and other essential workers in our society who wouldn't normally have child care costs?

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, I think one of the key pieces, too, is to recognize that there are a lot of different types of child care that parents across Alberta can access. Certainly, in Alberta we already had a vacancy in terms of how many spaces we have and how many spaces were being accessed by parents across the province. Even in terms of the spaces that we've already opened up, we're only at about 8 per cent in terms of uptake for those spaces.

We do recognize that day homes are still an option. We recognize that the hours that a child care centre is open – we are looking at areas where we may need to expand the hours for some of those front-line child care workers. Certainly, I do understand that this is a unique situation and some front-line essential services workers would be looking to find different types of child care than what they would normally have. However, there are absolutely subsidies in place for parents who need them. Our priority is still getting these centres up and running.

Another thing we've also committed to do is that given the amount of work and time that it takes for these centres to in fact reopen, we've also committed to funding all of the open spaces that are not currently being used. We recognize that this is also going to be fluid, that in some communities while we're going to be scaling up the opening of these spaces for front-line essential services workers, in other communities where the demand and the need is less great, we will then be scaling that down. There are certainly a number of options for parents across the province, based on a number of things like location, cost, and hours of care, that parents can look to for their children.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you for that.

I think I heard that 8 per cent of the spaces are currently occupied, which is not significant, and I wonder if part of that is the cost that people are feeling when it comes to these folks who are essential workers. We know that many of them don't make huge incomes. I know many grocery store workers who are making minimum wage, so the idea of having to pay for full-day child care when your kids

may not have required full-day child care because they were in school can be a very difficult decision. I wonder if we might need a new program, something that targets those essential workers and their children and ensures that operators find a way to do this viably.

We're hearing that some of the child care centres feel that the funding provided – they've told us that it's \$41 per space – isn't sufficient to cover the costs of reopening, and many have had a tough time finding educators to come back because they often have children of their own that they're taking care of at home right now as well, and they're worried about their safety, the safety of working in congregated sites where there could be something spread quite quickly. If these operators offer to suffer a loss as a result of reopening, will the minister consider closing that gap or making up that shortfall if this is something that we're seeing as an essential public service?

Ms Schulz: I would also say, though, that the fact that only 8 per cent of these spaces are full, that was an estimate in terms of how many spaces we opened to begin with. We also know that Alberta typically does have lower participation in licensed child care centres than, particularly, other provinces. It's for a variety of reasons. We do also have quite a variety of choice. We also have approved family day homes and a number of other types of child care that parents can access. Certainly, there are a number of factors that go into that.

We also know that the expanded definition of what an essential service is will likely result in an increase. We have heard from some of the child care workers that they were curious as to whether or not they were then considered an essential service so that their own children could access these spaces. We did seek the advice of the chief medical officer of health before we could include that as part of our definition of essential services. But we do know that that will be a key factor.

Again, given the unknowns about opening and given that it is sometimes difficult to get front-line child care, really childhood educators, back to work, I really do have to thank and express my gratitude for those centres who did in fact choose to stay open. In fact, Mr. Speaker, one child care worker said to me: you know, I am a little nervous about going back to work, but I appreciate the protocols put in place because those kids need us and we need their parents. I thought that that, again, speaks to Albertans stepping up to say: how can we help our neighbours, and how can we help those people on the front lines?

Ms Hoffman: I appreciate the minister talking about protocols being put in place because it brings me to the next set of questions I wanted to ask around private day home operators. Now, we know that they are still continuing to operate as they haven't been ordered to close by the chief medical officer of health. Some day home operators feel compelled to keep taking children as they cannot afford to lose the income. They fear that if they did stop taking kids, they wouldn't be eligible for the provincial supports because they haven't been ordered to close because of COVID-19. At the same time, they are worried for their own health and safety as well as that of the families that they're serving, of course, hearing over and over again: stay at home; don't mix with too many families, these types of words around flattening the curve. Then on the flip side, we know that some operators are feeling like they need to take as many kids as they can. How are we ensuring that both sets of operators are doing so safely, that kids and ensuring that we stop the spread of infection are a priority for us? Because, of course, it's hard to tell kids not to lick each other.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, we do rely on the guidance and advice of the chief medical officer of health as we make these decisions. Previously, if you were a private day home operator, you could operate your day home with a maximum of six children. We understand that when school was let out, some of these operators may have had children of their own, so based on the advice of Dr. Hinshaw, we changed the policy, if you will, to ensure that those parents could continue to serve the families that they were currently serving as well as their own children.

The small number of children in that home is why Dr. Hinshaw recommended that they could, in fact, remain open for now. However, we do encourage that all centres across the province – obviously, in the licensed centres they've received very, very strict guidelines around sanitation and protocols for drop-off and pickup, not only the number of people who can be in the centre at any given time. Certainly, even in a day home many of those sanitation guidelines – additional hand washing, additional cleaning of toys, things like that – you know, we would highly encourage even private day home operators to follow that good advice. Twenty-second handwashing: that can be a fun exercise for some kids who like to play in the water. Being a parent of a four- and a two-year-old, handwashing is now quite a fun time in our house. We go through a lot of soap. You know, I think that for anybody, whether you're in a licensed child care facility or you're in a licensed day home, obviously follow those rules.

But we do also know that we haven't seen an increase in terms of centres who are wanting to offer licensed day homes. We haven't seen an increase or a huge uptick in the number of parents accessing that care, which tells us that parents are finding care in other ways, as they did previously.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: May I have a time check, please, Mr. Speaker?

The Speaker: Four minutes and 20 seconds.

11:20

Ms Hoffman: Okay. Maybe I'll move to a different area, then, just given the quickness of tonight's discussion.

The Alberta child benefit. We know that the number of low-income families is growing every day in this province. We've seen that the federal government changed the criteria, increased the opportunities for people to apply for the Canada child benefit. Is that something that we are considering here? Of course, the Alberta child benefit is one of the reasons, I would argue, that we were able to close the gap on children living in poverty so significantly over the last four years, and I worry that if we don't take initiatives to match the federal program, we're going to lose that ground and we're going to see a lot more kids living in poverty.

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, over the last two weeks our government has committed billions of dollars in direct support and deferrals for individuals and businesses as we cope in this pandemic together. Combined with federal EI changes and supports for both small businesses and nonprofits, these are very comprehensive and will help Albertans who are struggling to get by. That said, our Premier has been clear that we'll continue to consider all options, both in the midst of this public health crisis but also afterward as we work to stimulate our economic recovery and support the most vulnerable people in our province.

Ms Hoffman: I think that was a: not now. I hope that's something that the minister is seriously advocating for around the cabinet table, because I think when we weigh ourselves on the progress that

we've made as a society, the work we do for vulnerable kids is one of the ways that we can measure our success.

The next one I want to touch on is around safety measures being taken for front-line child intervention workers, who we know the minister said in her opening remarks are doing important work. There are a lot of families where domestic violence is often on the rise when there are times of economic insecurity and public panic. So what's being done to ensure that these front-line workers, who are essential, are being given appropriate training and supports, and are there more visits being done virtually? What happens when that's not possible? How do we ensure that these workers aren't being put in a harmful situation?

Ms Schulz: That's an excellent question, Mr. Speaker, and I would like to thank the member opposite for the question. We are working closely with staff and caregivers to ensure that we have the right measures in place to support both vulnerable kids but also our front-line staff; also fostering and kinship care providers across the province; also our community partners who offer a lot of these support services on our behalf.

So this does mean that video conference and telephone calls for visits and things like that are being used when able to. We are adapting our direction and support in the field daily to ensure that we're consistent with the direction from Alberta Health. I've also spoken to many of our community partners that serve vulnerable youth, like Align and other front-line community partners, to understand if they have additional needs. I can tell you that where we can, we're using technology to ensure that things like visits are still complied with and are able to happen because we know that that's good for the well-being of kids and families but that staff aren't being put in those situations where they don't have to be.

However, things like assessments when kids are at risk and when we receive those reports, front-line staff do go into those situations. We do have PPE at the ministry. We do have protocols in place, again, but front-line staff bring questions and concerns, and given that this is a very unprecedented situation, staff continually bring up new situations, and then leadership is able to provide parameters for those types of services and safety. You know, we continue to work with our partners on PPE, and that's actually being co-ordinated not only through Children's Services but also through AHS as many of those service providers are shared between the two ministries. We continue to listen to the concerns of front-line staff and then adapt our policies based on their concerns and what we hear.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has five seconds remaining.

Ms Hoffman: The last one I want to leave the minister with is foster parents. Foster parents are being asked to do more now, including educating children. What's going to be done to provide more support?

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. Unfortunately, the time for debate on this matter has concluded.

We will be moving to, I believe, the hon. Minister of Seniors and Housing next to make a statement.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government continues to take strong actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect the most vulnerable. We know that individuals over 60 years of age and those with pre-existing health conditions are most at risk of severe symptoms from COVID-19. My ministry is connecting each day with our housing operators and groups that serve seniors. It is important to serve information, to listen, to understand the

challenges of our stakeholders and community partners. We listen and discuss ways our government can respond to their concerns and challenges. My ministry continues to deliver its core services and programs. That means that seniors with low incomes, more than 167,000 seniors in the province, are receiving their financial benefits with no change.

We continue to support those in need of affordable housing. Our focus is on the base needs of seniors and housing needs of Albertans with low incomes.

We are responding to COVID-19 through a number of initiatives. We are working with the Ministry of Community and Social Services to ensure seniors' services and nonprofit organizations receive funding through the \$30 million in emergency funding support provided through the family and community support services; working with Service Alberta to ensure no evictions for people who are unable to pay the rent; working with the landlords to monitor how tenants' sudden unemployment and the time it takes for Albertans to receive a temporary benefit affect a landlord's revenue and ability to operate; supporting housing providers who may have a COVID-19 tenant and who are not self-isolating; working with Health to ensure that Seniors and Housing provides timely information to prevent the spread; helping seniors' lodges and housing providers with safety protocol, personal protective equipment, and cleaning supplies.

Actions. We are co-ordinating with our network of stakeholders and seniors' groups to share information about COVID-19 and about available resources, including my weekly age-friendly newsletter, that was distributed to more than 1,400 seniors' organizations. I continue to communicate with seniors' organizations about available supports. I have had calls with both the federal Minister of Seniors and also the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development to discuss all of the important issues that apply in Alberta.

Our seniors. Financial assistance programs provide seniors in Alberta with some of the highest financial benefits in Canada. Seniors have resources available to help them access needed supports, including groceries or prepaid meals. Mr. Speaker, many seniors, alone right now, are unable to connect with family and their social circle. We are concerned about the social isolation of seniors, which is why I have sent a message to our partners reminding them about the importance of having someone call to check on the isolated seniors or to help them with their personal matters. This is most important in rural areas where some seniors have reduced or limited service.

There are seniors living in lodges who cannot have visitors and seniors who do not have people in their life to assist them. They can be more vulnerable to scams and fraud. In an emergency like this, dishonest groups or individuals often try to take advantage of our fear and uncertainty. Deceitful individuals who may pose as door-to-door salespeople, telemarketers, collection agents, and also sometimes even a distant relative can ask for help and can target vulnerable individuals, especially seniors.

I have issued videos asking Albertans to watch out for the seniors in their lives and often to be their buddy or someone that they can check in with before responding to matters that involve money, and to remind seniors not to respond to requests for personal information or needed payment. I cannot emphasize this enough. Please be the person to pick up the phone and reach out.

Here are a few other services available to seniors during the COVID-19 emergency: special shopping hours for seniors; municipalities and FCCs are working with the local grocery stores and the pharmacists for food and prescription delivery, transportation to medical appointments, emotional support through

the telephone, counselling, a crisis service, and access to social workers.

11:30

We are working nonstop to get good information to seniors and to help them stay connected. My thanks to those dedicated community workers and the volunteers who are helping to keep the most at-risk Albertans, including seniors, safe during this difficult time.

My ministry will continue to support housing providers and seniors' groups. As I outlined earlier, connecting with the stakeholders has been very important in our communications, and it included my minister's advisory committee for Seniors and Housing. When we hear of a problem affecting seniors or people who live in affordable housing, we work with our government colleagues to get answers and to make sure that we are responding to this issue as soon as possible.

I will continue to work and execute our strategic plan that we have in place as the needs change, our strategy to make sure that seniors and vulnerable Albertans are safe and healthy. I want to thank the seniors' services groups and our housing partners for their commitment to help us look out for the Albertans we serve.

Mr. Speaker, together we are strong, together we are making a difference, and together we will get through this. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have 15 minutes of question and answer available to any private member that might like to ask a question. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has risen.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to address these issues, and I'd like to thank the minister for her comments. Glad to hear that they are providing information to seniors regularly in a number of different areas. I'd like to ask about some of the more practical things that also may be done.

I guess the first thing that I'm concerned about – I'll address a couple of different areas, and I understand you'll speak to these later. The concern is that a significant number of workers with seniors are people who work in multiple settings, whether it be that they work different shifts in different lodges or different long-term care facilities, or perhaps they are home-care workers who spend the day going from one home to another regularly. I'm wondering if you can tell us about any changes to protocols or supplies and services that are provided or changes in practice or regulations or increased inspection or supervision of the work that's being done by these people to ensure, first of all, that nobody has had previous contact with someone who has been identified as being COVID-19 positive or perhaps even related to that.

Furthermore, what about those people who are asymptomatic, who themselves may not have a fever or anything of that nature but are continuing to travel from place to place, home to home? I would like to hear about some of the more practical, not informational but specific, interventions to change concerns in that area.

We're also concerned a little bit about the fact that right now there is a need for increased protocols for people . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Housing has the call.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the questions from the member opposite. I'll refer to the first question, about the mobile health care individuals, that move from place to place, or the staff working in long-term care.

For the staff working in long-term care, this will be under Health, the Minister of Health, but I can answer part of the question for the

Minister of Health. We put in some kinds of very tight protocols and regulations for the people that are visiting long-term care. We put in protocols like that they have to screen, that they have to designate all the visitors that come to visit the seniors in long-term care, and also that they have to have greeters in the front to screen and to make sure that those are designated persons going into long-term care and visiting their parents or grandparents or a relative. That is a part of it, that we are screening all the visitors and limiting the visiting.

In terms of all the mobile caretakers, currently we keep working with those caretakers and associations to find the best way to make sure that those caretakers working in a few different places don't have COVID-19, first of all, and to make sure, of course, that they don't overwork. These are the places that we care about, and we will make sure that those caretakers and medical officers follow certain protocols and make sure they are healthy to serve our seniors and the patients in long-term care.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for her answer. I understand that some of these questions, of course, could be best answered by Health, but I appreciate you giving me what information you can. You addressed people in institutional settings such as lodges and so on, that there are increased protocols at the doors and so on, but I'm also particularly concerned about seniors who are visited by people who travel to their home. I would appreciate it if you have a moment to address that. Home care is something that we have been trying to support for many years now in this province, and it does mean that a single individual may visit upwards of 12 to 15 homes in a single day. I'm just wondering about how you're handling that.

Of course, I'm interested in the increased protocols that are being taken to assist people in lodges as well. You've addressed some of those. If you have anything more to say, I'd be happy to hear that.

I also understand that a significant issue in many institutions or senior-serving organizations is that staff reductions have occurred as a result of people who are self-isolating for a variety of reasons. As a result, some institutions are referring to a loss of about 30 to 50 per cent of their staffing at this time. I'm wondering if you can tell me about what you are doing to help those institutions that are working with skeleton-level staff and what you are doing to help recruit or hire or train appropriate staff.

Furthermore, tasks that are normally done by trained health care professionals are now being undertaken by administrative or other support individuals in some of these institutions, everything from, you know, taking temperatures and so on. I wonder if you could speak to some of that.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Housing.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the questions from the member. In terms of the staff in those institutions, definitely we want to make sure that the staff fully service all the patients and take care of them even though some of the staff may be temporarily off or there are not enough hours to serve the seniors. However, for us, it's very important that each institution has enough staff to serve the patients and that there are no other exceptions.

That's why we continue to keep in contact. Actually, since we found the first case of COVID-19, my team and myself have been connecting or working very closely with all of the leaders and all of the CEOs that work to serve the seniors' homes and all the seniors. We are addressing every single day: what are the issues, what are the shortages, and what can we do as a government to support them?

In fact, a shortage of staff hasn't been raised in the last two weeks' calls. It is something that is raised. Definitely, my ministry will be the first one to address that. There's nothing more important as a government, as the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. We will look after and make sure all the seniors and all the vulnerable that we serve are healthy and safe.

11:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for some of those answers. I'm happy to hear that you've been working very closely with the CEOs of various organizations, and you actually listed a number of very important questions that you're asking them. What I didn't hear was their answer to any of the questions that you just suggested that you're asking them about their needs and so on and what the provincial government is actually doing to facilitate. I understand you are providing information and that you are in relationship and in consultation, and I congratulate you on all of that – fundamentally important – but what are you doing? That is the question of concern.

Of particular concern at this point, I wonder if you might address the issue of supplies. There is a concern that there are not enough thermometers, masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer in all of the facilities, and I'm wondering whether or not you are making sure that some of those kinds of supplies are available, particularly in those institutions that are not related to Alberta Health Services, where they may get the supplies through that mechanism. There are many institutions where seniors go where they are still in need of all of those supplies and don't have those things, so I'd be interested in some of the practical things.

You clearly are speaking to your support and your passion for seniors in this province, but I want to know what you're actually doing, and I haven't heard that yet. I'm very concerned that I don't hear about any financial assistance to people who need it, I don't hear about any assistance with supplies, and I don't hear about any assistance with staffing. Have there been any measures taken to actually address those issues in a practical, concrete sense for these institutions and for the seniors in this province? I'd really appreciate it if you have an opportunity to speak to that.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Housing.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Such great, important questions you're asking me. About PPE, first of all, the equipment: in fact, since day one, when we discovered that COVID-19 was happening here in Alberta, our caucus and our teams already discussed what we're planning to do to make sure that all the medical officers, hospitals, and the community have enough equipment to support the front-line people to do their jobs.

To answer your question, we addressed that even two weeks ago, and we are continuing to work on that, work with some of the private sector. Some private sector: they even wanted to donate some equipment, some masks and sanitizer, all the equipment that can be provided to seniors' homes or sent to different organizations. As for this government, you know that we have the website. We've posted from the federal level, from the government level. We are asking people who are interested to supply or interested to provide the equipment: they can register with us. The last time I heard, there were thousands and thousands of applications submitted to our government website willing to work with us to provide that equipment for us. This is the action we take, and at the same time I really work closely with the community.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Just yesterday in my community, a group in Calgary donated hundreds and hundreds so there are equipment and masks for the people in seniors' homes to make sure all the seniors are protected and, as well, so that those caretakers that take care of seniors are protected. Those are four different ways that we are looking after . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the minister for the answers. I guess my concern still remains that I haven't heard any specifics around the actual provision of supplies. I'm happy to hear that the private sector is stepping up. I certainly have faith in Albertans to contribute to the well-being of each other. We are an incredible province, and I'm glad that many people are stepping up. What I don't hear is whether or not the number of supplies that have come in from the private sector are being matched in any way by the public sector. Are we providing any supplies? When you look at both public and private supply provisions, is that a sufficient number, or is there any backlog in terms of people who are waiting for supplies, people who have asked for them who have not yet received them, that we should be concerned about?

I'd also like to move on to talk a little bit about some of the concerns about people's living arrangements, about what kind of plans are being made when couples are together but one member of a couple has been in contact with COVID and therefore needs isolation and the other member of the couple has not tested positive and therefore they're being separated in institutions and so on. What kind of strategies are being used to ensure that there are supports between couples who often have lived together for 50 or 60 years? How they are getting through this kind of situation in terms of living arrangements and so on?

I'm also concerned about – sorry. It feels like a lot of questions, but two minutes is a short time for me. I'm also concerned about the fact that the rental supplement program was greatly reduced in the fall budget by a cut of about 24 per cent. I'm just wondering how that is affecting people, particularly in rural areas.

The Deputy Speaker: Forty-four seconds, hon. minister.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you so much for the questions again. The first question talked about the living arrangements for the people who identify as having COVID-19. Currently this is the arrangement that we have: either in hospitals – or there are some arrangements in hotels; we are working on it – or some facilities that are currently unused. We're looking to see how to utilize those for the people that we can treat or quarantine, and we can put those people in there. So there is an action plan that is working on it, and we are just finalizing a few projects.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. minister, I hesitate to interrupt, but this now concludes your portion of the question-and-answer period.

We will now move on to the next minister, which is the hon. minister of indigenous affairs.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, and good evening, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to rise in the House and address my esteemed colleagues and members of the opposition in regard to our extensive and thorough outreach for indigenous communities in Alberta. As part of all of government's approach to combat the spread of the COVID virus and to care for the health of Albertans, the Ministry of Indigenous Relations has been very busy proactively and regularly communicating with indigenous communities. We've held many virtual meetings to plan for a

pandemic response and to anticipate the needs the communities may have.

Some of the examples we've had to date with indigenous leaders are that on March 14 the Premier and I had a call with various chiefs and grand chiefs to discuss the provincial response and collaboration with Alberta Health Services and the federal government; on March 23 I had a discussion with the chiefs from Treaty 8 and on the 25th another discussion with the chiefs from Treaty 6. There was also a call with the Treaty 7 chiefs and Indigenous Relations and Indigenous Services Canada staff on March 25. We've also proceeded with weekly conference calls with staff from the First Nations and Inuit health branch, Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, and Indigenous Relations.

Through this engagement we've heard many concerns such as access to protective equipment and medical supplies for their communities, food security and availability of groceries and trucking to remote communities, health risks that COVID-19 presents for seniors and those with chronic health issues, and the health and safety of indigenous people experiencing homelessness in urban settings. There are also concerns about challenges to spacing in regard to self-isolation as some communities have many family members or relatives living in the same house. There are also concerns about community wellness, mental health and addictions, support for increasing levels of anxiety and stress, and there are fears of increasing domestic violence and sexual assaults as stress levels increase and people spend more time together at home. There are concerns about financial support for employees unable to work or businesses that have had to shut down due to COVID-19. These are the concerns that we are working on together to address.

Our government, in collaboration with Alberta Health Services and the federal government, has specific supports in place to support indigenous communities and indigenous people both on- and off-reserve. The Provincial Operations Centre has field officers who provide dedicated support. Alberta Health Services has community health directors in place to co-ordinate communication, and Alberta Health Services is able to provide personal protective equipment, cots, portable handwashing stations, education materials, and testing kits as needed.

11:50

While the federal government, specifically the First Nations and Inuit health branch, is responsible for health care service on-reserve, the province, through collaboration between the Provincial Operations Centre, Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, and Indigenous Relations, also supports indigenous communities on- and off-reserve and in Métis communities and Métis locals. The federal government has announced specific funding to support First Nations on-reserve for the COVID-19 response. There's been \$125,000 dedicated for each First Nation for procurement of supplies, staffing, and co-ordination.

Alberta Health Services provides health care to indigenous peoples off-reserve. Alberta Health Services also provides support on-reserve when there is an agreement with the First Nation community. During a public health emergency the First Nations and Inuit health branch, or the FNIHB, is the first point of contact for communities. If the FNIHB is unable to address gaps in care, Alberta Health Services will step in and provide that service. Health care support for Métis communities is provided by Alberta Health Services.

Indigenous peoples are eligible for all Alberta supports announced to date. The province, through Community and Social Services, has announced \$30 million in funding for homeless shelters and women's emergency shelters. Indigenous people, as we know, are overrepresented in the homeless population, and this

funding will help to address the concerns around the health and safety of indigenous people experiencing homelessness that are off-reserve and in urban settings.

An additional \$30 million has been announced for community organizations to assist in local response to COVID-19. The Métis settlements are eligible to apply for this funding.

We continue to work closely with Transportation and Agriculture and Forestry to be sure that Alberta's supply chain for essential services continues unhindered. This includes ensuring that rail service and commercial trucking are unimpeded by interprovincial or federal trade barriers and that we have food security for remote communities all across Alberta.

Emergency isolation supports are available for all Albertans who are self-isolating or who are the sole caregivers for someone in self-isolation and have no other source of income. Applicants can view eligibility criteria and apply at alberta.ca, and there is no formal deadline for emergency isolation support. This is a temporary program to bridge the gap until the federal emergency care benefit is available. This government is doing everything it can to help contain the spread of COVID-19, and that includes ensuring that all Albertans, including indigenous people, can take the necessary leave without fear of losing their jobs.

First Nations and Métis leadership have been very proactive in pandemic response planning. I've seen countless communities take strategic steps to prepare themselves for this health crisis. For example, the Stoney Tribal Administration has set up an on-site command and control system used to manage emergency incidents and planned events. It ties into a food distribution centre and emergency call centre serving the Bearspaw, Chiniki, and Wesley First Nations. Their main focus is to get accurate information out to members quickly while following provincial rules for safety. Many communities have also declared a local state of emergency.

There is worry and fear, but there is also hope and trust that together we will persevere through this challenge. Engagement with indigenous leaders and communities is crucial for establishing trust in provincial COVID-19 interventions both on- and off-reserve and also with the Métis communities. Even though we face tough challenges in this fight to prevent the spread of COVID-19, I'm encouraged by the strong and level-headed leadership by the indigenous leaders in Alberta, and I'm committed to working together to protect the health of indigenous Albertans so that we may all stay safe, stay socially distanced. Let's look after our elders, our children, and, indeed, all Albertans. We're going to get through this together, and we will emerge stronger.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the minister for his statement and, of course, for his ongoing work with the indigenous communities in the province of Alberta. I know that they've been in regular contact with many of them, as I have as well, and they tell me that you are, so thank you. I appreciate that you do that.

I do have a number of questions, but some of the statements that you made in your statement I just want some clarity on. It just may be my own understanding of things. One of the things that you indicated was that there was \$125,000 per nation that was indicated. I just want clarity. Is this provincial money, or are you referring to the federal dollars that are being sent to First Nations? If it is provincial dollars, is it also available to Métis settlements or to other indigenous communities in the province of Alberta?

As well, you indicated that there was \$30 million that was available, but I'm assuming that that's the same \$30 million that was previously addressed by the minister of seniors, so it clearly is not \$30 million available to indigenous communities. I'd like to have some sense about what percentage of that \$30 million is actually available to indigenous communities specifically, and I'd like to have some sense about how much of that is available to communities outside of the major urban centres, because I realize that you're serving both urban and non-urban indigenous communities. I just want to have a sense of how that's divided.

You then went on to say that there was an additional \$30 million. I wasn't sure if you were just rephrasing your original statement about \$30 million, or are there two pockets of \$30 million that I need to understand? When you get a chance, if you could just speak to some of those clarity questions, but then let me move on to some of the specific questions that I have, I guess, next time.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you for the questions. I do appreciate you reaching out to the First Nations. I know you have a close connection with a lot of the settlements as well. The \$125,000: that is federal dollars. I right away contacted the federal Crown minister, Minister Bennett, and we had a good discussion, and she assured me that Alberta First Nations would be looked after with the money that they had set aside. Out of the money that they set aside, they put \$125,000 towards each of the First Nations. That did not include the Métis nations or the Métis settlements. As you know, Alberta is the only province that has Métis settlements, and I am constantly working with the federal people to let them understand that we also have Métis nations; plus, we have Métis settlements. They seem to forget about that sometimes. I'm constantly bringing that forward so that they understand that clearly.

What we've done is that we've set – of the one \$30 million, \$14 million was set aside through the FCSS program specifically for Métis settlements to apply for. That's not available to First Nations to apply for. That's only for the Métis settlements. All of the settlements have made applications at this point to tap into that fund, and that's to help them with supplies and what have you. They have very limited access to money. They have another fund, what they call the future fund, as you know. So I allowed them to access that fund, and we put that through the system as quick as we could so that each Métis settlement was able to tap into that. They took an additional \$200,000 each from the future fund just to help them get supplies in.

A lot of what we're finding with the First Nations and Métis settlements is that they're totally isolating themselves, so they're not even allowing their people to go to the stores and shop. They've brought groceries in to their settlements.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate the answer to some of these questions. Perhaps you could address whether or not there's more than one \$30 million, because you used the expression “an additional \$30 million.” I just wanted to be clear. Are you just referring to the original \$30 million, or is there a second set? And perhaps you could also further clarify the \$14 million. Is that exclusively for Métis settlements, or is it that Métis settlements may apply to the pot of \$14 million along with other groups such as friendship centres and the Métis Nation of Alberta and so on? Thank you. I appreciate that.

I guess I'm also wondering about some of the programming that's done on-reserve or on-settlement. I'm wondering whether the government is actually implementing measures for in-community testing as opposed to going out to the larger community. I think

that's particularly important for a number of reasons, a couple you have already addressed. Some of the communities are attempting to protect themselves by essentially cutting the community off, which then, of course, cuts them off from all the support services such as testing and medical/health services. So I just want to know: what is actually happening on-reserve, on-settlement, or in other communities that may be important?

I'm particularly concerned about Métis settlements because, of course, they don't have the resources that the First Nations do or are not receiving any of the federal dollars, as you've helped to clarify – thank you – and as a result, also, none of them have a health centre on the settlements although a number of them do have a health practitioner like a nurse practitioner. At least three of them have no local medical health practitioner. I'm wondering how you're ensuring that services are provided to isolated communities that are in fact isolating themselves even more, quite rightly, when there are no services available and they don't have supplies. Now, I understand that you're telling me that . . . [Mr. Feehan's speaking time expired] Jeez.

12:00

Mr. Wilson: You're usually quicker than that. I'm surprised. Thank you for the questions again. There are two sets of \$30 million. The one is available for all Albertans. I consider First Nations all Albertans as well. We're all humans, so they can apply for that one as well. Of the \$14 million that's set aside, they have to apply for that along with municipalities, so that one is a shared one as well.

As far as in-community testing, many of the First Nations do have very good health systems in place, and they are doing testing on-site. Like you said, some are not very sophisticated, and they have to travel to get tested, just like all other Albertans would have to travel to get tested. We did put a special leadership liaison in place for the First Nations so that they have their own person that they can contact and help them through the process. I've got a list I could read for you, but I get probably 10 to 12 chiefs calling me a day directly on my private line, and I always take their calls and help them get through the system because there's a lot of confusion out there, and everybody is just looking for information.

The Métis settlements, like you said: some do have nurse practitioners. Other than that, some do have to travel to get tested. So far we've been very lucky; we haven't had any positive tests on any of the First Nations or Métis settlements. That's a very positive thing. I think a lot of that has to do with that they are being very secure. A lot of them have gone back to the old ways. They've taken back to the land. They're out hunting, they're out fishing and then working closely with the RCMP and our Minister of Infrastructure to help them to isolate their communities, to make sure that they're doing it safely and not impeding critical transportation that needs to get out there to make supplies get to other communities.

So we're working very closely with them on all of those issues. Everybody has been very good about helping their communities.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate the clarity on some of these issues, and perhaps when we speak on Friday, I'll follow up a little bit on some of these just to make sure my understanding is right and I'm also providing accurate information.

I'm also concerned about the actual supplies that are available. I know that many of the First Nations and Métis communities are supplying groceries and other supplies house to house because they don't want people leaving the community to go to grocery stores and so on or any of the other activities because they're afraid that the back-and-forth into urban centres will bring the COVID back

into the community. What they don't have, though, is PPE, personal protective equipment, for the people who are delivering door to door. If it does enter the community, the mechanism that they are using to keep people in their homes may actually become the mechanism of transference. I guess I am wondering whether or not there are supplies that are particularly being given to the communities to ensure that the personal protective equipment is available.

I also know that, while I agree with the minister – all Albertans are Albertans – sometimes programs that are designed for everyone are not actually very appropriate for people in the indigenous communities for fear of issues such as racism or just feeling very uncomfortable about approaching those kinds of services in this province. As a result, people are often not reaching out when they should because they have to go to a community or a facility that does not feel comfortable for them. I know when I spoke to Dr. Yiu during estimates about . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you for the questions again. When there are gaps, Alberta Health Services is supplying personal protective equipment and swabs for testing to indigenous people. We did put special funding in place for the friendship centres. The friendship centres: for those who don't know, most of the major cities have friendship centres where the indigenous people can drop in and get their information. It's like their first point of contact. The friendship centres are out there in the urban centres making sure that urban indigenous people have access to food and protective equipment. That's already been going out and being delivered. I just had a conference call with them yesterday, and they assured me that that is happening.

As far as other supports, the Provincial Operations Centre has field officers. They provide dedicated support, and Alberta Health Services has health directors in place to co-ordinate that communication. We've been working to make sure that there is personal protective equipment in place like cots even, portable hand-washing stations, educational materials, testing kits as needed. So we've been working on that. I know that's a big issue, to make sure there's enough personal protection equipment. We just had a meeting this morning, and there is a lot more equipment coming in. If there is a shortage, we'll make sure it gets out to them, like you say, for them delivering groceries because that is happening on a lot of the First Nations. They are keeping their people isolated, and they are delivering groceries door to door.

What we're finding is that on First Nations there are many families – lots of times they're still living in poverty in a lot of places, and you could have two or three families living under one house. So if we did ever have an outbreak, it could be very bad because you could have 10, 15 people living under one roof, so it could spread very rapidly. So we're making sure that we've got supplies out there, and we're working closely with them to make sure that we don't get an outbreak out there. That's critical. I've actually tweeted and Facebooked out . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your answers to these questions. I will try to list off a few things. I think we're actually running out of time here.

You've addressed the fact that there are high vulnerability issues in the indigenous community: higher levels of poverty, higher levels of addictions, and higher levels of health problems than in nonindigenous communities. Of course, housing is an extreme problem in almost every Métis settlement and First Nations

community. I'm just wondering whether there are specific things that are being done given that this is a particularly highly susceptible, vulnerable community that's different from the average community, you know, in the city of Edmonton or Calgary, for example, who have the resources to take care of many issues by themselves. Are there specific programs designed to address these vulnerabilities, and can you also address the fact that some of the programs require Internet access for application and so on? Internet and phone service and so on in many of these communities is variable at best. What are we doing to ensure that individuals have access to the communication technology that's necessary to keep them safe during this time or to allow them to apply for programs?

You've mentioned, of course, the emergency isolation support program, but my understanding is that that is only for people that have been specifically directed to self-isolate, not for people who have been isolated by community decision. How would that apply to anybody who lives in these communities if it was not a specific direction by the chief medical officer? If you could just help me understand a little bit more about that.

You have as well noted that . . . [Mr. Feehan's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Twenty-two seconds, hon. minister.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you. One of the things is: I've encouraged the chiefs to set up a SOLE, state of local emergency. Once they've put their state of local emergency and they're able to enact laws to protect their people, one of the things that they've been doing is enacting curfews. What they're trying to do is . . .

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt, hon. minister, but that portion is now finished.

We will now move on to the next set, which is the hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate this. It's my pleasure to rise to talk about the COVID-19 efforts made by Alberta Transportation. I'd just like to start out by recognizing that the McKenzie Towne residence is in the centre of my riding, and I want to express my condolences to the people there, their loved ones, those that are ill, and those that have died. My thoughts are with you.

12:10

Also, I'd like to recognize that Transportation, our department – everything that we need during this COVID-19 time, or the very vast majority of it, is going to arrive to us on a truck, which is why transportation matters during this time. Lots of people to thank that do great work are folks at Alberta Transportation, the road maintenance workers, the folks that fix the roads and drive the snowplows and operate the tow trucks as well as other people who are partners: railway workers, shippers, receivers, labourers on the loading and unloading docks, gas station attendants, rest stop employees, grocery store tellers, those stocking our shelves, and of course the thousands of truck drivers moving the essential goods across Alberta, including those crossing the Canada-U.S. border, and doing so while trying to avoid the spread of the virus in conditions that they don't always control.

Of course, let's start talking about that a little bit because that has a lot to do with some of the efforts that we're making within Alberta Transportation. You know, when you think of Maslow's hierarchy, is it air, water, food, shelter? Those are essentially the things that right now truck drivers are having a hard time getting a hold of while they're delivering the food and the medicine and the goods

that we need and depend upon to get us through this pandemic. Alberta Transportation has been working with our partners and doing what we can on our own to make sure that truck drivers can get these things because right now they are finding that a large truck, of course, won't fit through a drive-through, just for beginners, for starters, and a lot of the restaurants are only open for drive-through and don't have bathrooms open, which is inconvenient if you are in a truck. In fact, we've been doing a lot of communications with people trying to get co-operation to look after our truck drivers.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I think we're making progress, but there's a lot more work to do, Mr. Speaker. I started out with Madam Speaker a minute ago. There have been cases where a truck driver has stopped at a store or a restaurant or a warehouse and delivered things they desperately need and then asked to use the bathroom and was told no, so one of the things that we're doing is just trying to point out the human decency that's required in order to let these men and women that are doing these jobs actually have a fighting chance. Sometimes they can't find a place to park their truck and get some rest. This is important stuff, and we're putting a lot of effort into it.

We've been working with the federal government and our chief officer of health also on border protocols for the truck drivers so that we've got it so that truck drivers that don't have symptoms don't have to self-isolate when they come back because then, of course, they couldn't afford to go to the U.S. and get the things we desperately need if they had to self-isolate on the way back every trip. We are working to keep our rest stop washrooms open. Unbelievably, people go in several times a day and loot them, steal all the toilet paper, steal the hand sanitizer, and sometimes, in at least one case where we checked, every hour of the day all the stuff was stolen every single time. One of the things that we're doing now, I suppose, is communication to get out to people: think of your neighbour and not just yourself and think of the consequences of how your life or your family's or your loved ones' lives could be worse if a truck driver doesn't get there with the food you need, if they don't get to the hospital with the medical supplies they need, if they don't get to the pharmacy with the prescription you need. That could actually happen because you've stolen all the toilet paper and the hand sanitizer out of the public restroom, and somebody could get sick. You can actually connect the dots pretty easily on this one, yet it's happening.

We're trying to set up additional portable bathrooms in places that we can, working with Justice and Solicitor General, to perhaps set them up at the weigh scales and inspection stations. We're encouraging restaurants to make exceptions for walk-up drive-through customers for truck drivers or to deliver it out to the truck. We're making some progress. McDonald's restaurants is allowing their app to be used for that. Truck drivers can stop. Then, of course, we're also trying to make the additional effort of making sure the drivers can get out and use the bathroom. Showers are another thing. There are fewer showers available during these times. When some truck stops don't have the sit-down restaurant open and, consequently, some of the other amenities closed, we're working with as many people as we can to make sure these opportunities are happening.

We have approved extensions to all commercial vehicle registrations, drivers' licences, and medical evaluation requirements. In other words, you actually have to pass your driver's test. You actually have to pass your vehicle safety inspection. You have to do that, but when it comes down to renewal, we've extended it so that none of those renewals will have to

happen before May 15, and if we need to extend it again based on how COVID-19 behaves and how it is still after this, then we will certainly consider and do that.

The same could be said for seniors coming up for a scheduled medical based solely on their age and not on if they got a safety concern. You don't actually have to expose yourself to other people at the registry. You don't have to expose yourself at the doctor's office, and consequently you don't have to expose the doctor. These are, I think, common-sense things that we're doing to try to keep the world working right now.

We developed a list of essential goods and services to help commercial carriers know that they can transport under the provincial and federal COVID-19 response. It includes medical supplies, hand sanitizers, obvious things, food, fuel, other emergency supplies, and we're trying to get the word out through the Alberta Motor Transport Association, through the trucking companies and directly to the drivers.

We also advocated – at one point it looked like drivers were not going to be able to get out-of-country health insurance or insurance even for their vehicles across the border. Now the insurance industry has said that, yes, they will actually provide that insurance again. It sounds like little things, folks, but we were that close to not getting groceries from the United States, from not getting fresh vegetables. This was a real risk. This was not a little risk. This was a huge risk. We've had our hands full with all these little details that we think actually make a big difference.

We've been suspending nonessential road tests for both the safety of the driver examiners and the drivers because, of course, you can't self-isolate two metres apart in a vehicle that's only a metre and a half wide, and you've got to get two people in there. So all road tests have been suspended until April 20. We know that we have to get them going again, but we're trying to do it at the time and the place when we can manage the risk, minimize the risk, or find other ways to do it. We're considering all those things as well. Even with all the other issues with truck drivers, there is a shortage of class 1 truck drivers, so it is kind of important that we get as many things organized as we can to get the training and the qualification system back up and running just as soon as this terrible virus allows us to do so.

Again, we provided an extension for doctors' notes for licence and application renewals and for vehicle registrations and drivers' licence renewals. We've postponed driver examiner monitoring and testing until further notice – and of course, we understand that we have to get that back on the rails just as soon as this terrible virus allows it to happen – and also extended renewals for drivers' school licences, examiners' certificates, and whatever other paperwork where people are already qualified for it and they don't have a bad record of, you know, bad behaviour. Then, of course, we're saying: you don't have to requalify or renew that right now.

I guess that's about it for starters. I'm just about out of time, but still, let me say this. The needs of the trucking industry are evolving, and their asks from week to week are different. We're trying to keep up, and we're trying to get them the new things that they need in their asks as they come up. Part of the biggest thing that we do is communication: communicate, communicate. Our people are talking to the Alberta Motor Transport Association, for example, probably many times every day. As well, we're in touch with Ottawa, with our counterparts, our federal ministers, and with trucking companies, individuals.

I think I'm out of my 10 minutes.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is on her feet. She has a question to ask. We'll have the next 15 minutes of question and answer.

12:20

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much, Minister, for the summary, to start with. You've obviously been busy. Thank you for the work you and your department have been doing to keep goods moving and flowing.

A lot of the questions that we talked about beforehand you've addressed through some of your remarks, so maybe just to get a little bit more detail. When you're talking about trying to make sure that truck drivers are able to get food through drive-throughs, it sounds almost like you're going through a very long process. Like, are you having to individually reach out to communities or restaurants or chains to figure it out? Is that the level of engagement that government is having to kind of get involved in to make sure that these drivers can get food and services?

You recognize the difficulty in truck drivers being able to find places to rest, with some towns banning overnight parking, as well as places to access showers. I was wondering if your goal was to ensure that every truck stop remains open or reopens or if you're looking along certain routes and trying to ensure that there are adequate facilities along those particular routes.

I will stop to see.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Great questions, hon. member. I would say that it's all of the above. First of all, we're trying to cast a wide net where we can. Actually, I was a couple days ago on the phone with the western Canada lead for Restaurants Canada and – it was by luck, not my good planning – I caught him about four hours before they had a board meeting, so they had a discussion not with quick-serve restaurants but all restaurants, saying: what can we do as an industry to help truck drivers out? There's been more and more. On the Alberta Motor Transport Association website, if you look there, they are putting out a list of restaurants that are available and facilities where a truck driver could get a shower, could park their truck for a sleep, could do all those types of things. So we're doing that.

Then after that we're working with our partners in industry, trucking companies and the transport association, to get, if you will, a catalogue of roads where amenities are needed. If we have to, we will do what you said, go restaurant by restaurant and say, "Look, I know you're closed, but you actually need to open," or, "I know you're not letting people walk up to you, but you actually need to because you're on a major truck route." We'll go guerilla warfare if we have to. It's not warfare, but you know what I'm saying. We'll go on the ground and try to get it done in a very granular way, but also we're reaching out through the networks and trying to cast a wider net to do more of it at once.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, and thank you, Minister, for that answer.

I know you were talking about people not needing to be retested, trying to make those accommodations. I just want to confirm: if a truck driver's licence does expire or is due to expire right now, that's part of the larger provincial strategy to make sure people don't need to go into registries. I'll just confirm that with you.

And then I also wanted to just ask around: has the province been approached by trucking companies that need cleaning supplies to give to their truckers to make sure that they can keep trucks clean

and implement the public health guidelines? Is there government involvement in making sure that the truck drivers and the trucks are able to continually be kept up as they're doing their deliveries?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. McIver: Thank you. Another good question. Well, let me say this. I guess there's probably a longer answer, but for your purposes here and mine I believe a good answer for you is that nothing will expire before May 15, almost nothing. For all intents and purposes, no one will have to go to the registry to renew anything until May 15, essentially, not a licence plate or a safety certificate or a driver's licence, anything like that.

Yes. Again, we're getting evolving requests from the trucking companies. Some are: where do I find hand sanitizer for my drivers, where do I find toilet paper for my drivers, you know, where can they stop and eat, where can they get a shower. We're, again, a two-pronged attack. We're trying to do it from an umbrella standpoint, and then after that we're getting more granular on highway number – fill in the blank – between this town and this city; we need help here. Then we're getting a little more granular.

As we go along, we'll start phoning for it. Right now, I guess, we're probably at the point where we're shifting from the more umbrella thing to more of the granular thing, where we'll phone individual restaurants and individual towns or maybe phone the town council and say: "You know what? In your town we really need a restaurant open; we really need a place for truck drivers to shower. What's available? What can you tell us? Is there a motel that could, you know, clean a shower regularly and make it available for truck drivers?" We're basically open to any and all solutions, and we're just doing the work.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My next question I hope will be very short lived, but right now we are experiencing winter road conditions again. Now we have fewer cars on the road, less traffic, so snow buildup and things like that seem to be happening faster just on the rural roads around Edmonton. Winter roads and low traffic: how does that change road clearing and plans along that way? Again, hopefully, we will get back to spring soon and not worry about the winter conditions so much.

Similarly, about controlling weather we cannot control: flood preparations and potential flooding downstream in Banff, Canmore, Calgary, High River. If there is spring flooding during a pandemic, what preparations need to be made? How do you plan to combat that flooding while physical distancing? What work would your department be doing along those lines to be prepared?

Mr. McIver: Well . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. McIver: Sorry; I'm not new here. I know you have to recognize me first. I apologize, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, on the winter road conditions, as the hon. member said, we're hoping that we don't get a lot of those, but my understanding is that April is the second-biggest snowfall month of the year in Alberta, so we're bound to get a few more storms. All of our contractors are contracted to clear the snow. There's no let-up on that. They're all fully staffed up and have got all the equipment and everything, so we push them. Some storms are easier to clean up than others just based on how the storm evolves, but that's the case, whether there's a pandemic or not. They are still expected to keep the roads safe, and they're enthusiastic about it.

They know that they are and we've made the point to them that they are an important cog in the wheel here and that if they don't keep the roads clear, then the food doesn't get through and the medicine doesn't get through and the urgent supplies don't get through.

One thing I will say is that our partners there, I think, have accepted the key and important role that they play in keeping us all healthy and alive during this time. My opinion is that everybody is carrying their weight and they're holding up their end, and we've encouraged them to just really understand how important they are right now to everybody: you're always important, but you're extra important right now.

As far as flood preparations go – you know what? – we have an emergency management organization under Municipal Affairs that will probably take the lead on that. For our part we do have some flood mitigation projects that we build within our ministry once they're approved – we're just the construction company – but we also get the approvals done through the regulatory authority. We're working on those. At this point anything that's not built by this spring's flood season won't be built by this spring's flood season. Nonetheless, we're working on those things as they come up. And, as I said, should there be a flood, then emergency management . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and to the minister. A question I've gotten from constituents – and I would be interested in your response – is if the province is looking at or considering nonessential interprovincial road travel being restricted or banned in any way. That potentially could be a decision made in different areas, but as Minister of Transportation have you heard that question?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, we've actually had people say: why don't you shut the borders? Well, of course, you can't shut the borders. No. It's a reasonable response. I'm not making fun of anybody that's said that because they're just trying to protect themselves and their family, but the fact is that we really need the borders open to get the things in that Albertans need to keep them alive and safe and healthy. You know, the obvious things, right? We keep saying it: the food, the water, the medicine, the medical supplies, all that kind of stuff. But we have actually made efforts through our partners – I will say this – because the other borders are at the airports, and we've had ongoing conversations with the international airports and with the federal government about doing a better job of giving people advice, when they get off an airplane from another country, about how they have to self-isolate for 14 days and advice to go straight home. You're actually not allowed to stop at the RV shop if you're a snowbird. You can't stop at the grocery store. No, you can't see the grandkids because not only are you threatening the grandkids lives; the grandkids are probably threatening your life. Though you love each other, you're threatening each other's lives, so you've just got to, like, phone when you get home or video chat, whatever it is you've got to do.

12:30

We're pushing, with the co-operation of Alberta Health. They've actually set up information tables at the airports at different times to get the information out. It's really the job of the federal government, through the airports, to do that, but we've been encouraging them to be super enthusiastic about getting everybody the news. There have been a variety of good and not good reports, so we're trying to stay on top of that.

We're not actually thinking of restricting road travel yet. Let me say that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South. There are three minutes and 44 seconds remaining, so you'll have two minutes to ask your questions.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll be brief here. Thank you to the minister. I think I missed a little bit when you were starting, so sorry if I retouch a couple of things. I just wanted to ask about the upcoming construction season and some of the things that might be happening in your ministry there. I did speak briefly to the Minister of Infrastructure offline about some of this and some of the things they were doing, but as the construction season and road maintenance come up in the next few weeks and months here, are you projecting any delays in projects, especially particularly large bridge projects, that have to get moving if we want to get the money out the door? If you are or are not, what precautions are you taking to ensure that the contractors are able to continue their work or have a safe work environment and those types of things?

I'll let you answers some of those questions if we're short on time here.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Thanks, hon. member. Good question. We are not anticipating a delay. In fact, because we're trying to put some stimulus into the market, we're actually looking at getting more construction projects out the door instead of fewer.

But, of course, we're talking to our partners there that build the roads for us, the road-building companies, and saying: what are you doing to get this built and to keep your staff safe? Each work site is, you know, required to have a plan for social distancing while they're doing things. In a lot of road-building jobs that's not extra hard because for the men and women that are in the big yellow Tonka toys running around, you know, moving a lot of stuff, they're usually one-seaters, so the social distancing is fairly automatic there. Most of the other work is kind of like that. There's not a lot of elbow-to-elbow work.

Probably the thing where we encourage our people and what they tell me – they told me, actually, that where they have to be careful is when they have their safety meetings at the beginning of the shift or when they, you know, punch the clock or check in to the office to get their instructions for the next day. At the meeting times at the beginning and the end of their shifts and when they stop for lunch and breaks are probably the biggest times that they have to be disciplined about personal distancing in order to keep all their employees safe.

We're working with them. We actually hope to get more work out the door this year because if there's one thing Albertans need right now, it's jobs. So that's a big priority for us.

The Speaker: The hon. member has a minute and 18 seconds left.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's good to hear, that you're trying to get more money out the door. I think shovel-ready projects right now like road maintenance are really important to get those jobs moving.

I guess one of the other things I had a particular question about is: in the situation that there's an exposure or somebody tests positive on a work site – not to identify any particular projects, but I think it has happened in some sites across the province and country already, and they've had partial shutdowns. Are you anticipating plans to keep those moving throughout this? I mean, I understand

that it's complicated and it's a safety issue, but is there going to be a plan to try and get those sites operational?

The Speaker: The hon. minister with about 30 seconds remaining.

Mr. McIver: Thank you. Yeah. You know what? Everything is urgent right now, so we've tried to tell the companies to take the lead of the chief medical officer of health. If you've got people that show symptoms, get them off your work site. Isolate them. Make sure that they don't feel like they have to come to work sick. Try to get them replaced with somebody that's healthy and keep the work going, because we really need you. Our guide is whatever comes out of the mouth of the chief medical officer of health. I think that she's our best guide for all of us, so we encourage the companies to take her advice and heed it every single time.

The Speaker: Thank you to the hon. minister.

Hon. members, we are back on Government Motion 17. It appears to me that the hon. Government House Leader is rising to make a statement.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to everybody for participating tonight. I want to just congratulate the Chamber on what is a unique process and an opportunity to be able to update everybody on COVID-19, the opposition for participating in that as well as all of my ministerial colleagues who participated in that process along the way. I don't know for sure, but I think I will be the last minister to rise. That's why I did that.

I will talk briefly about what's going on with Alberta Environment and Parks in regard to COVID-19, Mr. Speaker. With the brief time that I have, I'll probably focus on two areas. First, I'll talk about what's taking place with parks at the moment. Parks is a complicated problem in some ways when you're dealing with this pandemic. First of all, Parks is responsible for land all across the province of Alberta, a province that's two or three times, at least two and a half times the size of Great Britain, so it's quite spaced out. What we saw very early on in the process: when the chief medical officer made her first recommendations, it was pretty clear to us that we weren't going to be able to continue to maintain our facilities all across those areas and meet those requirements.

Plus, the idea of parks facilities is to attract large groups of people. You know, a ski hill at Cypress Hills, for example, has lots of people that come to it. The infrastructure just within parks is designed specifically to do that, Mr. Speaker, so we first made the step to shut those facilities to meet the requirements of the chief medical officer. Then the first week into that process we saw tons of people still coming to parks. Everybody kind of got the same idea at the same time, which was that if they were stuck at home, they were going to try to go to Kananaskis or to other places. We then saw lots of people still congregating in those spots, and they were not able to meet the social-distancing requirements set out by the chief medical officer.

Of course, because we weren't able to keep the facilities open, things like washrooms and things that hundreds of people, thousands of people – in some areas where they were going, they did not have places to be able to deal with their own human waste. We saw large amounts of garbage that were being dropped off, and it just was not a sustainable situation.

The reality was that we were also recognizing, Mr. Speaker, that if we were continuing to send our staff to try to maintain, just on the Parks' side alone, well over 2,000 washrooms with multiple toilets in them across the province, we would have to provide significant levels of personal protective equipment, PPE, and Parks was not prepared to divert that away from homeless shelters and

hospitals and from facilities that clearly need to make sure that that's where the PPE is being prioritized.

On March 27 as minister I signed two ministerial orders to shut provincial park staging areas and gathering areas across the province for the time being. We support that we're clear that we did not in any way stop indigenous or Métis activities inside our park areas or anywhere on public lands as far as their treaty rights. As the minister of indigenous affairs earlier said, we're working, of course, in those communities to help with social-distancing requirements as they exercise those treaty rights, but that is still taking place. We're also not shutting access for industry activities, forestry activities that are taking place within these areas because, as you know, Mr. Speaker, large portions of our public lands and park areas are also where we make the wealth of our province. So those activities are still taking place.

It'll be interesting to see how that develops as it gets busier and warmer. We anticipate that this pandemic will go on, as you heard from the Premier earlier, for quite a long period of time. This is actually the slowest time of year for parks, obviously.

In fact, I shall point out, Mr. Speaker, that one of the other concerns that we saw was that people were going into areas that they normally would go in the summer and that they weren't really exposed to in the winter. They were going farther into the backcountry. They probably shouldn't be there yet at this time of year. We're having trouble keeping up with avalanche tracking as well because of our own self-isolating within our employees as well as in the national park services.

People were west of Rocky Mountain House, an area I know that you know well. You grew up around Nordegg. Abraham Lake in my constituency was featured in the Disney movie, the lady here with the dogsled movie – right? – on Abraham Lake with the big ice bubbles. We've had thousands of people arriving on the weekends thinking that they would go and see the ice bubbles. Well, the problem is, as you know, Mr. Speaker, that Abraham Lake is part of a dam, and it is now melting, and we don't want to put people, obviously, inside spaces that are unsafe for them. Some people would not think about that when they do that. My other concern with that was also putting our search and rescue officials within our parks system in danger, trying to be able to overcome that.

As we proceed into the busier time of the year, we'll have to have further conversations on how we're going to manage public lands across the province. In my constituency alone, on an average May long weekend, as you know, over 100,000 people will come and visit us just outside the towns of Sundre and Rocky Mountain House. My hometown has less than 3,000 people, so that's a lot of people that come and visit us, putting pressure on our local hospitals and our emergency services as well as my officials and the Minister of Justice's officials, who have to manage that issue back there. We are, as I'm sure you know, Mr. Speaker, from managing the LAO, already having shortages of staff all across the province as they deal with self-isolation requirements as well.

12:40

Now, moving on from parks in regard to COVID-19, on the regulatory side of the environment department we've also made some decisions in regard to reporting for the time being. We immediately have taken action to provide temporary relief on reporting deadlines across the department. Our focus on this is to allow the industry to focus on crucial work while maintaining jobs and continuing to provide a safe workplace. We are hoping to give the industry an opportunity to focus on the health and safety of their staff and to continue to monitor air, land, and water in the areas that

they're working in across the province and not be focused on getting paperwork done on specific deadlines at the moment.

I want to be clear that operators are still fully required to comply with all environmental regulations. This does not take away environmental regulations. Any unauthorized releases into the environment must still be reported through our EDGE line, Mr. Speaker, which is the environmental and dangerous goods emergencies line. As well, these temporary suspensions for reporting, though, do not apply to drinking water and do not apply to waste-water facilities without authorizations from the department for, I think, fairly obvious reasons.

I think it's important as well, Mr. Speaker, to be clear in regard to that that record keeping and other activities will continue. We are just waiving the requirement to meet legislated deadlines to report this information, similar to what the hon. Minister of Transportation has done in regard to drivers' licences. People are still required to follow driver regulations when they are operating motor vehicles, but if their licence is expiring right here in this period of time, they are not required, because of the work the minister has done, to renew that.

We're also, Mr. Speaker, making a couple of other changes on reporting. For continuous air monitoring station collaborations we've reduced the frequency of collaboration from monthly to quarterly for the remainder of 2020. We've given a three-month extension to submit the 2019 annual emission inventory reports. The reports were due in September 2020. They'll now be due on December 31, 2020. We've removed the requirement to immediately report ambient air exceeding quality guidelines until September 30, 2020, to provide more time to prepare those. We've provided a two-month extension to submit airshed monitoring air monthly summary reports and ambient data until September 30, 2020. March reports are due on June 30, 2020, April reports will be due on July 31, 2020, May reports are now due on August 31, 2020, and June reports are now due on September 30, 2020.

I want to be clear that, again, this does not stop the environmental obligations of organizations, and they've been clear with us that that's not what they want. This provides them opportunities to make sure that they have the staff in place to be able to do the reporting obligations, which are complicated, Mr. Speaker, and this will help them to be able to focus on the immediate issues that they're dealing with in their companies.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I'd be happy to take questions.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we'll now move to a period of 15 minutes of questions and answers. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South has risen.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for giving us that update there. I think I have some particular questions. I'm going to start with the environmental reporting things that he had just spoken on at the end there. I do understand that there's an expiry date, and you outlined some new deadlines for those reports and everything. But I want to just get some clarity because you had mentioned that if there's a release during the suspension, they still have to report it through the emergency line. Is that an immediate report, or is that something that would happen after the suspension is lapsed in mid-August? If there was a release during this period when reporting is suspended, what's the process then, right? Like, does Environment and Parks go out and deal with that immediately, or do they not?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, to be clear, the extensions are in regard to reporting. It is the law to report releases into the environment and into waterways. That law remains in place, and

organizations that are working across our province would be required still to report as they always have through the hotline. The EDGE hotline is how that is dealt with. They have to immediately report. That is the requirement, and I'm happy to report, Mr. Speaker, that all of our emergency response teams are still fully intact and prepared to deal with that. Obviously, we will continue to monitor their ability to do that, just like we will for all parts of the department in regard to people that are in self-isolation and the capacity of the department, but we are fully capable of being able to respond to any emergency as always. I know that our industry partners will be reporting if that does happen.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have some questions about some comments that were made in the public earlier around – I think it was your press secretary that stated that this was to protect staff health and safety. Could you maybe outline for, in your case, your staff, suspending the reporting on their health and safety, or what other measures you are taking in your department? Are you providing the required PPE, sanitization stations, whatever it may be, in their cars, those types of measures? What are you doing to ensure that your staff are safe?

I just want to get my other question in because I know we don't want to waste time here. There's a public complaint process, of course. As well, if somebody notices a release or they're downstream of it, whatever, would those public complaints still be investigated? Are they still going to be investigated at the same rate as normal? Are they still going to be reacted to immediately, or does it have to be delayed in some way? What type of consultations were done before making this decision?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Jason Nixon: First off, in regard to staff safety, I referred to staff safety in my opening remarks in two different contexts. The first was for Alberta Environment employees. That was primarily around what was taking place in regard to parks. The reality, as the hon. member will appreciate, is that being responsible for just the washroom facilities alone, under the requirements and because of the medical situation that we face, we would have to provide PPE for our employees for obvious reasons to deal with that.

That is complicated not only in the concern about making sure that we can get PPE to front-line services, including health, Mr. Speaker, and other areas that I know the hon. member would agree would be the priorities, but, secondly, Alberta Environment employees are in and out of trucks constantly, driving across large-scale areas, and it's hard to even be able to maintain the PPE in that environment. That's one of the reasons why we chose to just shut. We did not feel, one, that we would be able to do that adequately enough with our staff; second, we didn't want to take PPE away from health services and homeless shelters and those type of areas.

The second way that I was referring to staff safety was in regard to companies on reporting. Companies are dealing with significant self-isolation issues, as you know. We didn't want companies to be in spots where they had to worry about immediate paperwork. We wanted to be able to make sure that companies were focused on making sure that they had the staff that they do have available to them focused on monitoring our air, water, and other environmental issues and making sure that they're able to continue to meet their regulatory obligations and then worry about long-term paperwork after that. To be clear, Mr. Speaker, through you to the hon. member, the requirement to report has not gone away. What has happened is that we've been able to provide an extension.

I think I got it all. I feel like I missed one of the questions. If I did, I'm sure the hon. member will remind me, but it wasn't done on purpose.

Mr. Dang: Consultations.

Mr. Jason Nixon: He's going heckle it to me right now, and then I'll get it.

Mr. Dang: Consultations.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Oh. Consultations. Thank you. I appreciate that. We did speak with the industry. I'll get back to you on that one next.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Dang: Maybe the minister can finish his thought there, then.

Mr. Jason Nixon: We have spoken with industry representatives, obviously, on ways that we can help them still meet their environmental obligations at the same time as reducing some of the reporting requirements in ways that will help them manage during the pandemic. We've also talked to our federal partners who help us with lots of this monitoring to understand where they're at. There has been consultation but certainly not to the level, with every department facing this at the moment, that we normally would do consultation because we are in a spot where we are trying to react very fast to the situation that's developing.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-South, do you have any additional questions?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has a question.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Since the minister brought it up earlier around the protective equipment and since it was mentioned by the Premier in his opening remarks, I thought the minister could take an opportunity to touch on why it is he feels that a housing first model, that would put vulnerable homeless folks in smaller environments, ideally in personal spaces where they could have access to their own washroom and their own bed, would be problematic. I know this is something that is related to another ministry, but the Premier himself said that this minister has extensive knowledge in this area, and I'd like to hear why he thinks that's a bad idea.

12:50

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Parks is welcome to respond. Government Motion 17 as amended does allow for questions and responses made by the minister. This is certainly not in the minister's particular area of responsibility. It may be in his field of expertise. It would be up to him as to whether or not he'd like to answer the question.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, I will answer, Mr. Speaker. You are correct. It's not within my ministry's purview. I want to be clear that the hon. Minister of Community and Social Services is doing a great job on this issue.

With that said, if the hon. member would one day like to come and work in a shelter and see what it's like and work several shifts overnight, I would be happy to show her what I did for most of my adult life.

The reality is that the hon. member rose and said that I don't think housing first is a good model. That is not what was said and not what was said by the Premier. In fact, I was one of the first people within the industry to fly to Portland and learn about what housing

first was all about long before the member probably even heard the word.

The reality is, though, that the work that it would take to create an emergency shelter inside motels, according to the people that run the shelters in our province, it would not work for their needs. It would require having to remove, as the hon. minister has already said, large portions of closets to be able to protect people from self-harm. It would probably require having to remove, in some cases, doors so that staff could be able to see what was taking place. It would require extra staff for all the shelters to be able to manage across that motel, Mr. Speaker. According to shelters, it's not the best way for them to manage an emergency shelter. Having run an emergency shelter, I also agree with them.

Now, that does not mean that you don't want people to move from the shelter through the housing first model into housing. As the hon. minister has already said tonight, she's been increasing investment to be able to help move people from shelter systems into homes to be able to make sure it works.

Mr. Speaker, I will close with this. If the hon. member thinks that every person that sleeps on the streets even wants to go into a house, she doesn't know the homeless population very well. The reality is that there are people that use our emergency shelter system that will not go even if you offer them a house. There are different demographics within the shelter system, and they have different needs.

The Speaker: The hon. member for – I see you both trying to rise. I'm happy to call the hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think I rose first.

I just wanted to get back to parks here a little bit. In particular, given the state of the health emergency I think that these parks are now closed. I think every park is now closed, actually. Given that there was indeed a plan to close many of these parks, whether fully or partially, and to sell them off and privatize them, I'm just wondering. There was this period when people would have been able to access these parks. They can't now, right? They're closed. They must remain home, or they should remain home in most cases, and they can't go into these parks. So people actually have lost probably months at this point of access to the parks. Would you consider delaying your sale of the parks or closure of the parks so people can get those months back and then do a consultation? As we heard in the last few weeks and months, people really do enjoy the outdoors. You've mentioned yourself that thousands of Albertans want to get out over the long weekends, and they can't now. So would you consider delaying this so that those Albertans can get to use those parks at least one more time and then consult with them about whether you're going to be selling them or privatizing them?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, I've got great news for the member. First, to be clear, it has nothing to do with the COVID-19 update, but I'm so excited to give him the good news. No matter how much his party wants to rise in the House and say that we're selling parks or closing parks, it won't make it true. Let me be very, very clear. We are not selling Crown land that is associated with our provincial park system, nor are we closing parks. What we are doing is moving some out of the parks regulations, moving them back into the public lands regulations to allow Albertans to fully utilize those spaces, unlike what that party did when they were in power.

If they want to bring it up – you know what they did, Mr. Speaker? Things that we're going to stop. They spent a ridiculous amount of taxpayer dollars doing things like flying firewood to

campsites where people weren't utilizing it, keeping campsites open and paying employees to do six-hour round trips when only 22 people camp there a year. You know what we're going to do instead for those areas? We're going to turn them back over so people can utilize them. We're no longer going to have park officials drive there. We're going to have public land officials that are already in the region go and monitor those spaces because it's a better use of taxpayer dollars. Those are the things that we're going to do, Mr. Speaker.

I will tell you this because the hon. member brought it up. I'll never be lectured by the NDP, who, while that member was part of the government, tried to shut my entire backyard by turning it into a provincial park to stop the very people that built it from accessing it. Mr. Speaker, at the end of the day, Albertans know who they can trust when it comes to Crown land.

The Speaker: Are there any additional questions or comments for the minister? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. I guess I would take this opportunity to say that I think Albertans that are sitting at home are hoping that they'll be able to access good public parks one day soon. Obviously, the stress that a lot of people are feeling right now through this pandemic is making them long for things like having a great opportunity to have a campfire in a park that's accessible to all of them. I want to say that the mischaracterization of closing down access to land by creating parks that are accessible to all I find just as frustrating as I'm sure the member finds it frustrating when we say privatizing parks or selling off parks, which is definitely the way I read the initiatives that he's launched.

I know that there are many kids right now who are sitting at home going a little bit stir-crazy, wanting to have an opportunity to access parks. I want to say that when we're through the other side of COVID, we want to make sure that we have those parks available for all Albertans. This is something that wasn't just launched in the last four years under the NDP. We've had public parks in this province for about a hundred years, and it's important that we continue to find ways to make the outdoors accessible to families who might be going a little bit stir-crazy, especially at this time when a lot of them are anxious to get out and spend time in parks.

I'd like the minister to elaborate on what he's doing to make sure that the staff that are necessary to protect those parks when they do reopen are available and are able to make sure that they can provide a great opportunity for Alberta campers.

The Speaker: There's a minute and 30 seconds remaining in the time allotted for debate.

Mr. Jason Nixon: We're going to continue to have all of our important employees both in parks – the hon. member doesn't have a lot of experience, obviously, with Crown land – and also on public lands, that she seems to be confusing with parks. Maybe one day I can learn a little bit about the area outside of Edmonton and will be

able to help her with that any time that she would like, Mr. Speaker. We're going to continue to use the great employees that we've got both within the public lands division as well as within parks.

Mr. Speaker, you know what else we're also going to do? We're going to continue to work with the hard-working municipalities that we come from that are adjacent to these areas. We're going to continue to work with volunteer organizations across the province that help us take care of our protected areas, something the NDP tried to shut out when that member was the Deputy Premier. Again, she wanted to bring it up. When she was the Deputy Premier of the last government, she tried to shut my entire backyard from the community of Rocky Mountain House, and because of that decision I'm proud to say that they sent me back here with the highest vote total in the history of this province.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Only by 63.

There is approximately 30 seconds remaining, unfortunately, for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Fortunately, for the hon. member?

The Speaker: That's what I meant.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you so much. I have to say that I don't love the disrespect that's thrown around this place by the hon. member. Certainly, he doesn't know where I grew up or how I grew up or the time I spent outdoors, too.

Mr. Jason Nixon: There's a whole world outside of Edmonton, hon. member.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. I grew up in Kinuso, hon. member. You grew up in Calgary.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. Unfortunately, the time for debate has concluded.

Are there any other members of cabinet that would like to make a statement?

Seeing none, the time for debate on the government motion has now been concluded. The matter is now closed.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, I move that we adjourn until 9 a.m. on Thursday, April 2. Thank you again for everybody's hard work tonight.

If any of the NDP want to learn the difference between public lands and parks, they're welcome to ask. We'd be happy to talk to them outside the House. [interjection]

The Speaker: Order. Order. We're just trying to adjourn the House. I'm sure that the Government House Leader can do so in an orderly fashion.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 1 a.m. on Thursday]

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